

Democrats cover up for Bush lies on Iraq WMD

By Patrick Martin
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Thursday night's debate in South Carolina among the seven candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination took place amid the mounting crisis of the Bush administration over the exposure of false claims that Iraq possessed huge stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. But not one of the Democratic candidates would state the obvious: that the Bush administration is guilty of deliberate lying to the American people and to the world to make its case for war.

The debate was held only days after David Kay, who for the past eight months headed the US search in Iraq for nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, resigned his post, saying the search for weapons was effectively over and the personnel of the Iraq Survey Group were being redeployed to combating Iraqi insurgents. Kay publicly admitted that no banned weapons had been found, adding that in his judgment none had existed at the time of the US invasion of Iraq last March.

This was a staggering political blow to the Bush administration, since the claim that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and would use them against the United States, either directly or by supplying them to terrorist groups, was the principal pretext for the US drive to war. Kay, himself a fervent supporter of the war, said bluntly, "We were wrong, all of us were wrong," about Iraq's possession of stockpiles of banned weapons.

The Bush administration's response has become increasingly tortuous. Witness the comments of Secretary of State Colin Powell, speaking during his recent trip to the Caucasus and Moscow. "We were not only saying we thought they had them," Powell said, referring to chemical and biological weapons. "We had questions that needed to be answered. What was it: 500 tons, 100 tons or zero tons? Was it so many liters of anthrax, 10 times that amount, or nothing? What we demanded of Iraq was that they account for all of this and they prove the negative of our hypothesis."

Powell blurted out the mechanism of the US tactics in provoking war with Iraq. The Bush administration demanded that Iraq "prove the negative", i.e., the absence of weapons, precisely because it was inherently impossible. Every attempt by the Iraqi regime to comply with demands from the US and the United Nations became the starting point for new efforts to declare Saddam Hussein in violation of yet another UN

resolution.

The *Washington Post*, like Kay an all-out supporter of the war, wrote of his revelations: "In an extraordinary five days since resigning as head of the Iraq Survey Group (ISG), Kay has provided interviews and testimony that have returned the Iraq weapons issue to the center of the national debate." But in South Carolina, the Democrats generally evaded the issue.

The debate's moderator, NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw, raised the WMD issue directly in his first question to former Vermont governor Howard Dean. He cited Kay's testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee Wednesday, where he sought to place the blame on the CIA, not the Bush administration, for the false claims about Iraq.

"You said that the books were cooked," he said, referring to a comment by Dean earlier this week. "Cooking the books means that there was a fraud of some kind, in an attempt to achieve something that wasn't in fact true. David Kay has said that that wasn't the case. He thinks the president was just simply abused by the intelligence agencies."

Dean refused to repeat the charge of fraud, responding tepidly, "Well, I don't think anybody knows for sure. And that's why I support the idea of an independent commission. What we do know is this: The president was not candid with the American people when we went to war. It's why I did not support going to war, even though I did support the first Gulf War and I did support the Afghanistan war."

He went on to note the well-known fact that Vice President Dick Cheney went to CIA headquarters for a meeting with mid-level CIA operatives responsible for making estimates of Iraq's weapons programs. Cheney's goal was to browbeat them into taking a more alarmist position, and "therefore influenced the very reports that the president then used to decide to go to war and to ask Congress for permission to go to war."

Dean's rivals were even milder in their criticism. Senator John Edwards of North Carolina echoed Dean's call for an independent commission to investigate "why there is this discrepancy about what we were told and what's actually been found there," a phrasing almost identical to that voiced by Bush's national security adviser Condoleezza Rice in a television interview earlier in the day.

Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, now the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination, changed the subject, referring only to “an enormous question about the exaggeration by this administration,” and then criticizing Bush’s failure to win international diplomatic support for the attack on Iraq.

Kerry declared that he would be a more effective war leader than Bush, saying, “I intend to hold him accountable in this election, because the American people’s pockets are being picked to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars, and our troops are at greater risk than they needed to be. And we deserve leadership that knows how to take a nation to war if you have to.”

Congressman Dennis Kucinich, who has proclaimed himself the most consistent opponent of the war among the Democratic candidates, avoided the question of weapons of mass destruction altogether. He made no criticism of the Bush administration’s lies, merely repeating his now familiar call to replace US forces in Iraq with peacekeeping troops from the United Nations.

Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, an arch-apologist for the Bush administration on the war, reiterated his support for the US conquest of Iraq. He bemoaned the fact that Kay’s exposure was discrediting the war. “The statements that this administration made before the war, the questions we now have about the intelligence about weapons of mass destruction, the failure of the Bush administration to be prepared for what to do after we overthrew Saddam, have all unfortunately given a bad name to a just war.”

All of the Democratic candidates accepted, implicitly or explicitly, that the issue raised by the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was the adequacy of pre-war US spying. They suggested that the major purpose of an investigation would be to correct flaws in the US intelligence-gathering apparatus, or at most, to rebuke the Bush administration for exaggerating or misinterpreting the findings of the CIA.

None of the Democratic candidates would speak the simple truth that the Bush administration engaged in deliberate, willful falsification in order to frighten the American people with the specter of a non-existent Iraqi threat and thus justify an unprovoked, unilateral military attack. None cited the innumerable statements of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell & Co. about the existence of weapons of mass destruction—like Rumsfeld’s declaration on the eve of the war that the US government had irrefutable proof of Iraq’s secret weapons stockpiles because “we know where they are.”

None of the Democrats used the word “lie” to characterize the actions of the Bush administration. There are other words that did not cross their lips during the South Carolina debate: aggression, militarism, war crimes, oil. Or impeachment—because certainly, if a US president deliberately caused the deaths of hundreds of American soldiers, and thousands or tens of thousands of Iraqis, by launching a war

based on lies, that would be an impeachable offense.

Former General Wesley Clark, perhaps inadvertently, touched on the devastating political implications of the exposure of Bush’s lies. At one point later in the debate, he returned to the issue of the war in a roundabout way, citing his discussions with top military officials shortly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. “I heard from the Pentagon two weeks after 9/11 that the administration was determined to go into Iraq, whether or not there was any connection with 9/11; that they were going to use it as a pretext for invading Iraq.”

He continued, “And this was common knowledge in Washington. There should never have been a congressional authorization for the president to have a blank check to take this country to war, because everybody knew that’s what he intended to do. And they knew what the timetable was. It was a politically motivated timetable to go in the 30th of March, just like this 30th of June date” (the date for the formal restoration of sovereignty to a US stooge regime in Baghdad).

Clark was taking the opportunity to criticize those among his opponents, including Kerry, Edwards and Lieberman, who voted for the “blank check” for Bush. But his comments go beyond this. He confirms that it was “common knowledge in Washington”—i.e., among leading Democrats and Republicans, and in the media as well—that the Bush administration had decided to use the terrorist attacks as a pretext for war, nearly 18 months before the actual invasion. In other words, all sections of the American political establishment share responsibility for what is, under international law, a war crime: the planning and launching of an unprovoked and aggressive war.

That is the real reason for the Democrats’ timid response to Kay’s revelations about weapons of mass destruction. The entire congressional Democratic Party is implicated in Bush’s crimes. Moreover, the Clinton administration, which trumpeted the supposed existence of WMD in Iraq, during the series of bombing attacks it launched during 1998, is equally culpable.

In that context, it is worth noting that Kucinich, the supposed antiwar stalwart, praised Clinton’s foreign policy in the South Carolina debate, saying “the Clinton administration handled its approach in a way that I think tried to create international cooperation.”

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