

A warning to the American people: “Thinking the unthinkable” at the Democratic presidential debate

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One exchange during Saturday’s debate among the Democratic presidential candidates in New Hampshire underscores the turn by the US ruling elite and its major political agencies—the Democratic and Republican parties and the media—to unfettered militarism and away from any genuine commitment to democracy.

ABC News anchorman Charles Gibson asked a question which he called “the central one in my mind on nuclear terrorism.” He continued:

“The next president of the United States may have to deal with a nuclear attack on an American city. I’ve read a lot about this in recent days. The best nuclear experts in the world say there’s a 30 percent chance in the next 10 years. Some estimates are higher. Graham Allison, at Harvard, says it’s over 50 percent. Senator Sam Nunn, in 2005, who knows a lot about this, posed two questions that stick in my mind. And I want to put them to you here. On the day after a nuclear weapon goes off in an American city, what would we wish we had done to prevent it? And what will we actually do on the day after?”

The “probability” estimates cited by Gibson have zero scientific credibility, since they come from “experts” associated with the US military/intelligence apparatus, who have a professional interest in terrorizing the American people with the prospect of nuclear annihilation in order to intimidate opponents of American military aggression around the world. But none of the Democratic candidates challenged Gibson for echoing the scare-mongering tactics of the Bush administration.

Former senator John Edwards embraced Gibson’s premise, saying, “In the short term, we’re faced with very, very serious threats about the possibility of these nuclear weapons getting in the hands of a terrorist group or somebody who wants to attack the United States of America. The first thing is we have to immediately find out who’s responsible and go after them. And that is the responsibility of the president of the United States. Because if someone has attacked us with a nuclear weapon, it means they have nuclear technology, it means they could have gotten another nuclear weapon into the United States that we’re unaware of. We have to find these people immediately and use every tool available to us to stop them.”

Senator Barack Obama regularly denounces the use of the 9/11 attacks by the Bush administration and the Republican presidential candidates to spread fear and win votes, but he likewise accepted the question as legitimate and sought to demonstrate his willingness to use force. Obama faced media criticism last summer when he failed to promise instant retaliation when asked a similar question during a debate.

“I think this is the most significant foreign policy issue that we confront,” he said—an extraordinary statement given the hundreds of thousands of lives destroyed by the Bush administration’s invasion and occupation of Iraq.

He continued: “We would obviously have to retaliate against anybody who struck American soil, whether it was nuclear or not. It would be a much more profound issue if it were nuclear weapons.”

Gibson then turned to Senator Hillary Clinton, reminding her that it would be a terrorist group, not an identifiable state, responsible for the hypothetical nuclear attack. Clinton first criticized the performance of the Bush administration in such areas as port security, and then argued, “The stateless terrorists will operate from somewhere. I mean, part of our message has to be there is no safe haven. If we can demonstrate that the people responsible for planning the nuclear attack on our country may not themselves be in a government or associated with a state, but have a haven within one, then every state in the world must know we will retaliate against those states.”

Citing the Cold War doctrine of nuclear deterrence, she concluded, “We have to make it clear to those states that would give safe haven to stateless terrorists that would launch a nuclear attack against America that they would also face a very heavy retaliation.”

It is notable that not one of the three leading Democratic candidates made reference to the measures that would be required to deal with the massive human cost of a nuclear attack. In this, they follow the lead of the Bush administration, which, while hyping the threat of terrorism incessantly, has done little or nothing in the way of practical preparation to deal with the possible consequences—as the dismal response of the Federal Emergency Management Agency to Hurricane Katrina

demonstrated.

There is a more fundamental issue, however, than the efforts of the Democrats to take up the mantle of the “war on terror.” That issue is what the very posing of the question says about the state of American democracy.

Ever since the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration and the main repressive agencies of the federal government—the Pentagon, the CIA, the NSA, the FBI—have been developing plans for the suspension of constitutional rule and the establishment of an executive branch dictatorship.

Nearly six years ago it was revealed that the Bush administration had assigned hundreds of federal officials to ensure “continuity of government” in the event of a terrorist attack on Washington DC. This was to be an openly dictatorial regime, drawn solely from the executive branch. No judges or elected legislators were to be included in the “shadow government,” and top legislators were not even aware of its existence.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* observed at the time these plans became public: “The greatest threat to the American people comes, not from foreign terrorists or Islamic fundamentalists, but from the behind-the-scenes machinations of the American government itself... The ‘war on terrorism’ has become the foundation on which the Bush administration has begun to erect a military-police dictatorship...” (See: “The shadow of dictatorship: Bush established secret government after September 11”)

In the years since, a definite *modus operandi* has emerged. Whenever the Bush administration feels under siege politically, the threat of terrorism is used to spread fear and anxiety among the American people, distract them from the deepening social and economic crisis of the capitalist system, and intimidate political opponents of the administration’s program of endless war.

In the spring and summer of 2004, with Bush trailing in opinion polls, there were numerous suggestions originating in the White House and the military-intelligence apparatus that the presidential election might have to be postponed in the event of a new terrorist atrocity. Bush administration officials told the press, referring to such an attack, “It’s going to happen.”

The Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice even began investigating the legal basis for suspending or postponing the November vote. Ultimately, the listless campaign of the pro-war Democratic candidate John Kerry provided so weak a challenge to Bush that such measures were unnecessary.

The 2004 election was only one occasion in which such police-state preparations came to light. They have been ongoing throughout the entire course of the Bush administration. They originated well before 9/11, within weeks of Bush’s installation in the White House after the Supreme Court intervention in the 2000 presidential election.

These measures include the establishment of a vast apparatus

of domestic spying and eavesdropping, first broached to several domestic telecommunications companies in early 2001; the passage of the Patriot Act; the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security; the creation of the Northern Command, the first-ever Pentagon command controlling all troops in the continental US; the creation of a worldwide network of CIA-run detention camps; and a series of “counter-terror” exercises in which federal civilian and military authorities simulated the imposition of a state of emergency in the United States.

In August 2005, the *Washington Post* revealed that the US military had developed plans for imposing martial law on cities, regions or the entire country in response to a terrorist attack. The existence of the plans was made known to the *Post*’s senior military correspondent at the direction of the White House and Pentagon.

The planning envisioned as many as 15 different scenarios in which “the military will have to take charge in some situations, especially when dealing with mass-casualty attacks that could quickly overwhelm civilian resources.” The *Post* cited military statements that such a declaration of martial law “probably would be temporary.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* observed at the time (“Pentagon devising scenarios for martial law in US”): “The anti-terrorism scare has a propaganda purpose: to manipulate the American people and induce the public to accept drastic inroads against democratic rights. As the Pentagon planning suggests, the American working class faces the danger of some form of military-police dictatorship in the United States.”

While he made no mention of it in framing his question about nuclear terrorism, Charles Gibson is undoubtedly well aware of these preparations for military rule. So are the presidential candidates who gave answers emphasizing their willingness to use military force—and implicitly sanctioning whatever restrictions would be deemed necessary on democratic rights at home.

The leadership of the Democratic Party has given one demonstration after another over the past decade that it is hostile to any struggle to defend democratic rights—even when, as in the Florida election crisis of 2000, its own access to power and privilege was directly affected. Saturday’s debate in New Hampshire was a further demonstration of this fundamental political fact.



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