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Kerry and the Democratic campaign: a descent into farce

By Bill Van Auken, SEP presidential candidate
14 August 2004

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The presidential campaign of John Kerry has in the two brief weeks since the Democratic convention descended from political bankruptcy into outright farce.

Kerry and his advisors have managed to paint themselves into a political corner that on first impression would have seemed unimaginable. Bush has the Democratic challenger on the defensive—on the war in Iraq.

This unelected government, deemed by millions of Americans to be illegitimate, has been caught out using monstrous lies to drag the country into an illegal and unprovoked war. The criminal character of the entire enterprise has been exposed before America and the world by the torture revelations from Abu Ghraib prison, the bombing of cities, and the shameless corruption and war profiteering by corporations with close connections to the Bush administration.

One-and-a-half years after an invasion that Bush claimed would be greeted with flowers, the entire country remains a combat zone. Tens of thousands of ordinary Iraqis have risen in armed resistance against the US military occupation and a puppet regime that lacks any legitimacy. The death toll among US soldiers is fast approaching 1,000, under conditions where the majority of the American population is convinced the war was unnecessary and not worth the blood already spilled.

How is it possible, then, that it is Bush who is on the offensive and the Democratic challenger on the ropes over such an unpopular and discredited

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war?

The answer is that the Democratic Party agreed in advance not to make the war an issue. It has no desire to turn the election into a referendum on the war, because Kerry, no less than Bush, is committed to continuing the bloodbath.

From the outset, any differences between the two parties over Iraq were tactical, not fundamental. They concerned how best to wage a war that the American people did not want and did not approve, and how best to fashion the lies used to justify it.

In the absence of any real debate over Iraq, the issue has been subsumed into the blather about “character” and “values” that both parties use to politically chloroform the electorate and exclude any serious consideration of the issues confronting the broad masses of the people. As a result, Bush and company have had little difficulty focusing what passes for a debate not on the war itself, but rather on Kerry’s political twists and turns on Iraq.

Consider the Democratic candidate’s problem. After criticizing the Bush administration for preparing to go to war prematurely, in October 2002 he joined with other Senate Democrats in voting to give Bush blank-check authorization to launch an invasion whenever he saw fit.

In the course of the Democratic primaries, after coming under fire from Howard Dean for his war authorization vote, Kerry suggested that he had cast that vote only because he took Bush’s word on the supposed existence of massive stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. He had been misled, he insisted.

He told voters in Iowa that if they believed “I would have gone to war the way George Bush did, then don’t vote for me.”

Under conditions in which tens of millions of people around the world, including millions of Americans, had judged the claims of the Bush administration to be crude fabrications, and had taken to the streets to denounce the administration’s war-mongering, Kerry’s pose of credulity was, to put it mildly, unconvincing.

Once he had the nomination wrapped up, Kerry abruptly dropped his anti-war pose and declared, at every opportunity, his support for the occupation of Iraq and opposition to the growing popular sentiment to pull the troops out of Iraq, stating repeatedly that America could not “cut and run.”

Finally, this week, in response to a direct challenge from Bush, the Democratic candidate announced that he would have voted for the resolution authorizing war, even if he had known then that the justifications given in the resolution itself—Iraq's supposed WMD and Saddam Hussein's alleged collaboration with Al Qaeda—were false. His principal national security adviser, former State Department official James Rubin, went on record saying that had Kerry been president, the US would “in all probability” have invaded Iraq by now.

Bush's advisers have taken the measure of their opponent. They have a clear campaign strategy: to use Kerry's contortions on the war to portray the Democratic candidate as a carping hypocrite. This serves to rally Bush's base of pro-war voters, while eroding the pool of potential Kerry voters who mistakenly associate a vote for the Democrat with opposition to the war. The Republican message to the latter is: “Why bother to go to the polls to vote for someone who agrees with our man on the war?”

Finding themselves on the defensive and in disarray, Kerry and his defenders protest that the Democratic candidate's record on Iraq is “consistent.” They are right—he has consistently talked out of both sides of his mouth.

On the one hand, he has intermittently postured as a critic of the war, in order to maintain the support of the millions who oppose it. On the other hand, he has repeatedly reassured the American ruling elite and the dominant right-wing faction within his own party that he shares the strategic goal of the Bush administration—colonial domination of Iraq and its oil wealth—and the use of military force to achieve it.

His campaign pitch has been reduced to the charge that Bush has bungled the job. If elected, he will pursue the same policy, but “do it right.” When obliged to elaborate, he declares that he would seek greater international support for this and future wars, while fostering “equality of sacrifice” in the destruction of lives and living standards that such wars entail.

This right-wing, overtly imperialist perspective is combined with Kerry's feverish self-promotion as a Vietnam War hero, and vows to increase military spending, double the size of the US Special Forces, and intensify the global “war on terror.”

In the face of this reactionary farce, we say to those opponents of US militarism who are backing Kerry under the banner of “anybody but Bush”—snap out of it and stop wasting your time!

It is impossible to listen with a straight face to the ever more implausible alibis churned out by Kerry's liberal and "left" apologists. In the aftermath of Kerry's categorical endorsement of the decision to invade a country that posed no threat to the American people, some of his "anti-war" supporters have resorted to the hair-splitting sophistry that voting to authorize the war is somehow different from supporting the war.

Was the Massachusetts senator so naïve as to believe that once granted this authority, Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld wouldn't use it? Everyone in Washington knew that the administration came into office determined to invade Iraq, and that the WMD argument was merely a pretext.

In point of fact, Kerry and other leading Democrats embraced the Bush administration's bogus intelligence reports because they themselves supported an unprovoked attack on Iraq, and were looking for a pretext and political cover to line up behind the war cabal in the White House and Pentagon.

In contests between the Democratic and Republican parties, socialists have always rejected the "lesser of two evils" argument on principle. The two parties are component parts of the same system. Whatever their tactical differences, both are instruments of the American financial oligarchy and are dedicated to defending its interests. Support for a supposedly less reactionary candidate can only serve to divert working people from the necessary fight to establish their political independence from the parties of big business.

But in this election, there is no discernible "lesser evil." Over the past decade, the Democratic Party has moved rightward in lockstep with the Republicans, providing—in the persons of Democrats like Kerry and Edwards—support for every one of the current administration's key policies, from the Iraq war to the USA Patriot Act.

We in the Socialist Equality Party state unequivocally that we have no preference for Kerry over Bush, and are utterly indifferent as to which of these two scoundrels wins the 2004 election.

In either case, the eruption of militarism abroad and the attacks on the basic rights and social conditions of working people at home will continue. The reactionary and criminal policies of the Bush administration are not an aberration arising from the right-wing ideology of its leading personnel. Rather, they are the product of the insoluble crisis of American capitalism, a crisis that will only intensify after November.

We reject the claim that there is no way to defeat Bush outside of supporting Kerry, and that all political activity must be subordinated to a Democratic victory in November. On the contrary, there is no way to put an end to the policies of the Bush administration—enacted with the support of the Democrats—outside of the emergence of a new, mass movement of the working class armed with a socialist and internationalist program.

Preparing such a movement politically and programmatically is the essential purpose of the Socialist Equality Party's 2004 election campaign. This is the vital task posed not just for this election, but for the great struggles to come, no matter who occupies the White House next January. We urge all our supporters and all readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* to join us in this fight: support our campaign, vote for our candidates and, above all, make the decision to become a member of the SEP.

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