

Attacks against Sanders intensify ahead of South Carolina primary

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Tuesday night's Democratic presidential debate in Charleston, South Carolina, has been widely criticized in the corporate media, with the candidates' performances denounced for "snarling incoherence" (*Politico*), for being "manic" (*The Hill*) and "a genuine freakout" (Frank Bruni in the *New York Times*), and like "watching professional wrestling" (Dana Milbank in the *Washington Post*).

What the media pundits were complaining about—particularly on the cable networks CNN and MSNBC—had little to do with the constant interruptions and general refusal of the candidates to follow the rules laid down but not enforced by the moderators, a panel of journalists from CBS. They were mainly upset that the six candidates opposed to frontrunner Bernie Sanders largely failed to coordinate their efforts and could not seem to agree on a common line of attack, replicating a similar failure in the debate last Wednesday in Nevada.

As a result, the Vermont senator is likely to take an insurmountable lead in convention delegates in the March 3 "Super Tuesday" primaries, held in 14 states, including California, Texas, North Carolina and Virginia. Those contests take place just three days after the February 29 primary in South Carolina.

Despite the cacophony on Tuesday night, it is clear that the capitalist politicians on the stage in Charleston were pursuing definite strategies, which reveal something about their own social bases and shed light on the deepening crisis of the Democratic Party.

Four of the candidates were competing to become the "moderate" alternative to Sanders: billionaire Michael Bloomberg, former South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg, former Vice President Joe Biden and Senator Amy Klobuchar.

Two others made direct appeals to Sanders' supporters. Senator Elizabeth Warren said she would be a more effective advocate for Sanders' policies, which she claimed to support. Billionaire Tom Steyer, seeking to position himself somewhat to the left of the four "moderates," claimed to agree with Sanders' diagnosis of the problems in America while disagreeing with him on the solutions.

Bloomberg's goal in the debate was clearly to survive it and avoid another debacle like that in Las Vegas, which would leave his campaign in danger of becoming an expensive laughingstock. He positioned himself as the most right-wing of the candidates, declaring his support for expanding charter schools, opposing the legalization of marijuana and making no reply when Warren pointed out his long history as a donor to Republican candidates,

including such notorious pro-Trump figures as Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina.

In his most revealing sally, Bloomberg boasted of how much he spent in the 2018 elections backing Democratic candidates whose victories gave the Democratic Party control of the House of Representatives. "They talk about 40 Democrats," he said. "Twenty-one of those are people that I spent a hundred million dollars to help elect. All of the new Democrats that came in and put Nancy Pelosi in charge and gave the Congress the ability to control this president, I bought—I, I got them."

The billionaire was about to say he had bought control of the House for the Democrats, but pulled back at the last second to make his comment slightly less obnoxious. But the implication was clear. He was suggesting that he was now in position to buy the White House for the Democrats, using essentially unlimited funds from his \$60 billion fortune.

Bloomberg's money had at least some impact on the debate, salting the audience with supporters who had to pay \$1,750 to the Democratic National Committee for admission. As a result, there was audible booing when Warren and Sanders attacked Bloomberg for trying to buy the nomination.

So far, however, Bloomberg's ability to actually accomplish the purchase is in doubt. The billionaire has pumped nearly \$500 million into campaign advertising and organization in the 14 Super Tuesday states, but according to current polls he trails Sanders in all of them. A detailed analysis in the *Washington Post* projected that Bloomberg stood to win fewer than 100 delegates out of the nearly 1,400 to be chosen on March 3.

Buttigieg, the former naval intelligence officer and McKinsey consultant for the Pentagon, joined with Bloomberg in portraying Sanders as the candidate backed by Russian President Vladimir Putin, allegedly because his nomination would ensure the reelection of President Trump, whom the Democrats have attacked from the right as a Russian stooge.

The former South Bend mayor spent the entire debate attacking Sanders from the right, frequently interrupting him to the point of deliberate disruption. He sought to present himself as the voice of the congressional Democrats, particularly those in marginal districts in the House of Representatives. He told Sanders that those newly elected in 2018 "are running away from your platform as fast as they possibly can." These include the 11 representatives who have similar backgrounds to Buttigieg, with careers in the military-intelligence apparatus before they entered politics.

