

Democratic presidential debate: Right-wing consensus boosts Hillary Clinton

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Thursday night's debate in Las Vegas marked a distinct effort to shift the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination to the right, to the benefit of Senator Hillary Clinton, the clear frontrunner in the campaign and the most right-wing of the candidates.

In contrast to several previous debates, there was little attention given to Clinton's history of support for the war in Iraq and for the Bush administration's war provocations against Iran. And efforts by Senator Barack Obama and former senator John Edwards to criticize Clinton fell flat, as the audience—seemingly packed with Clinton supporters—booed, and the other Democratic candidates disavowed the attacks.

Media commentary afterwards framed the debate as a significant success for Clinton, citing particularly her exchange with Edwards, which set the tone for the debate early on. Edwards criticized Clinton for backing continued US occupation of Iraq, voting with Bush and Cheney on a resolution on Iran, and defending a corrupt, corporate-dominated political system in Washington.

Clinton replied, "You know, we're Democrats and we're trying to nominate the very best person we can to win. And I don't mind taking hits on my record, on issues, but when somebody starts throwing mud, at least we can hope that it's both accurate and not right out of the Republican playbook."

The suggestion that criticism of Clinton's right-wing positions was "right out of the Republican playbook" makes no sense, since the Republican demonization of Clinton revolves around portraying her as a closet socialist, not as a warmonger or a tool of corporate interests.

But there was loud applause for this sally from the audience, which included a large number of trade unionists mobilized by the Culinary Workers, the union that represents most casino workers and is by far the largest in Las Vegas.

Three of Clinton's rivals—Senator Joseph Biden, Senator Christopher Dodd and Governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico—echoed her condemnation of Edwards' attack. Biden dismissed the criticism of Clinton's record, saying, "The American people don't give a darn about any of this stuff that's going on up here."

Dodd declared, "There's a shrillness to the debate. The American people want results. They want the job done, exactly what Joe Biden talked about here ... I think if we waste time on the shrillness of this debate, then we lose the American people."

Richardson exhorted, "Let's stop this going after each other on

character, on trust. Let us debate the issues that affect the American people and let us be positive."

None of these three has made much of an impact either in fundraising or in the polls, and each seems more to be angling for a spot on the national ticket or a high-level position in a future Clinton administration than seriously challenging the New York senator for the nomination.

Neither Edwards nor Obama offered any alternative to Clinton. Obama's positions on many domestic issues are even more right-wing than Clinton's, and she effectively attacked his proposed healthcare plan, noting that since it lacks any mandatory features it would not be truly universal.

"His plan would leave 15 million Americans out," Clinton said. "That's about the population of Nevada, Iowa, South Carolina and New Hampshire," she added, referring to the first four states holding presidential caucuses and primaries.

In reality, none of the Democratic frontrunners offers a serious answer to the healthcare crisis, because they all remain firmly within the framework of the profit-driven private healthcare and insurance system. Clinton's "mandatory" program would provide massive government subsidies to the profit-making insurance companies—a feature that she calculates will neutralize much of the insurance industry opposition that derailed her 1993 health care reform effort.

Clinton also rejected Obama's call for lifting the ceiling on Medicare taxation, currently set at \$97,500. This provision means that millionaires pay Medicare tax only on the first \$97,500 of their income, making the Medicare tax extremely regressive. But Clinton characterized the proposal to raise the ceiling as "a \$1 trillion-dollar tax increase" on "middle class families and seniors."

Edwards made his usual demagogic reference to the tens of millions living in poverty, going hungry, or going without health insurance, language which inevitably rings hollow, given his status as a multimillionaire lawyer and hedge fund adviser. And even this entirely rhetorical appeal was too much for Governor Richardson, who chastised Edwards for engaging in "class warfare."

Perhaps the most striking omission of the debate was the absence of a single question or comment on the turmoil that has swept the financial markets in the wake of the crisis in the subprime mortgage lending sector, together with a huge increase in the number of mortgage defaults, foreclosures and evictions.

No candidate or media panelist used the word "unemployment" in the course of more than two hours of discussion. Besides the

single mention by Edwards, no one referred to poverty, hunger, homelessness or any other form of social deprivation. This demonstrates the vast gulf between the millionaire candidates—as well as the millionaire anchorman Wolf Blitzer and his CNN colleagues—and the working people who constitute the vast majority of the American population.

