

## The meaning of the Democratic convention

# Kerry, Edwards vow to continue war and social reaction

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*The following is a statement by the Socialist Equality Party's presidential candidate Bill Van Auken.*

The Democratic National Convention in Boston this week provided the most powerful refutation of claims that the party's victory in November will yield a change in course from Washington's present policy of military aggression abroad and attacks on fundamental social and democratic rights at home.

The speeches delivered by the party's presidential candidate John Kerry and his running mate John Edwards, in particular, spelled out in no uncertain terms the sharp lurch to the right by the Democratic Party over the past year as the US ruling oligarchy has conditioned it for the potential assumption of power.

Both speeches were directed not so much to the cheering delegates or television viewers as to the financial-corporate elite and its media representatives. Their rhetoric was aimed at reassuring this select audience that a Kerry-Edwards administration will deny any influence to the antiwar sentiments to which elements of the party appealed during this year's primaries, and that it will make no attempt to resurrect the "liberal" reformist policies with which the Democrats were identified during an earlier period.

The convention's glorification of militarism and the party's subservience to big business were summed up in the presidential candidate's opening line: "I'm John Kerry and I'm reporting for duty."

Kerry presented his campaign not so much as a run for the presidency as a bid to be tapped as the new US "commander-in-chief." An observer unfamiliar with the US political scene could be forgiven for mistaking the Democrats' convention as an assembly called to select the new civilian figurehead for a military regime.

More than a dozen retired generals and admirals crowded the stage. General John Shalikashvili, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was brought in to address the delegates. General Wesley Clark, the former NATO commander and erstwhile Democratic candidate, delivered a bellicose speech telling the convention: "I am an American soldier. Our country has been attacked. We are at war. Our nation is at risk. And we are engaged in a life-and-death struggle against terrorists.... As we are gathered here tonight, our armed forces are in combat."

Indeed, during the four days the Democrats spent celebrating in Boston, another five US soldiers were killed and scores more wounded in Iraq. As Kerry spoke from the podium Thursday night, the US military was launching air strikes against the city of Fallujah, destroying homes and killing dozens of Iraqi men, women and children.

The overriding argument put forward for Kerry's nomination was that as a combat veteran of the Vietnam War he is better qualified to direct the armed forces in Iraq and new military interventions abroad.

Both Edwards and Kerry returned again and again to the candidate's

service in Vietnam. Citing an incident in which Kerry shot and killed a fleeing Vietnamese fighter, Edwards declared: "Decisive, strong. Is this not what we need in a commander in chief?" The vice-presidential candidate even managed to work the populist demagoguery he employed in his primary stump speech about "two Americas" into a militarist appeal for national unity. "We must be one America, strong and united for another very important reason," he said. "Because we are at war."

"We will strengthen and modernize our military, we will double our Special Forces, we will invest in the new equipment and technologies so that our military remains the best equipped and best prepared in the world," said Edwards. "This will make our military stronger, it will make sure that we can defeat any enemy in this new world."

Kerry echoed the same themes, declaring that the election was the most important in living memory because "We are a nation at war—a global war on terrorism against an enemy unlike any we've ever known before."

He went on to invoke once again his Vietnam service and promise: "As president, I will wage this war with the lessons I learned in war."

But what were the lessons that Kerry learned from Vietnam?

In his convention speech the candidate declared: "I defended this country as a young man and I will defend it as president. Let there be no mistake, I will never hesitate to use force when it is required." He pledged to build "a stronger military" by adding 40,000 active-duty troops.

Yet, when he returned from Vietnam more than three decades ago he described the war not as a defense of the US, but a crime against humanity. Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1971, he said the war was the result of a people "seeking their liberation from any colonial influence whatsoever." He further declared: "There is nothing in Vietnam ... that realistically threatens the United States of America. And to attempt to justify the loss of one American life in Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos by linking such a loss to the preservation of freedom ... is to us the height of hypocrisy."

It was just such hypocrisy that oozed from every pore of the Democratic Party during its Boston convention. There was no suggestion from any of the speakers that the war in Iraq is a criminal venture, that the deaths of nearly 1,000 US troops and tens of thousands of Iraqis had no justification or that the revelations of torture at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq constituted a national disgrace.

