

First Republican presidential debate displays a party in deepening crisis

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Thursday night's presidential debate in Simi Valley, California underscores the shattering impact of the failure of the Bush administration on the Republican Party. Six and a half years after Bush took office—thanks to the Supreme Court, not the votes of the American people—his government is so isolated and unpopular that the Republicans vying to succeed him avoided even mentioning the current occupant of the White House.

Only one of the ten candidates for the Republican presidential nomination used Bush's name in the course of the 90-minute session (Senator Sam Brownback, while declining to express an opinion on a pardon for convicted White House aide Lewis Libby). Even when moderator Chris Matthews used the last question of the debate to ask each candidate to explain how they would be different from the incumbent president, not one chose to name George W. Bush, whom polls show to be more unpopular than any president since Richard Nixon on the eve of his resignation.

Nor did the Republican candidates spend a great deal of time on the most important policy decision of the Bush administration and the central issue in the 2008 elections: the invasion and ongoing occupation of Iraq. In the first round of questions, Matthews asked several of the candidates to give their views on the war. After perhaps five minutes discussion, neither the moderator nor the candidates returned to the subject again.

If one simply lists the subjects that were *not* addressed in the debate—health care, the economy, poverty, jobs, social inequality, racial discrimination, the federal budget deficit, illegal NSA domestic spying, illegal CIA torture, Guantánamo, the war in Afghanistan—it becomes clear that the “debate” had nothing to do with the serious social and political issues facing the American people.

Instead, the event had more the character of an audition, held to give the candidates an opportunity to voice their views on a series of litmus tests imposed by the Christian

fundamentalist elements whose support they are courting in the Republican primaries: abortion, gay rights, stem cell research, the Terry Schiavo case, the teaching of evolution.

Nine out of ten, all but former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani, said they would welcome a Supreme Court decision overturning *Roe v. Wade* and allowing the states or the federal government to make abortion illegal. Seven of the ten backed the congressional effort to maintain Schiavo on life support despite overwhelming medical evidence that she was in an irreversible vegetative state. Eight of the ten opposed federal funding of stem cell research. And in response to a direct question, former Wisconsin governor Tommy Thompson said that businesses should be allowed to fire gay employees because of their sexual orientation.

Three of candidates—Kansas Senator Brownback, Congressman Tom Tancredo of Colorado and former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee—were the most openly theocratic in their outlook, starting with their declaration of opposition to the scientific theory of evolution. Brownback denounced supposed attempts to “run faith out of the public square,” although no advanced industrialized country is so saturated with religious humbug as America. He claimed that the United States (whose Founding Fathers were religious agnostics who advocated the separation of church and state) was “a faith-based experiment as a country.” Tancredo invoked religion as the deciding factor on policy issues ranging from immigration to stem cell research, while Huckabee reiterated his criticism of Romney for saying that his Mormon religious beliefs would not influence public policy.

Besides the pandering to the Christian right, the candidates showed the greatest enthusiasm for promising still more tax cuts for the wealthy and business. When Matthews invited them to name a tax they would cut, in

addition to preserving all of Bush's tax cuts, there ensued a stampede to promise bigger and bigger handouts to the rich, to be paid for through greater cuts in social spending.

Rather than engage in any serious evaluation of the legacy of the Bush administration for American society, the candidates sought to posture as the political heirs of a president who left the political stage nearly 20 years ago, Ronald Reagan. Speaker after speaker invoked Reagan's name as a talisman, as they advocated policies even more reactionary than the attacks on the working class which Reagan carried out in the 1980s.

The speakers invoked Reagan as a mythic figure who supposedly unified America and was a protagonist of great ideas. This is a grotesque distortion of the real record of the mediocre actor and paid speechmaker, whose right-wing policies were widely hated among working people and whose mental faculties had dimmed well before he left office.

The Reagan idolatry was only one of the elements that gave to whole event an overpowering sense of unreality. There were, as well, moments that can only be characterized as bizarre.

Former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, asked to say what he disliked most about America, refused to find a single flaw—not racism, not inequality, not even immorality or drug abuse or some other evil that could be safely decried before his right-wing audience. “Gosh, I love America,” he declared.

Huckabee, asked to give a letter grade on the president's handling of the war in Iraq, declined, saying—more than four years into the war!—“We're still in the middle of the exam. Let's wait and see how it turns out.”

Brownback said that a Supreme Court action stripping women of the right to make their own decisions about child-bearing would be “a glorious day of human liberty and freedom.” Tancredo topped him by declaring the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* would be “the greatest day in this country's history.” Presumably to be followed by even greater rejoicing when *Brown v. Board of Education* is repealed or the Dred Scott decision reinstated.

Senator John McCain, whose campaign has slid in the polls as public opposition to the war in Iraq has increased, reiterated his support for the war and explicitly declared that he would go to war with Iran as well to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons. After one blood-curdling promise to pursue Osama bin Laden “to the gates of hell”—without addressing why the current administration has failed to do so—he then inexplicably gave an

apparently practiced ear-to-ear grin, sparking some media suggestions that he was cracking under the pressure of a faltering campaign.

Giuliani has also fallen recently in the polls, with his nominal support siphoned off mainly by two non-candidates, former senator Fred Thompson of Tennessee, now a television actor, and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. He seemed indifferent to the proceedings and almost oblivious, summed up in his response to the abortion question. It would “be OK” if the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, and equally OK if it did not.

All the Republican candidates, not merely Giuliani, seemed to be going through the motions rather than seriously contesting for the nomination. This in part reflects the current bourgeois political landscape, where decisive sections of big business have shifted their support to the Democratic Party and look to the Democrats to carry out the Republican program of war and reaction more effectively than the Bush-Cheney regime.

But a more fundamental process is at work. The Republican right has dominated official American politics for much of the last three decades, despite the fact that only a small fraction of the American public supports its semi-fascist political agenda. Public opinion is now shifting dramatically to the left—reflected, in however a limited fashion, in the 2006 congressional vote, and in polls showing majority support for immediate withdrawal from Iraq. The Republican Party itself may well become a casualty of the debacle facing the Bush administration.



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