

The vetting of John Kerry

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21 February 2004

The US presidential election has entered a new stage, with Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts being treated as the near-certain Democratic nominee by the media, the Democratic Party establishment and the Bush administration. With the withdrawal of former Vermont governor Howard Dean, Kerry's only major rival is Senator John Edwards of North Carolina, who has won just one of the 17 state contests so far.

Kerry consolidated his lead in the nomination contest by winning primaries in Virginia and Tennessee February 10 and in Wisconsin February 17, giving him 15 victories in the first 17 states. He is heavily favored to win the bulk of the March 2 "Super Tuesday" primaries, which include California, New York, Ohio, Georgia, Minnesota and Maryland, as well as four states in New England, his home region.

Kerry already has nearly a third of the delegates needed for nomination, and should win another third in the ten states where balloting will be held March 2. Given Democratic Party rules that allocate state delegates on a proportional basis for any candidate winning as much as 15 percent of the vote, it would be extremely difficult for Edwards to overtake Kerry after March 2, even if he began to win primaries rather than finishing second. Were that to occur, it would represent a collapse of Kerry's campaign even more dramatic than the meltdown suffered by Dean.

As recently as last October, the Kerry campaign was in disarray, trailing badly in the polls, out of money and demoralized. Kerry fired his first campaign manager, Jim Jordan, and installed a new group headed by Mary Beth Cahill, chief of staff for Senator Edward Kennedy. In early December, Kerry mortgaged his mansion in Beacon Hill, Boston's wealthiest neighborhood, for \$6.4 million in order to pour the money into sustaining his campaign through the January 19 Iowa caucuses, the first actual contest.

Over the past month there has been a remarkable transformation. A candidate widely dismissed as an also-ran and has-been has become the likely Democratic Party nominee, and the favorite, if the election were held this month, to be the next president of the United States, according to public opinion polls.

This turnabout has little to do with Kerry's skills as a candidate or his ability to "connect"—as the American media jargon puts it—with average voters. The privileged son of a US diplomat, educated at a Swiss boarding school and Yale University, Kerry's social background is similar to that of George W. Bush. They even share membership in the Yale secret society Skull and Bones.

While undoubtedly more intelligent and articulate than the current occupant of the White House—a random drawing from the phone book would suffice for that—Kerry is otherwise a run-of-the-mill bourgeois politician and representative of the American ruling elite, with a leaden speaking style and a tendency to pontificate and equivocate.

The one distinctive feature in his political biography is his simultaneous identification with the soldiers who fought the war in Vietnam and the anti-war demonstrators who opposed it. Kerry was wounded three times and won two medals for bravery in combat, stemming from his conduct as the commander of a river gunboat in the Mekong Delta, one of the most hazardous areas of the war.

When he returned to the United States, disillusioned with the bloody

impasse in southeast Asia, he became a celebrated leader of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, speaking at the Winter Soldier meetings on US atrocities, organized by antiwar groups, and at a congressional hearing in early 1971 where he made a much-publicized denunciation of the war.

One year later he was an unsuccessful candidate for a Massachusetts congressional seat, the start of a 32-year career as a Democratic politician in which he served as a local prosecutor, lieutenant governor of Massachusetts, and US senator since 1984, always in the shadow of the senior Democrat in Massachusetts, Senator Edward Kennedy.

Ties to Wall Street

The rise of Kerry and the fall of Howard Dean were parallel processes. As the WWSW has explained (see "An object lesson in Democratic Party politics"), the Dean campaign won a significant response from a section of young people and others opposed to Bush's war in Iraq and angered by the wholesale capitulation of the Democratic Party—above all, its congressional wing. Dean rode high in the polls and in fundraising and by December 2003 he was virtually conceded the Democratic nomination in media commentaries.

From the standpoint of the ruling elite, at that point still overwhelmingly committed to a second term for Bush, this represented no threat. On the contrary, the Dean campaign promised to serve a vital interest of bourgeois politics by channeling antiwar opinion back into the Democratic Party and preserving the two-party monopoly of US politics.

