The final US presidential debate and beyond: Gore limps toward the finish line

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The final presidential debate, held October 17 in St. Louis, highlighted the political cowardice and reactionary underpinnings of Vice President Al Gore's campaign—a combination that could very well hand victory in November to his Republican opponent, George W. Bush, virtually by default.

Facing an adversary who openly acknowledged that his tax proposals would overwhelmingly benefit the rich, and declared, in a country with 44 million uninsured people, that he was "absolutely opposed to a national [health] care plan," Gore was unable to present an alternative that in any serious way addressed the social needs of the broad mass of working people.

It is not here a matter of giving advice to the Democrats, or political support to Gore as a "lesser evil" to Bush. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has stressed, the 2000 election campaign demonstrates the political crisis and corruption of both parties, which, whatever their differences, defend the interests of the ruling elite in America.

It is, however, necessary, in contrast to the cynical blather than passes for analysis in the media, to examine the social forces and processes that underlie political events, and, in particular, the impotence of the Gore camp.

As has been the case throughout his campaign, Gore's uppermost concern in Tuesday's debate was to appease the arbiters of official public opinion in the media and reassure the American ruling elite that a Gore administration would not signify a revival of welfare-state liberalism. In response to Bush's denunciation of a national health program, Gore declared that he too was opposed to "government-run" health care. His repeated assertions that he was for "small government" and fiscal discipline rendered his pseudo-populist appeals to "middle-class working families" all the more stilted and unconvincing.

At several points in the debate Gore took pains either to associate himself with reactionary policies advocated by Bush, or outflank his adversary from the right. When a questioner from the audience criticized Bush for his evident pride in presiding over a record number of executions as governor of Texas, Gore responded by affirming his own support for the death penalty and refrained from any criticism of Bush's grisly record of state killings. When another questioner expressed concern over "immoral" films, TV programs and music, Gore restated his earlier threat to launch a government crackdown on Hollywood. On the issue of military spending, Gore boasted that his budget proposal allocated more than twice as much for the Pentagon than Bush's.

Gore and his advisers were apparently pleased by the debate, which the media pundits and opinion polls generally acknowledged the Democratic candidate had "won." Given the mettle of Gore's opponent, however, this cannot provide much consolation for a campaign that has been floundering for several weeks.

Bush was unable to answer Gore's charges that his tax policies overwhelmingly benefited the wealthiest layers of the population and that his proposal to partially privatize social security would eventually require cuts in benefits, or bankrupt the system. But there was no indication that Gore's brand of reformism without serious reforms had inspired any real enthusiasm among broad layers of the electorate.

Moreover, Bush was able to exploit the glaring contradictions underlying Gore's pose as champion of the people "against the powerful." He repeatedly attacked his Democratic opponent as a "big spending" liberal. Gore's response was to plead innocent to the charge, citing his role in slashing 300,000 federal jobs and promising to reduce federal spending as a percentage of the gross domestic product to the lowest level in 50 years.

The fact that the two candidates competed with one another in renouncing government spending, while basing their budget proposals on the assumption of record budget surpluses, underscored the right-wing social policy of both parties.

The other major theme, invoked by Bush no less than 10 times in the course of the 90-minute debate, was the claim that he was a Washington "outsider" who would end the culture of partisan "bickering and finger-pointing" in the nation's capital. This remarkable assertion from the standard bearer of a party that waged an unprecedented campaign of dirty tricks, culminating in the partisan impeachment of President Bill Clinton, was only possible because Bush could count on Gore's fear of raising the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal and the Republican attempt at a political coup.

As in the previous two debates, both candidates avoided any mention of their respective parties, a tacit acknowledgment of the widespread public disaffection with the two-party system. In the case of Bush this reticence is more easily understandable, given the public repudiation of the right-wing agenda of the Republican Congress, and especially its effort to bring down the Clinton White House, which found an unmistakable expression in the Republican debacle in the 1998 congressional elections.

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But Gore's effort to distance himself from the Democratic Party and the Clinton administration might seem, at first glance, more perplexing. Gore has been intent on disassociating himself from Clinton, to the point of insisting that the 2000 election is not a referendum on the supposedly unprecedented record of economic success of the Clinton-Gore years. In none of the three debates did Gore utter Clinton's name.

