

Obama's patriotism tour: the last refuge of a Democratic scoundrel

Bill Van Auken
2 July 2008

Barely one month after sealing his victory in the primaries and with four months to go before the general election, the Democratic Party's presumptive presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama has embarked on a campaign swing that has the declared aim of proving his patriotism.

In practice, this exercise in self-abasement before the political right is aimed not at winning votes from the Republican Party, but rather at establishing Obama's credentials with the constituency that the junior senator from Illinois values most: America's corporate and financial elite.

Obama kicked off his patriotism tour—set to run through the July 4th holiday—with a speech entitled “The America We Love,” delivered in Independence, Missouri. The site was chosen not merely for the town's name, but to establish Obama's connection with its most famous son—Harry Truman, the Democratic president who ordered atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In the 24 hours leading up to the speech, the presidential race was dominated by a media-generated furor over a remark made by Obama supporter Gen. Wesley Clark, in an interview on a Sunday television talk show.

Clark, appearing on CBS television's “Face the Nation” responded to the moderator's remark that Obama, unlike his Republican rival John McCain, had no military experience, had not “ridden in a fighter plane and gotten shot down.” Clark made the rather obvious point that getting shot down in a fighter plane was not “a qualification for president.”

The howls of outrage from the McCain camp were answered by Obama's immediate repudiation of Clark. The contrast between the cowardice of the Democrats and the implacable attitude of the Republicans during the 2004 presidential election, when they waged a campaign to defame Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry by claiming that he had lied about his Vietnam War record, could not have been starker.

Behind this bowing before the Republican attacks on Clark's innocuous statement was the Democratic candidate's determination to prove himself prepared to wage war and unconditionally embrace American militarism. This theme was incorporated into Obama's speech, which referred to the Republican candidate by name, praising his military service and implicitly condemning once again Clark's remark.

Obama's speech, ostensibly a reflection upon patriotism and “American values” in the run-up to July 4th, was a thoroughly reactionary address, in which words were carefully chosen to identify with themes generally associated with the Republican right and, at key points, to deliver a kick in the teeth to sections of left-liberal Democrats who have deluded themselves and sought to generate illusions in others about the real political character of his campaign.

Obama began his speech with a ritualistic reference to the “men of Lexington and Concord ... our first patriots,” without a word to acknowledge that the democratic ideals embodied in the American Revolution and the guarantees of democratic rights written into the US Constitution have been subjected to a wholesale repudiation in practice by

the current Republican administration in Washington.

Obama made not a single concrete reference to the policies of the Bush administration. He criticized neither the war of aggression against Iraq, nor the sweeping destruction of Constitutional rights, from the scrapping of habeas corpus, to the practice of “extraordinary rendition,” torture, and the warrantless wiretapping of American citizens.

Of course, the Democrats and Obama himself are fully complicit in this process. “How do we keep ourselves safe and secure while preserving our liberties?” the Democratic candidate asked rhetorically at one point in the speech. Obama offered no answer, but just the week before he announced his support for a bill legalizing the Bush administration's domestic spying program, while offering blanket immunity to telecommunications companies that collaborated in the massive illegal warrantless wiretapping operation.

Supporting war and repudiating the 1960s

On the war, he cited the number of dead and wounded American troops and declared that their “sacrifice” called to mind “the commitments that bind us to our nation and to each other.” That this sacrifice was imposed upon the American people on the basis of lies and in pursuit of predatory interests bound up with the conquest of Iraqi oil, not a word.

Obama continued by ascribing the difficulties in today's debates about patriotism to the “culture wars of the 1960s.” In doing so, he deliberately identified himself with the ideological shibboleths of the political right. He denounced the “so-called counter-culture of the Sixties,” identifying it with “burning flags” and “failing to honor those veterans coming home from Vietnam, something that remains a national shame to this day.”

These conceptions are taken directly from the canon of the right wing of the Republican Party. The conception that the “national shame” was the failure to “honor” Vietnam veterans—not the fact that they were sent to fight and die in a criminal colonial war to begin with—is a central theme within the protracted campaign by the US political establishment to expunge the “Vietnam syndrome” and condition the American people to accept new wars of aggression.

In a gratuitous swipe at MoveOn.org, the left-liberal pressure group that has largely supported Obama, the candidate went on to condemn the continued prevalence of “these old, threadbare arguments,” exemplified according to him, when “a general providing his best counsel on how to move forward in Iraq was accused of betrayal.”

The reference was to a MoveOn.org ad published in September 2007 under the headline “General Petraeus or General Betray US?” It questioned the credibility of congressional testimony by the senior US commander in Iraq in defense of the Bush administration's military “surge.”

