

Clinton's national security campaign and Obama's political dilemma

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Saturday's Democratic caucuses in Wyoming, producing a 7-to-5 victory in terms of delegates garnered by Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, only served to underscore the continued undecided character of the race for the party's presidential nomination and the increasing crisis of the Democratic Party itself.

Both sides are now pitching their appeal increasingly to the so-called super-delegates—elected and party officials who control one-fifth of the convention's seats—without whose support neither can clinch the nomination.

Whatever the final outcome, this increasingly intense political battle is pushing both Democratic candidates sharply to the right.

Clinton's position has begun to largely dovetail with that of McCain, with both running principally on their supposed qualifications to serve as the US "commander in chief," and both having launched attacks on Obama, questioning his own credentials on this score.

The New York senator and former First Lady spelled out her "national security" campaign at an extraordinary press conference in Washington, DC last Thursday in which she surrounded herself with 13 retired senior military officers and appeared before a massed array of American flags. The assembled top brass were invited to weigh in on Clinton's national security capabilities and Obama's lack thereof.

Typical was the comment of Lt. Gen. Joe Ballard (tapped by Bill Clinton to serve as commander of the Army Corps of Engineers in the 1990s): "The voters shouldn't have to wonder whether their president is ready at three in the morning when the phone rings."

The unsubtle reference was to a fear-mongering campaign ad that the Clinton campaign ran with some effect in advance of the Texas primary earlier this month, featuring images of sleeping children and a ringing "red phone" in the White House.

The symbolism works—like so much else in American politics—on two levels. On the one hand, it is pitched to a mass audience, an attempt to scare the public into supporting Clinton over Obama by promoting some nameless fear that they will fall victim to a terrorist attack if they do not.

But the obvious question raised by Ballard's statement is: ready to do precisely what when the phone rings at 3 AM? Here the more essential message—directed to a far narrower constituency—emerges. The president taking the pre-dawn phone call should be prepared to tell the general on the line to go ahead and drop bombs on people in some corner of the globe and then be able to go back to sleep without any qualms. Clinton's message is meant to drive home to the American ruling elite that her experience sleeping in the White House has steeled her to act in this ruthless manner, while Obama—a relatively unknown political quantity—cannot be trusted to exercise equivalent killer instincts.

In her own remarks to the media following her appearance with the former members of the top brass, Clinton elaborated on her national security campaign by building up the Republican Party's presumptive presidential nominee, Senator John McCain, while tearing down her fellow Democrat, Obama.

"I think that since we now know Senator McCain will be the nominee for the Republican Party, national security will be front and center in this election. We all know that," Clinton told reporters. "And I think it's imperative that each of us be able to demonstrate we can cross the commander-in-chief threshold."

Praising McCain as a good friend and a "distinguished man with a great history of service to our country," she affirmed that both she and McCain had crossed this "threshold." As for her Democratic opponent: "You'll have to ask Senator Obama with respect to his candidacy."

Leaving no room for ambiguity in her message, Clinton stressed that both she and McCain "bring a lifetime of experience to the campaign," while "Senator Obama will bring a speech he gave in 2002," when he spoke out against the impending Iraq war while serving in the Illinois state senate.

The logical conclusion of this approach is that if Clinton loses the nomination to Obama, Democrats should cross over and vote for McCain.

There is one more issue raised in Clinton's press conference that bears careful consideration. She seized upon the detonation last week of a crude and not very powerful explosive device that damaged the door and windows of the armed forces recruiting center in New York's Times Square. This event, she claimed, was a reminder that it is "imperative that we be vigilant as we continue to face threats at home and abroad" adding that she would provide police and military personnel the "tools" they need to protect the public.

Not even the Bush administration has attempted to portray the inconsequential blast in Times Square—universally seen as a misguided act of protest—as a threat to national security. That Clinton would invoke such an event as justification for giving even more "tools" to the police-military apparatus is a clear indication that her vision of national security presidency includes an escalation of the wholesale assault on democratic rights conducted under the Bush administration.

Clinton's right-wing campaign on national security has proven effective, putting the Obama campaign itself on the defensive, pushing it to the right and provoking evident disarray.

This process found unmistakable expression in the forced resignation last Friday of Samantha Power, Obama's senior foreign policy advisor, after—in an interview with a British reporter—she described Hillary Clinton as a "monster" who was "stooping to anything" to get elected.

There are undoubtedly wide layers within the American political establishment that would agree with Ms. Power's characterization, but within these circles being a "monster" is not necessarily a negative. As the outcome of the nominating process moves to the super-delegate insiders, it works to Clinton's advantage. She, after all, has established a track record. After more than 35 years of involvement in bourgeois politics, including eight years in the White House at the pinnacle of state power, she and her husband have demonstrated that they are capable of making the "tough" decisions—i.e., ordering cruise missile attacks at 3 AM or any other time of the day. Whatever humane instincts she may once have

possessed have been burned out of her long ago.

But there is a question mark over Obama. The question that she is posing to the political establishment is: Can you be sure that Obama is ready to do what will be expected of him “from day one?” Does the ruling class and the military brass really want to have someone who will, as he learns the ropes at the White House, fret over the collateral damage caused by bombing raids or “targeted” assassinations?

For his part, Obama is trying to counter such doubts by sending reassuring messages to the decision makers in the political establishment. The firing of Power was one such signal. Prior to her “monster” outburst, Power had been identified as one of the more “leftish” of Obama’s foreign policy advisers. Specifically, she had been critical of American policy in the Middle East and had indicated sympathy for a more evenhanded approach in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Power had recently been attempting to distance herself from such controversial positions, which included private backtracking from public pledges on a withdrawal timetable from Iraq.

