

The Democratic Party and the struggle against the Iraq war

A reply to a reader

8 December 2005

The following is a letter from a reader responding to the December 1, 2005 WSWs Editorial Board Statement "Bush, Democrats back protracted war in Iraq", followed by a reply from Bill Van Auken.

To the Editorial Board:

Your article ("Bush, Democrats back protracted war in Iraq") focuses on the stupid comments of Senator Joseph Lieberman and ignores those of Nancy Pelosi, the leader of the House Democrats. After some fumbling and stuttering, she managed to endorse Rep. Murtha's call for US troop withdrawal.

In view of this, and comments by some other leading Democrats, including their previous presidential candidate, and, especially, their vice-presidential candidate, the latter of whom actually admitted he made a mistake in endorsing the war, it seems to me that the Democrats, as a group, are in the process of rethinking their stance and are slowly moving in an antiwar direction.

The US antiwar movement has long accused Bush, Cheney and company of "cherry-picking" intelligence to falsely justify their case for war. I accuse you of doing a similar thing—"cherry-picking" which comments you will cite to "prove" that that amorphous body, the Democratic Party, has a single stance on the war. This is faulty journalism.

In addition, it is profoundly unhelpful. If, as you correctly say, "The great advantage that the administration still enjoys is the support for the war from its ostensible opposition—the Democratic Party," you should be trying to weaken and destroy that Democratic/Republican unity. Therefore, you should be doing the very opposite of what you did: You should be publicizing and encouraging every antiwar voice from within the Democratic Party.

You write further that "the basic unity of the Democrats and Republicans in support of the US occupation reflects the broad pro-war consensus within the financial oligarchy, whose essential interests are defended by both parties." I predict that there will soon be further erosion of Democratic Party support for the war, and that this will reflect the breaking down of that consensus. It would be good if you could take off your blinders, so that you can see this.

So, I urge you to investigate further for signs that this Democratic/Republican consensus is weakening, and, if you see it developing, to give us your valuable insights about what it means.

EG

Dear Mr. G,

You accuse us in your December 1 letter of "cherry-picking" positions put forward by Democrats to falsely portray the party's attitude toward the war in Iraq, emphasizing the forthright pro-war declarations of Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman, while ignoring the mealy-mouthed, vacillating statements of House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi of California.

Your attempt to draw an analogy with the Bush administration's fabrication and manipulation of intelligence in laying the groundwork for the invasion of Iraq falls flat, however. As you well know, the White House lied about nonexistent weapons of mass destruction in order to drag the US into an illegal war of aggression. We are pointing to the well-documented and thoroughly consistent record of the leadership of the Democratic Party in helping the administration do just that, and in continuing to support this war, the latest comments of Pelosi and others notwithstanding.

You may find Lieberman's comments "stupid," but they are, in fact, an accurate reflection of the bipartisan policy that gave Bush the authorization to invade Iraq, provided uninterrupted funding for the war, and continues to advocate "victory" in the brutal campaign to suppress resistance to the US occupation.

It is, of course, true that the majority of Democratic voters regard Lieberman's views with disgust. When he ran in the 2004 Democratic presidential primary—putting forward much the same line on the Iraq war—he never received more than 5 percent of the vote, even in his home state of Connecticut, and went to the convention in Boston without a single delegate. Nonetheless, his right-wing, pro-war policy was adopted by the party leadership as the platform upon which John Kerry ran for president in 2004. Those who looked to the Democratic primary process and the 2004 presidential election as a means of opposing the war—many of them lining up behind Howard Dean—were deceived and betrayed.

What is there to be learned from this bitter political experience? That the next time Democratic politicians begin making critical noises about the war in Iraq, we should believe them, or look to their supposed opposition as a means to combat the war? No!

What are the supposedly hopeful signs that the Democrats are "slowly moving in an antiwar direction?"

First, let's deal with Pelosi. As is well known, this leading Democratic congresswoman, who represents one of the most liberal districts in the country, first reacted to the call by Pennsylvania Congressman John Murtha for a withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in six months by running and hiding. She canceled a joint press conference with Murtha and insisted that his proposal was merely a personal position.

Then came a particularly revealing episode. The Republican majority in the House of Representatives called the Democrats' bluff, putting forward a resolution that called for the immediate withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq. Only three Democrats out of the 200 in the House of Representatives voted for the measure, exposing the overwhelming opposition among the party's elected officials to a demand that polls have indicated is supported by a majority of the American people.

In the statement given after Bush's speech that you cite, Pelosi chided Bush for not having "a plan for victory" in Iraq. In endorsing the plan advanced by Murtha, she emphasized its call for the withdrawal of US

troops “at the earliest practicable date,” language that gives both Congress and the administration infinite wiggle room.

Pelosi went on to add, moreover, that she would not call for other Democrats to join in a party line vote on the measure, because “a vote on war is an individual vote.” In other words, her “support” for Murtha’s proposal is purely platonic; she has no intention of fighting for it. This is in large measure because she knows full well that the majority of the Democrats in Congress oppose an early withdrawal of troops from Iraq.

This certainly includes John Kerry and his vice presidential running mate John Edwards, whom you seem to think should get some credit for declaring that they were “fooled” by bad intelligence into voting for the war against Iraq. They are lying. They were not fooled by Bush’s rigged “evidence.” They chose not to challenge it because they supported a war against Iraq. They, like all those in the US political establishment, were well aware that this war was not about weapons or terror, but about using military force to seize oil and establish US hegemony in the strategic Persian Gulf region.

Now, even as they attempt to make some political hay off the growing popular anger over a war based upon lies, they still support the war. Kerry’s “opposition” has risen only to the level of proposing a drawdown of 20,000 troops after the Iraqi elections later this month, followed by “the withdrawal of American combat forces linked to specific, responsible benchmarks.” He recently made clear, however, that “this debate is not about an artificial date for withdrawal.”

