

# Republican candidates deny recession, hail Iraq war as “success”

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Thursday night’s debate among the Republican presidential candidates in South Carolina demonstrated a noxious combination of political reaction and willful self-delusion.

The debate’s initial focus was on economic policy, driven not only by the turmoil on financial markets, but also by the election calendar, with primaries in Michigan January 15 and South Carolina January 19. Both states have been devastated by plant closures and the destruction of jobs.

The gulf between the candidates’ rhetoric and the real situation in the US emerged in the responses to the initial question posed by Chris Wallace, anchorman for Fox News, which broadcast the six-candidate affair. Wallace cited growing fears of an economic slump in the United States and asked the candidates if they believed the US was headed for a recession and what they would do about it.

Five of the six Republicans cast doubt on the premise of the question. Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney said that a recession could be averted through tax cuts and measures to stem the spread of the home mortgage crisis. He attacked Arizona Senator John McCain, his main rival in the January 15 primary in Michigan, for a comment that “some jobs have left Michigan that are never coming back.”

“I disagree,” he said. “I’m going to fight for every single job, Michigan, South Carolina, every state in the country.” This empty demagoguery is particularly brazen coming from Romney, who made his \$500 million fortune at the helm of Bain Capital, a takeover firm that specialized in corporate reorganizations that invariably wiped out thousands of jobs.

Romney, the son of the late Michigan governor and auto executive George Romney, gave no specifics of any measure that would actually stem the tide of layoffs, foreclosures and bankruptcies. Michigan has the highest rate of unemployment and Detroit one of the highest rates of home foreclosure.

Senator McCain described his comment about Michigan jobs being lost forever as “a little straight talk,” reiterating, “There are some jobs that aren’t coming back to Michigan. There are jobs that won’t come back here to South Carolina.”

This professed candor was merely in the service of peddling more illusions, however, as he continued, “by the way, I don’t believe we’re headed into a recession. I believe the fundamentals of this economy are strong, and I believe they

will remain strong. This is a rough patch, but I think America’s greatness lies ahead of us.”

Such rosy predictions, combined with the rejection of any significant government intervention in the economy, were echoed by three other candidates—former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and former Tennessee Senator Fred Thompson.

Huckabee praised President Bush’s handling of the subprime mortgage crisis, saying, “I think he’s handled this right without trying to rush in and do something with taxpayer money to fix this.” Giuliani reiterated his support for even more tax cuts for the wealthy, singling out the corporate tax, which he called “anti-competitive.” Thompson expressed concern about the state of the financial markets, while echoing Giuliani in support of further tax cuts for business and calling for the Bush tax cuts to be made permanent, rather than being allowed to expire in 2010.

The only dissenter was Congressman Ron Paul, a former presidential candidate of the Libertarian Party who advocates abolition or privatization of most federal government programs. He gave a rambling disquisition on “the Austrian theory of the business cycle,” and seemed to welcome the recession, arguing that nothing should be done to alleviate the conditions of bankrupt homeowners because interference with the free market would only make the financial crisis worse.

The Republican candidates were, if anything, even more delusional on the subject of the war in Iraq. In previous debates, stretching back over nearly a year, it seemed that no Republican candidate would mention the war or the president responsible for it unless backed into a corner. But in the South Carolina forum, five of the six—again, all but Paul—went out of their way to hail the war in Iraq as a success and praise a president whose public approval rating is below 30 percent.

Fox journalist Wendell Goler asked the candidates about claims that the “surge” of 30,000 US troops into Iraq, announced by Bush exactly one year ago, was successful. “Can Republicans win in November with Democrats arguing that there has been no real reduction in troops in a war that is now longer than World War II?” he asked McCain.

McCain replied aggressively: “Can the Democrats win an election when they continue to deny the facts on the ground that

we are succeeding? Can the Democrats deny that casualties have come down, that the provinces like Anbar are peaceful, that Baghdad, on New Year's Eve, thousands of people poured out in the streets to celebrate the new year?"

He continued: "Today is a historic day, my friends. Today is the day that the president of the United States announced the change in strategy, the so-called surge. I supported that, I argued for it. I'm the only one on this stage that did."

