

# On eve of Democratic convention, Obama advances agenda of global militarism

**Bill Van Auken**  
20 August 2008

Speaking before an audience of 3,000 members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Democratic presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama defended his patriotism while attacking his Republican rival for being squeamish about launching unilateral military attacks against Pakistan.

Obama's speech Tuesday in Orlando, Florida followed an appearance Monday before the same convention by Republican candidate Senator John McCain, who delivered a right-wing diatribe portraying the Democrat as a political opportunist and virtual traitor for his policy on the war in Iraq.

McCain charged Obama with having "tried to prevent funding for the troops who carried out the surge." He continued: "Not content to merely predict failure in Iraq, my opponent tried to legislate failure."

In his response, Obama spoke not as an opponent of war, but rather as an advocate of a superior strategy for pursuing US imperialist interests by military means.

He chided McCain for "talking tough without acting tough and smart," while outlining a policy agenda that includes a continuation of the occupation of Iraq—albeit on a reduced basis—an escalation of the war in Afghanistan and its extension across the border into Pakistan. Finally, he put forward a policy of confrontation with Russia in the Caucasus that dovetails fully with the positions taken by the McCain campaign and the Bush administration itself.

Obama began his speech by declaring that America confronted a "defining moment in our history," a juncture that he indicated had been reached owing to a series of events involving the ongoing or potential use of American military force.

"We are in the midst of two wars," he said. "The terrorists who attacked us on 9/11 are still at large. Russia has invaded the sovereign nation of Georgia. Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons."

Obama objected to McCain's charge that he had shifted his position on Iraq, arguing that he had been consistent from the start. Referring to his initial opposition to the 2003 invasion, the Democratic candidate stressed that he was not opposed to aggressive wars in general, but that he viewed the war in Iraq as a miscalculation. He insisted instead that "our first priority had to be finishing the fight" in Afghanistan.

While suggesting that the "costly strategic errors" involved in the Iraq war had not been erased by the supposed successes of the military "surge" which sent 30,000 additional American troops into the country, Obama nonetheless praised the operation.

He hailed General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who oversaw the military escalation, as "outstanding Americans," while attributing the "lowering" of "the level of violence" in Iraq to "the outstanding efforts of our military, the increasing capability of Iraq's Security Forces, the ceasefire of Shiite militias, and the decision taken by Sunni tribes to take the fight to Al Qaeda." He concluded, "Those are the facts, and all Americans welcome them."

There are other "facts," however, which millions of Americans recognize as both criminal and shameful. The suppression of Iraqi resistance to foreign occupation, which is neither complete nor permanent, has been achieved through the killing of well over a million civilians and the turning of millions more into refugees. The US war and occupation have essentially destroyed Iraq as a functioning society.

Yet for Obama, the catastrophe produced by a war aimed at seizing control of Iraq's oil reserves is the fault not of Washington, but of the Iraqis themselves.

"We have lost over a thousand American lives and spent hundreds of billions of dollars since the surge began, but Iraq's leaders still haven't made hard compromises or substantial investments in rebuilding their country," declared the Democratic candidate. "And while we pay a heavy price in Iraq—and Americans pay record prices at the pump—Iraq's government is sitting on a \$79 billion dollar budget surplus from windfall oil profits."

"Iraqi inaction threatens the progress we've made and creates an opening for Iran and the 'special groups' it supports," he continued. "It's time to press the Iraqis to take responsibility for their future. The best way to do that is a responsible redeployment of our combat brigades, carried out in close consultation with commanders on the ground."

In other words, Obama is not advocating an end to a predatory war, but rather its reconfiguration in a manner designed to pressure the regime in Baghdad into acceding more fully to US demands.

As he spelled out, this "responsible redeployment" will not mean an end to the US occupation. While vowing to remove US "combat brigades" from Iraq over the course of his first year-and-a-half in office—extending their presence well into 2010—Obama made it clear that many other troops would remain.

"After this redeployment, we'll keep a residual force to target remnants of Al Qaeda, to protect our service members and diplomats, and to train Iraq's Security Forces if the Iraqis make

political progress,” he said. Such a force would inevitably consist of tens of thousands of American soldiers and Marines.

