

Clinton-Obama row over Iraq record masks consensus on continued occupation

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In the week following the New Hampshire primary, the Democratic presidential contest has been overshadowed by an increasingly bitter and dirty squabble between front-runners Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in which the deliberate manipulation of racial politics has played a prominent role.

Clinton sought to portray herself as the victim of an alleged attempt by the Obama camp to twist a statement she made invoking President Lyndon Johnson's role in enacting civil rights legislation into a denigration of civil rights leader Martin Luther King.

Others, however, saw the entire media-amplified affair as a deliberate attempt by the Clinton camp to cast Obama as the "black candidate" and thereby curry favor with more conservative white voters. *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson compared the episode to the moment in the 1992 presidential campaign in which Bill Clinton chose to make an obscure racial remark by hip-hop artist Sister Souljah an issue in a speech before Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition.

On Monday, both sides formally appealed for an end to the racial debate, with Obama declaring he did not want the campaign "to degenerate into so much tit-for-tat" and Clinton issuing a statement declaring herself and Obama "on the same side" and the Democratic Party "bigger than this." No sooner had the statement been issued, however, than New York Congressman Charles Rangel, a leading black Clinton supporter, declared in a television interview, "How race got into this thing is because Obama said 'race.'"

However this reactionary racial diversion plays out, there was another issue in the escalating conflict between the two front-runners that is certain to feature in the upcoming primary contests—the candidates' records on the Iraq war.

Reviled by a substantial section of Democrats and indicted by her political rivals for her 2002 vote in favor of the congressional resolution authorizing the Iraq war, Clinton has launched an aggressive counteroffensive against Obama, who has attempted to capitalize on antiwar sentiment among primary voters.

This new campaign was launched by the candidate's husband and former president Bill Clinton in a January 7 speech in New Hampshire on the eve of that state's primary. He took the press to task for what he charged was its failure to critically examine Obama's record, particularly on the war.

"It's wrong that Senator Obama got to go through 15 debates trumpeting his superior judgment and how he had been against the

war," Clinton said during a rally at Dartmouth College. "There's no difference in your record, and Hillary's ever since," he continued. "Give me a break. This whole thing is the biggest fairy tale I've ever seen."

The remark fueled the fire of racial politics, with some black Democrats accusing Clinton of characterizing the effort to elect a black candidate as president a fantasy, a charge the former president rejected.

Hillary Clinton stepped up the attack Sunday in an interview on the NBC News program "Meet the Press." She dismissed Obama's attempt to pose as an opponent of the war in Iraq, asserting that his only antiwar credentials amounted to a speech he gave in 2002 while still a state senator in Illinois.

"By 2004, he was saying he didn't really disagree with the way George Bush was conducting the war," she charged. "And by 2005, '6 and '7, he was voting for \$300 billion in funding for the war." She further stated that after he was elected to the US Senate in 2004, he made no statement against the war from the Senate floor for 18 months and voted against initial legislation proposing troop withdrawal deadlines.

She also cited statements by Obama in 2004, when, as a candidate for the US Senate, he was tapped to give the keynote speech to the Democratic National Convention. The speech itself praised presidential candidate John Kerry for his willingness to use military force, and Obama refused to criticize both Kerry's and vice presidential candidate John Edwards' votes for the war resolution, saying he did not know how he would have voted had he been in the Senate.

Clinton also defended her own record in response to aggressive questions from Tim Russert of "Meet the Press."

She claimed that she supported the 2002 resolution—formally known as the "resolution to authorize the use of United States Armed Forces against Iraq"—only in order "to put [weapons] inspectors back in" Iraq and that "it was not a vote for preemptive war."

Asked by Russert why she failed at the time to support an amendment proposed by Michigan Democratic Senator Carl Levin demanding that the administration seek a United Nations resolution explicitly authorizing the use of force and return to the Congress for such an authorization only after exhausting all attempts at the UN, Clinton replied that she opposed it because it would give the UN "a veto over American presidential power." She added, "I don't believe that is an appropriate policy for the

United States, no matter who is our president,” a statement that amounts to a tacit endorsement of illegal wars of aggression.

Clinton characterized the charge that her vote gave Bush a blank check for war as a “Jesuitical argument” and invoked statements by Republican Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, whom she described as “one of the architects of the resolution” to the effect that it was not a vote for war.

