

Democrats debate in the shadow of US war threats against Iran

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The Democratic presidential debate Tuesday night in Philadelphia was conducted under the shadow of mounting threats of a US attack against Iran, an expansion of the US military intervention in the Middle East that will have incalculable consequences for Iran, America and the world.

The debate made clear that the Democratic Party establishment believes it likely that Bush and Cheney will order a US military strike on Iran in a matter of months, and that neither the Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton nor any of her rivals for the nomination will take any action to halt a new and criminal US war of aggression.

Clinton herself joined with half the Senate's Democrats on September 26 to approve a resolution urging the Bush administration to classify Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organization and deploy American military resources in Iraq in such a way as to counter the alleged threat from Iran.

At Tuesday's debate, the other Democratic candidates attacked Clinton for this vote. Senator Christopher Dodd pointed to the similarities between the Iran resolution and the congressional resolution adopted in October 2002 authorizing US military action in Iraq. Senator Joseph Biden said the resolution was tantamount to a declaration of war. "We have emboldened Bush," he admitted, while calling Bush's suggestion that the conflict with Iran could produce World War III "incredibly irresponsible."

Clinton twice repeated a well-crafted formula—that she opposes a "rush to war" with Iran, rather than war itself. In other words, she opposes a hasty and precipitate attack on Iran, but not an attack on Iran that develops at a slower pace and with congressional and international support.

While opposing this "rush to war," Clinton added, she was "not in favor of doing nothing," and then proceeded to echo the talking points of Bush and Cheney. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps was "at the forefront

of nuclear weapons development" and involved in promoting terrorism, she said. She claimed that she had supported the resolution to reinforce US diplomatic pressure on Iran—a piece of sophistry that echoes the claims five years ago of herself and other leading Democrats who voted to authorize the Bush administration to use military force against Iraq.

Clinton concluded that the task of the Democrats "is to prevent Bush and the Republicans from going *on their own* to offensive military action"—a formulation that suggests that to prevent a unilateral war by the administration, the congressional Democrats should make it a bipartisan bloodbath.

"Meet the Press" host Tim Russert of NBC News, who co-anchored the debate, seemed to be conducting a single-minded effort to present war with Iran as legitimate and even inevitable, focusing the first 40 minutes on the subject with questions aimed at evoking the most hawkish responses.

After the opening discussion of the non-binding resolution, he asked each candidate to state what their personal "red line" would be for military action against Iran, and followed up with a demand that each pledge that Iran would not acquire nuclear weapons under his or her administration.

Clinton responded by declaring that her goal was to "pressure the Bush administration." She said, "We need Republican support to rein him in. Otherwise he can do what he wants."

Former senator John Edwards rejoined, "How does a vote for a resolution that could have been written by the neo-cons put pressure on the Bush administration? You stand up to administration by saying no. We have to make it clear that we have no intention of allowing Bush and Cheney to invade Iran."

Senator Barack Obama, while attacking Clinton for her vote on the Senate resolution, carefully crafted his

remarks to leave open the possibility of war with Iran at some future point.

Neither Edwards, Obama or Clinton suggested any action that the Democratic-controlled Congress could or would take to prevent such a war, or to bring a halt to the ongoing slaughter in Iraq.

Clinton was also attacked for her position on the war in Iraq, with Edwards and Obama both seeking to appeal to antiwar sentiment in the upcoming Democratic primaries and caucuses.

Edwards accused Clinton of “doubletalk” by promising to end the war while advocating the continued stationing of US combat troops in Iraq. His own “antiwar” position actually amounted to continuation of the US occupation: He called for withdrawing all combat troops by the end of 2009, less than half of the current US troop strength, but gave no deadline for withdrawal of the balance.

Clinton, asked directly whether she opposed the war in Iraq, replied with her standard mixture of evasion and patriotic bromides. “I oppose the war but not the troops who have fought so magnificently,” she said—referring to the operation of a killing machine that is responsible for the deaths of more than one million Iraqis.

Clinton said she “will begin to bring troops home” as soon as she takes office, then modified even this carefully hedged statement, saying her administration “will begin planning withdrawal” after she enters the White House.

Obama criticized Clinton for supporting the 2002 resolution authorizing the war, saying, “The next president should not be one of the co-authors of the situation in Iraq.” But he gave no timetable for withdrawal and did not disagree when Clinton replied that most of the Democratic candidates support an extended troop presence in Iraq in the name of “pursuing Al Qaeda.”

The only exception to this overtly pro-war consensus was Congressman Dennis Kucinich, who plays an important role in the Democratic campaign, not because he has any chance at the nomination, but to appeal to antiwar voters who are fed up with right-wing politics and prevent them from moving toward a break with the Democratic Party.

Kucinich flatly rejected both the continuation of the war in Iraq and any extension of the war into Iran. He described his fellow Democrats as “enablers of Bush,” and raised the demand for the impeachment of Bush and Cheney on several occasions. At one point he said, “The war in Iraq is illegal and planning for war with Iran is illegal. Democracy is in peril. Congress must stand up for

the constitution” and impeach Bush.

Significantly, neither Russert nor his fellow moderator, NBC Nightly News anchorman Brian Williams, asked any of the other Democratic candidates about impeachment, or the legality of the war in Iraq, or, for that matter, about the repeated violations of democratic rights and the US constitutional framework by the Bush administration. Nor did any of the major Democratic candidates address those subjects on their own.

When the debate turned to domestic issues in its final hour and a quarter, there was a remarkable consensus among the Democratic candidates that the political system is corrupted by huge corporate interests, and that all of them are part of that corruption. “None of us is pure,” Edwards admitted at one point, adding, as an example of the pernicious influence of big business, “The reason why we don’t have universal health care is because of drug companies, insurance companies and other lobbyists.”

Kucinich, asked about the refusal of the congressional Democrats to close the tax loophole enjoyed by hedge fund billionaires, who pay a much lower tax rate than their secretaries and janitors, declared, “The Democratic Party won’t stand up to Wall Street, won’t end the war, won’t stand up to the health insurance companies. People ask, ‘what do the Democrats stand for?’”

This, again, was not a call for the people to break with the Democratic Party. It was a warning by a longtime Democratic politician to his fellow big business politicians that they had to adopt a more populist posture in order to forestall such a political break.

Beyond the acknowledgment of the hammerlock which big corporate interests have on the political process, there was next to no discussion of the economic and social crisis confronting the vast majority of American working people. There were no proposals to halt the destruction of jobs and the deterioration of living standards.

The Democratic candidates, like the Republicans nearly all multi-millionaires, are divided from the working class by an unbridgeable social gulf.



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