

Why the Democratic Party is backing Bush's war drive vs. Iraq

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The Democratic Party is moving to provide a comfortable margin of votes to pass resolutions in the House of Representatives and the Senate authorizing an imminent US invasion of Iraq. The House voted Thursday to give Bush the power to wage war, a week after an agreement between Bush and House Democratic leader Richard Gephardt on the language of the resolution.

A series of top Senate Democrats have endorsed the resolution, including Majority Whip Harry Reid, Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Joseph Biden, and John Kerry of Massachusetts, a prospective presidential candidate and one-time leader of veterans' protests against the Vietnam War. It is expected that less than a quarter of the Senate will vote against a resolution to authorize Bush to launch a unilateral war of aggression.

The war resolution's text is an amalgam of the lies and distortions issued by the Bush administration to justify its long-sought goal of invading Iraq and overthrowing Saddam Hussein, including repeated mentions of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, although there is no evidence connecting Baghdad and the suicide hijackings.

The gist of the resolution is a blank check for Bush to use military force against Iraq: "The president is authorized to use the Armed Forces of the United States as he determines to be necessary and appropriate in order to (1) defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq; and (2) enforce all relevant United Nations Security Council Resolutions regarding Iraq."

For the first time in US history, the president would be authorized to launch a war preemptively against a country that had not attacked the United States first and has no ability to threaten or even reach the US militarily. This war is to be waged on the pretext of enforcing UN Security Council resolutions, even if the UN Security Council majority opposes such military action.

In statements defending the resolution, Gephardt embraced the "big lie" of the White House, that the September 11 terrorist attacks make it a matter of self defense for the United States to invade Iraq, in order to prevent further terrorist attacks using weapons of mass destruction.

"Everything changed with 9-11," Gephardt declared. "If you're worried about where terrorists will get these weapons, the first place you'd be concerned about is Iraq."

Effectively admitting that there is no evidence that the Iraqi regime has either the ability or the intention to use such weapons against the United States, Gephardt said, "There's no smoking gun, and you're not going to have one. Your standard of proof has to go down, because you're living in a world of terrorism. We have to prevent a weapon of mass destruction being detonated in the United States. We have to do everything possible to prevent that."

Such arguments do not make sense even in their own terms. If the greatest danger facing the American people is the possibility of a terrorist attack inside the United States using nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, nothing is more likely to produce such an outcome than a

foreign policy based on the principle that the United States has the unilateral right to invade any country in the world it chooses.

The Bush-Gephardt doctrine, by authorizing a one-sided US slaughter of the people of Iraq and, by implication, any other country targeted by the White House and Pentagon, makes terrorist retaliation and the slaughter of innocent Americans even more likely.

It is little more than two weeks since the Democratic presidential candidate in 2000, former vice president Al Gore, delivered a blistering critique of the Bush administration's war policy in a speech in San Francisco. It is worth recalling the speech today, since it reads as an indictment, not only of the Bush White House, but of the Democratic congressional leadership.

The bulk of Gore's September 23 speech was devoted to the implications of Bush's doctrine of launching unilateral, first-strike military action against Iraq. The former vice president's attack was couched in a right-wing, pro-imperialist framework, warning that the drive to war with Iraq would disrupt the international support necessary to wage a successful war against terrorist groups like Al Qaeda. Gore made no mention of the overriding motivation for the war: the desire to seize control of Iraq's oil resources, the second largest in the world. But the points he made were nonetheless telling.

Recalling that he had been among the minority of Senate Democrats who voted for the first Persian Gulf War, Gore noted that in 1991, Iraq had crossed an international border to attack to Kuwait, but in 2002, the US government was proposing to cross an international border to attack Iraq. Opposition to such a move had already become a powerful factor internationally, he said, pointing to the results of the German election campaign, in which the Schröder government overcame a significant deficit in the polls by appealing to antiwar sentiment.

Gore made an extraordinary admission for an American politician, pointing to the "great anxiety all around the world, not primarily about what the terrorist networks are going to do, but about what we're going to do." He then went on to outline the longer-term consequences of the doctrine of preemption.

"To begin with, the doctrine is presented in open-ended terms, which means that if Iraq is the first point of application it is not necessarily the last. In fact, the very logic of the concept suggests a string of military engagements against a succession of sovereign states—Syria, Libya, North Korea, Iran—none of them very popular in the United States, of course, but the implication is that wherever the combination exists of an interest in weapons of mass destruction, together with an ongoing role as host to or participant in terrorist operations, the doctrine will apply.

"It also means that if the Congress approves the Iraq resolution just proposed by the administration, it would be simultaneously creating the precedent for preemptive action anywhere..."

Gore also touched on the domestic consequences of the Bush war drive, noting that the administration has sought to deprive federal workers in the new Department of Homeland Security of civil service protection and

trade union rights, “in a manner calculated to please the portion of its base that occupies the far right.”

Even more dangerous, he said, was the administration’s broader attack on democratic rights. “The idea that an American citizen can be imprisoned without recourse to judicial process or remedies, and that this can be done on the say-so of the President or those acting in his name, is beyond the pale,” he said.