Nor has Gore sought to tap into public anger over the record of the Republican Congress. He has remained silent not only on the impeachment conspiracy, but on former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich and his "Contract with America," which culminated in the Republican shutdown of the federal government in 1995-96, an action that outraged tens of millions of Americans.

No less striking is Gore's refusal to campaign jointly with Clinton, a stance that has provoked protests from leading Democrats, including Clinton himself, who are well aware that Clinton remains the most popular Democratic politician and believe that Gore's only chance of getting crucial working class voters to the polls is to link his campaign as closely as possible to the incumbent.

Gore's silence on the impeachment episode and the overall record of the Republican Congress and his determination to keep Clinton at arm's length are of a piece. They are part and parcel of his effort to conciliate right-wing public opinion, as articulated by the media. A review of his campaign shows that it has been dominated by such considerations.

Gore's selection in August of Senator Joseph Lieberman as his running mate was an obvious concession to all those forces that supported the Republican impeachment drive. Lieberman made his mark by becoming the first prominent Democrat to publicly denounce Clinton for his relationship with Lewinsky. Lieberman's cloying speech in the well of the Senate at the height of the investigation by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr helped legitimize what was essentially a sting operation organized by Republican leaders, Christian fundamentalists and a section of the federal judiciary, and financed by reactionary businessmen.

When Gore continued to lag in the opinion polls, the Democratic candidate attempted to jump-start his campaign by making a populist-style speech at the Democratic convention later in the month. His appeal to popular grievances against the growth of economic inequality and the domination of corporate interests evoked a certain response, propelling his poll ratings above those of his rival.

But after the first televised debate he was roundly attacked in the media, and Gore responded by largely abandoning his populist demagogy and striking a pose of contrition and conciliation in the second contest with Bush. This failed to stem the tide of media criticism and led to a further decline in his poll numbers. In the final debate, Gore sought to revive his populist pose while simultaneously declaring himself an opponent of "big government."

Since the October 17 outing Gore has taken pains to reiterate his commitment to fiscal discipline, pledging in an October 19 speech at Columbia University in New York to "underspend" the budget surplus, pay off the national debt and reduce the size of the federal government. After being introduced by Robert Rubin, former treasury secretary and current chairman of the investment firm Goldman Sachs, Gore declared, "You better believe that the era of big government is over."

The same day he appeared on the Rosie O'Donnell television show and denounced Clinton's liaison with Monica Lewinsky, saying, "I condemned his personal mistake. I do so again."

Gore's conviction that the Lewinksy scandal and impeachment episode are huge liabilities flies in the face of the actual sentiment of the majority of the electorate. But this perception, which is shared by the Democratic Party as a whole, including Clinton himself, conforms to the outlook of the media establishment, which was itself deeply implicated in the political conspiracy. The disconnect between official opinion and mass sentiment on this issue exposes in the sharpest form the chasm that separates the entire political establishment and the general population.

That chasm is reflected as well in the widespread apathy of the public toward the election. The viewing audience for the third debate was a mere 37.7 million, nearly nine million less than the first debate. The dramatic erosion of popular support for the two-party system can be gauged by comparing these figures with the viewing audience for the October 1980 debate between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, which was 80.6 million. The intervening 20 years have seen an unrelenting offensive against the working class, a vast redistribution of wealth from the majority to the top 5 or 10 percent of the population, and an ongoing shift of both parties to the right. There can be little wonder that tens of millions of workers, especially the young and the most oppressed social layers, view both parties and their candidates with a combination of distrust and hostility.

The inability of Gore and the Democrats to gauge public sentiment dovetails with a deliberate effort to cover up the vast implications of the impeachment campaign. The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, are fearful that any honest appraisal of the concerted effort to remove an elected president by pseudo-legal means will expose the deep decay of democratic institutions in the US.

The decay of the political system is nevertheless evident in the 2000 election, a contest between a party politically dominated by extreme right-wing forces that seeks to mask its reactionary social agenda behind political banalities delivered by a political cipher, George W. Bush, and a party that seeks to conceal its defense of social inequality and the interests of a privileged elite behind threadbare phrases and empty promises, delivered by a political operative named Al Gore.

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