

Democratic candidates back Bush's Iraq war spending bill

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Last Thursday's debate among the 10 Democratic candidates for president, held at Pace University in New York City, was a largely undistinguished and unremarkable affair. The seven "major" candidates—those whose campaigns have received sufficient funding from corporate America and the wealthy to be considered viable—traded criticisms of each other, while ignoring the three most liberal candidates, Congressman Dennis Kucinich, former Ambassador Carol Moseley-Braun, and Reverend Al Sharpton, whose lack of financial backing renders them irrelevant to the outcome of the contest.

Virtually all the critical comments related to domestic policy: Dean and Gephardt criticized Lieberman and Kerry for doing the bidding of big corporations on trade rules and globalization; Gephardt and Kerry accused Dean of siding with Newt Gingrich on cutting Medicare; Kerry, Edwards and Lieberman criticized Dean and Gephardt for wanting to increase taxes on working class and middle class families.

In other words, the candidates all took turns attacking each other from the left. This was a peculiar but politically necessary maneuver, since all of the Democrats espouse policies that fall within the narrow limits permitted in American capitalist politics: ranging essentially from conservative to ultra-conservative. Given that the role of the Democratic Party is to sustain the illusion of a choice while blocking any real alternative to the right-wing consensus, each Democratic candidate seeks to posture as a defender of the working people or the middle class, while indicting his rivals as beholden to large corporate interests. At the same time, each candidate avidly seeks as much money as possible from the multimillionaires to finance his campaign.

Remarkably, none of the internecine sniping

concerned the war on Iraq, despite the fact that most of his rivals criticized Dean, the supposed antiwar candidate. Dean currently leads the pack in fundraising and in polls in key primary states, thanks to a successful campaign of outreach on the Internet, promoting him as the strongest opponent of Bush's war policies. But unlike previous debates, there was little or no disagreement among the Democrats over Bush's decision to invade and conquer Iraq.

Instead, the debate saw a demonstration of party unity in the response to the question posed to the entire panel by moderator Brian Williams of MSNBC and the other media questioners. They asked all the candidates to give their views on the Bush administration's request for \$87 billion in new spending to maintain the US occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. All but Kucinich and Sharpton indicated that they would support the request, and they used virtually identical language, candidate after candidate, citing the necessity to "support the troops."

Dean: "Even though I did not support the war in the beginning, I think we have to support our troops."

Clark: "We need to make this operation a success. We need to support our troops."

Lieberman: "We have no choice.... We have those 140,000 American troops there. We need to protect them."

Graham: "I will support whatever is required for the troops in Iraq."

Edwards: "We have young men and women in a shooting gallery over there right now. It would be enormously irresponsible for any of us not to do what's necessary to support them."

Moseley-Braun: "It is absolutely, I think, critical that we not cut and run, that we provide our troops with what they need."

Kerry and Gephardt spoke in a similar vein, but emphasizing the need to get a more comprehensive strategy from the Bush administration before providing funding, and calling for making the wealthy “share the burden” along with the soldiers and middle class taxpayers.

Not one of these candidates had the intellectual or moral honesty to explain what they meant by “supporting” the troops. Providing the troops what they most need and want would be a simple matter: give each one a plane ticket out of Baghdad to return to their families. Withdraw every American soldier, sailor and airman from Iraq and the entire Middle East.

What the Democrats—and Bush—mean by “supporting” the troops is to spend billions upon billions to enable American soldiers to continue killing and maiming Iraqis and destroying their country through the use of bombs, missiles, tanks, artillery and other weapons. And in the course of continuing the criminal occupation of Iraq, such “support” guarantees that hundreds more American soldiers will be killed, thousands wounded and countless more psychologically traumatized.

The Democratic candidates essentially agree to put aside the question of the origins and legitimacy of the war—on which they were sharply divided—in favor of a discussion of the best way to maintain American domination in postwar Iraq. This means accepting the war of aggression launched by the Bush administration and disputing only the best way to hold onto the fruits of this criminal act.

Thus there are proposals to offer concessions to the European powers to insure more international troops and UN backing for the US-controlled puppet regime in Baghdad. Or there are arguments over how to finance the continued US occupation, how to divide that burden among various segments of American society. But there is no questioning of the legitimacy of US occupation as such.

Not one of the Democratic candidates—or the media questioners—mentioned the comments the week before by Senator Edward Kennedy on the political motivations for launching the war with Iraq. In an interview with the Associated Press, Kennedy charged that Bush and his top political adviser, Karl Rove, launched the war for political advantage. “There was no imminent threat,” he said. “This was made up in

Texas, announced in January to the Republican leadership that war was going to take place and was going to be good politically. This whole thing was a fraud.”

Kennedy’s remark hit a nerve in the Bush administration and among congressional Republican leaders, who howled that the Democrat was guilty of virtual treason for questioning the rationale for the war.

The longtime leader of Senate liberals was only pointing to an obvious truth, even if it is one which the American media studiously ignores. This truth has definite implications: if Bush & Co. launched a war for political purposes, they are guilty of war crimes under the precedents set by the Nuremberg Tribunal. A political leader who took such charges seriously would demand the immediate impeachment of Bush and Cheney, and the resignation of all those officials who are co-conspirators in the war plot.

But neither Kennedy himself, nor his Democratic colleagues in the Senate, nor any of the presidential candidates at the New York debate have pursued the issue. The representatives of moribund liberalism do not take themselves seriously, and they believe, like Bush and his cronies, that the domination of American politics by an ultra-right clique is permanent and unchallengeable.



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