

Populism and patriotism: behind the posturing at the Democratic National Convention

Patrick Martin
29 July 2004

Two themes have run through the speeches by leading Democrats at the party's national convention in Boston: a limited and thoroughly hypocritical appeal to popular revulsion over the Bush administration's favors to the wealthy; and a celebration of presidential nominee John Kerry's Vietnam War military record, which is being touted as proof that a Democrat in the White House will be just as willing to use force and shed blood as the current occupant.

These conceptions were most clearly linked, in what liberal columnist Harold Meyerson described admiringly as "national security populism," in the speech Monday night by Bill Clinton. This address was an example of the former president's skill in giving a "progressive" gloss to deeply reactionary policies.

Clinton was introduced by his wife, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, who devoted most of her remarks to praising Kerry's military service and proposing an intensification of the "war on terror" launched by the Bush administration. "We need to increase our troop strength," she declared, while portraying Kerry as a stronger commander-in-chief than Bush.

Clinton himself focused almost exclusively on domestic policy, mentioning Iraq only once. He repeatedly contrasted the Bush administration's favors to the wealthy with its indifference to critical social needs, using himself as an example (the ex-president has become a multimillionaire since leaving office, from six-figure speaking fees and a best-selling autobiography).

"As soon as I got out and made money," Clinton joked, "I became part of the most important group in the world to them. It was amazing. I never thought I'd be so well cared for by the president and the Republicans in Congress. I almost sent them a thank you note for my tax cuts until I realized that the rest of you were paying the bill for it."

"They chose to protect my tax cut," he continued, "while cutting 140,000 unemployed workers out of their job training programs, 100,000 working families out of their child care assistance, and worst of all, while cutting 300,000 poor children out of their after-school programs."

Kerry has called for rescinding part of the Bush tax cuts—those that benefited people with incomes over \$200,000 a year—to finance expanded federal subsidies for health insurance. Clinton, however, made no mention of such a goal, suggesting instead that increased revenues should go to deficit reduction and increased spending on homeland security: more police and more intensive inspections at ports, airports and other potential targets of terrorist attack.

As is typical on such a highly orchestrated and heavily publicized

occasion as a national convention of one of the two major parties, Clinton was speaking to multiple audiences. The populist phrases were intended for the millions watching on television, as well as for the liberal activists who comprise the Democratic Party's shrinking base. But there was a message as well for the ruling elite: as one of its most experienced and conscious defenders, Clinton was warning that the policies of the Bush administration risk provoking a political explosion in the United States.

This was the content of his repeated references to the need for national unity, and his criticism of the Bush administration for exacerbating divisions within the American people. Democrats and Republicans both sought the same goals, he said, while "our differences are in how we can best achieve these things in a time of unprecedented change."

The Bush administration had taken advantage of the mood of national unity that prevailed after the September 11 terrorist attacks, he said, to abandon Bush's slogan of "compassionate conservatism" and push through a divisive right-wing agenda. "They believe the role of government is to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of those who embrace their economic, political and social views, leaving ordinary citizens to fend for themselves on important matters like health care and retirement security," Clinton said. "Now, since most Americans aren't that far to the right, our friends have to portray us Democrats as simply unacceptable, lacking in strength and values. In other words, they need a divided America. But we don't."

In criticizing Bush's decision to combine war and tax cuts for the wealthy, Clinton hinted at two dangers for the ruling elite. At home, to pay for US military operations, "everyone in America had to sacrifice except the wealthiest Americans," thus raising the prospect that popular discontent with cuts in social spending could reinforce antiwar sentiment. Abroad, the massive budget deficits made the US government dependent on borrowing from China and Japan, powerful economic competitors and—while Clinton left this unstated—potential rivals for access to Persian Gulf oil, the principal strategic aim of the war in Iraq.

The message from Clinton was that, for their own self-interest, his fellow millionaires should endorse the replacement of Bush by Kerry. At home, a Kerry administration could more plausibly impose sacrifices on the masses of working people, especially with a cosmetic trimming of the tax windfall for the wealthy. Overseas, a Kerry administration would pursue a more considered and less reckless foreign policy. It would hold onto the strategic positions conquered by the Bush administration in Afghanistan and Iraq, and prepare for

future confrontations with Iran and North Korea, while working to shore up support for US imperialism among its erstwhile allies.

