

National service forum at Columbia University

Obama calls for US military mobilization

By Patrick Martin
13 September 2008

In remarks that clearly pointed toward the restoration of the military draft under an Obama administration, the Democratic candidate said Thursday night that his job as president would include demanding that the American people recognize an “obligation” for military service. “If we are going into war, then all of us go, not just some,” Senator Barack Obama declared.

Obama’s comments came as he and his Republican opponent, Senator John McCain, took part in a forum on national service at Columbia University in New York City. Earlier in the day, both candidates joined in a memorial service at the site of the World Trade Center, commemorating the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

While “national service” encompasses more than the military, including such government-run programs as the Peace Corps, Americorps and Teach for America, as well as private and religious programs, both McCain and Obama focused on expanding the US Armed Forces as a major goal of the next administration, whether Democratic or Republican.

In an indication of the bipartisan support for the increasing militarization of American society, McCain jokingly offered to name Obama his coordinator for national service if the Republican were to win the election, and Obama reciprocated.

The forum was co-hosted by Judy Woodruff of the Public Broadcasting Service and Richard Stengel, editor of *Time* magazine. Woodruff introduced Stengel as the man responsible for the magazine’s 2007 cover story, “The Case for National Service,” which Woodruff said had “ignited this movement.”

McCain was the first of the two candidates to appear at the forum. In response to a direct question from Woodruff, he rejected the restoration of the draft, voicing support for maintaining an all-volunteer army. Such a disavowal is to be expected 55 days before a presidential election, and no doubt Obama would have given a similar response had he been asked the same question.

But in the course of his discussion with Woodruff and

Stengel, McCain repeatedly connected the imperative of “national service” with the outbreak of international crises in which an American military role would be posed. Citing the Russian intervention in Georgia and the deteriorating position of the US-backed regime in Afghanistan, he said the American people could “see a whole lot of things happening in the world that’s going to require us to serve.”

McCain also said that he would sign the bipartisan legislation, co-sponsored in the Senate by Democrat Edward Kennedy and Republican Orrin Hatch, to triple the size of Americorps, the domestic version of the Peace Corps.

Obama’s comments were even more directly related to building up the US military. He spoke at some length to offer effusive praise for the armed forces. Woodruff asked him about the record number of Army officers leaving the military because of repeated, lengthy overseas deployments.

The candidate responded, “Well, first of all, as commander-in-chief, my job is to keep America safe. And that means insuring that we’ve got the best military on Earth. And that means having the best persons in uniform on Earth. We have that right now, but as a consequence of these wars, they have been strained incredibly. I think it’s important for us to increase the size of our Army and our Marines so we can reduce the pace of tours that our young men and women are on.”

After recalling his grandfather’s service in World War II, in the army of General George Patton, he noted that his grandfather was eligible for GI Bill education benefits and Federal Housing Administration loans to help purchase a home because of government policies favoring the discharged veterans. “There was that sense of sacred obligation that, frankly, we have lost during these last two wars,” Obama said. “I want to restore that.”

Obama went on to make his most direct statement of the campaign about expanding military service, declaring: “But it’s also important that a president speaks to military service as an obligation not just of some, but of many. You know, I traveled, obviously, a lot over the last 19 months. And if you go to small towns, throughout the Midwest or the Southwest

or the South, every town has tons of young people who are serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. That's not always the case in other parts of the country, in more urban centers. And I think it's important for the president to say, this is an important obligation. If we are going into war, then all of us go, not just some."

Taken in the context of a forum on national service, these comments have an unmistakable and ominous implication. Military service in the volunteer army is undertaken disproportionately by small-town and rural youth, for both economic and cultural reasons. It is far less common for middle class and working class youth in large cities, and especially their suburbs, to enlist in the military.

Obama holds out the prospect that, at least initially, his demand for wider participation in military service would consist of encouraging more enlistments in the volunteer army. When that failed, as it undoubtedly would, to produce sufficient cannon fodder for the next round of imperialist wars, the logical next step would be reactivation of the Selective Service System, which still exists, albeit in mothballed form.

In political terms, Obama's appearance at Columbia was aimed at demonstrating to the American political establishment that he is prepared to reject any pressure from antiwar college students, who are a major component of his campaign's personnel and volunteers. To that end, Obama not only called for expanded military service, he directly attacked the exclusion of the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) from many college campuses.

Stengel noted that Columbia had invited President Ahmadinejad of Iran to speak on the campus, but "haven't invited ROTC to be on campus since 1969."

Obama replied, "Yes, I think we've made a mistake on that. I recognize that there are students here who have differences in terms of military policy. But the notion that young people here at Columbia or anywhere, in any university, aren't offered the choice, the option of participating in military service, I think is a mistake."

The suggestion that young people at Columbia or anywhere else are denied "the option of participating in military service" is preposterous. In no country in the world is there so much media advertising and societal pressure—largely, at this point, economic—to impel young people into the military.

ROTC became a focus of hostility on hundreds of campuses during the Vietnam War era, and was in many cases banned as a student organization. These restrictions largely ended after 1975, but they were continued or reestablished on a handful of campuses after the Clinton administration established the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy, reaffirming the longtime Pentagon ban on gays and

lesbians serving openly in the military. Such a ban violates the non-discrimination rules imposed by many campuses on corporate recruiters.

In response to a further question from Woodruff, Obama elaborated on his efforts to recruit young people to become participants in, and potential victims of, military violence. "Inspiring young people to serve is something that the president is uniquely positioned to do," he said, adding that this could be for civilian positions that are adjuncts to US military operations overseas, such as the State Department, USAID or civil engineering.

Obama returned to the subject of widening participation in military service in words that were cautiously phrased but deeply reactionary. "I think there are special obligations during wartime," he said. "We always have potential conflicts around the world, and our military has to remain strong and ready. And so I want to encourage military service, as well as other ways of serving, regardless of whether there's war or not. But I do think that over the last several years, the fact that the burden has been shouldered by such a narrow group is a problem."

In a closely balanced election, with the outcome still very much in doubt, Obama hopes to win the support of the real decision-makers—the topmost levels of the financial, political and military elite. Only a Democrat, he is suggesting, with the smokescreen of "equal sacrifice" and "fairness," can provide the millions of recruits for the US military machine that will be required for wars against countries such as Iran, Russia and China.

While utilizing the occasional high-flown phrase to appeal to the idealism of youth and students, Obama is offering the ruling class a brutal bargain: Select me as president, and I will repay you in blood.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>