

Democratic frontrunner declares he will be stronger “war president” than Bush

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In a speech Friday in Los Angeles, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, the likely presidential nominee of the Democratic Party, attacked the Bush administration’s management of the “war on terror” and declared that he would be a more effective—and more aggressive—“war president.”

The bulk of Kerry’s criticism of the Bush administration’s foreign and military policy was from the right, not the left, a clear indication of the type of campaign the Democratic Party will wage for the November election. He referred disparagingly to “armchair hawks” in the Pentagon and White House, implicitly contrasting the lack of personal experience in warfare on the part of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz with his own experience as a Vietnam combat veteran.

“I don’t fault George Bush for doing too much in the war on terror,” Kerry said. “I believe he has done too little.... George Bush has no comprehensive strategy for victory in the war on terror—only an ad hoc strategy to keep our enemies at bay. If I am commander in chief, I would wage that war by putting in place a strategy to win it.”

In language essentially identical to that of Bush, he declared that the capture of Osama bin Laden would not mean an end to the conflict. “We don’t just face one man or one terrorist group,” he said. “We face a global jihadist movement of many groups, from different sources, with different agendas, but all committed to assaulting the United States and open and free societies around the globe.”

Kerry thus embraced the Bush administration’s main pretext for its militarist foreign policy as well as its domestic attacks on democratic rights and social spending: the assertion that a state of war exists—of indefinite duration, and against largely unidentified or yet-to-be-named terrorist enemies—and that, as a “war president,” the commander in chief must be granted extraordinary powers.

In reality, there is neither a constitutional nor a legal basis for the “war on terror.” The congressional resolution adopted after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, was not a declaration of war and did not empower Bush to act as a “war president.” The facts surrounding the events of September 11 remain unclear—the identity of the terrorists, the means they employed, the extent of the network supporting them—in large measure because the Bush administration has resisted any serious investigation.

Kerry has said little in his campaign about the massive assault on democratic rights that has accompanied the “war on terror.” He

has included a sentence or two about the performance of Attorney General John Ashcroft, and criticized abuses of power in the implementation of the USA Patriot Act, but Kerry voted for the legislation and has continued to defend that vote and praise many of its provisions.

In his Los Angeles speech, Kerry outlined a foreign policy posture hardly distinguishable from the Bush “doctrine of unilateral preemption,” as the prospective Democratic nominee termed it. He said that he would, if necessary, “order direct military action” against terrorist groups, with or without international support. “Allies give us more hands in the struggle,” he said, “but no president would ever let them tie our hands and prevent us from doing what must be done.... As president, I pledge to you, I’ll never wait for a green light from abroad, from any other institution, if our safety and security are legitimately at stake.”

Kerry boasted that “George Bush inherited the strongest military in the world” from the Democratic administration of Clinton and Gore. “And I know and members of the military know ... that George Bush has in fact weakened that military by overextending it.” He called for increasing the power of both the Pentagon and the intelligence agencies, with an additional 40,000 active-duty Army troops and a spy apparatus centralized under the control of the CIA director. He supported involving the CIA directly in domestic police spying, which he described as an effort to “break down the barriers between national intelligence and local law enforcement.”

These barriers were set up at the time of the CIA’s creation, and reaffirmed in the wake of the exposure in the 1970s of widespread CIA and military intelligence spying on the antiwar movement—of which Kerry was once part—as well as illegal FBI break-ins and surveillance of political opponents of the Nixon administration.

Kerry’s speech was his first major foreign policy address since he began his string of primary and caucus victories in Iowa on January 19. It was clearly aimed at reassuring the US media and political establishment that he could be trusted to replace Bush as the commander in chief for American imperialism.

A clear signal was sent that the ruling elite understands and appreciates his effort. It was provided by the lead editorial Sunday in the *Washington Post*, titled “Mr. Kerry’s Path.” The editorial spelled out the concerns of the corporate and political establishment with unmistakable bluntness.

It declared: “President Bush’s decision to run as a ‘war

president' created a temptation for the Democratic Party to go down a misguided and ultimately self-destructive path. The opposition party might have decided to cast itself as the party of peace: to question whether the United States is at war, to accuse Mr. Bush of inflating the danger of terrorism for political gain, to demand an early withdrawal from Afghanistan, Iraq and other overseas engagements. Some Democrats have indeed succumbed to those temptations. To his credit, Sen. John F. Kerry (Mass.), the leading candidate for the Democratic nomination, has chosen a different path. In an address Friday, he accepted the premise that the United States faces a fundamental threat—and accused Mr. Bush of being too soft in response.”

