

# The media drive to shut down the Sanders campaign

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In the 24 hours since the Associated Press declared, on the basis of a canvass of unnamed superdelegates, that Hillary Clinton was the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, media pundits and Democratic Party officials have joined forces to pressure Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders to shut down his campaign and accept the inevitable.

The AP declaration—timed to preempt voting in six states on Tuesday, including California, the most populous state—was followed by a series of headlines declaring the Democratic contest over and consigning Sanders to history. To cite a few examples: “Hillary Clinton Clinches the Nomination,” “Sanders’ Last Stand,” “Sanders Pressed to Accept His Fate,” “After Sanders, Can the Democrats Unify Their Party?”

The pro-Clinton bias in the corporate-controlled media was expressed with particular brazenness at a Sanders press conference in Emeryville, California, where *New York Times* reporter Yamiche Alcindor repeatedly interrupted Sanders to demand that he respond to “women who say that you staying in the race is sexist because you’re standing in the way of what could be the first female president.”

Sanders, understandably taken aback, responded, “Is that a serious question?” The question implied, he pointed out, that “any woman who is running for president is by definition the best candidate” regardless of her political views or qualifications.

The most visceral attacks from Democratic Party officials and their media allies have been in response to Sanders’ declaration Saturday that the Democratic National Convention “will be a contested convention.” This has been characterized in the most scathing terms. Timothy Egan of the *New York Times* called it a “late-stage kamikaze mission.”

The generally unstated but invariable premise of all

the criticism of Sanders is that every day he remains in the race for the Democratic nomination he weakens Hillary Clinton and makes more likely a Trump victory in the November general election. That amounts to a backhanded acknowledgement of the political fragility of the Clinton campaign. Even the comparatively mild critique voiced by Sanders—almost entirely avoiding her role as a war hawk—is declared off-limit.

The consternation over the prospect of a contested convention, whether the conflict is about the nomination itself or about the party platform and rules for future presidential contests, only testifies to the sclerotic character of the Democratic Party, an institution that is incapable of playing the role it once played as an arena for the expression of competing social agendas, even if mediated through various factions of a bourgeois party.

Decades ago, it was commonplace for a Democratic or Republican convention to open with the identity of the presidential nominee uncertain, as political factions representing various regional and social interests maneuvered, engaged in political combat, and struck bargains. Some conventions were marked by serious conflicts over party platforms or the rules for nominating candidates.

John F. Kennedy was the frontrunner going into the 1960 Democratic convention in Los Angeles. In the run-up to the convention, former president Harry S. Truman resigned as a delegate from Missouri, declaring, with a fair amount of cynicism, that he had “no desire whatever to be a party to proceedings that are taking on the aspects of a pre-arranged affair.” He added, “A convention which is controlled in advance by one group and its candidate leaves the delegates no opportunity for a democratic choice and reduces the convention to a mockery.”

Responding to charges that the delegates at the convention were “controlled or prearranged,” Kennedy insisted, with an equal degree of cynicism, that “to the extent that I have anything to do with it, it will be an open convention.” He went on to promise that the proceedings would express the “free will of delegates, freely elected in contested primaries.” (Footage of the run-up to the 1960 convention can be found online, including here.)

In the end, Lyndon Johnson, who had not even contested the primaries, won 27 percent of the convention vote. Kennedy barely secured the 50 percent needed to be nominated on the first ballot. In order to placate the conservative faction of the Democratic Party and his opponents in the South, Kennedy agreed to select Johnson as his vice-presidential candidate.

The point is not that the Democratic Party, a longstanding and corrupt organization of the ruling class, was in an earlier period a model of democratic decision-making. The conventions, however, were a forum for the sorting out of various divisions, where policies and programs were debated.

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In the past quarter-century, however, the two major capitalist parties have degenerated into empty shells, completely dominated by corporate interests and without any significant popular support. The conventions, like the parties, have atrophied.

The last Democratic convention to be genuinely contested was in 1980, although even then Jimmy Carter was the near-certain winner over Edward Kennedy. The last contested Republican convention was in 1976, when Ford clinched the nomination against Reagan in Kansas City only by bribing uncommitted delegates and dumping Nelson Rockefeller as his vice president in favor of the local favorite, Kansas Senator Robert Dole.

The political conventions have become nothing more than lengthy infomercials, without genuine content, to the point that even the corporate-controlled television networks have declined to broadcast them “gavel-to-gavel” as they once did. The outrage among Democratic Party officials over Sanders continuing his campaign into the Philadelphia convention in July is in part due to concern that this will cut into the time

needed to stage a media-friendly coronation of Hillary Clinton.

There is a more fundamental concern as well. To the extent that the Sanders campaign has become the vehicle for millions of youth and workers to express their desire for a genuinely left-wing alternative to capitalist politics, and to the extent that they take Sanders’ professions of “socialism” seriously—which millions clearly do—the Democratic Party establishment is frightened and horrified.

They want to close down the Sanders campaign as quickly as possible and put the genie of mass support for a candidate claiming to be socialist back in the bottle. This is, to put it mildly, a forlorn hope. Sanders himself would like nothing better. But the shift to the left among millions of people was not caused by Sanders. It was only brought to light by his campaign, shocking him as much as the rest of the American political establishment.

The peremptory rejection of a “contested convention” by the Democratic Party establishment only confirms the bankruptcy of the perspective of Sanders, who claims that his campaign can transform the Democratic Party, one of the two main parties of American imperialism, into a progressive force.



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