

CNN.com

TRANSCRIPTS

CNN LIVE EVENT/SPECIAL

Democratic Debate in Las Vegas

Aired November 15, 2007 - 20:15 ET

THIS IS A RUSH TRANSCRIPT. THIS COPY MAY NOT BE IN ITS FINAL FORM AND MAY BE UPDATED.

WOLF BLITZER, CNN ANCHOR: So let's begin our questioning tonight, Campbell Brown. Campbell?

CAMPBELL BROWN, CNN: Senator Clinton, recently in an interview on CNN, you said of the last debate that you weren't at your best that day.

You stumbled on an important question involving illegal immigration. But your opponents are saying that that's really part of a larger pattern with you, that you often avoid taking firm positions on controversial issues. And one of your opponents on this stage calls this "the politics of parsing."

How do you respond to that?

SEN. HILLARY CLINTON (D) New York: Well, Campbell, I am happy to be here tonight. And this pantsuit, it's asbestos tonight.

(LAUGHTER)

So I am aware that some people say that, but I think that the American people know where I've stood for 35 years. I've been fighting for issues affecting women and children, workers and families.

CLINTON: I've been fighting for universal health care.

And I know that people are looking at this campaign and evaluating us, and I've put forth very specific policies about what I will do as president.

Because this has to be a big election. This is going to be one of the most important elections

we've ever had in our country's history. And it is important that we have a candidate who is tested and a president who is ready to lead from day one.

And I'm perfectly comfortable leaving these assessments up to the American people to make their judgments among us.

BLITZER: Let me bring in Senator Obama, because you've been among those critical of Senator Clinton. You've suggested she's triangulating, whatever that means, on some of the key issues. She's running a textbook Washington campaign, you've suggested that.

I want you to explain, if you don't mind, Senator: What do you mean by that?

SEN. BARACK OBAMA (D) ILLINOIS: Well, first of all, I'm really happy to be here in Nevada, and I appreciate this opportunity.

Senator Clinton, I think, is a capable politician and I think that she has run a terrific campaign.

But what the American people are looking for right now is straight answers to tough questions, and that is not what we've seen out of Senator Clinton on a host of issues -- on the issue of drivers' licenses for illegal immigrants.

We saw in the last debate that it took not just that debate, but two more weeks before we could a clear answer, in terms of where her position was.

The same is true on Social Security. We have serious disagreements about how we're going to make sure that Social Security is there for the people who need it.

And what I'm absolutely convinced of is that, right now, we need a different kind of politics. Everywhere I go all throughout Nevada, people are struggling with health care, people are working harder for less, they are having a tougher time saving, tougher time retiring.

And part of the reason is because they don't feel that Washington is listening to them.

OBAMA: And what I want to do in this campaign is make certain that we are breaking out of the gridlock and the partisanship and the standard practices of Washington, and actually start listening to the American people to get things done.

BLITZER: All right.

Senator Clinton, you want to respond?

CLINTON: Well, I hear what Senator Obama is saying, and he talks a lot about stepping up and taking responsibility and taking strong positions.

But when it came time to step up and decide whether or not he would support universal health care coverage, he chose not to do that. His plan would leave 15 million Americans out. That's

about the population of Nevada, Iowa, South Carolina and New Hampshire.

I have a universal health care plan that covers everyone. I've been fighting this battle against the special interests for more than 15 years, and I am proud to fight this battle.

You know, we can have a different politics, but let's not forget here that the people who we're against are not going to be giving up without a fight. The Republicans are not going to vacate the White House voluntarily. We have some big issues ahead of us, and we need someone who is tested and ready to lead. I think that's what my candidacy offers. (APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: All right, Senator Obama.

OBAMA: Well, let's talk about health care right now because the fact of the matter is -- the fact of the matter is that I do provide universal health care.

The only difference between Senator Clinton's health care plan and mine is that she thinks the problem for people without health care is that nobody has mandated, forced them to get health care. That's not what I'm seeing around Nevada.

What I see are people who would love to have health care. They desperately want it. But the problem is they can't afford it, which is why we have put forward legislation...

(APPLAUSE)

We've put forward a plan that makes sure that it is affordable to get health care that is as good as the health care that I have as a member of Congress. That's what the American people are looking for, that's what they deserve and that's what I intend to provide as president of the United States.

CLINTON: I can't let that go unanswered. You know, the most important thing here is to level with the American people. Senator Obama's health care plan does not cover everyone. He starts with children, which is admirable. I helped to create the children's health insurance program back in 1997. I am totally committed to making sure every single child is covered.

(APPLAUSE)

He does not mandate the kind of coverage that I do, and I provide a health care tax credit under my American health choices plan so that every American will be able to afford the health care. I open up the congressional plan, but there is a big difference between Senator Obama and me. He starts from the premise of not reaching universal health care.

(CROSSTALK)

BLITZER: Senator Obama, we're going to have a lot more on health care. Go ahead. Go ahead.

(PROTESTOR SHOUTS OFF-MIKE)

OBAMA: I will be very brief on this issue. Hillary states that she wants -- she states that she wants to mandate health care coverage, but she is not garnishing people's wages to make sure that they have it.

BLITZER: OK, please.

Go ahead. (PROTESTOR SHOUTS OFF-MIKE)

OBAMA: She is not -- she is not enforcing this mandate. And I don't think that the problem with the American people is that they are not being forced to get health care. The problem is they can't afford it. And that is why my plan provides...

(APPLAUSE)

... the mechanism to make sure that they can.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: All right. We're going to get back on health care shortly. Because we have a lot more to talk about.

REP. DENNIS KUCINICH (D) OHIO: But wait. The American people are entitled to a debate here...

BLITZER: I want Senator Edwards to weight in. Because you have spoken about the politics of parsing in your criticism of Senator Clinton. I want you to explain what that means.

FMR SEN. JOHN EDWARDS: Well, can I say, first, nobody on this stage is perfect, and that certainly includes me. And I don't claim perfection; far from it.

What I would say is, that the issue is whether we can have a president that can restore trust for the American people, in the president of the United States.

(APPLAUSE)

Because I think this president has destroyed that trust. And I think there are fair questions to be asked of all us, including Senator Clinton.

Senator Clinton says she will end the war. She also says she will continue to keep combat troops in Iraq and continue combat missions in Iraq.

She says she will turn up the heat on George Bush and the Republicans, but when the crucial vote came on stopping Bush, Cheney and the neocons, on Iran, she voted with Bush and Cheney.

On the issue of Social Security...

(APPLAUSE)

... on the issue of Social Security, she said, standing beside me on the stage, that she would not do anything about the cap on Social Security taxes, and she has said privately to people, because it's been reported in the press, that in fact she would consider raising that cap.

And the most important issue is she says she will bring change to Washington, while she continues to defend a system that does not work, that is broken, that is rigged and is corrupt; corrupted against the interest of most Americans and corrupted...

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: All right...

EDWARDS: ... and corrupted for a very small, very powerful, very well-financed group.

BLITZER: We're going to...

EDWARDS: So we have fundamental differences.

BLITZER: We're going to get to all of these issues, including energy and Iran and everything else.

CLINTON: Well, Wolf, I've just been personally attacked again, and I...

BLITZER: Senator Clinton, I'll let you respond because there was a direct charge made against you.

CLINTON: Thank you.

BLITZER: Then we're going to bring in everybody. Everyone's going to get time tonight; don't worry, we got a lot of time.

Go ahead.

(PROTESTOR SHOUTS OFF-MIKE)

CLINTON: Well, you know, I respect all of my colleagues on this stage.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Clinton!

CLINTON: And, you know, we're Democrats and we're trying to nominate the very best person we can to win.

And I don't mind taking hits on my record on issues, but when somebody starts throwing mud, at

least we can hope that it's both accurate and not right out of the Republican playbook.

(APPLAUSE)

Because what I believe is important is that we put forth what we stand for. I have been active for 35 years. The American people know where I stand.

You know, Senator Edwards raised health care again -- when Senator Edwards ran in 2004, he wasn't for universal health care. I'm glad he is now.

CLINTON: But for him to be throwing this mud and making these charges I think really detracts from what we're trying to do here tonight. We need to put forth a positive agenda for America...

BLITZER: All right.

CLINTON: ... telling people what we're going to do when we get the chance to go back to the White House.

BLITZER: Senator Edwards, we're going to give you a chance in a second.

(APPLAUSE)

We're going to give Senator Edwards a chance to respond. I want Senator Biden to weigh in.

SEN. JOSEPH BIDEN (D) DELAWARE: Oh no, no, no, no.

(LAUGHTER)

BLITZER: Senator Biden, I want you to weigh in.

(LAUGHTER)

BIDEN: Don't do it, no! Don't make me speak!

BLITZER: I want you to. Go ahead.

(APPLAUSE)

What do you think? Senator Biden, here's the question: What do you think about this exchange among Democrats? Is that good for the Democrats or is it bad?

BIDEN: Hey, look, let's get to it, folks. The American people don't give a darn about any of this stuff that's going on up here. Look, they're sitting -- no, seriously, think about it.

They're sitting down at their tables at night, they put their kids to bed, and they're worried about whether or not their child is going to run into a drug dealer on the way to school. They're worried

about whether or not they're going to be able to pay for their mortgage because, even if they didn't have one of those subprime mortgages, things are looking bad for them.

BIDEN: They're worrying about whether they're going to keep their job. And they're worried about whether their son in the National Guard's going to get killed in Iraq. Ladies and gentlemen...

(APPLAUSE)

Every political campaign gets to this place. And I'm not criticizing any of the three people who are the ones who always get to talk all the time at these things.

(APPLAUSE)

(LAUGHTER) I'm not. I'm not. I'm not criticizing. But look, folks, let's get straight to it here. This is not about experience. It's not about change. It's about action.

Who among us is going to be able to, on day one, step in and end the war? Who among us understands what to do about Pakistan? Who among us is going to pick up the phone and immediately interface with Putin and lay off Georgia because Saakashvili is in real trouble?

Who among us knows what they're doing? I have 35 years of experience. While everyone's talking about their experience -- and Hillary has great experience and John and the rest of them, I was passing the Violence Against Women Act.

BIDEN: I was passing the crime bill. I was passing...

(UNKNOWN): You're right.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Let me just point out, everyone is going to have plenty of time tonight. I want John Roberts to go ahead and ask the next question, and then we'll bring everybody in, I promise.

JOHN ROBERTS, CNN: Senator Clinton, you were saying just a moment ago...

(APPLAUSE)

(LAUGHTER)

The question is not going to her, by the way. Reiterating what you said, you said you think it is legitimate for you to take hits on your record.

Well, some of those hits on your record have come from the far right-hand side of the stage from Senator Edward, who has frequently attacked you for flip-flopping.

Senator, you have changed your position on several issues. You were for the Yucca Mountain nuclear repository before you were against it. You were for the Iraq war before you were against it.

People change their positions. If it is fair for you to change your position, is it not fair for her to change hers?

EDWARDS: It's absolutely fair. It's absolutely fair for people to learn from their experience and grow and mature and change. Anybody who's not willing to change based on what they learn is ignorant, and everybody ought to be willing to do that.

That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying there's a difference between that and saying the exact same two contrary things at exactly the same time.

I mean, for example, just over the course of the last week, Senator Clinton said in Washington that she would vote for the Peru Trade Deal, and she said in Iowa, talking to union members, that she wanted a moratorium on trade deals.

The important thing about this, though, is none of us -- none of us -- because the reality is, and I want to add on to something that Joe Biden said -- you know, before I came over here tonight, I was thinking we're going to have this debate. When we finish, all of you are going to be on television saying, "Oh, who scored points? Who won the debate?"

All of us are going to be fine.

EDWARDS: The question is: Will America be fine?

Because what I saw...

