

The Bush-Gore debate: snapshot of a political system in decay

Patrick Martin
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The first presidential debate between Vice President Al Gore and Texas Governor George Bush, held in Boston October 3, was a thoroughly contrived and dishonest affair, but nonetheless gave a glimpse of the crisis-ridden character of the political system in America.

Notwithstanding the attempt by the media to promote the initial contest between the two candidates and portray the event as a model of American democracy in action, the widespread distrust of the electorate for both candidates and both official parties was reflected in the size of the TV audience, one of the smallest for a presidential debate in recent history. Post-debate opinion polls underscored the disaffection of voters, indicating that few viewers who had not already made up their minds were impressed by either presidential aspirant.

For much of the 90-minute debate, the two candidates vied with each other to display their conservative credentials. The Republican Bush bashed Gore as a big-government liberal, while the Democrat declared that a Gore administration would cut the number of federal workers and make balancing the budget and paying down the national debt its number one priority.

Gore adopted a more aggressive stance in foreign policy, defending US military deployments in the Bosnia civil war and the NATO occupation of Kosovo. He boasted of his past support for Ronald Reagan's huge Pentagon buildup and President George Bush's 1991 war against Iraq.

In his most blatant attempt to cozy up to right-wing elements, Gore echoed the attacks of religious fundamentalists on Hollywood, criticizing what he called "cultural pollution" by the entertainment industry. Bush only murmured his agreement.

The Democratic and Republican candidates engaged in one-upmanship over who would be more draconian in enforcing testing of school children and teachers by state and local governments. Increasingly a regime of standardized tests is being employed around the country as a substitute for committing the resources needed to reverse the decline in public education. Many teachers in Texas and other states where such tests have become pervasive complain that the obsession with test scores is disrupting the learning process. In some states poor test scores are used to justify the closure of schools in working class neighborhoods.

Gore proposed mandatory testing in the fourth and eighth grades, while Bush said all children should be tested every year. Gore called for competency tests for new teachers, Bush for testing all teachers, new or experienced. Gore called for voluntary national testing, on top of state and local tests, and Bush demanded the national tests be compulsory. Both candidates voiced their support for charter schools.

Bush made one comment that bordered on the surreal. In the course

of the debate he sought to obscure his political alliance with extreme-right anti-abortion groups. But in reply to a follow-up question on abortion, Bush declared, "I think what the next president ought to do is to promote a culture of life in America." Gore, who himself supports the death penalty, chose not to expose the hypocrisy of the Texas governor, who has presided over the execution of more prisoners than any other elected official in recent history—145 and counting since Bush took office in 1994.

If this were all that was said at the debate, the affair would hardly be worth significant comment. But the event featured an intensification of Gore's populist-style attacks on Bush's tax cut plan, which the vice president first laid out at the Democratic National Convention in August.

Nearly a dozen times in the course of the 90-minute session Gore criticized the Bush tax plan as a windfall for the wealthy. The Republican candidate "would spend more money on tax cuts for the wealthiest 1 percent than all of the new spending that he proposes for education, health care, prescription drugs and national defense, all combined," Gore declared at the beginning of the session.

Bush was clearly unprepared to deal with the issue of economic inequality, despite the fact that Gore has made such populist rhetoric a centerpiece of his campaign speeches. The Republican candidate complained several times that Gore was guilty of "fuzzy math," but he never denied that his tax plan would provide the greatest rewards to the super-rich.

Instead of defending his own plan, Bush sought to compare Gore to Lyndon Johnson, suggesting that the Democrat's meager plan for limited prescription drug coverage under Medicare, together with a handful of other minor, Clinton-style reform gestures, would cost more than Johnson's entire Great Society program.

Gore's focus on the billions being given the top 1 percent marks something of a departure from the ground-rules under which American bourgeois politics has been conducted for the past quarter century. By raising prominently the gross inequities in Bush's tax plan and the general fact that Bush speaks for privilege, Gore lifted the lid on the dirty secret of American politics—that both parties have collaborated in a vast redistribution of wealth to the advantage of the richest layers and the disadvantage of everyone else.

This attack on the privileged elite has won a certain degree of popular support, reflected in Gore's rise in the polls. The response is limited, however, because of the right-wing record of the Clinton-Gore administration and the well-founded suspicion that the Democrats have only seized on the issue of social inequality as an electoral ploy.

