

Democrat Edwards backs war, austerity in vice presidential debate

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The debate Tuesday night between Vice President Richard Cheney and his challenger Senator John Edwards underscored the fundamental agreement between the two big business parties on intensifying the war against the Iraqi people and continuing the policy of global militarism pursued by the Bush administration.

On the eve of the debate, the administration was shaken by a series of revelations that indicated growing divisions within the political establishment over the conduct of the US intervention in Iraq and the explosive resistance it now confronts.

Most significant was the statement by Paul Bremer, who headed the US occupation until June, criticizing the administration for deploying a military force inadequate to secure the country in the aftermath of the invasion and toppling of Saddam Hussein.

This coincided with a statement by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and the leaking of a fresh report from the US Central Intelligence Agency, both refuting a key administration justification for launching the war: supposed ties between the Iraqi regime and Al Qaeda.

As a result of these developments, Cheney, whom the media had touted as a formidable spokesperson for the administration, was clearly on the defensive during the 90-minute exchange with Edwards.

Asked directly at the outset about Bremer's and Rumsfeld's remarks, Cheney was unable to deliver a direct answer. Instead, he defended the war by declaring Iraq was targeted because of "the possibility that this was the most likely nexus between the terrorists and weapons of mass destruction"—a far from convincing rationale, given that neither Al Qaeda ties nor weapons of mass destruction existed.

The vice president made the extraordinary claim, "I have never suggested there's a connection between Iraq and 9/11." In fact, Cheney led the efforts of the administration to manufacture links between the Baghdad regime and the terrorist attacks of 2001. He repeatedly floated the claim—long after it was discredited by both US and Czech intelligence—of a meeting between September 11 hijacker Mohammed Atta and an Iraqi official in Prague five months before the attacks. He suggested on more than one occasion that he possessed secret intelligence indicating such ties.

While Edwards repeatedly suggested that the Bush administration and Cheney were not being candid with the American people, he failed to directly challenge the vice president when he lied about his past statements linking Iraq to 9/11.

Edwards attacked the administration for its "incompetence" in organizing the Iraqi war, indicating that both he and Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry had supported military action against Iraq, but that it "needed to be done the right way."

He chided Cheney for not being "straight with the American people" about either the reasons for going to war or the debacle currently confronting the US in Iraq. He failed, however, to state the obvious—the Bush administration carried out a war of aggression based upon lies, a war crime under international law. Nor did he suggest that a Kerry administration would bring this aggression to an end.

Instead, he made a direct appeal to those sections of the American ruling elite that have grown increasingly disturbed over the developments in Iraq. While seizing on Bremer's statements about the inadequate size of the US invasion force, Edwards promoted the Democratic platform's call for adding another 40,000 active duty troops to the US military and doubling the size of the US special forces.

Edwards indicted the vice president for his record as the former CEO of Halliburton and attacked the company's no-bid government contracts in Iraq. Significantly, however, he was silent on the more essential issues raised by Cheney's intimate ties with US oil conglomerates, including the desire by US oil interests to gain control of Iraq's petroleum reserves.

The Democratic candidate made no mention of the secret meetings of Cheney's energy task force in 2001, in which oil industry executives and government officials poured over maps of Iraq's oil fields and discussed Baghdad's plans for awarding oil concessions to US rivals. In the course of these closed-door deliberations, the National Security Council issued an order to its staff to assist the task force in "melding" policies regarding "the review of operational policies towards rogue states," such as Iraq, and "actions regarding the capture of new and existing oil and gas fields."

Edwards—like John Kerry in last week's presidential

debate—avoided these fundamental questions. The reason is clear: the Democratic Party shares the basic strategic aims pursued by the Bush administration in the war against Iraq—establishing US control over the Persian Gulf’s petroleum reserves, and using its stranglehold on this vital resource to secure US capitalism’s dominance over both current and potential rivals.

