South Carolina Democratic debate: a spectacle of political prostration

Patrick Martin
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The first major public event of the 2004 presidential campaign, a debate among nine candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination at the University of South Carolina, displayed the decay and demoralization of what passes for the opposition party in the United States.

Far from presenting themselves as a credible alternative to George W. Bush and his cabal of right-wing zealots and militarists, the Democratic candidates seemed to accept and endorse the media presentation of Bush as politically invincible, at least on the most critical issue of war and peace.

ABC News, which broadcast the debate over a number of cable outlets, introduced the candidates as "eight men, one woman, vying to challenge one of history's most popular presidents." Moderator George Stephanopoulos sounded the same note in his opening statement, declaring, "The man they want to replace is enormously popular," and citing a 71 percent approval rating in a recent network poll.

The reality is that the Bush administration rests on an extremely narrow social base. While there is enormous political confusion among the American people, Bush's program of military aggression and social reaction enjoys genuine support only from a far-right Christian fundamentalist milieu, and among the semi-criminal elements of the ruling business elite who provide the leading figures in his administration. This government faces economic and social contradictions for which it has no solution but increasingly reckless military adventures abroad and intensifying repression at home.

But it is characteristic—although nonetheless remarkable—that none of the nine Democrats sought to emphasize the extreme fragility of the Bush administration, or to dispute the media propaganda which suggests that running against Bush amounts to engaging in a political suicide pact.

Nor did they challenge the political legitimacy of the Bush presidency. There were occasional references in the course of the debate to the disputed outcome of the 2000 balloting in Florida. But no Democrat made a serious issue of the fact that Bush actually lost the popular vote and only gained a victory in the Electoral College thanks to the intervention of the Supreme Court.

Just as Gore and Lieberman ran in 2000 without any attempt to challenge the right-wing effort to use the courts, the media and the independent counsel Kenneth Starr to subvert and destabilize the Clinton administration, the Democratic hopefuls for 2004 aim to conduct their political campaign without drawing any fundamental lessons from the assault on democratic rights in 2000. The stolen election is regarded as so much ancient history.

Instead of genuine political opposition, even of a bourgeois character, the Democratic candidates represent various versions of what one of them called "Bush lite." They largely accept the political framework laid down by the Bush administration: the justice and necessity of war with Iraq and the impossibility of any serious measures to alleviate the deepening social and economic crisis within the United States.

In both these areas, war and the domestic social crisis, the pattern of the South Carolina debate was the same: one of the six "major" candidates—*See* "The first US presidential contest: the money primary" for how the media and the Democrats themselves define this term—sought to criticize the Bush administration, however timidly, and the other five ganged up against any challenge to the right-wing political consensus in Washington.

On the war in Iraq, the odd man out was former Vermont governor Howard Dean. On social policy, it was Congressman Richard Gephardt, the former House minority leader.

In the run-up to the US invasion of Iraq, Dean sought to cash in on antiwar sentiment, directing himself largely, however, to well-heeled Hollywood liberals, whose objections to Bush are for the most part tactical or stylistic, not principled. Neither Dean nor any other prominent Democrat sought to appeal to the millions in the US who view the conquest of Iraq as an act of military aggression on behalf of the corporate oligarchy.

Dean was very restrained in his remarks about the war during the debate, undoubtedly smarting from criticism that he appeared insufficiently enthusiastic in his initial response to the US occupation of Baghdad. He was careful to declare himself "delighted" at the ouster of Saddam Hussein, but criticized Bush for implementing "a new policy of preventive war." He also warned that a Shia fundamentalist regime in Baghdad would represent a greater threat to US interests in the region than the ousted Iraqi dictator.

This extremely limited critique—entirely within the framework of the defense of US imperialism—was rejected by a solid front of the other five major candidates. Four of these—Senators Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, John Edwards of North Carolina and John Kerry of Massachusetts, and Congressman Gephardt—voted last October to give Bush the authority to invade Iraq, and subsequently endorsed the war. The fifth, Senator Bob Graham of Florida, backed the war, but opposed the resolution because he wanted the Bush administration to target other countries first—Syria, perhaps even Egypt—rather than Iraq, in the name of a more aggressive campaign against "terrorism."

In the course of Saturday night's debate, Kerry, Edwards and Gephardt quibbled with aspects of the Bush administration's diplomacy, suggesting more could have been done to gain international backing for the war. But in response to a direct question from moderator George Stephanopoulos, Kerry said: "It was the right decision to disarm Saddam Hussein, at the right time."

Lieberman, who has repeatedly said that there is "no daylight" between himself and the Bush administration on the issue, boasted that he was the only Democratic candidate to have voted twice for wars against Iraq, in 1991 and in 2003. Lieberman even sought to impose a litmus test on the prospective Democratic presidential nominee, declaring, "No Democrat will be elected in 2004 without being strong on national defense"—which means, in his terms, without enthusiastically backing the war with Iraq. He sought to link Kerry to the antiwar position, saying, "Dean and Kerry

send the wrong message, either of principled opposition or ambivalence."

None of the Democrats characterized the conquest of Iraq as predatory or imperialistic. Only one of the nine, John Edwards, even mentioned the word "oil," and he did so in advising the Bush administration to move quickly to restore Iraq's political independence. A prolonged occupation, he warned, would lead the world to believe that the real purpose of the war was not to liberate Iraq, but to expand American power and control oil.

Significantly, the three professedly more liberal and antiwar candidates, Al Sharpton, former Senator Carol Moseley-Braun and Congressman Dennis Kucinich, seemed eager to downplay the issue of Iraq. All three devoted most of their time to domestic issues; each paid tribute to the necessity to uphold "national security."