The ad became the subject of a ferocious campaign by the Republican right, which pushed through a Congressional resolution—with substantial Democratic support—denouncing it as an affront the US military.

The reality, to which the ad's provocative headline referred, is that Petraeus was a political general who went out of his way to provide apologies for the Bush administration's policies, which were opposed by other senior commanders. This is widely acknowledged within the military and well known to Obama, who now chooses to align himself with the Republicans and cast the general as a victim of intolerance by the antiwar left.

Returning to the theme of the military and patriotism, Obama hailed US troops who have fought in Vietnam and Iraq for having sacrificed "on behalf of a larger cause." What that cause was, he doesn't say. However he went on to add: "The call to sacrifice for the country's greater good remains an imperative of citizenship. Sadly, in recent years, in the midst of war on two fronts, this call for service never came."

Again, there is not a hint that these wars on "two fronts" were wars of aggression, based on lies. Instead, there is the implicit suggestion that young people should be dragooned into fighting them as part of the "sacrifice" that is "an imperative of citizenship."

Significantly, the same day Obama delivered the speech in Independence, his senior national security advisor, Richard Danzig, a former navy secretary, told the media that there was little chance that a Democratic administration would cut the gargantuan Pentagon budget after taking control of the White House.

"It's hard to see how we could spend less on the military in the near term," Danzig told the Reuters news agency. The advisor stressed that Obama would heed the advice of US commanders in Iraq on the question of troop withdrawals, adding that he will seek a "more muscular US presence" in Afghanistan. Danzig also said that Obama would continue the US efforts to build a missile defense system.

"Faith-based" renewal

Obama followed up his speech in Missouri with a presentation in Zaneville, Ohio in which he vowed to substantially expand the program initiated by the Bush administration to provide federal funding for so-called "faith-based" social service groups. He thereby embraced an initiative that involves a frontal assault on the constitutional principle of separation of church and state, while endorsing the fraud that these church groups can deal with the massive social crisis gripping America.

"We know that faith and values can be a source of strength in our lives," said Obama. "That's what it's been for me. And that's what it is to many Americans. But it can also be something more. It can be the foundation of a new project of American renewal."

Under conditions in which the American economy stands on the brink of a full-scale depression, with millions faced with the loss of jobs and homes as well as the steady erosion of real incomes by soaring gas and food prices, the conception of a religion-based "project of American renewal" is as ludicrous as it is reactionary.

Obama's lurch to the right, after winning a primary campaign by posturing as an advocate of change and an opponent of the Iraq war, has drawn widespread comment.

"I've been struck by the speed and decisiveness of his move to the center," Will Marshall, president of the Progressive Policy Institute, an arm of the right-wing Democratic Leadership Council, said approvingly.

In a June 28 article, the *Los Angeles Times* noted Obama's "emphasizing centrist—even conservative—positions on hot button issues," pointing to his support for the domestic spying legislation, his assertion

that states should be allowed to execute child rapists and his backing for the US Supreme Court's striking down of the District of Columbia's ban on handguns. "The changes carry some risk that Obama will diminish the image he has sought to build as a new type of leader who will change how Washington conducts business," the paper warned.

The positions being taken by Obama are not some clever vote-winning ploy. What you see is what you get. He is a thoroughly corrupt and reactionary politician, who has clawed his way up through the political cesspool known as the Chicago Democratic Party machine. He is prepared to do anything to succeed and whatever is required to uphold the interests of the ruling elite that both political parties serve.

For a layer of so-called lefts oriented to the Democratic Party, none of this will make a difference. They will only work harder at trying to convince people that Obama is merely being pressured from the right and can be pushed back by pressure from the left.

This standpoint is most clearly expressed by the *Nation* magazine, which recently commented on the controversy provoked by Obama's selection of a right-wing economic advisor.

"Now Obama has stumbled into embarrassing questions about his commitment to that message of change," it said in a June 19 editorial. "It wouldn't be the first time a Democratic presidential candidate talked about sweeping change, won over the party faithful and ordinary voters, and then abandoned them to powerful interests. But we believe Obama is better than that..."

The Nation peddles the crassest illusions in Obama and through him, in the Democratic Party and the profit system it defends. But this task becomes more and more difficult as Obama moves sharply to the right, even while the deepening economic and social crisis are creating the conditions for a broad shift to the left among American youth, students and working people.

The political evolution of the Obama campaign is the clearest confirmation that the struggle against war and social reaction can be advanced only through a definitive break with the Democrats and the building of a new independent party of the working class, based on a socialist program.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact