

US Senator Barack Obama and the war in Iraq

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13 February 2007

Barack Obama, the junior US senator from Illinois, formally announced his candidacy for US president in a speech in Springfield, Illinois on Saturday. Obama, who has emerged as a leading contender for the Democratic nomination in 2008, has already attracted a coterie of leading Democratic strategists, and insiders say there is little doubt that he can raise the tens of millions of dollars required to mount a “serious” campaign.

Because of the overwhelming antiwar sentiment of Democratic voters, Obama has attempted to strike a critical pose toward the war in Iraq—as have the other putative frontrunners, Hillary Clinton and John Edwards. Like his counterparts, however, he is a tried and true defender of the geopolitical interests of corporate America. If elected, he would not hesitate in using military force to secure US domination of the Middle East, Central Asia and the world.

Like the rest of the Democratic Party critics of the war, Obama’s differences with Bush are over tactics—not *whether*, but *how best*, to defend US imperialist interests. Within the confines of this limited “debate,” the Democratic presidential hopefuls are attempting to establish differences among themselves, and, in turn, their miniscule differences are magnified out of proportion by the media.

For example, John Edwards—John Kerry’s fervently pro-war vice presidential candidate in 2004—has, with considerable media assistance, rather incongruously attempted to stake out an “antiwar” position, calling on his rivals in the US Senate to cut off funding for Bush’s escalation, a measure the Democratic congressional leadership has already rejected out of hand.

Obama has this advantage over Hillary Clinton, Joseph Biden and Edwards: unlike the other leading candidates, all of whom as senators voted in favor of granting Bush authorization to illegally invade Iraq, Obama publicly opposed the invasion while still a state senator in Illinois. His opposition was of an entirely tactical character, however, based on the argument that the invasion of Iraq was simply the “wrong” war and a diversion from the “the war on terror.” Since arriving in the US Senate, Obama has walked in lock-step with the Democratic Party leadership, supporting every appropriation for the war and criticizing the Bush administration only over the war’s “mismanagement.”

Opposing the immediate and complete withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, Edwards, Clinton, and Obama have all gone on record as supporting the “redeployment” of US troops. Two weeks ago, Obama announced a senate bill, “The Iraq War De-escalation Act of 2007,” ostensibly aimed at curtailing the Bush administration’s escalation of the war in Iraq and mandating a “phased redeployment” of American forces to commence by May 2007 and end by March 2008.

Obama’s press release announcing the bill was riddled with evasions and outright lies. Typical of the cravenness of the Democratic Party, Obama begins by praising the American military, stating that “our troops have performed brilliantly in Iraq.” He says nothing of bloody war crimes committed by the US military, from the torture at Abu Ghraib, to the Haditha massacre, to the destruction of whole cities like Fallujah.

To explain the military failure, Obama has invoked the shibboleth employed by the entire political establishment: that the US military has been unwittingly caught in the crossfire of “somebody else’s civil war.” In fact, the civil war in Iraq pitting Shiite against Sunni and Kurd is the result of a conscious US policy to divide and conquer the country as well as the shattering impact of two US wars and 12 years of economic sanctions.

In his press release, Obama takes pains to reassure the ruling elite that his “phased redeployment” will continue “protecting our interests in the region, and bringing this war to a responsible end.” In the coded language of official American politics, a “responsible end” can mean only one thing: the total subjugation of Iraq, in one way or another, and the expropriation of its enormous oil wealth, delicately referred to by Obama as “our interests in the region.”

Indeed, Obama promises that his purportedly complete withdrawal “allows for a limited number of US troops to remain as basic force protection, to engage in counter-terrorism, and to continue the training of Iraqi security forces.” This “antiwar” proposal is reminiscent of Richard Nixon’s “Vietnamization” of American involvement in Southeast Asia: the US would pare down its direct “combat” involvement—Obama is careful to call for a “redeployment” of only “combat” troops—and turn over the dirty grunt work of imperialism to “Iraqi security forces”—that is, American-trained

death squads. US troops would still “engage in counterterrorism,” or bloody bombing raids and swift collective reprisals against Iraqi resistance to the country’s semi-colonial status.

