

Contradictions of Bush-Kerry debate: pro-war candidates confront debacle in Iraq and antiwar sentiment at home

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In the weeks leading up to the televised debates in the US presidential election, officials of the Bush campaign insisted that the first debate be devoted to foreign policy and homeland defense. This, they believed, would allow Bush to focus on the “war on terror,” his supposed political strong point, rather than on his domestic record of tax handouts for the rich and economic distress for the working population.

Last week’s debate, however, demonstrated that White House advisers Karl Rove & Co. are something less than political geniuses, despite their exaggerated standing in the eyes of the media and Bush’s loyal opposition in the Democratic Party. The debate was almost entirely taken up with the war in Iraq, and Bush was continually on the defensive, with a performance so stumbling, inarticulate and unconvincing that even his own partisans were taken aback.

In a setting that did not permit him to simply repeat his campaign stump invocations of September 11 as the all-purpose justification for every foreign and domestic policy, Bush found himself pressed to actually address the problems that US imperialism faces as a result of the growing nationalist resistance in Iraq. He could do little more than fall back on catch phrases learned by rote: “hard work”—good, “mixed messages”—bad. His performance quickly became the subject of ridicule in media post-mortems of the event.

It is a fact worth noting, and scarcely commented on by the bourgeois media, that nearly all of the questions posed by moderator Jim Lehrer of the Public Broadcasting System, and the bulk of the interchanges between the two candidates, concerned a topic that had received virtually no attention at either of the party conventions that nominated the candidates.

The Democratic convention featured far more mentions of Vietnam than of Iraq. The Democrats sought to promote Kerry’s war-hero biography as an antidote to expected Republican smear tactics. This effort was in vain, as it turned out, since it was followed immediately by the Swift boat ads—a smear campaign centering on crude lies about Kerry’s record in Vietnam.

The Republican convention likewise barely referred to Iraq, in keeping with the Bush administration’s efforts to present the invasion of that country as an integral part of a “war on terror” launched in response to the September 11 attacks. Speaker after speaker sought to link Saddam Hussein to terrorism, despite the White House’s own acknowledgment that there is no evidence linking the ousted Iraqi president to the crimes of 9/11.

The Democratic platform took an agnostic position on the invasion of Iraq, supporting the US occupation, while saying “people of good will” could disagree about whether the war was justified. Kerry sought to maintain this position for nearly two months, as his poll numbers slowly sank and the dimensions of the Iraqi disaster continued to unfold.

He only shifted gears with his September 20 speech at New York University, where he made a limited appeal to antiwar sentiment by

attacking Bush’s decision to go to war. He made this turn only after prominent Republicans—senators John McCain, Richard Lugar and Chuck Hagel—publicly criticized Bush’s conduct of the war, thus signaling the approval of sections of the ruling elite to broach the issue in the election campaign.

While adapting his campaign’s language to growing popular opposition to the war—and seeking support from ruling class circles increasingly concerned that Bush’s approach was leading to a debacle for US imperialism—Kerry remained adamant that the US could not withdraw from Iraq and had to crush the resistance by military force. On numerous occasions he vowed to wage the war more aggressively than the current administration.

This contradiction—a pro-war candidate seeking to win an election based on the support of antiwar voters—ran throughout the September 30 debate. Kerry continually sought, through a harsh tone and accusing demeanor, to imply greater opposition to Bush’s policies in Iraq than he actually articulated. He employed double-talk, describing the Iraq war as a “mistake” and an “error in judgment,” while declaring he had a plan to “succeed” in Iraq. His words were carefully chosen to leave open whether he was criticizing Bush from the left or from the right, and calling for less or more military violence.

Kerry had to walk a fine line as he simultaneously addressed two very different audiences: the masses of working people and young people who are looking for a way to reverse and repudiate Bush’s war policies, and the American ruling elite, which regards continued possession of Iraq and its vast oil reserves as a vital national interest. But when compelled to declare a firm position, in his closing statement, he came down decisively on the side of US imperialism, pledging military victory: “I believe we can be successful. I’m not talking about leaving. I’m talking about winning.”

In appealing to antiwar sentiment, Kerry voiced criticisms of the Bush administration that have far-reaching implications. He cited Bush’s claim that he would go to war with Iraq only as a last resort. “Those words mean something to me,” he declaimed. “You’ve got to be able to look in the eyes of families and say to the parents, ‘I tried to do everything in my power to prevent the loss of your son and daughter.’ I don’t believe the United States did that.”

If this is true—and there is no doubt it is—then the war with Iraq is not merely a “mistake,” as Kerry repeatedly labeled it. It is a crime.

The Bush administration deliberately sought war as its preferred option. It willfully caused the deaths of over one thousand American soldiers—and of tens of thousands of Iraqis—without doing “everything in its power” to avoid such a bloodletting.

Kerry, of course, avoided drawing any such conclusion. Nor was he pushed to do so. The moderator, Lehrer, made no mention of the recent

declaration by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan that the US war was illegal, nor did he raise the subject of US torture at Abu Ghraib prison.

Kerry referred gingerly to the predatory interests that were the driving force of the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq. "There's a sense of American occupation," he said. "The only building that was guarded when the troops went into Baghdad was the oil ministry. We didn't guard the nuclear facilities. We didn't guard the foreign office, where you might have found information about weapons of mass destruction. We didn't guard the borders."

