

They Do It Much Better In High School (Debating)

By Bob Banov and Roger Ohlsen
October 30, 2012

In 1858, when the Lincoln Douglas debates for the Senate in Illinois were held, the format was simple and strict. One candidate, Douglas, the incumbent, spoke first for 60 minutes, then Lincoln spoke for 90, and Douglas got a 30 minute "rejoinder."

The subject was slavery and both men put real substance in their presentations. There were no outside questions, and their discourses were way lengthier than audiences' attention spans would tolerate today. They were not meant to be entertaining and would never have been "tweetable" enough to attract millions of viewers to their 40 inch plasma screens.

Being substantive and factual is what makes for good debating. But since the PDC (Presidential Debate Commission) began planning America's all important debates in the sixties, debate templates have undergone real changes in form, and in particular, validity.

Consider that since the fifties, we have become the most over-stimulated, entertainment-minded society in history, not to mention the most propagandized, where it comes to politics.

When Groucho Marx said, "Those are my principles, and if you don't like them ...well I have others" was he foreshadowing Romnesia? We live in an era where, like it or not, we've seen so many flip-flops in principles. In this information age, we're bombarded with disinformation.

Planned debates where the winner must present facts and drop their propaganda must become the norm. It is the norm in high school. If that cannot happen, then when a candidate is sincere, his assertions inevitably get clouded by the lies of his competitor. And at the same time, political correctness is expected in the face of the most outrageous assertions. Shouting just isn't cool on national TV.

In lieu of this lack of respect for the American people, Noam Chomsky appears correct when he writes, "The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum." Sadly, that seems to be the way it is today.

Some Demands To The PDC

Why not take Lawrence O'Donnell and Ariana Huffington seriously when they speak to the need for fact-checkers during debates. (Perhaps high school searching whizzes with T-One line speed.) And if debates cover a great many highly complex topics, why not allow presidential candidates to bring a staffer who must hand them statistics when they need them. Ask a question then break for a commercial if need be, so a candidate must get his or her facts straight before making his pitch.

Have some respect for the public. Many know a lot more about what goes on than a sizable proportion of politicians and political handlers imagine. And they don't always get lost in whatever the current media narrative is.

If the purpose of a debate is to air a subject and win an argument, then no one can win these days, whatever office they're running for. Because there is no way to substantiate what the facts are in an even-handed democratic way for the public. In fact, we might even ask if the responsibilities of being president are somehow debatable today, listening to Romney.

If they are not, then what we need to learn about the candidates for the most important office, the leader of the Free World, whose policies will affect everyone's lives every day, requires discussion today's watered debates cannot support.

Does the PDC sincerely believe that in a nation of this size, where the voting percentage is smaller than you'd ever expect, that the stuff we hear during debates is intelligent and sufficient. Eighteen year old first-time voters are quick.

We might ask if it matters to the PDC and whoever appoints them why we have no voice in all this. Because when a candidate wins a debate in 2012, really he has won a personality contest or the equivalent of a verbal wrestling match.

Maybe for those of us who are really adults, it goes back to the fact that in high school they were offering ideals to our young minds, and to win a high school debate, truth always would triumph over any form of propaganda or lie. Certainly, we had to completely respect the debate moderator. Perhaps he or she should hit the “off” button on the mike after the two minutes is up. Everyone knows that fact-checking after the debate will prove all the errors.

High school debates are won with truth today, which means you have got to stay straight until you're a grown-up, and you're not encouraged to compromise your values.

Nothing ever gets settled in this town, a seething debating society in which the debate never stops, in which people never give up, including me. And so that's the atmosphere in which you administer.

- George P. Shultz

Final Word

Our leaders need to agree on the facts in order to find solutions. There can be no argument there.

No Labels Dot Org has a no nonsense solution: all members of Congress and the president get a nonpartisan report on the fiscal facts once a year -- and sign on their support. You can [click here](#) to add your support.