In the course of the debate, Dean backed off further from a remark which he made two weeks ago. Deploring Bush's foreign policy of unilateral military action and rejection of diplomacy, Dean said that the US had an interest in maintaining international law because "we won't always have the strongest military."

This was seized on first by Kerry and then by other candidates as proof that Dean advocated the weakening of the US military. Even to imagine a day when another country might surpass the US in military power proved Dean's unfitness to be commander-in-chief, they argued.

In South Carolina, Dean too embraced the principle that the US must forever be the number one military power on the planet. This mandate is the foundation of Bush's notorious doctrine of preventive war, which envisions unilateral American military action to block the rise of any potential threat to the current US dominance.

On the US social crisis, the lineup of the candidates changed, but the dynamics of the debate stayed the same. This time it was Gephardt who was isolated and on the defensive, having proposed a plan for providing universal access to health insurance through federal subsidies to expand the present employer-based insurance schemes, combined with stopgap measures to provide coverage to the unemployed, self-employed and early retirees. Gephardt proposed to pay for the plan by rescinding Bush's $1.3 trillion tax cut for the rich passed by Congress in 2001.

Lieberman denounced the Gephardt plan and the broader notion that tax cuts for the rich should be rescinded to provide the funds to meet social notion. "I'm not willing to raise taxes to pay for health care," he said, adding that the issue was "whether we want to go backwards or forward to new solutions. We're not going to solve these problems with the kind of big-spending Democratic ideas of the past."

Bob Graham took the same position before the debate, comparing Gephardt's plan to the fiasco of the Clinton health care program in 1993-94. "We've tried that before," he said, and "it just fell apart."

Dean, Kerry and Edwards attacked the Gephardt plan while claiming to agree with the goal of universal coverage. Dean called the plan "pie in the sky," declaring that Congress would never adopt such a "radical" proposal. What was necessary was a more incremental approach to the issue, which he said was feasible and less expensive.

Edwards adopted a "left" posture in relation to Gephardt's plan, calling it a tax increase on working families that would funnel one trillion dollars to corporate employers. "These are the people we're having trouble with, corporate America," he said, describing Gephardt's policy as "You're in good hands with Enron." Kerry echoed this criticism, but neither senator offered any positive health care proposal, demonstrating that their real concern was that Gephardt might win support on the issue.

Gephardt's rivals attacked the flaws in his plan—which are manifold, since this thoroughly conservative proposal in no way addresses the root of the problem, the subordination of health care to private profit—but proposed no alternative. This demonstrates that within the Democratic Party as well as the Republican, the consensus is that nothing can or should be done about serious social problems.

There is a fundamental social fact revealed here. The leading circles of both big business parties are separated from the masses by such a vast social gulf that they are largely oblivious to the problems of working people—health care, education, declining living standards, a secure retirement.

This indifference was expressed most crudely by a columnist on the *Wall Street Journal*'s editorial web page, writing May 6 about the South Carolina debate. After dismissing Gephardt's health care plan as unlikely ever to be adopted, the writer, James Taranto, sneered, "We have no opinion on the merits of the plan and the criticisms; the whole topic is just too boring to become informed about."

The media coverage of the South Carolina was distinctly tilted in favor of Lieberman, the most right-wing of the candidates. The *Wall Street Journal* praised his pro-war stance and opposition to traditional Democratic Party spending programs. The *New York Times* wrote, "In postdebate postmortems, even aides to Mr. Lieberman's rivals expressed admiration for what they described as his articulate performance."

The *Washington Post* was the most effusive, writing, "the surprise of the night was Lieberman's strong performance. The party's 2000 vice presidential nominee carved out space in a crowded field as a hawk on national security, a centrist on domestic issues."

This pro-Lieberman bias was evident even during the debate itself, during the portion where moderator George Stephanopoulos of ABC News—a former aide to Gephardt and a senior White House staffer under Clinton—posed direct questions to each Democrat about their biggest vulnerabilities as a candidate.

Some of these questions were quite barbed: he suggested that Graham was widely regarded as really running for vice-president, that Edwards was seen as flashy but out of his depth, that Gephardt was a political retread, "this year's Bob Dole," that Moseley-Braun's campaign was put up by Jesse Jackson to undermine Sharpton.

An analogous question for Lieberman would have been to ask why he wasn't seeking a spot on the Republican ticket rather than the Democratic, given his wide agreement with Bush on both foreign and domestic policy. Instead, Stephanopoulos asked about the perception that Lieberman was "too nice" to take on Bush, a softball question to which Lieberman initially replied with a joke. Then, as proof of his "toughness," Lieberman referred to his Senate speech condemning Clinton's conduct with Monica Lewinsky—in which he provided a moralizing cover for the right-wing campaign that culminated in impeachment.

The media boost to the Lieberman campaign does not mean that big business has already selected him as the Democratic nominee. That may yet develop, but his presence in the race as a major factor serves a broader purpose. It is further insurance that the Democratic presidential campaign will not pose any significant challenge to the policies of the ultra-right elements who now dominate in Washington.

In their closing remarks at the debate, several of the Democrats touched on the deep sense of unease among the American people. Edwards said that the administration and corporate America had "betrayed people of ordinary means."

Gephardt referred to cynicism, loss of faith in the political system and the decline in voting. Dean said, truthfully enough, "The reason people don't vote in this country is because we don't give them a reason to vote." There could be no more damning indictment of the Democratic Party.