Montana Democrat’s Thesis Presented Others’ Work as His Own

Senator John Walsh of Montana Confronts Questions of Plagiarism

By JONATHAN MARTIN  JULY 23, 2014

WASHINGTON — Democrats were thrilled when John Walsh of Montana was appointed to the United States Senate in February. A decorated veteran of the Iraq war and former adjutant general of his state’s National Guard, Mr. Walsh offered the Democratic Party something it frequently lacks: a seasoned military man.

On the campaign trail this year, Mr. Walsh, 53, has made his military service a main selling point. Still wearing his hair close-cropped, he notes he was targeted for killing by Iraqi militants and says his time in uniform informs his views on a range of issues.

But one of the highest-profile credentials of Mr. Walsh’s 33-year military career appears to have been improperly attained. An examination of the final paper required for Mr. Walsh’s master’s degree from the United States Army War College indicates the senator appropriated at least a quarter of his thesis on American Middle East policy from other authors’ works, with no attribution.

Mr. Walsh completed the paper, what the War College calls a “strategy research project,” to earn his degree in 2007, when he was 46. The sources of the material he presents as his own include academic papers, policy journal essays and books that are almost all available online.

Most strikingly, each of the six recommendations Mr. Walsh laid out at the conclusion of his 14-page paper, titled “The Case for Democracy as a Long Term National Strategy,” is taken nearly word-for-word without attribution from a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace document on the same topic.

In his third recommendation, for example, Mr. Walsh writes: “Democracy
promoters need to engage as much as possible in a dialogue with a wide cross section of influential elites: mainstream academics, journalists, moderate Islamists, and members of the professional associations who play a political role in some Arab countries, rather than only the narrow world of westernized democracy and human rights advocates.”

The same exact sentence appears on the sixth page of a 2002 Carnegie paper written by four scholars at the research institute. In all, Mr. Walsh’s recommendations section runs to more than 800 words, nearly all of it taken verbatim from the Carnegie paper, without any footnote or reference to it. In addition, significant portions of the language in Mr. Walsh’s paper can be found in a 1998 essay by a scholar at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, a research institute at Harvard.

For example, Mr. Walsh writes: “The United States will have an interest in promoting democracy because further democratization enhances the lives of citizens of other countries and contributes to a more peaceful international system. To the extent that Americans care about citizens of other countries and international peace, they will see benefits from the continued spread of democracy.”

The Harvard paper, written in 1998 by Sean M. Lynn-Jones, a scholar at the Belfer Center, includes the same two sentences.

Mr. Walsh does not footnote or cite Mr. Lynn-Jones’s essay, titled “Why the United States Should Spread Democracy,” anywhere in his paper.

Both the Carnegie and Harvard papers are easily accessible on the Internet.

In an interview outside his Capitol Hill office on Tuesday, after he was presented with multiple examples of identical passages from his paper and the Carnegie and Harvard essays, Mr. Walsh said he did not believe he had done anything wrong.

“I didn’t do anything intentional here,” he said, adding that he did not recall using the Carnegie and Harvard sources.

Asked directly if he had plagiarized, he responded: “I don’t believe I did, no.”

On Wednesday, a campaign aide for Mr. Walsh did not contest the plagiarism but suggested that it be viewed in the context of the senator’s long career. She said Mr. Walsh was going through a difficult period at the time he wrote the paper, noting that one of the members of his unit from Iraq had committed suicide in 2007, weeks before it was due.
The aide said Mr. Walsh, who served in Iraq from November 2004 to November 2005, “dealt with the experience of post-deployment,” but acknowledged he had not sought treatment.

The master’s degree in strategic studies from the War College has benefited Mr. Walsh’s career: In a military evaluation the year after Mr. Walsh received it, his commander praised him for it, writing that he “leads his peers and sets example in maintaining continuous military education and training subjects pertinent to today’s leadership challenges.”

In September 2008, Mr. Walsh, a recipient of the Bronze Star, was appointed adjutant general of Montana’s National Guard by the governor. A subsequent military evaluation said his prospects for the post had been “bolstered” in part by his degree from the War College.

Located in Carlisle, Pa., the Army War College is a coveted career stop for ambitious officers, and its graduates since its 1901 founding include Dwight D. Eisenhower, George Patton and Norman Schwarzkopf. As with most military institutes, the War College emphasizes honor and integrity: Its current student handbook states that plagiarism will result in disenrollment and that discoveries of academic violations have led to degrees being rescinded and names being scraped off the bronze plaques honoring graduates on campus.

“Sooner or later, academic dishonesty will be discovered,” the handbook, known as the Communicative Arts Directive, warns.

