

Obama outlines policy of endless war

Bill Van Auken
16 July 2008

Any misconception that Barack Obama is running in the 2008 election as an “antiwar” candidate should have been cleared up Tuesday in what was billed by the Democratic presidential campaign as a “major speech” on national security and the US war in Iraq.

Speaking before a backdrop of massed American flags at the Reagan Building in Washington, Obama made it clear that he opposes the present US policy in Iraq not on the basis of any principled opposition to neo-colonialism or aggressive war, but rather on the grounds that the Iraq war is a mistaken deployment of power that fails to advance the global strategic interests of American imperialism.

What emerges from the speech by the junior senator from Illinois is that the November election will not provide the American people with the opportunity to vote for or against war, but merely to choose which of the two colonial-style wars that US forces are presently fighting should be escalated.

As in his op-ed piece published in the *New York Times* on Monday, his call on Tuesday for the withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq was linked to the proposal to dispatch as many as 10,000 troops to Afghanistan to escalate the war there.

The thrust of Obama’s speech was a critique of the Bush administration’s incompetence in pursuing an imperialist strategy, combined with an implicit commitment to advance the same basic strategy in a more rational and effective manner once he enters the White House.

He summed up his policy as “a responsible redeployment of our combat troops that pushes Iraq’s leaders toward a political solution, rebuilds our military, and refocuses on Afghanistan and our broader security interests.”

Obama reiterated his campaign pledge to bring US “combat brigades” out of Iraq within 16 months of his inauguration. After this “redeployment,” however, a “residual force” would remain in Iraq carrying out counter-insurgency operations, protecting US facilities and training and supporting Iraqi puppet forces—tasks that would undoubtedly keep tens of thousands of American troops occupying the country indefinitely.

Obama stressed that he would make “tactical adjustments” to his plan based upon consultations with “commanders on the ground and the Iraqi government,” suggesting that even the partial withdrawal he proposes would unlikely unfold as quickly as promised.

The speech was scheduled in advance of a “fact-finding” tour that Obama is set to embark upon in the next week, visiting both Iraq and Afghanistan and conducting meetings with US military commanders in both countries.

Obama began his speech by invoking the legacy of US imperialism’s strategy in the aftermath of World War II, when it acted to “foster new international institutions like the United Nations, NATO and the World Bank” and rebuilt shattered European capitalism through the Marshall Plan. He contrasted that six-decade

policy with what he presented as the squandered opportunity for Washington to again seize global leadership following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

“The world, too, was united against the perpetrators of this evil act, as old allies, new friends and even long-time adversaries stood by our side,” said Obama. “It was time—once again—for America’s might and moral suasion to be harnessed; it was time to once again shape a new security strategy for an ever-changing world.”

The starting point for seizing this golden opportunity, according to Obama, was to “have deployed the full force of American power to hunt down and destroy Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, the Taliban and all of the terrorists responsible for 9/11, while supporting real security in Afghanistan.”

Instead, he charged, the Bush administration diverted these military resources into the war against Iraq, “a country that had absolutely nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks.” He continued: “By any measure, our single-minded and open-ended focus on Iraq is not a sound strategy for keeping America safe.”

This presentation is a gross and deliberate distortion of the motives underlying both the war in Afghanistan and the one in Iraq. Neither of them was launched with the aim of “keeping America safe,” but rather to advance definite strategic interests of American imperialism.

The central aim of the war in Afghanistan—planned well before the attacks of 9/11—was to take advantage of the power vacuum in Central Asia created by the Soviet Union’s dissolution to assert US domination over a region containing the second largest proven reserves of petroleum and natural gas in the world.

As for the supposed targets of this operation—Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda and the Taliban—all of them are, in the final analysis, the products of US imperialism’s own bloody history of intervention in the region, particularly in the 1980s, when Washington poured billions of dollars into funding the Mujahedin forces fighting the Soviet-backed government of Afghanistan and the Soviet army when it intervened there. Among these forces were bin Laden and those who went on to set up both Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

The legacy of this CIA-directed war was the devastation of Afghanistan and protracted political chaos, which Washington sought to curb by supporting the Taliban’s coming to power.

Now, nearly seven years after the US invaded Afghanistan, Obama proclaims, “As president, I will make the fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban the top priority that it should be. This is a war that we have to win.”

To that end, Obama vowed to send “two additional combat brigades to Afghanistan” and to press Washington’s NATO allies to make “greater contributions—with fewer restrictions” in terms of deploying their own troops.

He continued by vowing to expand the intervention in Afghanistan into neighboring Pakistan.

