

Raising More Questions Than Answers

The third and final presidential debate was an ugly affair with both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump dodging or botching many pressing questions about the future of America and the planet, writes Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

At the final presidential debate, Hillary Clinton was asked about her dream for “open borders” as disclosed in one of her paid speeches to financial special interests. Instead of giving a thorough answer, she pivoted into an attack on Russian “espionage” for allegedly giving the speech to Wikileaks to benefit Donald Trump’s campaign.

“This has come from the highest levels of the Russian government, clearly from Putin himself, in an effort, as 17 of our intelligence agencies have confirmed, to influence our election,” she charged. “Will Donald Trump admit and condemn that the Russians are doing this and make it clear that he will not have the help of [Vladimir] Putin in this election?”

Trump responded by saying Clinton had “no idea” if it was Russia, China or anyone else who had hacked into the account. Indeed, some former U.S. intelligence officials say the emails may have been leaked, rather than hacked. And the U.S. intelligence community has provided no public evidence to back up Clinton’s claim.

James Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence (which apparently represented Clinton’s “17 agencies”), said the “hack” was “consistent with the methods and motivations of Russian-directed efforts. ... however, we are not now in a position to attribute this activity to the Russian Government.”

By contrast, Trump espoused the benefits of cooperation with Moscow. “I don’t know Putin,” Trump said “He said nice things about me. If we got along well, that would be good. If Russia and the United States got along well and went after ISIS, that would be good. [Putin] has no respect for [Clinton].”

“Well, that’s because [Putin would] rather have a puppet as president,” Clinton shot back.

“You’re the puppet,” Trump interjected.

“You are willing to spout the Putin line,” Clinton retorted, “sign up for his wish list, break up NATO, do whatever he wants to do, and that you continue to get help from him because he has a very clear favorite in this race.”

Yet, if Russia prefers Trump it's probably because he wants dialogue with Moscow, while Clinton has called Putin "Hitler," made bellicose statement towards the country and dismissed areas of possible cooperation.

On Sept. 9, for instance, the U.S. and Russia concluded a deal on a limited ceasefire in Syria to allow a coordinated air campaign against ISIS and Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, the sort of cooperation that Trump has advocated, but the agreement collapsed after the U.S. said it "accidentally" killed about 80 Syrian soldiers in an airstrike near Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria.

But Trump's comments about the Middle East were muddled by his imprecision on facts and his singular focus on ISIS when it is Al Qaeda's affiliate, formerly called the Nusra Front, that is at the center of the U.S.-Russian dispute regarding how to combat terrorist groups in Syria.

Nusra Front, which recently changed its name to the Syrian (or Levant) Conquest Front, commands an array of rebel forces, including some backed by the U.S., that have refused to separate themselves from Al Qaeda fighters in east Aleppo and other combat zones.

It is Al Qaeda's domination of east Aleppo – and the U.S. inability to get its "moderate" rebels to break with Al Qaeda – that is the backstory of the Syrian-Russian bombing raids and the resulting humanitarian crisis in east Aleppo. But Trump failed to articulate that complexity.

"She doesn't like Putin because Putin has outsmarted her at every step of the way," Trump said. "All you have to do is look at the Middle East. They've taken over. We've spent \$6 trillion. [Russia has] taken over the Middle East. She has been outsmarted and outplayed worse than anybody I've ever seen in any government whatsoever."

At one point, Trump said that during the ceasefire Russia had taken "vast swaths of land" in Syria, though Russia has no ground troops in the country, further showing Trump's shaky command of facts.

Fighting in Syria and Iraq

Clinton again called for a "safe zone" and a "no-fly zone" in Syria, though the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford, told Congress this month that that would mean war with Russia. And in one of her leaked emails she admitted that enforcing a no-fly zone would "kill a lot of Syrians." She evaded a direct question from the moderator, Fox News' Chris Wallace, about whether "a President Clinton" would shoot down Russian aircraft, possibly plunging the world into a nuclear crisis.

