Democrats jump on Bush's war wagon

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21 September 2002

With Bush's dismissal of Iraq's agreement to readmit weapons inspectors, the pretense that the US war drive is motivated by concern over "weapons of mass destruction" stands thoroughly exposed. A number of US allies, led by United Nations Security Council member Russia, are resisting, at least for now, Washington's demand that the UN sanction its war plans. But the response from one corner—the Democratic Party—has been to rally all the more demonstratively behind the White House's preparations for a "preemptive" invasion of the oil-rich country.

While the administration submitted a draft resolution in Congress supporting an invasion to achieve "regime change" in Iraq, and top officials began making their case for war in Capitol Hill hearings, leading Democrats made it clear they would line up behind Bush.

Petty political calculations play a significant part in the shift by congressional Democrats to more openly support war against Iraq. But the fundamental basis for their unity with the Republican president is that they all represent the same big business constituency, which sees a war for control of the Persian Gulf's oil reserves as essential for US corporate interests.

Within the last few days, one leading Democrat after another has rushed to declare his support for a US war. Senate Majority Leader Thomas Daschle promised "strong bipartisan support" for a resolution granting the administration authorization to wage war. He indicated that such a measure would be passed within the next few weeks—that is, before Congress adjourns in advance of the November mid-term elections.

There were some muted expressions of concern about the unprecedented and sweeping military powers that the resolution would grant the president. The draft sent by Bush to Congress reads: "The president is authorized to use all means that he determines to be appropriate, including force, in order to enforce the United Nations Security Council Resolutions ... defend the national security interests of the United States against Iraq, and restore international peace and security in the region."

This amounts to a blank check for Bush not only to wage war against Iraq and install a US puppet regime there, but to use military force anywhere in the Middle East.

"We are interested and determined to keep the focus on Iraq, not on Iran or other countries in the region that also pose a threat to the United States," said Daschle, hinting that the administration may have more far-reaching plans for military action.

There were scattered murmurs of dissent from Democratic senators and congressmen suggesting that the US should first go through the motions of pressing the UN to act before launching a unilateral attack. These were notable above all for their scarcity.

If so-called liberals in the Democratic Party's congressional caucus, such as Senator Edward Kennedy, have qualms about the drive to war, they have for the most part kept it to themselves. Kennedy's fellow Massachusetts Democrat, Senator John Kerry, limited his reservations to suggesting that Washington pursue UN options before launching an invasion. Appearing on the "Face the Nation" television program last Sunday, Kerry declared, "You have to exhaust the possibilities here, so that you have a legitimacy in your actions." Aides have been quoted in the press as saying he is prepared to vote for a resolution authorizing Bush to

attack Iraq, even if the administration fails to embrace his proposal to "legitimize" war.

Daschle and others in the Democratic congressional leadership had previously temporized on Iraq, saying the administration had failed to make a case for military action and that full debate was needed. On Tuesday, however, the Senate majority leader declared that Bush's speech to the UN had removed all reservations and paved the way for Democratic support.

"We don't want to be a rubber stamp, but we do want to be helpful and supportive," said Daschle after receiving Bush's resolution

Daschle was forced to admit that the administration had yet to provide any detailed proof that the Iraqi regime was developing weapons that posed a threat to US security. He added, however, "We have ample evidence to suggest that Saddam Hussein is every bit as dangerous as he has been at any time in the last 10 years." In other words, there is no greater justification to wage war against Iraq today than has existed during the entire period since the end of the last Persian Gulf War.

Senator John Edwards of North Carolina, considered a likely contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004, rushed to the well of the Senate within hours of Bush's speech to the UN, declaring his willingness to support a unilateral US attack if the UN refused to give Washington its approval.

"America is united in its determination to eliminate forever the threat of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction," Edwards wrote in a September 19 *Washington Post* opinion column. Echoing Bush and other administration officials, he went on to dismiss the sending of UN weapons inspectors to determine whether any such weapons even exist as a "gambit we have seen before."

In fact, the "gambit" was Washington's. The US pressed for weapons inspectors in the hope that Iraq would balk, providing a pretext for war. There is little doubt that if inspectors do return to the Arab country, the US will provoke a confrontation that will be seized on as a new casus belli. However, all indications are that the US will refuse to allow the process of renewed inspections to unfold, because that would push back the timetable for military intervention and the establishment of a US protectorate in Iraq.

Bowing to Bush's demand for unlimited powers, Edwards insisted that Congress "not tie our own hands by requiring Security Council action" and warned his Senate colleagues not to "try to micromanage a war from Capitol Hill."

His sentiments were echoed by another Democratic presidential hopeful, Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, who also called for unilateral US military action. "If we lead, I am confident that many other nations will come to our side," he said.

The shift in the Democrats' alignment with the administration is striking. Only last week leading party officials expressed skepticism about the Bush administration's political motives in demanding passage of a war resolution before November. The aim, they suggested, was to use the threat of war to rally voters behind the president and his party under conditions in which Republicans are threatened with losing control of the House of Representatives. They insisted that further hearings and debates

were needed and could not be rushed to meet Republican electoral needs.

