

US political establishment lines up behind Barack Obama

By Patrick Martin
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As the contests for the presidential nominations of the Democratic and Republican parties head into the potentially decisive primary voting on February 5, there has been a pronounced shift in favor of the campaign of Senator Barack Obama of Illinois, reflected in a surge in opinion polls, large turnouts at campaign rallies, a flood of campaign contributions, and a series of high-profile political and media endorsements.

The past week has seen a significant intervention by the ruling elite to promote the Obama campaign, acting through its political representatives—particularly Senator Edward Kennedy, longtime leader of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party—and through the corporate-controlled mass media.

Kennedy's endorsement of Obama was a devastating blow to the Clinton campaign, signaling that Obama, far from representing an insurgency, was becoming the consensus candidate of the Democratic Party establishment. This was followed by a slew of newspaper endorsements, including 34 in California, among them the *Los Angeles Times* and *La Opinion*, the most widely read Spanish-language daily.

Opinion polls published Saturday and Sunday found Obama essentially tied with the longtime frontrunner in the Democratic nominating contest, Senator Hillary Clinton, both nationally and in the critical state of California. That state is among the 22 voting Tuesday and awards the largest single number of delegates, more than ten percent of the total, to the Democratic National Convention.

If Obama wins California and gains a majority of delegates chosen in the "Super Tuesday" primaries and caucuses, he would become the overwhelming favorite to win the Democratic presidential nomination and face the presumptive Republican candidate, Arizona Senator John McCain.

The Obama surge is undoubtedly a significant political event, but like any phenomenon in American politics, it has to be analyzed from two standpoints—what it reveals about changes in mass consciousness, and what it reveals about the ongoing policy discussions and political struggles taking place within the ruling elite.

For millions of voters, and particularly for young people, the response to Obama's campaign reflects both a deep-going desire for significant social and political change, as well as widespread illusions—fostered assiduously by the media—that the election of the first black president would represent a fundamental break with an old and discredited political order in the United States.

Obama is not, however, the product of the civil rights struggles against racial oppression, nor is he associated with any popular movement from below. His career has far more in common with those of Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell, individuals selected and groomed by the American ruling class to carry out its policies. Like them, he is being used to put a new face on fundamentally

reactionary policies and institutions.

In policy terms, there is little to distinguish Obama from Clinton, although her 2002 vote in the US Senate to authorize the war in Iraq has served as a lead weight around her neck throughout the campaign. The war is overwhelmingly unpopular among the American people as a whole, and among young people and Democratic primary voters in particular.

While Obama has never presented himself explicitly as an "antiwar" candidate, he has sought to take advantage of Clinton's record of support for the war, and his own early criticism of it, arguing that he would be a more effective opponent against McCain, a diehard advocate of the war.

It is necessary to distinguish sharply between the political shift among working people and youth, a movement to the left which presages the outbreak of mass social and political struggles, and the efforts of the ruling elite to manipulate popular sentiments, manufacture illusions, and disarm the masses politically.

The Obama campaign is not the vehicle of a leftward movement in the United States—as proclaimed by liberal groups such as MoveOn.org and publications like *The Nation*. It is a preemptive attack by the ruling class against such a movement. Its function is to delude the American people and divert their growing opposition to war, economic crisis and attacks on democratic rights back into the dead-end of the Democratic Party.

While the American people will cast ballots on November 4, the real decisions are made long before then, in the selection of candidates and framing of the election by the media and the corporate bosses and billionaires who finance and politically screen the candidates.

It was millions in "startup money" from wealthy backers that made it possible for a very junior senator from Illinois, a man who four years ago was serving in the Illinois state legislature and unknown nationally, to become a viable presidential candidate.

The largely flattering treatment of the Obama campaign, not only in the liberal sections of the media but in the right-wing press as well—Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* endorsed him in the February 5 primary in that state—demonstrates a broader agreement in the ruling elite that some sort of new departure in US politics may be required. This, of course, will be a cosmetic and not a fundamental shift.

Virtually all sections of the US ruling elite have now drawn the conclusion that the Bush administration is a disastrous failure. The world standing of America has declined catastrophically, while the base for imperialist policies has eroded within the United States itself, as the vast majority of the American people rejects the war in Iraq and opposes its extension into Iran, Syria, Pakistan or other potential targets.

The president who enters the White House in January 2009 will face immense crises both at home and abroad. To address these crises from the standpoint of the needs of the financial aristocracy will require the imposition of unprecedented sacrifices on the American people. That in turn will require a new political approach—a turn to the Democratic Party, which has always been

relied upon by big business to use its image as the “party of the people” to defend the profit system.

