

Take Back America conference: Democratic candidates seek “progressive” support

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23 June 2007

At the “Take Back America” conference, held in Washington June 18-20, leading Democrats played to a crowd of 3,000 Democratic Party activists and members of liberal protest groups, promising an end to the war in Iraq and a number of social reforms. The crowd met the politicians more than halfway and chose, for the most part, to believe them.

The annual “Take Back America” conferences have been organized by the Campaign for America’s Future, a liberal Democratic Party organization co-directed by Robert Borosage. A contributing editor at the *Nation* magazine, Borosage was a long-time director of the Institute for Policy Studies, a liberal think tank, and served as an advisor to the campaigns of the Rev. Jesse Jackson and Senators Carol Moseley-Braun, Barbara Boxer and Paul Wellstone.

The premise of “Take Back America” is that the country has been hijacked by a cabal of neo-conservatives under George W. Bush and needs to be restored to a healthy condition.

Six of the Democratic presidential hopefuls addressed the meeting: Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, John Edwards, Dennis Kucinich, Bill Richardson and Mike Gravel.

In his opening remarks to the conference, Borosage sounded several themes. He observed that the political winds were changing, saying, “The conservative era that defined our politics for the last quarter century is at its end.” Public opinion had turned sharply against the Bush administration and “Americans are looking for a [new] way forward.”

Borosage outlined a program of limited social reforms, a policy repudiated decades ago by the Democratic Party, and warned of the need to “revive the American dream.” He declared, “Corporations are now shredding the social contract that was the linchpin of the American dream—secure jobs that provided a family wage, health care, paid vacations, and pensions ... We must sustain the American dream.” He did not draw out the explosive political implications of a failure to do so.

Borosage identified what he described as the elements of “a new majority coalition for progressive change,” which could push the Democratic Party to the left. All of the components of this “new majority” were in attendance at the conference: the trade union bureaucracy (Richard Trumka of the AFL-CIO, officials from the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, as well as the Service Employees International Union), the Democratic pressure group MoveOn.org, the liberal think tanks (Economic Policy Institute, Center for American Progress, Institute for Policy Studies), “progressive bloggers,” and others.

The *Nation* magazine was well represented. Its editor and publisher, Katrina vanden Heuvel, shared the platform with three US senators in

a panel on energy policy. Retired Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca addressed a workshop entitled “Just Business: Progressive Policy and Business Voices.” Former Clinton administration functionaries and campaign advisers such as John Podesta and Donna Brazile spoke on other panels.

These forces, along with wealthy individual backers of “Take Back America” like Hamilton Fish (George Soros’ political adviser), millionaire Ned Lamont, Barbra Streisand and the like, form the backbone of the Democratic Party “left”—a thoroughly establishment crowd.

Last year’s conference was marked by noisy booing of Sen. Hillary Clinton of New York because of her defense of the Iraq war. The “political winds” *have* no doubt changed since then, with the popular mood even more opposed to Bush, the war, the mounting attacks on social conditions and democratic rights—and bitterly disillusioned with the Democratic-controlled Congress.

Borosage and the other organizers of this conference, however, are not leading a shift to the left. They are making every effort to control the popular radicalization and subordinate it to the Democratic Party. That is their overriding political concern.

In commentary on the conference this year, both before and afterward, the organizers and the media asserted that the dominant feature was a move to the left by the various candidates in response to public opinion. Politico.com termed it the “sometimes ungainly scrambling to the left on the question of US withdrawal from Iraq.” Borosage suggested, “They’ve all moved dramatically.” The director of MoveOn.org, Eli Pariser, told the media, “The dynamic is more positive this year. You have all the candidates trying to be the ‘out of Iraq’ candidate.”

Explaining why the leading candidates had all decided to appear at the “Take Back America” meeting this time, *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne noted, “A large majority of the country has now decided that the establishment was wrong to support the war, and that those who opposed it—including the left—were right.” This is true, and sections of the “establishment” Democratic Party are attempting to shore up their positions.

The three Democratic frontrunners, Clinton, Obama and Edwards, are in fact accomplices of the Bush administration in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Clinton and Edwards voted to authorize the war in October 2002, and all three senators (or former senators in Edwards’ case) voted for one or more of the massive war appropriations bills over the course of the past four years.

The opposition of Clinton and Obama to the most recent funding bill was an act of political cynicism. Each waited until it was clear that his or her “no” vote would not help defeat the \$100 billion funding bill,

and each had already endorsed stripping it of any restrictions on US military action.

Needless to say, this did not prevent them, along with Edwards, from flaunting their supposed anti-war credentials.

