

McCain launches fall campaign as Obama embraces Iraq “surge”

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The events of Thursday, September 4 demonstrate the two overriding political facts of the 2008 US presidential election campaign: a Republican Party in deep political crisis and widely hated for its program of social reaction and war, and a Democratic Party that represents no alternative whatsoever, galloping to the right.

Senator John McCain gave an acceptance speech on the final night of the Republican National Convention. The 72-year-old candidate, a 26-year veteran of Congress, postured absurdly as the proponent of change, seeking to run as far away as possible from his own party and the Bush administration whose major policies he has supported for the past eight years.

Only a few hours earlier, Democrat Barack Obama, in an interview on Fox television, waved the white flag on what had once been the principal issue in his campaign, the war in Iraq. He told right-wing talk show host Bill O'Reilly that the escalation of US military aggression in Iraq, dubbed the “surge” by Bush and McCain, had “succeeded beyond our wildest dreams.” He went on to threaten military action against Iran as well.

The myth of the “maverick”

The focus of McCain's speech was his persona as a supposed “maverick” in American politics, an opponent of corruption and “business-as-usual” politics in Washington. The goal of this contrived and false presentation was to distance himself from the Bush administration. McCain spoke for 30 minutes, but never named the president of his own party or took responsibility for the policies of his administration.

Instead, he claimed for himself the status of a tribune of popular anger against official Washington, declaring, “And let me just offer an advance warning to the old, big-spending, do-nothing, me-first, country-second crowd: Change is coming.”

Both liberal and conservative media representatives noted the preposterous character of this political masquerade. The *New York Times* wrote, “As Senator John McCain accepted the Republican nomination for president, he and his supporters sounded the call of insurgents seeking to topple the establishment, even though their party heads the establishment.”

Writing in the *Washington Post*, neo-conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer commented, “The problem is the inherent oddity of the incumbent party running on change. Here were Republicans—the party that controlled the White House for eight years and both houses of Congress for five—wildly cheering the promise to take on Washington. I don't mean to be impolite, but who's controlled Washington this decade?”

McCain made an extraordinary admission in the early part of his speech—in a passage greeted with stony silence by the Republican convention delegates. “We lost the trust of the American people when some Republicans gave in to the temptations of corruption,” he said.

He did not, of course, acknowledge that it was the launching of a criminal war of aggression in Iraq, and a domestic policy of tax cuts for the wealthy and indifference to the poor—expressed so starkly after Hurricane Katrina—that has made Bush the most unpopular president in recent history. Instead, the Republican candidate claimed that it was the failure of the Republican Party to enact sufficiently right-wing policies on cutting government spending that cost it public support.

McCain’s remarks revealed the political crisis of the Republican Party, which faces a heavy defeat in the congressional elections, both in the House and Senate, and is trailing in the presidential polls, both in the national popular vote and, more significantly, in the state-by-state polls that give Obama a sizeable lead in electoral votes.

Campaign officials have admitted privately that it was his deteriorating position in internal state-by-state polling that triggered McCain’s gamble on the selection of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate. McCain abandoned his preferred election strategy of picking Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman or former Pennsylvania governor Tom Ridge as a running mate and seeking to make inroads in the northeast and industrial Midwest, in favor of mobilizing the Christian fundamentalist base of the party through the nomination of Palin, a political cipher but a fervent opponent of abortion rights.

The myth of Vietnam

Both McCain’s acceptance speech and several of the other major speeches at the convention—by former senator Fred Thompson, former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani, and Palin herself—suggested that his principal qualification for the presidency was his military record during the Vietnam War, and especially his six years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam.

The constant invocation of McCain’s POW status gave a militaristic character to the entire Republican convention, whose theme appeared to be that only a former soldier could be entrusted with the office of commander-in-chief. Palin’s speech was typical in that respect, as she sneered at her Democratic opponents for their posturing as “fighters” for working people, declaring, “There is only one man in this election who has ever really fought for you, in places where winning means survival and defeat means death, and that man is John McCain.”

The depiction of McCain as a man who “fought for freedom” has gone unchallenged in the corporate-controlled media, but it is profoundly and utterly false. The war in Vietnam was not a war for the freedom of the American people; it was a war against the freedom of the Vietnamese people, an attempt by the most powerful imperialist power to enslave or destroy the people of an oppressed former colonial country.

When John McCain arrived at his Navy squadron in 1967, the Vietnamese people were in their 22nd year of a war which began with the uprising against French colonialism in 1945, continued until the historic victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 which shattered the French army, paused for seven years while the French withdrew and were replaced in the southern half of the country by the American-backed puppet regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, and then

raged with increasing fury from 1961 until the final victory of the Vietnamese in 1975.