Dean's campaign began to wane, however, as sections of the ruling elite became increasingly disillusioned with Bush's policies, both foreign and domestic. With both Iraq and Afghanistan ungovernable and threatening to tie down American military forces indefinitely, and with the federal deficit skyrocketing out of control, the question of a potential replacement for Bush—i.e., the selection of a Democratic presidential nominee who would serve not merely as a safety valve for dissent, but as chief executive for American imperialism—became a pressing concern.

The irony is that as questions about the viability of a second Bush term began to grow within the ruling class, the most outspokenly anti-Bush candidate among the major Democratic contenders became the victim. The beneficiary was Kerry, who in many ways epitomizes the spineless Washington Democratic Party establishment that Dean had initially targeted in his campaign.

During the first two years of the Bush administration, Kerry supported many of the policies of the White House that he now claims to oppose. He voted for the USA Patriot Act, he voted for Bush's "No Child Left Behind" education bill, and he voted to authorize Bush to go to war against Iraq.

Kerry's position on Iraq, in particular, became increasingly contorted, as he sought to adapt to the overwhelming opposition to the war among Democratic voters. He claimed to oppose the war, despite his vote empowering Bush to take military action. In September 2003, he voted

against an \$87 billion appropriation for US military and reconstruction operations in Iraq, even while declaring—like Dean, Edwards and most of the other Democratic candidates—that he favored the continued military occupation.

For the ruling elite, Dean was a relatively unknown quantity, while Kerry, of all the other candidates, has the longest political record, as a four-term US Senator. Moreover, he had the confidence of leading financial interests.

The *Wall Street Journal* profiled these ties in an article February 18 on a fundraising gathering for Kerry at the Park Avenue apartment of Blair Effron, vice-chairman of UBS Investment Bank. Among those attending were Pete Peterson, chairman of Blackstone Group and perhaps the leading advocate of austerity in US fiscal policy; Stephen Robert, former chairman of Oppenheimer Group; hedge-fund manager James Chanos; and real-estate executive and investment banker Richard Richman.

The *Journal* noted the cynicism of the Democratic front-runner's approach to the financiers: "Sen. Kerry's courting of Wall Street is no cakewalk. He is using populist corporate-bashing rhetoric to woo the party's liberal base, even as a campaign adviser privately sends the reassuring message that the senator actually is 'pro-business' and will be 'more nuanced going forward'."

Kerry's connection to Wall Street is not recent. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, he raised \$1.1 million from stock market interests for his senate reelection campaign in 2002, and \$2.3 million over the past 15 years, more than all but three other senators. He also has significant backing from the media moguls: with campaign contributions from top executives at Viacom, Sony and Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.

The corporate-controlled media shapes the campaign

As the Democratic nomination campaign moves into the home stretch, the American media monopolies are exercising their influence more and more openly to shape the campaign and insure that the "correct" lessons—those that reinforce the conventional parameters of bourgeois politics—are drawn, both by the candidates themselves and the broader public.

The media reversal on Howard Dean is quite striking. The days since his formal withdrawal from active campaigning have seen one tribute after another in the establishment media, which had systematically attacked and lampooned his candidacy for the previous six weeks. The reason for this sudden change of tone has nothing to do with a reluctance to speak ill of the dead. It is rather motivated by Dean's decision to render a final—and critically important—service to bourgeois politics, by declaring that he would not run as an independent candidate and strongly urging his supporters to unite behind the eventual Democratic nominee rather than look for an alternative third party.

A *New York Times* editorial published February 19 hailed Dean's statement as a boon to the remaining Democratic Party candidates, describing it as "a creative call to his followers to stay within Democratic ranks as a driving force for change." The *Times* continued: "For all the establishment's fear of him, Dr. Dean warned against an independent candidacy that might again sap the party's chances against Mr. Bush."

