

Keeping Up With Jones

The North Carolina congressman shows that antiwar conservatives can win—for now.

By W. James Antle III

LATE LAST YEAR, Walter Jones looked like he might lose his seat in Congress. The seven-term Republican's emergence as a fierce critic of the Iraq War had angered some erstwhile supporters back home. He had a serious primary opponent in Onslow County Commissioner Joe McLaughlin. Influential Beltway conservatives were beginning to set their sights on Jones as well.

A \$500-a-head McLaughlin for Congress fundraiser at Arent Fox's downtown law offices last November wasn't attended by an overflow crowd. The best known and most hawkish journalist on hand, David Frum, was there as a cosponsor rather than a reporter. But amidst the hors d'oeuvres and friendly banter, there was a sense of optimism that Jones could be beaten. The most hopeful may have been McLaughlin himself. "I've hammered in signs for Walter Jones," he told me. "But he's gone too far. People in the district are ready for a change."

Some people, perhaps, but not a majority of Republican primary voters. On May 6, Jones dispatched McLaughlin by nearly 20 points. He carried all but three out of 17 counties, including Onslow County, home to both McLaughlin and the Second Marine Division at Camp Lejeune. Incumbency and a familiar family name—between the congressman and his father, someone named Walter Jones has served in North Carolina's House delegation for all but two years since 1966—surely helped. "Being an incumbent is always a plus unless he's been walking around kicking people in the shins," explains Bob

Pruett, Republican chairman for the Third Congressional District, who was neutral in the primary.

Yet Jones didn't always seem like a shoo-in. The Third District houses three military bases and a large number of veterans. President Bush won there in 2004 with 68 percent of the vote. It is, to put it mildly, not the most hospitable environment for opposing the war, and initially Jones didn't: he voted to authorize the use of force against Iraq. In 2003, taking a cue from the Carolina-based Cubbie's restaurant chain, Jones sought to have French fries rechristened "freedom fries" on Congressional menus to protest France's stand against the invasion. French toast also fell casualty.

But Jones soon began to have second thoughts. After attending the funeral of Marine Sgt. Michael Bitz, who left behind a 2-year-old and newborn twins when he was killed in action, the congressman began writing letters to the families of each service member who died in Iraq. Doubts about prewar intelligence gnawed at him, and he continued studying the matter. By June 2005, Jones was persuaded that the war had been launched in error and was co-sponsoring a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq.

This conversion cost Jones the top Republican position on the Armed Services Committee's Readiness subcommittee, though ranking member Duncan Hunter did grant his request to sit on the Oversight subcommittee. But the political reaction back home was more troubling. McLaughlin, a photogenic and gregarious former Army officer, announced

his primary challenge in May 2007. Ronald Cherubini, chairman of the Onslow County GOP, withdrew his support from Jones. "Disloyalty is something you just can't tolerate," he told *The Politico*. "That's the way military people look at it."

"Most of the polls taken at activist events showed Congressman Jones to be in serious trouble," says Pruett. McLaughlin won straw polls at Republican dinners in five different counties and released his own district-wide polling showing the race neck and neck. The freedom fries at Cubbie's turned against Jones too. Owner Neal Rowland took down the congressman's pictures and offered to host McLaughlin's election night party. "Things are moving as we want [in Iraq]," he told the *Raleigh News and Observer*. "We're bringing democracy to them."

The McLaughlin campaign sought to link Jones to left-wing groups like MoveOn.org, Code Pink, and the American Civil Liberties Union. "They tried to paint him as a liberal," says Jonathan Morris, assistant professor of political science at East Carolina University. McLaughlin quickly capitalized on votes and statements that would allow him to expand this critique beyond the war. Jones received low grades on the Club for Growth's anti-pork report card and supported overriding President Bush's veto of the Water Resources Protection Act. He also voted for Democratic energy and farm bills that Americans for Tax Reform deemed a violation of the Taxpayer Protection Pledge, including a tax increase on some U.S. subsidiaries of for-

eign corporations that was intended to pay for higher spending on food stamps.

