

Obama's swing to right sparks warnings from 'left' backers

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9 July 2008

The sharp and relentless push to the right by the Senator Barack Obama has evoked a flood of worried responses from some of those who had promoted illusions in Democratic Party's presumptive presidential nominee during the protracted primary season.

A series of high-profile statements by Obama, apparently calculated to disassociate himself from what is vaguely referred to as the "left," are the source of this consternation.

In the space of barely a week, the candidate declared his support for a bill that he will vote for this week legalizing the Bush administration's massive domestic wiretapping program and giving retroactive immunity to the telecom companies that facilitated it; opposed a decision by the US Supreme Court opposing the extension of the death penalty to crimes other than homicide and appealed to the Christian right with a pledge of double funding for "faith-based" programs.

This embrace of positions associated with the Republican right followed his slavish declaration of support for right-wing Zionism at last month's conference of the pro-Israel lobbying group AIPAC and a series of bellicose statements regarding Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan.

Finally, on July 3, the candidate held a news conference that many cast as a retreat from his campaign pledge to withdraw US combat troops from Iraq in 16 months after entering the White House. Obama stressed that "the pace of withdrawal would be dictated by the safety and security of our troops and the need to maintain stability," while insisting that he would "continue to refine my policies" based on information he receives from "our commanders on the ground."

The remarks drew praise this week from the editorial board of the *Washington Post*, in a lead editorial which declared that the candidate's "softening on his unrealistic withdrawal plan is only sensible."

The shift, the *Post* affirmed constituted a "real step toward a responsible position on a conflict that, like it or not, involves vital US interests." This position reflects a growing consensus within America's ruling establishment that, whatever the divisions over the "mistake" of launching the war in the first place, the predatory venture must be made to succeed in the end, furthering "US interests," specifically domination over the strategic energy resources of Iraq.

However, for many of those who, over the course of the more than year-and-a-half-long campaign for the Democratic nomination, portrayed Obama's candidacy as a fundamental change in American politics, the candidate's new "sensible" approach has apparently come as a shock.

Typical is a column Tuesday by Bob Herbert in the *New York Times*, entitled "Lurching with abandon." An unabashed supporter of Obama

over the course of the primary campaign, Herbert writes, "Obama's strongest supporters are uneasy, upset, dismayed and even angry at the candidate who is now emerging in the bright light of summer."

Obama, he continued, "is not just tacking gently to the center. He is lurching right when it suits him, and he's zigging with the kind of reckless abandon that's guaranteed to cause disillusion, if not whiplash."

He notes, "There's even concern that he's doing the Obama two-step on the issue that has been the cornerstone of his campaign: his opposition to the war in Iraq."

Herbert portrays the candidate's recent positions as "clever panders" based on cynical electoral calculations. He says that Obama is convinced that "in the long run none of this will matter, that the most important thing is winning the White House, that his staunchest supporters (horrified at the very idea of a President McCain) will be there when he needs them."

The *Times* columnist warns, however, that this is "a very dangerous game for a man who first turned voters on by presenting himself as someone who was different, who wouldn't engage in the terminal emptiness of politics as usual."

Herbert's colleague at the *Times*, Frank Rich, penned a column Sunday expressing somewhat less outrage, but similar concerns that Obama may have miscalculated.

"For all the hyperventilation on the left about Mr. Obama's rush to the center—some warranted, some not—what's more alarming is how small-bore and defensive his campaign has become," writes Rich. "Whether he's reaffirming his long-held belief in faith-based programs or fudging his core convictions about government snooping, he is drifting away from the leadership he promised and into the focus-group-tested calculation patented by Mark Penn in his disastrous campaign for Hillary Clinton."

The implication is clear. Like Herbert, he fears that the retooling of the Obama campaign in preparation for the general election may alienate large numbers of voters, opposed to the war and deeply hostile to the Bush administration, who had previously viewed him as a political alternative.

The *Washington Post*'s liberal columnist E.J. Dionne Jr. expressed particular concern Monday about the perception that Obama had shifted his position on Iraq, noting that the Democratic candidate had been compelled to call a second news conference on July 4 — declaring, "I intend to end this war"—in order to clarify remarks made at the first.

"Obama needs to be careful not to cede the high ground on Iraq," Dionne warns. "Because Obama's strongest argument for himself on foreign policy rests on his sound judgment in opposing the war from

the beginning, any appearance of waffling on this issue is especially dangerous.”

