

BALLOT BOX

Grand Slam

Kerry crushes Bush in the third debate.

By William Saletan

A week ago, I compared the debates to the final inning of a postseason baseball game. The Democrats trailed entering the ninth. John Kerry led off with a single. John Edwards singled him to third. I'll need a couple of pinch runners to keep the metaphor going, since Kerry came to the plate again Friday and struck out, leaving runners at the corners. The Bush campaign liked my headline so much—"Strikeout"—that they sent it around to the rest of the press corps.

They won't be sending this one around. Because tonight President Bush walked the bases full, and Kerry hit a grand slam.

I counted one exchange that Bush won tonight and another that Kerry lost. The topic Bush aced was Social Security. His answer was brave and thoughtful. He pointed out that "the cost of doing nothing, the cost of saying the current system is OK, far exceeds the costs" of taking painful steps to fix it. Kerry responded with a shameful dodge: "If, later on, after a period of time, we find that Social Security is in trouble, we'll pull together the top experts . . . and we'll make whatever adjustment is necessary." Bush promptly nailed him: "I didn't hear any plan to fix Social Security. I heard more of the same."

The exchange Kerry lost was on affirmative action. He chose to defend its worst form—minority-owned business set-asides, which compensate the wealthiest blacks and Latinos for wrongs suffered primarily by the poorest. He also falsely accused Bush of never having met with the Congressional Black Caucus. When Bush corrected him, Kerry stared down at his podium with an expression of fear that he might well have screwed up.

If you're one of those Bush supporters who just want the good news, you'd better stop here, because the rest of the night was Kerry's. Let's start with body language. Kerry's was excellent. He has improved on this score in every debate. I don't know why it took him 20 years in office and two years on the presidential campaign trail to look into the camera. Maybe that guy with the tax question in the second debate got him over the hump. Whatever the reason, Kerry is now doing it in the debates and in his ads, and he turns out to be damned good at it. Tonight he explained in simple terms the good things he would do and the bad things he wouldn't. "Medicare belongs to you," he told the viewer. "I don't force you to do anything. . . . You choose your doctor." I caught him shaking his head just once. Another time, he grinned inappropriately when Bush was talking about abortion. The rest of his performance was flawless. His answers were crisp. His smiles recalled the good-natured confidence of Ronald Reagan.

Half an hour into the debate, as Kerry spoke about respecting gay people, a look of sincere attention passed across Bush's face. I remember that look, because it was the only time I saw it. The rest of the night, Bush labored unconvincingly to look as though he was listening. He seemed to be trying to rectify his listless, annoyed performance in the first debate. Eventually, he confirmed that his wife had told him "to stand up straight and not scowl." But tonight he overcompensated, as Al Gore did after getting bad reviews in the first debate of 2000. Bush blinked, bubbled, giggled, and blurted at odd moments. He grinned strangely as he talked about tax increases, entrenched special interests, defeat in Iraq, and contaminated flu vaccines. He held his chin up and tried to smile each time Kerry rebuked him, but the expression on his face was that of a fraternity pledge struggling to look like he was having a good time in the midst of a spanking. The

picture of the senior and junior Bonesmen cried out for the caption: “Thank you, Sir, may I have another?”

The sound bites both men brought were awful. Bush’s snort about Kerry being on the “far left bank” was dumb; Kerry’s analogy of Bush to Tony Soprano was dumber. Bush hammered tax relief, tort reform, government-run health care, and No Child Left Behind. I could swear he said 277 times that Kerry voted to bust the budget 277 times. But Kerry got in more licks, repeating that five million people had lost health insurance, that Bush was the first president in 72 years to lose jobs, that he had turned a huge surplus into a huge deficit, that he had blocked prescription drug imports from Canada and bulk drug purchasing for Medicare, and that Democrats would cut taxes for the middle class and raise the minimum wage. Kerry also invoked John McCain three times.

After the last debate, I chided Kerry for failing to rebut Bush’s attacks effectively. Not this time. Bush said Kerry would raise taxes; Kerry made clear that he would raise them only for the rich and would cut them for the middle class. Bush said Kerry’s health care plan was government-controlled and would deprive patients of choices; Kerry made clear that it wasn’t and wouldn’t. Bush said Kerry would let other countries veto American security decisions; Kerry made clear that he wouldn’t and that the “global test” he had embraced was simply the “truth standard.” The more Kerry explained himself, the more I came to understand his recovery in the polls. For seven months, Bush buried Kerry under negative ads. Now tens of millions of people who saw those ads are seeing Kerry for themselves. The debates are washing out the ads.

After the last debate, I chided Kerry for failing to point out Bush’s evasive answers. Not this time. Three times tonight, Bush ducked tough questions—on unemployed workers, the minimum wage, and affirmative action—by changing the subject, absurdly, to educating children. Kerry nailed him: “I want you to notice how the president switched away from jobs and started talking about education.” When Bush said young people should be allowed to shift their retirement contributions to “a personal savings account,” Kerry replied, “You just heard the president say that young people ought to be able to take money out of Social Security.” And when Bush dodged moderator Bob Schieffer’s question as to “whether you would like to overturn *Roe v. Wade*,” Kerry pointed out, “The president didn’t answer the question. . . . Clearly, the president wants to leave an ambivalence or intends to undo it.”

