Obama-Clinton debate: A whiff of McCarthyism as media pushes Democratic campaign to the right

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The debate aired Wednesday night by ABC television from Philadelphia was the 21st such contest held since the beginning of the Democratic primary campaign and, without a doubt, the most reactionary and contemptible.

After two brief opening statements followed by a commercial break and a stale repetition of the attempt to get Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama to declare that each would accept the other as a running mate, the moderators—ABC's Charlie Gibson and George Stephanopoulos—settled into what can only be described as a right-wing inquisition.

While the term "McCarthyite" has no doubt been overused as a political adjective over the years, there was a good deal in the moderators' questions—demanding affirmations of patriotism and implying guilt by association—that recalled the anti-communist witchhunts of more than half a century ago.

Inevitably, the questioning began with a rehashing of Obama's "bitter" statement. The remark, made privately to a group of well-heeled contributors in San Francisco, was used to describe the political alienation of Pennsylvanians from small towns who have seen industries shut down, their jobs destroyed and successive administrations—Democratic and Republican alike—do nothing about it. In response, he said, they "cling to guns or religion."

The statement has become the focus of a firestorm of right-wing attack from both the Republican Party and the Clinton campaign over the past week.

Sounding like a prosecutor, Gibson demanded of Obama, "Do you understand that some people in this state find that patronizing and think that you said actually what you meant?"

There is no indication from opinion polls that Obama has been wounded politically by the remark. With the Pennsylvania primary less than a week away, some polls show Hillary Clinton's lead narrowing, if not evaporating altogether.

Nonetheless, Obama expressed the demanded contrition, saying he could "see how people were offended." He went on, however to reiterate that "people feel like Washington's not listening to them," and that "wedge issues" are "exploited" to divert public attention from more fundamental questions facing society.

This was followed by the umpteenth round of extended questioning on statements made by the Reverend Jeremiah Wright from the pulpit of Obama's church in Chicago. "If you knew he got rough in sermons, why did it take you more than a year to publicly disassociate yourself from his remarks?" Gibson demanded.

After Obama disassociated himself, yet again, from Wright's remarks, Hillary Clinton was invited to weigh in on the subject. She used the opportunity to declare that what Wright "said and when he said it, and for whatever reason he might have said these things" was an issue that "deserves further exploration." She then dragged in Louis Farrakhan and a statement in the church's bulletin—reprinted from the *Los Angeles Times*—by a leader of the Palestinian movement Hamas—something that has been promoted heavily on the Internet by right-wing Republican and Zionist groups.

Not stopping there, Stephanopoulos—whose past employment as the communications director in the Clinton White House would seem to raise serious conflict of interest questions—was given the floor. He shamelessly pressed Obama with, "Do you think Reverend Wright loves America as much as you do?"

Clinton was then handed a softball question about her false claims that she had come under sniper fire in Bosnia during a visit there as first lady in 1996. Stephanopoulos directed the follow-up not to Clinton, but rather to Obama, in the form of a charge that his campaign had sent out a daily "cascade of e-mails" questioning Clinton's credibility.

Obama responded by observing that both candidates inevitably made misstatements and suggesting that it is "important to make sure that we don't get so obsessed with gaffes that we lose sight of the fact that this is a defining moment in our history." He pointed to an economy "teetering not just on the edge of recession but potentially worse," US involvement in "two wars" and "greater income inequality now than any time since the 1920s" as more fitting topics for debate.

The ABC moderators, however, were having none of it. Instead, they aired a video clip from a Pennsylvania woman asking why Obama didn't wear a flag lapel pin. Gibson sought to defend the relevance of this line of inquiry—dredged up from a non-news item dating from a year and a half ago—by declaring, "As you may know, it is all over the Internet."

No doubt it is, featured on the same right-wing web sites that refer to the Illinois senator as "Barack Hussein Obama" and suggest that he is a closet Muslim.

Obama replied obediently that he "revered the flag," while noting that this was the "kind of manufactured issue that our politics has become obsessed with."

Without skipping a beat, Stephanopoulos pressed on with what he termed "the general theme of patriotism in your relationships." He questioned Obama about William Ayers, a former member of the Weather Underground, a radical protest group implicated in bombings during the Vietnam War. Ayers, now a professor of education at the University of Illinois in Chicago and a neighbor of Obama, had hosted a meeting for him when he was running for state senator in 1995.

This question had been directly fed to Stephanopoulos by the right-wing Fox News commentator Sean Hannity, when he appeared on Hannity's radio show Tuesday. Hannity said Obama should be "asked about his association with Bill Ayers, the unrepentant terrorist from the Weather Underground," and demanded of Stephanopoulos, "Is that a question you

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might ask?" The ABC moderator replied, "Well, I'm taking notes right now."

Visibly exasperated, Obama responded by pointing out he had no close relationship with Ayers. He protested against the implication that "me knowing somebody who engaged in detestable acts 40 years ago when I was 8 years old somehow reflects on me and my values," adding that it "doesn't make much sense, George."

Clinton again was invited to pile on, adding the tidbit that Obama and Ayers had served on the same board of a local Chicago social welfare foundation, and stressing that "deeply hurtful" comments by Ayers were published "on 9/11" defending Weather Underground bombings. The article in question, which was printed by the *New York Times* in its arts section—coincidentally on September 11, 2001—was based on an interview given well before the 9/11 attacks on a memoir that Ayers had written of his 1960s protest days.

