

The Disappointing Selection of John Edwards, a Foreign Policy Hawk

By Stephen Zunes | July 16, 2004

John Kerry's decision to select a vice-presidential running mate who shares his militaristic foreign policy agenda has once again demonstrated the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee's willingness to take the party's activist core, which overwhelmingly supports human rights and international law, for granted.

While bringing Senator John Edwards—a bright and charismatic Southern populist—onto the Democratic ticket might attract some voters, it will likely serve to further alienate the majority of Democrats already disappointed in Kerry's strident support for President George W. Bush's illegal and disastrous decision to invade Iraq as well as a number of other questionable foreign and military policies of the current administration.

In September of 2002, in the face of growing public skepticism of the Bush administration's calls for an invasion of Iraq, Senator Edwards rushed to their defense in an op-ed article published in the *Washington Post*. In his commentary, Edwards claimed that Iraq, which had been successfully disarmed several years earlier, was actually “a grave and growing threat” and Congress should therefore “endorse the use of all necessary means to eliminate the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction.” Claiming “our national security requires” that Congress grant President Bush unprecedented war powers, he further insisted, “we must not tie our own hands by requiring Security Council action...”

The Bush administration was so impressed with Edwards' arguments that they posted the article on the State Department website.

Two weeks later, Edwards joined Kerry in authorizing President Bush to attack Iraq whenever and under whatever circumstances he chose. When the invasion went forward—despite Iraq's belated cooperation with UN inspectors and the absence of any signs of recent WMD activity—Edwards joined

Kerry in supporting a republican-sponsored resolution which “commends and supports the efforts and leadership of the President... in the conflict against Iraq.” In the same resolution—despite the consensus of the international legal community that such an offensive war is illegal—Edwards joined Kerry in insisting that the war was “lawful.” Subsequently, despite growing public disenchantment with the Bush administration's Iraq policy, Edwards has also joined Kerry in supporting the ongoing U.S. occupation.

No WMD, No Problem

In an interview on *Meet the Press* this past November, interviewer Tim Russert asked the North Carolina senator if he regretted giving President Bush “in effect a blank check for the war in Iraq.” Edwards replied by saying “I still believe it was right.”

When Russert noted the absence of Iraqi any weapons of mass destruction or any ongoing WMD programs, Edwards insisted that Iraq still posed a threat regardless of whether Saddam Hussein actually “had them at the time the war began or not” because “he had been trying to acquire that capability” previously and therefore posed “an obvious and serious threat to the stability of that region of the world.” In short, the Democrats are nominating a vice-president who believes the United States has the right to invade any country which at some point in the past had tried to develop biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons capability.



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Given that that would total more than fifty countries, the prospects of Edwards as commander-in-chief is rather unsettling.

The invasion of Iraq is widely seen as the incumbent administration's biggest blunder and is therefore the place where President Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney are most vulnerable politically. Nominating a ticket consisting of two senators who also supported the invasion of Iraq therefore robs the Democrats of what could have been their most powerful issue of the campaign. Indeed, in his Washington Post article, Edwards called for his Democratic colleagues to ensure "that politics plays no part in the debate about Iraq."

Beyond Iraq

Unfortunately, Edwards' militarism is not restricted to the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq.

He has joined Kerry in supporting dramatic increases in military spending, most of which have nothing to do with the war on terrorism.

He has also joined Kerry in his strident support for the occupation policies of the rightist Israeli government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. This has included supporting Sharon's plans for the unilateral Israeli annexation of large swaths of the occupied West Bank in order to incorporate illegal Jewish settlements from which the UN Security Council has called for an Israeli withdrawal. Edwards also joined Kerry in criticizing UN Secretary General Kofi Annan for raising questions regarding the legality of Israel's separation wall in the occupied West Bank, recently declared illegal by the International Court of Justice in a 14-1 decision.

The incipient Democratic nominees also appear to have little concern regarding human rights: For example, in the face of widespread criticism by reputable human rights organizations over Israel's systematic assaults against civilian targets in its April 2002 offensive in the West Bank, Edwards joined Kerry in 1) defending the Israeli actions, claiming that they were "necessary steps to provide security to its people by dismantling the terrorist infrastructure in the Palestinian areas;" 2) opposing United Nations

efforts to investigate alleged war crimes by Israeli occupation forces; and 3) criticizing President Bush for calling on Israel to pull back from its violent incursions into Palestinian cities in violation of UN Security Council resolutions.

In summary,

- Kerry and Edwards, like Bush and Cheney, lied about Iraq having weapons of mass destruction in order to convince the American public to support the U.S. takeover of that oil-rich country.
- Kerry and Edwards, like Bush and Cheney, insist on maintaining the U.S. occupation in the face of a growing and increasingly radical armed opposition.
- Kerry and Edwards, like Bush and Cheney, believe that while the use of sanctions and military force are appropriate means of enforcing UN Security Council resolutions against governments they don't like, it's acceptable for allied governments that violate UN Security Council resolutions to be rewarded with billions of dollars worth of unconditional military and economic aid.
- Kerry and Edwards, like Bush and Cheney, reject the efforts of Israeli and Palestinian moderates to end the repression and violence in favor of Sharon's policy of occupation, colonization, and repression.
- Kerry and Edwards, like Bush and Cheney, have wasted tens of billions of taxpayers' dollars to fill the coffers of military contractors in the face of severe cutbacks in education, health care, housing, public transportation, and other important programs.
- Kerry and Edwards, like Bush and Cheney, are willing to ignore the concerns of the human rights community in order to support repressive governments they deem to be strategic allies of the United States.

Kerry's choice for his running mate contrasts dramatically with that of independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader, who chose Peter Camejo, a forceful and articulate advocate of human rights and international law widely respected among peace and

justice activists. In the months leading up to the U.S. war against Iraq, during the invasion, and subsequently, Camejo found himself in the forefront of the anti-war movement, speaking at rallies and appearing in the media to denounce what virtually the entire international community saw as an act of aggression. Camejo has been a longstanding advocate of redirecting federal budget priorities away from excessive military spending toward human needs and has been an outspoken opponent of U.S. support for the Israeli occupation and other human rights violations.

Given the nature of the presidential election process and the Democrats' superior record to that of the Republicans on the environment, civil liberties and a number of other issues, most supporters of peace and international law will probably vote for the Kerry/Edwards ticket anyway. It would be naïve, however, to take such voters for granted.

It did not have to be this way. There are quite a few Democratic leaders who, unlike Kerry, do support more ethical and rational foreign policies. If the Democrats were smart, they would have tried to balance the ticket by bringing in someone who identifies with the party's liberal majority instead of yet another Senate hawk trying to be some kind of a "Bush Lite."

If the Democrats want our vote in November, they need to convince us that, in this time of unprecedented international threats and pressing domestic

needs, they will pursue a more responsible foreign and military policy than that of the Republican incumbents. Choosing John Edwards as the party's vice-presidential nominee has only made that job more difficult.

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