Such actions naturally led the Iraqi people to conclude that the Bush administration was interested in looting the country's oil resources, not finding weapons of mass destruction, as Kerry admitted: "When you guard the oil ministry, but you don't guard the nuclear facilities, the message to a lot of people is maybe, 'Wow, maybe they're interested in our oil.'"

Yet there was no suggestion that the armed attacks on American forces in Iraq had anything to do with the outraged and legitimate national feelings of the Iraqi people. Instead, like Bush, Kerry characterized the resistance in Iraq as terrorism, and declared that the only acceptable result was a US military victory.

Kerry absurdly compared his position on the war in Iraq to his well-publicized antiwar activities when he returned home from Vietnam. "I believe that when you know something's going wrong, you make it right," he said. "That's what I learned in Vietnam. When I came back from that war I saw that it was wrong. Some people don't like the fact that I stood up to say no, but I did... And I'm going to lead those troops to victory."

Here the contradiction between his pretended antiwar sympathies and his actual pro-war policy reduced the Democratic candidate to near-incoherence. When Lieutenant John Kerry came home from Vietnam and became a leader of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, his call was not to "lead those troops to victory" but to get out of Vietnam as quickly as possible.

Moderator Jim Lehrer intervened at this point to ask Kerry about his most famous antiwar statement from 1971, when he asked a Senate committee, "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?" Although Kerry had declared the decision to go to war in Iraq a "mistake," he denied that American soldiers were now dying in Iraq for a mistake. "I believe that we have to win this," Kerry said. "The president and I have always agreed on that."

Kerry went on to indicate his support for a renewed US military assault on Fallujah and other Iraqi cities dominated by the insurgent forces. More broadly, he embraced the Bush doctrine of pre-emptive war, with only one reservation: that a US claim of an impending threat had to be made credible to public opinion at home and abroad.

This declaration led the right-wing, pro-war *New York Times* columnist William Safire, the former Nixon speechwriter, to gloat that Kerry was the latest convert to the neo-conservative doctrine which has provided the ideological framework for the Bush administration's military interventions in the Middle East and Central Asia. He wrote: "On both military tactics and grand strategy, the newest neo-conservative announced doctrines more hawkish than President Bush."

Another columnist, James Pinkerton of the *Boston Globe*, wrote cynically, "The irony, of course, is that most actual and potential Kerry voters are doves, too. So they are likely to go to the polls hoping that Kerry will pull American troops out of Iraq, just as American troops were eventually pulled out of Vietnam. In other words, Kerry voters hope that Bush is telling the truth when he says that Kerry would give up on Iraq, and they hope that Kerry is fibbing when he says he would fight on till victory."

For his part, Bush is attempting to retain the White House by running as a successful war president, under conditions in which the war is widely

opposed by the masses of working people and regarded as a disaster by significant sections of the ruling class itself. At every step, Bush's statements are in conflict with the reality made visible on television screens every night. Iraq is a country of car bombs, blackouts, 50 percent unemployment and a hated and isolated US-imposed puppet regime. Bush portrays it as a thriving democracy whose people rejoice at their "liberation" by the American tanks and warplanes that are slaughtering them.

Bush was unable to press an attack on the contradiction at the center of Kerry's position on the war, not merely because of his intellectual deficiencies, but because of fundamental political contradictions of his own.

Kerry's antiwar posture is false, while his pro-war stance represents the real viewpoint of the Democratic Party establishment, many of them veterans of the Clinton administration. But the Republican Party needs to whip up its far-right base with the insinuation that Kerry's position represents quasi-treasonous opposition to US troops in wartime.

The Bush campaign has therefore turned reality upside down, asserting that it is Kerry's pro-war statements that are false, and that his real, but concealed, position is for retreat and surrender in Iraq.

Bush repeatedly cited Kerry's declaration, in his New York University speech, that Iraq was "the wrong war at the wrong place at the wrong time," pointing out that this conflicted with Kerry's claim that he could involve more US allies in policing Iraq. "So what's the message going to be?" Bush asked. "Please join us in Iraq. We're a grand diversion. Join us for a war that is the wrong war at the wrong place at the wrong time?"

There is a real issue here, in terms of the political conflicts within the US ruling elite. Bush and Kerry agree that Iraq is a vital piece of real estate. They are not prepared to give it up, regardless of the will of the Iraqi people, but Kerry is prepared to share it, to some extent, with the other major imperialist powers.

The Democrat referred to the subject only indirectly, criticizing Bush for excluding France, Germany and Russia in the awarding of lucrative post-war contracts. He mentioned Halliburton, which has become a code word for the Bush administration's policy of distributing the spoils of war to its closest corporate cronies, while other sections of the American corporate establishment are left out.

Kerry suggests that the cost of holding onto Iraq single-handed is too great, and the European rivals of US imperialism must be given a cut of the action. The incentive he holds out to them is not a share in the blood and conflict—as Bush pointed out, that's hardly an attraction—but a share of the spoils of war, above all Iraq's enormous oil wealth.

In a public debate before a national television audience, neither side in this argument within the ruling class could openly spell out its real positions.



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