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A Civil Debate in a Nasty Campaign

by Rushworth M. Kidder

By most accounts, it's been a negative presidential campaign, full of low-road ads and biting attacks. So when last Thursday's presidential debate gave us a glimpse of civility, it came as a welcome surprise. For a brief, radiant moment toward the end of the debate, President Bush and Senator Kerry laughed with, rather than at, each other. Oddly enough, the moment came as a result of a question about character that both men deliberately ducked.

Moderator Jim Lehrer set up the exchange by asking the president whether there were "underlying character issues that you believe . . . are serious enough to deny Senator Kerry" the presidency.

"Whew!" said the president. "That's a loaded question." Then, using the word "admire" five times, he set the tone for the ensuing moments by speaking of his respect for the senator. To be sure, Bush returned quickly enough to his fundamental differences with his opponent, but not before he mentioned how much he appreciated "the fact that his daughters have been so kind to my daughters."

Kerry returned the compliment. "I appreciate enormously the personal comments the president just made," he said with evident feeling. He then engaged in some banter about their daughters that led to chuckles on both sides. He also noted his "great respect and admiration" for Laura Bush, whom he called "a terrific person and a great first lady." And while he, too, went on to enumerate specific differences, he prefaced them by saying, "I'm not going to talk about a difference of character. I don't think that's my job or my business."

Doesn't character matter? Of course it does. But the invitation to consider it doesn't have to be phrased in the negative. The brief cordiality between the candidates reminds us of the best of U.S. politics. Fierce partisans can strongly criticize the positions of their opponents on some issues, and then work harmoniously with them on other topics. It's a comity that legislators from other countries sometimes find intriguing and baffling. Driven by affiliations to parties far more distinct from one another than are U.S. Democrats and Republicans, those legislators can more easily blur the difference between an *adversary* and an *enemy*.

Unfortunately, that blurring has infected the current campaign, where strident polarities seem the order of the day. Yet voters of all stripes continue to express their distaste for negative, attack-oriented campaigning. In the late 1990s, when the Institute did some polling on campaign ethics under a program funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, we heard the public telling us four things about attack-oriented campaigning:

- It is unethical.
- Those who get elected that way tend to become unethical public servants.
- It deters good people from running for office.
- It drives voters away from the polls.

With voter registrations soaring -- after paper-thin margins in 2000 made clear the importance of a single vote -- that last point may not hold this year. Otherwise, I suspect those attitudes remain

in force today. Yet the candidates seem unable to rise above the negativity of their own campaigns. Slipping helplessly into attack mode, each characterizes the other in terms so sweeping as to invite inaccuracy -- Kerry describing Bush as deceptive, and Bush hammering Kerry as indecisive. While voters may be fascinated, they seem also repulsed. If there's one refrain I've heard in my travels around the country in recent weeks, it is that neither man is *really* fit for the job and that the choice is between the lesser of two evils.

And then came last week's debate. It wasn't catty, personal, or sensational. It gave serious attention to sobering issues. The tone on both sides was tough but respectful, critical but dignified. And while it wasn't a discussion of character, it exemplified the candidates' characters.

The electorate now faces a quandary: Which view of the candidates is closer to the truth? One, based on daily campaign rhetoric and nightly ads, roils up our repugnance and makes us wonder whether either side is ethical. The other, evidenced in the debate, features two men who, while coming from different ideologies and styles of communication, display respect, comity, and integrity.

If the first view holds sway on election day, the winner will have an uphill battle against public disgust, particularly among those who haven't bothered to vote. If the second view prevails, the public will expect a sudden shift to a tone of graciousness quite unlike that of the campaign. Either way, the winner will have to prove his integrity by working strenuously to overcome the ethical damage of the campaign.

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