

Kerry plugs his conservative credentials in second presidential debate

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The second televised presidential debate, held Friday in St. Louis, took on an almost farcical character, as President Bush employed outlandish lies and non sequiturs to defend the war in Iraq, while Kerry spent much of his time disavowing the dreaded “liberal” label and listing his fiscally conservative and militarist credentials.

Amidst the sound-bites and catchphrases—Bush’s grotesque homilies on freedom and barbs about Kerry’s “confusing signals;” Kerry’s “I have a plan” mantra and mind-numbing “He rushed to war without a plan for peace” refrain—two things emerged clearly.

First, the deeply felt opposition of broad masses of people to the war finds no expression in the campaigns of either of the candidates and, second, the substantive differences between the Republican and Democratic parties on the crucial issues of war and peace, democratic rights, jobs and living standards are extremely narrow.

The debate was held under conditions of a worsening quagmire for US imperialism in Iraq, growing signs of economic crisis and social distress, and a series of revelations that have exposed all of the pretexts for invading and occupying the Persian Gulf country. The election, now less than a month away, has raised before the American ruling elite the prospect of its entire political system and both of its traditional parties losing all credibility in the eyes of the people.

The response of Bush’s handlers was to prime their man to defend, at all costs and in the teeth of the plain facts, the administration’s claims of success in Iraq and economic prosperity at home. He had been coached, after his stumbling and defensive performance in the first debate, to more forcefully exploit the contradictions between Kerry’s present criticisms of the war and his past record of support for military action to topple Saddam Hussein.

Kerry, on the other hand, noticeably muted his rhetoric on Bush’s decision to invade Iraq and soft-pedaled his previous charges that the president had “misled the nation.”

This was not simply a matter of either miscalculation or personal cowardice. In the aftermath of the first presidential

debate, held eight days ago, Kerry’s poll numbers have risen and the race has been declared a dead heat. With a Democratic victory now a serious possibility, the Kerry campaign is seeking to adjust its tactics to the political tasks that will confront a Kerry White House.

The Democratic Party is, no less than its Republican counterpart, a political instrument of American imperialism, which considers the crushing of the Iraqi insurgency and the consolidation of US control over the country’s oil resources a vital interest. A Kerry presidency will be entrusted with the execution of this bloody task.

Kerry must therefore tread a fine line between disparaging Bush’s conduct of the war and exposing the war for the criminal enterprise it really is. He is no doubt being warned that going too far with antiwar rhetoric risks discrediting the entire political establishment.

At the same time, he must contend with a powerful faction within his own party—represented by the likes of Senator Joseph Lieberman and the Clintons—which has consistently and adamantly supported the war.

The last thing the Democratic Party wants is a decisive victory on November 2 based on a popular mandate to end the war and reverse the flagrantly pro-corporate economic policies of the Bush administration. Thus, even as he continues to make certain populist gestures, Kerry is at pains not to unduly raise expectations.

The contradictions of the Kerry campaign—most acutely between his need to mobilize the overwhelmingly anti-war sentiment among Democratic voters and the even more critical task of reassuring the ruling elite of his commitment to continue the occupation and pacify Iraq—found particularly bizarre expression in Friday’s debate. Kerry barely referred to the report issued Wednesday by the CIA’s chief weapons inspector Charles Duelfer, which affirmed that Saddam Hussein had dismantled his unconventional weapons programs shortly after the first Gulf war of 1991.

Bush, on the other hand, turned reality on its head by citing the report several times as a vindication of his decision to invade Iraq. “He [Kerry] keeps talking about,

‘Let the inspectors for their job,’” Bush declared. “That’s what the Duelfer report showed. He was deceiving the inspectors.”

In reality, Saddam Hussein’s deception, according to Duelfer, was to bluff the Americans and, even more importantly for the Iraqi regime, the Iranians, into thinking he possessed weapons that were nonexistent!

At another point Bush made the absurd statement: “Saddam Hussein was a threat because he could have given weapons of mass destruction to terrorist enemies. Sanctions were not working.” The Duelfer report confirmed precisely the opposite: that Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction, and the sanctions were, indeed, “working.”

Kerry replied briefly to this howler, but he did not press the point. Why? One reason is that the Duelfer report established that the Democratic administration of Clinton and its supporters, such as Kerry, were just as guilty of lying about alleged Iraqi WMD and using it as a pretext for brutal sanctions and military attacks as the Bush administration.

To a large extent, the debate consisted of Bush charging Kerry with being a liberal, and Kerry protesting that “labels don’t mean anything” while he presented himself as a fiscal conservative. To this end, he repeated twice that he had broken ranks with Democrats in Congress to support the Gramm-Rudman budget-cutting bill under Reagan, stressed that he advocated a “pay-as-you-go” policy of fiscal austerity, and virtually pledged in advance to abandon his own campaign promises on health care and education if they conflicted with his promise to slash the budget deficit:

“I’ve even scaled back some of my favorite programs already, like the child-care program I wanted to fund and the national service program, because the president’s budget deficit keeps growing and I’ve said as a pledge, ‘I’m going to cut the deficit in half in four years.’”

He added that he supported the Patriot Act and Bush’s education bill, and further detailed his right-wing credentials: “I supported welfare reform. I led the fight to put 100,000 cops on the streets of America. I’ve been for faith-based initiatives to intervene in the lives of young children for years.”

The same pattern prevailed on foreign policy. Bush suggested that Kerry was “soft” on terrorism and a quasi-pacifist, to which Kerry responded that he would “never give a veto over American security to any other entity,” and that he would “go out and kill and find the terrorists.” He added, “If we have to get tough with Iran, believe me, we will get tough.”

He supplemented his call for 40,000 more active duty troops with a laundry list of retired generals and admirals who are supporting his campaign.

The event—ostensibly a “town hall meeting” between the

candidates and uncommitted voters—was stage-managed and vetted to exclude any real expression of the disgust felt by millions of Americans toward the war and those who authored it, as well as the social anger over ever-greater disparities of wealth and the ongoing destruction of decent-paying jobs.

The audience was hand-picked by the Gallup polling organization—which is run by an evangelical Christian—and all questions were written out and submitted in advance to the moderator, ABC News’ Charles Gibson, who decided which questions would be asked.

Even in this Potemkin village setting, most of the questions asked—on the war, on the Patriot Act, on jobs, on medical care, on the draft—evinced distrust or outright hostility toward Bush.

Kerry had no serious alternative to present on any of these questions. The Democratic candidate himself provided an insight into the reason for this when he spoke of his proposal to roll back the Bush tax cut for the 1 percent of the population earning more than \$200,000 a year:

“Now, for the people earning more than \$200,000 a year, you’re going to see a rollback to the level we were at with Bill Clinton, when people made a lot of money. And looking around here, at this group here, I suspect there are only three people here who are going to be affected: the president, me, and, Charlie, I’m sorry, you too.”

This lighthearted allusion to the fact that the presidential and vice-presidential candidates of both parties are multi-millionaires, as are the media principals who dispense the “news,” marked the only point at which the real class divisions in American society, and the social interests represented by both parties, emerged.

That a Democratic presidential candidate should openly present himself, in a nationally televised debate, as a representative of great wealth provides a measure of how far to the right the Democratic Party has moved, how completely it has repudiated any association with social reform policies, and how utterly removed it is from the working people it claims to represent.

With this quip, Kerry all but boasted that the “choice” before the voters was between two representatives of the American financial oligarchy.



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