Without referring to it by name, Gore denounced the national security strategy document released by the White House earlier in the month, saying that it was “important to note the consequences of an emerging national strategy that not only celebrates American strength, but actually appears to glorify the notion of dominance. The word itself has been used in the counsels of the administration.”

He concluded, “What this doctrine does is to destroy the goal of a world in which states consider themselves subject to law, particularly in the matter of standards for the use of violence against each other. That concept would be displaced by the notion that there is no law but the discretion of the President of the United States.”

The response on the part of the Bush administration, congressional Republicans and the bulk of the media was to portray Gore—who received more than 50 million votes for president in 2000, winning the popular vote over Bush—as a virtual traitor who was undermining national unity and presidential authority in wartime. Congressional Democrats reacted to this major pronouncement by the titular leader of their party with a combination of indifference to the substance of Gore’s criticism and fear that the speech would cost them votes in the November 5 election.

The hallmark of the congressional Democratic response to the drive to war with Iraq has been political cowardice and appeasement of the extreme right-wing forces that dominate the Bush administration.

The initial posture of Gephardt and Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle was to oppose any war resolution being brought before Congress before the elections, with the claim that the Bush administration was “playing politics” by seeking to put Democrats on the spot in the run-up to the November 5 vote.

It is, of course, true that the Bush administration and Republican Party operatives cynically calculated the electoral advantage they presumed they would gain from the war resolution—not so much because war with Iraq is popular, but because the issue would distract public attention from the deteriorating economic and social conditions in America.

But the position advanced by Gephardt, Daschle & Co., that a war vote should be postponed until after the elections, was fundamentally undemocratic. They sought to deprive the American people of any opportunity to express their opinions on Bush’s war plans, let alone voice outright opposition. They hoped to repeat the example of the 1990 congressional elections, in which the Democrats and Republicans agreed not to discuss the first Bush administration’s buildup towards war in the Persian Gulf. This was followed by the passage of a resolution endorsing the war, less than two months after the election.

When the White House decided to press ahead and insist on a pre-election vote—and Bush made several speeches on behalf of Republican congressional candidates, denouncing the Democrats as opposed to vital national security concerns—Daschle appeared on the floor of the Senate choking back tears and demanding a public apology.

This degrading spectacle was a mixture of incompetence, impotence and empty theatrics. A genuine opposition leader in control of the Senate could have made it impossible for the Bush administration to push through a war resolution that has no widespread popular support. But Daschle is not opposed to US aggression against Iraq, nor does he lead a Senate majority committed any such opposition.

Within a few days, his demand for apology forgotten, Daschle was back in talks with the White House over the language of the resolution. Ten days after he denounced the Bush administration for smearing Democrats

as unpatriotic, the Senate majority leader told network television interviewers that the Senate would approve the Bush war resolution by a hefty margin, and that he personally was inclined to vote for it.

Perhaps the most significant vote in the Senate took place more than a week before the final passage of the war resolution. It was the vote to shut down the one-man filibuster launched by Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia against any consideration of the measure.

Byrd, the longest-serving Democrat in the Senate and its president pro-tem, pointed out the war resolution was unconstitutional on its face because it shifts the power to declare war from the Congress, where it is vested in Article I, Section 8 of the US Constitution, to the president.

The resolution was “a product of presidential hubris,” Byrd said. “This resolution is breathtaking in its scope. It redefines the nature of defense. It reinterprets the Constitution to suit the will of the executive branch.”

Byrd cited a speech delivered by Abraham Lincoln while he served in Congress, opposing US aggression in the war against Mexico of 1846-48. Those who wrote the US Constitution had regarded the power to declare war as the most oppressive power of the British king, Lincoln argued, and therefore decided to place that power in the legislature rather than give it to one man, the president. Giving the chief executive power to wage war on his own decision “destroys the whole matter and places our president where kings have always stood,” Lincoln concluded.

But not a single senator, Democratic or Republican, would support an effort to invoke the Constitution against the drive to war. Byrd’s filibuster was shut down by a vote of 95 to 1.

A similar issue was raised by Congressman Jim McDermott, one of three Democrats who traveled to Baghdad two weeks ago to view firsthand the target of impending US military attack. McDermott told a public meeting in Seattle, Washington October 6 that war with Iraq was the occasion for a profound transformation in the American government.

“What we are dealing with right now in this country is whether we are having a kind of bloodless, silent coup or not,” he told several hundred people at a town hall meeting in his home district. The Bush administration was continually frightening the American people with threats of unspecified terrorist attacks, he said, in order to justify a decision to “suddenly go to war with the whole world.”

The central issue was the assumption of near-total power by the executive branch, McDermott concluded, saying, “If we don’t derail this coup that is going on, we are going to wind up with a government run by the president of the United States and all the rest of us will be standing around just watching it happen.”

Republican and Democratic congressmen have repeatedly denounced McDermott for his trip to Baghdad. A Washington state Republican Party official called his comments about a coup “the most irresponsible thing I’ve ever heard an American politician say.”

