

Obama Raises Hopes But Pledges More War

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The nomination of Barack Obama as the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party is historic. He is the first African American presidential candidate of one of the two major capitalist parties. He may win the election and become the first black president, something inconceivable only two years ago. That a black man might become head of government in a society still marked by ingrained racism puts race at the centre of the election campaign — more on this below.

Obama gave his acceptance speech at the end of the Democratic Party convention to some 84,000 people. Such a turnout for a presidential candidate is itself unprecedented. During the Democratic Party primary campaign Obama regularly spoke to audiences of thousands. He has raised hopes in a nation weary of war and which is in a worsening economic downturn hitting workers and the middle class hard.

At the same time Obama is the candidate of a capitalist, imperialist party. If he is elected, he will carry out policies in the interests of the US capitalist class. One front will be foreign policy, the central question of which is what the US rulers will do about their military debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan. Obama has taken on the mantle of the anti-war candidate. He has promised to bring home the troops from Iraq in 16 months after he takes office, that is, by May 2010.

This was basically the proposal put forward by the Baker-Hamilton commission at the end of 2006. Congress had set up the Iraq Study Group with James Baker, the Republican co-chair with the Democrat Lee Hamilton. Baker was a leading figure in the Reagan and Bush senior administrations. The whole Study Group was composed of “blue ribbon” ruling-class politicians. Their proposal was to begin to bring the troops away from combat, slowly, and gradually redeploy them in bases in Iraq, Kuwait, and other neighbouring countries, ready to again intervene if necessary.

Bush rejected this proposal in favour of “staying the course” with a troop increase — the “surge”. This has put stress on the troops, many of whom were forced into doing two, three or four stints in Iraq. But the “surge” has failed to achieve President George Bush’s stated goal of stabilising a pro-US regime in Iraq that can stand on its own with minimal US military support.

The Baker-Hamilton proposal, while not openly saying so, recognised that the US occupation is a political failure. It proposed a way to largely extricate the US military from Iraq while minimising the international repercussions of this defeat. Obama echoes the Study Group, tacitly accepting the fact that Iraq will be left in shambles. The US-led invasion has destroyed Iraq, whose citizens in their increasing majority want the foreign troops to leave and let them begin to rebuild their country. Under this pressure, the puppet government of

Iraqi PM Nuri al-Maliki is demanding a timetable for US withdrawal in negotiations for a new pact with Washington to allow its troops to stay in Iraq. Malcolm X said that “when the puppet talks back to the puppeteer, the puppeteer’s in trouble.”

The Bush administration has indicated that it may have to agree to a timetable, something which it said it would never agree to. Obama was thus able to say in his speech that even the Iraqi PM and Bush have come over, leaving Republican candidate John McCain high and dry sticking to the “stay the course” refrain. But Obama, in his speech, also said that he would increase the number of US troops in Afghanistan, that the mistake was to occupy Iraq instead of “securing” Afghanistan. Afghanistan is becoming another quagmire for the US. Sending more troops there will repeat the Iraq debacle.

Obama also promises to increase the size of the armed forces, another indication of the direction his administration will take if he is elected. He reiterated his unswerving support to Israel. Historically, the Democrats have been even more implacable in their backing of the garrison Zionist state than the Republicans.

Obama also said that he will confront Russian “aggression,” meaning Moscow’s resistance to NATO encirclement. While it was not in his acceptance speech, Obama charges that the Bush administration has not countered the Venezuelan “threat” in Latin America. He wants to regain US dominance in the region, although his plans on how to do that are unclear.

Concerning Iran, Obama positions himself as more inclined to diplomacy than Bush and McCain. He would negotiate with Iran, but with “nothing off the table” — meaning the threat of invasion or the use of nuclear weapons. But whichever of the two major candidates become president, he will inherit Washington’s Iranian debacle.

Another indicator of the direction of foreign policy under Obama is his selection of Senator Joseph Biden as his vice-presidential candidate. Biden is billed as an “old hand” on foreign policy, which means he is in the mould of Bill Clinton. It was under Clinton that the failed attack on Somalia occurred, and the 12 years of sanctions and bombing of Iraq were imposed. Another person on Obama’s team is Clinton’s secretary of state, Madeline Albright, who, when asked in 1996 about the 500,000 Iraqi children who died as a result of the sanctions, said “It’s worth it.”

