

AP fact check: Dems flub details on climate, guns

By HOPE YEN, CALVIN WOODWARD AND SETH BORENSTEIN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A dozen Democrats seeking the presidency tussled in a debate packed with policy, flubbing some details in the process.

Several gave an iffy explanation of why they're not swinging behind a bold proposal to make people turn over their assault-style weapons. Sloppiness also crept in during robust exchanges over foreign policy, health care, taxes and more. And when climate change briefly came up, its threat to the planet was exaggerated.

How some of their claims from Westerville, Ohio, on Tuesday night stack up with the facts:

Climate change

Bernie Sanders: "We're forgetting about the existential threat of climate change." "Right now the CEOs in the fossil fuel industry know full well that their product is destroying this world and they continue to make huge profits."

The facts: Earth's existence and life on the planet will not end because of climate change, as the Vermont senator asserts. Fossil fuels do not have Earth on a path of destruction.

Science says climate change is dramatic and will cause harm, but it won't wipe out everything and won't end humanity.

"It's an existential threat for many species. It's an existential threat for many ecosystems. I don't think it's an existential threat for humanity," said Princeton University climate scientist Michael Oppenheimer.

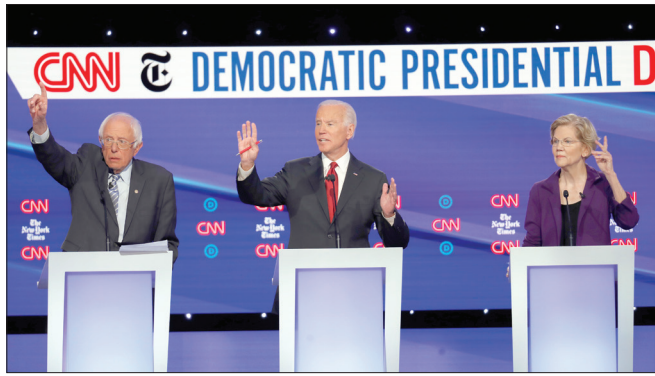
The Earth will still exist and so will humans, but the way we live and the planet will be dramatically different if burning of fossil fuels continues unabated, said Oppenheimer, a co-author of many of the most dire international science reports on climate change.

"Existential" has perhaps lost its literal meaning, as politicians in general and Democrats in particular cast many threats as existential ones even when existence is not on the line. In the debate, for example, Sen. Cory Booker described the closing of two Planned Parenthood clinics in Ohio as an existential threat to abortion rights in America.

Syria

Joe Biden: "I would not have withdrawn the troops, and I would not have withdrawn the additional 1,000 troops that are in Iraq, which are in retreat now, being fired on by Assad's people."

The facts: The former vice president is wrong. There is no evidence that any of the approximately 1,000 American troops preparing to evacuate from Syria have been fired on by Syrian government forces led by President Bashar Assad. A small



AP Photo/John Minchillo

Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., left, former Vice President Joe Biden, center, and Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., raise their hands to speak during a Democratic presidential primary debate hosted by CNN/New York Times at Otterbein University on Tuesday in Westerville, Ohio.

group of U.S. troops came under Turkish artillery fire near the town of Kobani last week, without anyone being injured, but there is no indication that Syrian troops have shot at withdrawing Americans.

Also, Biden was addressing the situation in Syria, not Iraq.

Gun control

Pete Buttigieg: "On guns, we are this close to an assault weapons ban. That would be huge."

Amy Klobuchar: "I just keep thinking of how close we are to finally getting something done on this."

The facts: No, the U.S. is not close to enacting an assault-weapons ban, as Buttigieg claimed, nor close on any significant gun control, as Klobuchar had it. Congress is not on the verge

of such legislation. Prospects for an assault-weapons ban, in particular, are bound to remain slim until the next election at least.

Legislation under discussion in the Senate would expand background checks for gun sales, a politically popular idea even with gun owners. But even that bill has stalled because of opposition from the National Rifle Association and on-again, off-again support from Trump. Democrats and some Republicans in Congress say they will continue to push for the background checks bill, but movement appears unlikely during an impeachment inquiry and general dysfunction in Congress. And Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has made it clear he won't move forward on gun legislation without Trump's strong support.

Buttigieg was citing the chance for an assault-weapons ban as a reason for not supporting the more radical proposal by Democratic presidential rival Beto O'Rourke to force gun owners to give up AR-15s and other assault-style weapons. Klobuchar spoke in a similar context.

Jobs

Elizabeth Warren: "The data show that we've had a lot of problems with losing jobs, but the principal reason has been bad trade policy. The principal reason has been a bunch of corporations, giant multinational corporations who've been calling the shots on trade."

The facts: Economists mostly blame those job losses on automation and robots, not trade deals. So the Massachusetts senator is off.

