

Bush-Kerry debate: two candidates committed to war

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The first of the presidential debates between President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry presented the American public with an empty choice between two candidates committed to continuing the war in Iraq and escalating US militarism around the world.

The deep-felt sentiments of millions of Americans, who want an end to the criminal war against the Iraqi people, found no expression in the debate. On a day that ranked as one of the bloodiest in recent months in Iraq, neither candidate made any direct reference to the ongoing carnage and the suffering of the Iraqi people due to the US invasion.

Much of what passes for political analysis in the corporate media will focus on the facial expressions and “body language” of the two candidates, as the pundits decide who won the contest at the University of Miami. Bush, who squirmed and grimaced through much of the 90-minute encounter, could do little more than repeat by rote a series of talking points attacking Kerry as inconsistent in his backing for the Iraqi intervention. He sprinkled his remarks with catchphrases meant to demonstrate his religious piety and appeal to his base among the Christian right.

For his part, Kerry managed to pull virtually every punch in his criticism of the Bush administration’s foreign and military policies, while nodding as his opponent mouthed lies and stupidities.

What predominated, amidst the media hype and the candidates’ bluster, was the extremely narrow range of substantive differences between Kerry and Bush. Behind the barbs and double-talk, both candidates defend the same strategic interests of the US financial oligarchy.

Kerry condemned Bush for “misleading” the American people about the reasons for the invasion of Iraq and called the intervention a “colossal error of

judgment.” Bush denounced Kerry for sending “mixed messages” and exhibiting an inconsistency that disqualified him from assuming the mantle of commander-in-chief.

But they both promoted their candidacies by fomenting fear and claiming their opponent would leave the country less safe. Both pledged to continue the war in Iraq until victory was secured, saying they would train Iraqi security forces for the job. Both vowed to intensify “homeland security” enforcement, and they agreed that halting nuclear proliferation and keeping nuclear weapons out of the hands of terrorists was the top foreign policy priority.

Kerry’s remarks were, as always, riddled with political duplicity. He condemned the war as a mistake and a policy based on lies. In the next breath, he affirmed his commitment to remain in Iraq and win the war. His differences with Bush on Iraq were entirely of a tactical nature, and his basic argument—directed above all to the ruling elite—was that he could carry out the imperialist enterprise more competently and effectively than the incumbent.

At one point, moderator Jim Lehrer of the Public Broadcasting System quoted back to Kerry the remark he made during his denunciation of the war in Vietnam before a Senate panel more than three decades ago: “How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?”

Asked whether US soldiers were currently “dying in Iraq for a mistake,” Kerry replied: “No, and they don’t have to, providing we have the leadership that I’m offering. I believe that we have to win this. The president and I have always agreed on that.”

In one of his more chilling remarks, the Democratic candidate denounced the Bush administration for failing to prosecute the war with sufficient ruthlessness.

“What I want to do is change the dynamics on the ground,” he said. “And you have to do that by beginning to not back off from the Fallujahs and other places, and send the wrong message to the terrorists.”

With US commanders openly discussing plans for a military offensive against major urban areas such as Fallujah, Kerry’s statement amounted to an advance endorsement of the bloodletting to come.

Kerry further indicated that the war in Iraq would not be the last war of aggression, no matter who won the election in November. Asked his position “on the whole concept of preemptive war,” the Democratic candidate responded: “The president always has the right, and always has had the right, for preemptive strike. That was a great doctrine throughout the Cold War... No president, through all of American history, has ever ceded, and nor would I, the right to preempt in any way necessary to protect the United States of America.”

This is a falsification of history. During the Cold War, successive administrations pursued a policy of “containment” against the Soviet Union. Many of those who now hold leading positions in the Bush administration were identified with the drive under Reagan to replace that strategy with one of “rollback,” based on an escalation of the arms race, confrontation with the USSR, and the attempt to develop weapons systems that would make aggressive nuclear war possible.

The “preemptive war” doctrine developed by the Bush administration, however, is a qualitatively new phenomenon. As spelled out in the 2002 “National Security Strategy” document, it promotes Washington’s “right” to launch unprovoked war against any nation that it believes poses—or may pose in the future—a threat to US interests. This is not, in strict diplomatic terms, a policy of preemptive war, but rather one of preventive war, which is a war crime under international law.

Kerry indicated he was prepared to utilize the same methods employed by Bush against Iraq in what would inevitably be far more dangerous acts of militarism, including a possible nuclear war. “Iran and North Korea are now more dangerous,” he said. “Now, whether preemption is ultimately what has to happen, I don’t know yet. But I’ll tell you this: as president, I’ll never take my eye off that ball.”

In his closing remarks, Kerry reiterated his commitment to continue the war and occupation in Iraq. “I have a plan for Iraq,” he said. “I believe we can be successful. I’m not talking about leaving. I’m talking about winning.”

Significantly, there was no mention either from the moderator or the candidates of the torture of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison, or any of the other war crimes committed in the name of the crusade against terrorism.

Whatever his criticisms of Bush, Kerry’s performance made it abundantly clear that he has no intention of winning the election by appealing to the sentiments of many millions of Americans who rightly consider the war in Iraq a crime and want US troops to leave the ravaged country.

The first presidential debate has underscored the narrow and right-wing parameters of the US two-party system. Independent and third-party candidates, including those of the Socialist Equality Party, were excluded. The ban extended to Ralph Nader, who won more than 2,800,000 votes in 2000 as the presidential candidate of the Green Party.

The interests and concerns of the vast majority of the American people find no expression in a political system monopolized by two parties of big business.

The Socialist Equality Party will continue to advance a genuine alternative to the two corporate-controlled parties, demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq. Our campaign is directed at preparing the independent political movement of the working class that will be required in the coming struggles, no matter whether the Democrats or Republicans win the November election.



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