



Underdogs Get Licks In During Fifth Republican Debate

During the fifth “top-tier” Republican presidential candidates debate held in Las Vegas on December 15, much of the attention still seemed to focus around the front-runner in the polls, Donald Trump. However, the other candidates seemed to have honed their skills to the point of making respectable showings for themselves, with several pairs of candidates engaging in face-offs of their own as they attempted to separate themselves from the pack and make their positions better known. And in one three-way back-and-forth exchange, a trio of senators, Ted Cruz (R-Texas), Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), and Rand Paul (R-Ky.) debated the merits and pitfalls of the collection by the National Security Agency (NSA) of metadata from calls made on landline telephones.



(As a matter of background, when the USA FREEDOM Act — which shifted the responsibility for collecting communications metadata from the NSA to companies such as AT&T, Sprint, and Verizon — passed in the Senate on June 2 by a 67-32 vote and was quickly signed by President Obama, Paul opposed it because he said it extends government surveillance authority while pretending to limit it. Cruz voted for passage of the act, while Paul and Rubio voted against it, for different reasons.)

When moderator Dana Bash asked Cruz (ignoring the fact that the USA FREEDOM Act did not do what it purported to do): “You voted for a bill that President Obama signed into law just this past June that made it harder for the government to access Americans’ phone records. In light of the San Bernardino attack, was your vote a mistake?” Cruz replied:

Well, Dana, the premise of your question is not accurate....

What the USA Freedom Act did is it did two things. Number one, it ended the federal government’s bulk collection of phone metadata of millions of law-abiding citizens.

But number two in the second half of it that is critical. It strengthened the tools of national security and law enforcement to go after terrorists. It gave us greater tools and we are seeing those tools work right now in San Bernardino.

And in particular, what it did is the prior program only covered a relatively narrow slice of phone calls. When you had a terrorist, you could only search a relatively narrow slice of numbers, primarily land lines.

The USA Freedom Act expands that so now we have cell phones, now we have Internet phones, now we have the phones that terrorists are likely to use and the focus of law enforcement is on targeting the bad guys.



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Bash then asked Rubio: “You voted against [the act]. So, is Senator Cruz wrong?”

Rubio replied:

He is and so are those that voted for it. There were some that voted for it because they wanted to keep it alive and they were afraid the whole program would expire....

We are now at a time when we need more tools, not less tools. And that tool we lost, the metadata program, was a valuable tool that we no longer have at our disposal.

After Bash invited Cruz to respond, he said:

Marco knows what he’s saying isn’t true.... What he knows is that the old program covered 20 percent to 30 percent of phone numbers to search for terrorists. The new program covers nearly 100 percent. That gives us greater ability to stop acts of terrorism, and he knows that that’s the case.

Rubio countered:

There is nothing that we are allowed to do under this bill that we could not do before.

This bill did, however, take away a valuable tool that allowed the National Security Agency and other law — and other intelligence agencies to quickly and rapidly access phone records and match them up with other phone records to see who terrorists have been calling.

Bash then invited Paul to add his views, asking why he has labeled his Senate colleagues’ calls for increased surveillance by law enforcement “hogwash.” Paul said:

You know, I think Marco gets it completely wrong. We are not any safer through the bulk collection of all Americans’ records. In fact, I think we’re less safe. We get so distracted by all of the information, we’re not spending enough time getting specific immigration — specific information on terrorists.

The other thing is, is the one thing that might have stopped San Bernardino, that might have stopped 9/11 would have been stricter controls on those who came here. And Marco has opposed at every point increased security — border security for those who come to our country.

On his Gang of Eight bill, he would have liberalized immigration, but he did not — and he steadfastly opposed any new border security requirements for refugees or students....

If we want to defend the country, we have to defend against who’s coming in, and Marco ... has more of an allegiance to [Sen.] Chuck Schumer [D-N.Y.] and to the liberals than he does to conservative policy.

Following the exchange among the senators about whether the USA Patriot Act benefited national security and if the Gang of Eight immigration bill harmed national security by opening the gates to allowing more potential terrorists to enter, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie pooh-poohed the entire discussion as typical of endless debates on the floor of the Senate “about how many angels [are] on the head of a pin.” (This put-down ignored the views of our Founding Fathers about the role of senators as the nation’s most astute body of foreign policy senior statesmen, whose advice and consent to the president was listed in the Constitution as a prerequisite for approving any treaties.)

Christie then cited his terrorist-fighting experience, which he regards as superior to the senators’: “For seven years [as the U.S. attorney for the District of New Jersey] I had to make these decisions after



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9/11, make a decision about how to proceed forward with an investigation or how to pull back, whether you use certain actionable intelligence or whether not to. And yet they continue to debate about this bill and in the subcommittee and what — nobody in America cares about that.”

Apparently, Dana Bash thought that some people in America cared about what the senators’ views were on the USA Freedom Act or she wouldn’t have asked them the questions.