"It's hard not to notice that the sudden urgency of war with Iraq has coincided precisely with the emergence of the corporate scandal story, with the flip in the congressional [poll] numbers and with the decline in the Republicans' prospects for retaking the Senate majority," Jim Jordan, director of the Democrats' Senate campaign committee, told the *Washington Post* early this week. "It's absolutely clear that the administration has timed the Iraq public relations campaign to influence the midterm elections..."

In other words, Democrats recognized Bush's claims about an imminent threat from Iraq as a political ploy aimed at distracting public opinion from the sinking economy and a wave of corporate scandals that have implicated top administration officials, including Vice President Richard Cheney, in massive fraud. Yet now they are prepared to declare their support for war and eschew any political differences or even debate in the name of "national security."

Subjectively, the congressional Democrats justify this shift in the name of political expediency. All of them rely on pollsters, consultants and professional political strategists—like themselves, members of a highly privileged and conservative elite—to gauge the popular mood, and therefore grossly overestimate support for Bush's war policy.

Their intention is to cover their right flank by voting in favor of a war resolution before November and then run election campaigns that concentrate entirely on the state of the economy and the Bush administration's fiscal policies, pretending that Iraq does not exist. As Democratic National Committee chairman Terry McAuliffe put it, Congress will vote for war "very quickly," and then the Democrats will return to "kitchen table issues."

The level of cowardice and cynicism involved in these political calculations is breathtaking, even by the debased standards of American politics. Whether their actions facilitate a war in which thousands of American youth could lose their lives is at best of secondary concern, and much less than that the prospect of protracted bombings and street battles in Baghdad claiming the lives of tens if not hundreds of thousands of Iraqi men, women and children.

Comparing the present position of the Democrats with their role in the days leading up to the last Persian Gulf War in 1990-91 provides a revealing measure of the decay of the American political system in the course of a decade.

On the surface at least, the pretext at that time for US military action—Iraq's invasion of Kuwait—was far more substantial, and the United Nations had already passed a resolution approving the use of military force to expel the Iraqis. Nonetheless, there was substantial opposition in Congress to giving George Bush senior the authorization to wage war. A large majority of Democrats voted against the war resolution.

In the end, with hundreds of thousands of US troops already deployed in Saudi Arabia, the Democrats gave the administration sufficient votes to achieve the majority it needed, supporting the use of "all necessary means" to implement the UN resolution. But it was by no means unanimous. The war authorization passed the House by a vote of 250-183 and narrowly cleared the Senate, with 52 in favor and 47 against. No one predicts anything approaching such opposition today.

What has changed? Some Democrats make self-serving reference to September 11, claiming that after the terrorist attacks, they have no choice but to back the president's war plans. This is said despite the admissions, even by some administration officials, that the Iraqi regime had no part in these attacks and was not allied with the forces that carried them out.

The line-up on war is the starkest demonstration that the Democratic Party has ceased in any significant way to represent a political opposition to the policies of the Republicans. The same party that cringed in the face of the right-wing conspiracy to impeach Clinton and then meekly accepted the theft of the presidential election in 2000 is more than prepared to endorse a war that is to be waged on utterly false pretenses.

The collapse of the Democrats is bound up with the vast social polarization that took place in the 1990s, shattering any relationship between this party—dedicated from its inception to defending the interests of corporate America—and the mass base of unionized workers, oppressed ethnic minorities, farmers and middle class professionals to which it once appealed.

So great is the gulf between the wealthy elite and the American working people that there exists no basis for crafting policies that bridge, even partially, the conflicting interests of both. The loss of US economic hegemony worldwide has shattered the objective basis for the kind of limited social reforms once promoted by Democratic politicians.

The Democratic Party has long been a party of American imperialism, with Democratic presidents presiding over every major US war of the last century. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, however, a significant section of the party was wary of involving American troops, voicing fears of being dragged into another "quagmire" that would harm "US interests."

With the line-up on Iraq, the Democratic Party has dispensed with any reservations about American militarism. Support for a war of aggression aimed at establishing neo-colonial control over the oilfields of the Persian Gulf spans the entire spectrum of official politics in the US.

Similarly, the Democrat leadership has rejected any serious opposition to the sweeping repressive measures implemented by the Bush administration in the name of the war against terrorism. Defense of democratic rights is not on its agenda in the fall elections.

One year ago, after Bush addressed a joint session of Congress following the September 11 attacks, Daschle joined Senate Republican Leader Trent Lott on national television and declared, "There is no opposition party." The actions of the Congressional Democrats over the past year and, in particular, their rush to grant Bush a carte blanche for war, have amply demonstrated the truth of this remark. Both parties represent the interests of Wall Street, the corporations and the thin layer of multimillionaires and billionaires who dominate American politics. The vast majority of working people is left without any real vote or voice on the issues of war, civil liberties, social policy or any other matter.

The struggle against US military aggression cannot be based on the Democratic Party or any illusion that Congress will somehow restrain the right-wing cabal in the White House. The Democrats will in no way oppose a war against Iraq; nor will they stand against future and even greater military interventions that are already being planned.

A genuine opposition to militarism requires a struggle against the Bush administration and its Democratic allies. It must take the form of an independent movement of working people against the financial oligarchy and the economic system that it controls, through the building of a new political party based on the struggle for international socialism.

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