(APPLAUSE)

... before we came over here, on your troll underneath the screen, 35 million Americans, last year, went hungry; 37 million people in this country live in poverty every day; 47 million Americans have no health care coverage.

And there is a fundamental choice that everyone in this room, and Democratic voters have to make. And that is, who do you believe will take on this system and change it so that it's no longer rigged, corrupt, and rigged against the interests...

BLITZER: All right. All right.

EDWARDS: ... of the American people.

That is the fundamental choice. And I think people are entitled to know that they have choices. There's nothing personal about this. This is about what America needs to be. This is about those 35 million people...

BLITZER: All right.

EDWARDS: ... who are hungry every single year. When is our party going to show a little backbone and strength and courage and speak up for those people who have been left behind?

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: All right. Hold on one second.

I want Senator Dodd to weigh in.

Senator Dodd, because you said -- made a statement earlier in the week, and I'm quoting you now: you're, "surprised at just how angry Senator Edwards has become," and you suggested, "He's not the same person I once knew."

(LAUGHTER)

Go ahead and elaborate. Tell us what you mean.

SEN. CHRISTOPHER DODD (D) CONNECTICUT: Well, let me, I mean, pick up on this point here.

I think, first of all, we Democrats have a job to do, and that is to unite this party, attract independents, Republicans who are seeking change, to join us 12 months from now and elect a Democrat to the White House and to hold on to the House and Senate. That's number one.

(APPLAUSE)

And it's going to take more than just getting people in our own party to support us. We're going to have to reach out.

There's a shrillness to the debate. The American people want results, they want the job done, exactly what Joe Biden talked about here. But people get up in the morning and go to work, they sit around and they worry about their jobs, their retirement, their health care, this kids' education, and they wonder if anybody in Washington is paying any attention to them and whether or not the job is being done on their behalf.

And, frankly, when a campaign is about turning up the heat or who's angrier or who's yelling louder, the American people turn off, in terms of listening.

They want us to come together. They want a president that can lead the country.

DODD: We want a Democratic candidate who can unite our party. And I think if we waste time on the shrillness of this debate, then we lose the American people.

BLITZER: All right.

DODD: So it's important to focus on those.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Governor Richardson, go ahead.

GOV. BILL RICHARDSON (D) NEW MEXICO: Well, by the way, I'm Bill Richardson. I'm Governor of New Mexico.

(APPLAUSE)

(LAUGHTER)

And nice to meet you all.

(APPLAUSE)

I -- you know, it seems -- you know, it seems that John wants to start a class war. It seems that Barack wants to start a generational war. It seems that Senator Clinton, with all due respect on her plan on Iraq, doesn't end the war.

All I want to do is give peace a chance.

(APPLAUSE)

And I say that because these are the fundamental issues. Do our plans end the war? Do our plans make America energy-independent?

(APPLAUSE)

RICHARDSON: Do our plans -- do our plans give health care to every American? Are we creating jobs and economic growth? Are we resolving the real problems affecting this country?

You know, let's stop this mud-slinging. let's stop this going after each other on character on trust. Let us debate the issues that affect the American people, and let us be positive. Let's be positive.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: I just want to go down the line and ask everyone, and then we're going to move on to the next question.

Just to be precise, because there was a little confusion thanks to Senator Edwards earlier in the week -- I just want to make sure I fully understand all of you Democrats.

Are you ready to commit, absolutely, positively that you will support the Democratic nominee, no matter who that nominee is? No ifs, ands or buts.

Senator Edwards?

EDWARDS: Is that a planted question?

(LAUGHTER)

BLITZER: Yes, I planted it.

EDWARDS: Yes, I absolutely will support the Democratic nominee for president.

DODD: Absolutely.

CLINTON: Absolutely, yes.

KUCINICH: Only if they oppose war as an instrument of policy.

(APPLAUSE)

RICHARDSON: Yes, I will support the nominee.

BIDEN: Hell, no, I wouldn't support any of these guys.

(LAUGHTER) No, I'm joking. Of course, I'm for them all.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Campbell, go ahead.

BROWN: All right, let's talk about the issues. Senator Obama, I want to ask you about immigration. It's an important issue in this state in particular. There are between 100,000 to 200,000 illegal immigrants here in Nevada.

And you supported various benefits for illegal immigrants, including drivers licenses and in-state college tuition. What do you say to those Americans who say they are losing out because you would give benefits to people who broke the laws of this country, who came here illegally.

And then more generally, as president, where do you draw the line when it comes to benefits for illegal immigrants?

OBAMA: I would say that they're justified in feeling frustrated because this administration, the Bush administration, has done nothing to control the problem that we have. We've had 5 million undocumented workers come over the borders since George Bush took office.

It has become an extraordinary problem. The reason the American people are concerned is because they are seeing their own economic positions slip away.

Oftentimes, employers are exploiting these undocumented workers. They're not paying the minimum wage. They're not observing worker safety laws.

So what we have to do is create a comprehensive solution to the problem. Now, I have already stated that as president I will make sure that we finally have the kind of border security that we need. That's step number one. Step number two is to take on employers. Right now, an employer has more of a chance of getting hit by lightning than be prosecuted for hiring an undocumented worker. That has to change.

They have to be held accountable.

(APPLAUSE)

And when we do those things...

(APPLAUSE)

When we do those things, I believe that we can take the undocumented workers, the illegal aliens who are here, get them out of the shadows, make sure that they are subject to a stiff penalty, make sure that they're learning English, make sure that they go to the back of the line so they're not getting an advantage over people who came here legally. And when we do that, I think that we can, instead of shedding all this heat, start shedding some light on the problem, and we can once again be a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants. That's what I intend to do as president of the United States.

BLITZER: All right. I want to just press you on this point, because it's a logical follow-up, and then I want to go and ask everyone.

On the issue that apparently tripped up Senator Clinton earlier, the issue of driver's licenses for illegal immigrants, I take it, Senator Obama, you support giving driver's licenses to illegal immigrants.

Is that right?

OBAMA: When I was a state senator in Illinois, I voted to require that illegal aliens get trained, get a license, get insurance to protect public safety. That was my intention.

(APPLAUSE)

And -- but I have to make sure that people understand. The problem we have here is not driver's licenses. Undocumented workers do not come here to drive.

(LAUGHTER)

They don't go -- they're not coming here to go to the In-N-Out Burger. That's not the reason they're here. They're here to work. And so instead of being distracting by what has now become a wedge issue, let's focus on actually solving the problem that this administration, the Bush administration, had done nothing about it.

BLITZER: Well, let's go through everybody because I want to be precise. I want to make sure the viewers and those of us who are here fully understand all of your positions on this barring -- avoiding, assuming -- there isn't going to be comprehensive immigration reform.

Do you support or oppose driver's licenses for illegal immigrants?

OBAMA: I am not proposing that that's what we do.

What I'm saying is that we can't...

(LAUGHTER)

No, no, no, no. Look, I have already said, I support the notion that we have to deal with public safety and that driver's licenses at the same level can make that happen.

But what I also know...

BLITZER: All right...

OBAMA: But what I also know, Wolf, is that if we keep on getting distracted by this problem, then we are not solving it.

BLITZER: But -- because this is the kind of question that is sort of available for a yes or no answer.

(LAUGHTER)

Either you support it or you oppose it.

(APPLAUSE)

Let's go down and get a yes or no from everyone, starting with Senator Edwards.

EDWARDS: Tell me again what your question is.

(LAUGHTER)

BLITZER: Do you support driver's licenses for illegal immigrants?

EDWARDS: If we don't have comprehensive...

BLITZER: In the absence of comprehensive immigration reform -- doesn't look like it's going to happen any time soon -- do you support driver's licenses for illegal immigrants?

EDWARDS: No, but I don't accept the proposition that we're not going to have comprehensive immigration reform.

(APPLAUSE)

What I do support, and what I will do as president of the United States, is move this country toward comprehensive immigration reform. And anyone who's on the path to earning American citizenship should be able to have a driver's license.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Senator Dodd?

DODD: Well, it's important to put it in context. It's obviously -- look, clarity is important here. The American people, in a debate like this, want clarity here. Certainly, the whole idea of getting immigration reform is something I strongly support.

But I believe part of our job is to discourage those who want to come here -- I understand why they want to come, but coming illegally creates serious problems -- four to 500,000.

BLITZER: So, is that a yes or a no?

DODD: No, my belief is that giving a -- as I've said in the very beginning here, I think drivers' licenses are the wrong thing to be doing, in terms of attracting people to come here as undocumented.

BLITZER: All right. Thank you. Senator Obama, yes or no?

OBAMA: Yes.

BLITZER: OK.

(APPLAUSE)

OBAMA: I'll tell you, I am going to be fighting for comprehensive immigration reform, and we shouldn't pose the question that, somehow, we can't achieve that.

I believe that the American people desperately want it; that's what I'm going to be fighting for as president.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Senator Clinton?

CLINTON: No.

BLITZER: Congressman Kucinich?

KUCINICH: I take issue with your description of people being illegal immigrants. There aren't any illegal human beings. That's number one.

(APPLAUSE)

KUCINICH: Number two, they are undocumented. I believe that the best way to do it -- thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

I believe the best way to deal with this is cancel NAFTA and renegotiate the trade agreement with Mexico.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Let me re-phrase the question, Congressman.

If undocumented people in this country should be able to get driver's licenses...

KUCINICH: You give people a path to legalization, and then they can be legal and have their driver's license. That's the way to work it.

BLITZER: What about in the absence of comprehensive immigration reform?

KUCINICH: You know what? You give people a path to legalization and you work to make sure that you don't criminalize their status any further. Again, I take exception to the way you framed that question.

BLITZER: Governor? RICHARDSON: Well, my answer is yes, and I did it. You know why? Because the Congress, and I notice Barack mentioned the president, but the Congress also failed miserably to pass comprehensive immigration.

RICHARDSON: And we need to have it in this country. I did it four years ago. My legislature sent me a bill. I signed it. My law-enforcement people said it's a matter of public safety.

What we need is public safety, a reduction in traffic fatalities. We wanted more people to be insured. When we started with this program, 33 percent of all New Mexicans were uninsured. Today, it's 11 percent.

BLITZER: All right.

RICHARDSON: Traffic fatalities have gone down. It's a matter of public safety. States have to act when the federal government and the Congress doesn't act. The answer is comprehensive immigration. The answer is...

BLITZER: All right.

RICHARDSON: The answer is -- secure the borders, a stronger relationship with Mexico. Those that knowingly hire illegal workers...

BLITZER: All right.

RICHARDSON: ... should be punished. And a path to legalization. That is the solution.

BLITZER: Senator Biden?

BIDEN: No.

(LAUGHTER)

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: John Roberts?

ROBERTS: Senator Dodd, a lot of people in this room, no doubt, are very concerned about the quality of education that their children will have and how it will prepare them for a post-secondary education and the working world after that.

In workplaces across America, it's pretty common to reward high- performing employees with pay raises and to terminate bad employees.

However, in our education system across the country by and large, in our nation's public schools, teachers' unions make it difficult to do that.

Question is: What is wrong with rewarding a teacher who excels at the job that they're doing by paying them more than an average teacher would make? (APPLAUSE)

DODD: Well, I think if you define excelling by teachers who will go into poor -- rural or poor urban areas and make a difference, mentor children after school, put in extra time to make a difference, then I think that sort of merit pay has value.

If you're judging excelling by determining whether or not that teacher has students who do better because they're in better neighborhoods or better schools, I'm totally opposed to that.

(APPLAUSE)

That's not the way to be judging...

(APPLAUSE)

And this is critical. I always say, this is the single most important issue. I've been asked the question, over 26 years in the Senate, 1,000 times. It's a difficult question to answer. What's the most important issue?