Later on, Cruz and Rubio went toe-to-toe on the subject of immigration. Cruz criticized Rubio for his role as one of the authors of the Gang of Eight immigration bill, and Rubio countered by alleging that Cruz had also supported amnesty for illegal immigrants, by telling Cruz:

Ted, you support legalizing people who are in this country illegally. Ted Cruz supported a 500-percent increase in the number of H-1 visas, the guest workers that are allowed into this country, and Ted supports doubling the number of green cards.

Accepting Bash’s offer to respond, Cruz said:

Look, I understand Marco wants to raise confusion, it is not accurate what he just said that I supported legalization. Indeed, I led the fight against his legalization and amnesty. And you know, there was one commentator that put it this way that, for Marco to suggest our record’s the same is like suggesting “the fireman and the arsonist [are the same] because they are both at the scene of the fire.”

He was fighting to grant amnesty and not to secure the border, I was fighting to secure the border.

When Bash asked Trump: “Who do you side with in this, Senator Rubio or Senator Cruz?” Trump replied:

I have a very hardline position. We have a country or we don’t have a country. People that have come into our country illegally, they have to go. They have to come back into through a legal process.

I want a strong border. I do want a wall. Walls do work, you just have to speak to the folks in Israel. Walls work if they’re properly constructed. I know how to build, believe me, I know how to build.

One of the more heated exchanges between the candidates began after moderator Wolf Blitzer asked Christie, “If the U.S. imposed a no-fly zone over Syria and a Russian plane encroached, invaded that no-fly zone, would you be prepared to shoot down that Russian plane and risk war with Russia?”

Christie replied:

Not only would I be prepared to do it, I would do it. A no-fly zone means a no-fly zone, Wolf. That’s what it means.

Blitzer then asked Paul: “I want you to respond to what we just heard from Governor Christie. If there was a no-fly zone, you say that potentially could lead to World War III. Why?”

Paul replied:

My goodness, what we want in a leader is someone with judgment, not someone who is so reckless as to stand on the stage and say, “Yes, I’m jumping up and down; I’m going to shoot down Russian planes.” Russia already flies in that airspace. It may not be something we’re in love with the fact that they’re there, but they were invited by Iraq and by Syria to fly in that airspace.

And so if we announce we’re going to have a no-fly zone, and others have said this. Hillary Clinton



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is also for it. It is a recipe for disaster. It's a recipe for World War III. We need to confront Russia from a position of strength, but we don't need to confront Russia from a point of recklessness that would lead to war.

Another very interesting discussion followed a question from Blitzer asking: "Senator Cruz, you have said the world would be safer today if Saddam Hussein were still in power in Iraq, Moammar Gadhafi ruled Libya, and Hosni Mubarak ruled Egypt. So would it be your policy to preserve dictatorships, rather than promoting democracy in the Middle East?"

Cruz replied:

Wolf, I believe in a America first foreign policy, that far too often President Obama and Hillary Clinton — and, unfortunately, more than a few Republicans — have gotten distracted from the central focus of keeping this country safe.

So let's go back to the beginning of the Obama administration, when Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama led NATO in toppling the government in Libya. They did it because they wanted to promote democracy. A number of Republicans supported them. The result of that — and we were told then that there were these moderate rebels that would take over. Well, the result is, Libya is now a terrorist war zone run by jihadists.

Cruz also provided as examples of this misguided interventionist foreign policy: "Egypt [where] the Obama administration, encouraged by Republicans, toppled Mubarak who had been a reliable ally of the United States, of Israel, and in its place, Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood came in, a terrorist organization." He also noted, quite accurately:

These same leaders — Obama, Clinton, and far too many Republicans — want to topple Assad. Assad is a bad man. Gadhafi was a bad man. Mubarak had a terrible human rights record. But they were assisting us — at least Gadhafi and Mubarak — in fighting radical Islamic terrorists.

And if we topple Assad, the result will be ISIS will take over Syria, and it will worsen U.S. national security interests.

While Cruz did an excellent job of pointing out the historic failures resulting from toppling dictators in the Middle East, and the discussion began with Blitzer's reference to Cruz's recent statement that the world would be safer today if Saddam Hussein were still in power in Iraq, one wonders why Cruz used the Obama administration's similar actions in Libya and Egypt and its proposed actions to topple Assad in Syria as exclusive examples. He never mentioned that it was President George W. Bush (egged on by his Vice President Dick Cheney and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice) who ordered the invasion of Iraq that removed Hussein from power and set the stage for the chaos that resulted in ISIS gaining control of much of the country.

Cruz also mentioned that not only Obama and Clinton, but "far too many Republicans," want to topple Assad, but did not take the opportunity to single out one Republican by name.

This omission may have been out of respect to the presence of the former president's brother, Jeb, on the stage. Or Cruz may still be observing what former President Ronald Reagan once called the 11th Commandment: "Thou shalt not speak ill of any fellow Republican."

However, considering the feisty exchanges exhibited during the debate, it appears that that commandment is no longer in force.

Perhaps the most curious puzzle that anyone watching the debate would be hard-pressed to solve is,



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however: Why is a candidate who seems so *un*-presidential in his demeanor as Donald Trump leading the polls?

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