

The Democrats and “Bush’s war”

The Editorial Board
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The eruption of a war of national resistance against the US occupation of Iraq has underscored the criminal character of the US invasion of that country and the culpability of the entire political establishment in dragging the American people into a shameful colonial enterprise.

At least 40 US Marines and soldiers have lost their lives in the recent upheavals. The death toll among the Iraqis is not even being counted by occupation authorities, but reports from across the country indicate that it is well over 1,000, for the most part unarmed men, women and children killed by missiles, bombs and heavy machine-gun fire unleashed on densely populated urban areas.

The spread of revolt from the so-called Sunni triangle to the impoverished slums of Baghdad and the predominantly Shiite towns and cities of the Iraqi south has given the lie to Washington’s pretensions that it has won the support of the Iraqi people and constructed institutions of self-government in the country.

Rather, the daily humiliation of foreign occupation combined with the gross profiteering by US contractors and the transparent US intention to expropriate Iraq’s oil wealth have engendered mass rage and revolt.

The tumultuous events in Iraq have created the deepest crisis for the Bush administration since it was installed in the White House. Polls indicate a significant majority disapproving of the US president’s policy in Iraq, and there are growing numbers of Americans demanding the withdrawal of US troops from the country.

With entire cities falling to the insurgents and brutal house-to-house street battles unfolding in Fallujah, the Bush administration—largely parroted by a corrupt and pliant media—has persisted in claiming that the US military is dealing only with a small band of “thugs” and “terrorists.” It has vowed to “stay the course.”

But what of the administration’s ostensible political opponents, the Democrats? Have they exposed the administration’s lies about the character of the Iraqi upheavals? Have they stepped forward to condemn the atrocities being carried out in the name of the American people? Have they offered real support to US troops and their families by demanding that young American men and women who are being killed, maimed and traumatized be taken out of harm’s way and withdrawn from Iraq? To ask these questions is to answer them.

There are, to be sure, diverging opinions among the Democratic Party officials. Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts earned the wrath of the Republicans and even some censure from within his own party with a speech he delivered April 5 describing Iraq as “George Bush’s Vietnam.” He flayed the administration for lying about weapons of mass destruction to provide a pretext for the war and charged that the intervention in Iraq had diverted attention from “the real war on terrorism.” Noticeably absent from Kennedy’s blustering denunciations, however, was any suggestion that the US should get out of Iraq, or indeed any alternative policy at all.

Other ranking Democrats in the Senate, like Tom Daschle of South Dakota and Evan Bayh of Indiana, have echoed Bush’s exhortations to “stay the course.” In an interview on NBC’s “Today” show on Wednesday, Bayh urged Americans to get used to the killing and dying. “This is really as much a test of perseverance as anything else,” he said “It’s going to be difficult. We’re going to have too many days ahead of tragedy like yesterday, unfortunately.”

Some have even urged the Bush administration to intensify the repressive violence. Senator Joe Lieberman, the Connecticut Democrat and former candidate for the party’s presidential nomination, declared that there were too few US troops in Iraq to “battle the insurgents and establish civil order.” He demanded that Bush “apply the Powell doctrine of overwhelming force in Iraq” and urged the Democrats’ presumptive presidential candidate, Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, to join with the president in working out a plan for a US military escalation.

Kerry himself has treaded with extreme caution in approaching the question of Iraq. Forced to address the recent events there during a speech on the economy Wednesday, Kerry declared, “No matter what disagreements over how to approach the policy in Iraq—and we have some—we’re all united as a nation in supporting our troops and ultimately in our goal of a stable Iraq.”

What cowardice! Kerry, who got his political start as head of a group called Vietnam Veterans Against the War, knows full well that the “support” that most troops stuck in Iraq—many of them for over a year now—want is an airplane flying them home.

While chiding the administration for its predictions that the Iraqi people would greet US soldiers with flowers, Kerry focused his main fire on the Bush administration’s announced plans to hand over “sovereignty” to a Quisling government on June 30. The implicit argument is that US colonial rule and repression must continue.

A similarly restricted range of opinion is to be found among the erstwhile liberal columnists of the major US dailies.

Harold Meyerson of the *Washington Post*, who opposed the war, wrote a lament on Wednesday titled “In Iraq, Without Options.” After declaring that the Bush administration’s policies had fatally undermined the project of “pluralistic nationhood,” Meyerson concluded that there was no alternative to staying the course. According to his logic, the criminal and immoral character of the invasion made continued occupation a moral obligation.

“But precisely because this was not a war we had to fight, just up and leaving would be politically and morally duplicitous,” wrote Meyerson. “We wrested control of Iraq when we did not have to, and leaving it to its own devices as sectarian violence grows worse would be a dismal end. The only unequivocally good policy option before the American people is to dump the president who got us into this mess.”