The only discussion of economic problems was in the context of trade policy, where all the candidates embraced one form or another of national chauvinism, condemning China, or Mexico, or South Korea, or even Peru for the decline in decent-paying jobs in the United States. There was no suggestion that there was anything fundamentally wrong with American or world capitalism.

Blitzer, the debate moderator, played a particularly noxious role in steering the discussion in a consistently right-wing direction. He repeatedly interrupted candidates when they sought to criticize Clinton from the left, however timidly. Two key interventions were his interruption of Edwards during the initial 10-minute three-way conflict among Clinton, Obama and Edwards, which largely silenced Edwards for the rest of the evening, followed by his cutting off of Congressman Dennis Kucinich when he sought to raise the issue of impeachment of Bush and Cheney.

Given that Biden remarked during the debate that Bush should be impeached if he ordered a unilateral military strike against Iran, and that Kucinich's impeachment resolution was briefly debated on the floor of the House of Representatives last week, before being tabled by the Democrats themselves, it would have been perfectly natural for one of the media panel to ask the candidates whether, in their view, Bush and Cheney had committed impeachable offenses. More than half the American public holds that view, according to recent polls, but the subject remains off-limits in the "mainstream" corporate-controlled media.

Blitzer also led the way in eliciting the most right-wing comments from the candidates, in their responses to a question about US policy towards Pakistan and the coup staged by General Pervez Musharraf. Biden, who first answered the question, criticized the Bush administration's backing of Musharraf and said US aid should be conditioned on the restoration of constitutional rule in Pakistan.

Governor Richardson, who followed Biden, expanded on this criticism and declared that US foreign policy should be based on promoting human rights, not simply defending US national interests. Blitzer then focused the discussion on that issue, saying, "I want to make sure we all—I heard you correctly. What you're saying, Governor, is that human rights, at times, are more important than American national security?"

Richardson accepted this formulation, and Blitzer then posed it to the remaining candidates, who began to back away from it as they saw the implications—that they would be portrayed as being "soft on terrorism." Edwards tried to change the subject to nuclear proliferation. Obama tried to evade the question, declaring national security and human rights to be "complementary" rather than contradictory goals.

When Blitzer posed the question to Senator Dodd, "What's more important, human rights or national security?", he got the answer he clearly wanted. Dodd replied, "Well, obviously national security, keeping the country safe. When you take the oath of

office on January 20—you promise to do two things, and that is to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States and protect our country against enemies both foreign and domestic. The security of the country is number one, obviously, yes, all right?"

This is actually a grotesque falsification. The presidential oath of office, as set down in Article II, section 1 of the Constitution, reads: "I, name, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and I will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States."

There is no reference to protecting the country against "enemies both foreign and domestic," nor, incidentally, is there any invocation of God or reference to swearing on the Bible (hence the interpolation "to affirm", for those who reject religious oaths).

The question of human rights vs. national security then went to Clinton, who fully embraced the formulation by Senator Dodd. "I agree with that completely," she said. "I mean the first obligation of the president of the United States is to protect and defend the United States of America."

The transformation of the president's main responsibility from upholder of the Constitution to defender of the nation is typical of the anti-democratic trend in contemporary American politics. Dodd's remark echoes Bush's constant reference to his sweeping and unchallengeable powers as "commander-in-chief." This role, however, was assigned to the president by the drafters of the Constitution for the opposite purpose: to emphasize the subordination of the military to the civil power, not to raise the president above the rest of the government as a quasi-monarch.

The Democratic Party has no fundamental differences with the assault on democratic rights conducted by the Bush administration. Biden openly defended the Patriot Act, denying that it had sanctioned racial profiling of Muslim Americans, and none of the candidates made mention of the Senate confirmation of Michael Mukasey for attorney general, after he refused to condemn waterboarding as torture.

Thursday's debate thus underscores the fundamental political problem facing working people in the United States. Both of the major parties represent the interests of the ruling financial aristocracy. Both of them uphold a program of imperialist war abroad and social reaction at home. The central question is the development of an independent political movement of the working class directed against the profit system and the corporate ruling elite.



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