

VIEWS » JULY 1, 2008 » [WEB ONLY](#)

Earth to Ken Brociner

By [MARTHA BIONDI AND JAMES THINDWA](#)

In [The American Left: What Progressives Can Learn From Obama](#), Ken Brociner claims that the U.S. left, especially the progressive media, has devalued political discourse by intentionally mischaracterizing conservatives and questioning their sincerity. Hello? What political universe does he live in?

That is a charge more applicable to the pundits on the right than the journalists and activists on the left, who labor in the trenches challenging right-wing dogma.

Brociner invokes Barack Obama's commitment to "a different brand of politics" as a foil to bludgeon such respected progressive voices as MoveOn.org, and *In These Times* Senior Editor and bestselling author David Sirota. However, these charges lack merit. Brociner provides no evidence that leftists have mischaracterized or defamed their opponents.

For starters, Brociner finds the use of the term "warmonger" to describe neoconservative champions of the War to be outside acceptable parameters of debate. This would be laughable were it not so tragically misplaced. This war was sold to the American people with lies and falsehoods. That is beyond dispute. Republican presidential candidate John McCain has himself asserted that the United States might occupy Iraq for another one hundred years. Why then, is the term "warmonger" equivalent to assigning, as Brociner puts it, "a consciously malevolent motive"? Doesn't the term "warmonger" depict "the world as it really is," a quality Brociner inexplicably finds lacking in progressive media?

Indeed, it was the Bush administration, not "the progressive media" that distorted the truth. Vice President Dick Cheney repeatedly, and falsely, charged that Saddam Hussein had "reconstituted nuclear weapons." Richard Perle, the then Defense Policy Board chair, asserted falsely that "Mohammed Atta met Saddam Hussein in Baghdad prior to September 11." And on PBS' NewsHour, National Security advisor Condoleezza Rice declared that the administration's nuclear assertions were "absolutely supportable." In each case, these declarations were made in spite of evidence to the contrary. What then, was the motive behind these utterances if not a desire for war?

Brociner castigates MoveOn.org for the "General Betray US" advertisement, claiming that it was "widely ... interpreted" as accusing David Petraeus of "consciously and deliberately betraying the United States." Not only does he offer no evidence of such a backlash, but in his pique, he seems to have misunderstood MoveOn's main point: the general had betrayed the American people, not committed treason. In fact, the view that General Petraeus' professional objectivity was compromised in his authorship of the Petraeus Report is not new. Tom Lantos, the late California congressman, no flaming lefty, charged that the administration had sent Petraeus "to convince members of Congress that victory is at hand" and that this "contrasts sharply with the deeply

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pessimistic reports of the independent Government Accountability Office.” Given the White House’s record politicizing governmental appointments, doubting the independence of an appointee whose report validates dubious war is only logical.

But Brociner’s most serious — again unsubstantiated — charge against the MoveOn ad is that it undermined “congressional efforts to set a deadline for withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq.” To blame progressive activists for the failure of the Democratic Congress to halt funding for the war is intellectually dishonest and downright bizarre. Congressional Democrats have a long history of capitulation on national security. They voted for the war and its funding way before the MoveOn advertisement. The failure to end the war after the 2006 election victories can hardly be blamed on a one-page ad in the *New York Times*.

Brociner assails David Sirota for failing to consider that Obama might actually be a true believer in centrist economic policies. But as those of us in community organizing in Chicago know, Obama has been “silencing populist rhetoric” of late, especially on NAFTA. But, it’s not just us. *Time*’s Massimo Calabresi makes this veiled point (“Obama’s Supreme Move to the Center,” June 26), writing, “while Barack Obama may be ranked as one of the Senate’s most liberal members....he is carefully moving to the center ahead of the fall campaign.” However, even if Obama does share the economic philosophy of his Wall Street donors, it is a fact that for a generation or more our government has been shaped by pay-to-play politics. It is this underlying reality that Brociner denies. Since when has it been “dogmatic” for the left — or anyone else, for that matter — to suggest that candidates receiving large corporate donations might become beholden to those interests? Indeed this aspect of American politics is taught in introductory political science classes.

Brociner also sees dogma in David Sirota’s view that “Clintonism ... is about trying to appease Big Money while pretending to serve ordinary people.” But it was commonly acknowledged in both the mainstream and independent media that Clinton governed through a strategy of triangulation. The Clintons in fact epitomize the dissonance between rhetoric and practice. Bill Clinton implemented neo-liberal policies, including ending welfare and enacting NAFTA, and Sen. Clinton voted for the infamous bankruptcy bill that made it difficult for average people to seek relief through the courts. Yes, they did all this while claiming to serve ordinary people.

A fundamental problem with Brociner is the mindset that assigns good intentions to everyone, including those who want to roll back our most basic rights. There are people who reject equality for everyone, economic and environmental justice, healthcare for all, peace (yes, they want war!), children’s rights and the right of workers to organize. Calling them out is not “demonizing” them. It is calling a spade a spade.

The forces of reaction are on the march and they don’t operate with good intentions. Recently, black and Latino workers at a Comcast facility on Chicago’s South Side voted 79 to 99 against unionizing. It was not a free choice. Comcast officials intimidated and threatened them. Three weeks prior to the vote, they were subjected to daily captive audience meetings and shown videos of unions as a subversive force. Nationally, one in five workers who openly support a union during a union drive is fired — this in a country ostensibly fighting a war for “freedom and democracy.” To what motive does Brociner think we should attribute Comcast’s conduct? What kind of “good intentions” underlie the actions of Comcast CEO Brian Roberts, who earns \$34.4 million per year while his workers are underpaid but can’t organize?

After thirty years of a well-funded conservative media machine that has institutionalized distortions, fear mongering, race-baiting and anti-union propaganda, it is stunning that Brociner would blame progressives for coarsening the public discourse. As a self-identified progressive, he should have aimed his ire at the right, which has made truth a casualty of its political agenda. Our problem has not been lack of civility, but our inability to vigorously challenge the right’s reactionary agenda. Brociner’s criticism of the progressive media confuses hard-hitting political analysis with incivility and divisiveness. But it is precisely the left’s willingness to fight back that has laid the groundwork for Obama’s rise and the possibility of a new direction.

[Editor’s note: Ken Brociner’s response to this article can be read [here](#).]

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