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## Trump Wins First Debate



By Marty Kaplan



BRUCE BENNETT VIA GETTY IMAGES

Apparently pretty much everyone I know is a bed-wetter.

The term gained currency in politics in January 2010 when Obama's 2008 campaign manager, David Plouffe, in a *Washington Post* opinion piece titled "November doesn't need to be a nightmare for Democrats," gave this advice to his party: "*No bed-wetting.*" "Instead of fearing what may happen," he wrote, "let's fight like hell."

He could have gone with the blander, "*No hand-wringing,*" which wouldn't have risked offending enuresis sufferers. But "bed-wetting" got traction in the American political lexicon — even though, as it turned out, Republicans picked up 63 seats in the House that November and recaptured the majority, a nightmare that retroactively warranted plenty of dread about nocturnal incontinence.

Plouffe was back at it during this summer's Democratic Convention. "No bed-wetting," he tweeted. "Clinton will enter August with strong electoral college advantage." But that lead has since been blown, and now my in-box is positively leaking anxiety.

Tell me Trump won't win, my friends are emailing. It's a slow-motion train wreck, they're saying, and I feel helpless to stop it. Why is the media letting Trump get away with it? I wouldn't be so nervous if it weren't for Gary Johnson; if it weren't for millennial apathy, for alt-right propaganda, for Paul Ryan's cowardice; if it weren't for sexism, racism, infotainment, Idiocracy, plutocracy, Citizens United, voter suppression... Help!

Now comes the first debate, adding fresh impetus to stock up on mattress pads. Yet no matter what Clinton does, the Trump-wins-first-debate narrative has already been written:

- Trump and Clinton will share the same stage. He is not a normal candidate, or even a normal person. She is. No matter what happens during the debate, it is declared afterward that the one-on-one matchup has "normalized" Trump. So Trump wins.
- Because the bar for a successful Trump performance has been set so low, when Trump fails to threaten to punch Clinton, it is acclaimed as evidence of his presidential temperament and general election pivot. Trump wins.

- Trump will attack Clinton. Clinton will defend herself. The verdict: Trump was strong; Clinton was on the defensive. But people want strength. Trump wins.
- The moderator, NBC's Lester Holt, will call Trump on a lie. Trump will heap scorn on Holt, NBC, MSNBC, the Commission on Presidential Debates and the corrupt, dishonest media. Gallup says public trust in the media is now at an all-time low. People will love Trump's attack on Holt. Trump wins.
- Clinton will nail Trump for lying. He'll lie so much, she won't be able to keep up with him. Fact-checkers will say, after the fact, that his pants were on fire, but it won't matter. The debate will be scored for entertainment value, not truth-value. Clinton's zingers will be called scripted. Trump's taunts will be so uncivil, so beyond the political pale, so viciously funny, he will be crowned the change candidate in a change election year. Trump wins.
- Trump and Clinton will go after each other so relentlessly that the debate will be called a draw. But the Beltway consensus is that Clinton needs to win; Trump just needs to tie. So a tie is a win. Trump wins.

Even if Clinton wipes the floor with Trump, the media's inherent bias is for suspense. The media business model requires capturing and keeping the audience's attention, so corporations can sell our eyeballs to advertisers. It doesn't matter how the debates go, or what the polls say; the press will portray the final stretch of this horserace as neck and neck, a photo finish, you won't want to miss this, stay tuned.

Four years ago, I predicted that Romney would win the first debate. For this clairvoyance, a colleague dubbed me "a Jewish prophet." I wish I could take credit for knowing that Obama would grudgingly phone in his performance, but all I did was deduce what good storytelling required the first debate and its aftermath to be: a rout, followed by a comeback. Trump's campaign has signaled that he's doing minimal prep for the debate. Maybe this is garden-variety expectation lowering, but even if he bombs, no media narrative will cover the last six weeks of the campaign as anything but a nail-biter.

If worrying that Trump can win this election makes me a bed-wetter, too, I cop to it. What could turn the race around? It'd help if the press didn't make the same mistake over and over. Last Friday, when Trump conned the networks into turning what was billed as a press conference about Obama's birthplace into a half-hour live broadcast of veterans' testimonials for Trump and an infomercial for his new hotel, CNN's John King admitted on air, "We got played again by the Trump campaign, which is what they do." No doubt Trump's base loved that humiliation. But will the press ever learn? By the time the media figures out that its addiction to BREAKING NEWS is a standing invitation to be punked, the guy who's gaming them may be sitting in the Oval Office.

I do see signs that Trump's press bullying is losing octane. The *Los Angeles Times'* lead story out of that birther event was headlined, "Trump trades one falsehood for two more," and the *New York Times* led with "Trump Gives Up a Lie But Refuses to Repent." If cable news covers the debates that unflinchingly, maybe Bed Bath & Beyond can let its inventory of waterproof bedding dwindle.

*This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you'd like at [martyk@jewishjournal.com](mailto:martyk@jewishjournal.com).*

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