

# Democratic presidential candidates debate where to wage war next

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In the first debate between candidates for the Democratic Party's 2008 presidential nomination, the leading contenders made clear that whatever their differences with the Bush administration's handling of the war in Iraq, they are all committed to maintaining the US occupation of the oil-rich country and that, if elected president, they would not hesitate to use US military power anywhere in the world to defend the geo-political interests of American imperialism.

The debate, which was broadcast by MSNBC television from South Carolina State University, included ostensible front runners New York Senator Hillary Clinton, Illinois Senator Barack Obama and former North Carolina senator and vice presidential candidate John Edwards, as well as Delaware Senator Joseph Biden, Connecticut Senator Christopher Dodd and New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson. Also included were Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich and former Alaska senator Mike Gravel.

The debate was overshadowed by the deep crisis over the war in Iraq and the growing popular hatred for the war—particularly among Democrat voters, who according to a poll released this week are 78 percent in favor of total withdrawal and 54 percent in favor of immediate withdrawal.

While all of the candidates did their best to feign opposition to the war, the debate began just hours after the Senate approved a supplemental spending bill that will provide the White House with an additional \$124 billion to continue the fighting and occupations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Most of those on the platform sought to cast the funding bill as an “antiwar” measure because of the toothless and non-binding timetable in the bill for the withdrawal of some troops from Iraq. “The Congress has voted, as of today, to end this war,” Clinton declared.

Echoing the comments of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid earlier in the week, Senators Clinton, Biden and Obama made it clear they were against “this” war—i.e., opposed to the way the Bush administration is conducting the occupation of Iraq, not “the” war itself. Clinton set the tone by claiming the US had done everything to help the Iraqi people to have “freedom” and “their own country” but now it was time for the Iraqis to decide whether they would “take that chance.” Blaming the Iraqi people for the devastating civil war that has resulted from the US invasion and the shattering of Iraqi society, Clinton said the Iraqi government had to provide “security and stability without our young men and women in the middle of their sectarian civil war.”

These comments parallel previous statements by Clinton who

has indicated that if elected she would keep large numbers of US troops in Iraq for the foreseeable future—not to protect the civilian population against sectarian reprisals, but to defend America's “vital national security interests”: first and foremost, oil.

In his remarks, Biden criticized Bush's “fundamentally flawed policy” in Iraq, which he defined as the “notion of being able to set up a strong, central government in Baghdad that will be democratic.” The way forward, Biden said, was to “decentralize Iraq” and have a “limited central government” to “share their oil wealth.” Biden has been the most strident proponent of partitioning Iraq into ethno-religious statelets, dividing Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis. Such a proposal is a prescription for ethnic cleansing and mass killings on a scale not seen since the partitioning of India in the 1940s. Governor Richardson endorsed this reactionary proposal, calling for the US to establish a “political framework” to “divide oil revenues” and possibly “set up three separate entities.”

Illinois Senator Barack Obama said he had opposed the war from the start and then attempted to justify his repeated votes to fund it as hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and more than 3,300 US soldiers have been killed. He claimed that the troops needed the best military hardware possible in order to “come home safely.” In reality, Congress has the power to assure the safe return of the troops by cutting off funding, something the Democratic leadership refuses to do.

Representative Dennis Kucinich pointed out this anomaly, saying every time the Democrats voted to fund the war they were “reauthorizing the war all over again.” The Democrats, he said, “have the power to end the war right now, and that's what we should do.” Criticizing the Senate war-spending bill, Kucinich said he had proposed a bill that called for the United Nations to provide peacekeepers and security forces that “will move in as our troops leave.”

Gravel—a Vietnam-era senator who opposed the Nixon administration on the military draft and the war—also denounced the war-spending bill, saying he was “embarrassed” by what was going on in Congress. Because Bush is determined to continue the war, the Democrats should pass a law, he said, making it a “felony” to keep the troops in Iraq.

Neither Kucinich nor Gravel enjoys any support from the Democratic Party leadership, let alone from the Wall Street investors and other corporate backers who are pouring millions of dollars into the campaigns of the top contenders. Nevertheless,

they play a central role in fostering illusions that the pro-war and pro-big business Democratic Party can be pressured to stop the war and defend the interests of working people. Kucinich in particular presents himself as the “voice of conscience” in the Democratic Party and living proof that there is an antiwar, progressive faction within it.