Obama and Edwards spoke back-to-back on June 19. The Illinois senator had some difficulty keeping his ego in check. "It has now been a little over four months since we began this campaign," he said. "And everywhere we've been ... we've been getting these inspiring, humbling crowds of thousands. For a lot of people, it's the first political event of their lifetime."

He added, half-jokingly, "I'd like to take all the credit myself, but I know that's not the only reason they're coming" Toward the end of his remarks, modestly, Obama told the crowd, "I am confident about my ability to lead this country. But I also know that I can't do it without you."

In the time remaining after he talked about himself and his accomplishments, Obama cursorily addressed the Iraq war. He called it a "dangerous diversion from the struggle against the terrorists who attacked us on September 11," and promised to pursue the goal "of bringing all combat brigades home by March 31, 2008." He made clear that his principal objection to the Iraq war was that it was "an occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences."

Edwards began his address with the question of the Iraq war, declaring, "I voted for this war and I was wrong to vote for this war. And I take responsibility for that, I will have to live with that." He did not, it must be said, look like a man who was haunted by the thought of hundreds of thousands of dead and a country destroyed. He implicitly criticized Obama, Clinton and the rest of the Congress for accepting Bush's May 1 veto of a war-funding bill that included a timetable for withdrawal.

Edwards, a multi-millionaire, went on to claim that "I will speak for the poor, I will speak for the uninsured, I will speak for the disenfranchised. This is my life and I'm going to do it as long as I'm alive and breathing."

An article in the *New York Times* June 22 revealed that, according to tax filings, the main beneficiary of the nonprofit organization Edwards created after the 2004 election "with the stated mission of fighting poverty"—the Center for Promise and Opportunity—"was Mr. Edwards himself." It was primarily a vehicle, according to the *Times*, for financing Edwards' travels and paying for his political staff.

The following day, June 20, Hillary Clinton, like the rest, denounced the Bush administration's Iraq policy. She promised, without providing details, "We are going to end the war in Iraq and finally bring our troops home." Some in the crowd were restive during her speech, shouting "Impeach him [Bush]," which Clinton ignored, and "Out of Iraq now!"

She termed the conflict in Iraq a sectarian civil war, as though the US occupation, which she voted to authorize, had played no role in fomenting civil strife. When she carried on, declaring, "The American military has succeeded. It is the Iraqi government that has failed," there was considerable booing. Clinton, flustered, continued ironically, "I love coming here every year." She went on, "I see the signs that say 'Get us out of Iraq' That is what we are trying to do."

In the course of her comments, Clinton also asserted that there was no conflict between science and faith and that we are all "good stewards of God's creation." She concluded her remarks with the obligatory populist pitch, pledging to enact government policies that would help people treated as "invisible" by the Bush administration.

Dennis Kucinich, the Ohio congressman, followed Clinton. He made the most "left" speech of the candidates, calling for a cutoff in funding for the war in Iraq and for US troops to be brought home. Kucinich, who has no hope of winning the Democratic nomination, called for "single-payer, not-for-profit health care," trade policy based on environmental policy, respect for the Constitution, and the impeachment of Vice President Dick Cheney. (He did not explain, and never has, why Bush is any less guilty of "high crimes and misdemeanors" than Cheney).

Kucinich was well-received. He carries out a particular function in the campaign: to deceive people into thinking the Democratic Party, one of the political instruments of American big business, is a "people's party," capable of bringing about social reform. He is, ostensibly, the embodiment of the "progressive" wing of the party, whose existence is supposed to prove, despite everything, that the party can be made to defend the interests of ordinary citizens and pursue a policy of peace.

No one in the left-liberal crowd apparently cared to remind him of his conduct in 2004, when he ignominiously capitulated to John Kerry, endorsing the latter's right-wing, pro-war candidacy at the Democratic national convention.

The appearances by the candidates, their anti-war demagoguery, their phony concern for the poor, the operations of all the liberal operatives, the "Take Back America" conference itself—all of this adds up to nothing more than a sordid political maneuver. The American population is moving sharply to the left, but the Democratic Party has been on nearly three-decade lurch to the right. Borosage's claim that "increasingly progressives are driving the Democratic debate," and that "We are setting the agenda," is a product of either self-delusion or a deliberate effort to deceive—or both.

The corporate-financial elite sets the agenda on all critical issues for the Democratic Party. The eventual Democratic presidential candidate in 2008 will be someone who has been carefully tested, vetted and given his or her marching orders by powerful sections of the American oligarchy. Those orders include, of course, the ability to tack to the "left" when necessary, to play the populist card. In that sense, the ability to maneuver and manipulate the audience at the "Take Back America" conference, not all that daunting a task, is merely one of the tests that the candidates must pass to qualify for the nomination.



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