

# New York's Clinton-Spencer debates—a reactionary charade

## Two candidates for war and repression

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The back-to-back debates held last weekend between New York's Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton and her Republican opponent, the right-wing former mayor of Yonkers, John Spencer, were a political charade, summing up everything that is reactionary about the political monopoly exercised by the two-party system.

I, as well as other candidates for the US Senate from New York, was excluded from these debates in order to reinforce this monopoly. Clinton could not tolerate the inclusion of a challenger from the left, opposing her policies of militarism and defense of the profit system from the standpoint of the interests of working people and a socialist perspective.

The Democratic incumbent and her Republican opponent made it clear that they both support not only a continuation of the war against Iraq, but intensified military threats against Iran and North Korea as well.

Both declared their support for the wholesale attacks on democratic rights enacted under the Bush administration, with Clinton vigorously defending her record of support for the USA Patriot Act. And neither candidate advanced even a hint of a program to meet the needs of ordinary working people in New York, who face a mounting crisis due to falling real wages, rising housing costs, lack of health insurance and unemployment.

The debates were held in the political context of the recent Johns Hopkins University survey revealing that the US war in Iraq has claimed the lives of some 655,000 Iraqis, and in the wake of Congress's approval of the 2006 Military Commissions Act legalizing torture and abrogating habeas corpus.

Yet the lion's share of the questions posed in this so-called debate centered not on these critical issues facing the American people, but on Ms. Clinton's personal political ambitions and celebrity status. Reporters asked the Democratic senator whether she was happy with her life and why people either "loved or hated" her. The main issue in the debates was not Clinton's policies, but whether or not she would run for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008.

Noticeably absent from the largely toothless queries of the reporters was any reference to her statement the previous week supporting legislation empowering the president to order the torture of suspects under undefined "extraordinary" conditions, a position that places her to the right of sections of the Republican

Party. Also untouched was the decision taken by Clinton and the rest of the Democratic leadership not to block passage of the Military Commissions Act so as to avoid Republican charges that the party is "soft on terrorism."

In the course of the questioning about Iraq, Clinton claimed, "If we knew then what we now know, there never would have been a vote and there never would have been a war." She went on to indict Bush for being "ill-prepared for what needed to be done in order to be successful" and to declared her own determination to see the "mission completed."

If her first statement were indeed true, Hillary Clinton should have resigned long ago for gross incompetence and dereliction of her most elementary duties of legislative oversight.

As her socialist challenger, I can point to point to my record on this issue. Unlike Clinton, who belatedly claims that she was deceived, I wrote article after article for the *World Socialist Web Site* in 2002 exposing the Bush administration's so-called evidence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction as lies, and warning that the vote cast by Ms. Clinton would rapidly lead to a war of aggression and ultimate catastrophe.

It was not a matter of unique foresight on my part. Tens of millions of people took to the streets of cities around the world because they recognized the charges against Iraq to be a phony pretext for seizing the world's second-largest oil reserves. Why didn't Clinton know as much as those millions?

In the end, Clinton's claim that she didn't know is just one more lie. She and other Democratic leaders were well aware that Bush's claim that Iraq's nonexistent weapons of mass destruction posed a threat to the US was a pretext for launching a long-planned war of conquest. They, like the Republican administration, believed these lies to be the best means of foisting this war onto the American people.

As for her remarks about Bush's failure to wage a "successful" war, the obvious conclusion is that far more troops were, and are, needed to crush the Iraqi resistance and complete the "mission" of reducing the country to a US semi-colony, with its oil resources safely in the grip of the American energy corporations. The unstated corollary of this criticism is that many more troops must be found, something that points inexorably toward the reinstitution of the military draft.

Clinton's right-wing Republican opponent, who trails the

incumbent by a two-to-one margin, all but labeled any criticism of the administration on the Iraq war as treason. He made a valid argument, however, in reviewing Clinton's record of having voted for the war, while attempting to disassociate herself from any responsibility for the resulting debacle, and for having alternatively called for the sending of even more troops and the "redeployment" of those already there. "Does anyone understand what that means?" he asked.