“He wants to impeach the vice president,” Grover Norquist quipped to *The Hill*. “ATR doesn’t have a position on that. But tax increases is going too far.” Jones’s vote to advance articles of impeachment against Dick Cheney and references to “Kool-Aid drinkers” who were duped into uncritical support of the war by conservative talk radio threatened to anger the Republican base even more than tax increases.

In February, a similar coalition of hawks and economic conservatives defeated nine-term Congressman Wayne Gilchrest of Maryland by ten percentage points in the Republican primary. The Club for Growth spent more than \$340,000 on anti-Gilchrest ads. Later, Pajamas Media website obtained poll numbers that purportedly showed Ron Paul, who had endorsed Jones, down 11 points in his own GOP Congressional primary against a pro-war opponent. Things did not look good for antiwar Republicans.

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Then a funny thing happened: much of the anticipated opposition melted away. The polling data Pajamas Media cited turned out to be bogus, and Paul won his primary in a landslide. The Jones campaign released a poll showing the incumbent leading McLaughlin 54 percent to 16 percent. With a few exceptions, the expected national support for McLaughlin failed to materialize. “Unfortunately, they didn’t do anything about it,” a North Carolina Republican activist says of D.C.-based conservatives’ interest in the race. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich came to the district to raise \$70,000 for Jones.

“Jones had a warchest. He had a lot of money and was very prepared for a primary challenge,” says Morris. “He advertised very heavily on TV and radio. With McLaughlin, I didn’t see many ads, mailers, signs, anything. They could partly have to do with my location in a college town, but we get the same airwaves as the rest of east Carolina.” Pruett sums up McLaughlin’s campaign similarly: “The financing just wasn’t there.”

Despite the campaign rhetoric about Jones’s “new liberal friends,” he had a much more conservative record than Gilchrest. The Maryland congressman was pro-choice, pro-gun control, and in favor of the “comprehensive” approach to immigration reform—all positions to the left of his district. Jones, a signer of the Contract With America, strongly opposed the Bush administration’s amnesty for illegal immigrants. He is staunchly pro-life and was endorsed by the National Rifle Association. “I’ve stood up for the right of military chaplains to pray in Jesus’ name,” Jones says. “I’ve stood up for the border control agents,

Ramos and Compean.” He voted against the Medicare prescription drug benefit and No Child Left Behind, both far more costly than any earmark. And while national conservative groups might have disliked Jones’s vote against trade deals like the Central American Free Trade Agreement, his position is popular in the district. “Even on trade, he’s at least arguably conservative,” says Morris.

It would be a mistake to read too much into Jones’s primary victory or that of fellow antiwar Republican B.J. Lawson in the neighboring Fourth District. Republicans who oppose the Iraq War remain a distinct minority. Jones’s

stalwart support for defense spending and veteran’s issues probably did more to help him win over military voters than his talk of exit strategies. “Any congressman who has been in office as long as I have has a great staff and does well with constituent services,” Jones says.

Moreover, the weakened national party must focus scarce resources on protecting seats rather than punishing dissent. Ron Paul Republicans are winning primaries. Most of the 17 GOP House members who voted for a non-binding resolution against the surge will return to Congress. Jones, like Paul, is heavily favored for re-election in the fall.

This isn’t to say there hasn’t been any rethinking of the war. “I think there are a lot of people, the kind who don’t go to party functions, who understand my position,” Jones maintains, “Republican, Democrat, and unaffiliated.” He points out that the last group of voters is the fastest-growing in North Carolina right now. For Republicans like Jones, the GOP’s national woes create opportunities to change the battered party’s brand. “People are rallying around the idea of looking out for America first,” he says. “On Iraq, on trade, on gas prices, on illegal immigration.”

