

Republican convention opens: panic-mongering in the service of war and reaction

The Editorial Board
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The opening day of the Republican National Convention was devoted to a crude exploitation of the September 11, 2001 tragedy, with the transparent aim of creating a climate of fear and justifying policies of war and political reaction under the banner of the “war on terrorism.”

The speakers improbably cast George W. Bush as the hero of that tragic day, and portrayed the political and intellectual cipher in the White House as a man of “strength,” “principle,” and even “vision.”

For nearly three years, the Bush administration has used the September 11 attacks as the pretext for every aspect of its agenda, from the long-planned wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to the abrogation of Constitutional rights and civil liberties, to massive tax cuts for the rich and new inroads into the rights of workers.

Now September 11 is invoked as the reason why Bush must be kept in office for another four-year term. The Republican Party’s decision to hold the convention at New York City’s Madison Square Garden on the eve of the third anniversary of the terrorist attacks was intended to reinforce the image of Bush as a decisive “war-time” leader and commander-in-chief.

Coming one day after a massive antiwar and anti-Bush protest, the largest demonstration in New York in decades, the convention proceedings provided an unwitting demonstration of an administration and political system gripped by crisis. The convention’s entire political framework—based on the paranoid view of a nation under siege by a demonic and omnipresent force, international terrorism—reflected the outlook of a ruling elite that confronts mounting economic and political contradictions both abroad and at home, for which it has no solutions.

The so-called “war on terrorism” has become the touchstone of politics for both big business parties. It serves a vital and manifold function: to sow fear and anxiety in the population; to divert attention from the ongoing enrichment of the financial elite at the expense of jobs, living standards and democratic rights; and to direct the social anger within the country outward against an external enemy, thus providing a pretext for ever more bloody imperialist wars.

It embodies the attempt of the US ruling elite to concoct a new ideological and political framework, following the end of the Cold War and the removal of the supposed threat of Soviet communism, for maintaining a political consensus and stabilizing its rule, under conditions of growing inequality and mounting social tensions. In the political mythology of the “war on terrorism,” 9/11 plays a central and indispensable role. It is depicted as the beginning of a new historical era—an era of perpetual warfare against a faceless and ever-changing enemy.

The “fortress America” rhetoric that flowed from the Republican convention platform was intended to project a posture of strength and power. In reality, it reflected the fragility of a political system that rests on an increasingly narrow social base, and confronts a growing movement of opposition among broad layers of the population who are outraged over the imperialist policies of the government overseas, and its open subordination to a financial oligarchy at home.

The chauvinism and militarism that pervaded the proceedings, including the singing of the hymns of all five branches of the armed services, point ominously to the strategy underlying the Bush reelection campaign: the establishment of a presidency virtually unaccountable to Congress or the courts, and based above all on the military and police.

There is more than a whiff of fascism emanating from Madison Square Garden, where those paraded before the television cameras—Giuliani, McCain, Schwarzenegger—are being promoted as the party’s “moderates.” What predominates among the delegates themselves are the super-rich, the ultra-right, Christian fundamentalists and the most backward layers of the American petty-bourgeoisie.

Behind the scenes, the Republican Party is ramming through a platform that is freighted with the social agenda of the religious right. The outlawing of all abortions and the denial of any rights to gay couples feature among the most prominent planks.

The headline speaker for the opening night, the city’s former mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, gave a potted and sycophantic version of the events of September 11. This included the implausible claim that, after seeing people jump from the top floors of the burning World Trade Center, he grabbed his police commissioner by the arm and declared, “Thank God George Bush is our president.”

Giuliani’s remarks were a celebration of American militarism and a blunt threat to the rest of the world that “you could be next.” Citing Bush’s vow during his visit to New York City on September 14, 2001 that those responsible for the attacks would “hear from us,” the former mayor declared that “They heard from us in Afghanistan...They heard from us in Iraq...So long as George Bush is our president, is there any doubt they will continue to hear from us?”

The former mayor went on to echo Bush’s infamous ultimatum to the peoples of the world that “either you are with us or you are with the terrorists,” this time with the implicit suggestion that only a supporter of terrorism would oppose keeping the Republican president in the White House.

Giuliani likened the supposedly omnipresent terrorist threat to the German conquest of Europe in World War II and the danger of a Soviet nuclear attack during the Cold War. He praised Bush for “playing offense with terror” by launching a war against Iraq that has cost tens of thousands of lives in a country that had no ties to the Al Qaeda organization and played no role in the September 11 attacks. He praised this act of unprovoked aggression and likened it to Ronald Reagan’s decision to break with the policy of “Mutually Assured Destruction” towards the Soviet Union and embark on an arms race that brought the world to the brink of nuclear annihilation.