The two candidates also sharply disagreed on the operation launched this week by the Iraqi Army, the Kurdish peshmerga and Shiite-dominated militia to retake Mosul in northern Iraq from ISIS.

Trump blamed Clinton for pulling U.S. troops out of Iraq when she was Secretary of State. "We had Mosul," said Trump. "But when she left, she took everybody out, we lost Mosul. Now we're fighting again to get Mosul."

Trump's imprecision was on display again. Though he continued to insist that he had always opposed the 2003 invasion of Iraq, he seemed to be saying that once the U.S. military had occupied Iraq, U.S. troops should have stayed there indefinitely. Also, the military withdrawal schedule was negotiated by President George W. Bush with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, not by President Obama and Secretary Clinton.

Without providing any details, Trump added that Iran would benefit most by the liberation of Mosul. "Iran should write us a thank-you letter," he said. "As I said many years ago, Iran is taking over Iraq. Something they've wanted to do forever. But we've made it so easy for them."

Trump also claimed that ISIS leaders had already fled Mosul because the U.S. had unwisely advertised the operation months in advance. "Whatever happened to the element of surprise?" Trump said, adding that the timing also was a boon to Clinton's campaign.

Clinton rejected Trump's allegation that the timing was designed to help her win. "I'm just amazed that he seems to think that the Iraqi government and our allies and everybody else launched the attack on Mosul to help me in this election," she said.

However, it's true that a victory in Mosul would undercut Trump's criticism of Clinton's record as Secretary of State. It also would boost Barack Obama's legacy, something he, like other Presidents, obsesses over in his final months in office.

Landing Some Zingers

Wallace's questions touched on a variety of topics, but he didn't mention climate change, government surveillance of citizens, energy policy, police violence or tension in the South China Sea. Despite the testiness, the debate saw the two contenders largely reiterate positions that they had taken throughout the campaign.

On domestic issues, the candidates disagreed on abortion, guns, immigration, health care and the economy.

Trump said he wants to cut taxes on all Americans including the wealthiest, while Clinton said she'd make the rich and big corporations pay "their fair share." It will certainly bear watching whether she follows through on this pledge should she win, given her very strong ties to Wall Street.

Trump landed a few zingers, exposing Clinton's hypocrisy in defending women's rights while cozying up to the Saudis. He pointed out that Saudi Arabia had given \$25 million to the Clinton Foundation.

"You talk about women and women's rights. So these are people that push gays off buildings. These are people that kill women and treat women horribly. And yet you take their money. So I'd like to ask you right now why don't you give back the money that you have taken from certain countries that treat certain groups of people so horribly? Why don't you give back the money?" Trump said.

But it was one of Trump's remarks late in the debate that sent the corporate media into a frenzy. He said he wouldn't know until the Nov. 8 election results were in whether he would accept them as free and fair. Over the past week, with polls showing Clinton heading toward victory, Trump has repeatedly warned that the election process would be "rigged."

Commentators hysterically called Trump's remarks an unprecedented challenge to America's democratic process. They read Trump's remark as a suggestion that he would countenance violence to prevent the "democratic transfer of power."

But America's democratic process has at times displayed significant problems. The 2000 and 2004 elections were marred by evidence of election fraud – mostly favoring George W. Bush – and a close result in three weeks could again open the results to contention. Given what happened in Florida in 2000 and Ohio in 2004, it is a completely reasonable for a candidate to withhold judgment on whether an election was fair or not.

Lacking a Leader

Corporate media's concern over Trump's comment appeared to reflect an alarm over the volatile class anger that has underscored the entire 2106 campaign. Americans who have suffered under neoliberalism since Ronald Reagan are fighting back.

Unfortunately, these Americans have yet to find the right leader. Sen. Bernie Sanders was certainly on the right track, railing against Wall Street, the trade deals, college debt and other issues, and he was without Trump's personal baggage and problematic temperament.

But Sanders promised to support Clinton and thus save his standing in the

Democratic Party although – at its leadership levels – it did what it could to sink his candidacy. He turned down becoming head of the Green Party ticket to make an independent run that could have siphoned votes from both Clinton and Trump.