This is the most important issue. Every other issue we grapple with depends upon our ability to have the best-educated generation we've ever produced.

(APPLAUSE)

And we need to have, in my view, far more cooperation at the national level.

We spend less than 5 percent of the national budget on elementary and secondary education. That is deplorable, in my view.

(APPLAUSE)

It's basically Title I. We need to fundamentally reform No Child Left Behind. No Child Left Behind is a disaster for most schools and most teachers...

(APPLAUSE)

I've spent 26 years in the Senate. I started the Children's Caucus, 26 years ago, with Arlen Specter.

I wrote the legislation dealing with after-school programs, infant screening, autism issues, as well. I spent a good deal of my time -- head start senator of the decade by the Head Start Association.

I've dedicated a good part of my public career to children and to education -- one-quarter of the population, but truly, 100 percent of our future.

This is an issue that deserves far more attention. We ought to have one single debate on education. (APPLAUSE)

It comes up about once every two hours in the discussion.

BLITZER: We're talking about education right now, and I want I want to bring Congressman Kucinich in, because I know you're a strong supporter of the unions -- the teachers union, very powerful -- teachers unions, very powerful.

Are there any issues with unions -- teachers unions or other unions, for that matter -- with which you disagree?

KUCINICH: My father was a truck driver. He was a member of The Teamsters. I happen to be a member of the IATSE. I think that the trade -- that the union movement is essential to upholding human rights.

And I think that if we had trade agreements that had workers' rights in them, that would lift up conditions for workers in this country and in all countries.

So I'm the candidate of workers in this -- this campaign because I've stood for jobs for all, full employment economy, health care for all, education for all.

And the fact of the matter is that a Kucinich administration will mean a workers' White House. Right now wealth is being accelerated upwards, and I'm the one candidate in the race who comes right from the working class and can address those needs directly because I remember where I came from.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: All right. I take it that the answer is there's nothing -- there's no issues, no major issues you disagree with America's unions.

KUCINICH: Well, you know, the Teamsters wanted to drill in Alaska. I voted against drilling in Alaska. So it's not like I'm a slam dunk on every issue.

BLITZER: All right.

Governor...

KUCINICH: But I'm for working people. That's why I'm up here.

RICHARDSON: I think the key -- the key -- I want to be the education president.

The key to a good education is a strong teacher. One of the problems we have in this country is we disrespect teachers. We underpay them. I would have a minimum wage for all teachers starting out at \$40,000 per year.

(APPLAUSE) And, Chris, I think we need to be bolder with No Child Left Behind. I would junk it. This is a disaster. It's got to go. I would have preschool for every child. I would have full-day kindergarten. America is 29th in science, to the European Union, to Japan. We need to have science and math academies. Hire 100,000 science and math teachers. Have art in the schools.

(APPLAUSE)

We need also to have a college education policy that deals with these huge loans that are killing our college students.

(APPLAUSE)

What I would do -- and, you know, we are in a great college here. What I would do is in exchange for two years of tuition, government pays tuition, one year of national service to this country. Those are the kind of creative solutions we want in this country.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Let me -- thank you, Governor. Thank you very much.

I want Senator Clinton to weigh in on the issue of merit pay.

If there's a teacher out there who's doing a great job, should that teacher get merit -- get a bonus for doing a great job, that individual teacher who works really hard, does a great job educating young people?

CLINTON: Well, I support school-based merit pay for a lot of the reasons Chris was talking about. We need to get more teachers to go into hard-to-serve areas. We've got to get them into underserved urban areas, underserved rural areas.

But the school is a team, and I think it's important that we reward that collaboration. You know, a child who moves from kindergarten to sixth grade, say, in the same school, every one of those teachers is going to affect that child.

BLITZER: But what if there's an excellent teacher in that team and a crummy teacher in that team, a teacher who's simply riding along and not really working very hard, not really educating those young kids?

Do you give just everybody the merit pay, or do you give it to individual teachers?

CLINTON: Well, you need to weed out the teachers who are not doing a good job. I mean, that's the bottom line. They should not be teaching our children.

(APPLAUSE)

I mean, what I believe so strongly is that our education system has served this country very well. But we're in the 21st century. We do need to reimagine it. We've got to get everybody to talk about it.

But what I object to with the Bush administration is it's always talking down. We need to have a collegial collaboration. And the teachers need to be at the table...

BLITZER: All right.

CLINTON: ... helping us figure out what the best way is to achieve our goals.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: I want to move on to the next question, but I want Senator Biden to weigh in, because I know your wife is a teacher, so go ahead. Should an excellent teacher be given merit pay?

BIDEN: An excellent teacher should be judged by whether or not that teacher outside of the classroom improves themselves and their teaching skills.

My wife got two master's degrees and a doctorate degree. That's merit pay. She went out there and she earned the ability to be able to demonstrate to everyone that she was an exceptional teacher, because she went out and she gathered this additional knowledge, instead of being -- not just being a good teacher.

Here's the problem with simple merit pay, based on the principle. Who makes the decision, based on merit pay?

(APPLAUSE)

Who is the person who...

(APPLAUSE)

I believe there should be teaching excellence. I think we should demand more of our teachers in continuing education. I think there should -- and unions don't like that.

I think there should be -- demand more of the teachers, in terms of the participation after school and in school.

(APPLAUSE)

But I think you've got to pay them.

And the last point I'll make is, Bill is correct. You have to -- look, the idea you start teachers at \$28,000, in most states, where, in the countries we're competing with, they start off and they graduate their -- the graduating seniors are getting the same pay that engineers are getting in those same schools.

BIDEN: My father has an expression -- God love him -- before he passed away. He'd say, "Don't tell me what you value, show me your budget and I will tell you what you value."

(APPLAUSE)

I've laid out a \$30 billion plan...

BLITZER: Thank you.

BIDEN: ... over five years to -- 16 years of education is what our kids need. They need to start two years earlier and be guaranteed two years after school.

BLITZER: Thank you, Senator.

(APPLAUSE)

Campbell Brown?

BROWN: Senator Biden, a question on Pakistan.

As you know, in the past few weeks Pakistani leader Pervez Musharraf has declared a state of emergency there. He's dismissed several Supreme Court justices. He's recently placed opposition leader Benazir Bhutto under house arrest twice now and imprisoned numerous other dissenters.

And I know you spoke with Musharraf last week. And you, along with several others on the stage, assert that the U.S. should maintain its current level of financial support for Pakistan.

And my question is, is it your view that there are times when the security of the United States is more important than the way a key ally, like Musharraf, disregards freedom and disregards democracy?

BIDEN: First of all, I do not think we should maintain the same aid we're giving. I have made it clear to Musharraf personally when he called me, and I've spoken personally to Bhutto, before -- I might add, the president spoke to either one of them -- I spoke to them and I indicated very clearly two things.

(APPLAUSE)

One, if he did not -- if he did not take off his uniform, if he did not hold fair and free elections by the middle of January, I would on the floor of the Senate move to take away the aid we're giving with regard to F-16s and P-3s, because that's the biggest leverage you have on him within his military.

He is not a sole player. He has to keep his military happy, as well. I would use that leverage.

Secondly, I've indicated that what we should do is move from a Musharraf policy to a Pakistan policy. Unlike anyone else, within five days of this happening, I laid out a detailed plan. The president hasn't, no one on this stage has -- no else has -- a detailed plan, as president, how I will proceed with Iraq.

And you have to move from military aid to giving to the middle class there. The middle class is overwhelmingly the majority. They get no connection with the United States. We have to significantly increase our economic aid relative to education, relative to NGOs, relative to all those things that make a difference in the lives of ordinary people over there, and not be doing it

through the military side.

I know there's more to say, Campbell. I appreciate you asking me the question, and I'm sorry I answered it. I know you're not supposed to questions based on what I...

(LAUGHTER)

BLITZER: Well, let me bring in Governor Richardson.

Governor Richardson...

(APPLAUSE)

... you've suggested cutting off military aid to Pakistan so long as the Pakistani leader doesn't take these steps to restore the constitution, take off his military uniform, end the national state of emergency and have free and fair elections.

But some are worried, including the opposition leader, Benazir Bhutto -- I spoke with her earlier this week -- that cutting off military aid to the Pakistan military could undermine U.S. national security.

This is a country that has nuclear weapons. It has a strong Taliban presence, an Al Qaida presence. Are you worried at all that as bad as President Musharraf might be, it could get a whole lot worse over there.

RICHARDSON: Well, of course I'm worried, but what happened with our Pakistan policy, we got our principles wrong. We forgot our principles, our principles that we said to Musharraf: You know, Musharraf, security is more important than human rights.

(APPLAUSE)

If I'm president, it's the other way around -- democracy and human rights. What I would do is, yes, I would condition the assistance to Musharraf. We give him \$10 billion. Sixty percent of that is to his military.

I would say, President Musharraf, unless you restore the constitution; unless you have elections in January; unless you end the state of emergency; unless you allow Benazir Bhutto to run as a candidate; unless you put the supreme court back -- and something else we forgot.

He is supposed to go after terrorists on his border. And he has done a very weak job of doing that.

And you know, I would condition the assistance...

BLITZER: All right.

RICHARDSON: ... but here's another point -- no, but here's another point. Pakistan and the politics of Pakistan, Islamic parties get maybe 15 percent of the vote. I mean, so this threat that, oh, revolutionary elements are going to overtake him, if he has a fair election, and you take his party and Benazir Bhutto's party, and you get the military...

BLITZER: But...

RICHARDSON: ... I believe that moderate forces can win. So, if we're on the side of democracy and human rights, and we're on the side of Musharraf having elections, then U.S. interests are preserved, and the Pakistani people have a democracy.

BLITZER: Let me just be precise because I want to make sure we all -- I heard you correctly.

What you're saying, Governor, is that human rights, at times, are more important than American national security?

RICHARDSON: Yes...

(APPLAUSE)

... because I believe we need to find ways to say to the world that, you know, it's not just about what Halliburton wants in Iraq. It's also about...

(APPLAUSE)

... our values of freedom, equality. Our strength is not just military and economic.

BLITZER: All right.

RICHARDSON: Our strength as a nation is our values: equality...

BLITZER: All right.

RICHARDSON: ... freedom, democracy...

BLITZER: All right.

RICHARDSON: ... human rights.

BLITZER: Senator Edwards, I want you to weigh in.

RICHARDSON: That's why we are strong.

BLITZER: Go ahead, Senator.

EDWARDS: Well, I think, first of all, we have some basic goals that we need to be focused on

with respect to Pakistan.

One is to make sure that the extremists in northwest Pakistan are under control; second that we provide support for the democratic reformers; third, as Senator Biden just spoke about, to make sure these elections take place in January; and, fourth, we need to make certain that the nuclear weapons are under control.

Now, this leads to a bigger questions. I think Pakistan is the living, breathing example that America's ad hoc policy of dealing with the spread of nuclear weapons, while it's absolutely required in today's world given what's happening with Iran, given what we see today in Pakistan and the incredible fragility of the administration in Pakistan and the presidents of an extraordinary extremist element within Pakistan.

But this is the living, breathing example of a policy that will not work over the long-term -- I'm about to finish. What we have to do, what America needs to do and what I will do, as president of the United States, is to lead a long-term international effort to rid the world of nuclear weapons.

It is the only way we're going to keep the world secure and keep America secure.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Everybody's going to have a chance.

Senator Obama, is human rights more important than American national security?

OBAMA: The concepts are not contradictory, Wolf.

BLITZER: Because occasionally, they could clash.

OBAMA: They are complementary. And I think Pakistan is a great example.

Look, we paid \$10 billion over the last seven years and we had two goals: deal with terrorism and restore democracy.

And we've gotten neither.

And Joe and Bill are exactly right on this. Pakistan's democracy would strengthen our battle against extremists.