This claim touched off a series of protests by McCain's rivals, each asserting that they, too, had been true believers in the surge. Giuliani said, "John gets great credit for supporting the surge. But, John, there were other people on this stage that also supported the surge. The night of the president's speech, I was on television. I supported the surge, I've supported it throughout."

Huckabee, Thompson and Romney all claimed the same position, with Huckabee defending himself against charges that he had been unduly critical of Bush's conduct of the war. Again, the only dissenter was Paul, who compared his position to that of Senator Robert Taft, a prominent Republican leader in the 1940s, who opposed the formation of NATO on isolationist grounds.

The assertions of "success" in Iraq come as the war is coming to the end of its fifth year, with nearly 4,000 American troops killed and a death toll among Iraqis that likely exceeds one million people. Not one of the Republicans, including the ostensibly "antiwar" candidate Paul, made any mention of the effective destruction of Iraq as a functioning society or the emergence of civil war.

As a campaign event, the South Carolina debate confirmed that the most powerful elements in the Republican establishment want to eliminate Huckabee as a viable candidate and promote McCain or Romney as the alternative. Fox News, which functions as an adjunct of the Republican Party, demonstrated this political agenda with a series of softball questions to McCain, Romney, Thompson and Giuliani, while savaging Huckabee and Ron Paul.

Huckabee was asked about his support for the Southern Baptist doctrine that wives should be totally subservient to their husbands, as well as his record as an alleged "big government" governor in Arkansas, increasing state taxes and spending. No similar questions were asked of Romney about the tenets of his Mormon religion, or a similar spending record in Massachusetts.

Fred Thompson played the lead role in attacking Huckabee, devoting one 90-second response to a diatribe against his supposed liberalism. "This is a battle for the heart and soul of the Republican Party and its future. On the one hand, you have the Reagan revolution. You have the Reagan coalition of limited government and strong national security. On the other hand, you have the direction that Governor Huckabee would take us in. He would be a Christian leader, but he would also bring about liberal economic policies, liberal foreign policies."

Last week Congressman Paul was the subject of a devastating profile in *The New Republic*, which combed through 30 years of his published newsletters to document virulent anti-Semitism and racism, including denunciations of Martin Luther King Jr. and praise for former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke.

The Fox panel avoided this subject—which would strike too close to home among the racists and Christian fundamentalists in the Republican ranks—and instead grilled Paul on his ties to the so-called 9/11 truth groups, which claim that US government agencies engineered the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

A prominent feature of the South Carolina debate was the fixation of the candidates on claiming the mantle of Ronald Reagan. Huckabee was questioned about a comment by his senior campaign adviser, Ed Rollins, to the effect that the "Reagan coalition," by which he meant the alliance of Christian fundamentalists, big business, anti-government libertarians and blue collar "Reagan Democrats," had been shattered.

All of the candidates, including Huckabee, sought to present themselves as the reincarnation of Reagan, boasting of their roles as "foot soldiers" in his army, as McCain put it, or citing even the most tenuous of connections with a president who was first elected in 1980 and left office nearly 20 years ago.

This orientation might appear bizarre, but it is driven by more than the reluctance of the Republican candidates to claim too close a connection to the Republican presidents who followed Reagan, George W. Bush and his father, Reagan's vice-president and immediate successor.

The presentation of Reagan as an inspirational and even intellectual leader is of course ludicrous. The 40th US president was a backward, narrow-minded, ignorant man whose mental universe was limited to what he could fit on a 3x5 index card.

What are the Republican candidates really worshipping in Reagan? They are harking back to what they regard as his greatest achievement: the right-wing onslaught that destroyed the American labor movement in all but name and fostered the orgy of personal enrichment that has so redefined American society over the past three decades.

The heaping of ever greater wealth for the tiny minority at the top has become the obsessive focus of the American political establishment. This enormous social polarization not only encourages the grossest material corruption—expressed in countless ways in both the Republican and Democratic parties—but a kind of political and intellectual stultification, of which the debate in South Carolina was one more demonstration.



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