

The third Republican debate: The myth of “big government”

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Media commentary and analysis of the third Republican presidential debate, held Wednesday night in Boulder, Colorado, has focused mainly on the horse-race aspects of the contest for the Republican nomination: which candidates “won” and which “lost,” which candidate expected to pick up big money support (Marco Rubio, from casino billionaire Sheldon Adelson), which candidates may be soon forced out of the race (Rand Paul, Chris Christie).

The performance of the candidates at the debate was assessed based on who had the most insults and one-liners against various rivals, or directed at the panel of moderators from CNBC, who served as doormats and whipping boys (and girls) both during and after the two-hour televised spectacle.

There has been precious little discussion of what was actually said by the candidates about the nominal subject of the debate, US economic policy, or what this reveals about the nature of the Republican Party and of social conditions and class relations in the United States.

If one were to summarize the outlook of the candidates—and they all expressed nearly identical right-wing viewpoints—it would run something like the following. Ordinary Americans are facing terrible economic conditions, spreading poverty, low wages, even social devastation. This is not due to the profit system, in which all the increases in wealth and income of the past three decades has been monopolized by a tiny financial elite. It is entirely due to something called “big government,” sometimes referred to simply as “government” or “Washington.” Once “big government” is dismantled, the American economy will bloom like a garden and everyone will live happily ever after.

A few citations demonstrate this fairy-tale theme:

Dr. Ben Carson, the new frontrunner in national polls after taking over Donald Trump’s position, perhaps the most politically ignorant person on the stage in Colorado, although he had stiff competition: “It’s so important, this election, because we’re talking about America for the people versus America for the government.”

Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, speaking about the crisis of college student debt, now higher than credit card debt: “We don’t need the federal government to be involved in this, because when they do, we create a \$1.2 trillion debt.” How the federal government helped “create” this debt, when it is the result of huge increases in tuition and fees charged by private and state colleges (and decades of low wages), he did not explain. He nonetheless continued, with typical Bush syntax, “It’s always a solution of the left to create more government from the federal government. It is broke, it is not working.”

Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky: “Liberty thrives when government is small. I want a government so small I can barely see it. I want a government so small that the individual has a chance to thrive and prosper. I think, though, government is too big now.”

Similar sentiments were sounded by the “undercard,” the four Republicans who debated separately and earlier on CNBC because they failed to reach three percent in published polls.

Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, whose state is bankrupt and has never recovered from the combined blows of Hurricane Katrina and the oil price collapse: “I’m the only one that’s reduced the size of government. Let’s shrink the government economy. Let’s grow the American economy.”

Former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum: “I’m the one in the—on this stage and, frankly, on both stages that has actually gone to Washington, said we would shrink government, said we would shake things up and actually delivered for the conservative cause, everything from welfare reform, which was the largest, most significant accomplishment in the last 25 years for conservatism.”

Some of the candidates doubled down on the denunciations of “big government” by claiming that big corporations were allied with “big government” in a conspiracy against ordinary Americans. Thus Senator Ted Cruz: “The truth of the matter is, big government benefits the wealthy, it benefits the lobbyists, it benefits the giant corporations. And the people who are getting hammered are

small businesses, it's single moms, it's Hispanics.”

Cruz is telling a fraction of the truth, albeit in highly distorted form, while lying about his own attitude to this alliance of the capitalist state and big business. His own campaign is largely financed by one wealthy investor, hedge fund mogul Robert Mercer, and Cruz has a record of shamelessly sucking up to every multi-millionaire and billionaire in sight. He seeks to disguise this with populist demagoguery that takes advantage of the right-wing record of the Obama administration to advocate even more right-wing policies.

Carly Fiorina followed the same tack, declaring, “Big government favors the big, the powerful, the wealthy and the well-connected, and crushes the small and the powerless.” Once she got started on this line of argument, it proved impossible for the CNBC moderators to divert her and slow down her diatribe.

“The more the government gets engaged in the economy, the slower the economy becomes,” she declared. “There is no constitutional role for the federal government in setting up—retirement plans. There is no constitutional role for the federal government to be setting minimum wages.”

It was noteworthy that not one of the other nine Republican candidates on the stage with Fiorina disputed her remarkable assertion that both Social Security and minimum wage laws are unconstitutional. Nor did any of her media questioners challenge this claim.

She went to declare that the alliance of “big government” and big business constituted “socialism,” and that the United States was well on its way there. “You see, folks, this is how socialism starts. Government causes a problem, and then government steps in to solve the problem.”

Fiorina’s presentation was particularly bizarre since her claim to credibility as a candidate consists in her tenure as CEO of Hewlett-Packard, one of the 50 largest corporations in America, and a huge government contractor (particularly of the National Security Agency) making her the personification of the alliance of big business and “big government” which she was stridently condemning.

What do the Republican candidates actually mean by their demonization of “big government”? It is notable that none of them condemns or proposes to shrink the single largest part of the federal government, the gigantic military-intelligence apparatus that constitutes the biggest threat both to the democratic rights of the American people and the physical survival of the human race.

Consider the distribution of federal employment in 2010, well into the third year of the Obama administration. There were just over three million people employed by the federal government. Of these, 391,800 worked in departments largely concerned with domestic social services: Agriculture,

Commerce, Environmental Protection Agency, Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Interior, Labor, Transportation. But some 2,980,400 worked in departments related to military, intelligence and domestic repression (CIA, Defense, Energy, Homeland Security, Justice, State, Veterans Affairs).

The latter figure balloons still further, to 5,580,400 working for the federal agencies concerned with repression and war, when one adds the 1.5 million Pentagon and intelligence agency contractors, and 1.1 military reservists, available for mobilization either for war or national emergency. That does not include members of the National Guard or state and local police forces.

The Obama administration, like its predecessors for the previous six decades, since the United States became the dominant imperialist power, presides over a state machine whose main function is spying and mass murder. The social programs run by the federal government are only a veneer applied to conceal the essentially repressive nature of the capitalist state.

When the Republicans demonize “big government,” they are targeting solely the 12 percent of federal workers who enforce health, safety and pollution regulations, administer federal social programs like Social Security and Medicare, or assist and subsidize largely state and local public services like education and transportation.

In other words, their focus is not on the federal agencies that threaten the democratic rights of the American people, or spy on, attack and kill the citizens of other countries, but the federal agencies that restrict in any way, however slightly, the operations of the giant corporations and banks. While employing somewhat different rhetoric, the current administration has pursued the same aim laid out by the Republican candidates by privatizing public education, undermining regulations on corporations and attacking social programs.



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