

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.

Joe Lauria is a veteran foreign-affairs journalist based at the U.N. since 1990. He has written for the Boston Globe, the London Daily Telegraph, the Johannesburg Star, the Montreal Gazette, the Wall Street Journal and other newspapers. He can be reached at tjoelauria@gmail.com and followed on Twitter at [@unjoe](https://twitter.com/unjoe).