The more we see repression, the more there are no outlets for how people can express themselves and their aspirations, the worse off we're going to be, and the more anti-American sentiment there's going to be in the Middle East. We keep on making this mistake.

As president, I will do everything that is required to make sure that nuclear weapons don't fall into the hands of extremists, especially going after Al Qaida in the hills between Afghanistan

and Pakistan.

But we've got to understand that, if we simply prop up anti- democratic practices, that that feeds the sense that America is only concerned about us and that our fates are not tied to these other folks.

And that's going to make us less safe.

That's something I intend to change.

BLITZER: Hold on. Hold on one second. Senator Dodd, I want you to weigh in. What is more important when they clash: human rights versus national security?

DODD: Well, first of all, I hope maybe others don't find this as ironic as I do that have President Bush urging the Turks not to invade Kurdish areas of Iraq and lecturing Musharraf about restoring the constitution. This is an administration that stepped all over our own constitutional processes.

(APPLAUSE)

And this isn't. Elections are -- there is an expression in Spanish that says elections...

BLITZER: What is more important, human rights or national security?

DODD: Obviously, national security, keeping the country safe. When you take the oath of office on January 20, you promise to do two things, and that is to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States and protect our country against enemies both foreign and domestic. The security of the country is number one, obviously.

BLITZER: All right. OK.

DODD: Secondly, this doesn't mean -- elections are only one note, as they say, in the tune of democracy. Be careful what you wish for. If there were totally free elections. In many of the countries we're talking about today, the Islamic Jihad or the Islamic Brotherhood would win 85 percent of the vote.

That's not a great outcome for us at this point either.

BLITZER: All right.

DODD: So we need to have a sense of balance about this here. I disagree with those who suggest here that we ought to condition Musharraf's actions regarding some of these issues on aid and assistance here.

There's only one way into Afghanistan. It's through Pakistan. The generals in the military control the nuclear weaponry here. We need to move and remind Musharraf that there are obligations he

needs to fulfill.

Be careful here about insisting upon...

BLITZER: All right, you answered the question, Senator.

DODD: No, no, let me finish. Because, literally, then you have to do what you say you're going to do. And if he doesn't do what he's suggesting, then you have to terminate that relationship, and that puts this country in a very, very dangerous position right now.

BLITZER: You say national security is more important than human rights. Senator Clinton, what do you say?

CLINTON: I agree with that completely. The first obligation of the president of the United States is to protect and defend the United States of America. That doesn't mean that it is to the exclusion of other interests.

And there's absolutely a connection between a democratic regime and heightened security for the United States. That's what's so tragic about this situation. After 9/11, President Bush had a chance to chart a different course, both in Pakistan and in Afghanistan, and could have been very clear about what our expectations were.

We are now in a bind. And it is partly -- not completely, but partly -- a result of the failed policies of the Bush administration.

So where we are today means that we have to say to President Musharraf, "Look, this is not in your interest either; this is not in the interest of the United States. It is not in your interest to either stay in power or stay alive." We have to figure out how we're going to navigate this.

When I was meeting with him earlier this year, I asked him if he would accept a high-level presidential envoy to begin to negotiate some of these issues.

He said yes. I got back, I called the White House, I asked them to send such a high-level envoy - - they did not do it. They're going to send one now.

So, I mean, you've got to stay on top of this and you have to manage it all the time. That requires presidential attention; we haven't had that, and part of the reason is obvious now.

BLITZER: Thank you, Senator.

(APPLAUSE)

John Roberts?

Stand by. Stand by.

John Roberts, go ahead.

You're going to have a chance.

ROBERTS: To Governor Richardson, a military police unit from the Nevada National Guard, stationed about 12 miles from here, just left for its third tour of duty in Iraq.

I want to talk to you for just a moment here about the effect of the troop increase over there. It's true that 2007 is the deadliest year so far since 2003 for American forces, but it's also true that U.S. troop deaths have been declining steadily since the spring. And in fact, in the month of October, they were at their lowest level in nearly two years. At the same time, there has been a marked decline in the number of deaths of Iraqi people.

Is General David Petraeus correct when he says that the troop increase is bringing security to Iraq?

RICHARDSON: John, we shouldn't be talking about body counts. One American death is too much.

(APPLAUSE)

And what I am saying here is the surge is not working.

There is less -- right now, less possibility of a political solution. Three out of the 18 benchmarks of the General Accounting (sic) Office have been fulfilled. Even among Republican math, that is a failing grade.

(LAUGHTER)

What I'm saying also is that -- look at this statistic: 65 percent of the Iraqi people now say it's OK to shoot an American soldier. Our troops are dying -- over 3,800, two today, 60,000 wounded, casualties, mainly mental trauma.

Now, my position is that we get the troops out in a year, leave no residual forces behind -- unlike some of my colleagues here that want to leave some until 2013 -- but not just wave goodbye, because we have a responsibility.

And that is: one, to get a political compromise, a U.S.-led political compromise among the three groups that they share power -- the Sunni, the Shia, the Kurds -- that they share oil revenues, that we have an all-Muslim, all-Arab peacekeeping force, with some European forces, headed by the U.N., a donor conference that involves other countries -- European Union, rich Arab states, contributing to the reconstruction of Iraq, where we have spent...

BLITZER: All right.

RICHARDSON: ... \$500 billion...

BLITZER: Thank you, Senator.

RICHARDSON: ... in this war, when this money should be used in America, for health care, education, and for kids.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Congressman Kucinich, is the troop increase...

(CROSSTALK) BLITZER: Is the troop increase, as General Petraeus has put forward over these past few months -- is it working?

KUCINICH: No. The occupation is fueling the insurgency. In 2003, I put forth a plan to get out of Iraq. I'm actually the only one on this stage who voted against the war...

(APPLAUSE)

... voted against funding the war, 100 percent of the time.

(APPLAUSE)

And also who has a plan to bring the troops home. And they should be brought home now. And let me tell you something, the Democrats in Congress have not done the right thing for the American people. They should tell President Bush, we're not going to give you another dime. We're not putting a bill on the floor. Bring them home now.

(APPLAUSE)

Also, when you talked about Pakistan, you didn't get a chance to come to me on that question, but I want to point something out to you, Wolf. You cannot look at Pakistan and the destabilization that is occurring in many Muslim nations without understanding the role that our aggression against Iraq has played in contributing to that destabilization. So I am speaking about a new policy of strength through peace, no more unilateralism, no more preemption, no more first-strike, open-dialogue diplomacy, and adherence to international law.

BLITZER: Thank you, Congressman.

Senator Obama, I will put the same question to you.

(APPLAUSE)

Is General Petraeus' strategy working?

OBAMA: There is no doubt that because we put American troops in Iraq, more American troops in Iraq, that they are doing a magnificent job.

And they are making a difference in certain neighborhoods. But the overall strategy is failed because we have not seen any change in behavior among Iraq's political leaders. And that is the essence of what we should be trying to do in Iraq.

That's why I'm going to bring this war to a close. That's why we can get our troops out -- our combat troops out within 16 months. That's why we have to initiate the kind of regional diplomacy, not just talking to our friends, but talking to our enemies, like Iran and Syria, to try to stabilize the situation there.

(APPLAUSE) OBAMA: But I just want to make this important point, because all of us as we're campaigning, we're seeing this in human terms. People are on two, three, four tours of duty. Families are carrying an enormous burden.

This year, we saw the highest casualty rates for American troops in Iraq since this war started.

The same, by the way, is true in Afghanistan. If we have seen a lowering violence rate, that's only compared to earlier this year. We're back to where we started back in 2006.

BLITZER: All right.

OBAMA: And so the notion that somehow because we've gone from horrific violence to just intolerable levels of violence, and that somehow that justifies George Bush's strategy is absolutely wrong, and I'm going to bring it to a halt when I'm president of the United States.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: All right. Thank you.

Thank you, Senator.

Campbell Brown?

BROWN: Congressman Kucinich, we're approaching the holiday season right now and parents across the country are in a panic. They are rifling through their toy boxes. They are throwing things away because they are so worried that toys, that products coming from China right now are too dangerous for their children.

Do you believe that the people on this stage who voted to fully open trade relations with China bear some of the responsibility for what's going on right now?

KUCINICH: Well, of course they do, in the same way that people who voted for the war bear responsibility for what's going on.

People who voted for the Patriot Act bear responsibility for what's going on.

(APPLAUSE)

People who voted for Yucca Mountain bear responsibility.

People have to take responsibility for their positions.

Now, let's talk about China trade. The fact of the matter is, Wolf, it was well known when China trade came up that China doesn't have environmental quality standards, doesn't have health standards, doesn't have workers' rights, doesn't permit people to form unions.

Now, everyone knew that. And for someone to come up afterwards -- and I think in the last debate, I think Hillary Clinton was criticized by John Edwards for some trade-related issue, but the fact of the matter is, John, you voted for China trade understanding that workers were going to be hurt.

Now, you're a trial lawyer, you knew better. I'm saying that it's important, really.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: All right.

Senator Edwards, he made a specific reference to you.

KUCINICH: This is a fact, though. I mean, I'm not backing down from this. This is a fact. People have to take responsibility for their position.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Let's ask Senator Edwards to respond.

Was that vote a mistake?

EDWARDS: I'm not sure what I being a trial lawyer has to do with it, but -- wait, what my response is...

KUCINICH: Product liability.

(LAUGHTER)

(APPLAUSE)

EDWARDS: Cute, Dennis.

I think America's trade policy has been a complete disaster. I do believe that NAFTA, CAFTA, Colombia, Korea, Peru, which we're now considering, has been a complete and total disaster.

And I think it's really important to prove what's been happening with trade into the bigger picture of what's happening with America. Because what I believe is that powerful interests, particularly big corporate interests, have literally taken over this government.

And they've taken over against the interest of ordinary Americans. And the living, breathing example of that is, in 1993, when we were in control of the White House, of the United States Senate and the United States House, we made an effort to pass universal health-care.

The big drug companies, insurance companies and their lobbyists killed it.

The same time, NAFTA was put on the table.

BLITZER: All right. EDWARDS: The big corporations in America were for NAFTA. So, what did we get with a Democratic Congress, with a Democratic president?

BLITZER: So...

EDWARDS: We didn't -- no, let me finish this. We didn't get something that America desperately needed, which is universal health care. But we got something America did not need, which is NAFTA, which has cost us millions of jobs. We will not change this country...

(APPLAUSE)

... if we replace a crowd of corporate Republicans with corporate Democrats. We have to give the power in this democracy back to the American people. That's what's at stake in this election.

BLITZER: All right. I'm going to let Senator Clinton respond. But let me just rephrase the question. Was your vote to normalize trade relations with China a mistake?

EDWARDS: I think what is a mistake is allowing China to operate unfettered, to send dangerous products into this country, to not have the president of the United States hold them responsible for their trading obligations to the WTO, which has not been done.

BLITZER: So it was a mistake.

EDWARDS: I think it was right to bring them into WTO. It's wrong to not hold them responsible for their obligations.

BLITZER: All right. Senator Clinton, all of us remember the big NAFTA debate when your husband was president of the United States. A lot of us remember the debate between Al Gore, who was then vice president, and Ross Perot.

Ross Perot was fiercely against NAFTA.

Knowing what we know now, was Ross Perot right?

(LAUGHTER)

CLINTON: All I can remember from that is a bunch of charts.

(LAUGHTER)

That, sort of, is a vague memory.

Look, NAFTA did not do what many had hoped. And so we do need to take a look at it and we do need to figure out how we're going to have trade relations that are smart, that give the American worker and the American consumer rights around the world.

And I want to go back to Campbell's question for a minute, because it's really related to this. It is something that every parent should be worried about. It's not only the toys. It's the pet food. It's the medical components in prescription drugs.