At no time in this epic 30-year struggle was the freedom of the American people ever at stake, except insofar as successive US presidents, Lyndon Johnson and then Richard Nixon, sought to suppress the freedom of the American people to oppose the increasingly unpopular war. It was the exposure of these antidemocratic conspiracies, following the Watergate break-in, that ultimately compelled Nixon to resign as president in August 1974.

This history is a closed book as far as both of the big business parties, Democrats as well as Republicans, are concerned. The media obediently echoes the portrayal of McCain as a war hero and, by implication, the war itself as a noble enterprise. In fact, however, the war in Vietnam was a crime of world-historic dimensions, one that in some respects approaches the atrocities committed by the Nazis in World War II.

More American bombs were dropped on that tiny country than the entire bomb tonnage dropped by all combatants in World War II, including the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some 3 million Vietnamese died, and countless more were maimed, tortured, raped or poisoned by chemical weapons like Agent Orange (dioxin) and sarin nerve gas. The cities of North Vietnam were subjected to relentless aerial bombardment against which the population had no defenses.

Those who organized and directed the onslaught on the Vietnamese people were, if the term has any meaning, war criminals. Among those was McCain's father, Admiral John S. McCain, who was head of the Pentagon's Pacific Command and had command responsibility for the saturation bombing of North Vietnam. If there had been a Nuremberg-style tribunal after the Vietnam War, McCain's father would have had a place in dock alongside Johnson, Nixon, McNamara, Westmoreland and other architects of the mass killings.

McCain's personal role was more modest—he merely delivered the bombs that killed thousands, if not tens of thousands, of innocent Vietnamese. His imprisonment as a POW, however harrowing, was no longer and no more brutal than the treatment meted out by US torturers at Bagram, Guantanamo and the secret CIA prisons, for the most part to men who have done far less than McCain to slaughter other human beings.

Obama on his knees

The most important factor propping up both the Bush administration and the Republican presidential campaign is the complicity and cowardice of the Democratic Party. McCain's claim to be leading an insurgency against the government of his own party is undoubtedly preposterous, but he is able to adopt this posture with at least a fig leaf of credibility because the Democratic Party does not fulfill the role of an "opposition" party in any serious sense.

Obama's performance Thursday on Fox television's "The O'Reilly Factor" was a case in point. After winning the Democratic nomination in large measure because of his purported opposition to the war in Iraq, Obama has sought repeatedly to demonstrate to the US political establishment that he can be a credible commander in chief for American imperialism.

He told O'Reilly that he "absolutely" believed that the United States was engaged in a worldwide war against terrorism, including not only Al Qaeda and the Taliban, but "a whole

host of networks that are bent on attacking America who have a distorted ideology.”

Obama described Iran as a “major threat,” and said it would be “unacceptable” to an Obama administration for Iran to possess nuclear weapons. “It would be a game-changer,” he said, adding, “I would never take a military option off the table.” He called for a more aggressive military posture towards Pakistan, the day after a major US military strike within that country.

But his starkest reversal came on Iraq, as O’Reilly pressed him to admit that the Bush administration’s troop “surge,” the escalation of the war by the addition of some 30,000 US combat troops, had been a success. Obama has sought to dance around the issue for months, but he finally embraced the surge emphatically on Thursday.

“I think that the surge has succeeded in ways that nobody anticipated,” he said, adding, “It’s succeeded beyond our wildest dreams.” This demonstrates not only Obama’s cringing submission to the pressure of the right wing, but a staggering degree of political blindness. Like Bush, Cheney, McCain and the rest of official Washington, Obama truly believes that US imperialism can, by military force alone, impose its will on the world. His only disagreement is with the Bush administration’s obsessive focus on Iraq, which Obama and many other spokesmen for the military and foreign policy establishment believe has undermined US interests in other parts of the globe.

The Democratic Party is a capitalist party that defends the same social interests as the Republicans—the massive fortunes of the superrich financial aristocracy which is the real ruling force in American society. The Democrats play a specific role in the political division of labor: while the Republicans consistently and unabashedly uphold the rights of the wealthy, the Democrats pretend to represent working people, while ensuring that there is no challenge from below to the profit system.

This division of labor explains the half-hearted and spineless performance of the Democrats in the current presidential campaign. Obama, Biden & Co. are at pains to demonstrate that they will make no appeal to mass discontent that goes beyond what is acceptable to the ruling elite. The Democrats offer their services to the financial oligarchy to win at least a certain degree of mass support for the reactionary program that both parties fundamentally share.

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