Leading Democratic presidential candidates disavow rapid Iraq withdrawal

Patrick Martin
21 August 2007

At a televised debate Sunday morning in Iowa, the three leading candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination all rejected calls for a pullout of all American troops from Iraq by the end of this year, declaring such an action either unfeasible or undesirable.

The side-by-side declarations by Senator Hillary Clinton, Senator Barack Obama and former Senator John Edwards demonstrate that if left up to the big business politicians in Washington, the US occupation of Iraq will continue indefinitely with an ever-greater toll in lives lost, destruction of Iraqi society and culture, and a growing danger that the conflict will spill over into neighboring countries.

Debate moderator George Stephanopoulos posed the question of the war in Iraq about half an hour into the debate, which was broadcast over the ABC "This Week" interview program which the former Clinton White House aide now hosts. He noted that Iraq had aroused more interest among voters in Iowa than any other issue. "They all wanted to know what your plans were to get out of Iraq," he said.

He introduced the question by playing an excerpt of an ad for Senator Joe Biden in which Biden declares—in opposition to calls for an immediate or rapid withdrawal—"We must end this war in a way that doesn't require us to send" troops back to Iraq later. Biden has carved out a niche as the Democratic presidential candidate most willing to publicly rebuke antiwar sentiment.

Des Moines Register journalist David Yepsen then asked New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson whether he agreed with the Biden ad. Richardson replied no. "To end this war, we have to get all the troops out, all of them. Our kids are dying. Our troops have become targets," he said.

Richardson, who trails badly in opinion polls both nationally and in early primary and caucus states like Iowa and New Hampshire, has sought to make an appeal to antiwar sentiment to revive his campaign. He has, at least rhetorically, embraced the call for a complete withdrawal of all American troops. Not merely the withdrawal of combat troops, who comprise less than half the US presence in Iraq.

He told the television audience: "We have different positions here. I believe that if you leave any residual forces, then none of the peace that we are trying to bring can happen. And it's important. And it's critically important that we do this with an orderly timetable. But what is key is all of the troops out—no residual forces. You leave residual forces behind, the peace cannot begin."

By calling on Richardson first on Iraq, Stephanopoulos gave each of the leading candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination the chance to publicly reject all-out withdrawal, and they seized on the opportunity with alacrity.

Biden, who is running sixth or seventh in the race, and is believed to be seeking the position of secretary of state in a future Democratic administration, set the tone in his remarks. Claiming to be leveling with the American people, he painted the consequences of an American defeat in Iraq in terms as apocalyptic as those habitually employed by the Bush administration.

"If we leave Iraq and we leave it in chaos, there'll be regional war," he said. "The regional war will engulf us for a generation. It'll bring in the Shia, it'll bring in the Saudis, it'll bring in the Iranians, it'll bring in the Turks." Biden reiterated his support for de facto partition of Iraq, with US troops used "to separate the parties, give them some breathing room in order to establish some stability." In any case, he declared, it was physically impossible to withdraw all US troops in less than 12 months.

Clinton, Edwards and Obama then responded, one by one declaring their full agreement with Biden and their opposition to full-scale withdrawal from Iraq.

CLINTON: We need to begin moving our troops out, and we have to do it carefully and responsibly. Joe is absolutely right. Moving troops out cannot happen without careful planning.... I think that, you know, this is going to be very dangerous and very difficult. A lot of people don't like to hear that. But, if you look at how we would have to take our troops out, plus the equipment, which we would not want to leave, plus what we do with the people in the Green Zone, plus what we do with the Iraqis who sided with us—thousands of them—plus, what we do with the more than 100,000 American contractors who are there—this is a massive, complicated undertaking. And we do have to do it as carefully and responsibly as possible, and I think my plan takes all of that into account.

EDWARDS: I think it would be hard to do by December. I

© World Socialist Web Site

think we can responsibly and in a very orderly way bring our troops out over the next nine or ten months. But one thing I want to say, as I'm listening—I know you're trying to create a fight up here, I understand that, but any Democratic president will end this war. That's what we know. And secondly the differences between us, whether it's Senator Clinton or Senator Dodd or Governor Richardson or Senator Biden, all of whom I have enormous respect for, the differences between all of us are very small compared to the differences between us and the Republican candidates.