He continues: “Republicans are pressing Obama on Iraq because they know that any new moves he makes will be interpreted, fairly or not, as a change in position and that this will hurt him with two groups: the antiwar base of the Democratic Party and independent voters, many of whom are just tuning in to the campaign.”

“Progressives for Obama”

Among the more foul responses to Obama’s lurch to the right came from the former Vietnam War protester and longtime Democratic state legislator Tom Hayden. Together with Carl Davidson, an ex-Maoist shill for the Democratic Party, Hayden established a group calling itself “Progressives for Obama.”

In a July 5 column in the *Nation*, Hayden acknowledges that Obama’s “core position on Iraq has always been more ambiguous than audacious” while warning that “as his latest remarks are questioned by the Republicans, the mainstream media and the antiwar movement,” his candidacy could be placed “at risk.”

Hayden goes on to note that Obama’s position on Iraq has always included the continued deployment in the country of “counter-terrorism” units, advisors and military trainers, a force that would number at least 50,000.

Nonetheless, he states: “I first endorsed Obama because of the nature of the movement supporting him, not his particular stands on the issues. The excitement among African-Americans and young people, the audacity of hope, still holds the promise of a new era of social activism.” He adds that “rising expectations … could pressure a President Obama in a progressive direction.”

He concludes, “The challenge for the peace and justice movement is to avoid falling into the Republican divide and conquer traps while maintaining a powerful and independent presence in key electoral states.”

Among the left liberals who have assiduously promoted illusions in Obama, there are those who are deluding themselves and those who work quite consciously to deceive others. Hayden clearly falls into the second category.

He supports Obama not because of any misunderstanding of his own about the Democratic candidate’s program, but because of candidate’s ability to generate illusions in others. Rather than seeking to clear up these misconceptions, Hayden works to deepen them in the name of building a movement that can “pressure” a right-wing big business politician from the left.

Nothing could more clearly define the politics of cynical opportunism that characterizes the great majority of the so-called left in America. Worshipers of the accomplished fact, they are mesmerized by the supposed immutability of the two-party system and seek to paint the Democratic Party as some vehicle for effecting progressive social change, despite decades of evidence to the contrary.

As an antidote to Obama’s turn rightward, Hayden proposes “a demand that Obama talk to legitimate representatives of the peace movement, not simply hawkish national security advisers.”

This pathetic proposal is based on the false conception that Obama is merely being pushed to the right by advisers and can be brought back around with a good pep talk from the protesters. What a fraud!

Obama’s campaign itself is a creature of these supposed advisers. His presidential candidacy has been engineered by a section of the political establishment that sees it as an ideal means of putting a new face on discredited American imperialism and carrying out real but quite limited adjustments in American policy after eight years of the Bush administration. His brief though meteoric political career represents for these forces an empty vessel into which policies are being poured that have nothing to do with peace.

The entire thrust of the politics pursued by the likes of Hayden is to tie those forces seeking a means of fighting against war and social inequality to the Democratic Party and thereby prevent the emergence of a genuine political alternative. In Hayden’s view, fighting for such an alternative based on the political independence of the working class and the struggle for socialism means “falling into the Republican divide and conquer traps.”

Obama’s rhetoric about “change you can believe in,” his invocations of Martin Luther King’s “fierce urgency of now” and phony concern for the poor have always served to mask a right-wing capitalist program.

When the candidate insists that he has not shifted on Iraq, he is essentially correct. His promise to “end the war” always envisioned the continuation of the US occupation and the pursuit of the war’s original predatory aims. His essential difference with McCain is over whether more troops should be shifted from Iraq to Afghanistan to escalate the US war there and potentially extend it into Pakistan.

As for domestic policy, the money that has poured into his campaign coffers from Wall Street, nearly twice the amount donated to his Republican rival John McCain, is based on the clear understanding that an Obama administration will faithfully serve America’s financial oligarchy.

If the candidate is more openly promoting his right-wing agenda now, it is not in interests of gaining votes. Over two-thirds of the American people want an end to the war and the overwhelming majority is hostile to the Bush administration; he does not have to appeal to some vast right-wing constituency. On the contrary, Obama is making his pitch to the ruling elite, attempting to cast himself as “presidential,” i.e., someone who is prepared to do whatever it takes to defend the interests of American capitalism, both at home and abroad.



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