Obama selects Biden to reassure the US ruling elite

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The selection of Senator Joseph Biden as the vice-presidential candidate of the Democratic Party underscores the fraudulent character of the Democratic primary campaign and the undemocratic character of the entire two-party electoral system. Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama, the supposed protagonist of "change," has picked as his running-mate a fixture of the Washington establishment, a six-term US senator who is a proven defender of American imperialism and the interests of big business.

The rollout of the Biden selection over three days of escalating media attention, culminating in the text-message announcement early Saturday and a kickoff rally in Springfield, Illinois, is a metaphor for the entire Obama campaign. His presidential candidacy represents not an insurgency from below, but an effort to manipulate mass sentiments, using Internet technology and slick marketing techniques, aided by a compliant media, to produce a political result that is utterly conventional and in keeping with the requirements of the US ruling elite.

Long gone are the days when the selection of a vice-presidential candidate by one of the two major big business parties involved a complex balancing act between various institutional forces. In the Democratic Party, this would have involved consultations with trade union officials, civil rights organizations, congressional leaders and the heads of particularly powerful state and urban political machines.

Today, neither party has any substantial popular base. In both parties there is only one true "constituency": the financial aristocracy that dominates economic and political life and controls the mass media, and whose interests determine government policy, both foreign and domestic. The selection of Biden, the senator from a small state with only three electoral votes, whose own presidential bids have failed miserably for lack of popular support, underscores the immense chasm separating the entire political establishment from the broad mass of the American people.

Obama has selected Biden to provide reassurance that, whatever populist rhetoric may be employed for electoral purposes in the fall campaign, the wealth and privileges of the ruling elite and the geo-strategic aims of US imperialism will be the single-minded concerns of a Democratic administration.

An establishment figure

Biden has been a leading figure in the political establishment for three decades. He was first elected to the US Senate from Delaware in 1972, when Richard Nixon was president and Obama was 11 years old, and he has held that position through seven administrations. He has headed two of the most important Senate committees: Judiciary, which vets nominations to judicial positions, including the Supreme Court, and Foreign Relations, which Biden chaired in 2001-2002 and again since the Democrats regained control of the Senate in the 2006 election. Biden ran for president 20 years ago and again this year.

In the 1990s, with Bill Clinton in the White House, Biden was one of the principal proponents of US intervention in the former Yugoslavia, a role that he describes in his campaign autobiography, published last year, as his proudest achievement in foreign policy. In the mid-1990s he called for the US to arm the Bosnian Muslim regime against Serbia, and then advocated a direct US attack on Serbia during the 1999 Kosovo crisis, joining with a like-minded Republican senator to introduce the McCain-Biden Kosovo Resolution, authorizing Clinton to use "all necessary force" against Serbia.

This legislative proposal provided a model for a 2002 congressional resolution authorizing Bush to wage war against Iraq, which Biden co-authored with Republican Senator Richard Lugar. The Bush administration opposed the Biden-Lugar resolution, because it was limited to ridding Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, and successfully pressured the Democratic-controlled Senate to adopt a broader war resolution, for which Biden voted.

On domestic policy, Biden is a conventional liberal whose roots go back to the Cold War era. He combines occasional populist bromides about concern for the poor and downtrodden with close relations with the trade union bureaucracy and unquestioning defense of the profit system. Like every other senator, he has "looked after" the interests of those big corporations with major operations in his state, including the Delaware-based MBNA, the largest independent issuer of credit cards until it was acquired in 2005 by Bank of America.

In this capacity, Biden was one of the most fervent Democratic supporters of the reactionary 2005 legislation overhauling the consumer bankruptcy laws, making it much more difficult for working class and middle-class families to escape debt burdens exacerbated by the corrupt and misleading marketing tactics employed by companies like MBNA. The 2005 law has compounded the problems of distressed homeowners seeking to avoid foreclosure.

Biden defended the bankruptcy bill during the Senate debate and voted for the legislation along with the overwhelming majority of Republicans, including John McCain. Obama opposed the bill, and has attacked it repeatedly during the 2008 campaign as a punitive measure against working families.

Employees of MBNA were the biggest single financial supporters of Biden's campaigns over the past two decades. In 2003, MBNA hired the senator's son, Hunter Biden, fresh out of law school, quickly promoting him to the position of executive vice president. (While his father is not wealthy by US Senate standards, Hunter Biden has since become a hedge fund multi-millionaire).

Biden has occasionally taken positions slightly more liberal than those of Obama, most recently voting against the bill (which Obama supported) authorizing a massive expansion of government surveillance of telephone calls and email, and providing legal immunity to the giant telecom firms

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that collaborated with such illegal spying over the past seven years. But he is a fervent supporter of the USA Patriot Act, defending it during the recent Democratic primary campaign against criticism by some of his opponents.

Biden and the war in Iraq

Senator Obama prevailed over Hillary Clinton in the Democratic nomination contest in large part because she had voted in October 2002 to authorize the Iraq war, while Obama, not then a US Senator, verbally opposed the decision to go to war. This difference in political biographies was utilized by Obama's campaign to make an appeal to antiwar sentiment, although Obama's record once he arrived in the Senate in January 2005 was indistinguishable from Clinton's.