There is, of course, also a cautionary tale for would-be mavericks: had Congressional Republicans fared better in fundraising and recruiting candidates for open seats, more resources would have been available to aid a challenge like McLaughlin’s. Either way, Jones is safe for now. “We’re committed as a party to getting Jones re-elected,” Pruett vows.

The North Carolina congressman has his own priorities for the next two years: “I’m going to try to continue to serve God and His people”—while keeping the lights on in the small but determined antiwar Republican caucus. ■

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Moscow Hangover

Soviet Communism no longer enslaves Russia, but the West has yet to exorcise Lenin's ghost.

By Peter Hitchens

WHAT A PITY it is that there will be no new Cold War. How useful it would be for the cause of freedom if we could once again hang the Kremlin and the Gulag round the radical Left's neck. But we cannot. The Kremlin is now swept clean of dogma, the Gulag is gone, and Russia is just another sordid despotism.

And so, freed from embarrassing associations with Lenin, Stalin, five-year plans, purges, famines, and the KGB, the world's radical reformers are far stronger, and far harder to resist, than they used to be. As long as the words "progressive," "Communist," and "Socialist" brought to mind images of Soviet oppression, Soviet shortages, and Soviet intolerance, millions of people were inoculated against them.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn used to complain that the Iron Curtain kept everything out of Russia except what he called the "liquid manure" of Western trash culture, which somehow seeped beneath the barriers. In a strange and subtle way, it also prevented the spread of revolution in the advanced world.

It is an interesting lesson in real power to see how much mightier left-wing ideas and movements have become since they lost the support of all those Russian tanks. Far from helping the revolutionary cause, the columns of T-72s showed to the dimmest observer that socialism is not a gentle, kindly thing but an arrogant, ironclad, goose-stepping bully, which answers doubts with bayonets as soon as it has the

power to do so. There was never any need to ask how many divisions the Communist Party had because it was so anxious to show them to us.

I watched the last proper Soviet tank parade as it thundered across Red Square on Nov. 7, 1990. There were red flags, rigid salutes, slanted faces, jackboots, and lush, totalitarian music. Just behind me and to my right, a shifty and diffident Politburo huddled on top of Lenin's tomb in the harsh wind. The thing they were uncertainly celebrating was called the Glorious October Socialist Revolution, that colossal failure that would have killed idealism off for good if we ever actually learned anything from history.

They were not enjoying themselves much because they knew just how bad everything was and suspected their days were almost over. I was enjoying it immensely because, in those days, I harbored the vain idea that the world might learn something useful from the unmitigated disaster of the Soviet Utopia. For thousands of miles in every direction, undeniable and no longer denied, lay the rusting, leaking, sagging evidence that this revolution had failed and that international socialism was a discredited, bankrupt idea.

A couple of months later, I saw some of the same tanks snarling down a midnight highway in Vilnius, capital of Lithuania, which was then battling to regain independence from Moscow. I was in a group of journalists following

them, until they swung their barrels toward our taxi in a way that seemed to lack a sense of humor. Earlier that day, Soviet soldiers had opened fire on civilians, so we thought it wise to drop back. We caught up with them later and also with the corpses they had caused, officially classified as "traffic accidents." They were part of a little known and failed attempt by Mikhail Gorbachev to seize control of the city while the world was distracted by the first phase of the recapture of Kuwait.

I saw the tanks for the last time in August 1991, when a squadron of them trundled up my Moscow street in the early morning sunshine, part of a fumbled KGB putsch against Gorbachev. The drunken collapse of this coup ended the Soviet Communist Party forever. All over Moscow, the trashcans were full of half-burned Communist Party membership cards. This was not a temporary setback but the death of an ideology. Soviet Communism had made a fool of itself and had gone. After that, of course, there could be no more Red Square parades, no more anniversaries of Glorious October, though they had one more excursion, in 1993, shelling the Russian parliament on behalf of Boris Yeltsin.

Oddly, the Communist Party, or rather its bewildered true believers, survived. No normal person continued to belong, but these rather touching, rather serious old people—far from contemptible, often incorruptible and serious, fre-