

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



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WHICH DEBATE DID YOU WATCH?

While not nearly as historic - or quotable - as the seven Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, this past Tuesday night's Democratic presidential gathering certainly had its moments. It contained a maximum of issues and civility, and a minimum of *ad hominem*;



a lot of vitality and heart, and little vituperation. To my way of thinking, the evening's debate - while likely lasting an hour longer than necessary, nonetheless delivered a clear message: to wit, "*Hey America, we're Democrats; and while you may not agree with any or all of our ideas or proposals, we hope it was obvious to you that none of us are crazy.*"

After months of watching more than a dozen Republican presidential hopefuls pander to what the Huffington Post's Richard Brodsky referred to as "*the wall-building, government-shutdown, destroy Planned Parenthood, investigate Benghazi and emails, fire Boehner, climate change denying, gun-toting, repeal Obamacare and gay marriage crowd,*" Tuesday's Democratic confab was a lungful of intelligent fresh air. And unlike the Republican field, the five Democratic contenders are all distinct personalities: Bernie Sanders, reminiscent of the rumpled uncle who cares deeply, and Lincoln Chafee, who possesses the kind of blue-blooded eccentricity rarely seen in public any more. Jim Webb, the only veteran currently running for nomination - on either side of the aisle - carried himself like the highly decorated marine officer he was,

and Martin O'Malley, who, despite being the only one on stage who has never held a federal, office came across as the most political of the lot - which in today's atmosphere has its plusses and minuses. And then there was Secretary Clinton: bright, quick, assured and possessing one of the best, most spontaneous laughs in American public life. Whether or not she - or Senator Sanders - "won" the debate is both difficult to access and not terribly important. After all, this wasn't a true ["Lincoln Douglas Debate"](#) format which classically places heavy emphasis on logic, ethical values, and philosophy, and is scored in such a manner as to be obvious who won and who did not. No, the true "winner" in this past Tuesday's debate, was the American electorate, who got a chance to meet several sane adults seeking our vote. No put-downs, few barbs and little preening.



The five debated and discussed issues ranging from economic inequality and climate change to war, healthcare and the N.R.A. And although there were disagreements over policies, procedures and priorities, and questions about how consistent (or politically expedient) their positions might be, they were all handled with a maximum of maturity and civility. Yes, there was that chuckle-headed comment from former Rhode Island Governor Lincoln Chafee about his first vote in the Senate, and former Virginia Senator Jim Webb's sophomoric complaint about not getting enough airtime. But these were by no means central to how the debate was reported in the mainstream media.

In sampling a plethora of post-debate wrap-ups and commentary on Twitter, Facebook, cable and talk radio, I discovered that not everyone was watching or listening to the same debate as I. No, for many, the debate was "a farce," "a bunch of Socialist, America-hating, abortion-loving hippies" who didn't address any issues of importance. One conservative talk-radio host, doing a not terribly convincing imitation of Bernie Sanders, had him say that when he's elected President, he will replace the American Eagle with the Hammer and Sickle. Unbelievably, the host, who at no time told his listening audience that it was he - and not the senator - making that statement - started receiving calls from listeners demanding Sanders' arrest and imprisonment! Then there was the talk-show host who edited 3 statements made by Secretary Clinton, bleeping out the word "given," after the word "God," thereby making it sound like she was taking the Lord's name in vane:

As an example, " . . . making it possible for every child to live up to his or her god given potential" became " . . . making it possible for every child to live up to his or her god BLEEP potential."

Another thread of commentary asserted that Senator Sanders having spent time on an Israeli *kibbutz* after his graduation from the University of Chicago more than a half-century ago, proved two things:



1. That he has always been a dangerous Socialist, and that
2. He hates Israel.

Although the second statement is both illogical and counter-intuitive, it didn't seem to bother all those tweeting their agreement.

At one point, when Sanders and Webb were going back-and-forth about Veterans' issues (which most conservative commentators claimed was never brought up even once during the entire three hours), Sanders - who served as chair of the Senate Veterans' Committee, said: *"When I was a young man . . . I strongly opposed the war in Vietnam. Not the brave men like Jim who fought in that war, but the policy which got us involved in that war. . ."* One radio host blasted Sanders for lying, hotly claiming that *" . . . Sanders was one of those long-haired hippies who spit on veterans when they returned home from Vietnam."* Unbelievably, he then asked his listeners to find video proof of his claim . . .

In comparing this "debate" to those recently held by the Republicans, it becomes abundantly clear that there are profound differences between the parties and the issues they choose to highlight. Candidates Bush, Carson, Rubio, Paul, Christie, Fiorina, Huckabee *et al* continually attack one another in an attempt to show the party's base that they are most closely aligned with God, guns and lower taxes, and most capable of standing up against gays, liberals and other assorted immoralists. Eventually, of course, whoever becomes their nominee will have to pivot towards the sensible center - a difficult task for anyone who has anchored her- or himself into the hard cement of the far right. In their rush to secure a nomination they may one day well regret, these Republicans have offered monosyllabic solutions to polysyllabic problems.

The Democrats, on the other hand - while far from perfect and certainly not possessing all the answers - at least offer a vision and a platform that is far more positive than negative; more sensible than Sinaitic.

The differences between the parties - and their base supporters - reveal a divide; not just in American politics but in a rapidly changing America itself. It is a divide between those who seek to conquer a challenging future and those who deify a mythic past.

The debate *I* watched carried the message "*We're Democrats: We are neither perfect nor have all the answers, but we are certainly not crazy. And if we can work together, there is nothing we cannot accomplish.*"

So tell me: which debate did you watch this past Tuesday . . . ?

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