Clinton also signaled her support for stepped-up militarism against both North Korea and Iran, declaring that she favored keeping "all options on the table," meaning new wars of aggression.

When accused by Spencer of having opposed the USA Patriot Act, Clinton bristled, affirming that she had supported this repressive legislation, having objected only to the fact that New York did not get more money to implement police-state measures.

The entire character of these debates was representative of the present political establishment and the system it defends, based upon social inequality, repression and reaction. The first was held Friday night in Rochester, an economically depressed upstate city that has seen 35,000 jobs destroyed since Clinton was first elected, and the second in New York City on Sunday morning.

In both cases, the debates were held behind an army of Secret Service agents, police and private security guards. As for the audience, it consisted of a relative handful of Democratic and Republican hacks, combined with a sprinkling of well-heeled donors. At the University of Rochester, the site of the first debate, students were given explicit instructions not to go near the debate auditorium, which was less than a third full for the event. The audience at the second, held in the studios of WABC television, was even smaller.

I and SEP supporters demonstrated outside both the events, demanding that all candidates be allowed to debate. Green Party members and their Senate candidate, Howie Hawkins, also turned out to protest the exclusionary policy both in Rochester and Manhattan. Also present were demonstrators from local antiwar groups.

In Rochester, security expelled both Hawkins and me from the university when we attempted to hand out our respective statements denouncing exclusion from the debates. A group of gay students, who had come to protest their own exclusion from the event as well as the positions of Clinton and her Republican challenger on same-sex marriage, were similarly chased off of their own campus. When Hawkins and I attempted to approach the press room after the debate to speak with the media, a phalanx of police blocked our path and threatened us with arrest if we didn't leave.

We later learned that the university and a number of its faculty members had held their own meeting with students to protest what had effectively become the hijacking of the university by Time Warner Corp., the debate's corporate sponsor, in league with the board of trustees.

No explanation was ever given for the policy of excluding all candidates save the Democrat and the Republican from these debates. During the Democratic primaries, Time Warner, a major donor to Clinton's campaign, refused to organize a debate on the

grounds that the failure of Clinton's challenger to raise more than half a million dollars in campaign contributions meant that he was not a "serious candidate."

These undemocratic criteria have no basis whatsoever in election law. The Socialist Equality Party was placed on the ballot by 25,000 New Yorkers who signed our nominating petitions.

Having met the onerous requirements set by the state of New York for ballot access, my candidacy is every bit as legitimate as those of Spencer or Clinton. The arbitrary rules for debates set by private corporations together with the Democratic and Republican parties are designed to exclude all candidates except those backed by the corporations or those who are multimillionaires in their own right, as well as to narrow the political discussion to views that are acceptable to America's financial oligarchy.

In the end, it wasn't just me who was excluded, but millions of New Yorkers and hundreds of millions around the country who want an immediate end to the war in Iraq, oppose the sweeping attacks on democratic rights and want to see a halt to the staggering growth of social inequality. They too were denied a voice.

While kept out of the debate between Clinton and Spencer, the SEP organized its own independent activities in New York state. The day before the first debate, the SEP held a successful campaign rally in Buffalo, and on the day of the second debate a well-attended meeting in New York City. On Monday, I participated together with Hawkins of the Greens and the Libertarian Party candidate for US Senate Jeff Russell in a press conference in Albany to denounce the exclusion, which was covered by several newspapers and television stations.

The Socialist Equality Party condemns this undemocratic, exclusionary policy, but it hardly comes as a surprise. The truth is that American working people, the vast majority of the population, are systematically excluded from any genuine participation in a political system that is organized by two big business parties against their interests.

The central aim of the Socialist Equality Party's election campaign is the building of a new socialist movement based upon these broad masses of politically excluded and politically alienated working people. Only such a movement can bring an end to war, political repression, social inequality and the capitalist system that creates them.



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