

With endorsement of Dean, Gore seeks to revive Democrats and contain political crisis

By Barry Grey
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In the media commentary—most of it hostile—regarding former Vice President Al Gore's endorsement of Howard Dean for the Democratic presidential nomination, various explanations have been given: personal animosity between Gore and the Clintons, Gore's wounded psyche, a Machiavellian scheme to ensure defeat in 2004 so Gore can emerge as the Democratic savior in 2008, etc.

A host of essentially subjective and secondary issues have been brought forward—everything but serious questions of policy. This predictable response to Gore's announcement only underscores the superficial and unserious approach of the media to all social and political questions.

Added to this is a pro-Bush bias. The media has been seeking to maneuver the Democratic nominating process to the advantage of those candidates least likely to raise any serious differences with the foreign and domestic policies of Bush and the Republicans. In the eyes of the media pundits, the rather conservative former governor of Vermont, who opposed the unilateral invasion of Iraq, is something of a wild card.

It is impossible to understand any significant political event simply at the level of personal and subjective motives. These come into play, but they are, in the end, entirely subordinate to more profound political and social issues.

Gore is not just any individual. He is the son of a long-time senator from Tennessee, the scion of a family of the Washington political establishment, and the Democrats' presidential candidate in 2000. His decision to back the "anti-establishment" candidate Dean reflects the thinking not simply of himself, but of a definite section of the American ruling elite and a faction within the Democratic Party hierarchy.

Gore's endorsement of Dean is the outcome of a conflict over policy and orientation that has been building within the Democratic Party for years, and has reached a high point over the past 15 months. The party is deeply divided over a series of major issues, the first of which is the war in Iraq.

It is hardly a coincidence that Gore's announcement came only days after Hillary Clinton returned from a trip to Afghanistan and Iraq not only defending the war and occupation of Iraq, but calling for more US troops in both countries.

The divisions over the Iraq war, however, are part of a broader conflict over the general posture of US foreign policy. The more far-sighted elements within the Democratic Party, and the American ruling elite as a whole, are alarmed over the implications of the extreme unilateralism and recklessness that characterize the foreign policy of the Bush administration.

They see Bush ripping apart the network of international relations established after the Second World War that served US imperialism very well, and involving the US in a series of dangerous and costly wars. Bush's foreign policy, moreover, is accompanied by an unprecedented assault on traditional bourgeois parliamentary norms and democratic rights, and a brazen policy of enriching the financial oligarchy that is bringing social tensions within the US to the boiling point.

Throughout most of his career in the US Senate, Gore was known as a hawk on foreign policy—he was one of a handful of Democratic senators who voted to authorize the senior Bush to attack Iraq in the first Persian Gulf war. Along with Bill Clinton, he helped establish the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), a right-wing caucus formed in the 1980s to persuade the Democratic Party to adapt itself to the agenda of Reagan and the Republicans.

In his 2000 presidential run, Gore attempted, in an inconsistent and half-hearted manner, to distance himself from the "Republican-light" policies of Clinton and the DLC. He sought to make a populist appeal, adopting the slogan "for the people, not the powerful," while maintaining his ties to the right wing of the party, signified by his choice of Joseph Lieberman as his running mate. By naming the latter, Gore associated himself with the Republican impeachment drive against Clinton, which Lieberman had aided with his denunciation of Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal. The divisions within the Democratic camp emerged in the heat of the election campaign, when Lieberman criticized Gore for going too far in denouncing sections of big business.

Despite the timidity of Gore's campaign, popular opposition among broad sections of the working class to Bush and the Republicans was such that the Democratic candidate won a 500,000 plurality in the popular vote. When Bush and the Republicans hijacked the election by suppressing votes in the disputed state of Florida—ultimately turning to the right-wing majority on the US Supreme Court to consummate the electoral fraud—Gore and the entire Democratic Party capitulated without a fight.

In the late summer and fall of 2002, Gore re-emerged in a highly public campaign clearly designed to prepare the way for a run for the White House in 2004. In September, he delivered a policy speech in which he attacked Bush's doctrine of "pre-emptive war" and the administration's drive to launch a unilateral and illegal war against Iraq. He called for congressional Democrats to vote against a resolution authorizing Bush to take military action in the Gulf. He also denounced Bush's social policies and attacks on civil liberties.

The speech met with a combination of ridicule and venom in the media and stony silence from the Democratic Party establishment. The following month, the Democratic leadership in both the House of Representatives and Senate came out in support of Bush's war resolution, which passed by comfortable margins in both chambers. Among those Democratic senators who voted for the measure was Hillary Clinton.

Gore responded to the hostile response from the corporate, media and political establishment, including his own party's apparatus, by abruptly announcing in December that he had decided not to seek the Democratic nomination. He gave as his reason a desire to avoid reopening the issue of the disputed 2000 election.

