

In Texas debate, Obama counters Clinton attack by asserting his readiness to use military force

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Thursday's televised debate in Texas between the Democratic presidential contenders Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, like all such events, was directed at two basic audiences—the voting public and the corporate-financial elite that controls both major US parties.

The debates are part of the process by which the ruling elite sizes up and vets the top personnel who are to administer its affairs for the next four or eight years.

While both candidates indulged in populist rhetoric aimed at winning votes in the crucial March 4 primary elections in Texas and Ohio, they sought to reassure the corporate and military establishment of their readiness to defend, by both diplomacy and military force, the global interests of American imperialism.

The debate, held at the University of Texas in Austin and broadcast by CNN, took place in the context of a foundering Clinton campaign that desperately needs victories in Texas and Ohio, following eleven straight Obama primary wins since the "Super Tuesday" contests on February 5. The latest Obama victory came the day of the debate, when he won the primary for Americans living abroad with 65 percent of the vote.

According to some estimates, Obama currently has a lead of 150 delegates over Clinton, a margin that could be overcome only by Clinton securing decisive victories in the major remaining primaries and winning most of the unelected superdelegates to this August's Democratic National Convention.

Polls released on Thursday reported that Clinton's lead in Texas had evaporated to the point of a statistical dead heat (48 percent for Clinton to 47 percent for Obama), while her double-digit advantage in Ohio had shrunk to a 7-point lead (50 percent to 43 percent).

There are indications that the Clinton campaign is considering conceding the race to Obama should the New York senator fail to win both states, with 334 delegates between them, on March 4. On Wednesday, Bill Clinton, campaigning for his wife in Texas, told his audience that she could not win the nomination if she failed to win the two major primaries next month. Vermont and Rhode Island also hold primary contests on March 4.

When asked in Thursday's debate whether she thought the nomination should be decided by the superdelegates, Clinton said, "I think that will sort itself out... We will have a nominee, and we will have a unified Democratic Party..."

Since Obama's 17-point victory over Clinton in the Wisconsin primary last Tuesday, Clinton

has sought to challenge the readiness of the first-term senator from Illinois to assume the role of “commander in chief,” suggesting that he lacks both the experience and the toughness to pursue US interests internationally with sufficient ruthlessness.

In what was billed as a major policy speech, given at New York’s Hunter College on Wednesday, Clinton declared that the American people “need a president ready on Day One to be the commander in chief of the United States military.”

She continued: “One of us is ready to be commander in chief in a dangerous world. Everyday around the world, situations arise that present new threats and new opportunities—situations like the change of leadership in Cuba and the elections in Pakistan. I’ve served on the Senate Armed Services Committee; I’ve represented you and our country in more than 80 countries around the world. I’ve worked with leaders. I’ve stood up to the Chinese government on women’s rights and human rights.”

The crucial point in Thursday’s Texas debate came when one of the moderators, Jorge Ramos, asked Clinton directly whether she was suggesting that Obama lacked the experience to be commander in chief.

Clinton dodged a direct reply, but reiterated her Hunter College remarks, adding that she was “one of the leaders in the Congress on behalf of homeland security” and including in her list of international crises Kosovo’s declaration of independence and the attack by Serbian protesters on the US embassy in Belgrade. In relation to the latter, she issued an implicit threat, saying she “would be moving very aggressively to hold the Serbian government responsible with their security forces to protect our embassy.”

Obama seized the opportunity to assert his credentials as the future commander in chief and leader of American imperialism. “I wouldn’t be running if I didn’t think I was prepared to be commander in chief,” he declared. “And my number one job as president will be to keep the American people safe. And I will do whatever is required to accomplish that, and I will not hesitate to act against those that would do America harm. Now, that involves maintaining the strongest military on earth...”

This response, no doubt prepared in advance, was calculated to reassure the ruling elite that his opposition to the US invasion of Iraq and his call for more flexible diplomacy are entirely from the standpoint of the defense of the interests of American imperialism. He underscored this point by attacking Clinton’s vote to authorize the invasion of Iraq as a blunder on “the single most important foreign policy decision of this generation,” mainly because it “diverted attention from Afghanistan” and resulted in the strengthening of Al Qaeda.

To emphasize his support for the so-called “war on terror,” Obama began his opening remarks by declaring that “our nation is at war.”

Both candidates continued to pose as opponents of the war in Iraq, and were not challenged by the questioners on their repeated votes to fund the US occupation and their earlier pledges to keep thousands of “non-combat” troops in Iraq for an indefinite period.

On another foreign policy issue, the US response to Castro’s retirement, Obama reiterated his earlier statements that he would be willing to meet as president with the leaders of countries with which the US is at odds. He said he would be prepared to meet with the

putative new Cuban leader, Raoul Castro, without preconditions, while Clinton insisted that the Cuban regime would first have to meet certain benchmarks, including releasing political prisoners and “opening up the economy.”

Defending his tactical difference with Clinton, Obama said, “I do think this is important, precisely because the Bush administration has done so much damage to American foreign relations that the president should take a more active role in diplomacy than might have been true 20 or 30 years ago.”

Here Obama was speaking for those forces within the US foreign policy establishment who have swung behind his campaign because they see him as a figure who could help change the image of the United States around the world, badly damaged by the policies of the Bush administration, reverse Washington’s isolation and declining political and diplomatic influence, and promote US interests with a more judicious mixture of diplomacy and military force.

On domestic issues, both candidates engaged in demagogic appeals to the deep-seated social grievances of working people, with particular emphasis on immigrants. Texas has a large Mexican-American population that could provide the decisive margin in the upcoming primary election.

When it came to specific proposals, however, neither went beyond health care proposals that left untouched the domination of the insurance and pharmaceutical giants, pledges to roll back Bush’s tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans, and modest tax cuts and rebates for working people. Obama, for example, boasted of his plan to offset payroll taxes for people earning less than \$75,000, which would mean “a thousand extra dollars in the pockets of ordinary Americans.”

Clinton repeated her call for a 90-day moratorium on home foreclosures and a five-year freeze on mortgage interest rate increases.

None of these proposals, even assuming the highly unlikely eventuality of their being enacted into law, would begin to address the social crisis engulfing tens of millions of American families or reverse the immense growth of economic inequality in the US.

Clinton made a point of pledging to close the massive US budget deficit and impose a regime of “fiscal responsibility,” without explaining how such austerity policies could be reconciled with her supposed commitment to progressive social change.

Obama insisted at one and the same time that “lobbyists and special interests have a stranglehold on the agenda in Washington,” and that the solution is to end partisan bickering by “bridging differences” and “bringing the country together.” How the American people can end the grip of corporate interests by uniting with their political representatives, he did not say.

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