Even here, however, Obama hedges his bets, offering this all-inclusive caveat: if prior to his plan taking effect, “the Iraqis are successful in meeting the thirteen benchmarks for progress laid out by the Bush Administration,”—that is, if in the meantime Bush’s plan for crushing Iraqi resistance achieves temporary success—“this plan also allows for the temporary suspension of the redeployment”—that is, a massive deployment of US troops will remain indefinitely within Iraq proper, rather than redeploying to neighboring states.

Obama endorses and recycles as his own all of Bush’s “thirteen benchmarks” for “progress” in Iraq. Among them, Obama singles out the demand for “eliminating restrictions on US forces.” In other words, the Pentagon should be given an even freer hand to drown the Iraqi resistance in blood. Obama also demands the Iraqi government reduce “the size and influence of the militias”—that is, fully confront the powerful Al Mahdi militia.

And where, according to Obama, shall American troops be redeployed? The troops would be sent “to Afghanistan; and to other points in the region” along with a “residual US presence [that] may remain in Iraq for force protection, training of Iraqi security forces, and pursuit of international terrorists.” In other words, in addition to the continued presence of US troops in Iraq, Obama supports greater US military involvement throughout the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Horn of Africa.

Where Obama’s plan breaks ranks with Bush is on the question of diplomacy. He calls for launching a “comprehensive regional and international diplomatic initiative—that includes key nations in the region—to help achieve a political settlement among the Iraqi people, end the civil war in Iraq, and prevent a humanitarian catastrophe and regional conflict.” The formulation “key nations in the region” is a coded reference to Iran and Syria, which the Bush administration has singled out as opponents of stability and as likely targets for escalation.

Obama is no opponent of military action against Iran. Like Hillary Clinton, he has consistently argued that the war in Iraq has been a diversion from “real” threats such as Iran. Obama has in the past called for missile strikes against Iran should it not buckle to American economic and political pressure. (See “Democratic keynote speaker Barack Obama calls for missile strikes on Iran”)

Rather, in his tacit call for diplomacy with Iran and Syria, Obama is lining up with sections of the ruling elite that fear an escalation of the war and its implications for the long-term interests of American imperialism and for the stability of “friendly” authoritarian regimes such as Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan.

Obama is an unapologetic advocate of the use of American militarism to advance US geo-strategic interests around the globe. In his recent book, *The Audacity of Hope*, he puts his stamp of approval on the Bush Doctrine of endless illegal preemptive wars and calls for boosting US military spending to confront the dangers to US geo-political interests posed by Iran, Russia, China and North Korea. For Obama, just as much as for Bush and Cheney, the US military must be made ready for combat around the world: “But our most complex military challenge,” he says, “may not be staying ahead of China. More likely, that challenge will involve putting boots on the ground in the ungoverned or hostile regions where terrorists thrive.”

The “war against terrorism” is a code word for never-ending US military interventions to secure control of oil and other strategic resources. One region Obama has in mind is Africa, which has become the venue for a renewed struggle between the great powers for raw materials, markets and influence. Last summer, Obama conducted a five-country tour of Africa, which included a visit with US troops at a counter-terrorism base in Djibouti—which played a key role in the recent US-backed Ethiopian invasion of Somalia. Following his tour, Obama told a forum organized by the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation that the US was making a costly mistake by not competing with China in Africa.

The US Senator, who has been a prominent advocate of US intervention into oil-rich Sudan under the humanitarian cover of “saving” the population of the Darfur region, complained, “The Chinese are everywhere throughout Africa. They are building roads . . . bridges . . . government buildings . . . hospitals.” He added that Chinese efforts were building good will and establishing relationships that could allow them to corner the market on the continent’s natural resources, particularly oil. “We’re not doing that because we don’t think it is important and, over time, that’s going to have an enormous impact on us,” he warned.



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