Democrats pose as Iraq war opponents in New Hampshire debate

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Only ten days after congressional Democrats officially capitulated to the Bush administration, ratifying an emergency appropriations bill for $100 billion in additional funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the candidates for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination sought to appeal to the antiwar sentiments of the American people in a televised debate.

The June 3 debate, held in New Hampshire and televised on CNN, was a piece of political theater aimed at propping up illusions in the Democratic Party and avoiding any serious confrontation with the issues posed by the debacle for American imperialism in the Middle East and the mounting social and economic crisis at home.

The discussion among the eight candidates on domestic issues was perfunctory and superficial. All of the candidates pledged themselves to conservative fiscal policies, thus precluding any serious effort to tackle the deepening social crisis. There was little mention of the Bush administration's attacks on civil liberties and next to none on the devastating growth of social inequality.

The debate centered on the war in Iraq, both during the first hour, with questions posed by the media, and in the second hour, with questions from selected members of the studio audience. While the rank-and-file voters who participated were screened ahead of time—thus insuring the exclusion of genuinely left-wing viewpoints—the majority of the questions concerned war and militarism. This reflects the sentiments of the state's voters, who turned out both of New Hampshire's incumbent Republican congressmen last November, replacing them with relatively unknown and poorly funded Democrats who ran as antiwar candidates.

Even more than in two previous presidential debates, the Democratic candidates all sought to present themselves as ardent opponents of the war. The principal conflict of the evening—at least in the opinion of the corporate-controlled mass media—was among the three leading candidates, senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama and former senator John Edwards, over who had shown "leadership" in opposing the war in Iraq.

In reality, all three Democrats have backed the war and share responsibility for it: Edwards and Clinton by voting for the October 2002 war authorization, and all three by voting for one or more military appropriations bills over the past four years. Now they are seeking to win the support of voters in next year's Democratic primary elections by pretending to share popular antiwar sentiments.

It was for that reason that Clinton and Obama, who had voted for every previous military appropriation and supplemental funding bill, opposed the latest legislation on May 24. The two frontrunners for the Democratic nomination waited to cast their "no" votes until they were certain their votes would not cause the bill's defeat. They had already endorsed the decision of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to strip the $100 billion appropriation of any restrictions on US military action, as demanded by the White House, and rejected any suggestion of a filibuster to stop the bill.

The claims by Clinton and Obama at the New Hampshire debate that their first action if elected president would be to end the war have no credibility. What is described by the Democrats and by the major media as proposals to "withdraw troops" and "get out of Iraq" are nothing of the kind.

None of the six "mainstream" Democratic candidates—counting senators Joseph Biden and Christopher Dodd and New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson along with Clinton, Obama and Edwards—advocates the withdrawal of all American troops. All six envision merely a redeployment from combat patrols in Iraqi cities to garrison duty, combined with quick-reaction strikes against supposed "terrorists." All six plan to keep tens of thousands of American troops in Iraq, and thousands more in Kuwait and elsewhere in the Persian Gulf.

This central falsification underlay the entire debate. But the contradiction between the public's antiwar views and the candidates' actual collaboration in the war kept cropping up, as one candidate after another pointed to his or her opponents' record of support for the US invasion and occupation, and tried to explain away the failure of the Democratic Congress to carry out the will of the American people and bring the war to an end.

Biden complained vociferously about the criticism of Congress by opponents of the war. "We're busting our neck every single day," he said—ten days after his own vote in favor of the funding bill. There could be no end to the war, he said, until a significant number of Republican senators defected, to provide the two-thirds majority needed to override a Bush veto, or until a Democratic president was in the White House. "We're funding the safety of those troops there till we can get 67 votes," he declared.

This is the crassest form of the self-serving and malicious falsification, spread by both Republicans and Democrats, that a vote to cut off funds is a vote to deprive troops of supplies and armor and thus contribute to their deaths. Pelosi, Reid & Co. have embraced this sophistry, which allows them to posture as critics of the war while continuing to provide the funding which ensures that hundreds more US soldiers and thousands more Iraqis will die in the coming months.

Clinton chimed in with the claim that the war is "George Bush's war," only to be rebutted by former Senator Mike Gravel and Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich, who said—admitting an obvious truth—that the vote for war funding made the Democrats responsible for the war as well.

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Perhaps the most cynical statements came from Edwards, who ran for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004 as a supporter of the war, and was selected by Kerry as his vice-presidential running mate to signal the shift towards an openly pro-war stance in the general election, after Kerry had adapted to antiwar sentiment in the primaries.

The real attitude of the Democratic candidates towards the interests of American imperialism came out in their across-the-board pledges to strengthen the American military and increase Pentagon funding—Obama, for instance, has called for recruiting 100,000 more soldiers—and in their bellicose pronouncements on foreign policy issues other than Iraq.

