

Democrats debate in Detroit: No alternative to Bush's program of war and reaction

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The latest debate among nine candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination, held October 26 in Detroit, provided another demonstration that the Democratic Party is incapable of waging a serious struggle against the ultra-right policies of the Bush administration.

The debate was the fifth to be held since Labor Day, in a series of media events whose purpose is not to elaborate policies or examine political issues, but rather to posture before a dwindling television audience. As always in such events, the aspirants speak to several audiences at once, sending signals to the media and ruling class opinion-makers even as they make their appeal to sections of the electorate. For politicians of the two big business parties, electoral success depends on gaining the support of financiers and media moguls whose dollars and favorable coverage can determine the fate of a campaign long before the primary season begins.

Indicative of the overriding role of big money in US elections, Senator Bob Graham of Florida withdrew from the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination in September, four months before the first primary or caucus. It was not Graham's lack of support among ordinary voters that forced his exit—no votes will be cast until mid-January. Rather, he was losing the more important primary, falling to seventh place among the candidates in terms of fundraising. His war chest of \$3 million was deemed hopelessly inadequate, and he was forced to pull out abruptly.

The very format of the Detroit debate indicated the political and intellectual superficiality of the event. Questions were determined by the narrow agenda of the media personalities who made up the panel. The candidates were limited to one-minute responses and encouraged to interrupt and attack each other—mainly with one-liners scripted beforehand. Under these conditions, any serious examination of issues was virtually excluded.

On the Iraq war, the candidates reprised largely familiar positions. Former Vermont governor Howard Dean postured as the only antiwar candidate, ignoring Congressman Dennis Kucinich, Reverend Al Sharpton and former senator Carol Moseley Braun, whose positions differ little from his. Senator Joe Lieberman staked out the most adamant pro-war position, with retired general Wesley Clark, Senator John Kerry, Senator John Edwards and Congressman Richard Gephardt taking intermediate positions.

All of the Democrats criticized Bush for failing to win international support for the conquest of Iraq, with the result that US troops are bearing nearly the entire burden of the military occupation. All endorsed the deployment of "peacekeeping" forces under United Nations auspices, with Kerry making perhaps the crassest statement of the logic of this position. "You have to take the target off of American troops," he said, meaning that the bull's-eye should be transferred from US soldiers to Turkish, Pakistani or other third-country soldiers wearing UN blue helmets.

Kerry and Edwards engaged in contortions to explain why it was correct for them to vote one year ago for the congressional resolution giving Bush authority to wage war on Iraq, while voting last week against the

administration's \$87 billion request to fund the occupation resulting from the war. Edwards declared that he voted against the funding bill because it would give Bush a blank check. But a year ago he voted to give Bush a blank check to sacrifice the lives of American soldiers and tens of thousands of Iraqis.

Gephardt defended his vote for the \$87 billion to fund the occupation of Iraq, despite his claim that the Bush administration's policy was a failure. "In the end, you're presented in the Congress with a vote, up or down, on the \$87 billion," he said. "And I can't find it within myself to not vote for the money to support the troops, our young men and women who are over there protecting us, dodging bullets in a very tough and difficult situation."

This is an overt capitulation to the Bush administration's propaganda, which condemns all opposition to US military aggression as unpatriotic and tantamount to support for "terrorism." Gephardt's statement is absurd on its face, since American soldiers in Iraq are not "protecting us"—i.e., the American people, who face no threat from that country. The only Americans at risk are the soldiers themselves, who are "dodging bullets" only because Bush sent them to conquer Iraq in the first place.

Kucinich reiterated his call to "get the UN in and the US out," declaring that the United Nations should handle Iraq's oil revenues, award reconstruction contracts and direct the establishment of a new government. Thus, even the most "antiwar" Democrat supports imperialist control of Iraq, as long as it is exercised in partnership with powers such as France, Germany and Russia, rather than unilaterally by the United States.

The second half of the Detroit debate, focusing on domestic policy, provided a few exchanges or statements worth noting. The overall tenor of the discussion was demagogic, with promises of millions of jobs, universal health insurance, and more funding for education, the cities and social programs generally. But several remarks shed a more authentic light on the conformist and conservative character of the candidates' policies.

The most significant comment came from Dean, who in the initial stages of his campaign seized on the phrase—initially identified with the late liberal senator Paul Wellstone—that he was running to represent "the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party." This was supposed to mean that he advocated a return to the policies of liberal reform with which the Democratic Party was once associated, and rejected the "New Democrat" posture identified with Bill Clinton.

In Sunday's debate, Dean revived the slogan but deliberately emptied it of any hint of a return to social reformism. He said, "I started out this campaign saying I was from the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party, which Paul Wellstone said. And I didn't mean that I was a big liberal, I was a big conservative, I was a big moderate. What I meant was, just like Paul Wellstone, I say what I think, and I don't care if 70 percent of the people in this country disagree with me, as long as I believe it's the right thing to do."

Most viewers would have had difficulty disentangling the syntax of this

comment, let alone grasping its political meaning. But for the powers that be in the Democratic Party, the message was clear. Dean is disavowing any identification with the left-liberal pretenses of a Wellstone, in favor of a more “centrist” position: balancing the federal budget, reining in spending on entitlement programs, and channeling public opposition to the war in Iraq into support for a UN fig leaf for the US occupation.

