

Republican presidential debate highlights further shift to the right

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9 September 2011

The Republican presidential debate in California Wednesday night marked a further shift to the right of the entire US political establishment. For the first time in modern US history, a major capitalist politician openly advocated the destruction of Social Security, the principal retirement program for tens of millions of elderly Americans.

Texas Governor Rick Perry, who has topped the polls since he entered the Republican presidential contest last month, was participating in his first debate since joining the contest. He was asked if he stood by his condemnation of Social Security, first made in a book published last year, and he reiterated this position vociferously.

“It is a Ponzi scheme to tell our kids that are 25 or 30 years old today, you’re paying into a program that’s going to be there,” he said. “Anybody that’s for the status quo with Social Security today is involved with a monstrous lie to our kids, and it’s not right.”

Perry’s principal rival, the previous frontrunner, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, rejected Perry’s language, if not his assessment. “We all agree and have for years that the funding program of Social Security is not working,” he said. But it was wrong to say Social Security was a failure, he said. “You can’t say that to tens of millions of Americans who live on Social Security and those who have lived on it.”

None of the other six Republican candidates – Congresswoman Michele Bachmann of Minnesota, Congressman Ron Paul of Texas, former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman, former Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, and former Godfather’s Pizza CEO Herman Cain – took up the issue explicitly.

Five months ago, House Republicans adopted a budget proposal that called for phasing out Medicare, the principal healthcare program for the elderly, and for ending Medicaid, which underwrites healthcare for the poor and disabled, by transforming it into a fixed block grant to the states.

The Republicans express most openly and nakedly the

basic direction of the political establishment as a whole and at the same time serve to shift the framework of the discussion ever further to the right.

The onslaught against the major entitlement programs has been facilitated by the policies of the Obama administration. Obama opened up Medicare for destruction by proposing \$500 billion in cuts in the healthcare reform legislation passed in 2010 by a Democratic-controlled Congress. He played the same role this summer in relation to Social Security, introducing proposed cuts in the retirement program as part of the deficit reduction talks with the Republicans.

The Wednesday night debate was conducted within a completely reactionary framework, subscribed to by all eight candidates and the two media representatives who moderated the affair, NBC anchorman Brian Williams and John Harris of the Politico.com web site.

Three years after the Wall Street crash triggered the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, there was not a single question about the responsibility of corporate America for the suffering of tens of millions of people.

On the contrary, both the millionaire candidates and the millionaire journalists took for granted that the solution to all problems was to boost corporate profits and increase the wealth of the super-rich.

Perry boasted of his supposed record of job-creation in Texas, rejecting suggestions from his media questioners that the state leads the US in minimum-wage jobs and ranks dead last in education and first in food stamp use. He claimed that the solution to the economic crisis was to cut taxes and regulations on businesses and “free them to do what they do best: create jobs.” No candidate or journalist questioned this argument, although corporate America has created no new net jobs in more than a decade.

Similarly, Romney sought to position himself as a career businessman, not a politician. “My experience, having started enterprises, having helped other enterprises grow and thrive, is what gives me the experience to put together a plan to help restructure the basis of America’s economic

foundation so we can create jobs again,” he claimed.

Again, there was no suggestion that as an investment banker and hedge fund manager, Romney’s business career personifies the utter parasitism of American capitalism, the characteristic that contributed most to the crash of 2008 and the subsequent depression.

The debate was structured to convey the division in the Republican field between the two frontrunners, Perry and Romney, and the six also-rans. Perry and Romney stood side-by-side in the center of the group of eight, and received the lion’s share of the questions and camera attention. Bachmann, whose candidacy was heavily promoted by the media in previous debates, and who won last month’s straw poll in Iowa, was effectively shunted aside in favor of the equally reactionary but better-financed governor of Texas.

As it unfolded, the debate became a round robin of reaction, as candidates attacked one another, each seeking to get to the right of their rivals. Thus Santorum attacked Bachman, Huntsman and Paul for opposing the Obama administration’s war against Libya, a position he denounced as “isolationist.” Gingrich attacked Paul for opposing the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security. Paul, Bachman and Romney attacked Perry for supporting a mandatory program of HPV vaccination of teenage girls in Texas.

Two of the lesser candidates sought to differentiate themselves from the group as a whole. Huntsman, a former US ambassador to China, criticized Romney for his proposal to officially label China a currency manipulator. He suggested that this might spark a trade war with China that would have devastating consequences for the US economy.

He also attacked Perry for his position of rejecting the scientific consensus on global warming and opposing the teaching of evolution, arguing that the Republican Party should not brand itself as the anti-science party.

Congressman Paul sought to stake out an even more extreme right-wing position than the any of his rivals, calling for the dismantling of virtually the entire federal government except for the military. Pressed by his media questioners, he backed the elimination of the minimum wage, school lunches, air traffic control, disaster relief and all federal regulation of health and safety.

All the Republican candidates called for the repeal of any restraints on profiteering by drug companies and insurance companies, as well as the token regulation of Wall Street imposed by the Dodd-Frank bill, as well most environmental regulations.

Here too the Obama administration has taken its cue from the Republicans, advocating major corporate deregulations, including the rejection of new smog regulations last week that would have saved thousands of lives.

Perry, Bachmann, Romney and several other candidates voiced their support for complete militarization of the US-Mexico border, with the stationing of thousands of federal troops and the construction of a full-length wall to stretch more than 2,500 miles.

Bizarrely, Perry responded to a question about why Texas has the highest proportion of its population without health insurance by blaming federal regulations and calling for block-granting the joint federal-state Medicaid program, a measure whose purpose is to allow states greater freedom to reduce health coverage for the working poor.

One incident late in the debate cast a chilling light over both the Republican candidates and the audience that had gathered in the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, a Los Angeles suburb, to hear them.

Brian Williams asked, “Governor Perry, a question about Texas. Your state has executed 234 death row inmates, more than any other governor in modern times. Have you...”

At this point, the question was interrupted by a spontaneous ovation from the audience for the blood on Perry’s hands. The Texas governor, in office five years longer than George W. Bush, has long since surpassed Bush in ordering executions.

Williams was clearly taken aback by this response, but continued to ask the question, “Have you struggled to sleep at night with the idea that any one of those might have been innocent?” Perry blithely rejected any such concern, declaring himself completely impervious to any doubts. Perhaps that is why he singled out only one action of Barack Obama for praise: the US military raid that assassinated Osama bin Laden.

Williams then asked, “What do you make of that dynamic that just happened here, the mention of the execution of 234 people drew applause?” Perry embraced his audience’s applause for state-sanctioned killing, declaring, “I think Americans understand justice.”



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