If we don't impose a third-party, independent investigative arm on our corporations that do business in China, as well as the Chinese government, we should not permit any items to be imported into our country until we're sure they're safe.

(APPLAUSE)

CLINTON: I mean, that, to me, is rule number one.

BLITZER: All right. So let me rephrase the question. I'll rephrase the question. Was NAFTA a mistake? Was NAFTA a mistake?

CLINTON: NAFTA was a mistake to the extent that it did not deliver on what we had hoped it would, and that's why I call for trade timeout. When I am president, I'm going to evaluate every trade agreement. We do need to get back to enforcing the ones we have, which the Bush administration has not done. They have totally abdicated that.

But I think we have to get broader than that. We've got to have enforceable labor and environmental standards. We've got the WTO that enforces financial and corporate rights. We need the International Labor Organization and other mechanisms that will be there to enforce labor rights and environmental rights.

And that's what I intend to do as president.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: I want to go to John Roberts in a second, but I know Senator Dodd and Senator Obama want to weigh in on this. Senator Dodd, you first.

DODD: Well first of all, look, I respect the fact that we are calling for time-outs. But, as pointed out earlier by John Edwards, we have had Senator Obama and Senator Clinton both come out in

support of the Peruvian free trade agreement.

Now, you're switching our positions on these issues here for the convenience of a debate and discussion, and where polling data may be. We are in a global economy. It is critically important that we do everything we can to expand those markets so that our products and our services can be sold in foreign nations.

It was outrageous in a sense here. If a U.S. corporation produced contaminated toys or food, they would have been shut down in 20 minutes. I called upon the president to put a moratorium on trade coming out of China. When those products were announced to be contaminated, it should have stopped right then and there.

BLITZER: All right. Quickly, Senator Obama was NAFTA a mistake?

OBAMA: Well, first of all, I hope Chris is clear. I haven't changed positions on Peru.

I am intending to...

(CROSSTALK)

OBAMA: I am for it, and I plan to vote for it, because it is a small country. This is a trade agreement that has the labor agreements and the environmental agreements that we've been fighting for in it. And I think it's the right thing to do.

I am opposed to CAFTA. I've been opposed to South Korea.

But going back to the issue of China, you know what Japan does with Chinese, when it comes to, for example, food importation. They send their own inspectors over to China, and they set up their own safety system, and they say, "If you don't abide by our rules, you can't send food into Japan."

Now, the question is, why doesn't the United States impose these same rules and regulations as Japan has?

(APPLAUSE)

This is the biggest market -- this is the biggest market in the world. China has to sell here.

But this goes back to how we did most favored nation trading status with China. The problem was, we had one lever. When we allowed them in, we should have said, "We will review this every single year, so if you are not behaving properly, if you are not safeguarding our consumers and find that you are not looking out for American workers, or the administration is not, we will have that subject to review."

BLITZER: Thank you.

BIDEN: Wolf?

OBAMA: That was the failure on that China vote.

BIDEN: Thirty seconds, Wolf, 30 seconds.

BLITZER: All right, 30 seconds. I got to let Senator Biden...

BIDEN: Look, it's not the agreement; it's the man. Under the WTO, we can shut this down. What are they all talking about here? It's about a president who won't enforce the law.

(APPLAUSE)

When they contaminated chicken, what happened? They cut off all chicken going in from Delaware, a \$3 billion industry, into China -- they cut it off.

We have power under this agreement. I don't know what anybody is talking about here. Enforce the agreement. Shut it down. BLITZER: Thank you, Senator.

(CROSSTALK)

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Go ahead, John.

ROBERTS: I want to explore the energy issue for a moment here, because it's of particular importance to this state.

Senator Obama, the price of oil is flirting with \$100-a-barrel- mark right now, making all the more urgent the need for alternate fuel sources.

You support nuclear energy as a part of the plan for the future, but there is an issue of what to do with the waste. You are opposed to the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Repository about 90 miles from here. Your state uses about -- gets about 48 percent of its power from nuclear compared to 20 percent for most other states, yet you are opposed to bringing nuclear waste from other states and keeping it in Illinois.

The question is, if not in your backyard, who's?

OBAMA: Well, as I've said, I don't think it's fair to send it to Nevada...

(APPLAUSE)

... because we're producing it.

So what have to do is we've got to develop the storage capacity based on sound science. Now,

laboratories like Argonne in my own home state are trying to develop ways to safely store nuclear waste without having to ship it across the country and put it in somebody else's backyard.

But keep in mind that I don't think nuclear power is necessarily our best option.

It has to be part of our energy mix. We have a genuine crisis that has to be addressed. And as president, I intend to address it. And here's what we have to do.

We have to, first of all, cap greenhouse gases, because climate change is real and it's going to impact Nevada, and it's impacting the entire planet. That means that we're going to have to tell polluters: We're going to charge you money when you send pollution into the air that's creating climate change.

That money we can then reinvest in solar, in wind, in biodiesel, in clean coal technology, and in superior nuclear technology.

BLITZER: All right, Senator, until there's some new technological breakthrough, as you would hope and all of us would hope, where do you send the waste?

OBAMA: Well, right now, it is on-site in many situations. And that is not the optimal situation, Wolf. But don't keep on assuming that we can't do something.

I mean, this is about the third time where you said, assuming we can't do it, what's our option?

BLITZER: Well, until we can...

OBAMA: But -- but -- but I'm running for president because I think we can do it.

(APPLAUSE)

I reject...

(APPLAUSE)

I reject the notion that we can't meet our energy challenges.

BLITZER: All right.

OBAMA: We can, if we've got bold leadership in the White House that is saying we are going to do something about climate change, we are going to develop renewable energy sources. That's what I intend to do as president.

BLITZER: Let...

OBAMA: And we shouldn't, you know, be pessimistic about the future of America.

BLITZER: OK. Well, I'm optimistic.

(LAUGHTER)

(APPLAUSE)

Governor Richardson is a former energy secretary. What do you do with the nuclear waste, in the interim?

RICHARDSON: Well, you mentioned all the labs, Argonne, Yucca Mountain. I was in charge of them.

Here's what you do. First, the future is renewable. It's not oil. It's not coal. It's not nuclear.

(APPLAUSE)

What you do with the waste is you don't put it in Yucca Mountain. All my life, as secretary of energy, as a congressman, I oppose the site, for environmental reasons, water saturation.

I don't think the answer also is in regional sites. There is a technological solution, a scientific solution. What I would do, I would turn Yucca Mountain into a national laboratory. We have the greatest brains in our national lab scientists. We need to find a way to safely dispose of nuclear waste. There is a technological solution, but while we do that, we shouldn't be giving the nuclear power industry all of these advantages in the Senate bills that are coming forth, or subsidies. Oil, coal and nuclear are getting most of the subsidies.

We need an energy revolution in this country to shift from fossil fuels to renewable sources by 50 percent by the year 2020. Eighty percent reduction of greenhouse gas emissions are mandated.

We need to have 30 percent of our electricity renewable, and it's going to be also the American people -- I going to say this honestly -- sacrificing a little bit when it comes to appliances, when it comes to being part of an energy efficiency revolution.

BLITZER: Thank you, Governor.

Campbell?

BROWN: Senator Clinton, you went to your alma mater recently, Wellesley College, and you said there that your tenure had prepared you to compete in the all-boys-club of presidential politics.

At the same time, your campaign has accused this all-boys-club, surrounding you on stage, of piling on with their attacks against you. And then your husband recently came to your defense by saying that these, quote, "boys," had been getting rough with you.

And some have suggested that you, that your campaign, that your husband are exploiting gender as a political issue during this campaign.

What's really going on here?

CLINTON: Well, I'm not exploiting anything at all. I'm not playing, as some people say, the gender card here in Las Vegas. I'm just trying to play the winning card.

(APPLAUSE)

And I understand, very well, that people are not attack me because I'm a woman; they're attacking me because I'm ahead. And I understand that...

(APPLAUSE)

You know, as Harry Truman famously said, "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen."

(APPLAUSE)

And I feel very comfortable in the kitchen.

(LAUGHTER) And I'm going to withstand the heat. But, you know, this is really one of the kind of issues that we can laugh about because it's exciting when you look at this field of candidates.

You know, several of us would never have had a chance to stand here and run for president -- a Latino, an African-American, a woman -- if it hadn't been for the progress of America over my lifetime. And I am thrilled to be running to be the first woman president.

(APPLAUSE)

BROWN: But, Senator, if I can just ask you, what did you mean at Wellesley when you referred to the "boy's club"?

CLINTON: Campbell...

(LAUGHTER)

BROWN: Just curious.

CLINTON: Well, it is clear, I think, from women's experiences that from time to time, there may be some impediments.

(LAUGHTER)

And it has been my goal over the course of my lifetime to be part of this great movement of

progress that includes all of us, but has particularly been significant to me as a woman.

And to be able to aim toward the highest, hardest glass ceiling is history-making.

Now, I'm not running because I'm a woman. I'm running because I think I'm the best qualified and experienced person to hit the ground running, but it's humbling...

(APPLAUSE)

It's been inspiring. And I have to tell you, as I travel around the country, you know, fathers drive hours to bring their daughters to my events. And so many women in their 90s wait to shake my hand. And they say something like: I'm 95 years old, I was born before women could vote, and I want to live long enough to see a woman in the White House.

BLITZER: Thank you, Senator.

(APPLAUSE)

We're going to take a quick break, but I want to give all the boys up here a chance...

(LAUGHTER)

... to quickly respond, if any of them want to respond.

Do any of you believe that Senator Clinton is playing this so-called gender card?

EDWARDS: I think -- you looking at me?

BLITZER: Yes.

(LAUGHTER)

EDWARDS: I think that -- I think that every single candidate on this stage should be held to exactly the same standard.

I do believe, however, that voters need to know that we have choices. There's nothing personal about this. I think there are very good people running in the Democratic Party for president, and we need to have a strong candidate in this presidential race.

(APPLAUSE)

But -- but I think there are differences between us. And voters are entitled to know what those differences are, without it being personal, without it being attack-oriented.

I spoke earlier about the difference between corporate Democrats and corporate Republicans and how critical it is for us to give the power in the democracy back to the American people so we

can give a better life to our children, as 20 generations before us have done.

And my point is, some of us have taken a different approach to that. Senator Clinton defends the system, takes money from lobbyists, does all those things.

(AUDIENCE BOOING)

My point is simply that people have -- no, wait a minute -- voters have those choices. Voters have those choices, and they deserve to know that they have those choices, that there are in fact differences between us. But I think every one of us should be held to the same standard.

BLITZER: Thank you, Senator.

Thank you, all of you. We're going to take a quick break. We have a lot more to do. We're going to readjust the stage up here, get some chairs, and when we come back, you're going to be hearing directly from voters here in Nevada. They're going to have a chance to ask these Democratic presidential candidates questions.

Much more of our Democratic presidential debate, right here on the campus of the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. We'll be right back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Welcome back. We're on the campus of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, in the Cox Pavilion. All the candidates are now seated. We're going to begin the second half of this presidential debate.

Our White House correspondent Suzanne Malveaux is here with us.

And, Suzanne, you have some undecided voters who are ready to ask these presidential candidates some specific questions. Let's begin right now.

SUZANNE MALVEAUX, CNN: Sure, Wolf.

They are all very excited, about 100 folks here. I've had a chance to actually meet at least some of you here. And, obviously, I noticed when you were responding to some of the candidates you were shaking your head, wrinkling your nose. I'm not sure if they've answered your questions, and this is your opportunity to ask the candidates what you really care about.

Catherine Jackson, I want to start off with you, if you'd stand with your son, please. Now, Catherine, I understand that you're quite concerned about your son, Christopher. You have served three tours of duty in Iraq, and you're recognized for service.