Challenged by Russert over her own votes to fund the war, Clinton responded, “I did. I never—I’m not premising my campaign on something different.” She claimed that she voted to continue a war that has claimed the lives of nearly 4,000 US military personnel and approximately one million Iraqis because it was “what I thought was best for our country and what I thought was best for our troops.”

The thrust of Clinton’s argument is not that her record on the war is any better than Obama’s, but rather that her rival’s hands are just as bloody as her own.

The Clinton campaign’s national security director Lee Feinstein echoed the candidate’s charges Tuesday. “The reality is that since 2004, Senator Obama has explicitly called for keeping troops in Iraq and opposed a timeline for withdrawal, only changing his position when he became a candidate for the White House.”

Meanwhile Clinton’s campaign web site posted a series of quotes from Obama supporting the war. These included a 2004 statement that a withdrawal from Iraq would be “a slap in the face to the troops fighting there,” a 2005 statement that “US forces are still a part of the solution in Iraq” and that he believed Washington should “reduce” and not “fully withdraw” American forces there, and a 2006 statement in opposition to a Democratic withdrawal timeline resolution opposing “a precipitous withdrawal of troops” based upon a “congressional edict rather than realities on the ground.”

Obama campaign spokesman Bill Burton responded to the posted quotes in a statement to *USA Today*: “None of those statements you cite flatly contradicts removing our troops—they oppose a precipitous withdrawal. Obama has always believed that our troops need to be withdrawn responsibly.”

In reply to questions from a *Chicago Tribune* reporter in Las Vegas Monday, Obama accused Clinton of “trying to rewrite” history. “Now she chose to vote for the war and she can decide whether it’s a mistake or not,” he said. “Apparently she has not said anything about it.” He said that his 2004 statements were driven by a desire “not to throw the Democratic nominee and vice presidential nominee under the bus” and that Clinton’s attempt “to suggest my position and hers is the same is ludicrous.”

Asked why he repeatedly voted to fund the war, Obama responded, “Once we had our troops two years into a war, it was important that we try to do the best possible job on it.”

The *New York Times* substantiated Obama’s charge that Clinton was rewriting history—in relation to her own record if not his. In an article published Monday, *Times* reporter Eric Lipton pointed out that Clinton’s attempt to hide behind statements of Republican maverick and opponent of the war Chuck Hagel was based on a crude falsification.

The resolution sponsored by Hagel, together with Senators Joseph Biden (Democrat, Delaware) and Richard Lugar

(Republican, Indiana) was scuttled in favor of more sweeping legislation dictated by the White House and accepted by the House Democratic leadership.

It was Bush’s resolution—not Hagel’s—that Clinton voted for and supported in a bellicose speech that included an ultimatum to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein that “this is your last chance—disarm or be disarmed” and praise for her husband’s administration’s missile attacks on Iraq and its adoption of a policy of “regime change” towards the country. Contrary to her current improbable claim that she was only seeking the return of inspectors, Clinton declared in her speech, “any vote that may lead to war should be hard—but I cast it with conviction.”

The acrimonious dispute between the two Democratic frontrunners over their respective records on Iraq is, in the final analysis, only a political diversion from the fact that they—together with the political establishment as a whole—are in essential agreement on continuing Washington’s colonial-style occupation of the oil-rich country indefinitely.

Obama, like Clinton, has repeatedly clarified that his call for withdrawing from Iraq does not include those forces being used to wage “counterterrorism” operations, i.e., the suppression of popular resistance to US occupation, the protection of US facilities in Iraq and the training of Iraqi forces—a prescription that would leave tens of thousands of American troops in the country indefinitely.

In a debate last September, Clinton, Obama and former senator John Edwards all refused to commit themselves to withdrawing all American forces from the occupied country by the beginning of their second term—in 2013. Edwards, in an evident attempt to reverse his fall in the polls, has since shifted his position, claiming earlier this month in an interview with the *New York Times* that he would withdraw all US troops from Iraq within his first year of taking office. Even then, he added, “We obviously would keep troops there to protect the embassy in addition to the quick reaction forces.”

The reactionary character of the debate within the Democratic primary contest, combined with the increasing claims by the Republican camp of “success” for the Bush administration’s military surge, only confirm that once again the two-party system will present the American people with no genuine alternative in 2008 and that the substantial majority of the American people, who support the withdrawal of American troops and an end to the war, will find themselves politically disenfranchised.



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