

Military and money dominate opening of US 2008 presidential campaign

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The early onset of the 2008 US presidential election campaign has cast a harsh and unflattering light on the current state of American democracy. Two things above all dominate this stage-managed political process: the military and money.

Both major parties are wrapping their campaigns in the flag of militarism while pursuing tens of millions of dollars in campaign contributions, largely from well-heeled donors. On both counts, they are only revealing the profound disconnect that exists between official politics and the sentiments of the broad masses of the American people.

Barring a cataclysmic defeat for US occupation forces, no one seriously doubts that the November 2008 election will take place against the backdrop of continued killing and dying by American soldiers in Iraq.

Democratic presidential candidates are carefully positioning themselves as critics of the Bush administration's policy in Iraq in order to appeal to the overwhelming popular opposition to the continuation of the war. At the same time, they are making it clear to America's ruling oligarchy that they remain committed to the US achieving the economic and political aims that have been pursued through this war, and have no intention of ordering a complete withdrawal of US troops.

This is the significance of the political theater on Capitol Hill that has accompanied the passage, under the direction of the Democratic leadership, of the \$100 billion supplemental funding bill to pay for the war's continuation and escalation. The House and Senate Democrats each attached their own versions of "deadlines" or "goals" for the withdrawal of "combat troops." On close inspection, these proposals are not plans for a complete and unconditional withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, but rather envision the "redeployment" and reconfiguration of US forces while continuing the war against the Iraqi people.

Nonetheless, President Bush has issued an uncompromising rejection of any conditions whatsoever being attached to the funding bill, while increasingly suggesting that the Democrats who have questioned his position are a bunch of traitors.

Bush delivered yet another speech Monday vowing to veto any measure suggesting deadlines. "I hope the Democratic leadership will drop their unreasonable demand for a precipitous withdrawal," he said.

House and Senate leaders are set to begin negotiations in conference committee Tuesday to iron out differences between the separate pieces of legislation passed by each chamber. On

Wednesday, Democratic leaders are to meet with Bush at the White House to discuss the legislation.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (Democrat, Nevada) convened a press conference Monday to spell out the Democratic position. Flanked by two retired US generals and appearing against a backdrop bearing the slogans "Support our troops" and "Transition the mission," Reid insisted that the Democratic proposals "have nothing that will cut off funding for our troops."

He continued, "We simply change the mission," while leaving significant forces in Iraq to conduct "counterterrorism" operations, train Iraqi forces and guard US facilities and interests.

The Wednesday meeting between Bush and the Democrats will begin to orchestrate the Congressional leadership's capitulation to White House demands.

In a television interview Sunday, Vice President Dick Cheney took the measure of the Congressional Democrats, predicting that they would end up sending the White House a "clean" bill funding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan without attaching any withdrawal timetables.

"They will not leave the troops in the field without the resources they need," Cheney said of the Democrats. Asked what would happen if the Democrats failed to capitulate, Cheney added, "I'm willing to bet the other way—that, in fact, they will."

As significant as Bush's remarks Monday was the audience to which he delivered them. He spoke before a handpicked group of military families, including those of troops currently deployed in Iraq and others of soldiers killed in the four-year-old war. The event was co-organized by "Families United for our Troops and their Mission," a right-wing outfit connected to various Republican front groups that has organized pro-war rallies and circulated a petition charging opponents of the war with endangering the lives of US soldiers.

The speech combined the same discredited lies floated by the administration since before the 2003 invasion—that the US is in Iraq fighting "the enemies who attacked us on September the 11th"—with charges that the Democrats are stabbing the troops in the back. "Democrats in Congress have spent the past 70 days pushing legislation that would undercut our troops," he said. "They passed bills in the House and Senate that would impose restrictions on our military commanders."

Bush warned: "We should not be substituting political judgment for the judgment of those in our military."

The message and the venue have been repeated several times

since the month began. On April 10, Bush made the same charges at an American Legion Post in Virginia, and on April 4 he did so before a captive audience of uniformed troops at Fort Irwin, California, again denouncing the Democrats for seeking to “substitute the judgment of Washington politicians for the judgment of military commanders.”