(APPLAUSE)

That's for you, Christopher.

Your mother, I spoke with her, your mom is so worried that you're going to be called to duty again, but not to be deployed in Iraq, but rather Iran. Do you share her concern?

CHRISTOPHER JACKSON: Yes, I do. I feel that if we continue on the path we're at, that's where we're going to end up: in Iran. And that's not what our troops need. Our troops need to come home now.

(APPLAUSE)

MALVEAUX: Catherine? Catherine, your question?

CATHERINE JACKSON: I finally got my son home after three tours of policing in the Iraq civil war. Now, members of the Bush administration and the conservative members of Congress are beating the drums of war again.

My son is still part of the Marine Individual Ready Reserve. And, if President Bush starts another unnecessary war, there will be a chance that he will likely be recalled for war. All of you on the stage have either -- I'm sorry -- have former political power or significant informal power and have the ability to stop the rush to war.

Please tell me how you are going to show us your leadership on this issue now so I can decide who I think would be the best leader for tomorrow.

MALVEAUX: To Senator Biden, please.

BIDEN: The way you do that, ma'am, is to not ratchet up the winds of war here. We had a vote in the United States Senate on declaring the Quds Force -- their special forces -- and the Revolutionary Guard to be a terrorist organization.

A lot of people voted for that -- 70-some voted for it. It's a serious, serious mistake. Because what it does -- it was completely counter-productive.

(APPLAUSE)

What it was, ma'am -- what it did was, it convinced the rest of the Muslim world this is really a war against Islam and not a war in Iraq, and, number two, it rose the -- caused the price of oil to head to a hundred dollars a barrel -- we're paying \$30 a barrel for what they call a risk premium -- and it helped to stabilize the situation both in Iran -- I mean, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

BIDEN: So the way to do this is keep quiet, hush up, and do what I told the president personally and what I've said as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee: If he takes the country to war in Iraq (sic) without a vote of Congress, which will not exist, then he should be impeached.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Senator, Senator Clinton, you voted for that resolution. You're the only one on the stage who did vote for that resolution. Do you want to respond to Senator Biden?

CLINTON: I do.

BIDEN: I wasn't attacking Senator...

CLINTON: No, no, no, no.

BLITZER: I know, but she did vote for the resolution.

But if you could address this young man...

CLINTON: Yes.

BLITZER: ... and his mother about their fear that because of your vote he might have to go fight in Iran.

CLINTON: Well, there is no basis for that fear. There is, however, a deep concern that is well justified about this president.

That's why what I've tried to do is oppose a rush to war. I started speaking out against it back in February because I was worried about President Bush. Working with members of Congress to do exactly what Joe is saying, which is to make it absolutely clear there is no legal authority whatsoever.

But what I think is most important is that we have aggressive diplomacy with Iran. I believe that the Bush administration has allowed this situation to worsen and fester because they won't have any diplomatic relations of any sort with Iran. So what I would do is to immediately begin that kind of negotiation. And I wouldn't ask the Iranians to give up their quest for nuclear power or anything else. Get them to the table.

Let's figure out if there's some way we can, number one, ratchet down the tensions; number two, prevent from becoming a nuclear weapons power. Because that would be dangerous for all of us. And get the rest of the world to help us.

We need China and Russia, the neighbors in the region. That's what I would be doing.

The only thing I would add, in addition to thanking you for your service, is that, having been in Iraq, you know that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard has assisted the militias and others in killing our Americans and in maiming them.

They have imported technology and technical assistance.

I believe they are a terrorist group. I think sanctioning them and putting some pressure on them is an important part of getting to the diplomatic table with both carrots and sticks.

BLITZER: All right.

CLINTON: So, oppose the rush to war, but get tough and have a diplomatic approach to Iran.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: All right. I want to hear from Senator Edwards first. Go ahead, Senator Edwards. Do you accept her explanation this was no vote for a rush to war with Iran?

EDWARDS: Well, let me say -- can I just say, first, Christopher, thank you.

God bless you for what you did for us and for America. Men and women like you have served this country so courageously, and I'm proud of both you and your mom being here to speak up, because I think this is such a crucial issue for the future of the country.

My own view is that it's important for us to stop Bush, Cheney and the neocons at every, single stage.

(APPLAUSE)

And I think there was an important opportunity to do that on the vote on the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Bush, Cheney and the neocons wanted the Iranian Revolutionary Guard declared a terrorist group, as Senator Biden just spoke about, because it's part of their path to moving militarily on Iran.

And, actually, the fear a lot of us had about that was realized about a week ago when Bush, Cheney and the administration declared the Iranian Revolutionary Guard a terrorist organization, and -- this is the part everyone's going to love -- a proliferator of weapons of mass destruction.

(AUDIENCE BOOING)

We've seen this movie. We know how it turns out. And I think it is absolutely crucial for Democrats on this issue to show real strength, real backbone and stop this president from moving forward on Iran.

BLITZER: Thank you, Senator.

(APPLAUSE)

Very quickly, Senator Obama.

OBAMA: Well, Chris, we appreciate your service. And your mom, I can only imagine what she went through when you were away. So we're glad you're back home.

But understand the problem with this vote on the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. It wasn't simply that it was identified as a terrorist organization; it was also that in the language of the resolution, it said we should maintain our forces in Iraq with an eye toward blunting Iranian influence.

So it's not just going to have an impact, in terms of potentially having a war against Iran; it also gives this administration an excuse to perpetuate their failed strategy in Iraq. And that could mean that you could be redeployed in Iraq.

That's why this was a mistake, and that's why not only do we have to bring the war in Iraq to a close, but we have to change the mindset that got us into war. Which means we initiate -- yes, I agree with Hillary that we've got to initiate bold diplomacy.

I think the next president has to lead that diplomacy. It can't just be envoys. And one of the reasons I'm running for president, and Hillary and I had a disagreement on this, I said I would meet with not just our friends but also with our enemies. Because that's what strong countries and that's what strong presidents do is meet with our adversaries, tell them where we stand.

BLITZER: Senator, I want to go back to Suzanne Malveaux, but this was an important vote, and you missed that vote. You weren't present in the Senate when that vote occurred.

OBAMA: No, this is true. And it was a mistake. This is one of the hazards of running for president. But what I have consistently said, and I said at the time of the vote, was that we should not take steps that would increase two presences inside Iraq with an eye towards blunting the impact of Iran. I always think that's a mistake.

BLITZER: Thank you, Senator.

Go ahead, Suzanne.

MALVEAUX: Jeannie Jackson, if you would stand for us please. You have something in common with the other mother, you have a son that's also in Iraq. But your question, your concern is very different. What is your question?

JEANNIE JACKSON: Well, I think you're all about getting us out of Iraq, and I appreciate, so it may be a moot point. But my son's making \$30,000, while corporate people are making minimum \$100,000 for going over there.

Is there any way to end this disparity in wages?

And also, I'd like to say to Bill Richardson, happy birthday.

(APPLAUSE)

Thank you.

BLITZER: All right. Well, let's throw the question to the birthday boy. Go.

MALVEAUX: OK. I guess he gets the gift here. And obviously we're talking about private contractors.

Governor Richardson, you know that Senator Obama has said he would pull out all of the private contractors if, in fact, that he was president. But in light of how stretched our military is, do you think that's a practical solution?

RICHARDSON: Yes. I would pull out all the contractors.

(APPLAUSE)

I would get them all out...

(APPLAUSE)

... just like I would get all our troops out, all residual forces, and I would do it within a year.

(UNKNOWN): Great answer.

RICHARDSON: Here's my answer. What I believe we need to do is we need to reform our military. This is what I would do. This war in Iraq has bled us enormously, has bled our military enormously.

I would find ways to keep the all-volunteer force. Now, I would say to you that I would have two more divisions in the Army, two more in the Marines.

I would increase military pay and educational benefits, a new G.I. Bill for our military.

(APPLAUSE)

But what I would also do is, with our veterans -- you know, in military families, I would have a hero's health card for every military person in this country... (APPLAUSE)

... which would mean that they could get health care, not just at the V.A. system, but anywhere they want.

I would fully guarantee funding at the V.A. And most importantly, the big, big challenge is mental health. We don't treat mental health with the parity that this country deserves.

(APPLAUSE)

And our kids coming back from Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam, there's a huge burden -- mental trauma, traumatic brain injury, PTSD. We have a V.A. system and we have a mental health system in this country this is not given the parity, the coverage that it deserves.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Thank you, Governor. Thank you.

Suzanne?

MALVEAUX: Our next questions is -- Khalid Khan, if you would please stand for a moment. You and I spoke very briefly, and you said you have some concerns about racial profiling.

KHALID KHAN: Yes, I do. I am an American citizen and have been profiled all the time at the airport. Since 9/11, hundreds of thousands of Americans have been profiled. And, you know, it is like a harassment.

KHAN: My question is that -- our civil liberties have been taken away from us. What are you going to do to protect Americans from this kind of harassment?

MALVEAUX: Senator Edwards, we'd like you to take that. You obviously voted for the Patriot Act, which gives the government extended powers of surveillance. What do you say to people like Mr. Khan who say he's been abused by that power?

EDWARDS: I say he's right. He's right. This administration has done more than abuse the Patriot Act, and the Patriot Act needs to be dramatically changed, by the way.

(APPLAUSE)

But in addition to that, the racial profiling that you are describing has to be stopped, and it will be stopped when I am president of the United States. We're going to take the steps that need to be taken to restore America's moral leadership in the world, and that means a whole group of things: stopping the profiling, stopping the illegal -- and I use that term intentionally -- the illegal spying on the American people that this president has been engaged in.

(APPLAUSE) Closing Guantanamo, which I think is a national embarrassment.

(APPLAUSE)

No more secret prisons, no more rendition.

EDWARDS: And it's just absolutely amazing to me that there's actually an open discussion in the United States of America about what kind of torture will be tolerated. I'll tell you what kind of torture will be tolerated when I'm president of the United States -- no torture will be tolerated when I'm president of the United States.

BLITZER: Thank you. Thank you, Senator.

(APPLAUSE)

EDWARDS: We're going to restore our respect in the world.

BLITZER: Congressman Kucinich, I believe you're the only person on this stage who had a chance to vote on the Patriot Act right after 9/11 who voted against it right away.

KUCINICH: That's because I read it.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Now, here's the question.

(APPLAUSE)

Here's the question. Here's the question. Here's the question.

Congressman, do you feel, as you felt on other issues, that those who voted for the Patriot Act, and there are several here on this stage, bear a responsibility for the way this individual, this American citizen is being treated when he goes through an airport?

KUCINICH: You're owed an apology, you really are. And every American should be able to present themselves without having to be further scrutinized based on ethnic identity.

But let's go back to the point that you made here. The time -- you know, the president of the United States is called upon to make the right decision at the right time. And you've seen here tonight people who voted for the war, voted to fund the war, now they have a different position. People voted for the Patriot Act. Now they have a different position. People voted for China trade. Now they have a different position. People who voted for Yucca Mountain. Now they had a different position.

Just imagine what it will be like to have a president of the United States who's right the first time. Just imagine.

(APPLAUSE)

And I don't think -- I don't think that the first questioner's question was really answered about what are you going to do about this president, and for that matter the vice president, because they're out of control, and Congress isn't doing anything.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Thank you. Thank you, Congressman.

KUCINICH: It's called impeachment and you don't wait.

(APPLAUSE)

You do it now. You don't wait.

BLITZER: All right. Suzanne has another question...

KUCINICH: Now. Impeach him now.

BLITZER: ... but I want -- Senator Biden, go ahead and respond, because you voted for the Patriot Act.

BIDEN: You know, let's -- facts are a funny thing. They get in the way.