Moreover, he explained, the purpose of this reduction in the American “footprint” in Iraq would not be to curtail the global role of American militarism, but rather to facilitate its exercise elsewhere.

The partial withdrawal from Iraq, he said, would allow Washington to “strengthen our military, and to finish the fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and the border region of Pakistan.”

Describing Afghanistan as the “central front in the war on terrorism,” Obama continued: “This is a war that we have to win. And as commander-in-chief, I will have no greater priority than taking out these terrorists who threaten America and finishing the job against the Taliban.”

Obama’s attempt to sell the US intervention in Afghanistan as some kind of “good war” being waged against the perpetrators of 9/11 is as grotesque a lie as the ones used by the Bush administration to justify the war in Iraq. US and NATO forces are waging a brutal campaign that is claiming an escalating toll of civilian casualties as they fight popular resistance to the US-led occupation from the predominantly Pashtun population on both sides of the porous Afghan-Pakistani border. “Taking out these terrorists who threaten America” means a savage military campaign against this population.

He called for throwing two more US combat brigades into the colonial-style war against the people of Afghanistan.

The Democratic candidate’s call for a shift in the relative weight of US military power from Iraq to Afghanistan has emerged as the consensus position within the predominant layers of the American foreign policy establishment.

A so-called “terrorism index” published Monday by *Foreign Policy* magazine and the Center for American Progress, based on a survey of “foreign policy experts” (US security officials, intelligence operatives and academics), found that 69 percent support shifting US forces from Iraq to Afghanistan and 80 percent believe that Washington has devoted too much attention to Iraq and not enough to Afghanistan.

Underlying this orientation is a concern not with combating “terrorism,” but rather with US strategic interests. Central Asia, with its extensive oil and natural gas reserves, has emerged as a region of critical importance. In the wake of the Soviet Union’s dissolution, Washington has attempted to assert its hegemony in Central Asia in opposition to both Russia and China. The attacks of September 11 provided the pretext for a military intervention that had been planned long beforehand.

Obama went on to attack McCain from the right, accusing him of reticence about “bombing our ally” in Pakistan.

“So for all of his talk about following Osama bin Laden to the Gates of Hell, Senator McCain refused to join my call to take out bin Laden across the Afghan border,” he said. “Instead, he spent years backing a dictator in Pakistan who failed to serve the interests of his own people.”

The McCain campaign issued a statement pointing out that in the Democratic primary debates last year, Obama voiced his own support for US collaboration with Pakistan’s military strongman,

Pervez Musharraf, who was forced to resign Monday.

“We have to work with Musharraf, because the biggest threat to American security right now is in the northwest provinces of Pakistan,” Obama said in the debate. He added, “We should continue to give him military aid contingent on him doing something about that.”

Finally, on Georgia, Obama stressed his unity with his Republican rival, declaring, “Senator McCain and I both strongly support the people of Georgia.”

The *Washington Post* reported Monday that “Some Democrats have been pleading with Obama to use McCain’s tough response to the Russian invasion of Georgia to paint him as a trigger-happy interventionist who would risk bringing a war-weary nation into military conflict in regions where the United States has no interest.”

Instead, Obama tried to outdo the Republican candidate in terms of menacing rhetoric. He regurgitated the war propaganda about “Russian atrocities,” while repeating the administration’s mantra that “Georgia’s territorial integrity must be respected,” a euphemism for supporting the attempt by the regime in Tbilisi to militarily conquer the autonomous territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. He also voiced his support for Georgia, a former Soviet republic, being “integrated” into the NATO military alliance, a policy that has dramatically heightened US-Russian tensions.

Obama included a tribute to Senator Joseph Biden (Democrat of Delaware)—reportedly a leading contender for the vice-presidential nomination—who had just returned from a trip to Georgia, and went on to cast the conflict in bellicose, Cold War terms.

The candidate concluded by warning Moscow that its actions in the Caucasus would “have consequences.”

With less than a week to go until the Democrats officially nominate Obama at their convention in Denver, and with barely two-and-a-half months until the election, the candidate’s speech underscores a stark political reality confronting the American people. Once again this November, the two-party system will offer no means of expressing the massive popular opposition to war, but rather an empty choice between two big business candidates who are committed to the expanded use of militarism in pursuit of US corporate and financial interests.



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