

Presidential candidates strike antiwar pose at Democratic National Committee meeting

Barry Grey in Washington DC
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At the winter meeting of the Democratic National Committee (DNC), held February 2-3 at the Washington Hilton Hotel, 10 candidates for the party's 2008 presidential nomination were paraded before an audience of party operatives, activists and fundraisers. It was an occasion to indulge in fictions about the fighting principles and popular sympathies of the party and allow its presidential aspirants to posture as critics of the Iraq war.

The proceedings left the impression that the party leadership was out to disprove Lincoln's aphorism that you can't fool all of the people all of the time.

The Democratic sweep of last November's congressional elections imparted an atmosphere of almost giddy self-congratulation, which had more to do with the perks and prerogatives of power than with any political convictions. One got the sense that among the hundreds in the audience, including contingents of College Democrats, there was new hope for career advancement and the financial rewards that go with it.

Every speaker was obliged to congratulate DNC Chairman Howard Dean for the farsighted brilliance of his "50-state strategy" in the November elections. But even the dimmest of the tribute-payers was aware that the Democrats' victory came virtually by default. Despite the efforts of the party to play down the issue of the Iraq war, voters went to the polls in the millions to register their opposition to the war in the only way the two-party system allowed—by voting for the Democrats.

Hence the chorus of antiwar slogans from all of the candidates, including two of the favorites to win the nomination—Hillary Clinton and John Edwards—who voted in October of 2002 to authorize Bush to go to war.

Before considering the candidates' speeches, it would be instructive to review the official policy statement of the Democratic Party on the war that was adopted at the weekend meeting. The resolution is almost a self-parody of duplicity and cowardice. In the name of rejecting the Bush administration's military escalation, it justifies a continuation of the US slaughter in Iraq.

The substance of the resolution is indicated by its title: "Resolution supporting and honoring the men and women who serve in our armed forces, expressing deep concern over the Bush administration's performance in Iraq and opposing the escalation of the war in Iraq."

The Democrats are incapable of criticizing the Bush administration's war policy without asserting their patriotism and "support for the troops." Beyond that, the title avoids any condemnation of the war as such. It narrowly criticizes Bush's "performance" in Iraq and limits its opposition to the administration's escalation.

The text of the resolution begins: "Whereas we give our unqualified support to the men and women serving in the United States armed forces at home and abroad and their steadfast commitment to defend our nation..." Echoing Bush's lies, this declaration implies that the US aggression in Iraq is about defending the American people. It implicitly legitimizes the war.

The resolution is laced with evasions and euphemisms, such as

"questionable intelligence," which are designed to downplay the criminal character of the war and obscure the Democrats' own complicity. It presents the Iraq war as a tactical blunder in the "war on terror," asserting that "It has diverted attention and resources away from the unfinished business of Afghanistan ... and has emboldened the radical regime in Iran..."

It implicitly rejects any early end to the US occupation or any attempt to cut off funding for the war, stating, "[W]e cannot ignore ... the dangers to the US and the world if we abandon Iraq to civil war..." It calls for Congress merely to "declare" its opposition to troop escalation and "work to prevent" it, so as to enable the US to "deescalate and redeploy our troops without abandoning the country to an uncertain fate."

This reactionary document underscores the hypocrisy that permeated the DNC meeting and the speeches of the presidential contenders. Virtually all of them touched on the same laundry list of issues—the war, healthcare, global warming, energy independence, poverty, CEO pay—striking a populist pose and making reform promises they knew they would never carry out.

Some of the "dark horse" candidates—Connecticut Senator Christopher Dodd, Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich, New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack—sought to outflank the frontrunners—New York Senator Hillary Clinton, former North Carolina senator and 2004 vice presidential candidate John Edwards, Illinois Senator Barack Obama—by criticizing the nonbinding congressional resolutions against Bush's troop surge as inadequate and calling for a rapid withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.

Dodd, whose father was a counsel for the US prosecution team at the Nuremberg trials before becoming a US senator from Connecticut, was the only speaker to prominently raise the attack on habeas corpus and the Geneva Conventions codified in the Military Commissions Act passed last September.

He pledged that as president he would "overturn the torture bill Bush signed last fall." He neglected to mention that the bill could not have been passed without Democratic support—34 Democratic votes in the House and 12 in the Senate.

Retired General Wesley Clark presented himself as a military man who won wars, touting his role as NATO commander in the 1999 US air war against Serbia.

Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, began his remarks by apologizing for his well-publicized gaffe earlier that week, when he seemed to suggest that Barack Obama was the first ever "articulate" and "clean" African-American presidential candidate. He promoted his plan for Shia, Sunni and Kurd autonomy in Iraq and presented himself as having the foreign policy expertise required to deal with the global crises facing the US.

"The next president will have to end the war in Iraq and immediately turn to other simmering hot spots before they explode," he said.

However, the main attractions were Obama, Edwards and Clinton. The

first of these gave a carefully packaged and slickly delivered sermon in favor of “hope” and against “cynicism.”

The advantage of Obama’s “nontraditional” style is that it permits one to remain almost entirely at the level of empty generalities. But within that framework, there lodges a cautious and calculating political operator entirely loyal to the American ruling elite.

Obama presents himself as a “consensus-builder” who can bridge all differences: racial, economic, geographic, political. He began his remarks by declaring that DNC Chairman Howard Dean had “proved that a progressive, common sense, practical message is not restricted to red states, not restricted to blue states, not restricted to one region of the country, it’s not even restricted to one party.”

He took pains to place his criticisms of the Iraq war within the context of his support for the “war on terror,” saying the next president had to “articulate a new foreign policy for the twenty-first century, one that refocuses our strength on the wider struggle against terror...”

“Every candidate for office in the next election,” he declared, “should put forward in clear, unambiguous, certain terms exactly how they plan to get out of Iraq.”