Let's start by acknowledging that the U.S. economy has been adding jobs, just that the nature of those jobs has changed as factory work and other occupations have become less prevalent.

Trade with China has contributed to shuttered factories and the loss of roughly 2 million jobs, according to research published in 2014. But the primary culprit that accounted for 88% of factory job losses between 2000 and 2010 was automation, according to researchers at Ball State University.

Job figures show that the outbreak of the Great Reces-

sion in late 2007 also contributed to manufacturing's decline.

Warren is basing her claim that trade policy mattered more than automation on research from the Upjohn Institute that suggests relatively modest productivity gains in manufacturing outside of the computer and electronics sectors, a sign to those researchers that trade policy mattered more for job losses.

But there is also a bigger threat from automation for workers outside factories. These are secretaries, bookkeepers and a wide array of professions. Automation can displace these workers and put downward pressure on their wages, forcing them to find other jobs.

Health care

Warren: Buttigieg's Medicare buy-in option is "Medicare for all who can afford it."

The facts: Warren ignored the fact that Buttigieg would provide subsidies to help people pay premiums for the plan.

She was jabbing at Buttigieg's proposal to create an optional health insurance plan based on Medicare. Individual Americans could join it, even those covered by employer plans.

Buttigieg calls it "Medicare for all who want it."

His plan tracks with Biden's health care proposal. Biden would also provide subsidies for those who pick his "public option."

Trump dismisses U.S. stakes in Syria: 'Let them fight'

By ROBERT BURNS
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Washing his hands of America's presence in Syria, President Donald Trump declared Wednesday the U.S. has no stake in supporting the Kurdish fighters who died by the thousands as U.S. partners against Islamic State extremists.

Condemnation of his stance was quick and severe, not only from Democrats but from Republicans who have been staunch Trump supporters on virtually all issues.

The House, bitterly divided over the Trump impeachment inquiry, banded together for an overwhelming 354-60 denunciation of the U.S. troop withdrawal. Many lawmakers expressed worry that it may lead to revival of IS as well as Russian presence and influence in the area — in addition to slaughter of many Kurds.

At the White House, Trump said the U.S. has no business in the region — and not to worry about the Kurdish fighters.

"They know how to fight," he said. "And by the way, they're no angels."

Trump said he is fulfilling a campaign promise to bring U.S. troops home from "endless wars" in the Middle East — casting aside criticism that a sudden U.S. withdrawal from Syria not only betrays the Kurdish fighters but stains U.S. credibility around the world and opens an important region to Russia, which is moving in.

"We have a situation where Turkey is taking land from Syria. Syria's not happy about it. Let them work it out," Trump said. "They have a problem at a border. It's not our border. We shouldn't be losing lives over it."

Trump said he was sending Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Ankara to urge the Turks to halt their week-long offensive into northeastern Syria. But his remarks, first to reporters in the Oval Office and later at a news conference with his Italian counterpart, suggested he sees little at stake for America.

"Syria may have some help with Russia, and that's fine," he said. "They've got a lot of sand over there. So, there's a lot of sand that they can play with."

He added, "Let them fight their own wars."

More than once, Trump suggested the United States

has little at stake in the Middle East because it is geographically distant — a notion shared by some prior to Sept. 11, 2001, when al-Qaida militants used Afghanistan as a base from which to attack the U.S. That attack set off a series of armed conflicts, including in Iraq, that Trump considers a waste of American lives and treasure.

The current withdrawal is the worst decision of Trump's presidency, said South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, who meets often with the president and is one of his strongest and most important supporters in Congress.

"To those who think the Mideast doesn't matter to America, remember 9/11 — we had that same attitude

on 9/10/2001."

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky said he strongly disagreed with Trump and had told the president so. But he asked, "What tools do we have" to back up that disagreement?

Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., told reporters he didn't know what could be done to undo the harm he felt was resulting.

"There are some mistakes that are not easy to reverse. And there are some that are irreversible," said Rubio, who was a Trump rival for the GOP presidential nomination in 2016.

Turkish troops and Turkish-backed Syrian fighters launched their offensive

against Kurdish forces in northern Syria a week ago, two days after Trump suddenly announced he was withdrawing the U.S. from the area. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said he wants to create a 20-mile-deep "safe zone" in Syria.

Ankara has long argued the Kurdish fighters are

nothing more than an extension of the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, which has waged a guerrilla campaign inside Turkey since the 1980s and which Turkey, as well as the U.S. and European Union, designate as a terrorist organization.

Trump mischaracterized the progress made thus far

by the U.S. military in carrying out his instructions to withdraw all 1,000 troops in northeastern Syria. He referred to the approximately two dozen soldiers who evacuated from Turkey's initial attack zone last week, but cast that as meaning the U.S. has "largely" completed its pullout.

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