Dean extended another olive branch to the party establishment, declaring in his closing statement, “The people on this stage with me have over three-quarters of a century of experience in Washington. And if one of them wins the nomination, believe me, I’m going to do everything I can to make sure they become the next president of the United States.” This declaration of party loyalty exposed the unprincipled character of Dean’s opposition to the war in Iraq, since both Lieberman and Gephardt have consistently supported the Bush administration’s war drive. Dean’s statement was not reciprocated by Lieberman, who might very well sit out the election or support Bush outright should an antiwar candidate win the Democratic nomination.

Kucinich, the most left-talking of the Democratic candidates, called for immediate US withdrawal from Iraq, a vast public works program to create jobs, universal health insurance, universal pre-kindergarten and free universal college education.

But his essential role as an American nationalist and defender of the profit system showed through in one comment, in which he called for the repeal of NAFTA and other agreements opening US markets to foreign trade. Kucinich concluded, “My economic program will address things like this: the sale of United States steel assets to foreign countries which are undermining our ability to defend our economy and to defend our national security.”

Kucinich, the former mayor of Cleveland, might oppose a war for oil, but he is quite capable of taking a different position on a war for steel. His economic protectionism reflects, in the final analysis, not the interests of steelworkers in Cleveland, but the profit drive of the steel bosses and their servants in the United Steelworkers union bureaucracy.

John Edwards made a revealing comment in reply to a question about the USA Patriot Act. He was asked how he could blame Attorney General John Ashcroft for repressive measures carried out under the new law when he had voted for the legislation and helped draft it in Congress. Edwards answered, “The attorney general of the United States came before us and told us that he would not abuse his discretion. He has abused his discretion. He has consistently abused his discretion. We all know that now. These provisions need to be changed.”

This posture of the congressional Democrats as a band of innocents, cruelly deceived by John Ashcroft, is more than a little ludicrous. Edwards is an experienced courtroom interrogator, a multimillionaire trial lawyer who made his fortune in legal combat with some of the largest and most ruthless corporations in America. In early 2001 he voted against confirming Ashcroft as attorney general, citing concerns over Ashcroft’s far-right record on civil liberties. Yet now Edwards suggests that no one could have known, in October 2001, that it was dangerous to give so much power to Ashcroft’s Justice Department!

The congressional Democrats have sought to justify every capitulation to the Bush administration on such specious grounds—their support for the Bush tax cuts, their endorsement of “No Child Left Behind Law,” now ravaging public education, their vote for the Iraq war resolution, their support for the bill funding the Iraq occupation. In truth, the Democratic Party has no stomach for a serious conflict with the Bush administration and the Republicans. When push comes to shove, both parties defend the wealth and power of the US ruling elite.

Several of the presidential candidates referred to aspects of the Bush White House that point to its conspiratorial and antidemocratic character. Yet none of them drew the conclusion that Bush & Co. should be removed from office for trampling on democratic rights at home and international

law abroad.

General Wesley Clark, for instance, declared, “Right after 9/11, this administration determined to do bait and switch on the American public. President Bush said he was going to get Osama bin Laden, dead or alive. Instead, he went after Saddam Hussein. He doesn’t have either one of them today.”

Clark reiterated his support for the invasion and conquest of Afghanistan, saying, “The failure of this administration was not to put the troops in to finish the job against Osama bin Laden.” He continued: “And you know why they didn’t do it? They didn’t do it because, all along, their plan was to save those troops to go after Saddam Hussein.”

Dean said, “The president tried to make us think that Al Qaeda had something—that Saddam Hussein had something to do with 9/11. Three weeks ago he admitted there was no evidence for that.”

If one takes such comments seriously, then Bush should be impeached, removed from office and indicted as a war criminal for causing hundreds of deaths of American soldiers and thousands of deaths in Iraq by lying to the American people and the world about the necessity of going to war.

A reporter for the *World Socialist Web Site* questioned a number of the Democratic candidates after the debate on this subject, asking them whether the lies used to engineer the war could serve as the grounds for the impeachment of Bush. (None of the nine had mentioned the subject in the course of the debate, although former candidate Bob Graham raised the issue during the summer.)

Gephardt replied by reiterating his agreement with the claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, even though none have been found in the seven months since the US invasion began. “I don’t listen to George Bush,” Gephardt said. “I went directly to the CIA and they told me that they had concerns about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and components for weapons of mass destruction.” If this information was wrong, he said, it showed the need to beef up US intelligence services to “correct the problem.”

Carol Moseley Braun called impeachment a “good question,” but gave no direct answer. “We should look at the results of the investigations going on and give it serious attention,” she said.

Kucinich flatly rejected impeachment, not on the grounds that it was impractical, but because “Impeachment would mean Congress choosing the president. My focus is on the election, nothing else.”

In other words, none of the Democrats, despite their Bush-bashing rhetoric for popular consumption, has any intention of waging a serious struggle against the Bush administration. That task requires the development of a mass political movement of the working class, independent of and opposed to both the Democratic and Republican parties.



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