

Second US presidential debate

Obama, McCain offer platitudes in the face of an economic disaster

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9 October 2008

The second presidential election debate between Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John McCain was an exercise in political deception, as both candidates sought to evade the implications of the US and world financial crisis.

The debate took place after weeks of unprecedented financial turmoil, culminating in a global stock market rout Monday and Tuesday that amounted to a vote of no confidence in the Wall Street bailout bill adopted last week by Congress and signed into law by Bush. But both Obama and McCain confined their remarks to platitudes that treated the crisis as a passing phenomenon rather than the overriding factor in American and world politics.

Moderator Tom Brokaw of NBC News began the debate by noting that since the first debate on September 26 "the world has changed a great deal, and not for the better. We still don't know where the bottom is at this time." (In fact, the Dow Jones Industrial Average had lost 1,700 points in the intervening period.) He then read a question submitted from the audience, asking how the candidates proposed to help workers and retirees whose livelihoods were threatened by the crisis. Neither candidate seriously addressed the subject.

Obama acknowledged, "I think everybody knows now we are in the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression." But he drew no conclusions, except to attack the record of the Bush administration.

Even this criticism was hollow, since he concluded his remarks by endorsing the current White House initiative, the \$700 billion bailout just approved by Congress. "We've got to take some decisive action," he said. "Now, step one was a rescue package that was

passed last week. We've got to make sure that works properly."

The reality he sought to conceal was that even as he spoke, the rescue package had already failed, with the Dow plunging nearly 900 points in two days and the panic spreading to Europe and Asia. Only hours before the debate, the Treasury and Federal Reserve had to intervene again to prop up the financial system by becoming the buyer of last resort for commercial paper issued by major corporations--a further raid on government funds that could prove even more costly than the bailout of the banks.

McCain's response to the same question was even more divorced from reality. "Americans are angry, they're upset, and they're a little fearful. It's our job to fix the problem. Now, I have a plan to fix this problem and it has got to do with energy independence."

Both McCain and Obama voted for the \$700 billion bailout when the legislation passed the Senate October 1, giving the Treasury secretary virtually untrammelled power to hand over vast sums to the banks.

When Brokaw asked whom they would choose as the treasury secretary to exercise this unprecedented authority over the financial system, both candidates suggested the same individual, billionaire investor Warren Buffett (who is supporting Obama). This underscores the bipartisan agreement of both campaigns on the defense of the financial aristocracy.

The essential identity of Obama and McCain on the basic class issues was demonstrated in a series of questions from the audience about the economy. Both candidates claimed that the bailout would help ordinary people, not just the wealthy. Both professed confidence in the future prospects for the American economy and

rejected suggestions that a major downturn was on the way. Both reduced the causes of the crisis to the small change of mismanagement and poor regulation--each blaming the other party--while denying that there was anything fundamentally wrong with the profit system.

Brokaw, a multi-millionaire in his own right, sought to challenge the two candidates by repeatedly suggesting that they "admit" that all Americans were responsible for the economic crisis and therefore all should be compelled to make sacrifices.

McCain flatly declared that future retirees would face reductions in their Social Security benefits, saying "We are not going to be able to provide the same benefit for present-day workers that present-day retirees have today."

Obama was more cautious, noting that it would be difficult to convince struggling middle-income and low-income families that they needed to make more sacrifices, but concluding, "And that's why I think it's important for the president to set a tone that says all of us are going to contribute, all of us are going to make sacrifices, and it means that, yes, we may have to cut some spending." Significantly, he did not criticize McCain's call for cuts in future Social Security benefits.

In their common dismissal of the significance of the financial catastrophe, it is hard to know where deliberate deception ends and self-delusion begins. Both candidates are firm believers in the mythology of the "free market," and, despite paying lip service to the seriousness of the crisis, did everything possible to cover up the catastrophic implications for the jobs and living standards of the vast majority of the American people.

The result was a "debate" that even the bourgeois media dismissed as soporific and inconsequential. After the initial evasions in regard to the financial crisis, the two candidates recycled talking points and criticisms from the first debate, in some cases almost word for word.

On foreign policy, they competed in affirming their support for a militaristic and aggressive stance, issuing open or veiled threats against Iran, Pakistan, Russia and other countries.

Only in some of the questions from the audience was there an expression of the impact of the crisis, in a more critical attitude to the political establishment and the profit system itself. After a skeptical question about

whether the bailout would help ordinary people in economic difficulties, the two candidates were asked, "How can we trust either of you with our money when both parties got us into this global economic crisis?"

A woman in the audience noted, "Selling health care coverage in America as a marketable commodity has become a very profitable industry," and then asked, "Do you believe health care should be treated as a commodity?" The two candidates responded by repeating their rival health care programs, while avoiding the implicit challenge to a profit-based healthcare system.



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