

The Democrats in the 2006 elections: the second party of reaction and war

Part one

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4 November 2006

This is the first of a two-part article.

The Democratic Party appears likely to make substantial gains in the November 7 elections, perhaps taking control of the House of Representatives for the first time since 1994 and even winning back the Senate. The Republican Party presently controls both houses narrowly, with a 55-44 margin in the Senate (with one independent), and a 232-203 margin in the House.

Nine Senate contests have captured the greatest public attention—two Democratic-held seats, in Maryland and New Jersey, and seven Republican-held seats, in Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Montana, Missouri, Tennessee and Virginia. A total of 33 seats are up for election this year, 15 held by Republicans and 18 by Democrats. Senators serve six-year terms and one third of the upper house is elected every two years.

While the tens of millions who will vote for the Democrats in the midterm election are undoubtedly motivated by opposition and even hatred of the Bush administration and its policies, above all the war in Iraq, the candidates of the Democratic Party by no means share those sentiments.

Many of them are running as political and cultural conservatives, all of them as supporters of Bush's "war on terror," and their criticism of the Iraq war is largely directed against the incompetence of the Bush administration, not the goal of seizing oilfields and strategic territory in the Middle East.

Below we profile three of the most prominent Democratic candidates for the US Senate, who are representative examples of the fundamentally reactionary character of this big business party.

Harold Ford, a congressman from Memphis, is bidding to become the first black senator to be elected by popular vote from a southern state (senators were chosen by the state legislatures until the passage of the 17th Amendment to the US Constitution in 1913). The son of a long-time congressman from Memphis, Ford is arguably running the most right-wing campaign of any candidate nominated by the Democratic Party for this year's Senate contests.

He is one of only a handful of Democrats who continues to defend his vote in 2002 to authorize the war in Iraq, when he was among those House Democrats who followed the lead of Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, an enthusiastic proponent of the Iraq war. When Gephardt subsequently retired to pursue an unsuccessful presidential bid, Ford ran for the post of House minority leader, calling the eventual victor, Nancy Pelosi, too liberal, particularly because she had voted against the war.

Since then Ford has been adamant about his pro-war views. He has endorsed Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman, the avidly pro-war Democrat who is running for reelection as an independent, over Ned Lamont, who won the state's Democratic primary in August by appealing to anti-war sentiment. Ford has called for an even more aggressive US

intervention in Iraq, urging the partitioning of the country into three autonomous zones, Sunni, Shia and Kurd, under a relatively powerless central government that would be wholly dependent on US support.

The *Wall Street Journal* editorial board noted approvingly (October 26), "Mr. Ford's votes for the war in Congress, and his willingness to talk about the need for it, has certainly resonated better than have the 'credentials' of the many war vets Democrats recruited to run elsewhere."

Ford has adopted a right-wing posture on social and cultural issues as well, including opposing abortion, calling for a greater role for religion in public life, and supporting constitutional amendments to ban flag-burning and gay marriage.

One campaign commercial—highly praised by the left-liberal journal the *Nation*—is actually filmed in the sanctuary of a Baptist church in Memphis, with a large white cross on a red tapestry in the background. Ford uses this setting to denounce Republican claims that he is a liberal at heart, declaring, "I voted for the Patriot Act, five trillion in defense, and against amnesty for illegals."

Ford has assiduously cultivated the support of Christian fundamentalists and the right wing of the Republican Party, voting for Bush's tax cuts and telling the Rotary Club in Cleveland, Tennessee, "I get in trouble with Democrats because I like President Bush."

He boasted, in a comment reported by the *Wall Street Journal*, that his Republican opponent, former Chattanooga mayor Bob Corker "can't name a single issue where I'm a liberal. They've had a hard time putting me in a box. That's been very frustrating for Republicans."

Last week, the Republican National Committee commissioned an ad appealing to racist sentiments. It ended with a bare-shouldered young blonde telling the camera, "Harold. Call me!" Ford denied that the ad was an appeal to racism, instead calling the sexual innuendo in the ad morally offensive.

Democratic Senate candidate Robert Casey, the state treasurer and son of the former Democratic governor of Pennsylvania, holds a commanding lead in pre-election polls over two-term Republican Rick Santorum, the third-ranking member of the Senate Republican leadership. Casey was backed for the Democratic nomination by Senator Charles Schumer of New York, the liberal who heads the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee.

