

Howard Dean rejects Washington Post charge that he is “beyond the mainstream”

David Walsh, Barry Grey
24 December 2003

Howard Dean, a leading candidate for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, published an opinion piece in the December 21 *Washington Post* replying to a December 18 *Post* editorial that criticized his positions on the Iraq war as “beyond the mainstream.” (See “Howard Dean and the shrinking US political ‘mainstream,’” WWSW, December 20, 2003.)

Dean’s response, headlined “Out of the Mainstream? Hardly,” argues that it is the Bush administration that is pursuing a foreign policy radically out of line with the “mainstream” of US policy in the post-World War Two period. Presenting himself as a clear-headed defender of the global interests of American capitalism, the former Vermont governor warns that the unilateralist and extreme militarist cast of the present government is undermining long-standing international alliances that have served the interests of the US ruling elite very well for more than half a century.

Dean, who, according to opinion polls, is the front-runner in the race for the Democratic nomination, has become the target of a ferocious political attack by most of the media and prominent figures within the Democratic Party establishment. These attacks reached a frenzied pitch following the capture of Saddam Hussein. Among those who have sought to use the seizure of the former Iraqi president to justify the invasion of Iraq and brand Dean a security risk and dangerous radical are rival candidates for the Democratic nomination—senators Joe Lieberman and John Kerry, and Congressman Richard Gephardt.

Dean writes in his column that “the Bush agenda represents a radical departure from decades of bipartisan consensus on the appropriate use of US power and our leadership in the world community.” He continues: “From its derisive treatment of allies to its rejection of important global agreements, this administration has favored a go-it-alone approach and a determination to use force as its weapon of first resort. Its approach has alienated friends and bolstered foes. Its agenda isolates the United States, placing responsibility for all the world’s problems in our hands, and runs counter to America’s traditions as a republic.”

Dean singles out for attack the Bush administration’s “signature doctrine of ‘preemptive war.’”

The former governor elaborates his own alternative, reflecting, as he sees it, “the best of our mainstream tradition.” He calls for strengthening “our military and intelligence,” rebuilding alliances—with the Europeans, in particular—that have been “badly damaged by the current administration,” making the defeat of “the terrorists who have attacked America” a top priority, and more seriously engaging with “developing nations on investment, trade, aid and public health.”

Dean explains that he opposed the invasion of Iraq because “Saddam Hussein did not pose an imminent threat to America.” He adds, “The administration had not (and still has not) presented clear evidence that Hussein was on the verge of attacking his neighbors or threatening the United States or the Middle East with weapons of mass destruction or supporting al Qaeda.”

At pains to refute any suggestion that he is, in principle, opposed to the use of military force, he states in the second paragraph that he supports

talks with North Korea, “backed by the threat of force.”

His effort, Dean writes, is aimed at returning US policy to its “fundamental course” of “protecting Americans and advancing our values and interests...through effective partnerships and global leadership, as well as military strength.” He concludes that in the end it will be clear “who is in the mainstream and who is swimming against the tide of history.”

Dean’s column, published only three days after the *Post* editorial denouncing him, is significant on several accounts. First, it indicates the sharp character of the divisions that exist within the corporate and political establishment—in particular, within Dean’s own party. Second, it outlines the substance of some of the major policy questions in dispute. Third, it underscores the fact that Dean himself is animated by the desire, as a bourgeois politician, to defend the interests of the American ruling elite against a perceived threat to those interests arising from the policies of more right-wing factions.

Dean’s column echoes positions that have been advanced over the past 15 months by Al Gore, the former vice president and Democratic presidential candidate in 2000. Earlier this month, Gore endorsed Dean’s bid for the 2004 Democratic nomination.

Dean and Gore speak for sections of the ruling elite who are deeply concerned over the impact of the current administration’s bellicose policies in both foreign and domestic affairs. When he writes that “Around the world, too many are now under the false impression that the American people are bent on global domination and war against Islam,” Dean is addressing the obvious signs of growing international hostility to Washington’s brazen drive for world domination.

International financial speculator George Soros, who has donated \$5 million to MoveOn.org, the liberal Democratic group that co-sponsored Gore’s recent speeches, writes along the same lines in the December issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, defending the “advocates of continuity” against those in the Bush administration who have redefined “the abnormal, the radical, and the extreme...as normal.”

Dean and others are concerned as well that the rightward lurch by the Democratic Party, which in the main supports Bush’s militaristic posture, will discredit the political setup in the US to the extent that an eruption of popular dissent will occur outside the orbit of the two-party system and fall under the influence of left-wing and socialist movements. They are seeking to revive the Democratic Party as an effective means of channeling social and political discontent and containing it within the framework of bourgeois politics.

Other leading candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination, such as senators Lieberman, Kerry and John Edwards, and Representative Gephardt, are principally appealing to elite public opinion, hoping to tilt it away from Bush and toward their respective camps. Each banks on sufficient discontent within the political and media establishment with the current administration, especially in light of the growing quagmire in Iraq, to make his candidacy more attractive.

