Democrats praise Bush after capture of Hussein

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16 December 2003

The applause for the capture of Saddam Hussein from the Democratic presidential candidates punctures the pretense that the Democrats are opposed to the Bush administration's policies in Iraq. All six of the leading Democratic candidates issued statements hailing the "success" of the US military occupation force in seizing the deposed Iraqi president.

(The six candidates with significant ruling-class support for the nomination are former Vermont Governor Howard Dean, Senators John Edwards, John Kerry and Joseph Lieberman, Congressman Richard Gephardt, and retired general Wesley Clark. The other three active candidates, Congressman Dennis Kucinich, former senator Carol Moseley Braun, and the Reverend Al Sharpton, will be considered in a separate article).

It was to be expected that the four candidates who voted for the congressional resolution authorizing Bush to attack Iraq in October 2002 should take the occasion to reiterate their pro-war stance, after months of posturing as opponents of the administration. Their comments underscore the fact that they share responsibility for the illegal US war against Iraq and only criticized the Bush administration's tactics, not its fundamental policy.

Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman gave the most full-throated roar of approval for Bush. The most hard-line Democratic supporter of the US invasion of Iraq, Lieberman has criticized the Bush administration only for failing to plan adequately for postwar contingencies and failing to win broader international support.

Lieberman declared himself "energized" by the capture of Hussein, and called for his execution after a speedy trial. He took the opportunity to bash the front-running Democratic presidential hopeful, former Vermont Governor Howard Dean, saying, "If Howard Dean had his way, Saddam Hussein would be in power today, not in prison, and the world would be a much more dangerous place. The American people would have a lot more to fear."

Congressman Richard A. Gephardt, another unrepentant supporter of the war, said, "It's a great day for our troops, for this administration, for the people of Iraq. My hope is that this will decrease the violence our troops will have to face."

Senator John Edwards, who also voted for the war resolution, gave Bush some friendly advice: "Our military leaders have accomplished a great success. I hope President Bush will use this opportunity to chart a course in Iraq that will bring in our allies in a meaningful way to achieve a democratic and peaceful Iraq."

Senator John Kerry, whose position on the Iraq war has been the most contorted of the Democrats—he has sought to combine a vote for the war resolution with appeals to popular antiwar sentiment—reverted back to a defense of his pro-war vote. In a clear reference to Dean, he said, "I think that this is a time that underscores that if we're going to beat George Bush, we need somebody who has the experience, and who got this policy right."

He added criticism of Bush, largely from the right, for not mobilizing more armed forces for the war, particularly from allied countries. "If we had done this with a sufficient number of troops," Kerry said, "if we had done this in a globalized way, if we had brought more people to the table, we might have caught Saddam Hussein sooner. We might have had less loss of life. We would be in a stronger position today with respect to what we're doing."

Retired general Wesley Clark issued a statement declaring: "I could not be prouder of the men and women of the U.S. armed forces for capturing this horrible despot. This is a testament to their courage and determination. I'd also like to congratulate Lieutenant General Sanchez and the intelligence community for the crucial role they played. We've been due good news from Iraq, and the world is a safer and better place now that he [Hussein] is in custody."

But Clark was more cautious about declaring that the capture of Hussein somehow vindicated the decision to go to war with Iraq. "I stand by all the concerns I have expressed from the beginning," he said. "I don't think that the capture of Saddam Hussein in any way invalidates those concerns."

For Lieberman and Gephardt, the embrace of Bush's policy of military aggression in the Middle East is nothing new. Lieberman vociferously backed US military action against Iraq even before the Bush administration, and Gephardt played a critical role in delivering congressional Democratic support to the resolution giving Bush blank-check authority to attack and conquer Iraq.

Clark, Edwards and Kerry, by contrast, have sought to appeal to rising antiwar sentiment, fueled by the steady toll of casualties in Iraq and the growth of Iraqi guerrilla resistance. Edwards and Kerry voted against the most recent $87 billion appropriation for the occupation of Iraq, and all three claimed that the invasion of Iraq was not justified by any imminent threat to the United States or the American people.

That did not stop them from claiming that the world and the American people were safer because of Hussein's capture. The Democratic candidates only parrot Bush administration war

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propaganda—long since exposed as lies—connecting the Baathist regime with Al Qaeda terrorism or claiming that Iraq possessed huge stockpiles of chemical, biological or even nuclear weapons.