The US is in a recession as far as working people are concerned. Unemployment is up. Real wages are down. Millions of families are facing foreclosure on their homes. Ten million homes have mortgages that are higher than what the homes can be sold for, and prices continue to drop. The price of gasoline has jumped over two times in as many years. Home heating oil is up, which means increased hardship for millions this winter. No-one knows how deep the credit crisis will go. All loans are becoming more expensive and harder to get. Some banks have failed already and more will follow suit.

What does Obama propose? In his speech he said “I will set a clear goal as president: In ten years we will finally end our dependence on oil from the Middle East”. (The US actually imports far more oil from Canada, Mexico and Venezuela than it does from the Middle East.) He said he will tap natural gas resources, invest in “clean coal” and “safe” nuclear power. He pledged to spend US\$150 billion in the next decade on solar, wind and biofuels.

He says he will cut taxes for 95% of working people, while scrapping the tax cut for the rich Bush pushed through. He promised health care for all. But his proposal rests on keeping

health insurance in the hands of private companies, the problem in the US healthcare system in the first place. He is opposed to government-provided “single payer” health insurance for all.

Obama referred to Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his speech. But he is staying clear of proposing any programs and reforms of the type FDR was compelled to implement during the 1930’s Great Depression and labour radicalization. Obama has no plan to help families facing home foreclosures. He is silent on the burning need to launch a massive public works program to rebuild the nation’s crumbling infrastructure and provide work for the unemployed. He is against raising the minimum wage to where it was in 1970 — \$10 an hour in today’s dollars — from the present \$6.25.

Such programs are well within the boundaries of capitalism. In fact they would strengthen the system. But the capitalist class is opposed for ideological reasons to anything that smacks of social intervention and responsibilities, fearing the spectre of socialism.

The race question, front and centre

The fact that an African American may become president places the race question front and centre in the election campaign. It indicates a change in attitudes among many whites, a move away from racism. It is a reflection of the great shift the victory of the civil rights movement of the 1960s caused. Nevertheless racism among many whites remains.

In a year when nearly 80% of the population believes the country is headed in the wrong direction, and the Bush Republican administration is greatly discredited, with Democrats set to win more local, state and congressional elections, polls show McCain and Obama in a dead heat. This cannot be explained by differences in the personalities of the two — if anything, Obama is far more capable, is a much better speaker, and so forth. The only explanation is racism. The fact is, a great many whites will simply never vote for a black, even if they agree with him or her.

Racism is the elephant in the room. Few openly acknowledge its role in this unprecedented presidential election. Code words are used by the media to avoid the issue. And innuendo, not crude racism, has been used to appeal to prejudice, and will become intensified for the rest of the campaign. Bill and Hillary Clinton used such subtle appeals during the Democratic primaries. Hillary Clinton even said that Obama couldn’t win the votes “of workers, white workers”.

McCain ran an advertisement ostensibly to ridicule Obama as a celebrity by counterposing a picture of him with pictures of Brittany Spears and Paris Hilton, two blondes. The real message was to appeal to deep sexual fears many white men have of black men with white women.

Another subtle ploy is the assertion that Obama is a Muslim, circulated by Republican operatives. Something like 10% of US voters believe the charge. The appeal is not only to prejudice against Muslims that is rampant in the US, but to the fact that most Muslims in the world are coloured. On some internet sites the race hatred against Obama is vicious and open, including calls for his assassination. McCain stays silent.

Obama’s acceptance speech was a sharp attack on Bush and McCain. The theme of “change” which has been his signature was concretized into one simple idea: reject the past

eight years of the Bush administration and its continuance under McCain. This theme is very popular, especially among young people of all colours, and a great number of whites.

Obama's nomination is seen by 95% of African Americans as a historic step forward for them. The election, for most blacks, is a referendum on race. Obama has raised hopes not only that the past eight years will be overcome, but that the war in Iraq will be ended and people of colour will step into a place in the sun. If he wins, his administration will fail to fulfill those hopes. Whether this will lead to demoralisation among his followers, or anger that leads to a new period of mass action, remains to be seen.

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