Trump is seriously flawed because he's a billionaire demagogue whose commitment to the interests of the embattled middle class is doubtful. For instance, he wants tax cuts for people as rich as he is, peddling the discredited trickle-down view that making rich people richer will somehow create middle-class jobs and increase wealth for all. Economists recognize that demand creates jobs and that means putting money into the pockets of ordinary people, not those at the top.

Trump also denies climate change and wants to reinstitute torture, and he's shown extreme intolerance towards Mexicans and Muslims. And he wants to increase military spending when the U.S. spends as much as the next ten countries. He has talked about Japan and South Korea getting nuclear weapons, as Clinton pointed out in the debate.

Though there's been media overkill on the story about his sexual misconduct, Trump's graphic words and alleged deeds mar his character. Arguably, his strongest suit has been his defense of cooperation with Russia, rather than a costly and risky confrontation, but even that is undermined by his failure to master important details or to advance an effective argument.

For instance, he didn't demand to see the evidence against Russia regarding the alleged hacks. He also doesn't flesh out his argument that the Obama-Clinton foreign policy team fostered the rise of ISIS (and Al Qaeda) in Syria as part of another harebrained "regime change" scheme that ignored warnings from the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Trump's many flaws have given the Establishment plenty of ammunition to use against him and to clear the way for a likely Clinton victory, despite her private comments in a speech and in leaked emails that reveal her disdain for Americans whose interests are being threatened.

It's going to be a very long four years as we wait to see if class resentments explode into full-scale social unrest.

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Jill Stein: On War, Trump Is Safer Than Clinton

The Green Party's Jill Stein has spoken an inconvenient truth, that on the existential issue of a strategic war with nuclear-armed Russia, Donald Trump is less dangerous than Hillary Clinton, writes John V. Walsh.

By John V. Walsh

According to Green Party presidential nominee [Jill Stein](#), "On the issue of war and nuclear weapons, it is actually Hillary's policies which are much scarier than Donald Trump who does not want to go to war with Russia. He wants to seek modes of working together, which is the route that we need to follow not to go into confrontation and nuclear war with Russia."

Yet, a glance at the front page of the New York Times or the editorial page or many other pages on any day gives a sense of the different environment in which we find ourselves. Absolutely nothing but evil is to be attributed to Donald Trump.

To do otherwise is to court risk. After all, who wants to find oneself labeled as a sexist, racist, homophobic deplorable? ("Bellicose," "hypocritical," "lying" and "murderous" are notably missing from the litany of deplorables.) What would the neighbors say? Or the other parents at the private schools? Or the other students huddled together in the "safe spaces" in the colleges?

The ruthless stifling of discussion is not only true of the Times, the Washington Post, NPR, the New Yorker and other outlets charged with molding the opinions of the lesser orders. The intimidation spreads like slime on the surface of a dying pond so that even supposedly iconoclastic online outlets fall meekly into line. And so the key issue confronting us in this election cannot be discussed: that is a dangerous state of affairs for all of humanity, war with another nuclear power, Russia.

Into this menacing atmosphere steps Jill Stein, the Green Party candidate for President of the U.S. Here is some of what she says in an [interview](#) on Oct. 12, headlined "Jill Stein: Trump Is Less Dangerous Than Clinton; She Will Start Nuclear War With Russia":

“It is now Hillary Clinton that wants to start an air war with Russia over Syria by calling for a no fly zone. ... We have 2,000 nuclear missiles on hair-trigger alert. They are saying we are closer to a nuclear war than we have ever been.

“Under Hillary Clinton, we could slide into nuclear war very quickly from her declared policy in Syria. ... I sure won’t sleep well at night if Donald Trump is elected, but I sure won’t sleep well at night if Hillary Clinton elected. We have another choice other than these two candidates who are both promoting lethal policies.

“On the issue of war and nuclear weapons, it is actually Hillary’s policies which are much scarier than Donald Trump who does not want to go to war with Russia. He wants to seek modes of working together, which is the route that we need to follow not to go into confrontation and nuclear war with Russia.”

