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Debate #2: And the Winner Is...

Assessing the second presidential debate.

James S. Robbins

President George W. Bush's win Friday night has nothing to do with how many points the respective candidates scored. (Meaning: This isn't college debate.) It has to do with how he came across this time compared to last time. Last time he just wasn't there. This time he was loose, had command of the facts, and showed he could stand up to Kerry (who for his part came across as haughty and wooden).

Friday night Bush showed those who were unsettled that he was just having a bad night the last time. By not being beaten, he won big. Now the polls can reset to where they were (sizable Bush lead) which is the default in my opinion.

I could not believe the dour faces on the Fox News Channel after the debate — it was like they were watching another debate. People who want to support Bush needed him to give them a justification for their support. He had to come through for them. He did not do that the first debate, he did it very well Friday night.

Analysts can talk about the issues all they want but debates are about atmospherics, seeing how people perform under pressure. Bush did amazingly well tonight compared to last time. The first debate is dead now. Just like Reagan in 1984. And Kerry was no better than Mondale for that matter.

— *A national-security expert, [James S. Robbins](#) is an NRO contributor.*

Peter Robinson

Open your window, close your eyes, and listen. That soft, sweet murmuring you hear isn't the wind in the trees. It's tens of millions of Republicans sighing with relief.

On style, I'd score roughly the first 20 minutes for Kerry — Bush seemed too hot for the famously cool medium of television — the middle stretch a draw, and the final half hour or 40 minutes for Bush. Kerry wore badly. What seemed eloquent at first seemed, by the end, merely glib. But Bush settled down, found his voice, and scored again and again. Who would have thought that Bush, not Kerry, would offer the tightest, best-informed, and most compelling answer to a question on the environment? Or that it would be Bush, not Kerry, who would make an effective use of wit? When, after Kerry's rambling, tortured answer to

the question on abortion, Bush began his own answer with, "I'm still trying to decipher that," he provided a moment of which the Gipper himself would have been proud.

Even at his worst — and there were plenty of moments when he made me cringe — Bush displayed plainspokenness and conviction, contrasting his own stands with Kerry's endless triangulations. The president reassured his supporters, made his case in a way that enabled the uninformed or undecided to grasp where he stands, and displayed the signal virtue in a wartime leader, strength.

Dubya won.

— *Peter Robinson, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and host of Uncommon Knowledge, is author of How Ronald Reagan Changed My Life.*

Peter Schramm

It strikes me that Friday night's was a very good debate. Much better than the first. The format had much to do with it, but Bush's thoughtful and articulate answers were, frankly, excellent. He was game and he did his homework and it showed. He was clearly thinking out loud, not just repeating well used lines. And he was amusing. Kerry, on the other hand, was repetitious, and was prepared to say what he was going to say regardless of the question asked. I don't think that he said anything I hadn't heard him say before. If this is his best stride, he has been outwalked. His consistent questioning of Bush's motives and saying that Bush is "not living in a world of reality" will, in the end, not be enough. Bush seemed to me to be clear, even about the most delicate questions (e.g., abortion and stem cell research), while Kerry stayed vague and a bit muddy. He is a president who understands that he is responsible for his actions. Bush was able to make clear, at almost every point, the differences between him and Kerry. Bush claimed Kerry is a liberal, not only a flip-flopper. This will be useful to Bush. I thought the questions were pretty good, by the way, that's why we should trust the people more than we do the elite journalists. The time flew. Good debate. It will be to Bush's advantage.

— *Peter W. Schramm is the executive director of the John M. Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs and a professor of political science at Ashland University.*

T. J. Walker

The good news for George Bush is that he wins the most-improved award since Reagan's transformation from the 1st to the 2nd 1984 debates. Getting Bush away from the lectern and moving around a stage played to many of his natural strengths as a communicator. Gone were the grimaces, puckering, leaning on a lectern, and general signs of disdain. Bush moved his head, his body, his legs, and hands in a fluid manner that suggested he was comfortable, confident, and

commanding. Overall, Bush seemed less flummoxed by questions, less unsure of specifics to questions. And yet he still hit message points without seeming as ham-fistedly repetitive as in the first debate. Clearly, Bush partisans did not feel let down after watching his performance.

The bad news for Bush is that Kerry also significantly improved his debate performance. The senator was consistently aggressive in forcefully attacking the president at every turn. (I was among the minority of analysts who thought Kerry did *not* win the first debate because I believed he was too defensive) Whereas Kerry was defensive about being a "flip flopper" in the first debate, in this meeting he spend 90 percent of his time attacking, yet he did so with more grace and likeability than he has ever displayed before. I kept expecting the old Kerry who used pompous, sanctimonious, and over-inflated rhetoric to appear in Friday night's debate. He only made one lapse when he started an answer with the wind-baggy "Let me begin by saying..." (This is a time-wasting phrase design to make one look pompous).

Additionally, Kerry looked respectful and attentive, and moved with grace and confidence. He truly seemed to listen to questioners and then used their names, even tying back relevant questions to previous questioners.

A close decision, but Kerry won the debate on both style and substance points.

— *T. J. Walker is the president of Media Training Worldwide.*