

Democratic presidential candidates back US occupation of Iraq

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The first nationally televised debate between those competing for the Democratic presidential nomination, held September 4 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, saw all the major candidates give their support to the continuing US occupation of Iraq. While criticizing various aspects of the Bush administration's policy, all agreed that the US government could not "cut and run" from a country which it has illegally invaded.

Only one of the eight candidates who participated in the forum, Ohio congressman Dennis Kucinich, supported immediate withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. All the others declared that, in one form or other, they would continue the Bush administration's policy of conquest and domination of the oil-rich country.

Of particular note, former Vermont governor Howard Dean, who emerged as the frontrunner during the spring and summer on the basis of professed opposition to the invasion of Iraq, used the Albuquerque debate to underline his sharp swing to the right.

While the consensus of the major media and the Democratic Party establishment was that the quick US conquest of Baghdad would undermine antiwar sentiment, the reverse was actually the case. Dean's status as the most prominent Democrat opposing the Iraq war produced a flood of support, particularly from college-age young people, as well as a surge of financial contributions.

In the course of the summer, Dean amassed a larger campaign war chest than any of his rivals and moved to the top of the polls in both New Hampshire and Iowa, the first two states conducting presidential primaries and caucuses.

In the weeks since his fundraising surged and he began to receive more flattering media attention—including cover stories in both *Time* and *Newsweek*—Dean has sought to position himself as a "mainstream"—i.e., pro-imperialist—candidate. While continuing to criticize Bush's efforts in Iraq, he has gone out of his way to emphasize his willingness to use American military power.

During the first half hour of the program, which focused on foreign policy, Dean reiterated his record of supporting the first Persian Gulf War, waged by Bush's father in 1991 after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, as well as his backing for the US conquest of Afghanistan in 2001.

Dean was the first to speak in the debate, in response to a question on how far the US should go in sharing decision-making power in Iraq with the United Nations in order to obtain UN sanction and troop contributions from other countries. He declared, "As you know, I believed from the beginning that we should not go into Iraq without the UN as a partner."

This represents a distinct shift from the position which Dean articulated during the run-up to the war, and even during the active phase of combat, from March 20 through May 1, when he flatly opposed Bush's decision to go to war, merely citing the absence of UN sanction as one reason among many for not invading Iraq.

The Vermont governor joined with the other Democrats in advocating use of the United Nations to encourage other countries to participate in the ongoing occupation. "If we need more troops, they are going to be foreign troops, not our troops," he declared. "Our troops need to come home." In other words, he proposes that the cost in blood and dollars to the United States should be reduced by pressuring other countries to sacrifice their resources and their soldiers' lives.

Similar positions were taken by the other Democrats. Former senator and ambassador Carol Moseley Braun, one of the most liberal candidates, said flatly, "We don't cut and run. Americans support their troops in the field." The issue, she claimed, was "how can we get out with honor."

Congressman Richard Gephardt, who staunchly supported the Bush administration's war resolution a year ago, used the same phrase. "We can't cut and run," he said. "We have to see that the place is left in better shape." He denounced Bush's policy as unilateralist, and said that the US should propose to other major powers that they participate jointly in running postwar Iraq, with an arrangement modeled on the current UN-backed occupations of Bosnia and Afghanistan.

Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, the most fervent supporter of the war among the Democratic candidates, was asked if he still stood by his statement that there was "not an inch of difference" between himself and Bush on Iraq. He declared that he had supported the overthrow of Saddam Hussein long before Bush's presidency, and hailed the conquest of Iraq as "a heroic and historic cause."

Lieberman condemned the administration's failure to plan for

a post-Saddam Iraq. Bush should have paid more heed to top military commanders who said larger numbers of troops would be needed to control Iraq than to conquer it. He was the only Democrat to advocate sending even more American troops to Iraq, saying, “The troops that are there need more protection.” This is an argument for essentially unlimited escalation of the US military role, since the more American troops are sent to Iraq, the more targets there will be for the indigenous Iraqi resistance to US occupation, requiring still more troops to protect them.

Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, who voted for the Bush war resolution, rejected Lieberman’s call for more American troops, saying, “That would be the worst thing. We do not want to have more Americanization. We do not want a greater sense of American occupation. We need to minimize that.”

Kerry criticized Bush for missing three opportunities to bring US allies into the war effort—before the invasion itself, immediately after the conquest of Baghdad, and now. A unilateral, long-term occupation of Iraq would put too much strain on US resources, he said, adding, “If you didn’t have the UN, you’d have to invent it.”

Senator John Edwards of North Carolina, another supporter of the Bush war resolution, joined in the chorus of criticism of Bush for not extracting more troops and money from US allies. “Saddam Hussein being gone is a very good thing,” he said, but the postwar situation was a debacle. “Our young men and women are in a shooting gallery,” he said.

Senator Bob Graham of Florida noted that he had voted against the Iraq war, not because he opposed overthrowing Saddam Hussein, but because he regarded it as a diversion from the pursuit of Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. He said he would vote for increased spending for the occupation of Iraq, adding that Bush “has an obligation to speak candidly to the American people about the long-term commitment.”

The most antiwar of the eight who spoke in Albuquerque, Dennis Kucinich, suggested that those Democrats who had voted for the Iraq war, including Kerry, Lieberman, Gephardt and Edwards, would have to answer for the consequences. But he put forward the demand to “get the UN in and the United States out”—i.e., continuing the occupation of Iraq under a blue helmet instead of the Stars and Stripes, and thus minimizing US casualties.

Thus, not one of the Democratic candidates takes a principled position which recognizes Iraq’s national sovereignty and independence and supports the removal of all foreign occupation forces.

The US occupation of Iraq has developed into a nightmarish dead end, with daily guerrilla attacks taking a steady toll in dead and wounded American soldiers and growing opposition to the US presence from the great mass of the Iraqi people—and from increasing numbers of the American working people as well.

The response by Dean and other leading Democrats has been

to narrow their differences with the Bush administration. For all the noisy criticism of Bush’s diplomatic methods, none of the major candidates advocates withdrawal of most or all American troops from Iraq.

Dean’s embrace of continued US occupation of Iraq is the predictable consequence of his emergence as a leading contender for the Democratic presidential nomination. It demonstrates once again the impossibility of conducting any struggle against war and militarism within the framework of the Democratic Party, which is a big business party unalterably committed to defending the interests of American imperialism.

Dean signaled another political shift during the Albuquerque debate, one which is equally revealing, if less dramatic than his support for the occupation of Iraq. Once a fervent free-trader and supporter of NAFTA—he was the governor of a border state which has extensive trade with Canada—Dean now says he will oppose future trade agreements unless they contain legally enforceable labor and environmental standards.

This is an attempt to appeal, not so much to workers hit by rising layoffs and wage-cutting, as to sections of the trade union bureaucracy, on the basis of economic nationalism. Dean is seeking to forestall an AFL-CIO endorsement of Congressman Gephardt, who has made opposition to NAFTA a central focus of his campaign.

Gephardt has been endorsed by a dozen major unions but seemed well short of the two-thirds majority required at the AFL-CIO’s endorsement convention in October, because several top union bureaucrats regarded Kerry as a more viable candidate. Dean’s rise in the polls, and Kerry’s consequent decline, makes it more likely that the trade union bureaucracy will turn to Gephardt in an effort to block the nomination of a supposedly “antiwar” candidate.



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