Schumer pressured a more liberal candidate out of the race, declaring that Casey was the better choice because of his well-known opposition to abortion rights and his overall right-wing posture. This, Schumer declared, would make Casey a more viable candidate against Santorum, an arch-conservative Catholic who is a vocal leader of the extreme-right faction in the Senate.

Santorum was the only US senator to fly to the bedside of Terri Schiavo

last year, associating himself with the Christian fundamentalist campaign to vilify Terri's husband, Michael Schiavo, after he decided to take his brain-dead wife off of life support and allow her to die.

Casey, who is also Catholic, has a strong family connection to the "right-to-life" side of the abortion debate, as his father, elected governor of Pennsylvania in the 1980s, was the most prominent anti-abortion figure in the Democratic Party. In an incident frequently cited in the current campaign, the elder Casey was snubbed at a Democratic presidential nominating convention and denied the right to a prime-time speaking slot because of his anti-abortion views.

In addition to making his peace with the ultra-right on social issues, Casey is running as a fiscal conservative, citing his role as state auditor in "saving Pennsylvania taxpayers over \$1 billion." He denounces the budget deficit of the Bush administration and pledges to target "wasteful spending" and demand "a return to fiscal discipline in Washington." This will include cuts in Medicaid spending, one of the fastest growing parts of the federal budget.

Casey's economic program combines professions of absolute faith in American capitalism with social demagoguery against the Bush administration, which he attacks for favoring wealthy interests at the expense of working people. His web site touts a seven-point economic plan which Casey first unveiled a year ago in a speech to the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce—underscoring his subservience to business interests.

Despite the attempt to appeal to working people over stagnating living standards, soaring health-care costs, and deteriorating conditions in the schools, Casey offers nothing but Clinton-style palliatives: minor improvements in the Medicare prescription drug plan, expansion of the Medical and Family Leave Act (which provides only unpaid leave), and extension of health care coverage to a tiny fraction of the 45 million uninsured in America.

According to Casey's web site, the Pennsylvania Democrat "believes that our nation must be committed to crushing the threat of terrorism," and pledges to "push the White House and the Pentagon to redouble efforts to capture or kill bin Laden and crush the terrorist threat."

He criticizes the Bush administration for failing to implement homeland security recommendations from the bipartisan 9/11 Commission, while remaining silent on the use of the "war on terror" to undermine democratic rights at home through such measures as the Patriot Act and the Military Commissions Act.

In a debate with Santorum last month, Casey declared his support for wiretapping by the Bush administration. He later told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "On the question of wiretaps, my position all along has been we've got to do everything possible and give every tool that government agencies need, intelligence, law enforcement, give them the tools they need to fight this war on terror. And I think we, in terms of wiretapping, whether its terrorists, known terrorists, or suspected terrorists, we've got to give this government all the tools it can."

Casey's campaign statements on the war in Iraq are carefully hedged, as he seeks to get the votes of the large majority opposed to the war while pledging to maintain US military predominance in the world and praising US forces in Iraq for "doing an outstanding job in battling insurgent forces." He calls for "a clear exit strategy and real plans for the Iraqi forces to take care of their own security, and development of a government structure that is widely seen as legitimate among Iraq's various ethnic groups. This year should be a year of transition for the Iraqis to take responsibility for their own security and governance."

The "transition," however, will not mean a withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, but a partial redeployment to meet threats that Casey, like the Democratic Party as a whole, considers more urgent: Iran, North Korea and Syria, to name only three. He criticizes the Bush administration for its supposed failure "to exhibit a serious hard-line attitude against North

Korea's nuclear program."

Casey explicitly includes war as an option against Iran, saying, "The United States should use every tool it has—diplomatic, economic, political, and even leaving all military options on the table—to stop Iran's nuclear ambitions." And, of course, he calls for continued all-out US support for the state of Israel, pledging to "provide Israel with sufficient military and economic aid, and remain committed to Israel's quest for peace with security."

