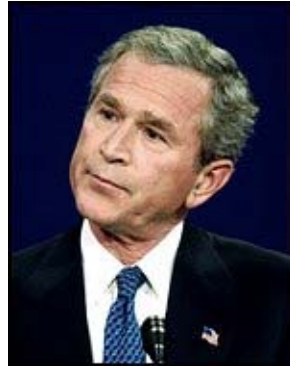


# Reaction Shots May Tell Tale of Debate

Bush's Scowls Compared to Gore's Sighs



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ALLENTOWN, Pa., Oct. 1 -- As Democratic nominee John F. Kerry criticized President Bush in Thursday night's presidential debate, Bush scowled, squinted, clenched his jaw and appeared disgusted as he hunched over his lectern -- images that were beamed into millions of American homes.

The episode was reminiscent of the first debate of the 2000 presidential campaign, when Al Gore's loud and pained sighs made the Democrat appear contemptuous and condescending, turning what could have been a victory into a political debacle for him. On Thursday night, it was Bush's aggravated demeanor that contributed to the impression that Kerry won the debate.

Body language can be more descriptive than actual language in presidential debates. No line from the 1960 debate was as memorable as Richard M. Nixon's perspiration. And President George H.W. Bush's glance at his wristwatch during the 1992 debate has endured beyond that night's words.

For the current president, the performance could be particularly damaging, because part of his advantage over Kerry is voters' perception that he is likable while Kerry lacks the common touch. Democrats on Friday moved quickly to maximize the damage. The Democratic National Committee posted on the Web a video titled "Faces of Frustration," showing Bush in various stages of consternation as he listened to Kerry. "He was defensive, annoyed, arrogant, even angry, and showed it," said DNC Chairman Terence R. McAuliffe.

Kerry spokesman Chad Clanton made the Gore comparison explicit. "If the sighs were what we remember from the 2000 debates, George Bush's smirk is what will be remembered this time," he said.

Ken Mehlman, Bush's campaign manager, dismissed the comparison. "I don't think that dog's going to hunt," Mehlman said here, noting that while Gore's sigh was not just a sigh

because it reflected that candidate's haughty reputation, Bush enjoys a sunnier image. "President Bush is a very optimistic guy," Mehlman said. "The reaction to the scowl in the media is not what we're getting from the American people."

Still, Bush aides acknowledged privately that that the candidate seemed imperious during the debate, and even Bush-friendly publications joined in the criticism. "Bush, throughout the evening, as Kerry spoke, had that pursed and annoyed look," Jay Nordlinger wrote for National Review Online. "I think it must have driven many people crazy."

Local coverage in battleground states such as Florida also dwelled on the presidential petulance. Kerry "looked mostly comfortable," the Orlando Sentinel reported, while "Bush, in cutaway shots as Kerry spoke, clenched his jaw several times."

Bush has flashed such expressions -- and worse -- at reporters when they ask him hostile questions. But the public has generally not seen the president's more petulant side, in part because he is rarely challenged in a public venue. He has held fewer news conferences than any modern predecessor, Congress is in his party's control, and he has a famously loyal staff. In rare instances when Bush has been vigorously challenged -- most recently in interviews with an Irish television journalist and a French magazine -- he has reacted with similar indignation.

As questions continued about Bush's demeanor on Thursday night, his aides have changed their explanation of it. On Thursday night, adviser Karen Hughes said: "On his face, you could see his irritation at the senator's misrepresentations." But by Friday morning, Mehlman said: "I don't know that he was irritated."

As with Gore's sighs, Bush's scowls were at first overlooked by many of the people covering the event. In the press room at the debate site at the University of Miami, the direct television feed of the debate did not have the telltale split screens and reaction shots that most Americans saw at home. Bush may have been so expressive in part because he thought the debate rules disallowed such reaction shots -- although the Bush campaign knew such rules would not be enforced.

At informal appearances, Bush's squint and slouch over the lectern can effectively convey Texas confidence, said Sonya Hamlin, a consultant on how body language affects communication. But in the formal setting of a presidential debate, it made him appear smaller and less commanding compared with a tall opponent who is standing straight up, she said. And his facial expressions conveyed insecurity, she said, raising the question "When things get tough, is this what he does?"

In debates, Henson said, "You don't get mad if someone disagrees with you."

*Staff writer John F. Harris in Washington contributed to this report.*