OBAMA: I think Joe is right on the issue of how long this is going to take. This is not going to be a simple operation. I think Senator Clinton laid out some of the challenges that were out there. I agree with John Edwards that all of us on this stage I think would begin to bring this war to an end. I think we also can all agree that it's going to be messy, that there are no good options. There are only bad options and worse options, and we're going to have to exercise judgment in terms of how we execute this.

Richardson sought to further distinguish himself from the three leading Democratic contenders, pressing them to answer how many residual troops they would leave behind. "I don't know, is it 25,000, 50,000, 75,000?" he asked. At the same time, he made it clear that he viewed withdrawal of US troops as a maneuver for achieving the same imperialist aims as his fellow Democrats. "My point is that by taking them all out, all our troops are no longer targets," he said. "And then Al Qaeda and the insurgents, both that see American troops as their prey, will turn on each other."

In rebuttal, Biden gave an even blunter declaration that Iraq was a failed state that the US government would have to sustain indefinitely. He denounced illusions "that there is any possibility in the lifetime of anyone here of having the Iraqis get together, have a unity government in Baghdad that pulls the country together. That will not happen, George. It will not happen in the lifetime of anyone here." In other words, the United States will be in Iraq for decades.

There is a clear division of labor among the Democratic presidential candidates. Three Democrats, Richardson, Congressman Dennis Kucinich and former senator Mike Gravel, are posturing, with minor differences, as full-blast antiwar candidates. They have zero chance of winning the presidential nomination, with Richardson widely expected to be seeking to raise his national profile in the hopes of being selected as a vice presidential candidate. Their candidacies serve, not to pressure the Democratic Party to the left, but to give a pro-war imperialist party an antiwar fig leaf.

Clinton, Obama and Edwards are the three candidates most likely to win the Democratic presidential nomination and the general election. They have the most money, the most support in the political establishment, and the most media attention—and therefore the highest ranking in opinion polls.

As plausible contenders for the position of commander in chief, they are constantly called on to reassure the American financial oligarchy—the true decision-making constituency in a presidential campaign—that they will use all necessary means to defend the worldwide strategic and economic interests of American imperialism.

Hence the series of squabbles over Obama's suggestion that he would be willing, as president, to meet face-to-face with various rulers targeted for overthrow by the US government—Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez, Kim Jong Il, etc—as well as the possible use of nuclear weapons against Iran or Al Qaeda, or a possible US commando raid into northwest Pakistan.

As potential presidents, all three are at pains to make clear to the ruling elite that, whatever verbal appeals they make to popular antiwar sentiment, they will not give up the territory seized by the Bush administration in Iraq and Afghanistan. Their differences with the Bush administration are quantitative and tactical, not qualitative or strategic.

Their real outlook was summed up by Obama in his description of Bush's leadership of the war in Iraq: "This is the equivalent of George Bush drove the bus into the ditch, and there are only so many ways you can pull that bus out of the ditch," he said. Obama indicts Bush, not for waging a criminal war of aggression, but for waging it incompetently. It's time for a new driver—i.e., a new commander who will execute future imperialist wars with more skill than the current occupant of the White House.

As the *New York Times* noted last week, in a front-page analysis August 12, "Even as they call for an end to the war and pledge to bring the troops home, the Democratic presidential candidates are setting out positions that could leave the United States engaged in Iraq for years.... The candidates are not only trying to retain flexibility for themselves in the event they become president, aides said, but are also hoping to tamp down any expectation that the war would abruptly end if they were elected."

Hillary Clinton demonstrated this reality in one remark at the Des Moines debate. The Democratic candidates had to be concerned how their antiwar statements were received, she suggested, declaring: "It's so important that we not oversell."

In other words, what truly troubles the leading Democrats is that popular sentiment has moved so sharply against the war that its continuation by a Democratic administration that takes office January 20, 2009 could touch off a political explosion. It's time to lower expectations, Mrs. Clinton counsels.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site