In the foreign policy section of the debate, the Democratic candidate attacked the Bush administration largely from the right. He chastised the vice president for having “been an advocate for over a decade for lifting sanctions against Iran, the largest state sponsor of terrorism on the planet.” He pledged that a Democratic administration would not merely maintain these sanctions, but “strengthen” them. He similarly criticized the administration for failing to take a sufficiently hard line against North Korea.

When Cheney criticized Edward’s running mate as unqualified for the post of “commander-in-chief,” the Democratic vice-presidential candidate responded: “John Kerry has voted for the biggest military appropriations bill in the country’s history. John Kerry has voted for the biggest intelligence appropriations in the country’s history.”

Among the most revealing moments in the debate was Edwards’s response to the question of whether Washington had failed to take an active role in seeking a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Democratic candidate responded with what can only be described as a blanket endorsement of any aggression the Israeli regime of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon might choose to unleash against the Palestinian people.

“The Israeli people not only have the right to defend themselves, they should defend themselves. They have an obligation to defend themselves,” Edwards declared.

Without so much as a nod to the suffering of the Palestinians, he added, “If Gaza’s being used as a platform for attacking the Israeli people, that has to be stopped. And Israel has a right to defend itself. They don’t have a partner for peace right now.”

Edwards made his remarks in the context of a brutal Israel assault on Jabaliya, a refugee camp inhabited by 100,000 Palestinians in the north of Gaza. Israeli tanks, bulldozers, attack helicopters and troops have attacked the camp, destroying houses, killing nearly 90 Palestinians and wounding hundreds more in the first few days of the operation.

Making reference to a Senate junket to Israel, Edwards spoke of his reaction to a suicide bombing in which Israeli children had been killed. The word “Palestinian” never crossed his lips. That Israel maintains an illegal occupation of Palestinian land, that five Palestinians have died for every Israeli over the course of this year, that tens of thousands have been injured by Israeli occupation forces and thousands of homes demolished are all a matter of complete indifference to the Democratic candidates.

The reaction to the Israeli aggression in Jabaliya is an accurate barometer of the attitude of Kerry and the Democrats to similar actions launched by the US military against the

civilian populations in Iraqi cities such as Samarra and Fallujah. The massive bloodletting in these operations—like the torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib and other detention centers—merited not even a mention.

While advancing a proposal for a more competent pursuit of US imperialist objectives, Edwards made a demagogic appeal on the issues of unemployment, falling living standards and the lack of healthcare. He criticized the Bush tax cuts and went so far as to invoke the image of millionaires “sitting by their swimming pool” counting stock dividends.

Nonetheless, even on these issues, the Democratic candidate attacked the Bush administration from a reactionary perspective. He stressed that he and Kerry were committed to policies aimed at getting “back on the path to a balanced budget” and “getting rid of some of the bureaucratic spending in Washington.”

“We are committed to cutting back anything in our programs that needs to be cut back to get us back on a path to fiscal responsibility,” he said. The pledge makes clear that even the timid Democratic campaign promises on jobs, incomes, health care and social services will be scrapped if and when a Kerry administration takes office.

From the standpoint of winners and losers—the stock-in-trade of the mass media—Edwards emerged clearly as the victor in the debate. Cheney appeared rattled and under siege, declining to respond on more than one occasion to the remarks of his challenger.

This “victory,” however, was the result of neither a challenge to the Bush administration’s policies of global militarism and social reaction, nor a genuine appeal to the mass opposition to the war in Iraq and deteriorating conditions of life in the US itself. Rather, it was based on a bid to win the endorsement of America’s ruling oligarchy for the election of a new leadership to pursue the same essential policies.

Whether this approach will ultimately translate into a Democratic victory at the polls in November is far from assured. The Bush administration continues to enjoy powerful support within US ruling circles and may well employ extraordinary measures to maintain itself in power.

Whatever the outcome, the vice-presidential debate has underscored the overriding need for a new political alternative: a party of and for the American working people, the vast majority of the population. The Socialist Equality Party is intervening in the 2004 election to lay the foundation for such a party and to develop the socialist and internationalist program that it requires.



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