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HEADLINE: Murtha's irresponsible remarks

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BODY:

Rep. John Murtha, who last year called for the immediate pullout of U.S. troops from Iraq, this week accused an entire Marine company of murdering 15 Iraqis "in cold blood." Mr. Murtha claims he received his information from sources inside the Pentagon, which is conducting an investigation into the Nov. 15 incident in the town of Haditha. That investigation is not yet completed, which makes Mr. Murtha's accusation not only irresponsible, but an egregious violation of ethical conduct by a sitting congressman.

Mr. Murtha concedes that he has not read any part of the Pentagon's unfinished report. All he has are his "sources." But if Mr. Murtha thinks he can hide behind them, he has severely underestimated the seriousness of his accusation. By turning the presumption of innocence standard on its head, Mr. Murtha is duty-bound to name his sources or provide evidence. Otherwise, he must immediately apologize to the Marines he so recklessly labeled as cold-blooded murderers.

The incident in question occurred when a roadside bomb struck a Humvee carrying Marines from Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines, killing Lance Cpl. Miguel Terrazas. What happened next is the subject of the Pentagon investigation, but 15 Iraqis were in fact killed. The Marine Corps, meanwhile, has responded to the investigation by suspending three Marine officers involved in the incident. What's important to remember is that if the Marines did act outside the rules of combat, they will be tried by a military court martial not by Jack Murtha, a former Marine who should know better.

Which makes us wonder if there's an ulterior motive behind his indefensible comments: "Our troops overreacted because of the pressure on them and they killed innocent civilians in cold blood," he said. Mr. Murtha is actually accusing the Bush administration of murder, because of the "pressure" it has put on U.S. troops. It bears noting that Mr. Murtha delivered his accusation at a press conference marking the six-month anniversary of his call for the United States to withdraw immediately from Iraq.

Mr. Murtha obviously has a problem with the Bush administration and the Iraq war. Fair enough. But he should leave the troops out of his vendetta.