Similarly, Senator John McCain of Arizona, a prominent candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, chose a military audience to deliver the first major speech of his campaign, delivered in support of continuing the Iraq war.

Speaking at Virginia Military Institute before an audience of cadets, with the front rows reserved for veterans returned from Iraq, McCain accused the Democrats of seeking to “deny our soldiers the means to prevent an American defeat.”

Of course these audiences are selected in part because they are under military discipline to sit through the stupidities and lies contained in such speeches without interrupting Bush and McCain with catcalls and boos.

Nonetheless, the military audiences have themselves become increasingly sullen as unit after unit has been put through the meat grinder of back-to-back deployments to Iraq and the number of US soldiers killed there has risen to over 3,300. Indeed, a poll conducted on behalf of the *Military Times* at the end of last year found that nearly three quarters of military personnel supported the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq within a year.

But there is a more fundamental and sinister objective underlying the venue chosen for these speeches. It is to foment an atmosphere of military opposition to the US Congress and the Democratic Party in order to create a base of support for the administration’s right-wing militarist policies.

Essentially, the message delivered by both Bush and McCain to military audiences is that the Democrats are aiding the enemy in time of war. Such a political pitch made to a military that by both law and tradition is supposed to be apolitical has the most poisonous implications.

The claim that “Washington politicians” must not be allowed to override “the judgment of military commanders” is tantamount to the repudiation of the fundamental constitutional principle of the subordination of the military to elected civilian government.

This is hardly a new position. Bush has relentlessly invoked his role as “commander-in-chief” of the US military to claim near dictatorial powers ranging from jailing people without charges or trials, torture and illegal domestic spying. In doing so he has repudiated the essential meaning of this constitutional function of the presidency, which was designed to ensure the elected government’s control over the military. Instead, he has used it to identify the presidency with the armed forces and war, thereby claiming powers approaching that of a military dictator over the political process.

Indeed, this attempt to make the military an instrument of political warfare was instrumental to the stolen 2000 election that brought Bush to power, when the Republicans vilified the Gore campaign and sought to incite the officer corps against it over the issue of counting illegal absentee military ballots. The Democrats, of course, capitulated to this demand, and to the theft of the election as a whole.

As the debacle in Iraq deepens, this appeal to the military has taken on an increasingly desperate and reactionary form, with the dark suggestion that the treachery of “Washington politicians” is to blame for the inability of US occupation forces to suppress Iraqi resistance.

For their part, the leading contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination are utterly incapable of answering this reactionary campaign. Instead they are making their own attempt to curry favor with sections of the military, including dissident retired generals who blame the Bush administration for the failure of the Iraq intervention. At the same time, the front-running candidates have all made it clear that they are for a continued US military presence in Iraq, as well as a buildup toward a new war against Iran.

Meanwhile, the principal preoccupation of all the presidential hopefuls remains money. Barack Obama, the junior Democratic senator from Illinois, is considered to have staged an upset victory against the front-runner, Senator Hillary Clinton of New York, by raising—during the first quarter of this year—\$24.8 million for the 2008 Democratic primary, compared with Clinton’s \$19.1 million. Clinton, nonetheless, has the larger bankroll, with \$10 million left over from her 2006 Senate re-election campaign, and another \$6.9 million that can be used only in the general election.

This vast amount of money—triple the previous record set by any presidential candidate at this stage in the campaign—comes for the most part from a narrow and highly privileged layer of millionaires, political lobbyists, corporate executives and Hollywood moguls.

As the *New York Times* indicated Monday, much of the money for Obama’s upset came from the same coterie of Democratic fund-raisers who “contributed to Mrs. Clinton’s Senate campaigns or political action committee, some as recently as a few months ago.”

As for Clinton, the *Times* reported that “5,100 big contributors accounted for about three quarters of the \$26 million combined that she raised for the primary and general election.”

What emerges is the portrait of a political system that is rotting on its feet. Candidates and political programs are determined by a financial oligarchy whose interests are wholly at odds with those of working people, the vast majority of the American population. And, under conditions in which neither party is capable of advancing a policy to resolve the immense social, economic and political contradictions wracking American society, much less the intractable crisis created by US military interventions abroad, sections of the ruling establishment are increasingly inviting the military to fill the vacuum.



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