In 2012, Mr. Walsh stepped down as the head of the state’s National Guard after winning his first bid for elected office to become Montana’s lieutenant governor. From that position, he was appointed to the Senate this year by Gov. Steve Bullock.

The Senate vacancy arose after President Obama nominated Max Baucus, the veteran Democrat who planned to retire from Congress, to be ambassador to China. Democrats hoped that installing Mr. Walsh in February would strengthen the party’s position and efforts to retain the seat.

Mr. Walsh’s military record and centrist politics were seen as assets in the independent-minded state, and, as an incumbent senator, he would be better positioned to raise money for this fall’s election. Still, Mr. Walsh is trailing Representative Steve Daines, his Republican opponent, strategists on both sides say, and has trailed Mr. Daines in fund-raising.

Questions have previously been raised about Mr. Walsh’s résumé and conduct, though they were comparatively minor.
Earlier this year, it was revealed that he was reprimanded in 2010 for using his role as adjutant general to urge other guardsmen to join a private advocacy group, the National Guard Association of the United States, in which he was seeking a leadership role.

As a result he was denied a promotion from colonel to general, he acknowledged in January. In response to the matter, Mr. Walsh released about 400 pages of his military records, which detailed his service awards and was full of effusive praise from his commanding officers.

There has also been a discrepancy about where Mr. Walsh earned his undergraduate degree. He was listed in the biographical directory of Congress as having graduated in 1990 from the University at Albany, State University of New York, but actually earned his bachelor of science from what was then known as Regents College, an adult learning institute that issued degrees under the umbrella of the University of the State of New York.

Mr. Walsh changed the listing after the newspaper Roll Call ran an article about the matter, but did not offer an explanation publicly. The breadth of Mr. Walsh’s apparent plagiarism, however, is startling — and rivaled by few other examples in recent political history. Senator Rand Paul, Republican of Kentucky, was found last year to have presented the work of others as his own in a newspaper opinion article, a book and speeches. And Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. dropped his 1988 presidential bid when it was revealed that in campaign speeches he had used language similar to that of the British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock without attributing the remarks.

Mr. Walsh appears to have gone considerably further.

About a third of his paper consists of material either identical to or extremely similar to passages in other sources, such as the Carnegie or Harvard papers, and is presented without attribution. Another third is attributed to sources through footnotes, but uses other authors’ exact — or almost exact — language without quotation marks.

The senator included 96 footnotes in his paper, but many of them only illustrate this troubling pattern. In repeated instances, Mr. Walsh uses the language of others with no quotation marks, but footnotes the source from which the material came. In other cases, the passages appear in his paper with a word or two changed, but are otherwise identical to the authors’ language.

For example, in the first paragraph of his paper, Mr. Walsh writes of
President George W. Bush: “During the 2000 presidential campaign Bush and his advisors made it clear that they favored great-power realism over idealistic notions such as nation building or democracy promotion.”

At the end of this sentence, which Mr. Walsh included without quotation marks, he footnoted a reference to a 2003 article in Foreign Affairs by Thomas Carothers, a prominent and highly credentialed foreign policy expert. Mr. Carothers’ essay read: “During the 2000 presidential campaign Bush and his advisers had made it clear that they favored great-power realism over idealistic notions such as nation building or democracy promotion.”

The only difference is that Mr. Walsh wrote “advisors” rather than “advisers” and did not use “had,” as Mr. Carothers did in his article.

In other instances, Mr. Walsh swaps a synonym for a word in the original document, and condenses sentences.

He writes on his second page: “There are deep disagreements about the appropriate theoretical framework, about whether democracy is simply an institutional arrangement for choosing rulers or an end in itself, about how to measure and evaluate democracy, and about the importance of prerequisites for democracy.

The footnote at the end of this sentence, presented without quotation marks in Mr. Walsh’s paper, is to a chapter by Robert L. Rothstein in a 1995 book of essays, “Democracy, War, and Peace in the Middle East.”

Mr. Rothstein’s sentence is slightly longer and uses “profound” rather than “deep,” but is otherwise identical.

Such copying of a footnoted source without quotation marks is specifically prohibited in the War College’s handbook.

“Copying a segment of another’s work word for word, then conveniently ‘forgetting’ to include quotation marks, but ‘remembering’ to cite the source,” is described as the second example of academic fraud in the handbook.

The first is: “Directly quoting another author’s work without giving proper credit to the author.”

“Plagiarism,” the handbook notes, “is a serious form of cheating that carries serious consequences.”

Nick Corasaniti and Kitty Bennett contributed reporting.