

Kerry's approach to McCain: Democrat seeks bipartisan pro-war ticket

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With little more than a month to go before he is officially nominated in Boston as the Democratic presidential candidate, Senator John Kerry is going out of his way to reassure the US ruling elite that he remains committed to a military victory in Iraq which will maintain the US grip on the country and its huge oil resources.

That is the political significance of the current round of media reports—obviously inspired by Kerry and his closest aides—about Kerry's private discussions with Republican Senator John McCain about becoming his vice-presidential running mate.

The latest wave of speculation about a Kerry-McCain ticket was touched off by a dispatch June 11 by the Associated Press, reporting that Kerry has discussed the vice presidency with McCain on several occasions, most recently in the past two weeks. Although no formal offer was made, and McCain said none would be accepted, the confirmation of actual talks on the subject was treated as a major political event.

As the *Washington Post* reported the story, citing an "official, who declined to be identified," Kerry offered McCain the vice presidency "in an informal way." Only Kerry and McCain were involved in the discussion, which was kept separate from the ongoing official vice presidential search conducted by longtime Democratic lobbyist James Johnson, who has interviewed a half dozen Democratic officeholders.

The *New York Times* gave additional details: "Mr. Kerry, the Massachusetts senator, made his first direct overtures to Mr. McCain about three weeks after locking up the Democratic nomination in March and approached him again, in person or by telephone, as many as seven times, as recently as last week, according to one person who has discussed the issue with both."

The *Times* noted the "persistent, and at times fevered, speculation among Democrats and others about the potential of a bipartisan ticket, with the two friends and Vietnam veterans matching up against President Bush and Vice President Cheney, neither of whom fought in that war."

Los Angeles Times also reported that Kerry and McCain have had a half dozen or more discussions about the 2004 campaign since early March, when the Massachusetts senator emerged as the Democratic frontrunner. These conversations have made no progress, the newspaper said, noting that McCain submitted petition signatures last week to run for his fourth term in the US Senate from Arizona. It is possible to run for senator and vice president simultaneously—Democrat Joseph Lieberman did it in 2000—but it has never been done on the Republican ticket for one office and on the Democratic ticket for the other.

On one level, it might appear bizarre that Kerry is considering naming as his running mate a man who has publicly pledged to vote against him. McCain, who was Bush's main challenger for the Republican presidential nomination in 2000, has endorsed Bush for reelection and agreed to campaign for him in several states.

On a variety of the issues which divide the two main big business parties—abortion, tax policy, gay rights—Kerry and McCain have conflicting positions. McCain is a three-term Republican senator who once stood on the far right of his party (in 1996 he backed arch-conservative Texas senator Phil Gramm for the Republican presidential nomination). During the impeachment crisis of 1998-99, he and Kerry were on opposite sides of the 50-50 Senate vote on removing President Clinton from office.

While McCain clashed with Bush during the 2000 Republican primaries, he supported Bush against Democrat Al Gore and subsequently voted for the 2001 tax cut, the USA Patriot Act, and the No Child Left Behind legislation imposing compulsory annual testing on public schools. But he formed a tacit alliance with the Democratic Party to insure passage of the campaign finance reform legislation, which he co-sponsored with liberal Wisconsin Democrat Russell Feingold.

McCain has since come into frequent conflict with the Bush administration over its fiscal policies. He opposed the second Bush tax cut and this year joined a group of four Republican "moderates" who have blocked passage of a

budget resolution for the past three months, demanding a provision that would restrict further tax cuts as long as the federal government is running huge deficits.

Kerry's overtures cannot be explained by such episodes, however. Nor are they simply the result of crass electoral calculations, based on polls showing a Kerry-McCain ticket running well ahead of Bush and Cheney.

If Kerry is prepared to embrace McCain as his running mate, it is because on the central issue facing the American people, the war in Iraq, they are in agreement. Offering a spot on the ticket to McCain amounts to a pledge that the Democratic campaign will remain firmly in the pro-war camp. McCain has been among the most fervent supporters of the war, criticizing the Bush administration only for its failure to mobilize more troops and use even greater violence to suppress the Iraqi resistance.

Kerry voted for the October 2002 congressional resolution which authorized Bush to go to war with Iraq, as well as the initial \$79 billion appropriation to pay for the invasion and conquest. In September 2003, facing the unexpectedly strong campaign of Howard Dean, which was based on an appeal to antiwar sentiment, Kerry postured as an opponent of the war, voting against the second appropriation of \$87 billion sought by the White House and the Pentagon.

Once the Dean campaign had been dismantled by the media and the Democratic Party establishment, however, Kerry quickly dropped any pretense of an antiwar posture, reverting to the position of criticizing Bush largely from the right, for not making a more effective effort to mobilize international support for the war, for not sending enough troops, or for not providing adequate equipment, body armor and other supplies.

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In a series of speeches over the last two weeks, Kerry has spelled out his position on national security issues, criticizing the Bush administration for failing to capture Osama bin Laden, failing to confront North Korea over its alleged nuclear weapons buildup, and failing to insure the safe disposal of Russian stockpiles of nuclear materials. He mentioned Iraq only in passing, saying that the Bush administration's exclusive focus on Iraq was straining the American military and undermining its effectiveness.

Kerry is running against a president wholly identified with the war in Iraq—and under conditions where the vast majority of the American people oppose the war and an increasing number want an immediate withdrawal of American troops. His attempt to recruit McCain to his ticket is a further sign that the US ruling elite, working through both parties, seeks to block any expression of mass antiwar sentiment in the presidential election campaign.

There is a second aspect to the Kerry-McCain maneuvers—one which is even more sinister. Kerry is making clear his willingness to form a bipartisan coalition government with a section of the Republican Party, in the event the situation in Iraq turns even more catastrophic and the Bush administration disintegrates.

This facet of the political crisis was discussed openly in a June 11 column by *Washington Post* foreign affairs columnist David Ignatius, a supporter of the US invasion and conquest of Iraq who is now critical of the Bush administration's conduct of the occupation.

Declaring his support for a Kerry-McCain ticket, Ignatius expressed the desperation which the debacle in Iraq is beginning to produce in the Washington establishment: "The United States is in trouble. The country needs to pull together, across party lines, to handle one of its toughest tests since World War II. The war in Iraq is unraveling, in ways that could harm America's interests for a generation..."

"America can't wait until November to resolve the uncertainty over Iraq. Too many lives are at stake. What's needed is a bipartisan signal that America will get it right — staying the course but also working more closely with the international community and refocusing US strategy on achievable goals."

McCain should join the Democratic campaign as a symbol of national unity, Ignatius argued, regardless of the conflict between his views and the Democratic position on issues other than Iraq: "This is an election in which both sides need to give up things that matter to them, for the sake of a country that matters more.... The logic of a Kerry-McCain ticket isn't to win an election but to provide leadership for a divided country at war."

The logic of such a demand for "national unity" is utterly reactionary. It implies the suppression of political debate and discussion—above all on the central issue of the legitimacy of the war with Iraq—and the establishment of a government that will proceed with methods of violent repression, both against the Iraqi resistance and against opponents of the war within the United States itself.



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