

Democrats conceal pro-war policy in South Carolina debate

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The eight candidates for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination participated in a televised debate Monday night at The Citadel, the military college of South Carolina. While the format of the debate was novel, with questions based on online submissions to YouTube, a video sharing site popular among young people, the candidates broke little new ground in their responses.

While the involvement of YouTube had not a few gimmicky elements, the questions, submitted by everyday people with real concerns, brought a measure of wit, spontaneity, and sincerity into the otherwise formulaic and stage-managed proceedings. But if anything, the relatively more democratic character of the questioning produced even more barefaced and crude lies and evasions from the candidates, underscoring their estrangement from the general population and the reactionary character of their political outlook.

CNN journalists reviewed the more than 3,000 submissions from YouTube users, selecting 39 for the two-hour debate. The event was the first 2008 presidential debate officially sanctioned by the Democratic National Committee, and is to be followed by a similar CNN-YouTube affair for the Republican candidates September 17.

Several questions gave a sense of the resentment brewing within the American population against the social polarization seen everywhere and expressed particularly in political life. One questioner asked if the candidates had flown to the debate on a private jet: all of the front-running candidates said they had. Another asked if they had sent their children to private schools; Edwards, Obama and Clinton answered in the affirmative, despite adding a string of caveats. Still another questioner asked if the candidates would be

willing to work for minimum wage. After the multimillionaires John Edwards and Hillary Clinton answered "yes," Barack Obama, conceding the irony of the situation, replied, "Well ... most folks on this stage have a lot of money."

The most bitter questions were posed in relation to the war in Iraq. The mother of a soldier on his second deployment in Iraq asked why the Democrats in Congress had refused to take any action to end the war, suggesting that they were cowards, afraid "that blame for the loss of the war will be placed on them by the Republican spin machine."

This set off a series of contorted responses as Clinton, Obama and Edwards, the three leading candidates in the polls and fundraising, sought to place blame for the continuation of the war on Bush and the congressional Republicans, although all three have voted in the Senate to fund the war.

Another question came from the father of a soldier killed in Iraq, who said that his grandfather and father had also been killed in military service. "I do not want to see my youngest sons join them," he said, asking the candidates, "By what date after January 21, 2009 [the first day after the inauguration of Bush's successor in the White House] will all US troops be out of Iraq?"

This question was answered with a flagrant lie by Senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut, who declared, "I have advocated, again, that we have our troops out by April of next year."

Actually, Dodd supports a plan to withdraw all US *combat* troops by next April, which would leave tens of thousands of American soldiers in Iraq indefinitely in the guise of training Iraqi forces, counter-terrorism, and protecting US installations (presumably including Iraqi oil fields).

This is the position of Clinton, Obama, Edwards and

Senator Joseph Biden as well, who all support indefinite US occupation of Iraq while claiming to oppose the war.

The other three candidates, New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, former senator Mike Gravel and Congressman Dennis Kucinich, sought to stake out positions critical of the frontrunners and more attractive to antiwar voters.

Richardson responded to Dodd's comments by claiming that he represented a more consistently antiwar viewpoint, advocating a withdrawal of all US troops, with no residual force, within six months. This provoked a vocal retort from Biden, who repeated the bogus claim, now increasingly common in official Washington, that it was physically impossible to withdraw US troops from Iraq in less than a year.

Throughout most of the debate, Clinton, Obama and Edwards found themselves tripping over each other in their scramble to the right. When asked if she considered herself a "liberal," Clinton replied "I prefer the word 'progressive,' which has a real American meaning." After Gravel answered the same question in the negative, the conversation turned to campaign contributions and the issue was dropped.

John Edwards, asked by a questioner whether he believed American troops in Iraq are dying in vain, lapsed into rhetoric indistinguishable from that of the Bush administration. He answered, "I don't think any of our troops die in vain when they go and do the duty that's been given to them by the commander in chief. No, I don't think they died in vain."

The post-debate coverage on CNN, as well as much of the subsequent press commentary, focused on one obvious conflict between Obama and Clinton over presidential diplomacy. When asked if he would meet with leaders of Iran, Syria, Cuba, North Korea and Venezuela in person, Obama responded that he would. Clinton, however, sensing a chance to undercut her rival from the right, replied that she would make no such guarantee, as she did not want such a meeting to be "used for propaganda purposes."

Many of the questions raised during the debate concerned healthcare, social security and other economic issues, and the ongoing right-wing attacks on culture and science. One question from an avowed atheist even made it through the media censorship that habitually portrays the American people as entirely

enslaved to religion.

The roles of Dennis Kucinich and Mike Gravel were notable as well. Kucinich, in one of the starkest moments of the debate, flatly admitted that the Democratic Party had refused to use the congressional "power of the purse" to end the war since it regained control of the House and Senate last November. He drew no conclusion from this, however, except to urge more public pressure on Congress, on several occasions using his speaking time to urge viewers to "text 'peace'" on their cell phones to send a message to their legislators.

Mike Gravel, a former senator from Alaska, was generally ardent in denouncing the other nominees' support for the war and the corporate takeover of the political system. His populism had a large admixture of right-wing nostrums, including support for a consumption tax and "competitive," i.e., market-driven education, and attacks on immigrants.

Gravel and Kucinich play the role that Kucinich and Howard Dean did in the 2004 campaign, appealing to antiwar sentiments only in order to pave the way for the "mainstream" bourgeois candidate and forestall any break from the Democratic Party.

Kucinich and Gravel were given time to indict the other candidates' support of the war and their acceptance of money from banks, hedge funds, and major corporations, but insofar as the practical selection of the candidates is concerned, they represented little more than a diversion. Hillary Clinton, the current frontrunner, has raised more than one hundred and eighty times as much money as Gravel and Kucinich combined, and Obama even more than that. The supposedly "left" candidates are allowed on stage simply to bolster the anti-war credentials of a pro-war, imperialist party.



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