

Howard Dean and the shrinking US political “mainstream”

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With Howard Dean the front-runner in the polls as the Democratic Party prepares for next month’s Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire presidential primary, the drumbeat of attacks from both his Democratic rivals and significant sections of the media, portraying the former Vermont governor as irresponsible and even extremist, is intensifying.

Dean, who made his reputation as a fiscally conservative governor with relatively liberal views on issues such as abortion, is being pilloried because he has criticized the Bush’s administration’s decision to launch an unprovoked, pre-emptive war against Iraq, in defiance of the United Nations. In recent weeks, as his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination has gained momentum, Dean has made a point of affirming his support for the “war on terror” and the invasion of Afghanistan, and opposing any early pullout of US troops from Iraq, declaring that regardless of the government deception that accompanied the war, the US occupation must be maintained and “failure” in Iraq must be avoided at all costs.

Despite such efforts by Dean to demonstrate his basic agreement with the global aims of American imperialism, the tenor of the political offensive against the Democratic front-runner has grown increasingly frenzied, reaching a pitch of near-hysteria in the aftermath of the capture of Saddam Hussein.

The attacks reached a low point this week with the release of a political ad—apparently prepared by operatives from rival Democratic campaigns, using trade union funds—featuring the visage of Osama bin Laden and suggesting that Dean is “soft” on terrorism.

This was followed by a crescendo of criticism from Dean’s Democratic rivals and the media over the candidate’s statement in Arizona that the capture of Saddam Hussein would not “make America’s homeland safer.”

The vitriolic denunciations from Democratic rivals signify that the dominant sections of the Democratic Party are opposed to fielding any candidate who is identified with mass sentiment against the war in Iraq. Senator Joseph Lieberman has led this assault, declaring that Dean’s nomination would “take us back to the days when we Democrats were not trusted to defend America’s security.” Senator John Kerry called Dean’s policies “a profound danger for both our national security and global stability.”

The intensity of these attacks suggests that, should Dean win the nomination, more than a few leading Democrats would either openly or tacitly work for his defeat and the reelection of Bush. Even some who formally endorsed the party’s candidate would be prepared to work behind the scenes to sabotage his campaign.

That factions within the right wing of the Republican Party are tacitly backing the campaign against Dean was made clear in a

column by Fred Barnes in the *Weekly Standard*, who declared Dean’s nomination “an event to be feared.”

“Why?” he asked. “Because it will harm the Democratic Party and lead to a general election campaign brimming with bitter assaults on the very idea of an assertive, morality-based American role in the world. And this will play out as the war on terrorism, and the outcome in Iraq, hang in the balance.” Barnes concluded by appealing to Bill and Hillary Clinton—whom the publication has continuously vilified—to “take on Dean.”

The *Washington Post*, in a December 17 editorial headlined “Beyond the Mainstream,” summed up the attitude of broad sections of the American political and media establishment toward a Dean candidacy. The same issue carried a tendentious front-page story attributing to Dean a “penchant for flippant and sometimes false statements” and a “history of making statements that are mean-spirited or misleading.”

The trajectory of the *Post* over the past two decades has provided an accurate barometer of the shift by the US political elite, and both of its parties, sharply to the right. In its foreign policy views, it has become virtually indistinguishable from the *Wall Street Journal*. In common with the modus operandi of that newspaper’s editorial pages, the *Post*’s editorial on Dean eschews reasoned argument for the dishonest language of political thuggery and intimidation.

Contrasting Dean to the other five “leading Democrats” in the race for the presidential nomination, the *Post* editorial declares: “...only Mr. Dean made the extraordinary argument that the capture of Saddam Hussein ‘has not made Americans safer.’ Mr. Dean’s carefully prepared speech was described as a move toward the center, but in key ways it shifted him farther from the mainstream.”

Why is Dean’s argument so “extraordinary?” Saddam Hussein was a hunted man, hiding in a hole in the ground without even a cell phone. His capture was all but inevitable, and there is no sign that it has had an effect even on the level of attacks on US occupation forces and their local agents in Iraq. Indeed, US soldiers interviewed in Iraq have said they do not anticipate any lessening of the dangers and casualties they experience daily. Some of those familiar with the politics of the country predict that Hussein’s imprisonment may have the effect of convincing many who have held back for fear of restoring the ex-dictator to join in a nationalist struggle to expel the US occupiers.

As for the US itself, no evidence has been produced linking Hussein to either the September 11, 2001, attacks or any other terrorist acts or conspiracies against the American people.

Dean’s real sin, it would appear, is cutting across a government and media propaganda campaign aimed at using the Saddam Hussein

capture to browbeat the American public into accepting the continued occupation of Iraq. Precisely in what way Hussein's capture validates a war carried out in violation of international law and based on lies has never been explained by the *Post* or anyone else.