Rather, the Democratic candidates made it clear that they view the war and occupation as legitimate and necessary. That they will not tolerate any opposition to this war was spelled out in their embrace of the extraordinary security measures taken in Boston to suppress antiwar protests as well as in the functioning of the convention itself. When one person on the convention floor tried to unfurl a banner calling for an end to the occupation of Iraq, she was dragged away by police officers and thrown out of the convention center. The incident provides an insight into

the attitude a Kerry administration would take toward antiwar dissent.

A passage in Edwards' speech could have been lifted directly from those made by George W. Bush, cloaking the predatory Iraqi intervention in democratic pretensions, while threatening new unprovoked wars:

"We can ensure that Iraq's neighbors, like Syria and Iran, don't stand in the way of a democratic Iraq. We can help Iraq's economy.... We can do this for the Iraqi people, we can do it for our own soldiers. And we will get this done right. A new president will bring the world to our side, and with it a stable Iraq, a real chance for freedom and peace in the Middle East, including a safe and secure Israel."

Kerry likewise vowed to "get the job done," declaring: "I know what we have to do in Iraq. We need a president who has the credibility to bring our allies to our side and share the burden."

In short, a Democratic administration will continue the occupation of Iraq for years to come. This is not "Bush's war," but a war waged on the basis of a fundamental strategy embraced by the most powerful sections of the American ruling elite. In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, a consensus emerged among both Democrats and Republicans that Washington should use its unrivaled military supremacy to press for US dominance over the world economy and its strategic markets and resources, most importantly oil.

Iraq represents the implementation of that strategy. To the extent that Kerry and Edwards criticized the Bush administration, it was for botching this operation. These arguments are directed to the ruling elite: that the Bush administration is too discredited to continue the war; it has unnecessarily alienated valuable allies with an ideologically driven and reckless unilateralism; it has lost credibility with the American people. Therefore, a new "commander-in-chief" is required to get the job done right. Who better than a Vietnam veteran who can invoke his own military service in demanding "sacrifice" from others, including, if necessary, a reinstitution of the draft?

Vague appeals to anti-Bush sentiments over the war only rebound on the Democrats themselves. "Saying there are weapons of mass destruction does not make it so," declared Kerry, adding, "As president, I will ask the hard questions and demand the hard evidence." Yet, as senators, neither he nor Edwards did any such thing before voting to grant Bush blank-check authorization to launch an unprovoked war against Iraq. Nor did either of them show any inclination to pose "hard questions" before casting their votes for the USA Patriot Act and its sweeping attacks on democratic rights.

At one point, Kerry obliquely denounced the Bush administration by declaring that he would not "mislead us into war," that his vice president would not "conduct secret meetings with polluters to rewrite environmental laws" and that his attorney general "will uphold the Constitution of the United States." The unmistakable implication is that the president, vice president and top aides are criminals who violated the laws, their oaths of office, and the US Constitution. Yet there is no proposal to fundamentally change course or to bring the criminals to justice. Rather, the promise is to prosecute their criminal policies more effectively.

The Democratic convention's adoption of the Bush administration's rhetoric about a "global war on terrorism" and the strengthening of "homeland security" are the clearest indication that a Kerry-Edwards administration will represent an essential continuity of the policies of Bush.

Not even the most "left" sections of the Democratic Party dared to question the validity of this "war" or suggest that it has been foisted upon the American people as a means of justifying military aggression abroad and repression at home. The specter of omnipotent terrorism has come to serve as a new ideological glue for a country riven by social and political contradictions, supplanting the supposed threat of "communist aggression" invoked during the Cold War. It is used to foment fear and

political disorientation as a means of pushing through policies that were previously politically unthinkable. This will continue under the Democrats, whose platform declares that "Bush's actions against terrorism have fallen far short."

On domestic policy, Kerry went out of his way to portray himself as a fiscal conservative. He touted his vote in 1985 for the Gramm-Rudman act that, in the name of balancing the budget, mandated automatic cuts in social programs already ravaged by the attacks of the Reagan administration. While promoting vague remedies for the crisis in health care and education, Kerry insisted that his administration would cut the federal deficit in half in four years and would "make the government live by the rule that every family lives by: Pay as you go." Given that his platform includes proposals for a further increase in the massive US military budget, this is a prescription for the destruction of what little remains of a social safety net in America.