In making this statement, Stein is doing more than making a pitch for her own candidacy although she is certainly doing that. She is doing more than muttering the cliché that both major parties are the same, which we hear endlessly without so much as a qualifying word. She is saying that in the midst of the bipartisan sameness, there can be a decisive difference from an accidental candidate on a critical issue, one of survival. In short she is saying that Trump is the lesser evil on the key issue of survival. That is “lesser evil” – big time

Not only is her statement very non-PC, it will also cause her difficulties with some of her own supporters. A number of Democrats are supporting Stein in “safe states,” those places where Hillary is a shoo-in, like California. Certainly the expectation from such folks is that Stein will be quiet about the greater danger of the rabidly hawkish Clinton than the Putin-friendly Trump.

But the safe states strategy in and of itself tells us that the first priority of such worthies is the election of Hillary Clinton. In fact a friend of mine close to the Stein campaign informs me that Jill has made statements like this previously and has run into criticism for them.

Let this essay not be seen as an endorsement of Jill whom I have known for many years. But this essay is intended as a tribute to her. Years ago in Massachusetts I watched her stand firmly against the attempt of the “DemoGreens” to turn the Green Party into a powerless appendage of the Democratic Party.

In her statement on Trump and Clinton, Stein has gone beyond cliché and said something uncomfortably true for all too many progressives.

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A Dark Debate Caps a Grim Campaign

Donald Trump seemed to have his feet on the ground during the early minutes of the last debate, but he soon soared back into his narcissistic universe where everything revolves around Donald, writes Michael Winship from Paris.

By Michael Winship

If I believed there ever was any chance of escaping the U.S. election by running away to France for a week of business meetings and a little off time, all hope was dashed the moment we stepped into a cab at Charles de Gaulle Airport and the driver immediately started grilling us about Donald Trump.

This is how it has been the whole time here, with almost everyone expressing their fears of what a Trump White House would mean for the entire world. They're shocked and disbelieving of the whole situation, their very real concerns the number one topic of conversation, followed in second place by the firm belief of many that we Americans soon will come to realize what a fine president Barack Obama has been and, running a distant third, the fallout from Britain's Brexit vote and its impact on the future of the European Union.

Our election has so seized the imagination here that posters around the city advertise "La Nuit Americaine," an evening of watching the voting results on Nov. 8 at the Carreau du Temple, the vast public space in the Third Arrondissement. And so it seemed imperative somehow that I had to be awake at 3 a.m. Paris time to watch the final presidential debate, sneaking in a nap and setting the alarm. I hadn't done anything like that since mom let me watch the moon landing, another otherworldly and momentous, perilous event.

At first it seemed that perhaps Donald Trump thought it was 3 a.m., too, although it was only early evening in Las Vegas. By his standards, he was restrained to the point of somnolence, making a few points that even indicated some thought process going on. But from the beginning of his answer to the very first question about the Supreme Court – that "Justice Ginsburg made some very, very inappropriate statements toward me" – it was clear that good old, vituperative, self-involved Trump was lurking just below the surface.

Under Trump's Skin

As has been the pattern with all three encounters, in the first half-hour, talk was fairly measured, and then Hillary Clinton could be seen getting under Trump's ochreous skin. Discussions of immigration, gun and abortion rights and Syria had their moments, especially when each candidate managed to move away

from the same old familiar talking points and boilerplate, which was not very often.

But soon, of course, Trump had to refer to some undocumented immigrants – alleged drug dealers – as “bad hombres,” as if he was Judge Roy Bean, Law West of the Pecos, ready to string up them non-American *hombres* without the benefit of a jury.

And so the evening progressed, if that’s the word for it, with the most stunning and headline-grabbing moment when Donald Trump refused to say if he would accept the final results on Nov. 8 and, in timeworn American fashion, calmly accept a win or loss.

