

The Biden-Trump debate and the crisis of the American political system

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Even by the standards of American “political culture,” Thursday night’s presidential debate between US President Joseph Biden and former President Donald Trump was a spectacle of degradation, reaction and stupidity.

It is not simply an issue of Biden’s dementia, which can no longer be denied. Nor of Trump’s thuggish persona, which has never been in doubt. Exposed before the entire world on the evening of June 27, 2024 was the far-advanced decline of the entire ruling class.

American capitalism placed on stage its two leading spokesmen—the senile warmonger Biden, whose overriding policies are support for Israel’s genocidal rampage in Gaza and limitless war against Russia, and the fascist blowhard Trump, who used the debate to defend his January 6, 2021 attempted coup d’état.

This is the “choice” American politics has on offer in 2024.

The media has focused in almost choreographic unison on Biden’s catastrophic debate performance, with several major outlets, led by the *New York Times*, calling for him to step aside. Coverage has been peppered with words like “unintelligible,” “incomprehensible,” “stumbling” and “incoherent.” Biden struggled to speak in whole sentences, think in whole thoughts, hold the thread of any subject or offer a single new idea—a fitting epithet for the Democratic Party as a whole.

Biden, indeed, is the perfect embodiment of an American political system that is rotting on its feet. The president, it is true, is not able to speak clearly, and may well be *non compos mentis*. But just what would the *Times* have him say? What policies should he be elaborating? What accomplishments can he point to? Where does he propose to lead the country as president and self-proclaimed “leader of the free world?” The answer to each question is the same—war.

Biden’s few moments of semi-clarity revealed him to be the creature of the military-intelligence apparatus that he has always been. Like the bed-ridden patient who perks up when nurses bring the medication, Biden was finally able to say something intelligible when prompted by the CNN debate hosts to restate his unstinting support for Israel’s mass murder of the Palestinians of Gaza.

“We are providing Israel with all the weapons they need and when they need them,” Biden declared.

With this policy, some 40,000 civilians have been slaughtered in nine months of merciless bombardment. But Biden’s “clarity” on

this subject will hardly win him support among the masses of workers and youth who hate the genocide.

Biden was similarly lucid in his demand for an escalation of the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, which threatens the planet with a nuclear holocaust. Of the Russian president, Biden repeated the official propaganda narrative:

Putin has made one thing clear: He wants to reestablish what was part of the Soviet Empire, not just a piece, he wants all of Ukraine. That’s what he wants. And then do you think he’ll stop there? Do you think he’ll stop when he – if he takes Ukraine? What do you think happens to Poland? What do you think of Belarus? What do you think happens to those NATO countries?

Biden’s position is that Russia must be militarily defeated, “as long as it takes” and “as much as it costs,” as he has said many times. This war-mongering threat is a matter of pressing urgency for every person on the planet. It is clear for all those with eyes to see that Washington, along with its NATO allies, is already deep into an undeclared war with nuclear-armed Russia.

As was to be expected, CNN hosts Jake Tapper and Dana Bash did not offer a follow-up on this momentous question. Likewise, the moderators asked nothing about the COVID-19 pandemic, whose unchecked spread was encouraged by both Trump and Biden, killing millions, much less the newly emerging H5N1 bird flu virus, even as epidemiologists and public health experts desperately sound warning alarms. The “Fourth Estate,” the media, is also far, far gone.

It is not only because of his age and senility that Biden could not effectively answer a single one of Trump’s fascist threats, let alone his moonshot lies. It is because, fundamentally, he offers no alternative to the presumptive Republican nominee.

Trump spent much of the debate fulminating against immigrants, repeating the demonstrably false assertion that migrant workers are responsible for a crime wave (data show that immigrants are *less* likely to commit violent crimes than native-born Americans) and that immigrants “are taking over our schools, our hospitals, and they’re going to be taking over Social Security.” (Immigrants are net contributors to the American tax base, as recently spelled out once again by the Congressional Budget Office. It is Trump’s

brethren among the superrich who are bleeding the country dry).

Trump dodged the only challenging question of the evening, from Tapper, who asked:

President Trump, staying on the topic of immigration, you've said that you're going to carry out "the largest domestic deportation operation in American history." Does that mean that you will deport every undocumented immigrant in America, including those who have jobs, including those whose spouses are citizens, and including those who have lived here for decades? And if so, how will you do it?

Trump did not explain how he would sweep up millions of immigrants—working class men, women and children. But it is obvious he could only carry out such a massive deportation by violent police state methods, which would very quickly be directed against the entire working class. Such a policy entails the destruction of what remains of American democracy and the complete inversion of the national credo of America as a nation of immigrants and "an asylum for mankind," as Tom Paine put it.

Biden did not, or could not, challenge Trump on immigration, perhaps because he and his Democratic predecessor, Barack Obama, bear responsibility for the creation of the very police state infrastructure that Trump now threatens to mobilize. The Biden administration openly boasts that it has deported "more people than in all four years of the prior administration," in the words of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas. Obama, for his part, deported more immigrants than all previous administrations combined. Only last week, Biden won a Supreme Court case that asserted the untrammelled right of the executive branch to prevent American citizens from living with their immigrant husbands and wives.

But it is not Biden's right-wing politics that has stunned the Democratic Party establishment and the factions of the ruling class that tend to orient to it—Wall Street, the intelligence apparatus, the upper military brass, and Silicon Valley, among others. What these layers fear above all else is that a Biden collapse and a Trump victory will alter the war policy against Russia, though Trump makes no bones about his readiness to unleash the American military, including its nuclear arsenal.

Biden's debacle comes at a moment of mounting crisis for the American ruling class. Washington's Ukrainian puppet regime is losing the war, at a cost of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian and Russian lives. Elections will soon take place in Britain and France, whose leaders, key Washington allies, are, if anything, more discredited than Biden. And on July 9-11, Biden is slated to oversee a NATO war council in Washington that will push for intensified intervention in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, US sovereign debt stands at nearly \$35 trillion and is rapidly growing, owing to the endless funding for the wars in Ukraine and Israel and the high interest rates imposed to punish the American working class in the name of fighting inflation, which has the effect of making debt more expensive. The political

bankruptcy of American capitalism, indeed, reflects its financial bankruptcy.

It is under these conditions that the *Times* is spearheading a campaign to remove Biden from the ticket. Such a move has dangers of its own. There are no politicians in the Democratic Party of genuinely national stature who are not despised (a similar problem confronts the Republicans should Trump be removed). And the upper-middle class base of the Democratic Party is cobbled together from various identity-based constituencies, which will demand that their "own" be put forward in lieu of Biden, threatening a faction war among the Democrats. This would have nothing to do with fundamental political differences. Any replacement would only mean a repackaging of Biden's war policies behind a new face and name.

In the final analysis, Biden's decline represents that of the political order and the capitalist ruling class it represents. It is a sclerotic regime that can brook no challenge to its authority.

Under these conditions, vast political possibilities open up, especially to the working class. This is why Biden has cracked down on campus protests against the Gaza genocide and why the Democratic Party is desperately seeking to exclude third parties from the ballot. Among those parties is the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

In a statement, SEP presidential candidate Joe Kishore commented:

The debate gave expression to the political rot in the United States, the center of finance capital and the cockpit of imperialist war planning. This crisis must be understood as an expression of profound objective factors.

While the exact course of events cannot be predicted, one thing is absolutely certain. There will be no progressive resolution to this crisis until the working class, on a world scale, comes together as an international force on the basis of a socialist program.



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