Republican presidential debate: A reactionary political system in decay

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Insulting, demeaning... Wednesday night's Republican presidential debate in Simi Valley, California undoubtedly left many viewers struggling for the right term to describe a television spectacle of a frightfully degraded character.

Eleven candidates took the stage at the Reagan Library and spent more than three hours lying, sneering and interrupting each other. Each proclaimed himself (or herself, with the addition of multimillionaire former CEO Carly Fiorina) the embodiment of the political legacy of Reagan—a right-wing politician who was deeply hated in the American working class.

After the first Republican debate, held last month in Cleveland, Ohio, we wrote, "The ten candidates who assembled on the stage, headed by billionaire Donald Trump, represented and appealed to everything rotten and backward in American society: racism, misogynism, anti-immigrant chauvinism, religious bigotry, militarism and the worship of accumulated wealth." The only change in Simi Valley was the addition of Fiorina, bringing to eleven the number of purveyors of political filth.

To even call the event a debate is to grossly exaggerate its intellectual content. The first debate, broadcast by Fox News, drew 24 million viewers, the largest cable TV audience for a non-sporting event in more than two decades. CNN hoped to do even better with the second.

The week before the debate, frontrunner Trump sent a letter to CNN Worldwide President Jeff Zucker noting that the network had been able to raise its ad rates 40-fold for Wednesday night, for which Trump took credit, writing, "While I refuse to brag, and you know very well, this tremendous increase in viewer interest is due 100 percent to 'Donald J. Trump.'"

It has been a mutually profitable bargain. While Trump's bullying antics and media celebrity have driven up ratings, CNN has devoted 78 percent of its primetime coverage of the Republican presidential contest to the billionaire, according to a study by the Media Research Center. So intense has been the media coverage, on both the cable and broadcast networks, that the Trump presidential campaign has not had to buy a single television ad so far.

The media frenzy centered on Trump has, however, a definite downside for the US ruling elite. The Republican Party is one of its two political parties, a primary instrument of class rule. Allowing it to become the plaything of one billionaire—and one whose ignorance is matched only by his vanity and instability—is politically dangerous to the class of billionaires.

Accordingly, the Simi Valley debate became the occasion for a concerted effort, involving both the other candidates and the media, to slow Trump's momentum and begin the process of displacing him as the Republican frontrunner. This was evident from the first question asked by moderator Jake Tapper of CNN, who asked the other candidates whether Trump could be trusted "with his finger on the nuclear codes."

A majority of the candidates, including former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, Ohio Governor John Kasich, Kentucky Senator Rand Paul, Florida Senator Marco Rubio, retired neurosurgeon Carson, and, particularly, Carly Fiorina, the former CEO of Hewlett-Packard, joined in the effort to take Trump down a notch.

The post-debate media coverage drove home the point, proclaiming Fiorina the "winner" and Trump (among others) the "loser." This was the consensus of corporate-controlled publications both liberal and conservative. According to the *Washington Post*,

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"Fiorina gets rave reviews," while the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page gloated, "Carly Trumps Donald."

A notable feature of the event was the hostility of all the candidates to discussing the conditions of life of the great majority of the American people. The moderator Tapper announced halfway through the debate that the issue of jobs and the economy was now to be the topic. The candidates took this as a signal to discuss various proposals for tax cuts for the wealthy. In the course of that discussion, candidates declared their opposition to any increase in the minimum wage (Scott Walker) and branded as "socialism" any suggestion that the rich should pay higher taxes than the poor (Ben Carson).

The candidates themselves personify the class divisions in America. Besides the billionaire Trump, and Fiorina, a former CEO with a personal fortune estimated at more than $50 million, they include politicians who enriched themselves as investment bankers (Kasich and Bush), politicians whose wives enriched themselves as investment bankers (Christie and Cruz), a multi-millionaire former neurosurgeon (Carson), a multi-millionaire former governor and talk-show host (Huckabee), and another multi-millionaire former doctor (Rand Paul). Rubio is a recent addition to the ranks of the millionaires, leaving only Scott Walker (temporarily) outside that charmed circle.

Each of the candidates is backed by a billionaire or billionaires, with Trump playing both roles in his own campaign. The 2016 campaign, more than any in US history, is an oligarchs' election, in which a small number of the super-rich will account for the rise and fall of candidates and the eventual selection of the nominee in both corporate-controlled parties. This is just as much true for the Democrats as for the Republicans.

The stage-managed and manipulated character of the presidential campaign, in both parties, is part of the process of breakup and disintegration of the old two-party structure. Neither the Democratic Party nor the Republican Party has any genuine popular base. Both are controlled by political cliques supported by various billionaires, with the Republicans making use of fundamentalist church groups and the Democrats making use of the trade unions to supply Election Day organization.

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