In a BBC interview, Power insisted that Obama “will revisit” the plan once he enters the White House. “He will, of course, not rely upon some plan that he has crafted as a presidential candidate or a US senator,” she continued. “He will rely upon an operational plan that he pulls together in consultation with people on the ground.”

This position leaves virtually nothing to distinguish Obama’s prescription for US policy in Iraq from that of Clinton, both of which would keep US forces, even if on a reduced scale, in an indefinite colonial-style occupation of Iraq.

At any rate, these recent shifts did not help Power. Her “monster” gaffe provided an opening for Obama to drop her from his inner circle, and thereby send a reassuring message to the pro-Zionist constituency in the Democratic Party.

Along similar lines, Obama himself last Wednesday took the opportunity to forcefully reiterate his vow to strike “terrorist targets” inside Pakistan, with or without the approval of that country’s government. The clear aim was to portray himself as no enemy of militarism and therefore fit to serve as “commander-in-chief.”

This attempt to answer Clinton’s attacks by shifting further to the right and waging his own “national security” campaign will inevitably alienate layers of younger voters attracted to his candidacy based on the illusion that it promised substantive change and even a means of opposing the war.

But what is Obama’s alternative? His political dilemma is clear. On the one hand, he has sought to make a popular—though exceedingly vague—appeal to the widespread desire for fundamental change in American society. In doing so, however, he is always aware of the constraints imposed by the social and financial interests of the ruling elite that controls both the Democratic and Republican parties.

This gives rise—as seen in Power’s statement on Iraq and his economic advisor’s assurance to the Canadian government on NAFTA—to the repeated attempts to insist that what he says in the public arena should not be held against him in terms of his real policies.

Ironically, the pressures working on Obama prevent him from replying effectively to Clinton’s attacks. It would not be too difficult for Obama, at least in terms of rhetoric, to expose the real content of Clinton’s much touted “experience.” One starting place would be a more thorough examination of her 2002 vote for the war, which Obama has made a consistent talking point in his campaign.

In her speech on the floor of the Senate justifying the vote, Clinton claimed credit for her husband’s administration in laying the groundwork for a war against Iraq through sanctions, cruise missile attacks and making regime change the stated policy of the US government. The speech underscored the fundamental continuity between the Clinton and Bush administrations on this score, despite serious tactical differences over how such a war should have been prepared.

The fifth anniversary of the Iraq war is rapidly approaching. An aggressive campaign to expose the cost of this war in terms millions of Iraqi and thousands of American lives, the destruction of an entire society and the diversion of trillions of dollars in social wealth to pay for the war would have a powerful effect in debunking the elevation of “national security” to the preeminent issue in 2008.

In short, the only politically consistent answer to Clinton would be a thorough-going critique of US foreign policy and the social interests that underlie it.

Obama is unable to conduct such a campaign. First, it would not be credible as he has never really been an antiwar candidate. As Clinton herself has often pointed out, since entering the Senate, his voting record is exactly the same as her own, including support for successive measures funding the war and keeping US troops in Iraq. It is true that he didn’t vote for the war, like her, in 2002, but then he wasn’t yet in the Senate to do so.

That Obama’s reputation as an opponent of the war is an illusion is widely recognized within the ruling establishment. Significantly, the right-wing *Wall Street Journal* editorial pages featured a half-page defense of Obama’s foreign policy credentials Friday by Martin Peretz, editor of the *New Republic*. Peretz—an early supporter of the Iraq war who opposed the election of Democrat John Kerry in 2004 on the grounds that he would be a “disaster for Israel”—wrote that Obama had “won my confidence.”

Describing Obama as a “patriot of the old cadence and the old convictions,” Peretz continued: “If he is elected president, he will disappoint many of his supporters, and surprise many of his detractors.”

Secondly, to make such a critique of Clinton’s record and American foreign policy would alienate decisive sections of the ruling elite upon whom Obama’s campaign rests and inevitably would necessitate an attack on the Democratic Party itself.

Obama’s campaign represents not some kind of insurgency from below, but rather has served as a vehicle for elements within the Democratic foreign policy establishment (many of them veterans of the Clinton administration) who saw his candidacy as a means of effecting a tactical shift in US foreign policy, while at the same time presenting to both the world and the American people themselves an image of change.

No doubt, the policy divisions in question are narrow in scope—all factions are firmly committed to upholding the essential strategic and profit interests of American imperialism—but they are no less bitter over who and what policies are responsible for the present quagmire confronting US policy and how to get out of it.

In the end, the bitter internecine struggle being conducted in the Democratic primaries will yield the same essential results as the Kerry campaign in 2004, no matter which of the two candidates comes out on top. The question of Iraq will be reduced to a secondary issue and both parties will assure that the election is not turned into a referendum on war.

It is already March, and it is high time for political conclusions to be drawn. It is clear that once again in the general election the overwhelming majority of the American people who want an end to the war in Iraq are to be politically disenfranchised as the ruling elite fields two candidates committed to pursuing the original aims of the 2003 invasion: the conquest of an oil-rich country and the assertion of US hegemony over a vitally strategic region of the globe.

The evolution of the Democratic primary campaign has confirmed once again that the struggle against war and political reaction, as well as the defense of jobs, living standards and basic rights of working people, can be advanced only through the building an independent mass political movement, founded on a socialist program that seeks to unite working people in a common struggle against capitalism.



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