Nothing could more clearly indicate how little would be changed by a Kerry victory in November.

Then there is the ineffable Thomas Friedman of the *New Times*, who promoted the war as a mission to democratize the Middle East. On Thursday, he penned another column oozing his trademark journalistic mixture of sanctimony, banality and deceit.

The column was provocatively entitled “Are There Any Iraqis in Iraq?”—a question that is hardly asked by US soldiers on the ground, who know that there are, because Iraqis, Sunni and Shiite alike, are shooting at them. Friedman began with the conceit that the revolt in Iraq was fueled entirely by religious factionalism and fanaticism, and that the issue posed by was whether an Iraqi “silent majority” would come forward to counter the upheavals.

He wrote: “Is there a critical mass ready to identify themselves—not as Shiites, Kurds and Sunnis—but as Iraqis, who are ready to fight for the chance of self-determination for the Iraqi people as a whole?”

Friedman’s concept of self-determination—a term subjected to substantial abuse over the course of the twentieth century—must rank as the most perverse definition ever devised. To fight for self-determination, he tells his readers, “real Iraqis” must side with the US occupation against those demanding the expulsion of foreign troops from Iraqi soil.

He accuses the insurgents of trying to “disguise their real objectives behind a mask of anti-Americanism” in order to fool an “Iraqi silent majority.” (Friedman fails to credit the author of this politically infamous term—Richard Nixon.) Why such an anti-American “disguise” would hold appeal if, as Friedman claims, the “silent majority” supports the US project in Iraq, is not explained. The only logical conclusion—if Friedman were capable of logic—is that this majority, like the rebels themselves, see self-determination as a matter of overthrowing the US occupation.

He concludes by criticizing the Bush administration for failing to provide sufficient resources for the occupation. He writes: “I know the right thing to do now is to stay the course, defeat the bad guys, disarm the militias and try to build a political framework.... But this will take time and sacrifice, and the only way to generate enough of that is by enlisting the UN, NATO and all of our allies.”

These words could have come directly from Kerry’s mouth. It is the fundamental Democratic platform on Iraq as the November election approaches. The Bush administration may be criticized for how it prepared the war or for its failure to obtain the UN’s sanction, but as for continuing the war against the Iraqi people, there can be no debate.

This essential unity on the Iraqi occupation within the Democratic Party officialdom and what passes for liberal voices in the media reflects the fundamental interests of America’s ruling elite. It is also the outcome of the calculated political manipulation of the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Last year’s buildup to the Democratic primaries was dominated by political activism reflecting mass popular opposition to the war in Iraq. Initially this activism was channeled largely behind the candidacy of former Vermont governor Howard Dean. Dean emerged as the frontrunner in the pre-primary polls as a result of his denunciations of both the Bush administration and the Democrats who had supported the war. His meteoric rise set off alarm bells within the political establishment.

The realization that Bush could be defeated in 2004—an outcome that sections of the ruling elite, for their own reasons, are increasingly leaning toward as the preferable option—required that a tested and reliable Democratic candidate be chosen. The media launched a merciless assault that Dean was politically ill-equipped to counter, although he did his best to conciliate his detractors by stressing his

support for the Afghanistan war and, notwithstanding his criticism of the decision to invade Iraq, his backing for the continuing US occupation of the country. Dean was portrayed as unstable and unelectable, and support was swung behind John Kerry, a veteran—and the richest—member of the US Senate, who had himself voted to authorize the Iraq war.

The essential objective of these political machinations was not to ward off any perceived threat from Dean, a fairly conservative bourgeois politician. Rather, the aim was to neutralize the effect of anti-war sentiment within the political process and preclude any challenge from below to the US occupation within the context of the presidential election. The latest events in Iraq have shown why this was seen as so necessary, and the Democratic reaction has confirmed that the political objective of excluding any serious debate about the Iraq war has been achieved.

The war being waged against the Iraqi people is not just the criminal enterprise of the Bush administration, but a bipartisan policy. Behind all the hand-wringing by erstwhile Democratic liberals about not “abandoning” the Iraqi people lie the strategic interests of American imperialism in maintaining a military stranglehold over the oil resources of Iraq and the entire Middle East.

The election of Kerry will not mean a withdrawal of American troops from the Iraq. They will continue to kill and die there in increasing numbers. Opposition to this slaughter can be advanced politically only through a decisive break with the Democratic party and the emergence of an independent political mass movement of working people determined to fight against war and social inequality.

The Socialist Equality Party and its candidates are participating in the 2004 US elections to lay the political foundations for such a movement. Our party will continuously raise the demands for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq and for holding all those who conspired to launch this war criminally responsible.



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