The press treatment of the Edwards campaign is likewise instructive. He continues to be celebrated as an effective and even inspiring campaigner, despite the fact that he has collected fewer delegates than Howard Dean won before his withdrawal. At the same time, he was warned by a number of commentators—most notably, the right-wing Republican columnist William Safire of the *Times*—that he should drop his protectionist trade stance if he hopes to go further in presidential politics.

The media has for the most part tiptoed around the fact that Edwards apparently possesses only a single speech, which he delivers verbatim to each new audience, before moving on to a new venue, in the manner of a traveling medicine show. An editorial in the *Times* conceded, however, the artificial and stage-managed character of his populist rhetoric, observing, "People who see him 10 or 12 times will discover that he has a talent for staying on message that makes even George Bush look ungarded."

The real reason why the Edwards campaign is receiving media support at this stage is that it serves to keep pressure on Kerry from the right on key issues like Iraq (Edwards also voted to give Bush authorization to attack Iraq) and domestic social spending. One of the few sharp exchanges in the last Democratic debate, before the Wisconsin primary, came when Edwards rebuked Kerry and the other candidates for making too-sweeping promises on health care. "It's just not the truth," he said. "People need to know the truth about what we can afford and what we can't afford."

As for Kerry himself, the presumptive nominee has become the focus of a systematic effort to compel him to define political positions more precisely in line with the requirements of corporate America. Media commentaries and editorials have demanded that Kerry commit himself on key issues.

A column February 15 by the principal foreign policy columnist of the *Times*, Thomas Friedman, suggested that "the most important statement on Iraq right now could only come from the likely Democratic presidential nominee, John Kerry." Friedman urged Kerry to declare that despite tactical differences on the war in Iraq, there was "no daylight" between himself and Bush in relation to the guerrillas fighting US forces there. A Democrat in the White House would have to proceed just as ruthlessly as the Republicans to crush the resistance by military force, Friedman argued.

Friedman speaks for that section of the liberal establishment most closely identified with support for the war in Iraq, and he suggested the following language for a Kerry address on the subject: "I want every suicide bomber—from Bali to Baghdad—to understand one thing about a Kerry administration: 'You can blow yourselves up from now until next Ramadan, but we'll still be in Iraq. You'll be dead, but we'll still be there. Which part of that sentence don't you understand?'"

The same day the *Washington Post* published an editorial noting that Kerry had still to define his position on issues ranging from gay marriage to tax policy to health care. The *Post* outlined Kerry's shifts on US policy in Iraq over the past decade, voting against the 1991 Persian Gulf War, supporting bombing of Iraq in 1998, voting for the war authorization in 2002, then opposing the war appropriation in 2003.

"More important," the *Post* continued, "Mr. Kerry should clarify what he believes should be the objectives of the US mission in Iraq going forward—and what military and aid commitments he is prepared to make... Mr. Kerry spoke of 'completing the tasks of security and democracy' in Iraq. But he hasn't yet offered a realistic plan for how he would do it or committed himself to the likely cost in American troop deployments and dollars. If he is to offer a credible alternative to Mr. Bush, he must explain how he would manage the real and dangerous challenges the United States now faces in Iraq—without the fuzzing."

A front-page lead article in the same newspaper that day analyzed the likely political platform of the Democratic Party and concluded that it would represent a largely "split-the-difference" campaign against the Bush administration, rather than a reversal of Bush's right-wing policies.

This approach would include "putting the brakes on some, but not all, trade deals, starting with one being negotiated with South America; slightly modifying the new education law and increasing spending for it; retaining tax cuts for the middle class; and somehow, holding back government spending enough to reduce the federal budget deficit as fast as, if not faster than, President Bush says he would... The result: Voters

this year likely will be presented with two clear, but not dramatically different, approaches to solving the nation's domestic problems, ranging from failing schools to soaring drug costs.”



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