

US political elite engineers a Kerry-Bush election

The Editorial Board
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The Democratic presidential primary campaign has provided a textbook example of how a genuine movement of popular protest against the policies of the ruling elite—the mass opposition to Bush’s invasion of Iraq—could be channeled within the two-party system and politically emasculated.

Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts won nine of ten state primaries and caucuses held March 2, taking an insurmountable lead in convention delegates and impelling his last major rival, Senator John Edwards of North Carolina, to quit the race for the Democratic nomination.

The stage is now set for a presidential election contest between two representatives of the American political establishment, Kerry and George W. Bush, who have no fundamental differences. In a country of nearly 300 million people, with a complex and increasingly polarized social structure, the political choice offered in November will be to decide which Yale-educated scion of a wealthy family will govern the country.

On the most burning issue, the war in Iraq, Kerry’s differences with Bush are purely tactical. He opposes demands for the withdrawal of American troops from the occupied country and calls for the commitment of whatever military forces and resources are required to crush the Iraqi resistance.

As one right-wing columnist gloated Tuesday in the *Washington Post*, Kerry’s nomination means the war is off the table as an issue. Columnist Robert Kagan wrote: “The chief criticism of President Bush’s foreign policy in this campaign is obviously not going to be that he invaded Iraq. The big antiwar candidate, Howard Dean, is finished. The two remaining candidates for the Democratic nomination both voted for the war.”

In his major foreign policy speech last week, Kerry made it clear that he would attack Bush as much from the right as from the left, indicting him for not spending enough on homeland security, for not pursuing the war in Afghanistan aggressively enough, and for not confronting North Korea over its alleged possession of nuclear weapons.

Kerry, who voted for the USA Patriot Act, will not challenge its basic premises: that the United States is engaged in a “war on terror” that justifies curtailing democratic rights, overriding constitutional procedures and funneling vast resources into the police, the military and the intelligence agencies, at the expense of social needs.

The media and political establishment intervened in the campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination to head off the then-frontrunner, former Vermont governor Howard Dean, who was considered too closely associated with opposition to the war in Iraq, and install a nominee who would be a more trusted and acceptable replacement for Bush, should that become necessary.

In less than two months, the operation was accomplished—skillfully and without significant difficulty. A critical factor in this process was the political naïveté and inexperience of those who looked to Dean and the Democratic Party as a vehicle for their opposition to the war.

Millions participated in the demonstrations and protests of February and March 2003 against Bush’s decision to launch the war. Many of these subsequently sought to continue the struggle against the war through the framework of the Democratic Party presidential campaign.

Dean, himself a conventional bourgeois politician and defender of American imperialism, with a long record as a middle-of-the-road governor in Vermont, presented himself as an opponent, not only of the war, but of the Democratic Party’s prostration before Bush and the Republican right. His campaign surged in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, and by July he had taken the lead in both fundraising and opinion polls in key primary states.

A key role in promoting illusions in the Democratic Party was played by those in the leadership of the antiwar protests—many of them veterans of the radical protest politics of the 1960s, which also found a dead end in the Democratic Party.

As late as the second week of January, Kerry’s campaign was being written off in the media, and opinion polls showed him trailing badly, not only in Iowa, which held caucuses on

January 19, but also in New Hampshire, the first primary state, where he was well known from four Senate campaigns in neighboring Massachusetts.

Dean's campaign was hit with a barrage of media attacks, while Kerry and Edwards were promoted in the Iowa caucuses, a political event involving barely 100,000 people in one of the smaller US states. Both Kerry and Edwards adopted Dean's antiwar rhetoric, despite having voted for the October 2002 resolution to authorize Bush's attack on Iraq.

Kerry's narrow victory in Iowa, with a plurality of 38 percent, was hailed as a miraculous political comeback. It became the starting point of an almost uninterrupted run of victories—27 wins in 30 states. In each state, Kerry's previous victories, hyped by the media as proof of his "electability," became the basis for further first place finishes.

During this same period, evidence came to light that conclusively demonstrated that the war had been waged on false pretenses. The Bush administration was compelled to admit that there was no evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and its chief weapons inspector declared that there had been no WMD when the invasion was launched in March of 2003. Nonetheless, the issue of Iraq quickly receded in the campaigns of Kerry and his leading rivals for the Democratic nomination.

In the final analysis, the Dean campaign served as a political diversion, a means of capturing the popular antiwar sentiment which welled up so powerfully last spring, particularly among young people, and containing it within the framework of the bourgeois two-party system.

Dean played the major role, but there was also the dog-and-pony show of Dennis Kucinich and Al Sharpton, who continue in the presidential primaries despite winning only a handful of delegates. They were tolerated—even welcomed—by the party establishment and the media, participating in every debate, in order to boost the credibility of the Democratic Party and fuel the illusion, by means of left-sounding rhetoric, that it represents a genuine alternative to the Republicans.

Despite campaign sound bites about the plight of the working man, Kerry has no greater differences with Bush's domestic policy than with his foreign policy. Both Kerry and Bush defend the profit system and the domination of American life by a tiny minority of multi-millionaires—of which they are a part. Both subordinate the jobs, living standards and social needs of tens of millions of working people to the profit requirements of the giant corporations and banks.

Nothing that Kerry has proposed begins to seriously address the massive social crisis in America—where the

richest one percent of the population owns 40 percent of the wealth. But even the minimal measures he has talked about will, if he becomes the next president, fail to materialize. The Democratic Party long ago dropped any policy of social reform, a process that culminated in Clinton's abandonment of his health care plan and his scrapping of welfare.

None of the urgent needs of working families can be met without a far-reaching redistribution of social resources and a direct attack on entrenched wealth and privilege, something Kerry and the Democrats oppose no less than Bush and the Republicans.

There are critical lessons to be drawn from this experience. The Democratic and Republican parties are both political instruments of the American ruling elite, which has more than a century of experience in using the Democrats to influence, capture and ultimately destroy mass social movements that might threaten its interests.

From the populists of the 1890s, to the mass industrial union movement of the 1930s, to the civil rights and antiwar struggles of the 1960s, movements of social opposition have been lined up behind the Democratic Party, and thereby eviscerated. The two-party system is a political monopoly of the financial aristocracy, blocking the development of any effective challenge to the profit system.

The 2004 Democratic primary campaign has demonstrated that the existing political structures are a trap for masses of people seeking an alternative. The development of a movement against imperialist war, poverty and social inequality requires a break from this political straitjacket.

That is why the Socialist Equality Party is running its own candidates in the 2004 presidential election on the basis of a socialist program. The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party are holding a conference in Ann Arbor, Michigan, March 13-14, to discuss the political basis for building a genuine alternative to the two parties of war and reaction. We urge all those looking for such an alternative to attend the conference.

Click here for conference information and registration



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