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## Does Iraq Need More Debate?

**We've had plenty of shouting matches on the war; what we need are better leaders and more capable media.**

By Martin Kaplan

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EVERYONE SAYS WE need a national debate on Iraq. Left, right, politicians, pundits, editorial writers, academics. If ever there was a universally held position, it's the belief that holding a national debate on Iraq is just the thing for what ails us in the Middle East.

Rep. Walter Jones (R-N.C.), who coined the term "freedom fries," has called for it. So has Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), repeatedly. Conservative columnist William Rusher believes "the stage is set for a national debate." Liberal evangelical Jim Wallis thinks that what we really need is a "new national debate on Iraq." The only one not joining the parade seems to be President Bush, but that may just be because his Iraq "listening tour" has caused a scheduling conflict.

It's not just Iraq. From healthcare to education, immigration to entitlements, there's hardly an issue on the national radar screen that hasn't been nominated for a cleansing and clarifying national debate.

But what would a national debate on anything really look like? How would it be any different from what we're already doing now? Imagine the elements of a national debate on Iraq, and then ask whether what's going on today fits the bill.

Analysts offering opposing views on television shows? Check. Dueling Op-Ed pieces? Check. Senators and representatives making floor speeches? Check. Presidential candidates staking out positions, and critics taking them on? Check. Magazines and journals offering thoughtful, conflicting takes? Check. A take-no-prisoners brawl in the blogosphere? Check. Public opinion polls? You can't go to the restroom without tripping over a new one. Thousands of people in the streets? Well, it's not like the Vietnam era — without a draft, it won't ever be — but plenty of cities have seen plenty of passionate marchers.

So why, despite all appearances of actually having a national debate right now, do people keep insisting that we mount one?

Perhaps it's because the mainstream media are too timid to declare the difference between right

and wrong. Imagine if journalism consisted of more than a collage of conflicting talking points. Imagine the difference it would make if more brand-name reporters broke from the bizarre straitjacket of "balance," which equates fairness with putting all disputants on equal epistemological footing, no matter how deceitful or moronic they may be.

There's a market for news that weighs counterclaims and assesses truth value. It just hasn't kept up with demand. No wonder Jon Stewart has such a loyal audience: He has a point of view, and it's rooted in the reality-based — not the ideology-based — world.

Anyone who's watched a presidential debate knows how useless they are for deciding our country's direction. The coming presidential primary season, which will stretch for more than a year, will be the scene of multi-candidate cattle calls in which entrants will moo canned messages, spring scripted attacks, ignore interlocutors' questions and declare inevitable victories.

The debates are also useless for finding common ground. There are no points to be scored with nuance. We're a nation of 300 million, which means there's one political party for every 150 million points of view. Politicians behave the way they do for a reason: Wedge issues work. Bipartisan consensus is a mug's game. The base is what counts. Swing votes win elections. Food fights win ratings.

Presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich has been calling for a series of Lincoln-Douglas debates across the nation. I'd like that. I'd also like a pony, an end to racism, a cure for cancer and a date with Scarlett Johansson. The actual Lincoln-Douglas debates drew huge crowds and galvanized public attention; Newt's would make C-SPAN, and maybe Fox, but most people would get them in 12-second snippets. Besides, it's tough to imagine Newt and his opponent (John McCain?) actually coming up with anything that they haven't broadcast in the news-and-gasbag venues to which they already enjoy full access.

Maybe we don't need a national debate. Maybe what we really need are leaders with more character, followers with more discrimination, deciders who hear as well as listen and media that know the difference between the public interest and what the public is interested in. National debates nicely fulfill the circus part of the bread-and-circuses formula of modern public life. Like psychoanalysis, national debates are basically interminable. And in our postmodern era, they do a nice job substituting for the hard work of actually figuring out what's true and what's good.

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