

“There is no debate... There is nothing”

Senator Byrd laments Democrats’ silence on Iraq war

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Rarely do the public utterances of American bourgeois politicians rise above the level of lies and platitudes. Earlier this month, however, the octogenarian Democrat from West Virginia, Robert Byrd, took the floor of the US Senate and gave a speech that merits consideration.

Byrd, the Senate’s senior member, stated an obvious truth, though no doubt a painful one for him. The political institution and party to which he has devoted a political career spanning half a century are utterly venal and bankrupt.

“To contemplate war is to think about the most horrible of human experiences,” Byrd began. “On this February day, as the nation stands at the brink of battle, every American on some level must be contemplating the horrors of war. Yet, this chamber is, for the most part, silent—ominously, dreadfully silent. There is no debate, no discussion, no attempt to lay out for the nation the pros and cons of this particular war. There is nothing.”

It is an extraordinary situation that is barely remarked upon by media pundits and political analysts. Washington is about to launch an unprovoked war of aggression that is opposed by broad layers of the American population, yet the institution that is constitutionally empowered to decide upon war and the party that constitutes the official opposition have nothing to say.

Byrd first came to Capitol Hill when Eisenhower was president more than 50 years ago. Having begun his career as a supporter of the Ku Klux Klan and drawing nationwide attention for his marathon filibuster against the Civil Rights Act in 1964, Byrd is no stranger to all that is reactionary and corrupt in American bourgeois

politics.

In 1964, he joined the overwhelming majority of the US Senate in approving the Gulf of Tonkin resolution authorizing the US war in Vietnam. This fateful measure was based on false charges that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked an American warship. Byrd has since expressed regret for that vote, and now charges that the Bush administration’s reasons for war in Iraq are equally fraudulent.

Above all, Byrd has decried the cowardice of Congress in its acceptance of the wholesale repudiation of the US Constitution. Known for lacing his speeches with quotations from Roman historians and rulers, Byrd may well see himself as a latter-day Cicero, pleading with the Senate to defend the ideals of the republic against the encroachment of empire. Today’s US Senate, like its Roman counterpart more than 2,000 years ago, has become so debased as to render such an appeal futile. This is what lends Byrd’s speeches a measure of pathos.

Even as Byrd was condemning the silence in the Senate chamber, several of his colleagues were announcing their candidacies for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination. Last weekend, the party’s national committee held its first forum for the announced candidates in Washington. All of those considered front-runners—Congressman Richard Gephardt and Senators Joseph Lieberman, John Kerry and John Edwards—backed Bush’s war resolution against Iraq. Now they are going through the motions of a political campaign while attempting to ignore the unfolding catastrophe in which they are complicit.

In his Senate speech, Byrd warned of the far-reaching implications of the looming war. The attack on Iraq, he

said, will represent “a turning point in US foreign policy and possibly a turning point in the recent history of the world.” The Bush administration’s doctrine of preemptive war “appears to be in contravention of international law and the UN Charter,” he continued, adding that a war in which Washington has refused to rule out nuclear weapons and which could end in the seizure of Iraq’s oilfields and an open-ended military occupation “may reap disastrous consequences for years.”

“On what is possibly the eve of horrific infliction of death and destruction on the population of the nation of Iraq—a population, I might add, of which over 50 percent is under age 15—this chamber is silent,” said the Senator.

“On what is possibly only days before we send thousands of our own citizens to face unmitigated horrors of chemical and biological warfare—this chamber is silent ... it is business as usual in the United States Senate. We are truly sleepwalking through history. In my heart of hearts, I pray that this great nation and its good and trusting citizens are not in for a rudest of awakenings.”

This is not the first time that Byrd has called attention to the abject submission of his fellow Democrats to the Bush administration’s war drive. Last October, he mounted a one-man filibuster in a vain attempt to block a vote on a sweeping resolution granting Bush the power to declare preemptive war.

The Democratic leadership wanted no part of Byrd’s opposition. They joined the Republicans in a vote of 95-to-1 to shut him up. They had already made the craven decision to give Bush the vote on war in order to better concentrate their campaign in the 2002 midterm elections on “domestic” issues. The result was a well-deserved rout at the polls.

In an earlier attempt to prevent the administration from ramming through Congress legislation creating the new Homeland Security Department, Byrd said he felt increasingly as if he himself were “the only thing standing between a White House hungry for power and the safeguards in the Constitution,” adding, “That is not bragging, that is lamenting.”

Byrd’s lonely voice defending the separation of powers, checks and balances, and civil liberties embodied in a constitution drafted some 215 years ago sounds more and more like the death rattle of American

democracy.

While the extra-constitutional measures taken by the Bush administration are sweeping, they have not come out of the blue. American democracy has undergone a protracted degeneration, driven by both imperialist ambitions abroad and deep-going social contradictions at home. The most decisive feature of this process has been a steadily widening social polarization, the result of a reverse redistribution of wealth from the pockets of working people to the portfolios of the financial elite.

The existing political setup already provides no means for the masses of American working people to express their views and defend their vital interests. Those who are part of this system—Democrats and Republicans alike, together with the media establishment—tailor their policies to meet the needs of a narrow and corrupt social layer whose striving for ever-greater personal wealth is at direct odds with the basic needs of the majority of the population.

The inevitable result of unbridled social inequality is the transformation of the system of government itself. To defend a super-rich oligarchy against the majority requires a different kind of state, one that is capable of jailing opponents without trial and waging wars without provocation.

Harkening back to the traditions of the Senate or the sanctity of the Constitution, no matter how eloquently, cannot halt this transformation. The defense of democratic rights today depends upon the emergence of a new, independent political movement of the working class, in opposition to both the Democratic and Republican parties, and directed against the profit system.



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