Dean, however, and those who support him are convinced of the need,

in order to effect a change in course, to appeal—cautiously, and within strict limits—to broader social forces. The former Vermont governor has made use of the Internet as a major instrument in his campaign. He reportedly has 540,000 online supporters. In response to a television ad featuring the face of Osama bin Laden and a scurrilous anti-Dean message, run by a group of right-wing Democrats, the Dean campaign received \$552,000 in Internet contributions in three days.

In Iowa, where the various candidates are competing to win the Democratic caucuses January 19, Dean has been running a quasi-populist campaign, telling an audience at Grinnell College, “We’ve allowed ourselves to become the slaves to the bottom line of multi-national corporations all over the world.” He told another crowd, “We are not cogs in a corporate machine. We are human, spiritual beings who deserve better consideration as human beings than we’re getting from this administration.”

Dean’s entirely reasonable suggestion that the capture of Saddam Hussein had failed to make American citizens any safer brought denunciations from his rivals. Lieberman labeled Dean “Dr. No,” because of his opposition to the invasion of Iraq and claimed—in a crude attempt to link Dean to Saddam Hussein—that Dean had crawled into a “spider hole of denial.”

On CNN Sunday, host Wolf Blitzer questioned Kerry about Dean’s comments regarding the Hussein arrest, egging him on to repudiate the former governor. After showing a clip of Dean’s remarks, Blitzer asked Kerry, “Now, you disagree with him on that?” In reply, Kerry said, “I think that the *Washington Post* editorialized and called Howard Dean’s view ‘ludicrous.’”

Kerry went on to assert that “for a major candidate not to understand that the capture of that man makes America safer, I think, shows an extraordinary lack of understanding of foreign policy and national security.” Blitzer concluded this portion of the interview by twice asking whether Dean was “qualified to be president.” Kerry, significantly, refused to give the standard assurance that he would support whichever candidate emerged as the Democratic nominee, and instead replied that Dean’s fitness to be president was “for the American people to decide.”

To this point, Dean has been relatively assertive in fending off the criticism from fellow Democrats. Last Friday, campaigning in New Hampshire, he commented, “I think the Democratic Party has to offer a clear alternative to the American people,” and reiterated his contention that “Americans are no safer from these serious threats than they were the day before Saddam Hussein was captured.” He added, “We are no safer today than the day the planes struck the World Trade Center.”

In Iowa on December 20, Dean urged supporters not merely to support him, but to change their party: “It has to be about rebuilding the Democratic Party. You have the power on January 19 to change the Democratic Party.”

Dean’s critique of American politics remains both limited and superficial. It stops precisely where it should begin. This is not primarily a function of Dean’s personality or intellectual powers. Rather, it flows from his position as a defender of American capitalism and the basic interests of the US ruling class.

He leaves unanswered the decisive questions: Why has the US government, with the support of the dominant sections of the ruling elite and media, embarked on its “radical departure” from more traditional approaches? Why is it pursuing reckless policies, alienating the mass of the world’s population and creating conditions for a widespread radicalization in the US as well? Why has a major section of his own party, and certainly the overwhelming majority of its leading personnel, gone along with these same policies?

It is true that Dean’s line in foreign policy was the more or less dominant viewpoint in Washington until the installation of the Bush administration in the hijacked election of 2000. At the same time, the

impetus for a shift to more unilateralist and belligerent policies had been accumulating for decades, including under the Clinton administration. Clinton oversaw a marked escalation of American military action internationally, including repeated bombings of Iraq, the deployment of US troops in Somalia and Haiti, the air war against Serbia, and missile strikes against Afghanistan and Sudan.

The basic dividing line in post-war American ruling class thought was between those who favored “containment” of the USSR and advocates of “roll-back” (i.e., a direct military confrontation with the Stalinist regimes). The same extreme-right forces that pressed for confrontation with the USSR have, in the aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union, championed the doctrine of American global hegemony, utilizing US military supremacy as the chief instrument and adopting the aggressive policy of preemptive war. With the coming to power of the Bush administration, this faction has achieved political supremacy within the US.

Dean does not address the obvious question: Why has the traditionally more dominant stance, represented by Gore and himself, been pushed to the margins of the political establishment?

To answer such questions would require seriously probing the social and economic roots of this shift in US policy. Such an examination would inevitably bring to the center of attention the entire evolution of American capitalism, its insoluble contradictions and its new imperatives.

That the current administration is “wildly straying,” in Dean’s words, from the traditional course is not simply the personal whim of Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld or Paul Wolfowitz. The impulse for these violent and belligerent policies arises from the social and economic system defended by Republicans and Democrats alike, including Dean.

Were he to win his party’s nomination, Dean would find himself obliged to tailor his campaign to the demands of the corporate elite in a manner that would propel him along the same general lines as the forces of extreme reaction he currently criticizes.

The attacks on Dean and his response reflect serious divisions within the ruling elite, although the most powerful sections continue to support the Bush administration. Dean himself does not represent the interests or needs of working people. Rather, he speaks for a disaffected and concerned section of that same elite. Those who ascribe to Dean a genuinely radical and even left-wing program are deluding themselves and others.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact