

The Philadelphia Inquirer

August 3, 2006 Thursday

**SECTION:** NATIONAL; Pg. A01

**LENGTH:** 1038 words

**HEADLINE:** A two-front war for Murtha;  
He's under attack by those livid about his Iraq criticism.

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**BODY:**

In May, U.S. Rep. John P. Murtha roused the anger of some in the military and on the political right by saying that American Marines had "killed innocent civilians in cold blood" in Iraq.

Now, the Western Pennsylvania Democrat - who hopes to become majority leader if his party captures the House in the fall election - finds himself under fire on two fronts as a result of his comment, which dealt with a still-unresolved incident in Haditha, Iraq, late last year in which 24 people died.

Politically, Murtha is under attack from a few of the veterans who during the 2004 presidential campaign led an assault on U.S. Sen. John Kerry's record in the Vietnam War. Their campaign - right down to images on their Web site, [www.bootmurtha.com](http://www.bootmurtha.com) - deliberately echoes what Democrats have called the "swiftboating" of Kerry.

Legally, Murtha faces a lawsuit filed yesterday in federal court in Washington in which a 26-year-old Marine sergeant contends that Murtha defamed him and his unit.

Amid all of this, the facts of the Haditha incident remain clouded.

No one has been charged with a crime, although the Associated Press quoted unnamed Pentagon sources yesterday saying that evidence supports the contention that Marines shot the 24 people deliberately and that they were not killed amid a house-to-house gun battle, as was claimed in the libel suit filed by Staff Sgt. Frank D. Wuterich, a member of the 3d Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment.

Murtha, 74, a 26-year House member and the top Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, has become a lightning rod for Iraq controversy because of his persistent calls for the U.S. to pull out of Iraq.

"The war cannot be won militarily," he said yesterday.

He is a tough-talking Marine Corps veteran of the Vietnam War with two Purple Hearts for wounds received in combat. But some bloggers on the right have raised vague questions about the legitimacy of his combat medals, just as some questioned Kerry's three Purple Hearts from Vietnam when he was the Democratic nominee for president in 2004.

Murtha, in a phone interview yesterday, said such questions were "ridiculous" and nothing but efforts "stop me from talking" about what he sees as failed U.S. policy in Iraq.

In a prepared statement on the lawsuit, he commented: "I don't blame the staff sergeant for lashing out. When I spoke up about Haditha, my intention was to draw attention to the horrendous pressure put on our troops in Iraq and to the cover-up of the incident."

Among other things, the lawsuit seeks to smoke out the military officials who gave him the information on which he based his charge that Marines had killed innocent civilians.

Asked about this in the interview, Murtha said the information came from Gen. Michael Hagee, the commandant of the Marine Corps, in a one-on-one conversation the day before Hagee made a trip to Iraq. **Hagee did not use the term "in cold blood," he added.**

**Col. Dave Lapan, a Marine spokesman, disputed Murtha's account.**

**He said the commandant did brief Murtha about the Haditha incident. But he said that was on May 24, a week after Murtha made his public comment. The next day, May 25, Hagee left for Iraq, he said.**

In Johnstown today, a group calling itself Vets for the Truth planned to hold a news conference in front of Murtha's congressional office to announce plans for an anti-Murtha rally Oct. 1. Murtha's Republican opponent, Diana Irey, who faces an uphill battle, said in an interview that she, too, was upset by Murtha's comment about the Haditha Marines.

The veterans' group is led by retired Navy Capt. Larry Bailey of Chocowinity, N.C., a former Navy SEAL who once commanded the Naval Special Warfare Center in Coronado, Calif.

Bailey was president of the anti-Kerry Vietnam Vets for the Truth, which sponsored a 2004 rally on Capitol Hill. The group called attention to what it said were Kerry's lies in the 1970s about atrocities committed by U.S. troops in Vietnam.

Its Web site carries an image of Murtha on a made-up book cover bearing the same title and same look as a book written about Kerry in 2004, *Unfit for Command*.

*Unfit for Command* was co-written by John E. O'Neill, a Texas lawyer who co-led a group of anti-Kerry swift boat veterans, some of whom Kerry had served with as a Navy officer in Vietnam.

Bailey said his group, which so far consists only of "five or six" veteran members, is not related to the former Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. But he said he had asked O'Neill to speak at the fall anti-Murtha rally.

O'Neill, reached at his law office in Houston on Tuesday, said he had no comment on the request or the group's activities.

Bailey said his group raised \$150,000 in 2004, while the larger swift-boat group raised millions. The two were unrelated but worked in harmony, he said.

He said he was furious when Murtha "slandered" the Haditha Marines without knowing all that had happened.

"No intelligent patriot would make a statement like that until the facts were in," he said.

This time around, Vets for the Truth had just \$15,000 in the bank as of Tuesday, Bailey said.

But he said his group has become part of another group, Iowa Presidential Watch, which is registered with the Federal Election Commission and IRS to accept contributions. That group is led by Roger Hughes, the Republican Party leader of Hamilton County, Iowa.

Hughes, in an interview, said, "I think there is a potential for many people in the country to rally to this cause."

In comments attributed to him on the Web site [www.iowapresidentialwatch.com](http://www.iowapresidentialwatch.com), Hughes says Murtha's ambition to be House majority leader gives him "the potential to hurt America's security more than in the past."

"He has taken upon himself the role of being in the front line of the assault on America's security," the Web site quotes Hughes as saying. "His 'fifth-column' efforts in former years have not resulted in any significant weakening of America's strength, but now it is different!"

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines *fifth column* as "a group of secret sympathizers or supporters of an enemy that engage in espionage or sabotage within defense lines or national borders."

Said Murtha: "To call me a fifth-columnist, I cannot believe that."

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