

Democratic Party leaders embrace Bush's war of aggression

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The outbreak of war with Iraq has already produced one abject surrender—by the congressional leadership of the Democratic Party and all the contenders for the party's 2004 presidential nomination. Whether in the months leading up to March 20 they claimed to oppose a US war with Iraq or openly supported it, all sections of the Democratic Party have rallied behind the White House in the wake of Bush's go-ahead for the invasion.

Both the Senate and House of Representatives adopted resolutions supporting the US armed forces engaged in bombing and invading Iraq and endorsing the policies of the Bush administration. The Senate voted 99-0 for a resolution that did not mention Bush by name, but "commends and supports the efforts and leadership of the President, as Commander in Chief, in the conflict against Iraq."

The House resolution was passed 392-11, with 22 abstentions. It went further than the Senate version in supporting Bush, with its text citing the Bush administration's claim that Iraq was in "material breach" of United Nations resolutions as justification for going to war without UN support. It expressed "unequivocal support" for Bush's "firm leadership and decisive action in the conduct of military operations in Iraq," which it described as "part of the ongoing Global War on Terrorism."

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi negotiated the text with Republican Majority Leader Tom DeLay and voted for it. Eleven Democrats voted against the resolution, while proclaiming their support for American troops, citing unwillingness to endorse Bush's leadership. Jim McDermott of Washington state said, "I, for one, will not be forced to praise the president's decisions, when what I want to do is praise the troops."

Statements issued by Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle and Pelosi the night US bombs first hit Baghdad pledged full support to the American effort to conquer Iraq. Daschle said, "We may have had differences of opinion about what brought us to this point, but the president of the United States is the commander in chief, and today we unite behind him as well."

Pelosi added, "Saddam Hussein is a menace to his own people, and a threat to the peace and stability of the entire region. As our soldiers risk their own lives to secure the lives and liberty of others, we pledge to repay their courage by guaranteeing that we will spare no resource and no effort to make sure nothing stands between them and victory."

Daschle was among the majority of congressional Democrats who voted last October to give Bush undisputed authority to

launch a war against Iraq whenever he chose to do so. The 29 Democratic senators who voted for the war resolution included presidential candidates Joseph Lieberman, John Kerry and John Edwards, as well as Hillary Clinton.

Of the nine announced Democratic presidential candidates, five have long backed the Bush administration's goal of waging war in Iraq, including Lieberman, Kerry, Edwards, former House Majority Leader Richard Gephardt and Senator Bob Graham of Florida. These reiterated their backing for Bush after the onset of war, with Gephardt saying, "We must face the challenge of terrorism head on and I support our commander in chief and the American military at this critical time in that struggle."

In an interview on CNN the night the bombing began, Lieberman said, "Tonight is one of those nights, I think, in which we're all standing shoulder-to-shoulder. President Bush is a Republican, I'm a Democrat. I'm seeking the office he holds now, but tonight there's not an inch of distance between us." Edwards, on the same network, said, "My prayers are with our troops, their families and our commander in chief."

Kerry—who first came to national attention as an antiwar activist among former Vietnam War veterans—has tried to play to both sides on the war, voting for the congressional resolution last October, then criticizing Bush for failing to win UN support. "The administration's handling of the run-up to war with Iraq could not possibly have been more inept or self-defeating," he declared, but concluded with a general statement of support for the military effort.

The five openly pro-war candidates have raised the lion's share of the campaign funds and collected most of the support of Democratic Party officeholders. But it is perhaps even more significant that the four avowedly "antiwar" presidential candidates have all chimed in with pledges to "support the troops" now that war has begun. Most of them never define precisely what "supporting the troops" means. In fact, the phrase is used as a political euphemism for conciliation with the Bush administration and the Pentagon, and an avowal of basic solidarity with American imperialism.

Former Vermont Governor Howard Dean said in a written statement, "This is not Iraq, where doubters and dissenters are punished or silenced—this is the United States of America. We need to support our young people as they are sent to war by the president, and I have no doubt that American military power will prevail."

Dean told Reuters news service that the outbreak of war “calls for a change in how you campaign.” He continued: “I’m going to say what I think ... but I certainly want to make clear that I am going to support the troops and then I’m going to campaign without criticizing the president by name.”

Al Sharpton, the New York-based preacher, political charlatan and former FBI informant, said he would continue to participate in antiwar protests, but added, “We’ve got to be respectful of the troops while we criticize the president’s policies.”

