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A “Great Debate” Ingrate (Me)



By Marty Kaplan

It's surprising that 40 years passed between the Nixon-Kennedy debates in 1960, which won the largest viewing audience in television history until then, and the airing of the first season of *Survivor*, a monster hit that launched the “reality” boom that's dominated television ever since. Those presidential debates were arguably the first reality show. What took so long for television executives to figure out that there's gold in them thar unscripted hills?



We speak with reverence about the Nixon-Kennedy debates, as though judging their outcome by whose 5 o'clock shadow looked worse on TV doesn't amount to Exhibit A of our susceptibility to stagecraft. We love recalling Ronald Reagan's putting away the age issue with a gag (“I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience”), as though his getting off a good joke were enough to undo our complicity in his subsequent cluelessness about Iran-Contra. We delight in noting how Al Gore's sighing, George H.W. Bush's looking at his watch and Michael Dukakis' unwillingness to bite Bernie Shaw's head off because of a hypothetical about his wife Kitty being raped, could well have lost them the White House, as though deciding presidential elections on *American Idol* criteria weren't an indictment of the shallowness of the media-political complex.

Yet we keep on insisting that how a candidate does in a presidential debate is a useful surrogate for how he would do as president. What was there about George W. Bush's opposition to nation building in the

2000 debates that could have enabled us to anticipate his aggrandizing freedom-on-the-march agenda? What was it in Dick Cheney's performance during the debates that could have prefigured the most arrogant flouting of the Constitution in the history of the Republic? For that matter, what was it that Bill Clinton said to Bob Dole in 1996 that might have forewarned us of the indiscipline and heartache to follow? Only hindsight makes any of those encounters illuminating.

As an inveterate goo-goo, I know I should be encouraged by the new proposal from the Commission on Presidential Debates: to junk the 30-second timers and to give the candidates eight 10-minute segments to discuss single topics that are lobbed in by a moderator who then withdraws to the sidelines. But this strikes me as tinkering at the margins.

Candidates have an innate horror of going off message. That's why debate prep is a quadrennial growth industry in campaignland. Thick binders, with tabbed Qs & As on every conceivable topic, are already being assembled. Key phrases are being polled and focus-grouped. The most wounding attacks are being imagined and countered. Potentially embarrassing votes and quotes are being cataloged and repudiated. Jokes and one-liners are being contributed by advisers and gag-writers. Stand-ins for the opposition are being coached for rehearsal. Gimmicks and stunts are being compiled and considered: issuing a challenge to sign a no-new-taxes pledge, say, or to have your gums examined by a panel of independent periodontists.

Presidential debates are solemnly portrayed by the media as great learning opportunities for the public. But unless something goes very wrong, there is nothing substantive a candidate will say in a debate that he has never said before. We are conditioned by the press to expect spontaneity, candor, a bombshell, a Perry Mason ending. "Did you hear that? He's for the Arabs! He admitted it!" Or: "See? He's a just another Republican, in maverick's clothing." But what we actually get is political kabuki — scripted and choreographed down to the last gesture and gerund.

The early press reaction to the Commission on Presidential Debates' proposed format is a microcosm of what now counts for political analysis. At two of the three debates, candidates will sit together at a table. This, we are told in various media accounts, will have the effect of neutralizing the height advantage that Obama, at 6 foot 1, has over McCain, who is 5 foot 9.

I don't doubt that for some American voters, a candidate's height is a worthy proxy for his presidentiality. Nor do I doubt that for other Americans, race or age or rumors will determine whom they choose. I am also aware — though it depresses me deeply — that the outcome of the election will likely depend on those voters who reach Election Day still undecided. Apparently a two-year campaign will have offered these swing voters in swing states insufficient information on which to base a decision.

That the result of a presidential race may depend on the limbic systems of a million or so Americans is a feature, not a bug, of universal suffrage. What Thomas Jefferson and James Madison proposed as countervailing measures to combat the potential dangers of self-government were a thriving public education system, an ingenious mechanism of checks and balances and a robust Fourth Estate. Unfortunately, none of these systems for safeguarding democracy from ignorance and subversion is in

notably healthy shape today, which leaves us at the mercy of sound bites, canned quips and body language.

Instead of applauding genteel format tweaking, why don't we junk the Commission on Presidential Debates entirely? It was an outrage when, in 1986, the two political parties seized control of the debates from the League of Women Voters. Ever since, the candidates have signed Memoranda of Understanding under party auspices that virtually guarantee the twin hazards of civic piety and packaged zingers.

Rather than holding the debates in college auditoriums full of "soft supporters," why not broadcast one of them, say, from a crowded classroom in Dorsey High during lockdown and see which candidate can best connect with the future American workforce? Rather than pretending that questions like, "How can you do everything you promise and still balance the budget?" will get honest answers, why not ask the viewing audience to text in after each response whether they believed what they heard?

My first question for the candidates? "If you don't do something in your first 100 days that pisses off half the public, you'll be a lousy president who'll break the country's heart again. Energy, education, immigration, Iraq: nothing's got easy answers. Which of you has the balls to tell us some hard ones?" Well, maybe not "pisses off" and "balls." But you get the idea. And so should they.

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A version of this appears as my weekly column at www.jewishjournal.com.

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