“I will look at it at the time,” he said. “I’m not looking at anything now, I will look at it at the time.” Pressed by Chris Wallace of Fox News, the debate moderator, Trump reiterated, “I will tell you at the time. I will keep you in suspense, okay?”

Not okay. This election isn’t the season finale of *The Amazing Race*. Not only did what he said directly run contrary to prior comments by vice presidential candidate Mike Pence and even Trump himself, with those words Wednesday night, he trampled on principles of democracy and human decency that help the republic keep its difficult balancing act together.

To constantly charge, as he has, that the election will be rigged – with no real evidence to back up his allegations – is a danger to our democracy and the words of a thug rather than a potential president.

As *The New Yorker’s* Adam Gopnik wrote back in May, “[U]nder any label Trump is a declared enemy of the liberal constitutional order of the United States – the order that has made it, in fact, the great and plural country that it already is. He announces his enmity to America by word and action every day... It is self-evident in the threats he makes daily to destroy his political enemies, made only worse by the frivolity and transience of the tone of those threats.”

In post-debate spin, Trump team members tried to liken their man’s stance to Al Gore in 2000, when the Democratic presidential candidate questioned the Florida vote. But there is little if any valid comparison. Gore challenged the count after it was announced, went through the legal process all the way up to the Supreme Court and when the court found for Bush – even though strong evidence remained of fraud and inaccuracies – Gore gracefully conceded the race. A divisive, weeks-long crisis ended with a call to unify as a nation and to let George W. Bush lead.

Grace is not a word that springs to mind when contemplating Donald Trump, as was

proven yet again toward the end of the debate when he referred to Hillary Clinton as “such a nasty woman.” All of his misogyny, all of his indifference to women’s rights, and the dismissiveness that treats women as playthings or doormats was on full display in those four words. Sad.

In a little less than three weeks, after all these torturous months of campaigning, we finally should know who our next president will be, provided Trump accepts the outcome either way and doesn’t go off on yet another adolescent hissy fit.

As for Hillary Clinton, she performed competently in Wednesday night’s debate simply by remaining unruffled by Trump’s inchoate attacks, stating her positions, artfully dodging landmines on emails and Syria, baiting Trump and hauling him in like the orange roughy he is.

Here in Paris, they tell the famous story of the Abbé Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, a pamphleteer of the French Revolution, who even during the worst and bloodiest parts of the Terror still dreamed of a representative democracy. Asked what he accomplished during the revolution, he replied, simply, “*J’ai vécu*” – “I survived.”

Hillary Clinton survived the last of these dumbed-down debates and from here in Paris, Donald Trump increasingly looks – *pardonnez-moi* – like French toast.

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The Risks of Clinton’s Syrian ‘No-Fly Zone’

Hillary Clinton’s scheme for a “no-fly zone” – if implemented without the Syrian government’s approval – would be an act of war and a risk of a nuclear showdown with Russia, says ex-Congressman Dennis Kucinich.

By Dennis Kucinich

The most consequential statement by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Wednesday night’s debate was her pronouncement that a no-fly zone over Syria could “save lives and hasten the end of the conflict,” that a no-fly zone would

provide “safe zones on the ground” was in “the best interests of the people on the ground in Syria” and would “help us with our fight against ISIS.”

It would do none of the above. A U.S. attempt to impose a no-fly zone in Syria would, as Secretary Clinton once cautioned a Goldman Sachs audience, “kill a lot of Syrians,” and, according to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Dunford, lead to a war with Russia. If the U.S. has not been invited into a country to establish a “no-fly zone” such an action is, in fact, an invasion, an act of war.

It is abundantly clear from our dark alliance with Saudi Arabia and our conduct in support of jihadists in Syria that our current leaders have learned nothing from Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya as we prepare to plunge head-long into the abyss of a world war.

Our international relations are built upon lies to promote regime changes, the fantasy of a unipolar world ruled by America, and a blank check for the national security state.

As others prepare for war, we must prepare for peace. We must answer the mindless call to arms with a thoughtful, soulful call to resist the coming build-up for war. A new, resolute peace movement must arise, become visible and challenge those who would make war inevitable.