Minutes later he contradicted this demand for a plan to end the war with the following rhetorical flourish: “There are those ... who say, ‘Well, we want specifics, we want details and we want white papers, we want plans.’ We’ve had lots of plans, Democrats. What we’ve had a shortage of is hope.”

John Edwards presents the highly unpleasant spectacle of a multimillionaire personal injury-lawyer turned politician posing as the tribune of the poor, the downtrodden and the working man. He gave an embarrassingly mawkish speech constructed around the refrain “somewhere in America.” (There is a poor child, an overworked and underpaid worker, etc., etc.).

He has set out to make himself the candidate of the trade union bureaucracy, and accordingly paid tribute to the role of “organized labor.”

“Let’s stand up for the working people whose labor made this country great,” Edwards declared. “America was built by men and women who worked with their hands. And organized labor has fought for and made better the lives of every working man and woman ... labor never stands silent where wrongs need to be righted.... I am proud to stand beside organized labor.”

The labor bureaucracy was, in fact, a major presence at the DNC meeting. AFL-CIO President John Sweeney was among the DNC members and honored guests on the floor and Linda Chavez-Thompson, the executive vice president of the AFL-CIO, was on the stage in her capacity as DNC vice chair.

Edward’s tribute to organizations that have spent decades betraying the working class and are currently hard at work giving up pensions, health benefits and a living wage—and continuing to shrink to the point of irrelevance—evoked whoops of support from the crowd.

Edwards adopted a militant tone on the war, saying, “We cannot be satisfied in passing nonbinding resolutions. We have to use our power.” It would be a “betrayal,” he proclaimed, not to speak out against “the escalation of this war in Iraq.”

The lawyer chose his words carefully: It was not a betrayal to go along with the war itself, as he had done when he voted to authorize it. And today it was not the war itself that had to be opposed, but only Bush’s escalation.

Hillary Clinton sold herself as a pragmatic, but tough and effective politician who gets results. She adopted a folksy pose, in line with what she calls her “conversation with America.” This obviously rehearsed “common touch” only made her seem even more phony.

She paid tribute to the “great American middle class” with whom the government had broken its solemn bargain: “If you served your country, your country would serve you.”

She would devise a “new economic strategy to rebuild the American middle class” and “renew the promise of America.”

Evidently a component of this new strategy is economic nationalism and an appeal to anticommunist and anti-Asian sentiments. She moved seamlessly from denouncing “closing our factories and shipping our jobs overseas” to a call to “Get tough on China” and “start standing up for the American worker again.”

Only a few months ago Clinton stood firmly in the pro-war camp of the Democratic Party, opposing setting any timetables or benchmarks on the US occupation of Iraq. Only after Democratic voters in Connecticut repudiated pro-war Senator Joseph Lieberman and defeated him in the state’s Democratic primary election did Clinton begin to adopt a more critical tone.

At the DNC meeting, she defended the effort to pass nonbinding resolutions on the war and suggested that nothing more could, or would, be done by the Democratic Congress to impede Bush’s war policy. She pledged to help “rein in the president” over the next two years, and to “hold the president accountable and limit the damage.”

Hecklers in the audience interrupted her speech. One Iraq war veteran shouted, “How about bringing them home!” Clinton spoke over him and talked about her initiative to cap troop levels.

Then, in what was doubtlessly conceived of as a dramatic statement, she declared: “If I had been president in October of 2002, I would not have started this war.” To thunderous applause, she followed with: “If we in Congress don’t end this war before January 2009, as president I will.”

The first of these assertions lacks any credibility, since in October of 2002 she voted to authorize Bush to go to war. As for the second, it actually commits Clinton to nothing more than ending the war within the next six years (or ten years if one assumes a two-term presidency).

The one candidate who had something of value to say was the Vietnam-era senator from Alaska, Mike Gravel. In 1971, Gravel put the Pentagon Papers into the public record by entering 4,100 pages into the record of his Senate subcommittee on Buildings and Grounds. For this he was sued by the Nixon administration in a case that eventually was decided, in the government’s favor, by the US Supreme Court.

That same year Gravel carried out a one-man filibuster against a bill renewing the military draft. He succeeded in blocking the bill for five months until Nixon and Senate Republicans agreed to allow the draft to expire in 1973.

He is, in other words, a representative of an earlier generation, when the two bourgeois parties had considerably more of a popular base of support and members of Congress had broader social constituencies beyond their direct corporate backers. There were legislators such as Gravel who were genuinely opposed to the Vietnam War and were prepared to take a stand against the White House and the majority within their own party’s congressional caucus.

For precisely that reason, Gravel’s entry into the 2008 primary race is being treated by the Democratic Party apparatus and the media as a quaint and somewhat amusing sideshow. His presence at the DNC meeting was a living reminder of how far to the right the Democratic Party has moved over the past 35 years.

In his speech, Gravel told the meeting: “The Democrats controlled the Senate on October 11, 2002 and provided political cover for George Bush to invade Iraq. The Senate leadership could have refused to even take up the resolution, or a few senators who opposed it could have mounted a filibuster...”

“Given the extreme importance of any decision to go to war ... it’s my opinion that anyone who voted for the war on October 11—based on what President Bush represented—is not qualified to hold the office of president...”

“We must bring our troops home now—not six months from now, not a year from now—NOW! One more American death for ‘our vital interest’

is not worth it. We all know 'vital interest' is code for 'oil'...

“The Democrats in control of Congress need to act resolutely—and I’m not talking about some mealy-mouthed, nonbinding resolutions. They need to precipitate a constitutional confrontation with George Bush.”

The overwhelming majority of those in the hall expressed their dismay and disapproval by sitting on their hands throughout the ex-senator’s speech.



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