However, Gore re-emerged last summer, delivering an acerbic speech in August denouncing Bush's use of lies to justify the invasion of Iraq, his recourse to secrecy and cronyism, and his attacks on democratic rights. He made a further speech in November, in which he warned of a "Big

Brother” government and accused Bush of covering up the circumstances surrounding the events of September 11, 2001.

Both of these speeches were sponsored by MoveOn.org, a liberal activist group on the left flank of the Democratic Party that has increasingly identified itself with the campaign for Dean. Once again, Gore’s interventions were generally ignored by both the media and the Democratic Party officialdom.

Gore’s latest move suggests that he—and those with whom he is working—concluded that a more dramatic gesture was needed to alter the trajectory of the Democratic Party. What events are motivating these increasingly aggressive interventions?

First and foremost is the worsening quagmire in Iraq. But Gore is also responding to a series of political debacles for the Democratic Party that have occurred since his first policy speech in September 2002.

The Democrats suffered a disaster in the November 2002 congressional elections, losing ground in the House of Representatives and ceding control of the Senate. This was followed by the debacle in California, when a Republican-led recall resulted in the ouster of Democratic governor Gray Davis—a right-wing politician who was promoted by the DLC and its ilk as a model Democrat and electoral “success story.”

Finally, there was last month’s Medicare fiasco, when the congressional Democrats proved unable to mount a serious fight against a bill aimed at destroying the last remaining cornerstone of Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society.”

Gore’s decision to back Dean has the character of political triage aimed at saving the Democratic Party from self-destruction and reviving it as an instrument of bourgeois rule. He is among those representatives of American capitalism who are highly conscious of the danger of a mass movement against war and social reaction developing outside of the control of the bourgeois establishment and coming under the influence of anti-capitalist, revolutionary forces.

The general political considerations behind Gore’s decision were apparent at the joint appearance of Gore and Dean in the Harlem section of New York City, where Gore made his announcement Tuesday morning. The choice of venue was itself significant. It was intended to portray Dean as an advocate for African-Americans and other minorities, as well as poor people and working people as a whole.

In a brief speech, Gore characterized the Dean campaign as a “grass-roots” movement to “remake the Democratic Party” and “take back” America “on behalf of the people of this country.” He said Dean, of all the Democratic candidates, had the best chance of defeating Bush in 2004, and singled him out as “the only major candidate who made the correct judgment about the Iraq war.”

As always, Gore placed his opposition to the present war within the framework of support for the “war against terror,” asserting that this war has been weakened by the unprovoked assault on Iraq.

In his remarks, Dean was even more explicit in making a populist appeal to social and political discontent and disassociating himself from the more right-wing sections of the Democratic Party. Saying he was pleased to be in Harlem, he declared that the Democrats had lost the 2002 congressional elections because they “went after the swing voters.” He said his campaign would “start with African-Americans, Latinos, women and trade unionists” and promised he would not campaign on the basis that he had “voted with the president 85 percent of the time.”

Notwithstanding such gestures, the very fact that a conservative politician such as Dean is considered an “anti-establishment” radical testifies to the magnitude of the rightward shift of the Democratic Party and American politics as a whole. If and when Dean wraps up the Democratic nomination, he will quickly tack to the right, stressing his credentials as a loyal defender of US imperialism at home and abroad.

Indeed, he is already moving in that direction. Only hours after joint appearances with Gore in New York and Iowa, Dean participated in a

televised debate of the nine Democratic hopefuls in New Hampshire in which he underlined the narrow limits of his foreign policy differences with Bush and some of his Democratic rivals. He reiterated his support for the US invasion of Afghanistan and made his most explicit statement to date endorsing the continued US occupation of Iraq. “The tragedy of what we did in Iraq, which I have opposed right from the beginning, is that now we’re stuck there,” he said.

Iraq was not a threat to US security before the war, he added, but now “there is a threat from an Iraq with Al Qaeda in it or with a fundamentalist Shiite regime which is closely allied with the Iranians.” Pressed by *Nightline* host Ted Koppel, Dean declared that US troops would have to remain in Iraq “over a period of a few years.”

When challenged by Ohio congressman Dennis Kucinich—whose slogan is “US troops out of Iraq and UN troops in”—to square opposition to the invasion with support for the occupation that is the outcome of the invasion, Dean ignored him.

The notion that any section of the Democratic Party can provide a genuine alternative to the policies of Bush and the Republicans is an illusion. The White House agenda of militarism and social reaction is not some accident, nor is it merely the whim of certain right-wing individuals. It is the response of American capitalism to insoluble contradictions and the objective necessities of a social system in crisis.

Any attempt to fashion such an alternative within the framework of bourgeois politics immediately comes up against the reality of a massive concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a financial oligarchy. Only an independent political movement based on the working class and armed with a socialist program can break the grip of this elite and open the road to peace, democracy and social equality.

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