Kerry also won the honesty contest. All politicians distort their opponents’ views. The practical test is whether they’re capable of shame and self-correction once their distortions are exposed. Tonight Bush repeated his widely debunked insinuation that Kerry considered terrorism no more serious than prostitution. In the evening’s most revealing exchange, Kerry complained that “America now is paying already \$120 billion—up to \$200 billion before we’re finished, and much more probably”—for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Until now, Kerry has used the \$200 billion figure to describe the war’s current cost. He backed off because independent fact checkers calculated that only \$120 billion had been spent so far, though \$200 billion would probably have to be spent before our troops could get out. How did Bush respond to this concession? By repeating, contrary to the analysis of independent fact checkers, that in the first debate Kerry had said “in order to defend ourselves, we’d have to get international approval.” One candidate yielded to the truth. The other did not.

My favorite moment was Bush’s answer to a question about partisanship. Fifteen minutes in, he joked, “When you’re a senator from Massachusetts, when you’re a colleague of Ted Kennedy, ‘pay-go’ means you [the taxpayer] pay, and he goes ahead and spends.” Later, Bush told Kerry, “Your record is such that Ted Kennedy, your colleague, is the conservative senator from Massachusetts.” A bit later, Bush scoffed, “Only a liberal senator from Massachusetts would say that a 49 percent increase in funding for education was not enough.” Finally, Schieffer asked the candidates what they would do “to bring the nation back together.” Bush replied, “My biggest disappointment in Washington is how

partisan the town is. . . . The No Child Left Behind Act, incredibly enough, was good work between me and my administration and people like Sen. Ted Kennedy.” Pose with Kennedy, punch Kennedy, pose with Kennedy again. Two presidential campaigns—the uniter of 2000 and the steady, principled leader of 2004—self-discredited in 90 minutes.

I lost count of Bush’s goofs—his unexplained allusion to “pay-go,” his recollection of “the buggy and horse days,” and his dead-end, mumbling defense that “Mitch McConnell had a minimum-wage plan that I supported.” When Schieffer asked whether the Bush administration was responsible for the rising cost and declining availability of health care, Bush blurted out, “Gosh, I sure hope it’s not the administration.” And after Kerry observed that “two leading national news networks have both said the president’s characterization of my health care plan is incorrect,” Bush replied, “I’m not so sure it’s credible to quote leading news organizations about—oh, never mind.”

Really. The president of the United States said that.

All the strengths and themes Kerry had failed to clarify in two years of campaigning, he clarified tonight. He spoke frankly and comfortably about his faith. “We’re all God’s children,” he said as he defended the right of gays and lesbians “to live [as] who they were, who they felt God had made them.” He defended his Catholicism against bishops who opposed him. “My faith affects everything that I do,” he said, but “faith without works is dead. . . . That’s why I fight against poverty. That’s why I fight to clean up the environment and protect this earth. That’s why I fight for equality and justice. . . . God’s work must truly be our own.” He spoke about family values and rewarding those who “play by the rules.” “Five hundred thousand kids lost after-school programs because of your budget,” he told Bush. “That’s not in my gut. That’s not in my value system.”

After the last debate, I chided Kerry for expressing his abortion position poorly. Not this time. “It’s between a woman, God, and her doctor,” he said. “I will not allow somebody to come in and change *Roe v. Wade*. The president has never said whether or not he would do that. But we know from the people he’s tried to appoint to the court [that] he wants to.” Kerry went on: “I’m not going to appoint a judge to the [Supreme] Court who’s going to undo a constitutional right, whether it’s the First Amendment or the Fifth Amendment or some other right. . . . The right of choice is a constitutional right.”

Kerry patched up his troubles with women voters, noting his efforts to get them equal pay for equal work. But his most important assurance to them—and to men—came in his answer to the debate’s sole question about national security. He spoke fluidly of the military’s overextension and the additional special forces and active-duty divisions necessary to alleviate it. He described how he would deploy the National Guard to protect the homeland. He reminded the audience that he was a gun owner and former prosecutor. He paraphrased a terrorism handbook captured from al-Qaida. Everything he said, and the facility with which he said it, conveyed a man ready to assume the presidency in wartime.

By the time the clock had ticked down to 15 minutes, the balance of power onstage had shifted. Kerry was the one talking like a president. He complimented his opponent as a leader and father, pledged to work across the aisle, admitted with a twinkle that “I can sometimes take myself too seriously,” and joked to Schieffer, “The president and you and I are three examples of lucky people who married up.” The audience laughed, and Kerry, growing looser by the minute, took another poke at himself: “And some would say maybe me more so than others.” The audience laughed again, and Kerry relaxed into the smile of a man who has been humbled by the toughest campaign of his life and believes that despite it all, he is about to win. “But I can take it,” he shrugged, beaming through a goofy grin. Bush, sensing that everyone else was having a good time, tried to smile along, but all he could do was twist up one corner of his mouth. His eyes darted around the room as though trying to make sense of a nightmare.

The closing statements confirmed the tide of the race. Kerry spoke like a man closing

a deal. He recalled his service to his country, promised “tested, strong leadership that can calm the waters of the troubled world,” and vowed to protect the nation in the tradition of FDR, JFK, and Reagan. Bush spoke like a man pleading for a second chance. He fumbled his opening sentence. He talked about the hard times we’d been through and the good things he’d do in a second term that he hadn’t done in his first. He called for faith and optimism. Kerry ended with the words of a president: “Thank you, goodnight, and God bless the United States of America.” Bush ended with a plea: “I’m asking for your vote. God bless you.”

I wasn’t surprised when the instant polls showed Kerry winning the debate handily. I bet Bush wasn’t, either. All night long he looked like a pitcher who knew his stuff wasn’t working and was stuck out there, alone on the mound in front of millions of people, with no idea what to do next. Now he’s given up four runs and the lead. But he’s still got the home field. And he’s got half an inning—the bottom of the ninth—to turn things around.

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