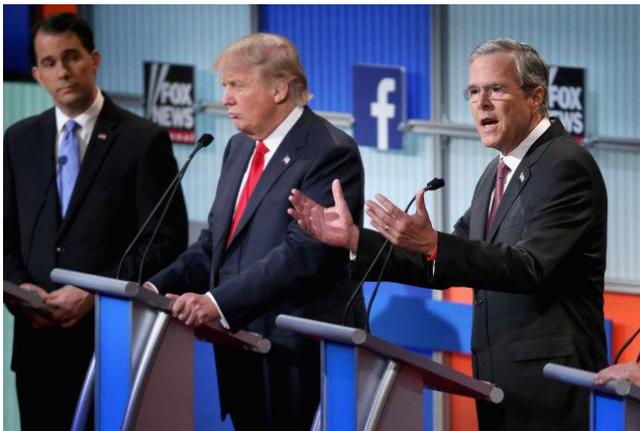


GOP Hopefuls Punt on National Security Issues

Despite some pointed questions, most candidates offered platitudes and well-worn rhetoric on complex international issues.



Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and others didn't delve into specifics when it came to foreign policy or national security at Thursday's debates.

By Paul D. Shinkman Aug. 7, 2015 | 12:37 a.m. EDT

Republican candidates at Thursday night's presidential debate spent surprisingly little time on national security issues like Iran, and almost none on Syria, China or American war veterans, despite recent polling that rates national security the most important issue among GOP voters.

Pointed questions from the moderators about the military or warfare were largely met with platitudes and well-worn rhetoric from the White House hopefuls, particularly on the recent deal the Obama administration helped solidify with Iran over its nuclear program. All who were asked – and even some who weren't – said that, if approved, they would tear the deal up on their first day in office.

“To honor the people who have died [in Iraq], we need to stop the Iran agreement for sure,” concluded former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, when asked to reconcile how he now opposes his brother George W. Bush's decision to wage war in Iraq in 2003.

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky and former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee all repeated their opposition to the deal when asked about it. None offered an

alternative or responded to the specific arguments that Obama put forward in defense of the deal during extensive remarks at American University on Wednesday.

Business tycoon Donald Trump was asked specifically how he would respond as president to reports that Qassem Soleimani – the shadowy leader of Iran’s Quds Force – had traveled to Moscow in recent days, perhaps against U.N. travel bans.

He instead blasted the Iran deal, the negotiators Obama sent to Vienna to finalize that agreement and previous attempts at wartime negotiations, such as the White House decision to trade prisoner of war Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl for five Taliban prisoners detained at Guantanamo Bay.

“We have people in Washington who don’t know what they’re doing,” he said, before turning to an applause line: “If Iran was a stock, you folks should go out and buy it right now because it would quadruple.”

Huckabee, also a Baptist minister, staunchly opposed recent social initiatives for the military imposed by the last three defense secretaries, including the repeal of the so-called “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, and current Secretary Ash Carter’s consideration of allowing openly transgender people to serve in uniform.

“The military is not a social experiment,” he said. “The purpose of the military is to kill people and break things.”

(He did not address counterinsurgency strategies for the bulk of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that advocated against killing and destruction and placed a premium on building and protecting infrastructure).

Perhaps the most thoughtful answers about security policy came from neurosurgeon Ben Carson and New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, both of whom catalogued how they would bolster the size of the military, including the number of Army soldiers and Marines, Navy ships and Air Force planes.

“That would send a clear message to the world,” Christie said.

They did not, however, discuss the congressionally mandated cuts known as sequestration that have accounted for some shrinking of the military in recent years, nor Congress’ plans to reduce the size of the military as it withdraws from wars in Iraq and Syria. Carson trotted out familiar statistics about how the current Navy is as small as it was during World War I – an argument that also emerged in the course of heated debate between Obama and then-GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney four years ago.

Veterans' issues received almost no attention, before the subject was awkwardly folded into a concluding question from moderator Megyn Kelly when asking Florida Sen. Marco Rubio about his faith.

“We helped change the law to give the power to the VA secretary, the ability to fire any executive that isn’t doing their job,” Rubio said, referencing a string of scandals that have dogged the department in recent years. “We’re going to have a VA that cares more about our veterans than about the bureaucrats who work at the VA.”

Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas placed heavy blame for the rise of the Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq on Obama’s refusal to refer to the extremist network as “radical Islamic terrorism.” The White House, which insists the fight is about “countering violent extremism,” has previously responded to similar criticism from Cruz’ by saying his preferred terminology gives religious legitimacy to a group that does not deserve it.

“We need a commander-in-chief that speaks the truth. We will not defeat radical Islamic terrorism so long as we have a president unwilling to utter the words ‘radical Islamic terrorism,’” Cruz said. “What we need is a commander-in-chief that makes clear: If you join ISIS, if you wage jihad against America, then you are signing your death warrant.”

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