US vice-presidential debate: Demagogy and reaction

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The assessment of any official political function in the United States, like last night's debate between the Democratic and Republican candidates for vice president, Joseph Biden and Paul Ryan, must begin with a recognition of the reactionary character of the entire framework of the discussion of political issues imposed by the two capitalist parties and the corporate-controlled media.

The exchanges between Biden and Ryan, two right-wing defenders of the profit system, had such a predictable and banal character that it was painful to watch. Biden's forte was hollow populist demagogy, while Ryan appeared to be struggling to conceal his ultra-reactionary views under a layer of political pabulum.

In the wake of President Obama's debacle in the first presidential debate, Biden was tasked with dusting off the old platitudes of Democratic Party liberalism—albeit without the slightest genuine content. He stuck to his talking points: against cuts in Social Security and Medicare, for tax increases on the wealthy, against imposing the social views of the ultra-right on the US population, for the withdrawal of US forces in Afghanistan by the end of 2014, against US participation in new wars in the Middle East.

These positions are no doubt popular, but the Obama campaign seems to be counting on the American public forgetting that the Obama White House and the Democratic Party have repudiated all of them in practice. The Obama administration has moved to slash entitlement spending and make working people pay for the fiscal crisis brought on by the Wall Street crash of 2008. When the Democrats controlled Congress in 2009-2010, they refused to raise taxes on the wealthy and even balked at rescinding special tax breaks for private equity and hedge fund operators like the Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney.

As for foreign and military policy, Obama has escalated the war in Afghanistan, stepped up drone attacks in Pakistan and Yemen, intervened in Libya, and is now seeking to subvert the government of Syria in preparation for a confrontation with Iran that could plunge the whole of the Middle East, and the entire world, into a military bloodbath.

In the first minutes of the debate, Biden gloated about how the economic blockade of Iran orchestrated by Washington had devastated the Iranian economy and caused widespread suffering among the people. He boasted of the US role in aiding the Syrian forces seeking to overthrow the Assad regime. And he repeatedly defended the administration by declaring that it had the full support of the Pentagon brass—accepting Ryan's premise that the generals should have veto power over foreign policy.

The questions offered by debate moderator Martha Raddatz—an ABC News foreign correspondent with close ties to the US military-intelligence apparatus—took as their point of departure the unchallengeable legitimacy of the operations of American imperialism abroad and the profit system at home.

Many of them touched on foreign and military policy, in every case tacitly assuming that the United States has the right to bomb, invade and conquer any country it chooses. The discussion between the candidates dealt with the expediency of such military actions, not whether they were legally or morally justifiable.

Similarly, the parts of the debate that touched on domestic policy—the economy, health care, taxes and social issues like abortion—took for granted the existing division of the wealth of society between the tiny minority that controls nearly all of it and the large

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majority who are struggling to survive.

In the entire 90 minutes, there was not a single question or answer about the conditions of life of the working class—about cuts in wages, pensions and other benefits; the growth of poverty, homelessness and hunger; the spreading plague of evictions and foreclosures; the deterioration of public services such as education; the collapse of the social infrastructure.

The domestic side of the debate focused almost exclusively on two topics: whether there should be a slight increase in taxation on the super-rich, which Biden advocated and Ryan opposed, and how spending on social programs such as Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security could be cut, where the two candidates agreed in principle but tried to avoid specifics for fear of alerting the American public to what is coming under the next administration, whether headed by Obama or Romney.

The two issues are directly linked, in that the Democratic Party talks of imposing a nominal increase in taxes on the wealthy to provide a fig leaf of "fairness" and "equal sacrifice" for what will be devastating attacks on programs upon which tens of millions rely for access to health care and economic survival in old age or disability.

One of the few illuminating moments in the debate came when Raddatz asked Biden directly whether he would support an increase in the age of eligibility for Medicare from 65 to 67—a move that would impose a severe financial burden on millions of people nearing retirement age.

Biden responded with a rambling anecdote about taking part in negotiations in 1983 between the Reagan administration and congressional Democrats on enacting a similar increase in the retirement age for Social Security. The implication was that Biden would support a similar step for Medicare.

Another glimpse of the right-wing consensus of both parties came when Biden referred to raising taxes only on those making "one million dollars a year" or more. This represents a significant pullback from the previous position of the administration, which had called for taxes to rise for those making over $250,000 a year.

One measure of the politically dishonest and reactionary basis of the debate was a question from Raddatz, towards the end, about the relation between religion and public policy. She pointed out that both candidates were Catholics and asked how their religious faith had affected their attitude toward the issue of abortion.

The two replied predictably: Ryan declaring his adamant opposition to abortion rights, Biden defending *Roe v. Wade*. But neither alluded to what a Catholic presidential candidate, John F. Kennedy, said in 1960: that he adhered to the tradition of a wall of separation between church and state and that no church official or doctrine should determine government policy.

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