

The US elections: In whose interest is the campaign for “bipartisan unity”?

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11 January 2008

On the eve of the New Hampshire primary, a group of prominent Democrats and Republicans held a forum at the University of Oklahoma to press the demand for “unity” and bipartisanship.

The forum, called by former Democratic senators David Boren (now president of the university) and Sam Nunn, included ex-Democratic senators Bob Graham of Florida, Charles Robb of Virginia and Gary Hart of Colorado. Republicans in attendance included former senators Bill Brock of Tennessee, William Cohen of Maine and John Danforth of Missouri, and retiring Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska.

Boren, who organized the conference, is a right-wing Democrat with close ties to the most powerful sections of the American ruling elite. A graduate of Yale University, he was a member of the Yale Conservative Party and the elite Skull and Bones society, whose members include George W. Bush. He served for years as chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Most of the other Democrats at the conference have been associated with the Democratic Leadership Council, the right-wing lobby within the Democratic Party that was founded in 1985 to adapt the party’s policies to the “free market” and pro-corporate nostrums of the Reagan administration and definitively repudiate any connection to the social reform policies dating back to Roosevelt’s New Deal and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society.

The star of the Oklahoma event was New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a former Democrat-turned-Republican who left the Republican Party last spring and declared himself an independent. Bloomberg, whose personal fortune is estimated at \$11 billion, has been toying with the idea of running as an independent candidate for president.

The conference issued a statement calling on the Democratic and Republican candidates to embrace bipartisanship and pledge to establish a “government of national unity” with cabinet members from both parties. Many participants held up the threat of running an independent ticket, headed up by Bloomberg, should the two

parties fail to heed their advice.

Were Bloomberg to enter the presidential race, his candidacy would have no genuine independence from the two-party system. It would be used, as has previous “independent” presidential campaigns by bourgeois politicians, as a political lever to shift the direction of the campaigns of the two major parties and ultimately tip the balance in favor of one or the other party. Such was the role, for example, of the campaign of multimillionaire H. Ross Perot in 1992, which in the end pushed for the election of Bill Clinton against the elder George Bush.

The demand, made in the name of the American people, for an end to what Nunn called “rampant partisanship” is as brazen as it is absurd. What is an election about—if it is anything more than an empty ritual—if not the airing of political differences and the advancement of competing programs?

It is all the more ludicrous in a country where political discussion is suppressed as in no other “democracy” and the substantive differences between the two officially sanctioned parties are increasingly negligible. The Democratic 110th Congress is a testament to the fundamental unity of the two parties on all issues—war, the further enrichment of the financial aristocracy, the assault on democratic rights—that are critical to the American ruling elite.

The demand for bipartisan unity serves to obscure the objective reality of a society that is riven by class and social divisions. The agents of Wall Street who preach the gospel of “unity” have good reason to suppress any genuine political discussion. They preside over a country where the concentration of wealth has reached unprecedented levels, with the top 1 percent of families owning 40 percent of the nation’s net worth. And the economic disparities continue to grow.

The “unity” demanded by Messrs. Boren, Hagel & Co. is essentially unity of the corporate elite against the working class. The billionaire Bloomberg is, therefore, an entirely logical rallying point. Possessed of the wealth required to launch a 50-state independent campaign, at a cost estimated

at \$500 million to \$1 billion, Bloomberg's message to both parties is: Don't stray too far from the consensus positions of the financial oligarchy, or I can single-handedly upset all your electoral calculations.

The rhetoric of bipartisanship has also played a major role in the corporate media's embrace of Barack Obama. There has been a frenzied media campaign over the past two weeks to transform Obama into an unstoppable frontrunner, an effort that was at least temporarily stalled Tuesday by Hillary Clinton's narrow victory in New Hampshire.

Obama is a conventional bourgeois politician, dependent, like his rivals, on lavish financial support from corporate interests and the wealthy. He is not the product of any sort of genuine movement from below in American society, but rather the latest in a long line of demagogues employed to foster illusions that the big business-controlled political system can serve the interests of ordinary people.

Working people have absolutely no stake in the outcome of the struggle between Obama and Clinton for the Democratic nomination. Neither has any answer to the social crisis affecting ever wider layers of the population, and both defend the use of military force to secure the global interests of the US corporate-financial elite. The Democratic Party, no less than the Republican Party, is an instrument of the financial elite that monopolizes the wealth and dominates the political life of the country.

It is doubtful that many of the college students who flocked to Obama's campaign in Iowa and New Hampshire were transported by visions of working hand-in-hand with Newt Gingrich or Mitch McConnell, or even the more moderate Republicans of the type who gathered in Oklahoma.

But it is noteworthy that leading lights of the Republican right have joined in the praise for Obama. The editorialists of the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*' Republican columnist David Brooks and such conservative media pundits as Peggy Noonan, William Bennett and Rush Limbaugh have all had good things to say about him.

On the Republican side, the promotion of Obama is motivated in part by calculations that he will be easier to defeat in the general election than Clinton. No one should doubt that the Republican notables who are currently hailing the rise of an African-American candidate as a vindication of American democracy are prepared to conduct an unofficial campaign of virulent racism against him, especially in the South, should he win the Democratic nomination.

Those representatives of the Republican right who have sought to boost Obama have praised, in particular, his attack on what he calls "the politics of division." Similarly, the senator's call for bipartisan unity figures prominently in the media hype of his campaign.

New York Times, in an extraordinary editorial postmortem of the New Hampshire primary headlined "Unite, Not Divide, Really This Time," lashed out against Clinton, accusing her of unfairly attacking Obama and sowing divisiveness. "The last thing they [Americans] want," the newspaper wrote, "is for either party to drag out the old playbooks of division and anger."

There is a common thread in the efforts of the media to promote Obama's call for bipartisanship and the intervention of Boren, Bloomberg and company. In the 2008 elections, the politically explosive question of an unpopular war has been joined by a deepening economic crisis that is fueling growing anxiety over jobs, prices and living standards. A majority of voters in the New Hampshire Democratic primary said their chief concern was the economic situation.

With unemployment sharply rising, food and gasoline prices soaring and home foreclosures at a record high and expected to hit another 2 million households over the next year, the ruling elite fears that a sharply contested and protracted election process could become a focus for rising social discontent. It wants, in the name of "unity," to suppress any real discussion of the social crisis.

In the complaint of the *New York Times* and the injunction handed down by the multibillionaire Bloomberg and his allies, the American oligarchy is seeking to lay down the law—to delegitimize any critique of the establishment political consensus behind militarism and imperialism, and proscribe any challenge to the ever-greater concentration of wealth at the very top of American society.

The campaign for bipartisanship thus has a distinctly antidemocratic and sinister aspect. It is an effort to discipline the political squabbling within the US ruling elite in order to face a far greater danger: an eruption of social conflict produced by the increasingly desperate conditions facing the vast majority of the American people.



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