

DAILY EXPRESS

## Beyond Debate

by Ryan Lizza

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Confidence is always one of the best clues for sniffing out which side really believes its own spin. And in Spin Alley last night one could detect a confidence gap. Spin Alley is the place you see on TV after the debates where candidates' spokesmen and reporters engage in the bizarre ritual of exchanging notes about the debate. The most important officials in both campaigns wander the room with assistants holding signs high above the crowd announcing their names. Rock star surrogates have huge scrums of reporters around them jousting for position. John McCain and his entourage walk through the room like a small tornado, displacing cameras crews and minor league surrogates all around him and also adding new reporters to his orbit. His scrum knocks me into Ed Gillespie. Other surrogates wander the room in lonely circles without attracting any questions from reporters. The sign-carrier for Kerry's old Swift Boat crewmate, Del Sandusky, who walks around un-interviewed, asks, "Where do we go now?" "Let's do another loop," he suggests.

Reporters want to talk to the brand-name spinners. The first inkling that the Bushies know their man didn't do so well comes minutes after the debate ends when Karl Rove walks into the press filing center. Like a game of telephone, the conventional wisdom that Kerry won the debate is already seeping out across the sea of journalists in the room. Into this skeptical ether, Rove tries out a line: "It was one of the president's better debate performances and one of Kerry's worst." Vince Morris of *The New York Post* stares at Rove and asks, "Can you say that with a straight face?"

In Spin Alley last night, a weird dynamic takes place. Both sides start on almost equal footing, but as everyone shares note and impressions about Kerry's "control" or Bush's weird facial ticks, as the first wave of instant polls overwhelmingly crowning Kerry the winner roll in, as the pro-Kerry punditry on cable gets passed around, things shift. Kerry's surrogates start to seem more caffeinated and giddy, while Bush's sound defensive. "Sometimes you don't have to spin and this is one of them," says Mike McCurry. Tad Devine, who lived through Al Gore's disastrous trio of debates in 2000, is bouncing up and down and shouting after an aide reads poll results off a blackberry. "CBS, two-hundred fence-sitters," he says, "forty-four Kerry, twenty-six Bush. ABC, forty-five Kerry, thirty-six Bush." Devine is ecstatic. "Ha! Killer!" he yells, head cocked, eyes bulging. "That's crushing. Crushing!" Across the room, White House communications director Dan Bartlett, beads of sweat glistening on his forehead, resorts to a very odd line of spin. He lowers expectations for Bush after the debate is already over. "President Bush spoke the only way he knows how," he says. "He's never been labeled the most eloquent and articulate speaker."

There are three keys to presidential debates: expectations, style, and substance. Kerry won on all of them. First there is the expectations game. Somehow the Bushies, masters of setting expectations, misplayed their hand. Their attempt to define Kerry as a master debater—better than Cicero, in the words of Matt Dowd—never took hold with the press. Bush had won too many debates for it to work. Instead the pre-debate chatter was all about how James Baker had rolled Vernon Jordan and won every concession the Bush campaign wanted about the terms of the debate. These victories backfired. Bush wanted last night to be about foreign policy because it is supposed to be his strength. That lowered the bar for Kerry. Bush demanded that those little warning lights

be prominently displayed on the podium to embarrass Kerry when he delivered long-winded answers. The opposite happened. The tight time limits helped Kerry—always at his best when on deadline—control his message. Instead the lights served to emphasize that Bush didn't always have enough to say to fill out his time. In previous debates Bush would sometimes answer a question with a short declarative sentence and a sharp nod of the head. The lights would have made this embarrassing, and at times Bush started repeating stock lines and seemed as though he were filibustering. The Kerry campaign used the lights brilliantly. Before the debate they even mischievously demanded that the lights be removed when in fact they knew they would help Kerry. "We protested too much on the lights and you all fell for it," Joe Lockhart told me.

The other expectation that the Bush campaign let get out of hand was the caricature they built of John Kerry. Many voters paying only casual attention to the campaign may have been surprised to learn that the John Kerry they saw was not the craven, flip-flopping, spineless politician they had heard so much about in Bush TV ads. The Bushies accidentally set the bar much too low for Kerry on this score. Tad Devine told me this was the key to their strategy. In 2000 Gore was defined by Bush as a serial exaggerator and his misstatements in the first debate helped make that case for Bush. "John Kerry didn't do that last night," Devine says.

If the post-debate analysis is as silly as it was in 2000, when Gore was ridiculed for sighing and rolling his eyes, then Bush will probably be crucified for his testy facial expressions and smirks. (The Kerry campaign is already putting together a DVD of Bush's best expressions of exasperation.) Bush seemed irritated and sometimes his answers were halting. The podium, the dimensions of which the Bush campaign had demanded, made him look puny. Kerry looked statesmanlike and was obviously conscious that the camera could be showing cutaway shots of him when Bush spoke. This is the part of the debate that should have the least consequence but may end up defining the match. If the idea that Bush looked ridiculous becomes a major issue in the next few days, then Bush may find himself in the same spot as Gore four years ago. Gore became so defensive about his body language that he seemed to be on valium for the second debate, a change that itself led to a round of criticisms that he wasn't quite comfortable in his own skin.

As for why Bush seemed so irritated, one explanation is that his efforts to cut himself off from criticism and tough questions have backfired. Perhaps his penchants for limiting press conferences and campaigning only among his most ardent supporters have lowered his tolerance for the kind of relentless challenging he faced during the debate.

Finally, Kerry won the battle of substance. Bush's problem last night was that he was not agile enough to change his war plan when he made contact with the enemy. Kerry approached the debate like a prosecutor, delivering a respectful but forceful presentation of facts. Bush had a few good rebuttals of Kerry's arguments—on how Kerry sometimes denigrates allies even though he says he will win them over as president, for example—but mostly he resorted to the flip-flop argument. A more skilled debater would have realized that character-based attacks weren't always enough. Kerry's factual attacks required factual rebuttals. Out on the stump where he can get away with it, Bush often campaigns against a caricatured version of John Kerry, a straw man who takes all sorts of radical positions. Bush's problem last night was that he continued to debate that straw man instead of the person who actually showed up on stage.