Biden's record on Iraq makes his selection as the vice-presidential candidate all the more cynical, since he was an enthusiastic supporter of the war far longer than most Senate Democrats. He advocated measures to drastically increase the scale of the violence in order to win the war, including the dispatch of 100,000 additional US troops and the breakup of Iraq into separate Sunni, Shia and Kurdish statelets—on the model of the former Yugoslavia—which would presumably be more easy to control.

In the run-up to the launching of the unprovoked US aggression in March 2003, Biden echoed Bush administration propaganda. At a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee just after Secretary of State Colin Powell's notorious appearance before the United Nations Security Council in February 2003, Biden gushed, "I am proud to be associated with you. I think you did better than anyone could have because of your standing, your reputation and your integrity ..." Every major element of Powell's indictment of Iraq has since proven to be false.

Once the Bush administration's lies about weapons of mass destruction and Iraqi connections to Al Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks had been exposed, Biden began to express increasing alarm over the failure of the Bush administration to find an adequate rationale for maintaining public support for the war.

He bemoaned the Bush administration's failure to sell the war effectively to the American people. In a speech to the Brookings Institution in June 2005, he declared, "I want to see the president of the United States succeed in Iraq...His success is America's success, and his failure is America's failure."

Biden was particularly critical of the rosy forecasts of imminent success in Iraq being issued by the Pentagon and White House, which were at odds with the reality on the ground. "This disconnect, I believe, is fueling cynicism that is undermining the single most important weapon we need to give our troops to be able to do their job, and that is the unyielding support of the American people. That support is waning."

Only after public opinion turned decisively against the war did Biden shift from advocating escalation to a limited pullout of US troops. A *Washington Post* column in late 2005—which noted the convergence of views of the longtime senator from Delaware and the newly elected senator from Illinois, Barack Obama—described Biden as "an early and consistent supporter of the US intervention against Saddam Hussein."

Once the Democrats regained control of Congress in the November 2006, Biden became chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where he played a major role in the capitulation by the congressional Democrats to the Bush "surge" policy. Millions of antiwar voters had cast ballots for the Democrats seeking an end to the war, but the White House escalated the war instead, and the Democrats postured impotently and then went along.

The Democratic-controlled Congress meekly submitted after Bush vetoed modest restrictions on the conduct of the war, and in May 2007 passed full funding for military operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. When several Democratic senators voted against the funding bill as a protest—including Clinton and Obama—Biden denounced them for undermining the safety of the troops.

Two weeks after this critical vote, Biden denounced antiwar critics of the Democratic Congress, claiming, "We're busting our neck every single day" trying to end the war. There could be no end to the war, he said, until a significant number of Republican senators defected, to provide the two-thirds majority needed to override a Bush veto, or until a Democratic president was in the White House. "We're funding the safety of those troops there till we can get 67 votes," he declared.

By then, the Democratic presidential contest was well under way, and Biden, despite winning little support and no delegates, played an important political role. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted following a candidates' debate in August 2007, "Biden has carved out a niche as the Democratic presidential candidate most willing to publicly rebuke antiwar sentiment."

In the course of the debate, Biden attacked those who suggested that by threatening a quick withdrawal, the US government could compel Iraqi politicians to establish a stable government in Baghdad. He denounced illusions "that there is any possibility in the lifetime of anyone here of having the Iraqis get together, have a unity government in Baghdad that pulls the country together. That will not happen.... It will not happen in the lifetime of anyone here." In other words, the US occupation would have to continue indefinitely.

There have been numerous suggestions from Democratic Party officials and the media over the past few days that, given Biden's reputation for verbal confrontation, his selection signals a more aggressive attitude from the Obama campaign. On his record, however, it is quite likely that Biden will be deployed as an "attack dog" against antiwar critics of the Obama campaign.

This fact makes all the more despicable the fawning embrace of Biden by purportedly "antiwar" publications like the *Nation*. John Nichols, Washington editor of the left-liberal magazine, wrote that the choice of Biden was an "acceptable, perhaps even satisfying conclusion to the great veep search," which could tip the polls back in Obama's direction.

Commenting on the Springfield rally Saturday, Nichols gushed, "When Biden went after John McCain, with a vigor and, yes, a venom that has been missing from Obama's stump speaking, it was a tonic for the troops who have been waiting for a campaign that is more prepared to throw punches than take them."

This response only confirms a fundamental truth about the political crisis facing working people in the United States: it is impossible to conduct a serious struggle against American imperialism, and its program of social reaction and war, without first breaking free of the straitjacket of the Democratic Party.

Working people have no stake in the outcome of the Obama-McCain contest, which will determine, for the American ruling elite, who will be *their* commander-in-chief over the next four years. The task facing the working class is to break with the two-party system and build an independent political movement based on a socialist and internationalist program.

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