Biden's campaign has made little secret that he must win the South Carolina primary on Saturday or face financial and political collapse. Given that position, Biden devoted every intervention in the debate to wooing older black voters, who comprise the main Democratic voting bloc in South Carolina. Sanders leads among black voters in South Carolina younger than 45, but older voters, particularly those over 65, are expected to support Biden.

This explains Biden's effort to mention President Barack Obama in nearly every comment, as well as his choosing to focus his attack on Sanders on the issue of gun violence, citing Sanders' votes against restrictive gun legislation some 30 years ago. Biden referred to the 2015 mass shooting by a white supremacist at a church in Charleston, South Carolina, that killed nine African Americans.

Biden also targeted Steyer, who has dumped \$20 million into advertising in South Carolina and risen to third in state polls. The former vice president attacked the billionaire for investing in a company operating private prisons in which young black men had been "hog-tied" and otherwise abused.

Significantly, Biden received little criticism from his "moderate" rivals. All of them want Biden to win South Carolina, because the alternative, a Sanders victory, would make his nomination far more likely. On Wednesday, the morning after the debate, Representative Jim Clyburn of South Carolina, the House Minority Whip and a longtime leader of the Congressional Black Caucus, publicly endorsed Biden—one more effort by the party establishment to forestall a knockout blow by the Sanders campaign.

The fourth "moderate," Senator Amy Klobuchar, focused her attack on Sanders on the cost of his proposed reforms, such as "Medicare for All" and free college tuition, claiming, "The math does not add up." She also cited the thinly veiled attack on Sanders a few months ago by former President Obama, claiming that Sanders was ignoring "where the voters of this country are."

Two of the Democrats on the stage in Charleston sought to appeal to Sanders' supporters more directly. Steyer said that "Sanders' analysis is right," in relation to the defects of an untrammelled private sector, but that his proposed remedies were wrong. "We all know, unchecked capitalism has failed," Steyer said. "The answer is not for the government to take over the private sector, though. The answer is for us to break the corporate stranglehold on our government and have the government work for the people again."

How the "corporate stranglehold" could be broken while leaving corporate power intact, he did not explain. Nor did he address the contradiction of a billionaire private equity investor presenting his own campaign as the vehicle for such an "anti-corporate" effort. Instead, he boasted of his efforts to support the impeachment of Trump, the only mention of that debacle on the Charleston stage.

Steyer has deliberately cultivated a corrupt layer of the black upper-middle class, hiring dozens of black Democratic Party operatives and state legislators to act as his political representatives in South Carolina, and touting his efforts, through his investment fund, to promote minority-owned businesses.

Senator Elizabeth Warren presented herself as an ideological ally of Sanders, but one who would be a more effective advocate of

similar policies. Her approach to Sanders was so conciliatory that she seemed to be auditioning to become his running mate. She then reverted to her role in the Las Vegas debate, targeting Bloomberg and citing his role as a Republican campaign donor, a sexist boss, and a law-and-order mayor of New York City.

Sanders, given center stage as the leader in delegates and poll numbers, sought to demonstrate that his policies were not "radical," as claimed by his right-wing opponents, citing the example of state-financed health care systems in Western Europe. He combined this with some "left" talk on foreign policy issues, denouncing Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu as a "reactionary racist" and declaring that "it might be a good idea to be honest about American foreign policy, and that includes the fact that America has overthrown governments all over the world."

These gestures cannot disguise the fundamental fallacy of the Sanders campaign: the claim that he can carry out a "political revolution" under the auspices of the Democratic Party, a party of big business and American imperialism, symbolized by the presence on the debate stage of two billionaires, a naval intelligence agent, Barack Obama's vice president, and Klobuchar, dubbed the "favorite Democrat" of Senate Republicans.

The role of Sanders is to trap leftward-moving sections of working people and young people within the straitjacket of the Democratic Party and the two-party system, thus blocking any challenge to American capitalism.

Large sections of the American population are far to the left of all of the candidates, including Sanders, a political fact that strikes terror in the Democratic Party establishment. They are frightened not that Sanders' modest reform policies will alienate working people, but that they might open the door to far more radical demands that directly threaten the profit system and the global operations of American imperialism.

That explains the apparent contradiction in the party establishment hysteria over Sanders: The more he runs up his vote totals and demonstrates popular support, the more they scream he is unelectable.



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