

# US Democratic Party : Some Stupid Dirty Politics

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YOU DIDN'T READ it here first: The Democratic Party is on the edge of sacrificing its 2008 presidential campaign before it officially starts. This kind of political suicide requires remarkable skill in the art of self-destruction, considering the current Republican administration's legacy — the massively unpopular, lost war in Iraq and quagmire in Afghanistan, combined with the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression — and the fact that the Republican candidate eagerly embraces the war and the financial deregulation policies that produced these disasters.

The day after Hillary Clinton's Pennsylvania primary victory, the editors of the New York Times (April 23, 2008: A24) declared that round to have been "even meaner, more vacuous, more desperate, and more filled with pandering than the mean, vacuous, desperate, pander-filled contests that preceded it" — and further stated that Clinton, the candidate they'd previously endorsed, "is mostly responsible" for it.

Well before April 22, however, to get themselves into such a fine mess the Democrats had to accomplish all of the following feats:

- \* Threaten to suck the energy and enthusiasm out of the party's voting base with sick, nasty racially coded slurs against the candidate who actually inspires hope of "change." We're referring here, of course, to the Clinton camp's increasingly desperate efforts to question Obama's fitness for office and especially his resolve to launch missiles when that red phone rings at 3 AM. It got worse when Hillary Clinton attacked Obama for his stated willingness to (gasp!!) talk to the likes of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez and the leadership of Cuba.

- \* Convince the population that the war in Iraq will continue, regardless of public opinion. This was accomplished by caving in every time to George W. Bush's escalating demands for "supplementary" war spending (with the leading Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama never voting against the appropriations at crunch time).

- \* Keep the only viable solution for the health care crisis out of the election debate. In fact, a single-payer (i.e. government) health insurance system would guarantee universal coverage, eliminate massive administrative waste and remove the obscenities of the profit-driven private insurance industry's incentive to deny payment when sick people most need it. With huge contributions to the Clinton campaign, the industry made sure she wouldn't attack its interests — and as Obama emerged as a major force, it's covered its bets by financing him too. The result is to neutralize the Democrats' natural overwhelming advantage on the issue.

- \* This editorial is being completed immediately after Pennsylvania, and before the party has figured out how to salvage the wreckage of those early out-of-order Michigan and Florida primaries. We don't know, therefore, whether the Convention "superdelegates" will be deciding the Democratic nomination against the will of a majority of elected, committed delegates. In any case, as a socialist publication we have no candidate in a party of corporate capital and imperialism, and no stake in how it chooses its nominee.

But we're pretty sure of this much: If Barack Obama winds up with a clear lead among the elected Convention delegates, and the superdelegates (party officeholders) throw the presidential nomination to Hillary Clinton, the outrage among African-American and many young voters will haunt the Democrats for a decade if not longer. We're guessing, though nothing is certain, that the Black community has signaled its response to a "hijacked nomination" outcome strongly enough to block this scenario. And if Obama does win the nomination, African Americans and others will surely be watching to see whether the pro-Clinton wing of the party establishment will campaign aggressively for an Obama-led ticket.

There's no question now that the racial politics of the campaign have become central, in particular the attacks on Obama's former pastor and "Black Liberation Theology," although Obama himself never intended these to become the issues. These critical questions are discussed in some detail by Malik Miah elsewhere in this issue of *Against the Current*. In our previous issue (ATC 133, available on our website: [www.solidarity-us.org](http://www.solidarity-us.org)), Dianne Feeley addressed the false notion that the Obama-Clinton contest reflects a competition between the women's and Black liberation movements about who gets to win first.

But there are some broader points about the ways in which the whole debate is trapped and sterilized within the trap of corporate politics.

### **Health Care, War and "Change"**

Let's look at the health care example, which is instructive although recently forgotten in the eruption of negative campaigning. Hillary Clinton, whose role during her husband's administration was notable mainly for derailing the popular movement for real health insurance reform, maintains that universal coverage cannot be achieved without "mandates," i.e. legally requiring that everyone is included. She is quite right about this, of course. Barack Obama, naturally and also correctly, counters that turning people who can't afford insurance into lawbreakers is unfair and absurd. (It might be added that any federal legislation that targeted people this way would be dead before the ambulance arrived.)

The obvious answer must be that the "mandates" for insurance be imposed not on individuals or families, but on the government — replacing the disintegrating crazy-quilt of employer programs and above all getting rid of the monstrous corporate health insurance industry. Because the Democratic Party and its leadership are subordinate to corporate power, that simple, efficient and necessary solution is off the agenda.

The war in Iraq offers an even more striking case. How much air time was consumed in discussing whether Hillary Clinton would be politically smart to admit that her vote for authorizing war was a "mistake based on faulty intelligence"? But the real issue is that the "preemptive" invasion and occupation of Iraq was and is a crime that the United States had no right to commit.

Hillary Clinton and the U.S. Senate were parties to a criminal enterprise when they voted to authorize this war — entirely independent of the secondary fact (also true) that it was an act of folly and imperial blunder of the first order. This elementary fact is also outside the bounds of what "serious" presidential candidates — meaning those who have any real chance to win, i.e. not those antiwar voices like Dennis Kucinich on the populist edge of the Democratic Party or Ron Paul on the libertarian-Republican fringe — are allowed to say.

Clinton's statement right before the Pennsylvania vote threatening Iran with annihilation if it "attacked Israel with nuclear weapons," was particularly disgraceful. Iran of course doesn't have nuclear weapons and abandoned its program to develop them after Saddam Hussein's Iraq regime (Iran's most feared enemy) fell in 2003. Indeed the Iranian regime, as horrible as its behavior is

toward its own population, has never aggressively attacked another sovereign state — except when it invaded Iraq in the 1980s, after having repelled Saddam Hussein's original invasion of Iran, for which both countries paid a hideous price.

Barack Obama's call for "renewing American leadership" (Foreign Affairs, July-August 2007) inevitably avoids this fundamental issue of the Iraq war as a crime, just as he has jettisoned the pro-Palestinian views he once expressed when he was a community organizer. Regarding Iraq, Obama's essay uses the standard terms "strategic mistake," "tragic blunder" and "a diversion from the fight against the terrorists who struck us on 9/11," all stock-in-trade squawks of all the Democrats who then vote for every one of Bush's self-perpetuating "supplementary" war appropriations.

Obama's article is worth reading in full, as it documents the candidate's transition from insurgent to "statesman" status, that is, to a conventional centrist corporate Democrat. (Safety warning: Due to the essay's coma-inducing strings of policy clichés, do not attempt reading it immediately before driving or operating heavy machinery.) It is virtually interchangeable with anything that Hillary Clinton has stated, including its enthusiastic embrace of U.S. military power, which Obama proposes to augment by adding 65,000 Army soldiers and 27,000 Marines to augment our nation's capacity to engage in imperial malicious mischief.

Obama and Clinton share with the entire Democratic establishment the argument, repeated over and over, that the Bush administration's "misguided" Iraq war became a "diversion from the right war to defend us from terror," in Afghanistan. This formula deliberately obscures the reality: The war in Afghanistan was never fundamentally about Afghanistan, or the horrors of the Taliban regime, or even about Osama bin Laden. Invading Afghanistan from the beginning was about turning Central Asia into a U.S. military base, and a curtain-raiser for taking out Iraq and then Iran.

The "neglect of Afghanistan" that's caused the disintegrating situation there today is the consequence of this entire failed imperialist project. The Obama-Clinton-Democratic nostrum hides the fact that there is no such thing as a "defensive war" for imperialism — which is only to be expected, after all, from a party that exists first and foremost to defend the interests of the imperialist ruling class.

But we recognize another part of this discussion that's not reducible to policy positions: Barack Obama's campaign has inspired and energized not only millions of African Americans, but a multiracial generation of largely young voters who really are looking for peace and a path to social justice. That search for a new direction for our society is the most significant feature of this election, regardless of November's outcome.

People are deeply moved by Obama's embrace and open discussion of his biracial parentage, something that was considered political taboo in recent memory, by his statements that America is scarred by intertwined legacies of racism and class-based inequality, and by his appeal to something — however wispy in substance — beyond cynical political calculation and appeals to narrow self-interest. The greatest "success" of the Clinton attacks has been to tarnish these hopes by dragging the whole campaign downward.

The difference between the Clinton and Obama campaigns isn't really about whether a woman or an African American gets to "own" the historic breaking of the white male monopoly on the presidency. Nor is it about their policy differences, which are narrow and mostly of interest to specialists. It has come down to the Clinton campaign's efforts to destroy the half-coherent hopes for "change" that Barack Obama inspires — hopes that Hillary Clinton herself can't embody, despite her attempts to capture them, because she's made herself a creature of corporate politics for so many decades that it's almost impossible to recall that once upon a time she actually did believe in something.

That's why Clinton's attempts to discredit Obama's "experience" and "judgment" wind up in trying to tear down the hopes he suddenly embodies for millions: attacking his roots in a radical-edged sector of the Black church; insinuating in TV ads that an untested young Black man isn't up to the job of protecting sleeping (white) children from unnamed threats in the dead of night; laying claim to the votes of the superdelegates who share her status as party insiders.

### **Independent Politics in 2008?**

Among the flood of questions surrounding the 2008 election are not only who the Democratic candidate will ultimately be, how much the Democrats can expand their Congressional majorities, and whether the Democrats' self-destructive internal war will cancel out the Republicans' loss of the institutional capacity to steal Florida and Ohio as they did in 2000 and 2004 respectively.

There's also the question of whether an independent, genuinely antiwar and anti-racist campaign can gain any traction this year. Frankly, that's a tough call. Ralph Nader, whose campaigns we have sympathetically covered in the last three presidential elections, has announced he will run as an independent candidate this time with his running mate Matt Gonzalez, a prominent California Green Party activist who came close to winning the San Francisco mayoral election. While the Green Party itself hasn't nominated its candidate, there's a strong chance that it may select Cynthia McKinney, the African-American former Georgia Congresswoman who's broken from the Democratic Party over issues of the Iraq war, Palestinian rights, and the Democrats' general abject refusal to fight for social justice.

At this writing it appears, as a practical matter, that the space for an independent progressive campaign to occupy will probably be very small this year (unless, possibly, the Democrats are seen to "steal" the nomination from Obama through insider superdelegate manipulation, unleashing a wave of Black and young people's anger that could flow toward a McKinney or Nader campaign).

Nonetheless the importance of an independent political presence remains vital, both for reasons of principle and in order to be prepared for the inevitable, when people's faith in a figure like Barack Obama are disappointed — when that object of hope is denied the nomination, or loses the election, or is elected and soon forced to betray the hope that put him or her in office. That's the movement's only answer to the stupid dirty politics of the present moment.

### **The Editors**

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