

Republican debate in Iowa promotes war and reaction

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Thursday night's Republican presidential debate in Des Moines, Iowa showed that the presence of billionaire Donald Trump is not required to ensure a degrading spectacle in which war-mongering and fear-mongering are combined with racism and attacks on democratic rights.

Trump boycotted the event after Fox News refused to remove Megyn Kelly from the panel of three journalists moderating the debate. Whether this was a manifestation of personal pique or a deliberate maneuver to make his closest rival in Iowa, Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, the main target of crossfire from six other candidates, matters little.

The result was a further demonstration of the drastic shift to the right in the Republican Party, where every candidate pledged himself to policies that would in the past have been considered beyond the pale, even in the right-wing context of official American two-party politics.

Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, currently the leading candidate of the so-called establishment wing of the party (as opposed to Trump and Cruz), brazenly defended his past call for the closing of mosques and even restaurants where American Muslims might congregate. He rejected the suggestion from Megyn Kelly that this would violate the First Amendment guarantees of freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

"Radical Muslims and radical Islam is not just hate talk," Rubio declared. "It's hate action. They blow people up. Look what they did in San Bernardino. Look at the attack they inspired in Philadelphia..."

He continued, "When I am president of the United States, if there is some place in this country where radical jihadists are planning to attack the United States, we will go after them wherever they are, and if

we capture them alive, they are going to Guantanamo."

Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky disagreed with Rubio, but then attacked him from the right on immigration, claiming that Rubio's willingness to back a compromise immigration reform bill in 2012 that ultimately was blocked in the Republican-controlled House showed he was soft on terrorists who would infiltrate and attack the United States in the garb of refugees.

Other candidates offered variations on the same basic theme: Islamic terrorists are coming to get you, Mr. and Mrs. small-town, church-going Iowa, and you should be very, very afraid. The answer to this imminent danger is to create a police state in the United States and wage unrestricted war on the Middle East.

Cruz made the connection between fear-mongering and militarism most explicitly, declaring, "I will apologize to nobody for the vigorousness with which I will fight terrorism, go after ISIS, hunt them down wherever they are, and utterly and completely destroy ISIS."

He reiterated his previous calls for "carpet-bombing" ISIS against criticism from his rivals that this was so much hot air. "It is not tough talk," he argued. "It is a different, fundamental military strategy than what we've seen from Barack Obama.

"You want to know what carpet bombing is? It's what we did in the first Persian Gulf war; 1,100 air attacks a day, saturation bombing that utterly destroyed the enemy... And we need to be focused and lift the rules of engagement so we're not sending our fighting men and women into combat with their arms tied behind their backs."

New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, asked whether he supported recent Obama administration moves escalating military action against ISIS in Libya,

proceeded to outbid the White House and Pentagon, declaring, “We need to develop a strategy together to take on ISIS every place that it is around the world.”

Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush noted that Senators Rubio, Cruz and Paul had all opposed giving authorization for the use of military force against ISIS until after the attacks in Paris and San Bernardino. “Now we hear the tough talk,” he said, before outlining his own proposed measures, including, “Get the lawyers off the damn backs of the military once and for all.” This declaration of support for torture and war crimes evoked loud cheering from the Republican audience.

Bush said he would “have a no-fly zone in Syria and create safe zones to deal with the refugees... But, more importantly, to train a Sunni-led force in Syria to take out ISIS with our support.” As more than one media commentator noted, this is precisely the policy proposed by Hillary Clinton and may well be the policy adopted by the Obama administration in the coming months.

There was one noticeable change in the Republican debate compared to the previous six such exercises in right-wing demagogery and name-calling. Nearly every reference to Hillary Clinton, still the frontrunner for the Democratic nomination, included suggestions that she was guilty of criminal offenses in relation either to the attack on a State Department facility in Benghazi, Libya in 2012 or to the handling of communications on the personal email server she used during her four years as secretary of state.

Christie and Rubio, in particular, returned to this issue repeatedly, declaring in nearly identical language that Clinton’s conduct in relation to Benghazi or the email server, or both, had “disqualified” her to be commander-in-chief.

Referring to the use of a private email server, Christie declared, “She put America’s secrets at risk for her convenience. She put American intelligence officers at risk for her convenience. She put American strategy at risk for her convenience.”

He concluded another long-winded response to a question by referring to his own experience as US attorney in New Jersey. “Hillary Clinton will never be prosecuted by this Justice Department,” he said, and Republicans are “going to want to put a former federal prosecutor on the stage to prosecute her next

September. And, there is no one on this stage better prepared to prosecute the case against Hillary Clinton than I am.”

Rubio followed suit, charging, “Hillary Clinton is disqualified from being the commander-in-chief of the United States. In fact, one of her first acts as president may very well be to pardon herself because Hillary Clinton stored classified information on her private server. And Hillary Clinton lied to the families of those four brave Americans who lost their life in Benghazi. And anyone who lies to the families of Americans who have died in the service of this country can never be commander-in-chief of the United States.”

The vehemence and specific language suggests that both Governor Christie and Senator Rubio had advance knowledge of the declaration by a State Department spokesman, issued less than 24 hours after the debate, that 22 emails found on Clinton’s private server had been classified “top secret” by the intelligence agencies.



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