

Shrinking from the Debate

A recent episode of the HBO program "The Newsroom" featured an exposé of the lame presidential debate procedure we have accepted in America. The producer of the series, Aaron Sorkin, set up a confrontation between some Republican flunkies and the noble newsroom folks who wanted to change the debate format. Sorkin, a committed leftist, used the scenario to mock the GOP primary contenders, but the point is valid: the debates are largely a sham.

First of all, the candidates don't have to answer the questions posed, and often fly off into rehearsed bloviating that is as boring as it is offensive. The debate moderators rarely interrupt the bilge so the politicians are free to say whatever they want, basically unchallenged. Any interruption would be considered "rude." Yes, there is a follow-up question but it is rarely, "is it me, or did you just completely ignore the question I asked you?"

Instead of saying, "you have 60 seconds to answer the question," the moderator should be honest and state: "you have a minute to dodge what was asked and talk about anything you want."

This year, Jim Lehrer, Bob Schieffer, and Candy Crowley will moderate the three presidential debates. All are veteran hard news people who know their stuff. All are also polite establishment journalists who well understand that they can ask whatever they want but will rarely get a direct answer. All seem fine with that.

The third debate will be the most excruciating because it will be "Town Hall" style. That means that some regular citizens will get to ask some questions and stand there while Obama and Romney dodge them.

The candidates prep for the debates by having a series of

likely questions thrown at them by surrogates and then memorizing scripted retorts. They pay consultants big money to advise them on the debates but, really, fifth graders could do it. The president knows he'll be hit with statistics that indicate he has badly mismanaged the economy. Governor Romney knows he'll be asked things about being a rich guy who wants to decimate entitlements for working Americans so that Donald Trump can buy another golf course. These guys know what's coming and should one of the moderators actually surprise them with a query that is not expected, they'll fall back on how they love America and reality TV or something.

The face-to-face confrontations are also largely bogus although here there is at least some drama. Only two presidential contenders really benefited from debating: John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan. Kennedy looked vibrant standing across from Richard Nixon who appeared to be auditioning for a role in "The Night of the Living Dead." Reagan looked powerful next to Jimmy Carter and openly mocked him for being weak and incompetent, which he was. Once voters got a look at Reagan and his confident pro-American demeanor, it was back to the peanut farm for Jimmy.

By the way, Carter also won the presidency largely because of a debate, but it was nothing he did. Incredibly, President Gerald Ford told the world that Poland was a free country – which sent the Soviet leadership into spasms of laughter. Ford did that because he was so over-rehearsed he completely lost his thought process.

So, don't expect much substance from the debates this October, because it will not be there. It is conceivable that Obama and Romney could go after each other personally, which would at least be entertaining. I'm not expecting that but, hey, if one guy is down in the polls big he'll have to go for the jugular. But if that were to happen, expect the moderators to break tradition and interrupt. Enough is enough; honest emotion simply will not be tolerated.