For his own part, the former Vermont governor added his voice to the media triumphalism that accompanied the announcement of Saddam Hussein's capture, issuing a cringing statement declaring the event a "great day for America" and adding that "President Bush deserves a day of celebration" free from any discussion of "policy differences."

This, however, is not enough for the *Post*. In lashing out at Dean, the newspaper repeats the lies and half-truths used by the Bush administration to promote its war of aggression. Unlike Dean, the paper declares, "...most Americans understand Saddam Hussein for what he was: a brutal dictator who stockpiled and used weapons of mass destruction, who plotted to seize oil supplies on which the United States depends, who hated the United States and once sought to assassinate a former president, whose continuing hold on power forced thousands of American troops to remain in the Persian Gulf region for a decade..."

Those Americans who have followed events are well aware that not a trace of the weapons of mass destruction invoked by the Bush administration as its reason for war has been found, and there have been multiple exposures of the administration's fabrication of "evidence" to deceive the public on this score.

What weapons Hussein had in an earlier period were largely supplied by Washington and its surrogates as successive US administrations sought to build up this "brutal dictator" as a counterweight against Iran. Newly released documents of US-Iraq diplomacy in 1983-84 involving the personal intervention of then US special envoy and current secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld reveal, moreover, that Washington gave Saddam Hussein's regime assurances that its public opposition to the use of chemical weapons did not imply any lessening of US support for Iraq in its conflict with its neighbor.

The *Post's* charge that Saddam Hussein plotted to "seize oil supplies" admirably, if inadvertently, reflects the unbounded arrogance and rapaciousness of an imperialist power that assumes it has the right to control strategic resources wherever they exist in any part of the world. It is the US that has sent tens of thousands of troops and a deadly armada across oceans and continents to seize control of Iraqi oil, not the other way around.

Getting to the heart of its concerns over Dean, the newspaper warns that the Democratic candidate "appears eager to extract the United States from the Middle East as quickly as possible, rather than encourage political and economic liberalization." The editorial continues: "His speech suggests a significant retreat by the United States from the promotion of its interests and values in the world... His most serious departure from the Democratic mainstream is not his opposition to the war. It is his apparent readiness to shrink US ambitions, in Iraq and elsewhere..."

In other words, Dean's attempts to win the Democratic nomination through appeals to antiwar sentiment risk derailing Washington's re-colonization of Iraq and expropriation of the country's oil wealth, and its even broader geo-strategic and military aims "elsewhere." In a word, Dean's nomination could complicate American imperialism's drive for global hegemony.

What is this "mainstream" that the *Post* invokes, and how has Dean departed from it?

Post's mainstream clearly is not the broad masses of the American population. Even opinion polls that are notorious for underestimating the breadth of opposition to official policy have shown the American people deeply split over whether the war was justified, with many of those who supposedly back the venture evincing no agreement with a protracted occupation. Not only has the war provoked some of the most massive protest demonstrations in US history, but within the US military itself disaffection with the Iraqi operation is rampant.

The obvious question is why, if Dean is, politically speaking, beyond the pale, has he emerged as a front-runner in the Democratic race? It is precisely his appeal, however tame, to antiwar sentiment that has propelled him from relative obscurity to become a leading candidate.

The mainstream, as far as the *Post* is concerned, has nothing to do with democratic government or popular sentiment. It is defined by the US financial elite, whose interests ultimately determine the policies of not only the Republicans, but the Democrats as well. For these layers, US hegemony over the vital energy supplies of the region is a critical matter. While divisions exist over the provocative and unilateral character of the Bush administration's foreign policy, there is little stomach for an election campaign that in any way calls into question such strategic goals.

The mainstream of corporate wealth and power is disquieted over the prospect of a Democratic presidential candidate giving even limited voice to the opposition that exists to US policy in Iraq.

The irony underlying the *Post's* sophisms is that its so-called mainstream feels itself so isolated and out of line with the broad sentiments of the people that it cannot brook any debate or discussion in a presidential election of the single most important issue facing the American people—the war in Iraq. Any criticism of the war must be branded illegitimate, if not downright traitorous. The frenzied response to Dean's candidacy reflects the fear that official toleration of antiwar views could fuel popular opposition that is so intense and deep, it could mushroom and spin out of control of the two-party system.

Thus, the well-orchestrated offensive against Dean, including his banishment to the political fringe by the US capital's newspaper of record, expresses the acute and deep-going social crisis in America—a crisis that has overtaken the political system, rendered it dysfunctional, and made any genuine democratic debate and discussion a mortal danger to the powers-that-be.

The attacks on Dean are two-pronged. The first aim is to defeat his bid for the Democratic nomination. The second, should Dean continue to consolidate his position in the upcoming primaries, is to accelerate his turn to the right.

In the end, the many millions of people opposed to the Bush administration's policies of militarism abroad and social reaction at home will find no real alternative in Dean or in any other Democratic candidate. Such an alternative is possible only through a break with the two-party system and the emergence of an independent, mass political party of the working class.



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