

Democratic Congressman backs continuing military occupation of Iraq at California meeting

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11 May 2006

Supporters of John Burton, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for the 29th Congressional District of California, intervened at a speech given by his Democratic opponent, the incumbent Adam Schiff, at Glendale Community College on Monday.

In response to questions about his October 2002 support for the Bush administration's Iraq war resolution, Schiff hid behind claims of "faulty intelligence" while voicing support for continuing the US military presence. His only difference with the current policy is to call for "strategic redeployment" of US troops out of urban areas.

Addressing a mostly captive audience of students on class assignment, Schiff concentrated his opening remarks on various banalities about the career of a congressman. Instead of addressing the war, the ongoing attacks on democratic rights, the gutting of social programs and other burning social issues, Schiff spoke of how he enjoyed his job and the "interesting people" he meets. He complained about having to spend so much time raising money and working in a coat and tie.

Schiff called it a "travesty" that Congress building up hundreds of billions of dollars in debt to fund "national security and health care," money that would have to be paid by the younger generation in the audience. He did not, however, call for the repeal of tax cuts to the rich, nor did he provide any alternative to reducing the debt than slashing federal programs on which millions of people depend. In fact, Schiff has voted for tax cuts, including the repeal of the estate tax, a tax on inherited wealth that affects only multimillionaire families.

After his trite opening remarks, the audience posed questions that forced Schiff to address more substantive issues that revealed his right-wing agenda.

One audience member asked about Schiff's attitude to globalization. Reflecting Schiff's close relationship with the film industry—the 29th District includes Burbank, home to Disney and other large entertainment firms—he responded by

attacking China. Complaining about limits imposed on the number of US films shown in China, Schiff questioned, "Isn't it amazing that the Chinese film industry makes more money in the United States than the US film industry makes in China?"

Schiff also expressed his regret that immigration policies were reversing the "brain drain" from foreign countries, as fewer well-trained professionals and scientists are able to live and work in the United States. In addition, he said that there was no "level playing field" for American corporations to extract profits in other countries, and attacked Russia, India, and China for not protecting the intellectual property of the US entertainment industry.

When asked about the immigration debate on Capitol Hill, Schiff reiterated his support for the McCain-Kennedy bill, but said there was only a 40 percent chance that any immigration bill would pass. The McCain-Kennedy bill includes a measure requiring the mass deportation of between 1 million and 2 million immigrants that have been in the US for less than two years; a "guest worker" program that puts immigrants at the mercy of employers; and a provision that doubles the amount of money spent on border control, further militarizing the border. (See "Anti-immigrant politics kill 'reform' bill in US Senate")

A supporter of John Burton took up Schiff on his support for the Iraq war. Schiff played a key role in promoting the lie that the invasion was necessary because Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. He helped ensure that Congress passed a bill authorizing the use of military force against Iraq in 2003, and he has repeatedly voted to fund the occupation. "Mr. Schiff," the SEP supporter asked, "isn't it true that you and other politicians lied to the American people about the motivation for the invasion of Iraq because the true motivation for the invasion was to seize control of Iraq's natural resources, its oil, to further the geo-strategic interests of American corporations? Isn't the reason that you refuse to discuss the reasons for the invasion of Iraq is

because the same motivations lie behind the saber-rattling against countries like Iran and Venezuela, which also happen to sit on major supplies of oil?”

Schiff denied avoiding discussion of the true motivations for the war. Throughout his response, however, he avoided entirely the question of control over international energy supplies. His own decision to support the war, he claimed, came after a briefing with Condoleezza Rice, the former National Security Advisor, former CIA head George Tenet, and former Secretary of State Colin Powell. Schiff claimed Tenet told him personally that on a scale of 1 to 10, his confidence that Iraq had a functioning nuclear weapons program was a “10.” He made the absurd claim that he had no reason to suspect at the time that Tenet or other administration officials were lying.

Another Burton supporter followed up, pointing out that Schiff appeared at meetings during the run-up to the invasion at which his own constituents accused him of lying about Iraqi weapons programs in order to justify support for the war. He called Schiff’s talk of an “intelligence failure” disingenuous, noting that there was enough evidence already available to draw the conclusion that the administration lied to the American people, lies that Schiff himself perpetuated. He demanded to know whether Schiff, who now claims that he made a mistake in voting for the Iraq war authorization, was prepared to call for the immediate withdrawal of US troops from the country.

Schiff responded that some of his constituents, the leadership of the Democratic Party, as well as Bush administration officials believed Iraq had a nuclear program, justifying his support for the war. He even made the absurd claim that Saddam Hussein himself believed Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, despite numerous statements to the contrary made by the Iraqi government before the war.

In the face of growing opposition to the war in the US—including in California’s 29th District—and the catastrophic consequences of the war, Schiff argued that the US military cannot leave Iraq. He argued instead for a “strategic redeployment” of troops, as outlined in the Democratic Party’s position statement on the war.

As Bill Van Auken, the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for New York senator, pointed out, “The call for ‘responsible redeployment’ means that US troops will remain in Iraq until all resistance to the US takeover of the country is crushed. To the extent that a tactical shift is suggested, it is one in which American forces would be redeployed to permanent bases, utilizing air strikes and rapid reaction forces to suppress a hostile population. It is a prescription for a protracted colonial war which promises an even more horrendous death toll among Iraqi civilians.” (See “Democrats unveil midterm election platform: a blueprint

for endless war”)

During the course of the meeting, Schiff claimed that the experience of the Iraq war would make him more wary when it came to administration claims regarding Iran. However, the Democratic Party, and Schiff in particular, has played a critical role in escalating the militarist rhetoric against Iran. Schiff gave a speech to the House floor on September 15, 2004, in which he accused Iran of developing nuclear weapons. “Until Tehran sees that its continued nuclear activities have economic and diplomatic costs, they are unlikely to begin serious negotiations that might lead to the shutdown of their nuclear program. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be sufficient support in the IAEA for a tougher line with Iran,” Schiff said.

“There is no doubt that Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons, along with the ongoing standoff with North Korea over its nuclear weapons program, constitute the gravest threat to American national security today,” Schiff continued. “How we deal with this threat will shape our global security environment for decades. When coupled with the desire by terrorists to acquire and use these weapons against the US, the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran and North Korea is petrifying.” Such saber-rattling toward Iran reveals the true nature of the Democratic Party.

Burton and his supporters handed out campaign leaflets and gathered signatures to put Burton on the ballot. Just over a week into the petition-gathering period, SEP supporters have received a warm and enthusiastic response from workers and young people in California. Many have signed Burton’s petition, supporting the SEP call for the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and voicing disgust at the complicity of Schiff and the Democratic Party as a whole in the continued occupation. There has been a strong positive reaction to the SEP’s call for a break with the Democratic Party and the building of a new party that will connect opposition to the war with opposition to the capitalist system.



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