

Republican debate in South Carolina: Lies, mudslinging and an important truth

Patrick Martin
15 February 2016

The ninth Republican presidential debate of an already interminable primary campaign was another two-hour session of reactionary posturing and mutual mudslinging in which the four leading candidates denounced each other as liars—and were telling the truth when they did so.

The debate was held in South Carolina, a week before the February 20 Republican primary. Billionaire demagogue Donald Trump currently leads in state polls, with about one-third of the vote, followed by Texas Senator Ted Cruz, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush and Florida Senator Marco Rubio, in that order.

The smaller field, and the likelihood that the lowest finisher among the four may be pushed out of the race after the South Carolina primary, no doubt contributed to making this debate the most vitriolic so far. The four leading candidates all appealed to the basest prejudices in their television audience, vilifying immigrants and the poor, pledging the military annihilation of opponents of US imperialism and denouncing each other for any deviation from an ultra-right world view.

Thus Rubio and Cruz waged a lengthy argument, each charging the other with being too soft in his attacks on immigrants. Trump declared that Bush was even softer on the issue, which has been the main focus of the billionaire's campaign, with demands for deportation of all 11 million undocumented immigrants and the building of a wall along the US-Mexico border.

Cruz denounced Trump for his past support for abortion rights and campaign contributions to prominent Democrats, including former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination. Trump has in the past dismissed such donations, to both parties, as the cost of doing business for a wealthy real estate baron.

Trump interrupted Cruz to declare, "You probably

are worse than Jeb Bush. You are the single biggest liar," adding, "This guy will say anything, nasty guy. Now I know why he doesn't have one endorsement from any of his colleagues." The two candidates—who had generally praised each other before the first primary contests—traded insults and taunts along these lines for several minutes.

There was only one portion of the debate that deviated from this moronic pattern: when Trump, in the course of an exchange with Jeb Bush over US policy in the Middle East, turned to the issue of the war in Iraq, spearheaded by Bush's brother, President George W. Bush, in 2003. "They lied," Trump said of the Bush administration. "They said there were weapons of mass destruction and they knew there were none."

Moderator John Dickerson of CBS News intervened, citing Trump's comments in 2008 when he expressed surprise that Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had not tried to impeach Bush after the Democrats took control of Congress in January 2007. "You said, quote: 'which personally I think would have been a wonderful thing.' Then you were asked what you meant by that and you said: 'For the war, for the war, he lied, he got us into the war with lies.' Do you still believe President Bush should have been impeached?"

Trump hemmed and hawed, repeating his criticism of the war in Iraq and attacking Jeb Bush for defending it, but finally declared, referring to impeachment, "You do whatever you want. You call it whatever you want. I want to tell you. They lied. They said there were weapons of mass destruction, there were none. And they knew there were none. There were no weapons of mass destruction."

The sudden and unexpected appearance of an actual political truth in the midst of the Republican debate touched off an uproar, with most of those in the

auditorium, drawn from the rival campaigns, booing Trump loudly. All the other Republican presidential hopefuls rushed to defend President Bush, Vice President Richard Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell and the other officials responsible for the war.

Trump continued with his denunciation of George W. Bush, rejecting claims that as president, Bush had “kept the country safe,” pointing to the obvious fact that the 9/11 attacks took place while Bush was in the White House, and that the president had ignored warnings from the CIA about the preparations of Al Qaeda for attacks within the United States.

Following the debate, both media pundits and Republican office-holders claimed that Trump’s comments on the Iraq War and the 9/11 attacks were a political disaster for his campaign. Significantly, there was no such reaction to Trump’s racist attacks on Mexican immigrants or his fascistic proposal for an unconstitutional and illegal ban on Muslims entering the United States.

In an appearance on the NBC interview program “Meet the Press” Sunday, only hours after the debate, Trump sought to beat a retreat. Asked by interviewer Chuck Todd whether he still believed that the war in Iraq was an impeachable offense, Trump replied, “Well, that’s for other people to say. And look, that is for other people to say. I can say this, it may not have been impeachable because it was a mistake.”

When Todd suggested that he was risking his frontrunner position in South Carolina polls by calling President Bush a liar, Trump spluttered, “I didn’t call him a liar. I say—I said, I didn’t call anybody a liar.”

He continued lamely, “Look, I said maybe, Chuck, I said maybe there were lies. Because look, the weapons of mass destruction, they said they existed, and they didn’t exist... There were no weapons of mass destruction. Now, was it a lie? I don’t know.”

There is little doubt the billionaire has been informed, directly or indirectly, that his brief exercise in truth-telling is not looked on favorably by the US military-intelligence apparatus.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact