



OPINION: THE MISSED GOP DEBATE OPPORTUNITY - JOSH HAMMER

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Wednesday's second Republican presidential primary debate bore a striking similarity to the first debate one month earlier. Post-debate polls and focus groups indicated Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis won (albeit in less than knockout fashion), former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations and South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley and smarmy "entrepreneur" Vivek Ramaswamy delivered polarizing performances that one either loved or hated, substance and policy took a back seat to internecine squabbling, irrelevant candidates who shouldn't be near the stage hogged up far too much microphone time, moderators did a poor job of crowd control and question selection, and viewers were left wondering whether any of this actually matters while front-runner Donald Trump refuses to show up.

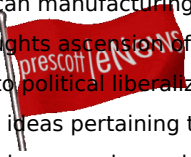
The second GOP presidential debate, in other words, was a largely missed opportunity. Part of the problem was on the candidate side: DeSantis, who consistently polls in second place behind the former president, finally took some much-deserved shots at the absentee and mudslinging Trump, but something more has to happen to meaningfully alter the trajectory of the primary. One can only slay a dragon with sword in tow and spear firmly in hand, not by stealth or beating around the bush.

But a big part of the problem was on the moderator and host venue side. Given the location of the debate at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and host network Fox Business' playing of famous clips from the Reagan presidency, the "missed opportunity ... for the conservative movement," Heritage Foundation President Kevin Roberts tweeted in the aftermath of the melee, was "the absence of the glaringly obvious question: What has changed about America since Reagan was president?" Indeed, if the moderators had taken advantage of the iconic Air Force One Pavilion setting to take the debate in this natural direction, Republican primary voters would have benefited greatly.

Toward the beginning of the debate, Fox Business played the well-known and oft-recited Reagan clip wherein the Gipper declaimed, "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the government, and I'm here to help." But do the candidates now seeking the presidential nomination of Reagan's party believe that is still correct today? Or do they instead believe that the greatest threat facing America is not necessarily redistributionist socialism, traditionally understood, but the metastasis of the leftist illiberal "woke" ideology and the fusing of state and corporate power to more efficiently subjugate enemies of the corrupt ruling Regime -- something that political science textbooks would, in the not-so-distant past, have readily identified as "fascism"?

Reagan also famously said, in a 1975 interview with Reason magazine, that "the very heart and soul of conservatism is libertarianism." But do the candidates seeking the presidential nomination of Reagan's party believe that is correct? Or do the candidates instead believe that libertarian dogma in promoting untrammelled free trade, which took the form of the so-called Washington Consensus after Reagan's

presidency, has actually done tremendous harm to American manufacturing might and supply chain resilience? Do the candidates think that "libertarian" ideas, which helped usher in the early-aughts ascension of China to the World Trade Organization under the farcical theory that economic liberalization for Beijing might lead to political liberalization, backfired tremendously and emboldened our arch-geopolitical foe? Do the candidates think that "libertarian" ideas pertaining to economic and social deregulation bear much of the blame for today's mass despondency epidemic and catastrophic drug overdose crisis, which has seen annual drug overdose fatalities skyrocket from just over 5,000 in 1992 to over 106,000 today?



Reagan also famously got bamboozled in the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act amnesty, which legalized millions of illegal aliens and promised border enforcement measures that never came. Have the Republican candidates today learned from this sordid history, or do they still hold out naive hope that some sort of "comprehensive immigration reform" grand compromise is achievable? Do the candidates agree with Reagan's 1981 formulation that America is a "nation of immigrants" -- or do they instead believe that America is a "nation of citizens," some of whom may be immigrants and some of whom may not be? Do the candidates, more generally, sympathize with Reagan's ardently pro-immigration sentiments, or do they side instead with the sentiments of fellow 20th-century Republican President Calvin Coolidge, who signed the ultra-restrictionist Immigration Act of 1924 on the commonsense grounds that America should severely slow migration flows after historic immigration waves in order to allow for proper assimilation?

Other examples abound. A debate moderated along these lines would have highlighted a real, interesting philosophical candidate divide between the outmoded "BoomerCons" (boomer conservatives) and the young guns who "know what time it is." Instead, we got Haley and Sen. Tim Scott (R-S.C.) sniping at each other over overpriced curtains and moderator Dana Perino asking which candidate on stage should be "voted off the island."

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