Edwards, who likewise opposes a timetable, has called only for the “gradual” withdrawal of a “significant” number of troops, conditioned on the training of Iraqi security forces.

Neither position is distinguishable in any serious way from that elaborated by the Bush administration in its “strategy for victory.” The same can be said of the positions advanced by Senators Hillary Clinton and Joseph Biden, and every other Democrat considered a likely presidential candidate in the 2008 election.

The latest to weigh in on the issue is Democratic National Chairman Howard Dean—the repository of the antiwar hopes of many Democrats during the party’s 2004 primaries. His proposal is a “gradual” withdrawal over the course of two years—with tens of thousands of troops transferred to Afghanistan and a sizeable “rapid-reaction force” left behind in the Gulf region for continued attacks on the Iraqi people.

The “opposition” of all of these big business politicians to the war in Iraq extends no further than the charge that this militarist venture has been poorly executed. Their position is that it should have been better prepared and carried out with even more US troops. Those who oppose the war not on the grounds that it “didn’t work,” but because it was a crime against both the Iraqi and the American people, can only view these so-called “critics” as being every bit as responsible as the Bush administration itself.

And what about Murtha, whose resolution has helped spark illusions that the Democrats are turning into an “antiwar party?” If ever there was an unlikely opponent of US militarism, the congressman from Pennsylvania is it. He has an unbroken record of supporting every US military intervention from Vietnam to Central America to the first Persian Gulf War to the Iraqi invasion. He is considered the Pentagon’s best friend in Congress and is the top beneficiary in the House of campaign contributions from defense contractors. In 2004 he trailed only behind Bush and Kerry, netting \$284,750 from the arms manufacturers.

In his resolution calling for withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, Murtha is speaking for the Pentagon’s uniformed command, which fears that the continuation of the meat-grinder counterinsurgency campaign will result in an institutional breakdown of US combat forces. Are we to encourage this new “antiwar voice” among the four-star generals as well?

Murtha’s proposal is hardly one for an end to the war against the Iraqi people. It is more precisely a proposal for prosecuting the war in a way

that results in fewer US casualties—and, very likely, far more Iraqi ones.

This new strategy would involve the utilization of air power to bomb the Iraqis into submission, while using Special Forces troops allied with Shiite and Kurdish forces to wage a vicious civil war against the Sunni population. Citing Pentagon and intelligence sources, Seymour Hersh spelled out this strategy in the December 5 issue edition of the *New Yorker*. US domination of Iraq’s oil wealth would be further secured by the permanent deployment of a “rapid reaction force”—as called for in Murtha’s resolution—to intervene against any challenge to Washington’s interests.

There is no doubt that the American ruling elite and its political representatives in both parties have been plunged into crisis over Iraq, precisely because the war of aggression which they all supported has turned into a debacle. The deterioration of the situation has led to bitter recriminations. In this sense, it is true that the consensus is breaking down.

But that process can be seen in the Republican Party no less than in the Democratic Party. If you’re looking for signs of big business politicians “moving in an antiwar direction,” why leave the Republicans out? Often the likes of Republican senators Chuck Hagel and Richard Lugar have taken the lead in criticizing Bush’s conduct of the war, with the Democrats chiming in only after seeing that it was safe to do so. Should we start “publicizing and encouraging every antiwar voice” in George Bush’s party as well?

None of this means that any significant faction of the ruling establishment is turning against militarism and war. Far from it. To a large extent, the dissension among Democrats and Republicans alike over the Iraqi quagmire stems from concern that it will leave the US military ill-prepared to launch new and bloodier wars of aggression—wars that are already being prepared.

We state unequivocally that a genuine struggle to put an end to war is impossible without a complete and irrevocable break with the Democratic Party, which stands as a central obstacle to such a struggle.

What you refer to as “blinders” in relation to the Democrats is in fact a historical perspective. We do not base ourselves on the immediate conjuncture, drawing our political perspective from the latest sound bite delivered by this or that politician.

The Democrats represent one of the oldest bourgeois parties in the world. Its class character has been determined over the course of two centuries. How far does one need to go back to establish this track record? Andrew Jackson would be a likely start. The first Democratic president, Jackson set the pattern of corruption, defense of wealth and privilege (in his case, of the southern slavocracy) and hoodwinking of the people that has continued ever since.

This party remains a component part of a two-party system by means of which America’s financial elite exercises a political monopoly, defending a profit system whose crisis finds its most malevolent expression in the eruption of US militarism. Historically, the special role of the Democrats has been to divert mass social movements—from the agrarian populist rebellion of the 1890s to the industrial union movement of the 1930s to the civil rights and antiwar struggles of the 1960s—into safe political channels, rendering them harmless to the profit system.

Since the days when it upheld southern slavery while pretending to champion the interests of workers in the north, the modus operandi of the Democratic Party has been to defend the established order, while claiming to be the party of the common man. This pretense has become ever more threadbare as the gulf separating the financial elite from the masses of working people has widened.

Those who cling to unfounded hopes that this corrupt and reactionary party can somehow become the voice of the people and fight for peace and equality are only fooling themselves.

We do not intend to promote such illusions. The WSWP will continue to follow closely the debate within the ruling establishment over Iraq, but it

will do so with a clear understanding of the class interests expressed in the positions advanced by both major parties.

We will state frankly to American working people that they alone can bring an end to this war, and to war in general, by mobilizing their social power independently and building the Socialist Equality Party as the spearhead of a mass political movement fighting for socialism, internationalism and the revolutionary transformation of society.

Yours sincerely,
Bill Van Auken



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact