

The politics behind Kerry's Iraq speech

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22 September 2004

Two critical factors have finally compelled Senator John Kerry to denounce, after interminable delay, the Bush administration's conduct of the war in Iraq.

The first is the increasingly desperate state of the campaign of the Democratic presidential candidate, whose spineless groveling before Republican attacks and inability to find a rationale for his own campaign was on the verge of reducing the senator to an object of national derision.

The second and more important factor is the growing anxiety within broad sections of the ruling elite that the United States is now facing the possibility of a catastrophic defeat in Iraq.

For months, Kerry contemptuously ignored appeals from the antiwar constituency of the Democratic Party that he identify his presidential campaign with opposition to the invasion of Iraq. Even as his rapid slide in the polls made clear that Kerry's refusal to address the issue of Iraq was alienating potential supporters and destroying his credibility as an opponent of the Bush administration, the senator insisted that he did not want to make the war a central issue in the 2004 campaign.

However, the rapid and obvious deterioration in the situation in Iraq over the last two months has provoked alarm within the political establishment and produced a change in the political winds. Previously, it has been agreed within the leadership of the Democratic Party that the presidential campaign should not become a referendum on the Iraq war. But even as Kerry sought at all costs to avoid the issue of the war, the defeats and setbacks in Iraq of the last two months have led to demands for a critical reassessment of the policies of Bush administration.

The weekend prior to Kerry's Monday speech at New York University saw the unleashing of a barrage of criticism of Bush's handling of the war. Three leading Republican senators, McCain, Lugar and

Hagle, sharply criticized Bush for refusing to acknowledge that the situation in Iraq was spinning out of control. Senator Hagle stated that "the worst thing we can do is hold ourselves hostage to some grand illusion that we're winning. Right now, we're not winning. Things are getting worse." He added, "We can't lose this. It is too important."

In an editorial published Saturday, September 18, entitled "Drop the Pretence on Iraq," the *Los Angeles Times* declared: "The increasing deaths and injuries demand explanations and concrete plans to solve the problems, not more pie-in-the-sky statements from President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney."

The next day, the *Washington Post* chastised the president for having offered "scant acknowledgement of the quandary he faces or the worsening state of a mission that has dominated more than half his first term. His description of Iraq is bland to the point of dishonesty.... Not only has Mr. Bush not said how, or whether, he intends to respond to the worsening situation; he doesn't really admit it exists."

The *Washington Post* concluded: "This duck-and-cover strategy may have its political advantages, but it is also deeply irresponsible and potentially dangerous."

The publication of editorials in influential newspapers and statements by key Republican senators signified that an official debate of the Bush administration's conduct of the war is now being sanctioned by the political establishment. Having received this authorization, Kerry proceeded to deliver what amounts to, within the framework of bourgeois politics, a comprehensive condemnation of the policies of the Bush administration.

Addressing the issue of the reasons given by the Bush administration for going to war, Kerry stated:

"The first and most fundamental mistake was the President's failure to tell the truth to the American people.

“He failed to tell the truth about the rationale for going to war. And he failed to tell the truth about the burden this war would impose on our soldiers and our citizens...

“His two main rationales—weapons of mass destruction and the Al Qaeda/September 11 connection—have been proved false by the president’s own weapons inspectors and by the 9/11 Commission. Just last week, Secretary of State Powell acknowledged the facts. Only Vice President Cheney still insists that the world is flat.”

The essential content of this indictment is that the president lied to the American people and that support for the decision to launch the invasion of Iraq was based on lies. But Kerry avoided the obvious conclusion that a war justified on the basis of lies lacks all legal foundation and must be opposed. Rather, Kerry developed his argument along very different lines.

Directing himself not to the broad mass of people who oppose the American occupation of Iraq, but to the ruling elite, Kerry developed his criticism of Bush to make the case for change in the political leadership of the war.

“At home,” Kerry warned, “the American people are less likely to trust this administration if it needs to summon their support to meet real and pressing threats to our security.”

Implied in this statement is that the Bush administration lacks the political credibility to mobilize public support should it become necessary to take more drastic measures to avoid defeat in Iraq or conduct other military operations—measures such as the reintroduction of the draft.

Far from representing the antiwar sentiments of millions of working people, Kerry’s speech is aimed at convincing the ruling class that his candidacy offers a means of avoiding disaster in Iraq.

The Kerry speech does not represent a repudiation of the war by the Democratic Party, but rather a proposal for its more effective prosecution.



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