“The greatest threat to that security lies in the tribal regions of Pakistan, where terrorists train and insurgents strike into Afghanistan,” he warned. “We cannot tolerate a terrorist sanctuary, and as president, I won’t. We need a stronger and sustained partnership between Afghanistan, Pakistan and NATO to secure the border, to take out terrorist camps and to crack down on cross-border insurgents. We need more troops, more helicopters, more satellites, more Predator drones in the Afghan border region. And we must make it clear that if Pakistan cannot or will not act, we will take out high-level terrorist targets like bin Laden if we have them in our sights.”

There is no evidence that US forces are fighting Al Qaeda in Afghanistan or that the bulk of those attacking American and NATO forces are following orders issued by the remnants of the Taliban. The Pentagon has not reported the capture of Al Qaeda operatives in the stepped-up fighting that has claimed the lives of 69 US and NATO soldiers in the months of May and June.

The reality is that the resistance to the US-led occupation has grown dramatically as a direct product of the escalating slaughter of civilians, as seen in the July 6 US air strike that killed 47 members of a wedding party, the vast majority of them women and children. Anger has also been generated by the arbitrary detention and frequent torture of those picked up by US units and Afghan puppet troops, as well as by the gross corruption of the US-backed regime of President Hamid Karzai.

In the attack on a US base last Sunday that claimed the lives of nine US soldiers, local villagers reportedly participated, providing direct support to the insurgents who carried out the assault.

With “more troops, more helicopters, more satellites, more Predator drones,” Obama is proposing to escalate this slaughter, which will generate greater resistance and an expanded war involving more US troops and, inevitably, their deployment across the border into Pakistan.

Obama vowed to beef up the US military for a war that threatens to prove far more intense than the one in Iraq. He called for an overall increase of American ground forces by 65,000 soldiers and 27,000 marines, and “investing in the capabilities we need to defeat conventional foes and meet the unconventional challenges of our time.”

Much of the media reaction to Obama’s speech centered on speculation over whether it was aimed at reassuring his Democratic base that he is still committed to effecting a withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, or if it indicated a further “move to the center” by stressing his willingness to use force as the US commander-in-chief.

In reality, the speech reflected what is becoming a consensus position within much of the American political establishment, Democratic and Republican alike. There is a growing conviction that the US can secure its strategic interests in Iraq with fewer troops and without expending the more than \$10 billion a month that is compounding the deepening economic crisis of American capitalism.

To underscore this message, Obama was introduced Tuesday by former Democratic congressman Lee Hamilton, who, together with Republican ex-Secretary of State James Baker, chaired the Iraq Study Group, the bipartisan panel that called for a revamped US military and diplomatic policy aimed at salvaging the American intervention in Iraq.

Both Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, have expressed concern that there are insufficient troop levels in Afghanistan to secure US domination of the country. They have indicated that they would like to deploy another 10,000 there—the same number proposed by Obama.

Even Bush, in a White House press conference Tuesday morning, sounded this theme, claiming that Washington and its NATO allies were already initiating a “surge” in Afghanistan.

As for the speech signaling a shift to the right, the reality is that Obama has sounded the same themes repeatedly since initiating his run for the presidency. While in the Democratic primaries he stressed his opposition to the 2002 Senate vote to grant Bush authorization to launch the Iraq war—a resolution that was supported by his principal rivals Hillary Clinton and John Edwards—he always made it clear that he embraced the ideological framework of the “global war on terrorism” used to justify both the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions.

Given this position and his subsequent votes to fund the war once he entered the Senate in 2005, there is little reason to believe that he would not have joined his rivals in giving Bush a blank check for an Iraq invasion had he been a US senator at the time.

Writing in *Foreign Affairs* a year ago, Obama stressed that the lesson of the Iraq debacle was the necessity to prepare for new US wars. “We must use this moment both to rebuild our military and to prepare it for the missions of the future,” he stressed. “We must retain the capacity to swiftly defeat any conventional threat to our country and our vital interests. But we must also become better prepared to put boots on the ground in order to take on foes that fight asymmetrical and highly adaptive campaigns on a global scale.”

While Obama’s “left” apologists will no doubt excuse the blatant militarism and warmongering in the candidate’s speech as a mere political device aimed at winning over “centrist” voters, the reality is that the candidate is spelling out what can be expected from an incoming Democratic administration in 2009.

Its policies will be determined not by the hollow campaign rhetoric about “change” that has been Obama’s specialty, but rather by the deepening economic and social crisis of American capitalism and the determination of the American ruling elite to continue using military force as a means of offsetting its economic decline.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wswp.org/contact