The Republican official added: “If President Bush is engaged in a coup then his co-conspirators are Richard Gephardt and Joseph Lieberman,” referring to the leading pro-war Democrats in the House and Senate.

Precisely—there is an ongoing political coup, and leading Democrats are co-conspirators with the Bush administration.

Apologists for the congressional Democratic leadership claim that quick passage of a war resolution will allow the party turn its election campaign back to discussion of domestic economic and social issues and thus win the November 5 vote.

This new Democratic strategy is just as bankrupt, undemocratic and cowardly as the initial attempt to delay a vote until after the election. Again, the effect of this policy is to exclude the American people from any influence on the decision to go to war, in the face of public opinion polls that show a sizeable majority opposed to a unilateral US invasion of Iraq. Moreover, the claim that it is possible to support Bush’s war policy while maintaining opposition to his domestic policies is completely false. The administration’s foreign and domestic policy is of one piece. It is

rooted in the systematic plunder of the resources of American society and of the world to benefit a wealthy elite.

The Democratic Party capitulation to Bush cannot be explained as a caving in to the pressure of public opinion. On the contrary, American popular sentiment, even as measured in the opinion polls conducted by the corporate media, is far more critical of the administration approach and more reluctant to take the path of war.

As the *Los Angeles Times* noted in a commentary on Bush's war speech in Cincinnati October 7, "The contrast between the support in Congress and across the country is striking. Over the last month, as Bush has more emphatically pressed his case for action against Iraq, resistance has dwindled in Congress.... But public opinion hasn't grown warmer to the idea of war—and by some measures has cooled."

Marxists have long understood that the Democratic Party is a party of big business that defends the interests of American imperialism. But its class character does not, in and of itself, explain the shift between 1991 and 2002. The Democratic Party was just as much a capitalist party and defender of imperialism in 1991, when the vast majority of Democratic congressmen and senators voted against the Persian Gulf War of Bush's father.

The last decade represents the culmination of the protracted historical decay of the Democratic Party and of American liberalism in general. The Clinton administration repudiated the last shred of the politics of social reform, as Clinton embraced the Republican dogma of putting an end to "big government," symbolized by the abolition of welfare in 1996.

The Democratic Party proved increasingly incapable, not merely of advancing new reforms, but even of defending bourgeois-democratic procedures in the face of a right-wing campaign to subvert and oust a twice-elected president. A section of the congressional Democratic Party—led, significantly, by Senator Joseph Lieberman, who now takes the lead in campaigning for war against Iraq—joined the attack on Clinton over the Lewinsky affair. Only overwhelming public opposition prevented congressional Democrats from moving to force Clinton to resign in the fall of 1998. And neither the Democratic Party nor Clinton himself would conduct any struggle to mobilize popular opposition to the right-wing attempted coup.

In the 2000 election crisis in Florida, the Democratic Party again demonstrated its impotence in the face of the right-wing grab for power. Gore won the popular vote by more than 500,000 nationwide, and would have won Florida's electoral votes in any fair recounting of all disputed ballots. But when the Supreme Court intervened to shut down the vote-counting, Gore, his running-mate Lieberman and the entire Democratic Party leadership counseled submission.

In the wake of September 11, Daschle and Gephardt declared that there was no longer an opposition party in Congress. The Democrats gave fervent support to Bush's war against Afghanistan, even though the Taliban regime was not responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and offered to surrender Osama bin Laden if the US government produced evidence of his culpability. Democrats in the House and Senate voted for the USA Patriot Act and other repressive measures at home.

Underlying this steady shift to the right is a fundamental social change. The Democratic Party has long since lost whatever connection it once had to the needs and aspirations of broad masses of working people. Its social base has drastically narrowed: a thin, privileged stratum of the upper middle class; the corrupt and reactionary trade union bureaucracy; and an aspiring privileged layer of the black and Hispanic minority populations, connected to the civil rights organizations and the apparatus of the local, state and federal governments.

An analogous process has taken place in the Republican Party, which has long since broken with its former mass base of Midwestern farmers and small businessmen. In the context of this isolation from the broad

masses, relatively small groups can exercise disproportionate influence, like the Christian fundamentalist groups in the Republican Party. And in both parties, big-money donors—right-wing billionaires like Richard Mellon Scaife, the pro-Israel lobby, corporate PACs of all kinds—play a decisive role.

The result is a politics based entirely on fraud and pretense. The Democratic Party pretends to represent working people, but actually enlists only the support of the trade union bureaucracy, which presides over sclerotic and moribund organizations despised by their own members, let alone the majority of workers outside the unions. The Democratic Party pretends to defend the interests of black and Hispanic and other minority people, but cultivates instead a privileged stratum that is viscerally hostile, on a class basis, to the most oppressed layers.

The vast majority of the American people are politically disenfranchised. Their views and feelings and interests find no expression within the structure of official politics and the two-party system. The stage has been set for a political transformation of unprecedented dimensions, in which political, military and economic events will compel tens of millions of working people to seek a new political road.

The struggle against imperialist war, in Iraq and internationally, can only go forward through the building of an independent political movement of the working class, based on a socialist program, and seeking to unite all working people of every country in a common struggle.



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