

Democratic Party Platform Shows Shift to the Right on Foreign Policy

By Stephen Zunes | August 5, 2004

Against the backdrop of ongoing death and destruction in Iraq as a result of the U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation, the Democratic Party formally adopted its 2004 platform on July 28 at its convention in Boston. The platform focused more on foreign policy than it had in recent years. It represented an opportunity to challenge the Republican administration's unprecedented and dangerous departure from the post-World War II international legal consensus forbidding aggressive wars as well as a means with which to offer a clear alternative to the Bush Doctrine.

Even the Republican Party under Barry Goldwater in 1964 and Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984 did not openly challenge such basic international principles as the illegitimacy of invading a sovereign nation because of unsubstantiated claims they might some day be a potential security threat.

Yet not only have Senators John Kerry and John Edwards continued to defend their support of the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq, the 2004 Democratic platform complains that the administration "did not send sufficient forces to accomplish the mission." The most direct challenge to Bush administration policies in Iraq contained in the platform is its alleged failures to adequately equip American forces.

The only thing the 2004 Democratic Party platform could offer opponents of the war is a sentence which acknowledges "People of good will disagree about whether America should have gone to war in Iraq." As the *Los Angeles Times* editorialized, "Indeed they do. That is why we have elections, and it would have been nice if the opposition party had the guts to actually oppose it."

A Platform in Defense of Unilateralism

While the foreign policy segments of this year's Democratic Party platform had some positive elements, there are serious problems not only in what it did not say, but also in much of what it did say.

For example, the platform justifies the ongoing U.S. military occupation of Iraq by claiming "having gone to war, we cannot afford to fail at peace. We cannot allow a failed state in Iraq that inevitably would become a haven for terrorists and a destabilizing force in the Middle East." This ignores the fact that Iraq's instability and the influx of foreign terrorists is a direct consequence of the U.S. invasion and occupation authorized and supported by the Democratic Party's presidential and vice presidential nominees.

To those who are disturbed at Senator Kerry's support for invading foreign countries in defiance of the United Nations Charter, the platform asserts "With John Kerry as commander-in-chief, we will never wait for a green light from abroad when our safety is at stake." However, there is nothing in the UN Charter which limits the right of the United States or any government to genuine self-defense. Such language may be preparing the way for a President Kerry, like President Bush, to launch invasions or other military actions against foreign countries in defiance of international law by simply claiming that "our safety is at stake," just as Kerry did from the Senate floor in justifying his support for the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

One possible target for American forces under a Kerry administration is Iran. The platform implies an American right to such military intervention by stating that "a nuclear-armed Iran is an unacceptable risk to us and our allies." No concern is expressed, however, about the already-existing nuclear arsenals of



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Iran's neighbor Pakistan or of nearby Israel. Iran has called for a nuclear-free zone in the region, which the Democrats appear to reject, apparently because it would require America's regional allies to get rid of their nuclear arsenals as well. The Democrats, like the Republicans, believe that instead of pushing for multilateral and verifiable arms control treaties, the United States can effectively impose a kind of nuclear apartheid, unilaterally determining which countries can have nuclear weapons and which countries cannot.

Furthermore, like the neocons in the Bush administration, the Democrats appear to have rejected the longstanding doctrine of nuclear deterrence in favor of policy based upon risky, destabilizing, and illegal unilateral pre-emptive military strikes.

Democracy and Double Standards

The Democrats appear to be similarly selective regarding democracy. For example, the platform calls for strategies to “end the Castro regime as soon as possible and enable the Cuban people to take their rightful place in the democratic community of the Americas.” Significantly, there are no similar calls anywhere in the platform to end any of the scores of non-socialist dictatorships currently in power throughout the world or of enabling the people oppressed by these regimes—many of which receive significant U.S. military and economic support—to join the democratic community of nations. Similarly, the platform promises to “work with the international community to increase political and economic pressure on the Castro regime to release all political prisoners, support civil society, promote the important work of Cuban dissidents, and begin a process of genuine political reform,” yet there are no calls for such pressure on any right-wing dictatorships.

The Israel Exception

Strategic parity has long been considered the most stabilizing relationship between traditional antagonists if the goal is peace and security. When it comes to American allies like Israel, however, the Democrats instead appear to be committed to maintaining that country's military dominance of the region, with the platform pledging “we will insure that, under all circumstances, Israel retains its qualitative edge.”

Regarding the city of Jerusalem, the Arab-populated eastern half of which was seized by Israeli forces in 1967 and subsequently annexed, the platform insists that “Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and should remain undivided.” This has been widely acknowledged as yet another Democratic attack on the UN Charter, which forbids any nation from expanding its boundaries through military force, as well as a rejoinder to a series of UN Security Council resolutions calling

on nations to not recognize Israel's illegal annexation of East Jerusalem. It can also be reasonably viewed as an effort to undermine last year's Geneva Initiative and other Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts which call for Israeli control of Jewish neighborhoods and Palestinian control of Arab neighborhoods in a city which would serve as the co-capital of Israel and Palestine with full access to holy places by people of all faiths.

In yet another attack on international legal principles, the platform also dismisses as “unrealistic” any obligation for Israel to completely withdraw from lands seized in its 1967 conquests and denies Palestinian refugees' right to return, insisting that they instead only be permitted to relocate to a truncated Palestinian state which Israel might allow to be created some time in the future.

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Skewed Priorities

Despite pressing domestic needs, the Pentagon budget now constitutes over half of all federal discretionary spending. The United States spends almost as much on its military as the rest of the world combined. Never in history has one power been so dominant on a global scale. Yet this is not enough for the Democrats. The Democratic Platform insists that the U.S. military “must be stronger, faster, and better armed.”

Ironically, the first reason mentioned in the platform as to why, despite pressing needs at home, “we must strengthen our military” is the “asymmetrical threats we now face in Iraq”—threats that were non-existent until the U.S. invaded that country, a decision authorized and supported by Kerry, Edwards and the Democratic leadership of both houses in Congress.

Opposition from the rank-and-file

This does not mean that a majority of Democrats support such right-wing foreign policies. For example, a poll just prior to the convention showed that 95% of the delegates oppose the decision to invade Iraq, something that both their presidential and their vice presidential nominees have steadfastly refused to do.

That the delegates were prevented from even challenging the platform or voting to include an anti-war plank is a demonstration of how undemocratic the “Democratic” Party has become. Even in the 1968 Democratic convention, when the target of anti-war activists was the incumbent Democratic administration and when most state delegations were dominated by the party establishment, the delegates were allowed to propose, debate and vote upon an anti-war plank, which—despite its defeat on the convention floor—did give opponents of the Vietnam War

an opportunity to express their views before the convention and the national media.

It is also a sign as to just how far to the right the Democratic Party leadership has become as compared to the rank-and-file, which could severely weaken the enthusiasm of the party base the Kerry campaign needs to counter the Republicans’ advantage in funding during the fall campaign.

Finally, it is a reminder that should Kerry and Edwards be elected, those who support international law, human rights, and adequate funding for domestic needs will have to continue their struggle as much as ever.

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Recommended citation:

Stephen Zunes, “Democratic Party Platform Shows Shift to the Right on Foreign Policy,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, August 5, 2004).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0408shift.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Stephen Zunes
Editor: John Gershman, IRC
Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC

p. 4

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