The huge swing to the Democratic Party in campaign contributions from big business reflects this emerging consensus. According to recent financial reports to the Federal Election Commission, investment bankers have tilted their financial support overwhelmingly to the Democratic Party, giving roughly equal amounts to Clinton and Obama. In total contributions, both Clinton and Obama collected more than \$100 million apiece in 2007, more than twice the largest amount raised by any Republican, while Obama raised an additional \$32.6 million in January 2008 alone.

Among those backing the Obama campaign are such pillars of the US political establishment as Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter and an arch-Cold Warrior; retired Air Force General Merrill McPeak and a host of other retired military brass; billionaire Warren Buffett, the second-richest man in America; and an array of Wall Street and corporate executives, none of whom could be suspected of any sympathy for radical social change.

Important sections of the ruling elite have concluded that, particularly for the overseas interests of American imperialism, a President Obama would provide important advantages. He would at one stroke put a “new face” on American foreign policy, and make it more likely that Washington could overcome the international isolation and global hostility created by the arrogant unilateralism of the Bush White House and its failed intervention in Iraq. And it may well require a Democrat in the White House to reinstate the draft and provide the manpower required to sustain and expand the US drive for military domination of the oil-rich Middle East and Central Asia.

An argument along these lines is made in Sunday’s editorial in the *Los Angeles Times*, the most widely read newspaper in California. The Times has not made an endorsement in a presidential primary contest since 1972, but broke with that tradition to back Obama in the Democratic primary and McCain among the Republicans.

The *Times* editorial says Obama “electrifies young voters ... because he embodies the desire to move to the next chapter of the American story.” It praises his early opposition to the war in Iraq, while noting approvingly his “understanding that some liberal orthodoxies developed during the last 40 years have been overtaken by history.” This last comment indicates that Obama has reassured the ruling elite that there will be no return to policies of liberal reform or expensive government social programs.

Then comes the meat of the argument: “An Obama presidency would present, as a distinctly American face, a man of African descent, born in the nation’s youngest state [Hawaii], with a childhood spent partly in Asia, among Muslims. No public relations campaign could do more than Obama’s mere presence in the White

House to defuse anti-American passion around the world...”

The *Los Angeles Times*, owned by Tribune Corporation, one of the giant US media monopolies, is not here declaring any opposition to the principle of US world domination embraced by all sections of the moneyed elite. It is rather voicing the desire to turn away from an exclusive reliance on the use of military force alone to sustain that dominance.

A sizeable section of the US ruling class recognizes, in the wake of the Bush debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan, that it is necessary to revive methods of diplomacy, political propaganda, economic penetration and the use of alliances to promote imperialist interests. It should go without saying that this “soft power” is to be employed in combination with, not as a substitute for, military force.

An Obama presidency (or a Clinton presidency, should her campaign ultimately prevail), would thus represent a fine-tuning or adjustment in American foreign policy, but no let-up in American imperialism’s drive to war and conquest, which arises not out of the brains of George W. Bush and Richard Cheney, but out of the historical crisis of American and world capitalism.

Obama is merely the product of an effective marketing campaign which has utilized media outlets ranging from Rupert Murdoch to *The Nation* to sell this new version of a very old product—the Democratic Party “friend of the people,” previously incarnated in the “insurgent” candidacy of Jimmy Carter in 1976, then in the “man from Hope,” Bill Clinton himself, in 1992. An Obama presidency would no more represent a fundamental change in American politics than the election of Carter and Clinton did, and if Murdoch & Co. feared it would, he would never have been allowed anywhere near the White House.

The typical Obama speech is a mass of nebulous phrases about uniting America, without the slightest acknowledgement that social and economic interests of working people, the vast majority of Americans, are diametrically opposed to those of the corporate and financial elite. In perhaps his most noteworthy comment, after the South Carolina primary, he explicitly rejected the notion that the wealthy don’t care about the condition of ordinary people.

Obama’s mantra of bringing everyone together may appeal to the naïve illusions of youth who are making their first political experiences, but Obama and the Wall Street bankers and media moguls who are promoting him know exactly what they are doing. Theirs is a conscious policy of blurring social and political differences and denying class divisions in a society more deeply divided along economic lines than ever before in its history.

The *World Socialist Web Site* opposes all those who seek to bolster the shattered credibility of the Democratic Party. The only road to progressive social change in the United States is the road of the political independence of the working class, through a break with the Democratic Party and the whole structure of capitalist politics, and the building of a mass political movement based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.