
October 9, 2004

The Town Hall Debate

Town hall meetings are one vestige of early American democracy that modern presidential candidates know very well. No one who has survived a New Hampshire primary season needs to be told what it's like to answer questions tossed out by a group of average citizens. It's the democratic process in its most amiable state: earnest Americans asking serious questions about the issues. Last night's format was much more suited to George Bush's talents than the hard-edged debate last week, but John Kerry still managed to goad him to irritable near-shouting at some points.

One of the uncommitted voters in the audience sensibly asked President Bush to name three mistakes he'd made in office, and what he had done to remedy the damage. Mr. Bush declined to list even one, and instead launched into an impassioned defense of the invasion of Iraq as a good idea. The president's insistence on defending his decision to go into Iraq seemed increasingly bizarre in a week when his own investigators reported that there were no weapons of mass destruction there, and when his own secretary of defense acknowledged that there was no serious evidence of a connection between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda.

Even worse, the president's refusal to come up with even a minor error - apart from saying that he might have made some unspecified appointments that he now regretted - underscores his inability to respond to failure in any way except by insisting over and over again that his original decision was right.

Unfortunately, for long stretches of the evening, the format did not lead to such telling responses. On occasion, the arguments were impossible to follow. Heaven help any citizen who relied on last night's debate to understand what is going on with North Korea or who tried to understand the fight about tax cuts on Subchapter S corporations.

Mr. Bush was deeply unpersuasive when asked why he had not permitted the importation of cheaper prescription drugs from Canada. He claimed that the reason was "I want to make sure it cures you and doesn't kill you." Mr. Kerry cleanly retorted that four years ago in a campaign debate, Mr. Bush had said importing medicine from Canada sounded sensible.

And the president was utterly incoherent when asked about whom he might name to the Supreme Court in a second term. His comment about how he didn't want to offend any judges because he wanted "them all voting for me" was a joke - but an unfortunate one, given the fact that the president owes his job to a Supreme Court vote.

Mr. Kerry was weaker when he had to respond to a woman who wanted to know about spending federal money on abortions. Social issues seem to bring out the senator's worst tendencies to paint a word picture in shades of gray and equivocation.

Both men seemed overly defensive at times, as if they were fighting shadow opponents that were not even in the hall. Mr. Kerry seemed intent, without much prompting by Mr. Bush, on countering the attack ads run by the president's campaign and by other Republican organizations. Mr. Bush sometimes seemed as if he was trying to make up for his weak performance in Debate No. 1.

Mr. Kerry demonstrated, at the very minimum, a stature that was equal to the president's. If Mr. Bush was hoping to recover all the ground he lost last week, he failed in his mission.

The president seemed to fall back frequently on name-calling, denouncing his opponent as a liberal and a tool of the trial lawyers. "The president's just trying to scare," Mr. Kerry said. It will be another few weeks before we see how well that works.

