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Republican Presidential Candidates Back Nuclear Strike Against Iran

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Nine of ten candidates for the Republican presidential nomination explicitly or tacitly supported a US attack on Iran using nuclear weapons, in response to a question at Tuesday night's nationally televised debate in New Hampshire.

Despite the extraordinary character of these declarations-giving support to the first use of nuclear weapons in war since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 62 years ago-there was virtually no US press coverage of these remarks and no commentary on their significance.

While the Republican candidates sought to present the military action as a limited one against Iran's alleged nuclear weapons facilities, calling them "tactical nuclear strikes," no one should misunderstand what this means. The use of nuclear weapons, in whatever form, against a densely populated country of 75 million would be an act of mass murder.

These comments reflect the derangement and depravity of considerable sections of a ruling elite which believes it must make a "success" of its occupation of Iraq, even if it requires "doubling its bet" and attacking another major country in the Middle East-one which is three times larger than Iraq and with a long history of struggle for independence and against colonial-style rule.

The initial exchange came about half an hour into the debate, which was broadcast on CNN and moderated by CNN anchorman Wolf Blitzer. After some initial discussion on the Iraq war, in which nine of the ten candidates vowed to persevere in the effort to control the oil-rich country, Blitzer asked Congressman Duncan Hunter of California, former chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, about recent talks between US and Iranian officials in Baghdad. He asked Hunter whether it was correct to negotiate with Iran, given Iran's alleged efforts to develop nuclear weapons. When Hunter endorsed the talks, Blitzer followed up with this question:

Blitzer: If it came down to a preemptive US strike against Iran's nuclear facility, if necessary would you authorize as president the use of tactical nuclear weapons?

Hunter: I would authorize the use of tactical nuclear weapons if there was no other way to preempt those particular centrifuges.

Blitzer then turned to former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who currently leads in opinion polls of prospective Republican primary voters.

Blitzer: What do you think, Mayor? Do you think if you were president of the United States and it came down to Iran having a nuclear bomb, which you say is unacceptable, you would authorize the use of tactical nuclear weapons?

Giuliani: Part of the premise of talking to Iran has to be that they have to know very clearly that it is unacceptable to the United States that they have nuclear power. I think it could be done with conventional weapons, but you can't rule out anything and you shouldn't take any option off the table.

The same question was then posed to former Virginia Governor James Gilmore, and to former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, the candidate with the most backing from Wall Street and other financial interests.

Gilmore criticized "the desire for Iran to dominate that portion of the world," adding that while he supported negotiations with Iran, "We're also going to say that having a nuclear weapon is unacceptable. They need to

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understand it. And all options are on the table by the United States in that instance."

Questioned by Blitzer, Romney used the same formulation.

Blitzer: Governor Romney, I want to get you on the record. Do you agree with the mayor, the governor, others here, that the use of tactical nuclear weapons, potentially, would be possible if that were the only way to stop Iran from developing a nuclear bomb?

Romney: You don't take options off the table.

These four candidates were the only ones directly asked the question, but five others-Senator John McCain, Senator Sam Brownback, Congressman Tom Tancredo, former Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson, and former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee-had ample opportunity to object or to distinguish their positions from this endorsement of mass murder.

Only one candidate chose to do so, Congressman Ron Paul of Texas, the former Libertarian presidential candidate. Paul, a conservative politician who articulates the isolationist strain in American bourgeois politics, is a critic of the Iraq war. He finally addressed the issue of using nuclear weapons an hour after it was raised, in response to a question from a college professor in the audience, who asked what each candidate thought was the most important moral issue facing the country.

Several of the Republican candidates gave predictable responses, citing abortion and the "right to life," a right which they are not prepared to concede to the people of Iraq, Iran or any other country that stands in the way of American imperialism. Congressman Paul's response is worth quoting, since it demonstrates how far the "mainstream" of American bourgeois politics has gone in embracing mass killing as an instrument of state policy.

Blitzer: Congressman Paul, what's the most pressing moral issue in the United States right now?

Paul: I think it is the acceptance just recently that we now promote preemptive war. I do not believe that's part of the American tradition... And now, tonight, we hear that we're not even willing to remove from the table a preemptive nuclear strike against a country that has done no harm to us directly and is no threat to our national security!"

These remarks were greeted with considerable applause, an indication that even among self-identified rank-and-file Republicans there is growing unease over the escalating militarism of the American ruling elite.

But in the corporate-controlled US media, there was little or no commentary about the endorsement of a nuclear strike against Iran. CNN, which broadcast the debate, reported it in passing, and cited only Congressman Hunter's support for the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

The Washington Post reduced the issue to a single clause of a sentence towards the end of its report on the debate, in which, it claimed, McCain, Giuliani and Romney "each had moments in which they shined." The Post reporters did not say if they thought that Giuliani's and Romney's support for possible nuclear strikes on Iran was such a moment.

The entire treatment of the subject was limited to the following: "The candidates said they would not remove the option of using nuclear weapons to prevent Iran from obtaining such weapons, and they also fielded questions about abortion, religion, health care and global warming."

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The rest of the mainstream press did not even report this endorsement of an unprovoked US nuclear attack on Iran. The New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Associated Press, Bloomberg News Service, ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox News all said nothing.

There is no politically innocent explanation for this silence. One can only imagine the howling in the American media if a prominent official figure in China had threatened the use of nuclear weapons against Taiwan, or if a candidate to succeed Vladimir Putin in Russia had called for nuclear strikes against one of its pro-Western neighbors.

Outside the United States, the significance of the threats of nuclear attack on Iran was widely recognized. The British news service Reuters led its report on the debate with the Iran comments, under the headline, "Republicans: Iran Must Not Have Nuclear Arms." The lead paragraph begins: "Republican candidates for US president agreed on Tuesday that Iran must not develop atomic weapons even if a tactical nuclear strike is needed to stop it ..."

The Israeli daily newspaper Ha'aretz also took note, commenting, "One of the more memorable statements was made by former Governor Jim Gilmore, who said that all options were on the table in dealing with Iran, including the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons."

The bloodlust expressed in these remarks is not limited to the nine Republicans on the stage in New Hampshire. Prospective candidate Fred Thompson, the former senator from Tennessee, gave a television interview immediately after the debate in which he solidarized himself with the call for a preemptive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities.

As for the Democrats, nearly all of the party's presidential candidates, as well as the entire congressional leadership, are on record in support of escalating the US campaign of diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions and military saber-rattling against Iran, aimed at preparing public opinion in the United States for a new and even more terrible slaughter in the Middle East.

Patrick Martin, 07 June, 2007, World Socialist Web

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