(LAUGHTER)

You know what I mean? There is nothing in the Patriot Act that allows profiling. Let's get that straight. Nothing in the Patriot Act allows profiling. Number one, you're profiled illegally. I have voted against and worked with legislation with many people on this stage to stop profiling. That's number one. It did not. It's not because of the Patriot Act. It's a convenient thing to talk about, number one.

Number two, you know, when we had a chance to close down Guantanamo, I voted against funding Guantanamo. Other folks up here voted for funding it, including the two leading candidates. I voted to not build the new \$36 million part. I called for closing it three years ago.

(APPLAUSE)

And so folks, this -- but this is not about who was right when.

BIDEN: It's: What's your plan now?

What are you going to do now?

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Thank you. Thank you, Senator.

(APPLAUSE)

Go ahead, Suzanne.

MALVEAUX: George Ambriz, you're a graduate student here, and you're also a mentor to children. I understand that you have a concern about immigration.

GEORGE AMBRIZ: Yes, I do.

Buenos noches y bienvenidos.

(APPLAUSE)

It seems that many political commentators, such as Lou Dobbs, are guiding the debate and strongly shaping U.S. policy on immigration, by insinuating a linkage to terrorism.

As many people know, no terrorist has come from our southern border.

Do you consider fighting terrorism and slowing the flow of illegal immigration coming from our southern border as intrinsically related issues?

MALVEAUX: Governor Richardson, since you're the only one on this stage who does not support even building a fence, why don't you take this one?

KUCINICH: That's not true.

RICHARDSON: By the way, Dennis, you keep -- stop including me in all these votes. I've been a governor. I'm in New Mexico. I'm not in Washington.

(LAUGHTER)

(APPLAUSE)

Here's my answer. You know, two years ago -- and I'm the only one who's dealt with the immigration issue directly.

You know, and by the way, with the Congress, let me just say the Congress' approval rating is 11 percent. Now, you know who's higher? Dick Cheney and HMOs.

My point is that, you know...

(LAUGHTER)

Let's talk about the need to bring this country together. Dysfunctional relationships exist between the president and the Congress. It needs to be corrected.

Here's my answer. Two years ago, I'm the first governor to declare a border emergency because the federal government wasn't doing its job in stopping the flow of drugs and people. But you know what? We should stop demonizing immigrants. We should stop doing that.

(APPLAUSE)

And I'm against the fence because it will not work. The Congress only funded half of the fence...

(LAUGHTER)

... and it's not American. What I would do is do four quick things. One, we have to secure the

border. Double the number of border patrol agents. Keep the National Guard there a little longer. Detection equipment, as you mentioned.

Secondly, those who knowingly hire illegal workers should be punished.

(APPLAUSE)

Third, we should have a relationship -- it's called foreign policy -- with Mexico. They're our friend. But we should speak frankly to our friends, and it should be something like this: Mexico, give jobs to your people.

At the very least...

(APPLAUSE)

You know, at the very least, stop handing out maps on the easiest place to cross.

(LAUGHTER)

And then, lastly, a legalization plan -- a legalization plan. Not amnesty, not citizenship, but a path to legalization that involves conditions -- learning English...

BLITZER: Thank you.

RICHARDSON: Paying back-taxes.

BLITZER: I want to Senator Dodd, though, to respond, because you voted for that security fence along the border between the U.S. and Mexico.

DODD: Bienvenidos tambien. (SPEAKING IN SPANISH)

(LAUGHTER)

(APPLAUSE)

I Was in the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic.

DODD: I will give you some points. In certain places you could make a case that a wall might help, not of course on the entire border. I am opposed to that. But the idea of having some sort of better security, including additional guards, additional technology here to allow us to deal with the issues.

But there ought not to be any correlation here. When you take the oath of office, you don't swear to uphold the Constitution or protect the country. I believe by upholding our rights, we do protect the country. And the administration has taken the opposite view. They are posing to us the false choice, the dichotomy that to be safer, we have to give up rights. I think that is so

fundamentally flawed and fundamentally dangerous for the United States of America to embrace that idea.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: All right. Thank you, senator.

Let's go back to Suzanne.

MALVEAUX: We have Judy Bagley here with us. If you would stand for a moment.

You have been working in the casino business for some 27 years now, a cashier?

BAGLEY: That's right.

MALVEAUX: You've seen a lot of people come and go, obviously.

BAGLEY: Absolutely.

MALVEAUX: What is your concern?

BAGLEY: I'm a booth cashier and we moved here over 30 years ago. And I have three children, and as of yesterday, 8 grandchildren.

(APPLAUSE)

MALVEAUX: And what is your -- congratulations. That's amazing.

BAGLEY: Thank you.

MALVEAUX: And what is your question to the candidates?

BAGLEY: My question is, over the next several years, the Baby- Boomers, like my husband and I, will be retiring en masse. At the same time, the country is at a record deficit. We face a major challenge.

When I retire, I will have my pension, but many others will not. Throughout the campaign, we've heard the candidates supporting -- committing to support -- oh my goodness -- committing to support Social Security and Medicare.

My question is -- but the ideas on reform are often vague.

My question is: What do you plan to do to ensure that Social Security and Medicare are truly available to us, our children and grandchildren in light of the current budget conditions?

MALVEAUX: Thank you very much. Very important issue.

(APPLAUSE)

Senator Obama? OBAMA: Well, first of all, Judy, thank you for the question, and thanks for the great work you do on behalf of the culinary workers, a great union here.

(APPLAUSE)

Look, this is something that we've talked about in our campaign. We've got 78 million baby boomers who are going to be retiring. And the first thing we have to do is to put an end to George Bush raiding the Social Security trust fund to pay for a misguided war in Iraq.

(APPLAUSE)

If we take some of that money back and we start getting control of our budget and have fiscal discipline, that will make some of the difference. But not all of it, because we're going to have more senior citizens, more retirees and fewer workers.

So I've been very specific about saying that we should not privatize, we should protect benefits. I don't think the best way to approach this is to raise the retirement age.

But what we can do is adjust the cap on the payroll tax. Right now, anybody who's making \$97,000 or less, you pay payroll tax on 100 percent of your income. Warren Buffett, who made \$46 million last year, pays on a fraction of one percent of his income.

And if we make that small adjustment, we can potentially close that gap, and we can make sure Social Security's there.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Thank you.

OBAMA: Last point, just because I have to answer the full question. Medicare is a tougher problem because we've got health-care inflation going up. And I am meeting people all across the country who just can't manage even if they've got health insurance.

Their premiums have gone up 78 percent since George Bush took office. It's a scam. And people are getting desperate.

The only way we're going to fix Medicare is if we get that rising cost under control. And that means having a universal health care plan, where every single person has prevention, and they are able to get the treatments they need.

We're instituting health technologies and managing the chronically ill so that we save money, we provide coverage for everybody. That, over the long term, will save Medicare enormous amounts of money and it will be there for you.

BLITZER: Thank you, Senator.

(APPLAUSE) Senator Clinton, you've been criticized by Senator Obama and, I think, Senator Edwards, among others, for refusing to take a hard and fast position on whether you would raise the tax above those making \$97,500 a year, to try to secure Social Security in the long term.

Are you ready to make a hard and fast statement, now, on your position on what Senator Obama just said?

CLINTON: Well, I'll tell you what I'm for. And I think Judy raises two really important issues. I am for getting back to fiscal responsibility. I think I counted you said "deficit" three times.

Six and a half years ago, when George Bush came into office, he inherited a balanced budget and a surplus.

(APPLAUSE)

And the Social Security system was on a path to be solvent into 2055. We have long-term challenges with Social Security.

We have a crisis with Medicare, just like we have a crisis with health care costs.

We have a crisis with energy costs.

We have a lot of very intense challenges we have to meet right now.

So what I want to do is move back toward fiscal responsibility. I think if we don't do that, we're not going to deal with any of these problems adequately.

Then I think we will demonstrate that we're serious about getting our house in order again, and then I think we have to have a bipartisan commission.

I do not want to fix the problems of Social Security on the backs of middle-class families and seniors. If you lift the cap completely, that is a \$1 trillion tax increase. I don't think we need to do that.

But I want to say one final word about Medicare. Number one, Medicare should be able to negotiate for lower drug prices. It was a travesty...

BLITZER: All right. Thank you, Senator.

CLINTON: ... when the Bush administration did not allow that to happen, and I have a lot of other ideas about we'll preserve and strengthen Medicare.

BLITZER: So, Senator, you're not ready to accept a raising of the cap on that? But I know that

Senator Obama wants to respond to you.

OBAMA: I will be very brief on this because, Hillary, I have heard you say this is a trillion-dollar tax cut on the middle class by adjusting the cap. Understand that only 6 percent of Americans make more than \$97,000 a year. So 6 percent is not the middle class.

(APPLAUSE)

It is the upper class. You know, this is the kind of thing that I would expect from Mitt Romney or Rudy Giuliani, where we start playing with numbers. We start playing with numbers in order to try to make a point.

(APPLAUSE)

And we can't do that. No, no, no. This is too important -- this is too important for us to pretend that we are using numbers like a trillion dollar tax cut instead of responsibly dealing with the problem that Judy asked for, and she said she wants a specific answer. And she said she wants a specific answer and that's what I provided.

But understand that this is the top 6 percent, and that is not the middle class.

BLITZER: Senator?

(APPLAUSE)

CLINTON: First of all -- first of all, I think that you meant a tax increase, because that's what it would be.

But, secondly, it is absolutely the case that there are people who would find that burdensome. I represent firefighters. I represent school supervisors. I'm not talking -- and, you know, it's different parts of the country. So you have to look at this across the board and the numbers are staggering.

Now, when people say, "Be specific," I listened very carefully to what Senator Obama said when he appeared on one of the Sunday morning shows, and he basically said that he was for looking at a lot of different things and using a bipartisan commission to do it. I think that's the right answer. That is where I have been from the very beginning.

That's what worked back in 1983 when we had a real crisis in Social Security. The government got together. President Reagan and Speaker Tip O'Neill put together a bipartisan commission.

Then everybody looked at everything at once. It wasn't one person's idea or somebody else's idea. Everybody had to get into a room and say, here's what we're going to do to fix the problem. That's what I want to do, because I think that's what will work for America.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: I want everybody to stand by because we have a lot more to talk about, a lot more of these questions from undecided voters here in Nevada, but we're going to take a quick commercial break. Much more from the campus of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, right after this.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(CROSSTALK)

DODD: First of all, thanks for your question. But obviously you want people here that are going to have a balanced sense of justice, that bring a life experience to that bench, where they're not just there are academics, that have a clear record in the judicial branch, where they either served as a judge or as a lawyer, where they've demonstrated that ability to be fair and just when it comes to the administration of the laws of our country here.

I don't necessarily believe in applying litmus tests here. I think that's a dangerous precedent to begin that process here. You start down that path, others may follow it, you end up with a court then that may lack that kind of balance.

Obviously, as someone who's pro-choice and have been their entire public life and career, I feel very strongly about Roe v. Wade. I would not want a justice to be appointed who would even think about overturning that.

But I want to be very carefully here...

(APPLAUSE)

But I'd want to be careful about making sure that I'd know the person, I'm not just looking at people I don't know or don't understand their background, so I have a very good feel of where they're going to be on these matters, not the people here, when they make the statement that they will uphold precedent and they raise their right hand before the Judiciary Committee and make that committee, and then violate that commitment. That I find highly offensive.

That will not happen in a Dodd administration. I promise.

BLITZER: All right, let's go through the whole panel. I want everybody to weigh in; this is an important question that was raised with Senator Biden.

Would you insist that any nominee for the U.S. Supreme Court supported abortion rights for women?

BIDEN: Suzanne's decided. I'm not answering her question. I'm answering the question of the woman who was there, OK?