Instead of exposing this line of accusation as the McCarthyite smear that it was, Obama responded by pointing to President Bill Clinton's decision to commute the prison sentences of two other former members of the Weather Underground, calling it "a slightly more significant act" than his own.

This questioning of Obama's "patriotism" occupied the entire first half of the debate. What followed was a fairly perfunctory review of political positions held by the two candidates on the Iraq war, Iran, taxation, gun control and affirmative action.

On Iraq, both candidates repeated their vows to withdraw "combat troops" from Iraq after taking office. Left unstated—and certainly unexplored by the ABC moderators—was the position of both campaigns that US military forces would be left behind in the occupied country for the purposes of "counter-terrorism" operations, training Iraqi forces and protecting US interests. Both pitched their opposition to the elevated US troop presence in Iraq from the standpoint that forces were needed for military operations elsewhere, including in Afghanistan.

On Iran, Clinton made the most noteworthy statement of the evening, vowing that an Iranian attack on Israel "would incur massive retaliation from the United States." She went further, declaring that Washington should "do the same with other countries in the region" and "create an umbrella of deterrence that goes much further than just Israel." The implication was the founding of a NATO-like mutual defense pact between the US and various repressive and semi-feudal Arab regimes aimed at preparing a war against Iran.

Again, the moderators showed no interest in questioning such an unprecedented military commitment and escalation in the region.

The most extended questioning was on taxes, with Gibson heatedly grilling both candidates about the possibility that they would raises capital gains taxes or taxes on those earning more than $250,000 a year, something that he seemed to take quite personally.

So one-sided and inquisitorial was the questioning that it provoked significant criticism of ABC from commentators in the major media. *Washington Post* television critic Tom Shales condemned Gibson and Stephanopolous for "shoddy, despicable performances," in which they "dwelled entirely on specious and gossipy trivia that already has been hashed and rehashed."

Will Bunch of the *Philadelphia Daily News* wrote an open letter to the ABC pair, declaring, "you disgraced my profession of journalism, and, by association, me and a lot of hard-working colleagues who do still try to ferret out the truth, rather than worry about who can give us the best deal on our capital gains taxes." He added, "asking Obama whether he thought Rev. Wright 'loved America' and then suggesting that Obama himself is somehow a hater of the American flag, or worse, were flat-out repulsive."

Greg Mitchell, editor of the trade magazine *Editor & Publisher*, posted a blog on the liberal *Huffington Post* web site which noted, "Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the health care and mortgage crises, the overall state of the economy and dozens of other pressing issues had to wait... Yet neither candidate had the courage to ask the moderators to turn to those far more important issues. Talking heads on other networks followed up by not pressing that point either. The crowd booed Gibson near the end. Why didn't every other responsible journalist on TV?"

The popular reaction to the ABC debate was one of generalized outrage and disgust. This was reflected on the reader comment section linked to the network's online article on the event, which had received nearly 17,000 responses by late Thursday. The words "travesty," "shameful" and "disgusting" were among the most recurrent in these reactions.

"ABC should be ashamed. George should be ashamed. Charlie should be ashamed. This isn't a debate. This is a hit job," wrote one viewer.

Another commented: "The cost of oil is at an all-time high and the value of our currency is at an all-time low. We are fighting two wars and the subprime mortgage crisis is having a debilitating effect on the middle class. We have record numbers of Americans without access to affordable health care and our Social Security system is barely solvent. And Gibson and Stephanopoulos—two despicable clowns posing as thoughtful journalists—focus on lapel pins, the Weather Underground, Jeremiah Wright, a misstatement about sniper fire in Bosnia and whether one candidate likes and respects the other candidate. This 'debate' was an affront to all middle class American families who have no alternative but to rely on circus clowns to pose questions to the ruling class."

A third wrote: "It is so hard to try and identify the absolutely WORST question. Was it, 'Does Rev Wright love America?' Was it, 'Do you love the flag?' This travesty of a debate was an insult to the intelligence of the American people. It was a reflection of the degradation of the state of the press. The issues that face this country are immeasurable and you trivialized the problems that we face."

There is every reason to believe that the revulsion expressed in these comments is shared by broad sections of the American people, including those who will vote in Pennsylvania.

The motivation behind what can only be described as a crudely biased intervention by ABC in the presidential campaign is not so much a desire to shift the opinion of the public as to intimidate Obama and drive the Democratic Party even further to the right.

Clinton proceeds with similar calculations, as her increasingly desperate campaign seeks to convince the so-called "super delegates"—the party and state officials who will cast the deciding votes at the Democratic convention in August—that Obama is unelectable, despite his winning the majority of the primaries.

For his part, Obama will inevitably shift further to the right to accommodate his critics within the Republican Party, the media and the Democratic leadership. In the end, he represents the same fundamental class interests as they do, and therefore cannot have a program to address the real issues facing the American people.

While his candidacy, with its promise of "change," has undoubtedly aroused a degree of popular support, it represents not an insurgency from below, but rather a bid by sections of the ruling elite itself to revive the credibility of US imperialism both at home and abroad, and effect changes in the tactics and tone of American foreign policy, in order to better pursue the same strategic goals.

Such a political project offers no real alternative to the broad layers of American working people seeking an end to war and the attacks on jobs, living standards and social conditions that are being driven by a historic crisis of the profit system.

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