Clinton has continued his Republican predecessors' offensive against

the living standards of working people, making Gore's populist pretensions all the more hypocritical. If Gore wins the election, his self-proclaimed devotion to "the working men and women of this country" will evaporate as quickly as it arose.

There is, however, an objective logic behind the emergence of social inequality as a pivotal issue in the 2000 election. The gulf between the most privileged social layers and the masses of working people has grown to unprecedented dimensions over the last 20 years. It has become impossible to entirely insulate the US political system from the consequences of this social polarization. Just beneath the surface of official reaction in America, social discontent is mounting within the general population.

Neither the Republican Party nor the media have been able to adjust to this new element in American politics. Bush was visibly on the defensive throughout much of the debate, not only on his tax-cut bonanza for the wealthy, but on social issues such as restricting abortion rights, eliminating all government restrictions on big business and introducing school vouchers, a major step toward the privatization of education.

The cosmetic character of Gore's populism was demonstrated by his decision not to discuss either the record of the Republican Congress or the right-wing-inspired campaign to force President Clinton from office. The failed impeachment drive was the great unmentionable of the debate, as it has been throughout the presidential campaign.

On several occasions, when Bush criticized the failure of the Clinton-Gore administration to carry out previous pledges on Social Security, Medicare and other social programs, Gore conspicuously avoided any criticism of the Republican Congress. Gore made only one oblique reference to the right-wing policies of the Republican congressional leadership, citing their opposition to the Clinton administration's environmental program.

While Democratic congressional candidates in 1998 and again this year have made heavy use of public antipathy toward former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich, Gore made no mention of Gingrich, his right-wing "Contract with America" platform, or the shutdown of the federal government during the budget conflicts of 1995-96.

Bush was more than willing to remain silent on impeachment and the record of the Republican Congress, both of which are deeply unpopular. It is a remarkable fact—illustrating the shallowness of what passes for politics in America—that only five weeks before the election, after an interminable campaign lasting at least 18 months, Bush has never publicly stated his attitude to the attempt to impeach Clinton.

In his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, Bush declared that he "had no stake" in the partisan wars in Washington—an astonishing claim for a candidate whose party spearheaded the first impeachment and trial of an elected president in US history. A compliant media has never asked Bush whether he would have voted to impeach Clinton or remove him from office.

Public Broadcasting System anchorman Jim Lehrer, who served as moderator, continued this media silence. Although the attempt to remove a twice-elected president was certainly the most important event of the 1990s, from the standpoint of the American political system, Lehrer asked no questions about the Clinton impeachment.

Only one of Lehrer's questions went beyond the banal and predictable. That was when he asked both candidates in succession about their general attitude to government intervention in the event of a crisis in the stock market or the failure of a major financial

institution.

After the two candidates gave virtually identical responses, pledging federal assistance in the event of a market collapse and invoking the name of Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan, Lehrer pressed Bush to confirm that he did not oppose the "federal government intervening in what might be seen by others to be a private financial crisis." Bush responded: "No, there's no difference on that."

The subtext of this question is mounting concern on Wall Street over statements by Bush's chief economic adviser, former Federal Reserve governor Lawrence Lindsey, suggesting that he opposed the actions of Greenspan and Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin during the August 1998 crisis involving Long-Term Capital Management, a major hedge fund which faced bankruptcy as a result of its investments in Russian securities.

Greenspan and Rubin, together with leading Wall Street bankers, organized a rescue operation which stabilized LTCM long enough to ensure an orderly sell-off of its massive and complex investment portfolio, averting a panicky liquidation that could have had incalculable consequences for the broader market.

Lindsey had indicated that this intervention amounted to an unwarranted interference in the "free market," and that unsuccessful speculators like LTCM should be allowed to fail without assistance. Lehrer extracted from Bush a de facto repudiation of this position, in a comment that meant little to the national television audience, but had great significance for those who dominate the US financial system.

The very fact that the PBS anchorman chose to raise the issue of a potential market collapse is a sign that, in the judgment of elite circles, the health of the US economy and financial system is far different from the rosy scenario painted by both Bush and Gore.

This underscores the unreality of much of the debate between the Democratic and Republican candidates. In a few months time, arguments over how to distribute a massive and burgeoning Treasury surplus and "extend our prosperity" could well be superseded by talk of dire austerity measures and other emergency actions to cope with panic on the monetary and securities markets and a slumping economy.

Bush's huge tax cuts for the rich and Gore's promises of minimal social reforms are premised on a budget surplus that is problematic at best and will disappear entirely in the event of a significant downturn in the US and world economy.



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