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## 'Debate doesn't hurt the troops,' says president of Iraq, Afghanistan veterans group

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Filed by David Edwards and Josh Catone

Paul Rieckhoff, the president of [Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America](#) (IAVA), appeared as a guest on MSNBC's Countdown program on Wednesday, Feb. 14. The former infantry platoon leader in Iraq from 2003 to 2004 explained that debate about the war doesn't hurt the troops. Such arguments, claimed Rieckhoff, are simply "political shields."


"The reason guys like me join the military is to preserve that free right to have a real dissent and a real debate about the most important issue facing our country," said Reickhoff. "That is why we joined the military. It's why we take up arms, to defend exactly that type of right. So I think [saying criticism of the war demoralizes the troops] is a really dangerous road to go down when it comes to the political dialogue."

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Speaking on the Bush troop surge plan, Reickhoff was surprised to find himself agreeing with Col. Oliver North, who has publicly disagreed with the assertion of surge supporters that the plan has overwhelming support among soldiers in Iraq. Reickhoff said, "Everybody I talked to inside Iraq, and most of the people coming home, who have come home in recent months, don't support the surge because they don't think it will work."


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A transcript of the segment is below:

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**OLBERMANN:** To anyone with a brain or faith bigger than a walnut it remains a mystery why anyone would think democracy's vital signs, debate, dissent and disagreement, would demoralize defenders of democracy, the men and women of America's armed forces, but that is a central claim of those who argue that true Americans would not question the president's deployments of those troops, presumably any deployment of those troops.

And so today our third story, the morale of our troops overseas, and the question of whether they have become political pawns, human shields in politics here at home. They and their morale have been waved as rationales for virtually every element of Mr. Bush's war in Iraq, including the troop increase he announced last month.

Supporters John McCain and Joe Lieberman from the Senate famously went to Iraq, reporting back on the unanimous troop support for the plan. Unanimous that is, except in the account of Oliver North, who spoke to some of the very same troops, now making the rounds, revealing that each and every one told North just the opposite, that Iraq's problems cannot be solved with more U.S. combat troops.

President Bush himself today said most morale issues stem from concerns about families left behind.

*(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)*

**BUSH:** I'm talking to our commanders. Their job is to tell me what the situation on the ground. And I know there's concern about the home front. I haven't heard deep concern about the morale of the troops in Iraq.

**UNIDENTIFIED MALE:** Would commanders tell you that?

**BUSH:** Yes, they would tell me that, sure, absolutely, just like they told me that they thought they needed extra troops to do the job.

*(END VIDEO CLIP)*

**OLBERMANN:** None of this stopping other Republicans in this week of war debates from suggesting that Democratic opposition both emboldens the enemy, some enemy anyway, and brings down our troops. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer tackled that claim head on today.

*(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)*

**REP. STENY HOYER (D-MD), HOUSE MAJORITY LEADER:** When you come to the floor, my friends, debate the substance of the policy. But do not hide behind the troops. Do not assert that anybody on this floor does not have every intention and commitment to supporting, to whatever degree necessary, our young men and women. And as I have said, some not so young, who are deployed in harm's way at the point of the spear.

*(END VIDEO CLIP)*

**OLBERMANN:** In fact, just as some Republicans were questioning Democratic support of the troops, at a hearing Tuesday Republican Senator Larry Craig threw his weight behind a White House plan to increase health care fees and prescription drug payments asked of veterans, some of whom are still in harm's way, while simultaneously cutting the budget for Veterans Affairs.

Let's turn to a veteran of this war, Paul Rieckhoff, author of "Chasing Ghosts," and founder Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. Paul, as always, great thanks for your time.

**PAUL RIECKHOFF, "CHASING GHOSTS":** My pleasure, Keith. Thank you.

**OLBERMANN:** You are in Washington today for reasons that are relevant to these issues we just raised. Explain your presence there, if you would.