The *Post*, which has been among the most fervent editorial advocates of the US war in Iraq, praised Kerry for ruling out any quick withdrawal of US forces as “disastrous.” The editorial said approvingly, “His speech Friday further positioned Mr. Kerry for a serious challenge to the incumbent. He denied that as president he would allow allies to inhibit America’s defense ... or that he would return to a law-enforcement-only approach to fighting terrorism.”

The newspaper’s only criticism was that Kerry, while backing military action against terrorist organizations, failed to spell out his attitude to “regimes that support terror.” Notwithstanding this reservation—which the *Post* all but instructed Kerry to expeditiously address—the editors approvingly noted the basic agreement between the Democrat and the White House: Kerry supports the broad outlines of the “Bush doctrine,” the *Post* said, despite differences on one or another plank.

The newspaper concluded “The United States is at war; the threat is existential. The debate he proposes to hold with Mr. Bush is over how best to meet that threat. That could make for a lively and constructive campaign, worthy of the first post-Sept. 11 election.”

The principles espoused by the leading daily newspaper in the US capital have the most reactionary implications: the campaign will be “lively and constructive,” says the *Post*, because the Democratic Party will not seek to run as the “party of peace” against Bush’s White House of war. What makes Kerry’s contribution so valuable, in the eyes of the ruling elite, is that his campaign will deprive the American people of any significant choice on the most basic issue, war and peace. There will be no fundamental change in US foreign policy if Kerry wins the election.

Kerry’s Los Angeles speech underscores that his vote for the Iraq war resolution in October 2002 was no accident, nor the result of confusion or deception by the Bush administration, as he has occasionally sought to imply. The war resolution, on the contrary, represented a consensus in the American ruling elite, including the bulk of the Democratic congressional leadership and the majority of the Democratic presidential candidates—including Kerry’s last major opponent, Senator John Edwards of North Carolina.

Kerry, Edwards, Congressman Richard Gephardt, Senator Joseph Lieberman, as well as then-Senate Majority Leader Senator Tom Daschle and Senator Hillary Clinton, all voted to give a blanket grant of authority to Bush, allowing him to mount a military assault on Iraq at the time and in the manner of his choosing, and to maintain the occupation of Iraq for as long as the

White House deemed necessary.

Kerry described the current situation as one in which US troops are “bogged down in a deadly guerrilla war with no exit in sight,” but he rejected calls for an immediate US withdrawal from Iraq, saying the country has now become “a major magnet and center for terror,” even if it was not before the US invasion.

The US had to maintain its occupation and train an Iraqi security force, Kerry said. His main criticism was that Bush was devoting inadequate resources to this task. “Far too often, troops have been going into harm’s way without the weapons and the equipment they depend on,” he said.

Kerry also called for stepped-up US involvement in Afghanistan and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Bush “has all but turned away” from Afghanistan, he said. US troops could have captured Osama bin Laden two years ago at Tora Bora, he claimed, but “George Bush held US forces back, and instead called on Afghan warlords with no loyalty to our cause to finish the job.”

In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* after the speech, Kerry said he would be “potentially” more aggressive than past Democratic presidents when it came to deploying military force abroad.

He sounded the same theme in the Democratic candidates’ debate Sunday in New York City, where he and the other three remaining Democrats criticized Bush for responding too slowly to the crisis in Haiti. Kerry, Edwards and Al Sharpton all said they would have ordered US troops in sooner than Bush did, and Congressman Dennis Kucinich backed the deployment of Marines in Port-au-Prince.

“He’s late, as usual,” Kerry said of Bush. “I never would have allowed it to get out of control the way it did.”

Kerry reiterated, in the face of criticism by Kucinich, that he had no regrets about his vote to authorize the war in Iraq, and that he would not withdraw US troops until a stable, pro-US regime was established in Baghdad. He said that the Bush administration’s proposed transfer of authority to a “sovereign” Iraqi government (appointed by the US), now set for June 30, might have to be postponed. “The test is the stability and viability of Iraq,” he said.

In the course of the debate, Kerry and Edwards agreed that US military action against North Korea could not be ruled out and accused the Bush administration of neglecting a threat of weapons of mass destruction much greater than that supposedly represented by Saddam Hussein. They both endorsed the Israeli decision to build a border wall that seizes much of the Palestinian West Bank and incorporates it into territories controlled by Jewish settlements.



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