

Republican “debate” in Las Vegas

A two-hour commercial for militarism and fear-mongering

By Patrick Martin
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The fifth televised debate among the candidates for the Republican presidential nomination amounted to a two-hour infomercial for war and dictatorship, featuring ten spokespersons touting their noxious wares—the nine candidates and CNN itself.

CNN moderator Wolf Blitzer framed the event from the start as a debate focused on “how to keep America safe” from the allegedly omnipresent threat of terrorism. The various reactionary proposals from the Republican candidates—from increased spying on the American people to saturation bombing of much of Syria and Iraq—were discussed exclusively from that standpoint.

The program was premised on the notion that the killing of 14 people in San Bernardino, California on December 3 by alleged ISIS followers was the central issue confronting the American people. According this paranoid, even demented, outlook, every American is now in imminent danger of similar terrorist violence, and therefore the supreme—indeed the only—political issue is how to prevent future attacks and destroy ISIS and its supposed sympathizers within the United States.

Leading up to the debate, there had been suggestions in the media that some of the Republican candidates would challenge the current frontrunner, billionaire Donald Trump, over his call for a complete ban on Muslims entering the United States, as well as other fascist-style statements calling for the abrogation of constitutional rights.

Instead, there was near-unanimity in support of the general direction of Trump’s comments, putting the United States on a wartime footing and treating immigrants and Muslims as a potential fifth column. At least five of the other candidates were asked directly

about objections they had expressed over the past week to Trump’s “no Muslims” demand. They either evaded the issue entirely or, like Jeb Bush, limited their criticism to quibbling over the practicality of an outright ban on Muslims entering the United States, particularly the stooges of imperialism in the Middle East like the monarchs of Jordan, Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf oil states.

The candidates vied with each other to present more aggressive military options—a no-fly zone over Syria, carpet-bombing of ISIS-controlled territory, including major cities like Raqqa and Mosul, the dispatch of American ground troops, even (from Ohio Governor John Kasich) a military mobilization on the scale of the first Persian Gulf War, in which more than half a million US troops were deployed. All agreed on dramatic increases in US military spending, already by far the largest in the world. Several declared they would authorize the shooting down of Russian warplanes if they violated a no-fly zone, regardless of the danger of triggering a war with a nuclear-armed power.

Domestically, there was unanimous agreement on barring all Syrian war refugees from entering the United States, as well as a consensus on removing what few restrictions remain on spying by the FBI, NSA and other intelligence agencies, the recruitment of IT and Internet companies to serve the military-intelligence apparatus, and the arrest and jailing of anyone expressing sympathy for ISIS on social media (a category defined so broadly that the expression of opposition to a wider US war in Syria and Iraq could be criminalized).

While the Republican candidates all proclaimed their

unbridgeable hostility to the Obama administration and Democratic presidential frontrunner Hillary Clinton, there is considerable overlap in policy. Clinton, for example, has repeatedly called for imposition of a no-fly zone in Syria, while Obama has regularly defended the US government spying on telecommunications and the Internet. The day before the debate, Obama visited the Pentagon to reiterate his support for intensified air strikes and Special Forces operations in Iraq and Syria.

The two-hour event in Las Vegas was not really a “debate,” in the sense of exploration or discussion of political issues and differences. It was rather an attempt to browbeat the American public to accept the shifting of the country to a wartime footing. There were distinctly fascistic overtones shown in the condemnations of the alleged “enemy within,” and claims that the American people were being “betrayed” by the supposedly pusillanimous character of the Obama administration.

Obama has authorized hundreds of assassinations by drone-fired missiles, carried on wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and now Syria, whitewashed CIA torture and defended NSA spying, but this does not satisfy the blood-lust of the Republican presidential field.

In one chilling exchange, right-wing radio talkshow host Hugh Hewitt, who joined Blitzer and Dana Bash of CNN on the media panel, asked Dr. Ben Carson if he, as a retired neurosurgeon who had saved many children’s lives, could give orders as commander-in-chief that would mean the death of “hundreds, even thousands of innocent children.” Carson proudly declared that he could, and the audience applauded loudly.

At one point, Senator Rand Paul objected to Trump’s calls to censor the Internet and to target the families of ISIS leaders, pointing out that this would require abolishing the First Amendment and repudiating the Geneva Conventions. Neither Trump nor any of the other candidates bothered to respond, effectively saying, “So what?”

Paul did not press the issue, instead seeking to demonstrate his solidarity with the overall consensus on war and repression, launching a reactionary diatribe against immigrants. He has co-sponsored legislation to halt all immigration from all countries for an unspecified period, in the name of the “war on terror.”

There was another revealing incident when Jeb Bush blurted out that those calling for removing restraints on US intelligence agencies didn’t know what they were talking about. “The FBI has the resources it needs, and the powers it needs,” he said. “We shouldn’t even be talking about this here in public.”

As the son and brother of presidents, Bush is undoubtedly familiar with the scale of the spying operations of the US military-intelligence apparatus directed against the American people, which go far beyond anything publicly acknowledged.

Bush followed this up by demanding that the 800,000 local police be trained to be “the eyes and ears” of the federal government on both terrorism and illegal immigration. This would mark a further stage in the development of an American police state.

It is clear from the framework of the Las Vegas debate that powerful sections of the US ruling elite have decided to make use of the San Bernardino events as a second edition of the 9/11 attacks. The aim is to revive the scare tactics of the “war on terror,” seeking to spread panic and help overcome the deep-seated popular opposition to expanded US military intervention in the Middle East.

It is noteworthy that President Obama ended his speech last week on the San Bernardino attack by calling on Congress to pass an Authorization for the Use of Military Force against ISIS. He was echoed by Republican Ben Carson, who began his remarks at the debate by calling for a formal congressional declaration of war against ISIS.

Both capitalist parties seek to create a wartime atmosphere, in which they can carry out both military escalation overseas and a savage crackdown on opponents of war within the United States.

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