Thus Clinton and Edwards flatly refused to rule out the use of force against Iran, echoing the position of the Bush administration that Iran's alleged nuclear weapons programs could not be tolerated. "No responsible president would ever take any option off the table," Edwards said. Biden said, using the gangster-style language that he seems to enjoy, "at the end of the day, if they posed the missile, stuck it on a pad, I'd take it out."

Biden went on to propose US military intervention in Sudan as well, on the pretext of opposing "genocide" in Darfur—although more people have been killed by American military action in Iraq, which the senator has repeatedly voted to fund. "We should impose a no-fly zone," he declared, "and we should commit 25,000—2,500 NATO troops. You could take out the Janjaweed tomorrow."

Other Democratic candidates voiced their support for a no-fly zone over Sudan, and Richardson and Edwards called for threatening a boycott of the 2008 Beijing Olympics to pressure China, the biggest trading partner of Sudan and leading customer for its oil exports.

There is an unbridgeable social and political gulf between the feelings of the broad masses of Americans, sickened by the slaughter in Iraq and the lies employed by the Bush administration to engineer the war, and the calculations of the Democratic candidates, who promote the fiction that opponents of the war can find representation within the two-party system.

Disguising this reality is the particular task of Congressman Kucinich, whose campaign serves to provide a left cover for a reactionary party of American imperialism. Kucinich played a more prominent role in the New Hampshire debate than in any previous campaign forum, and was repeatedly called on by CNN moderator Wolf Blitzer to voice ostensibly radical positions on issues ranging from withdrawal from Iraq to a single-payer healthcare system.

Despite his rhetoric about peace and occasional sallies against the more right-wing frontrunners, Kucinich was careful not to challenge the fundamental legitimacy of either his Democratic rivals or the Bush administration itself. This was made clear in several key responses during the debate.

The first instance was a question from an Iraq war veteran, relayed through the panel of journalists: "Can you tell me if the mission we accomplished during our deployment in Iraq was worth our effort and sacrifice, or was it a waste of time and resources?"

The truthful response would obviously be: "Yes, those lives were wasted." Kucinich did not say this, because to do so would suggest that the war itself was a crime, and raise the question of holding those responsible to account. Instead, he treated any suggestion that American lives were wasted as a slur against the military, hastening to declare, "I honor the people who served. We all owe them a debt of gratitude, but those who sent those soldiers were wrong."

When a member of the audience raised the question of ending major military operations in Iraq, Blitzer again called on Kucinich to give the first response, crediting him with early and consistent opposition to the war. Kucinich made the obligatory bow to the military, thanking the troops "for serving."

He called for a halt in congressional funding for the war, but then went on to call for "a strong Army." Most of the $100 billion in Iraq war spending "isn't going to the troops," he added. "A small fraction goes to the troops. So we need to have a strong military. We need to encourage people to be serving in our country's military, but we've got to end the United States' commitment to war as an instrument of diplomacy."

Kucinich made no mention of impeachment, even though he recently introduced a bill in the House of Representatives to impeach Cheney for lying to the American people during the run-up to the war in Iraq and for threatening an illegal war in Iran.

Impeachment of Bush has widespread popular support in New England. Only last month, the state legislature in neighboring Vermont had an extensive debate on a resolution to support impeachment and urge the state's congressional delegation to initiate such proceedings in Washington. The resolution passed the state senate 16-9, but was defeated in the lower house by 60 to 87, after 39 Democrats joined 47 Republicans and one independent.

At one point, Kucinich made an apparent (but cryptic) reference to a possible trial of Bush and Cheney for war crimes. The occasion was a question—again directed to him by Blitzer—about whether he would authorize the assassination of Osama bin Laden.

Kucinich replied: "I don't think that a president of the United States, who believes in peace and who wants to create peace in the world, is going to be using assassinations as a tool, because when you do that, it comes back at your country. And I think that Osama bin Laden, if he's still alive, ought to be held to account in an international court of law and *so should any other person who's been involved in a violation of international law, which has been result—which has resulted in the deaths of many people*."

The italicized text—which Kucinich uttered with a quick side-glance at his fellow candidates—was clearly intended as a reference to Bush and Cheney. It could equally apply to congressional Democrats who have sustained this illegal war for the past four years. He dropped the hint, but deliberately did not make it explicit. Neither Blitzer nor any of the other candidates sought to follow up.

This incident underscores the stage-managed, two-faced character of the whole Democratic presidential campaign, in which Kucinich plays an important and thoroughly despicable role, as he did in 2004. The Ohio congressman makes the suggestion in order to polish his "radical" credentials, but he avoids making it explicit, because any open discussion of criminal sanctions against the Bush-Cheney cabal remains officially taboo.

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