On the question of jobs, the Democrats offered the rhetoric of economic nationalism. Kerry called for further tax cuts for the corporations on the grounds that this will "revitalize manufacturing" and "reward companies that create jobs where they belong in the good old USA."

"If you give the American worker a fair playing field, there's no one in the world that the American worker can't compete against," the candidate said.

The underlying conception here is that American workers should be pitted in a self-defeating contest with workers of every other country to see who can provide the cheapest labor and most profitable conditions for transnational corporations, which are able to move their operations from country to country. It is a policy embraced by the trade union bureaucracy of the AFL-CIO, which serves as an agent of these corporations, pressuring workers for more and more concessions to attract employer investment. The logic of this economic nationalism is to unite workers with their "own" capitalist rulers against foreign competition, a perspective that fuels chauvinism and militarism.

There are those on the so-called left—like the *Nation* magazine—who try to delude themselves, and others, into believing that the right-wing orgy in Boston is merely a case of political calculation, a pose adopted by the Democrats in order to appear "centrist" and win the election. In reality, the carefully staged convention has revealed the political essence of the Democratic Party.

It is a party that is controlled by and defends the interests of the American oligarchy. This is what unites it, tactical differences notwithstanding, with the Republicans. Its real social base can be seen in those it puts forward as its candidates: Kerry, who sits on top of one of the largest family fortunes in the country, and Edwards, whose worth is measured in the tens of millions. Former president Clinton set the tone for the convention by noting that he is one of the "top one percent" and recommending that tactical changes be made to defend the essential interests of his social class.

The convention and the evolution of the Democratic Party itself express the profound socioeconomic polarization that has intensified uninterruptedly over the past 30 years in the United States. The vast gulf separating the financial elite from the masses of working people has led to the disintegration of American bourgeois democracy. There are indeed "two Americas," and the division between them is so great that not a single significant social or political issue can be resolved on a democratic basis.

As reactionary as the convention was, there is no doubt that the ruling elite will push Kerry and the Democrats even further to the right in the three months leading up to the election. This was spelled out by the *Washington Post*, the voice of the Washington political establishment, which published a highly critical editorial on Kerry's speech Friday entitled "Missed Opportunity." It upbraided him for failing to celebrate the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and for suggesting that Bush's

policy of “preemptive war” was wrong.

“Mr. Kerry should have spoken the difficult truth that US troops will be needed in Iraq for a long time,” declared the *Post*. “In economics as in national security Mr. Kerry missed an opportunity for straight talk,” the editorial continued. He “failed to acknowledge the fiscal challenge posed by the imminent retirement of the baby boom generation.... To the contrary, he raised the issue of Social Security only to reaffirm that he would not cut benefits—a promise that a President Kerry might come to regret.”

Kerry has already demonstrated his extreme sensitivity to such criticism. In the wake of the Democratic primaries, the *Post* demanded that the Democratic candidate proclaim his support for the continued occupation of Iraq. He quickly obliged.

The policies advanced by the Democrats in Boston vindicate in the most powerful fashion the political perspective elaborated by the Socialist Equality Party and our decision to run in the 2004 election. The Democratic convention has made it abundantly clear that working people cannot take a single step forward on any of the vital issues that confront them—war, jobs, democratic rights, living standards and social conditions—within the straitjacket of the two-party system.

The most burning issue in the coming election is not “anybody but Bush,” but rather the preparation for the inevitable social and political struggles that will erupt in the United States, whether the Democrats or the Republicans control the White House come 2005.

Our party’s campaign is directed towards this necessary preparation. It is initiating a broad discussion within the working class, among students, youth and professionals aimed at laying the foundations for the emergence of the independent mass political movement that will be required for this struggle.

The struggle against war and the defense of basic rights will be possible only through a break with the two-party system and the development of a new perspective based upon socialism, internationalism and the political independence of the working class. I urge all those who want to carry forward this struggle to participate in our campaign, help place myself and my running mate Jim Lawrence on the ballot along with our congressional candidates and make the decision to join the Socialist Equality Party.



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