

Disappointing Debate Showed a More Modest Trump

By Conrad Black

It was on balance a disappointing debate. The moderators were absurdly partisan, hounding President Trump with pettifogging questions while Vice President Harris's frequent whoppers were not questioned. Ms. Harris would have impressed those who had been conditioned to expect an endless series of banalities and word salads.



Viewers at the Angry Elephant Bar and Grill at San Antonio watch the Trump-Harris debate on September 10, 2024.
AP/Eric Gay

She was fluent but in the manner of a 19th-century elocution school student robotically repeating "C-A-T spells cat." To those

looking to find evidence that she is a moron, she would have created a reasonably strong impression that she was not. To those looking for the substantive answers to the questions raised, she was annoying and practically ignored every remotely difficult question and was allowed to escape by the indulgent moderators.

On the Trump side, he was somewhat more modest than usual but

unnecessarily repetitive: he must have repeated at least ten times that the world had emptied its jails and insane asylums and reduced crime rate by shipping undesirables illegally into America. The point had to be made powerfully but was made too often and reduced in its impact by Trumpian exaggeration.

Trump supporters are far from disconsolate, though. Ms. Harris completely failed to make anything out of the nonsense about Trump being a felon, completely failed in the standard Democratic effort to portray MAGA as a virtual précis of *Mein Kampf*, completely failed to portray Trump as a racist, and more important electorally, failed to portray him believably as a militant opponent of abortion. In all these respects, Trump came through without a glove being laid upon him.

Perhaps the most definitive single score of the night was right at the end when Trump effectively demanded to know why all of the joyful hopes that Ms. Harris expressed for a better future had eluded her and President Biden's ability to enact in the last 3 1/2 years. There was no knockout blow like President Ford declining to acknowledge that Poland was a Russian-dominated country in 1976, or President Reagan promising in 1984 not to use Vice President Mondale's youth and inexperience against him in rebutting concerns about Reagan's own age.

Trump won on the substantive issues: the economy was better when he was president, foreign affairs were in better condition, and he did practically seal the border other than to those who crossed it legally. While he was repetitive and prone to hyperbole, though not as chronically as has often been the case, he also won the argument on factual points.

Trump's recollections of the past when he was in office were substantially accurate and so was his description of the Biden-Harris record. To those seeking to find a plausible executive as a candidate to support, he would certainly have prevailed. To those seeking a likable and sympathetic

personality, Ms. Harris might have appeared somewhat more solicitous but almost as tiresome and schoolmarmish as Senator Warren and just as humorless. In terms of wit, Trump won easily and did actually say several things that were intentionally humorous.

At hard punching, Trump scored between five and ten knockout blows directed against Mr. Biden and only the vice president by implication though he did tidily add after his several references to Mr. Biden as the most incompetent president in history the assertion that she was also the most incompetent vice president. She made no attempt to defend Mr. Biden, who was savagely disparaged, or to distance herself from him.

The former president was quite consistent in associating his opponent with the incumbent president's policy and ideological shortcomings, and certainly won the contest to establish himself as the candidate of comparative change. It would be surprising if the polls jumped significantly in either direction, but on balance I think it is likely that the former president emerged as the probably more capable executive and while it is possible that the vice president might have appeared slightly more likable, but less substantial.

Trump did a little better calling her a Marxist than she did trying to represent him as a frightening monster. Trump was nothing like as sensitive as he often has been, but became a little bit entangled in defending matters that he could have simply risen above.

All polls on the issue show that the great majority of Americans believe the country is headed in the wrong direction. Trump emerged as the person more likely to put that right. He won on the border, crime, inflation, foreign affairs, and green arguments against him, like those on abortion, were not effectively made and had practically no impact.

There were no appalling indignities such as we saw in some of the Trump and Biden exchanges four years ago, and the protagonists were adequately polite to each other. It wasn't Lincoln and Douglas, or even Nixon and Kennedy, and was a bit of an anti-climax, that is unlikely to move the needle much.

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