

New Hampshire debates: Democrats and Republicans embrace US militarism

Patrick Martin
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The back-to-back televised debates among the leading Republican and Democratic presidential candidates, broadcast over ABC television Saturday, provided a stark glimpse of the militaristic policies that will be undertaken by whichever of these candidates wins the November election and enters the White House a year from now.

While the Republican candidates—with one exception—backed George W. Bush and the major policies of his presidency, above all the Iraq war, the Democratic candidates showed themselves equally determined to defend the global interests of American imperialism.

Six Republican candidates took the stage first at St. Anselm's College in Manchester, New Hampshire, in a 90-minute encounter moderated by ABC News anchorman Charles Gibson. All but Ron Paul, the Texas congressman who was the 1988 presidential candidate of the Libertarian Party, solidarized themselves with the Bush White House and went out of their way to praise Bush personally, more than in any previous debate.

The first question posed by Gibson was: "If you are the nominee, will you run on the Bush foreign policy record, or will you run away from it?"

Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, Senator John McCain, former Senator Fred Thompson and former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani all said they stood for the continuation of the administration's foreign policy.

Despite mild criticisms of particular aspects of the Bush administration's performance, all five embraced its most important principle—the waging of preventive war against countries declared by the White House to be a potential threat.

Only Congressman Paul acknowledged that the Bush doctrine is a violation of international law. He went on to assert that the terrorist attacks by Al Qaeda and other Islamic fundamentalists against US targets had taken place "because we invade their countries and occupy their countries, we have bases in their country—and we haven't done it just since 9/11, but we have done that a long time."

These comments provoked a piling on by all the other Republican candidates, each of whom sought to outdo the next in attacking Paul and saluting the record of George W. Bush. It was a remarkable reversal from previous debates in which the Republican president, whose approval rating in opinion polls is now well below 30 percent, was barely mentioned by the candidates seeking the nomination of Bush's own party.

Paul, a social and political reactionary who harks back to the old isolationist wing of the Republican Party, expresses the position of a section of Republicans who consider Iraq a diversion that cuts across the global interests of the American ruling elite. Paul supported and

continues to support the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

The Texas congressman was fully in accord with his Republican opponents once the debate shifted to domestic policies. He joined in a right-wing chorus opposing any government action to alleviate the social conditions produced by American capitalism.

All the Republicans opposed government action to improve access to health insurance, deriding even the most modest and inadequate measures proposed by the Democrats as "socialized medicine." All rejected a windfall profits tax or any other measure to curb the ability of the giant oil companies to plunder the American consumer. Not one Republican so much as mentioned jobs, unemployment or the growing threat of recession.

Romney, whose personal fortune is in the hundreds of millions, sprung to the defense of the drug monopolists. "Don't make the pharmaceutical companies into the big bad guys," he declared. Thompson came to the defense of the oil companies, saying, in response to a question about huge oil company profits, "I take note of those profits, and I take note of the losses when they've had them."

All six candidates supported an immigration policy based on savage repression of immigrants, rejecting any path to legalization as "amnesty" and howling for bigger border fences, more sensors, more border guards and immigration agents, and more detention camps.

Thompson and Romney suggested that all 12 million "illegal aliens" be forced out of the country by a combination of repression and denial of access to jobs and public services. McCain and Giuliani rejected this as impractical, while agreeing that undocumented workers should be punished. Paul and Huckabee focused on completion of a militarized fence across the entire US-Mexican border.

At the end of the Republican event, moderator Gibson enforced a moment of bipartisan unity that symbolized the right-wing consensus underlying the two debates. He invited the four Democrats—Senator Hillary Clinton, Senator Barack Obama, former Senator John Edwards and Governor Bill Richardson—onto the stage with their Republican opponents for a round of mutual back-patting and handshaking.

The ABC anchorman set an extremely right-wing tone for the Democratic debate with three questions (out of the first four) which expressed the Bush administration's paranoid perspective of a generations-long "global war on terror." He first asked the candidates whether they would authorize a unilateral military strike into Pakistan if, as president, they received intelligence information confirming the location of Osama bin Laden.

This question was directed to Obama, who made headlines during the summer when he said that he would order a cross-border strike, with or without the permission of the Pakistani government. He reiterated his position, and was then asked by Gibson whether this

wasn't a version of the Bush doctrine: "Attack when we want, regardless of the sovereignty of the government." Obama replied with a lame evasion, saying an attack on Osama bin Laden would not be "anticipating a future threat," but responding to the attacks of September 11, 2001.