Echoing the anti-democratic and authoritarian essence of the Bush administration’s policies and the thrust of his reelection campaign, Giuliani declared, “In choosing a president, we really don’t choose just a Republican or Democrat, a conservative or a liberal. We choose a leader. And in times of war and danger, as we’re now in, Americans should put

leadership at the core of their decision.”

Giuliani himself reacted to the September 11 attacks by proposing that the 2001 New York mayoral election be cancelled, insisting that the city could not survive without the continuation of his own quasi-dictatorial methods of rule. In recent months, there have been discussions within the Bush administration on the possible cancellation of the November elections in the event of another terrorist attack.

The other major speaker, Arizona Republican Senator John McCain, sounded a similar theme, declaring the global war on terror a battle between “good and evil.” McCain insisted, “Only the most deluded of us could doubt the necessity of this war,” while acknowledging that, “the sacrifices borne in our defense are not shared equally by all Americans. But all Americans must share a resolve to see this war through to a just end.”

By McCain’s definition, prominent among the ranks of the “most deluded” are many of the families of the nearly 1,000 soldiers who have already died in Iraq, as well as many of the troops who are presently there.

On the Thursday before the convention opened, Nick Skinner, 20, was killed in Najaf. The young Marine was the fifteenth person from Iowa to die in Iraq since July 2003. His mother, Laura Hamann, told the local newspaper that she wants to see all American troops pulled out of Iraq now because “they don’t want us there.” She added, “I don’t support the war, but I support the troops.” This reaction has become increasingly common among those hearing the horrific news that their son, husband or loved one has been killed in this war.

By all accounts, the war and the president who launched it are widely opposed by the troops in Iraq. According to one recent report, US officers there are invoking military discipline to stop soldiers from derisively referring to Bush as “the deserter.” Within the US itself, more than half of the population opposes the war.

The profound disconnect between the rhetoric from the convention podium and the social and political reality in America is readily apparent, not only in the streets outside the convention, but in the neighborhoods of New York City, where poverty, unemployment and homelessness are growing.

The Republicans are meeting in a city where nearly one out of every three children is living below the official poverty line and 50 percent of African-American men are without jobs. Social polarization has reached levels unseen in US history, with the wealthiest 20 percent of the city’s population enjoying incomes that are nearly 30 times those of poorest 20 percent. This is the context in which Giuliani mouths phrases about New York being “stronger than ever.”

The attempt to use September 11 to justify the reactionary policies of the Bush administration has provoked growing hostility and skepticism in New York City and beyond. A highly revealing poll—virtually blacked out by the media—was conducted on the eve of the convention, reporting that half (49.3 percent) of the city’s residents believed that at least some members of the administration “knew in advance that attacks were planned on or around 11 September 2001, and that they consciously failed to act.”

The poll, taken by Zogby International, also indicated that a substantial majority was dissatisfied with the official investigations into the attacks and believed that a new probe was required into “still unanswered questions” surrounding the September 11 events.

Clearly, millions of people have drawn their own conclusions: a government that would drag the people into a war based on lies is prepared to do anything. This includes allowing a terrorist attack to take place to provide the pretext for implementing longstanding plans for wars in the Middle East and Central Asia to seize control of the regions’ vast oil resources.

That the sentiments expressed in the mass demonstration of August 29 and in this poll find no expression in the official political debate in

America is a function of the Democratic Party’s fundamental agreement with the Bush administration’s policies of war and political reaction. In his speech to the convention, McCain drew attention to this essential unity, declaring that his “friends in the Democratic Party...share the conviction that winning the war against terrorism is our government’s most important obligation.”

Democratic candidate John Kerry has adopted the Bush administration’s central justification for its policies of global militarism, curtailment of democratic rights and attacks on social conditions of the working class. Like the Bush administration, the Democratic platform insists that foremost among the “great challenges” facing the US is to “win the global war against terror.”

Similarly, Kerry has committed himself to the continued occupation of Iraq, guaranteeing that a Democratic victory in November will only mean a continuation of the killing and dying by American soldiers there.

Kerry’s vote in October 2002 for the infamous resolution authorizing Bush to launch an unprovoked war on Iraq was not a mistake or an accident. It expressed a consensus policy within the American ruling elite that Washington should utilize its preeminent military strength to pursue global economic and political hegemony, first and foremost by establishing a stranglehold over the strategic oil reserves of Central Asia and the Persian Gulf.

Whatever tactical differences exist between the Republicans and Democrats over the desirability of unilateralism versus the maintenance of international imperialist alliances, there exist no essential differences on these strategic aims. The militarism of the Republican convention is merely a repetition—in a more rabid form—of the display put on by the Democrats in Boston in July.

There exists no means to fight against war or wage a defense of democratic rights within the confines of the existing two-party system. The precondition for mounting such a struggle is a break with both big business parties and the building of a new mass party based on the political mobilization of working people on a socialist and internationalist program. The Socialist Equality Party is running in the 2004 election to advance such a program and to lay the foundations for the emergence of such a mass independent movement.



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