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## At Navy school in Monterey, voices of skepticism about Iraq war

Robert Collier

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When former Secretary of the Navy James Webb gave a speech last Thursday at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey slamming the Bush administration's threatened war with Iraq, an outsider might have expected the officers assembled there to give him a frosty reception.

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In fact, the opposite occurred. The respectful, admiring welcome he received gave an unusual, somewhat counterintuitive glimpse into the often-closed world of the U.S. military. Among the Naval Postgraduate School's students and faculty, at least, it seems that independent, critical thinking is alive and well.

Granted, Webb is no outsider. A much-decorated former Marines officer, he became assistant defense secretary and secretary of the Navy during the Reagan administration - quitting the latter job in 1988 to protest budget cutbacks in the Navy's fleet expansion program.

In recent months, Webb has been a vocal critic of the Bush administration's Iraq policy, calling it, in an op-ed in the Washington Post, a distraction from the fight against al Qaeda.

But in his introduction before a packed auditorium, the school's superintendent, Rear Adm. David Ellison, called Webb a "military hero" and a "dedicated public servant."

Webb took the baton and ran with it, warning that a war in Iraq -- and a possible long-term occupation of the country -- would be a critical mistake.

"We should not occupy territory in Iraq," he said. "Do you really want the United States on the ground in that region for a generation?"

"I don't think Iraq is that much of a threat," said Webb, an opinion rarely heard among current or former Republican administration officials.

But Webb recalled proudly that as Navy secretary in 1987, "I was the only one in the Reagan administration who opposed the tilt toward Iraq in the war with Iran," referring to the U.S. sharing of intelligence and arms with Saddam Hussein's forces.

The reaction at Monterey to Webb's speech might have surprised Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who has led the administration's charge on Iraq.

"His reputation may be controversial, but a lot of things he said we tend to agree with," said Navy Lt. Cmdr. Paul Tanks, a graduate student in space systems operations.

The Naval Postgraduate School, at least in civilian circles, does not have the name recognition of military institutions like West Point. But it is a premier school for the U.S. armed services, giving master's and Ph.D. degrees to mid-level officers of the Navy and

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other branches. About one-quarter of its student body is foreign, from the armed forces of 45 nations.

Some departments, such as meteorology and computer science, rank with the best of U.S. civilian universities.

"The military is not monolithic," said John Arquilla, a professor of defense analysis who was in the audience Thursday. "These are all military officers, they're very sensible people, and Webb is a very, very thoughtful guy."

Arquilla, like Webb, is one of the military's critical thinkers, an oft-quoted expert on what he calls "network theory" -- studying decentralized organizations like al Qaeda.

"Iraq is a terrible detour from what we ought to be doing," Arquilla said. "The real threat is from the al Qaeda network. Saddam is a minimal threat to us. He knows that if he uses any of his weapons of mass destruction against us or our allies, we're going to nuke him into glass, but if al Qaeda uses them, what are we going to retaliate against? Whom do we target?"

Arquilla explained that many students agree with Webb. Military officers, he said, are far from the hard-line, uncritical followers that most civilians think they are.

"Most of my students are in special operations, they want to be challenged, they are off-design thinkers by nature," Arquilla said.

"Overall, military officers have a great openness of mind. There's a great capacity for innovative thinking. They've seen a lot, they've done a lot, they come here at mid-career. Now, we're getting many who are rotating out of Afghanistan. This isn't like four-star generals who are just thinking how to protect their conventional force structures."

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