

Obama, Clinton debate in Ohio: What accounts for the bitter struggle within the Democratic Party?

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Watching Tuesday night's Democratic debate in Cleveland, Ohio, one could not but be struck by the incongruity between the bitterness of the conflict between the Obama and Clinton camps and the narrowness of the differences expressed by the candidates themselves.

With one week to go before critical primaries in Texas and Ohio, which could well spell the end of Clinton's presidential bid, there was an air of desperation in the attempts of the New York senator and former first lady to draw sharp lines between her policies and those of her opponent.

This took the bizarre form at the beginning of the debate of a 15-minute exchange over minute differences in the health insurance plans advanced by the two candidates. In the end, a somewhat exasperated Obama protested that "there's no real difference between our plans."

Egged on by the moderators, NBC News anchor Brian Williams and "Meet the Press" host Tim Russert, the candidates exchanged complaints about allegedly unfair and misleading leaflets from the other side, rather absurdly exaggerating the import of such campaign minutiae.

Indicative of the embittered state of the campaign was an article published Wednesday on the *New Republic* web site by Sean Wilentz, a well-known historian and supporter of Clinton, entitled "Race Man: How Barack Obama Played the Race Card and Blamed Hillary Clinton."

The disconnect between the heated rhetoric and recriminations and the narrow range of visible political differences draws one to the conclusion that more fundamental issues are being fought out behind the scenes and are driving the public conflict between Clinton and Obama.

What are those issues? One can surmise that they involve the intersection of a deepening economic and financial crisis, growing social discontent within the US, and a palpable decline in the world position of the United States after seven years of foreign policy debacles by the Bush administration.

The Iraq war, more than any issue since Vietnam, has divided the US political and foreign policy establishment, and it clearly plays a central role in the conflict within the Democratic Party. Clinton's support for the invasion, epitomized by her 2002 vote

to give Bush authorization to use military force, has been a huge political liability which the Obama campaign has successfully exploited. Once again, Obama used Clinton's 2002 vote against her on Tuesday night.

Clinton has sought to portray Obama, a first-term senator, as too inexperienced and naïve to oversee US foreign policy and serve as commander in chief. When this was raised by Brian Williams, Obama responded by saying Clinton's vote to authorize the use of force in Iraq was a failure of judgment "on the most important foreign policy decision we face in a generation."

He went on to call the invasion of Iraq "a strategic blunder" for which Clinton shared political responsibility. "Once we had driven the bus into the ditch," he said, "there were only so many ways we could get out. The question is: who's making the decision initially to drive the bus into the ditch?"

He added that Clinton had "facilitated and enabled this individual (President Bush) to make a decision that has been strategically damaging to the United States of America."

This was at once an appeal to popular opposition to the war and a signal to those within the foreign policy and Democratic Party establishment who see the Iraq war as a disaster for US imperialist interests in the Middle East and beyond.

As he has throughout the campaign, Obama made clear that his opposition to the invasion of Iraq did not imply a reluctance to use military force in defense of US interests. He decried the Iraq war as a diversion from the war in Afghanistan, calling for an increase in US troops in that country, and a distraction from the worsening situation in Pakistan, where he repeated his earlier call for unilateral US military action against Al Qaeda sanctuaries. Later in the debate, he joined with Clinton in calling for a tougher policy against Russia and suggested he would support a NATO military response to a Russian-backed Serb attack on Kosovo.

Moreover, as Clinton repeated Tuesday night, since Obama became a US senator he, like she, has voted repeatedly to fund the war, and both Democratic candidates hedge their calls for a US withdrawal with qualifications that imply an ongoing and indefinite presence of US troops in the region.

But as always in American politics, symbols play an immense role, and Clinton's 2002 vote has become a symbol in the popular mind of Democratic complicity in a vastly unpopular war.

It seems that sections of the US political and foreign policy establishment who are deeply worried and bitter over the foreign policy debacle in Iraq, and frustrated by their inability to effect a change in policy through the more established leadership of the Democratic Party, have promoted Obama and rallied behind his campaign as a means of forcing a change in course in Iraq and the broader Middle East.

The prominence of Iraq in this year's Democratic primary contest stands in stark contrast to previous elections. In the 2002 congressional election, the Democrats sought to exclude Bush's drive toward war in Iraq from the campaign. They welcomed a vote on his authorization of force resolution in October of that year in order to get Iraq off the agenda in advance of the November election.

In the 2004 presidential election, Democratic candidate John Kerry did everything he could to distance his campaign from the growing popular opposition to the war.

By the time of the 2006 congressional elections, the Democrats could not avoid raising the issue of Iraq. They owed their rout of the Republicans and return to power in both houses of Congress to mass antiwar sentiment that they neither encouraged nor welcomed.

In the run-up to the 2006 congressional elections, the bipartisan Iraq Study Group was formed to publicly lobby for a shift in policy, including a diplomatic initiative that would include Iran and Syria, not to end the war, but to avert an outright US defeat and salvage what could be salvaged from the colonial adventure.

But the hopes of those Democratic insiders who were pressing for a change of course were dashed by the refusal of the Democratic congressional leadership to take up the Iraq Study Group's proposals or mount any serious opposition to Bush's war policy. Moreover, the cowardice of the Democratic Congress and its complicity in the war aroused immense anger among Democratic voters, intensifying the crisis within the party establishment.

Unable to effect a change of course through internal pressure, these forces are evidently, through the Obama campaign, taking their factional struggle into the public arena and making an appeal to the broader population. They have rallied behind Obama because they view Clinton as inalterably linked to the disastrous Iraq war and because, as numerous Democratic commentators have explained, they see in Obama, an African-American with less political baggage than his opponent, an opportunity to present a new image of America to the world.

One must always bear in mind that those within the Democratic Party establishment who are pressing for a change in course are by no means advocating a break with imperialism or repudiating the use of military force as an instrument of

foreign policy. Rather, Obama advisers and critics of the Iraq war like Zbigniew Brzezinski are seeking to make US imperialist policy more effective. A major concern within these circles is the need for a president who could rally popular support at a time when the interests of the US ruling elite might require military actions in other parts of the world.

Obama's mind-numbing platitudes—his empty slogans of “hope” and “change” and invocations of the “American Dream”—cannot address the profound contradictions of American capitalism and the crises that beset it both at home and abroad. There is, moreover, the danger, from the standpoint of the ruling elite, that his candidacy could unwittingly serve as a catalyst in the political radicalization of broad masses of working people and youth.

Should Obama, as seems increasingly likely, emerge as the Democratic presidential candidate, the divisions within the Democratic Party establishment will remain and the stage will be set for a general election that could sharply polarize the population.

The Republican candidate, Senator John McCain, is running as a supporter of the Iraq war and threatening to extend it into Iran. His “no surrender to terrorism” campaign is aimed at mobilizing the military and more right-wing and backward sections of the electorate and stigmatizing Democratic critics of the war as turncoats who are endangering the security of the American people.

This can only intensify the crisis and divisions within the Democratic Party, at a time when broad masses of people will be increasingly demanding not only an end to the war, but also answers to a deepening economic and social crisis.



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