**RIECKHOFF:** Well, IAVA, the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, is the first and largest Iraq and Afghanistan veterans group. And we are bringing veterans from all over the country to meet with legislators this week on both sides of the aisle, and urge them to support our 2007 legislative agenda.

We are getting hem to sign on to really support the troops. Two of the top items are the Lane Evans Veterans Health care Bill, which would expand health care services and mental health treatment for returning veterans. It's co-sponsored by Olympia Snowe on the right and Barack Obama on the left, and also a new G.I. Bill. These are ways people can really support the troops.

There's a lot of talk in Washington and we are going to go around in the next few weeks and see who really supports the troops and who is willing to put their money and their votes behind them for real.

**OLBERMANN:** Yes, not cut the benefits and raise the fees you charge them. Does this Oliver North, John McCain, Joe Lieberman story surprise you and do you have any evidence on it? Is Colonel North

right?

**RIECKHOFF:** You know, I never thought I would say on national TV, but I think Oliver North is right and I do agree with him. He is talking to the troops on the ground it seems like. Everybody I talked to inside Iraq, and most of the people coming home, who have come home in recent months, don't support the surge because they don't think it will work. An increase in troop numbers, especially this small level, is not going to be the silver bullet solution to all our problems in Iraq.

And the administration hasn't listened to any of the generals throughout this war, so what makes anyone think that now they are going to start going down to the sergeants and lieutenants, who are at the tip of the spear and kicking in doors every day? They are not talking to the troops on the ground, because they don't support this, and surprisingly, Oliver North gets that.

**OLBERMANN:** And to the point of the troops and the new troops, the "New York Times" today reported that the Army has increased the number of waivers that have been given to new recruits who have passed criminal behavioral records by 65 percent in the last three years, after previous reports of lowering the educational standards, lowering the physical standards. Is that the way to support the troops on the ground, by giving them people who might be less qualified new comrades?

**RIECKHOFF:** No, not at all. It is way to put a band-aid solution on the larger problem that our military is dramatically and dangerously overextended. You have got folks going back for a third and even fourth tour, divorce rates are skyrocketing, suicide rates are up and the Army has got to lower the standards right now to bring in new recruits, because this country doesn't support the war, and one way they are doing it is by increasing the age to enlist. You can be 42 years old and join. You don't need a high school diploma and you can have committed a felony or a misdemeanor.

And I don't know what other people think, but I was in Iraq for over a year, for about a year, and I don't want a guy in my platoon who has been a burglar, or has some kind of a felony. You just don't want a guy like that carrying a weapon in your unit. So lowering the bar endangers us all.

**OLBERMANN:** Assuming that rising fees do not demoralize the troops, are we really to believe that U.S. troops are so fragile that they wilt whenever somebody suggests that what is happening there needs to be criticized, reviewed, analyzed, discussed? How is this--I could understand if people were saying, hey, you know, to hell with these guys and let them deal with their own trouble over there, which is not what anybody is saying, critical or supportive of this war.

But where does the idea come across that simply discussing the point of their being there is a demoralization factor?

**RIECKHOFF:** I think it's a shield for a flawed policy and I'm personally offended by it. You know, the troops are not anybody's political chew toy. We're not somebody you can just throw back and forth, or some kind of a political shield. We are tough. We are taking mortar fire, there are roadside bombs going off. We are going back for repeated deployments. Those are the things that affect morale profoundly, not what Trent Lott or Nancy Pelosi is saying back home.

The reason guys like me join the military is to preserve that free right to have a real dissent and a real debate about the most important issue facing our country. That is why we joined the military. It's why we take up arms, to defend exactly that type of right. So I think it is a really dangerous road to go down when it comes to the political dialogue.

**OLBERMANN:** Paul Rieckhoff, executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, lobbying for increased benefits, and not increasing the fees we charge those veterans. Good luck on the project Paul, and thanks for your time tonight.

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