We must not wait until the Inauguration to begin to build a new peace movement in America.

Dennis Kucinich is a former congressman from Ohio and a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004 and 2008. [This commentary originally appeared at <http://worldbeyondwar.org/dennis-kucinich-war-peace/>]

Clinton Repackages Her Syrian ‘No-Fly’ Plan

Exclusive: In a surprise twist, Hillary Clinton dramatically revised her scheme for a “no-fly zone” over Syria, presenting it as a subject for negotiation with Syria and Russia, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

While the major news media focused on Donald Trump’s agnostic response about whether he would respect the results of the Nov. 8 election, Hillary Clinton

slipped in a little-noticed but important revision to her call for a “no-fly zone” in Syria, suggesting that it would be negotiated with Russia and Syria.

“This would not be done just on the first day,” Clinton replied to a question about the military cost and human toll that imposing a no-fly zone would require. “This would take a lot of negotiation. And it would also take making it clear to the Russians and the Syrians that our purpose here was to provide safe zones on the ground.”

Before Wednesday night, Clinton had left the impression that the U.S. military would unilaterally impose a “no-fly zone” on Syria, a military action that not only would violate international law but would require a major commitment of U.S. forces to destroy Syrian air defenses and to shoot down planes from the Syrian and possibly the Russian air forces.

President Obama and the U.S. military high command have resisted pressure to implement Clinton’s suggestion because of the potential for killing large numbers of civilians and dragging the United States into a wider war, potentially a clash with nuclear-armed Russia.

Debate moderator Chris Wallace noted, “General Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, says you impose a no-fly zone, chances are you’re going to get into a war – his words – with Syria and Russia. So the question I have is, if you impose a no-fly zone – first of all, how do you respond to their concerns? Secondly, if you impose a no-fly zone and a Russian plane violates that, does President Clinton shoot that plane down?”

Breaking from her usual belligerent tone, Clinton repackaged her idea as something quite different, a diplomatic initiative to persuade the Syrian and Russian governments that they should allow the creation of a “safe zone” so Syrians fleeing the fighting could have a place to live inside Syria.

Clinton said: “We’ve had millions of people leave Syria and those millions of people inside Syria who have been dislocated. So I think we could strike a deal and make it very clear to the Russians and the Syrians that this was something that we believe was in the best interests of the people on the ground in Syria, it would help us with our fight against ISIS.”

Whether the Syrian leadership and the Russian government would accept such a plan is doubtful, since it would amount to inviting the U.S. or NATO military to establish a beachhead inside Syria from which rebels, terrorists and other insurgents could operate beyond the reach of military retaliation.

Distrusting Clinton

The Syrians and the Russians are also well aware of the duplicity of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2011 when she led the effort to persuade the United Nations Security Council to authorize an emergency program to protect Libyan civilians around Benghazi from an offensive by the Libyan army seeking to root out Al Qaeda-connected terror groups

Once the Security Council agreed (with Russia abstaining rather than vetoing the plan), U.S.-coordinated airstrikes decimated the Libyan government's forces. Next, NATO military advisers began assisting the rebels on the ground, with the "humanitarian" mission quickly morphing into a "regime change" operation, with Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi driven from power, captured, tortured and murdered.

After Gaddafi's death on Oct. 20, 2011, Clinton exulted in a TV interview, "We came; we saw; he died."

So, a President Clinton isn't likely to get the benefit of the doubt again, especially since she has made clear that her desire is to see Syrian President Bashar al-Assad suffer a fate similar to Gaddafi's. Clinton's open hostility toward Russian President Vladimir Putin, whom she's compared to Hitler, also is not likely to make Russia eager for concessions.

But Clinton's repackaged "no-fly zone" – as a negotiated undertaking, rather than a unilateral act of war – suggests that the Democratic presidential nominee is at least trying to present a less warmongering face to the American voters, especially to peace-oriented Democrats. Whether the American people have any more faith in Clinton's words than the Syrians and Russians do is another question.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).