Clinton made a closing remark about previous historical periods of sharp divisions in American society—again, a coded warning to the ruling elite about the potentially explosive conditions in today’s America. “In the 1960s, when I was a young man, we were divided again over civil rights and women’s rights,” he recalled. This reference is significant for what it leaves out: the most acutely polarizing issue of the 1960s, the Vietnam War. The omission, from someone who famously sought to evade the draft because he opposed the war, is very conscious.

Unlike the 1960s, when the Democratic Party sought to make an appeal to antiwar sentiment—albeit for the purpose of neutering the mass protest movement and blocking any broader political challenge to American capitalism—the Democratic Party of 2004 cannot tolerate even a pretense of opposition to imperialist war. Thus, with the partial exception of former president Jimmy Carter, none of the major speakers to address the convention condemned the actual decision to invade and conquer Iraq.

Bush was criticized for *how* he took the United States to war—without allies, without adequate diplomatic preparation, without enough troops—but not for launching an unprovoked attack on a country that represented no threat to the United States. Nor did any speaker even suggest a withdrawal of US forces, either now or in the future.

Clinton’s statement—the Republicans “need a divided America, but we don’t”—was echoed by other speakers at the convention, above all, the keynoter, Illinois senate candidate Barack Obama. This comment sheds important light on the differing, but complementary, functions of the two major US political parties. Both represent and defend the interests of the corporate elite and the super-rich—the top one percent of American society that controls the bulk of wealth and income, and maintains its domination through manipulation of the media and the political system. Each seeks to mobilize broader support through appeals to popular fears and prejudices.

In the case of the Republican Party, which encompasses the most rapacious, aggressive and short-sightedly selfish sections of the ruling class, the appeal to the masses necessarily avoids addressing real social needs. The Republican platform consists of antitax demagoguery—in which tax cuts for multimillionaires and giant corporations are packaged as a boon to small businessmen and struggling middle class families—and the exploitation of religious sentiments, ignorance and prejudice (hysteria over abortion and gay marriage, support for the death penalty, veiled racism).

The electoral base of the Republican Party is extremely unstable, as the so-called “red states,” those which have consistently voted Republican in recent presidential elections, are generally the poorest and most economically backward, where the population has suffered the most from the Republican Party’s pro-corporate economic policies.

The Democratic Party’s platform is just as hollow and demagogic as that of the Republicans, and just as devoid of real solutions to the critical problems of the masses. It has been decades since the Democratic Party has enacted any genuine social reform. The last effort, Clinton’s health care plan of a decade ago, collapsed in pathetic failure: it was too cumbersome and obviously inadequate to arouse popular enthusiasm, while the very attempt provoked such outrage in the ruling elite that the Democrats were punished with the loss of control of Congress and Clinton was ultimately targeted for

impeachment.

While devoid of genuine progressive content, the Democratic Party’s desiccated liberalism still enables it to make an appeal, albeit largely rhetorical, to the real social needs of working people—jobs, health care, education, a secure retirement. This serves a vital political function for American capitalism, by propping up illusions that socially progressive measures can be attained through support for the Democratic Party. As long as the masses of working people remain trapped within the framework of the two-party system, they are blocked from conducting any political struggle that would threaten the profit system and the elite of multi-millionaires who dominate American society.

The refrain of “unity” and criticism of Republican “divisiveness” reflect the growing concern of Democratic Party leaders like Clinton and Kerry that America is a social and political powder keg into which the Bush administration is tossing matches. The United States faces unprecedented federal budget and trade deficits, rising interest rates, enormous financial imbalances, a stagnant stock market and a foundering economic recovery.

The Democrats are far more afraid of the potentially revolutionary consequences of a serious attempt to arouse the masses than they are of the Republican Party—a fact demonstrated most clearly by Al Gore’s decision to accept the theft of the 2000 presidential election, a capitulation which Clinton specifically praised in his convention speech as an act of great statesmanship.

While timid and half-hearted in their conflicts with the Republicans—who represent a rival faction of the same class—the Democrats are ruthless in their drive to keep independent and third-party candidates off of the ballot, even reformist forces who do not challenge the capitalist system and are oriented to pressuring the Democratic Party to the left, such as independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader and the Green Party.

Far more deep-seated is the hostility of the Democratic Party toward socialists who fight for the development of an independent political movement of the working class, as evidenced by the ferocious effort of the Democrats to keep the Socialist Equality Party candidate in Illinois, Tom Mackaman, off the ballot.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact