

Keynote speech at Republican convention: a fascistic rant from a pro-Bush Democrat

The Editorial Board
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The keynote speech by Democratic Senator Zell Miller to the Republican National Convention Wednesday night was a snarling diatribe against the presidential candidate of his own party, John Kerry, in which Miller depicted all opposition to the Bush administration as tantamount to treason.

The Georgia Democrat's nationally televised speech recalled the anticommunist ravings of Joseph McCarthy. The enthusiastic response by the assembled Republican convention delegates exposed the dirty secret of American politics: the Republican Party's embrace of a political perspective, based on militarism, chauvinism and Christian fundamentalism, with distinctly fascistic overtones.

The center of Miller's address was the charge that the Democratic Party was guilty of dividing the country in wartime. "Where is the bipartisanship in this country when we need it most?" he asked. "Today, at the same time young Americans are dying in the sands of Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan, our nation is being torn apart and made weaker because of the Democrats' manic obsession to bring down our commander in chief."

The content of this charge is to criminalize all political opposition to the Bush administration, including opposition from within the bourgeois establishment. Leveled against the Kerry campaign and the Democratic Party, it is an absurd inversion of the truth.

At the Democratic convention, Kerry and the party officialdom sought to impose a ban on any direct criticism of Bush—lest the media and the Republicans denounce them for "negative" campaigning. Needless to say, Bush and the Republicans felt no compunction in turning the bulk of their convention into a savage attack on Kerry, which reached its apogee in Miller's speech.

Moreover, the Democratic Party has—from the right-wing conspiracy to topple the Clinton administration, to the stolen election of 2000, to the failure of the Bush administration to prevent the 9/11 attacks and its subsequent cover-up of the events surrounding the attacks, to the massive lying employed to justify the Iraq war, to the revelations of US torture in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo and elsewhere—done everything in its power to conceal the criminality of Bush and the Republicans from the American people and shore up the Bush administration.

"Manic obsession" far more accurately describes the Republican Party campaign that led to the impeachment and Senate trial of Clinton—in the course of which congressional Republican leaders denounced Clinton's bombing of Iraq in December 1998 as an attempt to divert attention from the Monica Lewinsky scandal, paying no heed to the prerogatives of the "commander in chief."

Miller's demand for unconditional support for any president engaged in military action overseas has the most ominous implications. It amounts to a declaration that under conditions of war—which in the case of Bush's self-declared "war on terror" is of indefinite scope and duration—all opposition to or even criticism of the president is disloyal and must be suppressed.

Kerry, in fact, has limited his criticisms of Bush's war policy entirely to the tactics and methods employed in the attack on Iraq, never calling into question the legitimacy of Bush's decision to launch the unprovoked invasion of a defenseless country.

Miller continued with a bizarre presentation of the military as the foundation of American democracy. He declared, "it is the soldier, not the reporter, who has given us the freedom of the press. It is the soldier, not the poet, who has given us freedom of speech. It is the soldier, not the agitator, who has given us the freedom to protest."

He made a crude appeal to nativism and chauvinism, saying, "Kerry would let Paris decide when America needs defending. I want Bush to decide." The delegates responded with cheers and chants of "USA, USA."

According to the US Constitution, the president does not "decide" whether to go to war. The power to declare war resides exclusively with Congress. The president's role as commander-in-chief originally signified the supremacy of the civil power over the military, not the elevation of the chief executive above democratic control. But over the past six decades, as the United States emerged as the dominant imperialist power in the world, there has been a corresponding decline in any legislative restraint over the use of the military.

Miller combined his glorification of militarism with a saccharine, fawning depiction of Bush's personality. He laid special emphasis on the president's religiosity and his messianic view of the world role of the United States, saying Bush "is unshamed of his belief that God is not indifferent to America." In other words, America is God's country and Bush is God's chosen leader. The implication—which clearly resonated with the assembled Republican delegates—is that anyone who opposes Bush is doing the devil's work.

Vice President Dick Cheney followed Miller to the podium and touched on much the same themes, in a speech that was equally reactionary but delivered in a plodding fashion, without the overt hysteria of the keynote speaker.

Cheney made only a perfunctory reference to domestic issues, devoting one paragraph each to education, jobs and health care. On the economy, with perhaps unintended irony, he declared, "President Bush delivered the greatest tax reduction in a generation, and the results are clear to see." The results are indeed evident: the wealthiest one percent of Americans reaped hundreds of billions, while working class living standards have continued to decline and an additional four million people have been pushed down into poverty.

The vice president then turned to his main task, intimidating the American people with the threat of terrorism. Significantly, he did not speak the word "Iraq" in the course of his 40-minute address. This omission is typical of the duplicity of the entire Republican convention.

Speaker after speaker has evaded the issues posed by the invasion of Iraq—the lies used by Bush & Co. to justify the war, now thoroughly exposed; the mounting resistance of the Iraqi people; the staggering cost in human lives and resources; the growing hatred of the US government

throughout the world. Instead, Iraq is presented as a central part of the “war on terror,” supposedly a justified response to September 11, despite the fact—admitted by Bush himself—that there is no evidence of any connection between Saddam Hussein and the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

Cheney echoed many of Miller’s criticisms of Kerry’s national security record, while repeating one of Bush’s standard invocations of American unilateralism, that he “will never seek a permission slip to defend the American people.” Of course, the invasion of Iraq had nothing to do with defending the American people, who faced no threat whatsoever from that blockaded and impoverished country. What this phrase really means is that Bush will not be deterred by worldwide outrage or international law from attacking whatever country he chooses. Again the Republican delegates responded with chants of “USA, USA.”

The vice president also claimed that Bush had “put this nation where America always belongs: against the tyrants of this world and on the side of every soul on Earth who yearns to live in freedom”—another brazen lie. The Bush administration’s closest allies include the medieval ruling family of Saudi Arabia, dictators like Mubarak of Egypt and Musharraf of Pakistan, ex-Stalinist thugs like Karimov in Uzbekistan and Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, the King of Morocco and many other rulers just as tyrannical as Saddam Hussein.

In perhaps his most significant comment, Cheney declared that Kerry did not threaten US national security as one of 100 senators, because his views rarely prevailed. “But the presidency is an entirely different proposition. A senator can be wrong for 20 years, without consequence to the nation. But a president always casts the deciding vote.” Like Miller’s declaration, “I want Bush to decide,” Cheney’s comment amounts to endorsing a presidential dictatorship.

The remarks of Miller and Cheney were clearly addressed to the ultra-right, Christian fundamentalist layer that constitutes the sole significant popular base of the Republican Party. These elements were well represented at the Republican National Convention, although their far-right, xenophobic, semi-fascist political views have been largely concealed by the media coverage and the Bush campaign propaganda. A few glimpses, however, have appeared in the press.

The *Washington Post* took note August 29 of several planks in the platform of the Iowa state Republican Party, adopted in June. These include: abolition of government-mandated minimum wages; supporting landlords who refuse to lease property to cohabiting gays “based on moral objections”; backing termination of parental rights for people convicted of a second drug offense; supporting the teaching in public schools of non-evolutionary theories such as “creation science”; US withdrawal from the United Nations and the removal of UN headquarters from US soil; and a constitutional amendment denying citizenship to the children of illegal immigrants born in the United States. Perhaps the most remarkable plank was one denouncing any national health care system, characterizing such plans as socialistic, and proclaiming the belief that “health care is a privilege and not a right.”

The *Post* also noted the dismay among some delegates that the invocation for the opening session of the convention was delivered by Imam Izak-El M. Pasha, the Muslim chaplain of the New York City Police Department. The newspaper cited the views of Robert Steinhagen, a delegate from Dallas, Texas, full-time fundraiser for a Christian ministry, and veteran of several Republican congressional campaigns. Steinhagen declared, “I think the president is wrong when he says Islam is a peaceful religion.” Bush, he said, “should not have allowed this to happen.”

The purpose of Zell Miller’s speech, however, goes beyond simply pumping up “the base” with ultra-right demagoguery. The logic of Miller’s characterization of the Democratic Party and Kerry leads inexorably to a refusal to accept an electoral defeat of Bush as legitimate, and, ultimately,

to a resort to force. “The soldier,” in Miller’s phrase, must intervene to defend America from the traitors within.

There has been a constant undertone through the election campaign that Bush & Co. have not resigned themselves to accepting the outcome of the November 2 vote. Top administration officials have raised the possibility of postponing the election in the event of a terrorist attack, or holding it under conditions tantamount to martial law. Bush’s repeated statements that “I don’t intend to lose my job” should be understood as more than the usual election-year bluster.

In that context, it is worth noting the lengthy profile of Bush that appeared in the *New York Times* September 2. The *Times* quoted one Bush supporter, conservative economist Bruce Bartlett, who worked in the first Bush administration. “The key to understanding George W. Bush is to understand that he is a deeply religious man in a fundamentalist sense,” Bartlett said. “He truly believes there is good and evil in the world and that his job is to be on the side of good ... he’ll pretty much do anything to stay in office because he truly believes in his foreign policy.”

There is the sharpest contrast between the ruthlessness of the Bush campaign and the impotence and half-heartedness of Kerry and the Democrats. Kerry himself made no explicit response to Zell Miller’s vicious speech, and his running mate John Edwards contented himself with a limp comment that the Republican convention had offered “hate” while the Democrats were offering “hope.”

Kerry’s spinelessness is bound up with the fact that there are many potential Zell Millers in the Democratic Party establishment. Another prominent Democrat, former New York mayor Ed Koch, also spoke from the Republican convention platform on Wednesday to urge a vote for Bush.

Kerry has solidarized himself with the invasion and occupation of Iraq because, whatever tactical differences might exist, the consensus within the American ruling elite is fully in favor of a strategy of US global hegemony, and the Democratic Party is, no less than the Republican Party, an instrument of American imperialism. But were Kerry, as an electoral maneuver, to veer significantly from his pro-war stance, he would face defections to the Bush camp by pro-war Democratic officeholders like Joseph Lieberman, and public attack by the likes of Joseph Biden and Bill and Hillary Clinton.



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