In the 2004 elections, the Ohio congressman also sought the party’s presidential nomination. After the Democratic Party leadership smothered the Howard Dean campaign—around which significant antiwar sentiment had gathered—it took measures to suppress antiwar opposition within the party and to make sure the elections were not turned into a referendum on Iraq. This campaign culminated in the nomination of a pro-war candidate—Massachusetts Senator John Kerry. Kucinich immediately dropped his campaign and called for “unity” behind Kerry, thus attempting to confine the opposition to the war tightly within the borders of a pro-war party.

Earlier this week Kucinich introduced three articles of impeachment against Vice President Cheney for the campaign of lies about WMDs and Iraqi-al-Qaeda ties that was used to justify the war against Iraq, as well as similar fabrications used to prepare another war against Iran. These are indeed grounds for impeaching Cheney. However, there is zero support for this within the Democratic Party leadership, which is averse to any serious struggle that might bring masses of working people into a political confrontation with the Bush administration. For that reason, when the debate moderator asked for a show of hands from the Democratic candidates on who supported Kucinich’s action against Cheney, not one hand was raised.

In the end, Kucinich and Gravel functioned as foils during the debate so that the leading Democratic contenders could re-assert their commitment to defending the interests of corporate America with military force. This point was noted by the *Washington Post*, which said that Kucinich and Gravel “provided a counterpoint of left-wing ideas that drew rebukes for a lack of seriousness from Biden and Obama. The challenges from the liberal flank allowed almost all the others to assert that, despite their criticisms of President Bush’s Iraq policy, they are ready to use military force to retaliate against future terrorist attacks.”

Fully embracing the “global war on terrorism,” the leading Democratic candidates singled out as potential future targets of US military action not only Iran and North Korea, but also Russia and China. Biden also specifically raised the possibility of intervening in Darfur, which leading Democratic think tanks hope will be a launching point for defending US interest in Africa, while at the same time selling it to the American people as a “good, humanitarian” war.

Kucinich pointed out that Obama and Clinton had told pro-Israeli lobby groups that “all options were on the table with Iran” and that this was a thinly-veiled threat to use nuclear weapons. Obama justified his remarks by saying a nuclear-armed Iran “will be a major threat to us and to the region.” Calling Iran “the largest state sponsor of terrorism” because of its support for Hezbollah and Hamas, Obama repeated the same threats made by Bush and Cheney in the run-up to the war with Iraq, saying Iran could “place a nuclear weapon into the hands of terrorists,” posing a “profound

security threat for America.”

Gravel pointed out that the US has carried out sanctions against Iran for 26 years, while constantly threatening the country with military strikes. “Tell me, Barack,” he said, “who do you want to nuke?” Obama shrugged the question off, responding, “I’m not planning to nuke anybody right now, Mike, I promise you.”

Biden was even more forceful, calling on Kucinich and Gravel to “stop all this happy talk here about the use of force doesn’t make sense. The use of force in Afghanistan is justified and necessary; in Darfur, justified and necessary; in the Balkans, justified and necessary. You guys can have your happy talk, there’s real life.”

The debate made clear that the Democrats’ chief criticism of the war in Iraq is that it has placed an enormous strain on the fighting capacity of the US military and diverted attention from other threats to US interests throughout the world. The plan for “strategic redeployment” advocated by the Democratic candidates is aimed at maintaining colonial control in Iraq—by waging a bloody counter-insurgency with fewer troops, primarily US Special Forces and the Air Force—and freeing up troops for Afghanistan and interventions in other global hot spots.

This support for militarism stems from the fact that the Democratic Party speaks for the same financial oligarchy as the Republicans. This truth was reiterated throughout the debate, as Clinton, Obama and Edwards went out of their way to praise the multi-millionaire and multi-billionaire hedge fund managers and Wall Street speculators who have enriched themselves at the expense of the great mass of working people. Clinton praised the people willing to invest their money in the “free market system” and the “entrepreneurial economy,” many of whom have poured some of that money into her multi-million-dollar campaign war chest.

After repeating his refrain about being brought up poor and humble in a South Carolina textile mill town for the one thousandth time, John Edwards responded to a question about being hired by the \$30 billion hedge fund Fortress Investment Group with the absurd claim that “those people in New York who work in financial markets understand—in some ways, at least—what can be done and can play a significant role in trying to lift people who are struggling.”



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