Former Illinois senator Carol Moseley Braun said she was praying for the troops: “I think it’s awful that this president has put people in harm’s way in this way. I’m very disappointed that he could not see the wisdom of choosing peace.”

Perhaps the most revealing posture was that adopted by Dennis Kucinich, an Ohio congressman who has presented himself as the most militant antiwar candidate. “I am going to continue to speak out and challenge this administration’s policies that are putting this nation at greater risk,” Kucinich declared. “This war must be challenged. It’s wrong. It will ruin this country.”

But when the resolution drafted by DeLay and Pelosi was put before the House of Representatives, praising Bush and repeating the lie that the war in Iraq is a response to the September 11 terrorist attacks, Kucinich did not vote against it. “While I support the troops, I cannot support this mission,” he declared, and proceeded to abstain rather than vote “no.”

Congressional Democrats who have criticized the Bush administration’s Iraq policy sounded the same note. Senator Edward Kennedy, who attacked the drive to war in a speech on the Senate floor earlier this month, called for support for troops “now risking their lives for opportunity and hope and liberty and justice for all.”

The speciousness of this argument is apparent. If it was correct to oppose war in the months before American troops were committed to combat, then it is doubly correct to do so once war has begun.

On political issues of lesser import—the nomination of right-wing ideologue Miguel Estrada to the US Circuit Court of Appeals, the opening of the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling, and Bush’s \$726 billion tax cut package for the wealthy—the Democrats have used their position in the Senate, where the Republicans hold only a narrow 51-49 majority, to tie up, defeat or significantly alter Bush administration policies. But on the overriding issue of war, the Democrats have not even attempted to offer serious opposition.

This prostration transcends the attitude of individual Democratic Party leaders to the Bush administration’s war policies. It demonstrates that on the most decisive issue of the day, there is no fundamental difference between the two big business parties that share a political monopoly in the United States. The Democrats may oppose Bush over secondary matters, but on issues where the worldwide interests of American imperialism are concerned, the Democratic Party demonstrates that it is an imperialist party, just as it did in initiating US military intervention in Korea, Vietnam and the former Yugoslavia.

The collapse of official opposition to the US war on Iraq not only implicates the Democratic Party in the crimes being

committed by the Bush administration, it reveals the protracted decay of American democracy as a whole. It is a further revelation of the erosion of constitutional procedures in the United States, and the emergence of an executive branch with quasi-authoritarian powers, able to decide on the most important policies—above all, war and peace—without consulting with the legislative branch.

Despite clear language in the US Constitution reserving to Congress the power to declare war, the Senate voted last fall to cede this power to Bush by a margin of 77 to 23. Contrary to statements by Daschle, Kerry and others, that resolution clearly anticipated the subsequent US diplomatic debacle at the Security Council, authorizing Bush to go to war unilaterally if diplomacy “is not likely to lead to enforcement of all relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions regarding Iraq.”

Since then, amid worldwide controversy and protest, there been no serious effort to hold a congressional debate on the merits of a war that represents a complete break with the framework of international law that the United States itself established at the end of the Second World War. There have been lengthy discussions and votes in the parliaments of Turkey, Britain and other countries, but not in the United States, despite huge popular opposition to the war.

Only one Democratic senator, Robert Byrd of West Virginia, has focused public attention on this abdication of constitutional responsibility, in a series of speeches that have gone largely ignored among his fellow legislators (Byrd was actually silenced by a cloture vote when he attempted a one-man filibuster against last October’s pro-war resolution.)

In a speech March 19, on the eve of the war, Byrd denounced the Senate’s silence, saying, “A pall has fallen over the Senate chamber. We avoid our solemn duty to debate the one topic on the minds of all Americans, even while scores of thousands of our sons and daughters faithfully do their duty in Iraq.” He accused the Bush administration of proceeding with arrogance, making a case for war based on “falsified documents and circumstantial evidence,” and destroying the image of the United States around the world.

It must be noted, however, that Byrd did not oppose the pro-war resolution passed by the Senate once the bombing had begun.

The Democratic Party functions as spurned and rejected, but nonetheless loyal, adviser of the Bush administration. Democratic Party criticism of the Iraq war drive has always been voiced on the basis of concern that unilateral military action, by undermining the United Nations and destabilizing the Middle East, might have long-term negative consequences for American imperialism. Democratic politicians have disputed the tactics and methods of the Bush administration, not its goals.



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