(APPLAUSE)

And, number one -- and then I'll answer Suzanne's question.

BLITZER: So, let's ask the woman.

Do you want him to answer that question?

BIDEN: Do you want me to answer your question?

(UNKNOWN): I would like for you to answer both questions.

BIDEN: I will answer both. Answer your question first.

Your question first. I've provided over more Supreme Court justices than anyone in American history -- number one.

Number two, I have taken on those justices who, in fact, show no balance -- they are ideologues. We have enough ideologues. We have enough professors on the bench.

I want someone who ran for dog catcher. I want someone -- literally, not a joke. When Hillary's husband asked me for his advice when he was appointing people, I wanted to go to people and so did he -- we couldn't. Four people turned it down.

We wanted to get someone who, in fact, knew what it was to live life. Knew what it was -- not as some intellectual feat.

(APPLAUSE)

And by the way, the next person that is appointed in a Biden administration is going to be a woman. We don't have enough women on the bench, number one.

Number two, to Suzanne Malveaux's question, I would not appoint anyone who did not understand that Section 5 of the 14th Amendment and the liberty clause of the 14th Amendment provided a right to privacy. That is the question I would ask. If that is answered correctly, that that is the case, then it answers the question, which means they would support Roe v. Wade.

BLITZER: Let's go down the whole panel, and if you could give me a short yes or no, would you insist on a Supreme Court nominee supporting abortion?

RICHARDSON: I would have diversity as a prime criteria, but I would also ask my nominee, this is what I would ask. Number one, do you believe Roe v. Wade is settled law? Number two, do you support the right to privacy? Number three, do you support civil rights? Number four, do you support what you asked -- education, school equalization?

If the answer is no to those questions, that basically say, is it settled law or not -- you want to call it a litmus test, fine -- those would be the judges that I would appoint to the Supreme Court.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Thank you, Governor.

Congressman?

KUCINICH: A Kucinich appointment to the Supreme Court would have a litmus test on abortion. It's a question of a woman's right to choose and a right to privacy. But a president has to do more than that. A president has to be a healer. And this has been one of the great divides in our country. And so I want to let the American people know that I'll stand for prenatal care, postnatal care, child care, a living wage, universal health care, sex education, birth control...

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: All right.

KUCINICH: We can make abortions less necessary if we have a healer in the White House. And we can also protect a woman's right to choose. We can do both.

BLITZER: Thank you, Congressman.

Senator Clinton?

(APPLAUSE)

Senator Clinton, would this be a sine qua non for you that any nominee you name to the Supreme Court would have to share your view on abortion?

CLINTON: Well, they'd have to share my view about privacy, and I think that goes hand-in-hand. Privacy, in my opinion, is embedded in our Constitution. What does it mean to have a right to free speech or the right to worship as you choose if you also don't have the right to be left alone, to have that privacy that goes with being an American.

(APPLAUSE)

So it would be absolutely critical. And I, like Senator Biden...

BLITZER: So the answer is yes.

CLINTON: Yes, the answer is yes.

BLITZER: OK, all right.

CLINTON: But I just want to say, Senator Biden really deserves a lot of plaudits because he knows this issue forwards and backwards, and I think it's important to have a president who

understands the intricate connections of our branches of government and the Constitution.

I think that's one of the great tragedies of George Bush's presidency, is he didn't really understand the way our government was supposed to work.

BLITZER: Thank you.

Senator Obama, you used to be a professor of law.

(APPLAUSE) OBAMA: I would not appoint somebody who doesn't believe in the right to privacy. But you're right, Wolf. I taught constitutional law for 10 years, and when you look at what makes a great Supreme Court justice, it's not just the particular issue and how they ruled. But it's their conception of the court.

And part of the role of the court is that it is going to protect people who may be vulnerable in the political process, the outsider, the minority, those who are vulnerable, those who don't have a lot of clout. And part of what I want to find in a Supreme Court justice -- and Joe's exactly right. Sometimes we're only looking at academics or people who've been in the courts.

If we can find people who have life experience, and they understand what it means to be on the outside, what it means to have the system not work for them, that's the kind of person I want on the Supreme Court.

BLITZER: Thank you, Senator.

We heard from Senator Dodd, so let Senator Edwards go ahead.

Would you insist that nominees support abortion?

EDWARDS: I would insist that they recognize the right to privacy and recognize Roe v. Wade as settled law.

But I want to go beyond what some others have said here, because it is so crucial, if you grew up like I did in the segregated South and you saw how important it was to have federal judges who had some backbone and were willing to stand up against popular opinion. We had a judge who desegregated the public schools in North Carolina, in Charlotte, North Carolina. He literally had to have armed guards take him from home to work and home each day.

That's the kind of courage and strength we need in a United States Supreme Court justice.

BLITZER: Thank you, Senator.

All right, Suzanne.

MALVEAUX: Frank Perconte is a student here.

Frank, what is your question.

FRANK PERCONTE: Whether it's the continuing violence in Iraq or if it's a potential confrontation with Iran or even the emerging instability in Pakistan, nothing seems to be getting any better in the Middle East; it only seems to be getting worse.

And if the upcoming election is anything like the last two elections -- if any of you is elected, in all likelihood, you'll be presiding over an extremely divided electorate.

Almost half the country is not going to agree with you on the direction you want to take this country to meet those challenges in the Middle East.

So, my question to you is, assuming you are elected, the day after you take the oath of office, what message will you offer the whole country to unite all of us behind you so you can see us through this period of transition that we're in?

(APPLAUSE)

MALVEAUX: I'd like to throw that to Senator Obama.

Senator Obama, you said on a TV interview just this past weekend you didn't believe that Senator Clinton was able to unite this country.

Why do you believe she can't?

OBAMA: No, that's not what I said. What I said was I thought I could do it better, that's why I'm running for president.

(APPLAUSE)

If I didn't think I could do it better, then I wouldn't be running for president, because the stakes are too high, just as we heard.

Here's what I would do immediately. I would convene a continuous advisory meeting with not just Democrats, but Republicans, specifically on national security issues, because there is a long tradition that our differences in foreign policy should end at the water's edge. And we have lost that tradition.

And there's some wonderful Republicans -- Dick Lugar, Chuck Hagel -- there are a group of them who have continued that tradition, but we have lost it because the polarization of the Bush administration.

So I want Republicans and Democrats and independents to understand that, as president, I am going to want to go before the entire world and say: America's back. We are ready to lead. But we're not just going to lead militarily. We're going to lead by building schools in the Middle East that teach math and science instead of hatred of Americans. We're going to lead by shutting

down Guantanamo and restoring habeas corpus in this country so that we offer them an example.

BLITZER: Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

OBAMA: We're going to lead by talking to our enemies, and not just our friends. And I believe that there are a lot of Republicans who hunger for that kind of bipartisan approach. That's what I will offer as president of the United States.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Senator Clinton -- thank you, Senator... (APPLAUSE)

Senator Clinton, some have suggested, including some on this stage, that you are simply too polarizing to unit the country, if you were elected president.

What do you say to those critics?

CLINTON: Well, I say that I am running to be the president of the entire country.

You know, when I started running for the Senate in New York, I heard the same things. And what I did was to reach out to Republicans, Democrats, independents, rural, urban. Because we've got to begin to work together.

That's what I've tried to do in the Senate, working across party lines, trying to find common ground -- to go back to Chris -- you know, working to get health care for Guard and Reservists with a colleague, a Republican colleague from South Carolina.

You know, you have to look to find common ground. It is the responsibility of a leader to try to make that possible.

Now, that doesn't mean there won't be differences, because there are. We're not going to wake up the day after the election and not believe what we believe and not see the world as we see it.

But we can certainly begin under presidential leadership to listen to one another, to look for those chances to find that common ground and work together.

That's the kind of president I will be. I will spend a lot of my time working with not just Republicans, but people who aren't in public life. We've got smart people all over this country who want to make a contribution, who want to give something back. Let's enlist the best that we have and start acting like Americans again to solve our problems and make a difference.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Thank you, Senator.

Senator Biden?

BIDEN: Let me give you a direct answer to this question. I'd start by ending the war. And I've already gained the respect of my Republican colleagues -- the only person that's gotten 75 votes in the United States Senate on a plan to end the war. It's sitting in a drawer. It'd begin the day that I get elected.

Secondly, one of the ways you work in the House and the Senate is, over time you gain respect. Find me a Republican on the other side that doesn't respect my judgment and that doesn't think I tell them straight up the truth. I've worked with them. I've already done it. I would also include Republicans in my administration. Look, the basic premise you operate on, I reject. The vast majority of Republicans think this war stinks as well. The vast majority of Republicans out there think that our foreign policy is a shambles.

The vast majority of the independents think that. Folks, this is not going to be that hard. This is like not -- this isn't pushing a rope. They're sticking with George Bush out of loyalty.

But I promise you, I've already brought them along. I brought them along on Bosnia under the administration of President Clinton. I brought them along on the issue of dealing with arms control. I've brought them along on the issue of the war in Iraq.

So folks, don't buy into this premise that Republicans, average Republicans and Republican senators, don't agree with this. They do. They're afraid to take on Bush. I will end that, I've already done it, and I would start with ending the war in Iraq with 75 senators voting...

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Thank you, Senator.

We're going to go back to Suzanne.

But go ahead, Governor Richardson, very briefly.

RICHARDSON: Well, you know, tonight, we've talked about Iran; we've talked Iraq; we've talked about regimes that have not been friendly. I'd throw in North Korea.

The cornerstone of my foreign policy would be diplomacy and negotiation. We would be not the world's policeman, but the world's conscience.

All my life as an ambassador to United Nations, as a special envoy, I've brought people together: as a governor, bipartisan solutions; as a congressman; as the secretary of energy.

I'm going to answer your question specifically on the Middle East. Number one, I would have a Middle East peace envoy. This president is the only president that hasn't had one.

I would base a Middle East settlement on a two-state solution -- protection for the security of Israel and a Palestinian state.

I would also look at adjustments in the '67 borders. I would also look at dealing effectively and efficiently and fairly with the settlements issue, with Jerusalem.

I would do something else. I would talk to Syria. I would talk to Iran.

It's all tied in a solution. It's called leadership and diplomacy. And to take these steps you have to be bold. BLITZER: Thank you.

RICHARDSON: We're talking about electing a president that is going to need to repair the enormous damage of this administration...

BLITZER: Thank you, Governor.

RICHARDSON: ... in the last eight years.

BLITZER: Thank you, Governor.

Suzanne, go ahead.

Maria, would you stand please? Give us your full name.

MARIA PARRA SANDOVAL (ph): Maria Parra Sandoval (ph), and I'm a UNLV student. And my question is for Senator Clinton.

This is a fun question for you. Do you prefer diamonds or pearls?

(LAUGHTER)

(APPLAUSE)

CLINTON: Now, I know I'm sometimes accused of not being able to make a choice. I want both.

(LAUGHTER)

(APPLAUSE)

MALVEAUX: Do we get to ask any of the other candidates or I supposed just Senator Clinton?

BIDEN: I'm for diamonds. Diamonds.

SANDOVAL (ph): It's the only thing -- it's the only thing shiny up there.

MALVEAUX: OK. Thank you so much.

BLITZER: All right. So on that note, diamonds and pearls, I want to thank all of the Democratic presidential candidates for joining us here this evening. Let's give them a big round of applause.

(APPLAUSE)

And that wraps up our debate tonight. This is the first presidential debate ever held here in the state of Nevada. We'd like to thank our hosts here at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and the Nevada Democratic Party for all their help and all their volunteers in putting this together.

TO ORDER A VIDEO OF THIS TRANSCRIPT, PLEASE CALL 800-CNN-NEWS OR USE OUR SECURE ONLINE ORDER FORM LOCATED AT www.voxant.com