Nor did any of these candidates bother to explain how US forces in Iraq were any safer because of the capture of Hussein—a 66-year-old man on the run, reduced to two aides and without any means of communication. Even the American military admits that Hussein had no control of the guerrilla resistance to the US occupation.

While the statements of the openly or tacitly prowar candidates were significant, even more important is the response of the supposed antiwar standard-bearer, Howard Dean, whose rise to prominence in the presidential nomination contest was based on his appeal to popular opposition to the war in Iraq.

After Hussein's capture was announced, Dean issued a statement while campaigning in Florida, filled with the same patriotic bunkum as those of his rivals. "This is a great day of pride in the American military, a great day for the Iraqi people and a great day for America," he said. "I think President Bush deserves a day of celebration. We have our policy differences, but we won't be discussing them today."

He added, "This is a day to celebrate the fact that Saddam's been caught. We'll have to wait to see what happens to the campaign later."

Dean has sought to distance his campaign from his earlier appeals to antiwar sentiment—or, more precisely, to hold on to his antiwar supporters while making his peace with the party establishment and the Democratic wing of the foreign policy/intelligence apparatus.

This maneuver was on display during last week's Democratic presidential debate in New Hampshire, in which Dean used what amounts to coded language, allowing him to communicate simultaneously with his two distinct audiences.

To the ruling elite and its national security establishment, he sought to send the message that he is a reliable defender of US corporate and strategic interests abroad. At the same time, he sought to appeal to the growing popular hostility both to the occupation of Iraq and the overall belligerency of the Bush administration's foreign policy.

This led to some excruciating political contortions. Dean publicly disagreed with Senator Hillary Clinton, who concluded a fact-finding trip to Baghdad by calling for more American troops in Iraq. At the same time, he agreed with Clinton on the necessity to withdraw National Guard and Army Reserve soldiers, while replacing them with other forces, either American or international.

On the most fundamental question, Dean declared his full support for the continued US occupation of Iraq. "We will not be able to withdraw an American presence," he said. "The tragedy of what we did in Iraq, which I have opposed right from the beginning, is that now we're stuck there, because there was no serious threat to the United States from Saddam Hussein, but there is a threat from an Iraq with Al Qaeda in it or with a fundamentalist Shiite regime which is closely allied with the Iranians."

Dean admits that the Bush administration's justification for the invasion and conquest of Iraq was false—there was no threat from Baghdad to the United States or the American people. But he declares that now Iraq, even though under complete US military control, IS a threat to US national security, and therefore the occupation must continue.

Pressed by debate moderator Ted Koppel of ABC News, Dean said that the occupation of Iraq might continue for some time: "Over a period of a few years, until the Iraqis really are able to have a democracy which is strong enough not to allow Al Qaeda to emerge and has a constitution that's widely enough respected so they will not have a fundamentalist Shiite regime."

At one point during the December 9 debate, Dean declared that the model for postwar Iraq should be Afghanistan, a war that he supported. "The thing we ought to take out of Afghanistan is their model for how they're writing their constitution," Dean said. "They had an elected group of people who came to meet in Kabul for quite some time. They wrote a constitution which is an Afghan version of democracy. That can work in Iraq, and that's the first prerequisite."

Actually, the constitution-writing process in Afghanistan is just as undemocratic and rigged as the process that the Bush administration has proposed in Iraq. There have been no elections in either country, despite Bush's claims to be waging a worldwide crusade for democracy. In Afghanistan, US officials or their political stooges, like Afghan President Hamid Karzai, have appointed councils of notables who then selected delegates to an assembly that will write the constitution.

After this bizarre rewriting of history, Dean suggested that too much emphasis was being placed on the issue of Iraq (although his own campaign would have been stillborn without it). "Iraq and national security are important, but it's not what this debate's about," he said. Domestic issues, particular the economy, were more important, he argued.

The statements of the major Democratic candidates on the capture of Hussein only underscore the unity of the two big business parties when it comes to the fundamental interests of American imperialism.

As millions of working people and youth understood at the time, the Bush administration's decision to go to war against Iraq was a criminal act of aggression. The United States carried out the invasion and conquest of Iraq on the basis of lies and fabrications, in deliberate violation of international law.

The capture of Hussein neither justifies nor vindicates the war on Iraq, and the Democratic candidates' applause for this "success" by the US military occupation force only gives aid and comfort to the criminals who head the Bush administration.

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