James Webb is the most prominent example of a major category of Democratic candidates for the House and Senate: the Republican-turned-Democrat. Webb, a decorated Marine officer in the Vietnam War and the author of a half-dozen novels on the US military experience in that conflict, much-praised in the right-wing press, held a number of positions in the Reagan administration, ending as secretary of the Navy.

He endorsed George Allen in the 2000 election when Allen ousted Democrat Charles Robb to win a Senate seat from Virginia, but subsequently broke with the Bush administration and the Republican Party over the war in Iraq, which he has repeatedly attacked as a "strategic blunder." Webb is not "anti-war" in the sense of rejecting the predatory aims of the US intervention in Iraq. He opposed the decision to invade Iraq as a diversion from more pressing strategic concerns, particularly Iran and North Korea, as well as Russia and China.

Webb was heavily promoted by the national Democratic Party leadership, which backed his candidacy for the Democratic nomination against a more traditionally liberal, long-time Democrat, multi-millionaire Harris Miller. Webb won a narrow victory in the primary after a bitter campaign which included the distribution of a leaflet depicting Miller, who is Jewish, as a hook-nosed moneybags. The lack of popular enthusiasm for either candidate was reflected in the turnout—a minuscule three percent of those eligible to vote took part in the primary.

Schumer, the head of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid and 2004 Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry all backed Webb in the primary, claiming that the former Reagan administration official would be able to attract Republican voters disillusioned with the fiasco of Bush's intervention in Iraq. Webb voted for Bush in 2000, but publicly opposed the decision to go to war in Iraq, backed Kerry in 2004, and joined the Democratic Party.

Webb has opposed the war on the grounds that it was a strategic blunder from the standpoint of the longer-term interests of American imperialism. He has warned that an open-ended commitment of the bulk of American ground forces in Iraq is tying down the American military and denying it "the mobility to confront the other strategic challenges, such as the threat of an emerging China."

Last Saturday the Democratic Party selected Webb to give its official response to Bush's weekly radio address, in effect endorsing Webb's criticism of the Iraq war from a right-wing, pro-imperialist and militarist standpoint. He praised the intervention of "a few realists in the Republican Party, such as Senator John Warner and former Secretary of State Jim Baker," who have urged the White House to adopt a new strategy in Iraq.

"A re-positioning of forces will allow them to more aggressively pursue the war on terrorism," Webb said, and he called for efforts to break up the alliance of Syria and Iran in order to further isolate Iran. He concluded with this pledge: "If we want a new direction in Iraq, we need a new team in Congress. A Democratic Congress will demand from day one that the president find a real way forward in Iraq."

If elected, Webb will undoubtedly play a prominent role in the post-election reshaping of American policy in Iraq that will take place regardless of which party holds a majority in the House and Senate. In that context, it is worth recalling the views that the 60-year-old ex-Marine expressed in the aftermath of the last great American military debacle, in Vietnam.

Besides writing novels like *Fields of Fire* about the military experience in Vietnam, Webb became a well-known conservative pundit, denouncing President Jimmy Carter's pardoning of draft resisters as a betrayal of the military and an abuse of power. According to a recent profile in the *New Yorker*, "Webb reserved a good portion of his pique for the 'activist Left and cultural Marxists' and their efforts to effect 'what might be called the collectivist taming of America, symbolized by the edicts of political correctness.'" He denounced the investigation into the Tailhook sexual abuse scandal in the Navy as an effort to undermine the military services.

The *New Yorker* profile continued, "According to Robert Timberg's book *The Nightingale's Song*, Webb was recruited into the Reagan administration by a Republican official who had once heard him being interviewed on the radio. The interviewer, talking to Webb about *Fields of Fire*, mentioned that Jane Fonda was in town and asked Webb whether he might wish to meet her. 'Jane Fonda can kiss my ass,' Webb replied. 'I wouldn't go across the street to watch her slit her wrist.'"

This bitter-ender of the Vietnam War era, a virulent anti-communist and militarist, is now being brought forward by the Democratic Party as the face of its "opposition" to the war in Iraq. Nothing could better demonstrate that, despite its efforts to capture anti-war votes in 2006, the Democratic Party is party of imperialist war, just as committed as Bush and the Republicans to a "successful" outcome of the American aggression in Iraq.



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