

Infighting in South Carolina presidential primary

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The campaign for the Republican presidential nomination reached a new low in this week's campaigning in South Carolina. Rival right-wing candidates appealed to racism, anti-immigrant prejudice and religious bigotry in an increasingly vicious contest in the state, with the polls opening at 7 a.m. Saturday.

Only four candidates remain in the race with the withdrawal of former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman on Monday and Texas governor Rick Perry on Thursday. Huntsman endorsed former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, seen as the frontrunner nationally, while Perry endorsed former House speaker Newt Gingrich, who now holds a narrow lead in the polls of likely voters in South Carolina.

Besides Romney and Gingrich, the remaining candidates include former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum and Texas Congressman Ron Paul.

This week's campaigning revolved around two debates, Monday night in Myrtle Beach with the four candidates plus Perry, who had not yet quit the race, and Thursday night in Charleston, with the field reduced to four.

The turning point in the South Carolina primary may turn out to have been the debate Thursday, when the first question put to the four candidates went to Gingrich. CNN host John King asked him about the impending ABC News broadcast of an interview with his second wife, Marianne, in which she denounced him for his marital infidelity in the 1990s.

Gingrich responded with a denunciation of both ABC for its broadcast and King for his question, which prompted a standing ovation from the audience.

There is vast irony in Gingrich's purported outrage, as he declared, "I think the destructive, vicious, negative nature of much of the news media makes it harder to govern this country, harder to attract decent

people to run for public office." It was Gingrich who pioneered what came to be known as the "politics of personal destruction," particularly in his role in spearheading the impeachment of President Bill Clinton in 1998-99.

As ABC News pointed out in its broadcast Thursday night, Gingrich was having an affair with a congressional aide, now his third wife, Callista, at the very point that he was declaring that Clinton had "less moral authority than any administration in history" after the exposure of Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky.

There was, however, no discussion of the Clinton impeachment in either the Republican debates or the media coverage of the campaign. Gingrich's personal conduct in the 1990s was raked up only to provide lurid television footage and headlines, while the critical political background—the right-wing effort to oust a twice-elected president through a sex scandal—was ignored.

Once again, sensationalized coverage of marital infidelity served to obscure the real political issues, both historical and contemporary. The result—a further degrading of the already abysmal level of political discussion in the corporate-controlled media and the election campaigns of the two big business parties.

While the media was devoting hours of coverage to Gingrich's conduct towards his three wives, there was relatively little attention paid to the increasingly frenzied shift to the right by all the Republican candidates.

Gingrich openly appealed to racial bigotry during the first debate. Fox News panelist Juan Williams, who is black, asked about his repeated declarations that African-Americans should seek jobs instead of being satisfied with food stamps and his calling Obama a

“food-stamp president.”

Gingrich clearly welcomed the criticism and received a standing ovation from the audience when he denounced “political correctness” and declared, “I’m going to continue to find ways to help poor people learn how to get a job”—as though mass unemployment were not an inescapable reality imposed by the capitalist system on millions of working people, black, white and Hispanic.

In campaign appearances and press statements in South Carolina, Gingrich also avowed that on his first day as president he would issue an executive order to defy Supreme Court rulings providing legal rights to prisoners at Guantanamo and other US facilities who were seized by the US military and the CIA overseas.

“If the court makes a fundamentally wrong decision, the president can in fact ignore it,” he declared, essentially asserting a presidential dictatorship that would overturn the traditional separation of powers.

In the course of Monday’s debate, Romney sought to outdo Gingrich in bellicosity and assertions of executive authority, declaring that the US government had the right to send its military forces into any country in the world, regardless of sovereignty or international law, in the name of fighting terrorism. Referring to leaders of Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, he said, “We go anywhere they are, and we kill ’em... Of course, you take out our enemies, wherever they are.”

Romney also responded to the barrage of attack ads over the record of his private equity firm, Bain Capital, in asset-stripping and closing companies at the cost of thousands of jobs, while he amassed a personal fortune of a quarter of a billion dollars. Asked about the subject during the second debate—when he was also criticized for his reluctance to release his personal tax records—Romney blustered, “I’m going to stand and defend capitalism across this country throughout this campaign.”

Santorum also attacked both Gingrich and Romney, somewhat improbably, for “playing footsie with the left” on health care, because both candidates had, at some point in the past, supported the individual mandate that is a key element in the Obama administration’s health care program.

Actually, the individual mandate would be better described as Obama “playing footsie” with the right. The individual mandate was originally proposed by

Republican congressional leaders in the early 1990s, when Gingrich backed it, as an alternative to the Clinton administration health care plan. It was later implemented as part of a bipartisan health care plan in Massachusetts in 2003, when Romney supported it.

Obama embraced this right-wing proposal to compel working people to buy coverage from private insurance companies rather than providing government-run insurance coverage through a single-payer plan. He did so in order to win support for his cost-cutting health care overhaul from insurance and drug companies and from congressional Republicans, who now ludicrously describe their own previous policy as “socialized medicine.”



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