

First GOP Debate Throws Trump Into Sharp Relief as the Most Capable – and Deserving – Candidate for President



by Conrad Black

In what President Trump correctly labeled in advance a “vice presidential debate” conducted Wednesday by Fox News at Milwaukee, his eight principal rivals for the Republican presidential nomination sorted themselves out neatly. All of them – together do not have as much support in the polls as Trump himself has.

Governors Christie of New Jersey and Hutchinson of Arkansas, neither still in office, have no business being in this race. They are proud of being ex-prosecutors and cogs in the wheel

of the profoundly corrupt American criminal justice system. In their pathological dislike and envy for the former president, they have failed the litmus test of all Republicans in the run-up to the next presidential election.

They think that even in the District of Columbia, where the Democrats habitually outpoll Republicans on election day by 95 to three or four percent, and where it is effectively a crime to be a Republican, a guilty verdict at trial disqualifies a Republican candidate, regardless of what might happen on appeal to a serious court.

They are really Democrats, and prefer dishonest, rabidly partisan Democratic prosecutors and the atrophied criminal injustice system of Merrick Garland to the former president and leading presidential candidate of what they claim to be their own party.

It is generally assumed that Mr. Christie, who was a prodigious cheerleader for Mr. Trump after being knocked out of the nomination race early in 2016, was rejected as an office-holder in the Mr. Trump administration because of his role in convicting and imprisoning the father-in-law of the former president's daughter, Ivanka, Charles Kushner.

Mr. Christie's present campaign is a straight smear-job and sour grapes spoiler operation that has no chance of success at any level. Mr. Christie even has the effrontery to judge Mr. Trump's "conduct" unacceptable, which disqualifies him, whether he is convicted or not, as if this bedraggled has-been who limped out of office with some polls showing his approval number in a single figure, with the "Bridge-Gate" fiasco around his neck like an albatross, fancies himself the moral arbiter of American public life.

Mr. Christie could have had the Republican nomination in place of Senator Romney in 2012 and would have made a better fight of it. He could have joined Woodrow Wilson as only the second

New Jersey governor to be president. That office only seeks the man once. His vendetta is a disgrace, and Laura Ingraham was probably correct in saying that Mr. Christie is the candidate who has the best chance of becoming an MSNBC political commentator.

Mr. Hutchinson seems to imagine that because President Clinton and plausible dark horse candidate Mike Huckabee were governors of Arkansas, he might have a chance. too. On Wednesday evening, he was a pompous, beaming, nonentity who has not yet climbed to two percent support in any poll.

A third Trump-hater, a former congressman, Will Hurd, couldn't qualify even for this first debate. It is devoutly to be hoped that his absurd challenge will evaporate without his ever getting in front of a national audience. He and Mr. Hutchinson are bucking for the Eric Swalwell-Jay Inslee Prize for asinine presidential campaigns that crash before take-off and remind us of how virulent Potomac Fever arouses mad egotism in even the most insignificant politicians.

No one who attaches more credence to Mr. Trump's dishonest prosecutors than to Mr. Trump himself is fit to be a Republican candidate for any office. This is the defining event of contemporary American affairs: One side of the showdown comprises the corrupt bipartisan log-rolling and back-scratching society of post-Reagan Washington where 90 percent of the population are Democrats, the parties alternate but government moves steadily to the left, on one side. The other side includes the only force strong enough to frighten and defeat it, which is, warts and all, Donald Trump.

Governor Burgum of North Dakota and Senator Scott of South Carolina came through as good and likable men, capable in their positions, but lacking the gravitas required of the presidency; Mr. Scott would be a plausible vice presidential candidate, which is presumably his real objective. No one could dispute that Vice President Pence is qualified.

Mr. Pence is, though, unimaginative, ponderous and addicted to sanctimony, though an authentic conservative of generally sound judgment. He is unexciting. He is also attempting to promote the idea that to accept all of the states' electoral votes was one of the great reinforcements of constitutional government in American history.

It was a defensible decision, but it would have been better to seek an immediate Supreme Court ruling on some of the issues presented, instead of allowing the judiciary to duck the constitutional issues completely as it did. Instead, he has effectively allied himself with the Democratic election manipulators who assured that there would be millions of mail-in ballots – mysteriously delivered by them to drop boxes at odd hours, raising concerns over ballot harvesting and verifiability – producing a miraculous turn of electoral fortunes in several of the swing states.

In seeking to be commended for undercutting the president who liberated him from Hoosier obscurity, Mr. Pence disqualified himself from serious consideration. He has his honor and his toil, but the Republican Party can do better.

Vivek Ramaswamy is intelligent and articulate, an original thinker, but too mechanical and mouthy an interrupter and too quick to impute dishonest motives to opponents. He had no business claiming all the other candidates were bought by PACs and defense contractors, and did not entirely escape the charge of simplistic treatment of very complicated foreign policy issues.

Mr. Ramaswamy is correct that along with assuring the survival of a viable and secure Ukraine, the principal strategic goal in the present Ukraine war is to ensure that Russia is not pushed into a permanent embrace with China. He could develop quite quickly into a strong presidential candidate, but not this year.

Governor DeSantis handled most questions well, is clearly plausible as a president, and is a successful two-term governor of a large state who has staked out a number of independent positions and adhered to them courageously. He could be a strong candidate, but he waffled on Ukraine, and on abortion, and Florida's six-week limit for approved abortions would be a terrible handicap in a national election.

Mr. DeSantis should have been better prepared on both these issues. There was one destructive moment, when candidates were asked to raise their hands if they would support Mr. Trump were he was nominated even after having been convicted of a felony; Mr. DeSantis looked to see what others did before tentatively raising his hand. On such a question, that is not what a leader does.

Governor Haley put in the strongest performance. She was right to acknowledge that the Republicans were also blameworthy in the orgy of national debt; she was right in her comprehensive treatment of abortion, and she was right in her references to Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan. She would be as plausible a candidate for president as Mr. DeSantis and is probably the strongest candidate in this group for the vice presidential nomination.

The winner, however, was Donald Trump. He was right not to appear, and his status as the most capable candidate to be president as well as the most deserving, was effectively affirmed by a good look at the alternatives.

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