The other three Democrats essentially agreed with Obama, differing only in their attitude to the government of Pakistani military dictator Pervez Musharraf. Edwards called for pressure on Musharraf to ensure the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. Richardson said the US should try to push Musharraf to resign and make way for a democratically elected government. Otherwise, Richardson warned, he could, like the Shah of Iran, be overthrown from below and replaced by an openly anti-American regime.

Clinton, remarkably, described Musharraf as "the elected president" of Pakistan, although he took power in a military coup in 1999 and was subsequently "elected" by stooge parliaments he convened after rigged elections.

Clinton somewhat inadvertently touched on the potentially catastrophic consequences of the type of aggressive US military action all of the Democratic and Republican candidates countenance, mentioning, as though in passing, that in advance of a US missile strike into Pakistan, "the Pakistani government has to know they're on the way."

She explained that "one of the problems is the inherent paranoia about India in the region in Pakistan, so that we've got to have a plan to try to make sure we don't ignite some kind of reaction before we even know whether the action we took with the missiles has worked."

Here Clinton was somewhat obliquely alluding to the possibility of US unilateral military action triggering a nuclear war on the Indian subcontinent.

Gibson then posed a fear-mongering question on national security and terrorism. He said experts agreed it was virtually certain a terrorist attack would occur within the next five years in which a nuclear bomb destroyed an American city, and demanded to know how the candidates would respond.

None of the four Democrats challenged the premise of his question—that the death of hundreds of thousands or even millions of Americans in a terrorist attack was an imminent danger. The WSWS will examine the implications of this question and the candidates' response in an article to be posted tomorrow.

After a question on Social Security and health care which generated some low-key wrangling among the four candidates, who have virtually identical policies in these areas, Gibson returned to foreign policy, posing a question about the Bush surge in Iraq. This began with a video clip from ABC News in Iraq that portrayed the surge as a major military success. "Are any of you prepared to say that the surge worked?" he asked, suggesting that the Democrats were denying reality.

Obama and Clinton each responded in the same vein, paying tribute to the prowess of the American military while blaming the Maliki government in Iraq for failing to enact power-sharing and oil revenue-sharing legislation and take other actions to alleviate the smoldering civil conflicts in the country.

Gibson then turned to Edwards, who lately has said he would bring "almost all" US troops out of Iraq. Gibson posed the question as follows: "If the generals in Iraq came to you as President Edwards and said, Mr. President—on January 21, 2009—you're wrong, you can't do this. You're going to send Iraq back into the kind of chaos we had before, are you going to stick with it?"

This was Gibson's way of browbeating the Democratic candidates into making a declaration of their support for the military brass.

Edwards had to remind the anchorman, "It is the responsibility of the president of the United States and the commander in chief to make policy decisions," although he hastened to add, "of course, I would always listen to my uniformed military leadership—directly. Not filtered through civilians—directly."

Richardson declared his goal was to remove all US troops, combat and supporting alike, by the end of his first year in office, a statement that serves only to boost illusions in the Democratic Party, since Richardson has no chance of becoming the nominee and his three rivals have flatly rejected this position.

Clinton then summed up the consensus position of the Democrats, saying, "I think we're in vigorous agreement about getting our troops home as quickly and responsibly as we possibly can, serving notice on the Maliki government that the blank check they've had from George Bush is no longer valid."

This formulation serves several purposes: to inoculate Clinton and Edwards from criticism of their votes to authorize the war in the first place; and to give an incoming Democratic president the necessary wiggle room—"as quickly and responsibly as we possibly can"—to keep troops in Iraq indefinitely.

The balance of the debate consisted of perfunctory questions on energy policy, health care and the political tactics of the various candidates against each other and against their Republican opponents. There was much backbiting as Clinton, Edwards and Obama traded charges of flip-flopping on various issues, and each proclaimed himself or herself the candidate of "change," without little effort to make that term less of an empty abstraction.

Only near the end did the discussion turn to the question of the economy and jobs, when Clinton noted—for the first time in the three hours of back-to-back debates—that the United States was on the brink of a recession. But neither Clinton nor her two main rivals, Edwards and Obama, offered any policy to address the threat to jobs, leading Richardson to ask, somewhat plaintively, "Whatever happened to the Democratic Party? We used to be the party of economic growth and jobs."

This utter indifference to the fate of the vast majority of the American population characterized both of the debates. Both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party are instruments of the American financial aristocracy, which is separated by an unbridgeable social chasm from the problems and concerns of working people.



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