

What Debate? by Dan Jacoby

After the first face to face (to face to face to face...) showdowns for both the Democratic and Republican nominations for President, the only reaction we can all share is that these "debates" were anything but actual debates. There were only two questions that could be answered: How did the candidates look on television, and how smoothly did they speak?

In the Democratic show, at least the candidates tried (mostly) to answer the questions that were asked. The Republicans often didn't even bother to pay lip service to the question, preferring instead to spit out whatever they had memorized.

Anyone who did bother to tune in learned nothing new. There were no real plans offered, no ideas discussed for their true merits (or lack of merit), and no new conclusions drawn.

The problem is that nobody can give a real answer to anything important in 60 seconds. The historic Lincoln-Douglas debates went on for hours, with only two candidates. The recent presidential "debates" had eight and ten candidates, lasted only an hour and a half – and much of that time was taken up by the moderators' questions. As a result, the average candidate got to speak for less than nine minutes, and only in small segments.

These early debates should last all day, and multiple debates should be scheduled. Candidates should be allowed – and required – to challenge each other. The moderator should be there only to ensure that everyone gets roughly the same opportunity to make his or her points. In an eight-hour debate, each candidate would not only be able to explain his or her plans and positions thoroughly, but also be required to defend those plans and positions against real opposition.

At the end of three or four debates, we would know exactly where each candidate stands and why. We would have a much more complete understanding of both the issues and the solutions being proposed to the problems we face. We would also have a far more intimate understanding of each candidate's character.

In a side note, the really twisted aspect of comparing these "debates" to the Lincoln-Douglas contests is that the audience back then didn't even have the right to vote for either of these candidates; until 1914, Senators were chosen by state legislatures. At least we can choose our nominees for President directly, but all we get in races where we have the vote is sound bites.

Is it any wonder we end up with a President like George W. Bush? And is it any wonder that, despite all the tens of millions of dollars the candidates have raised, not one of them is considered top-notch Presidential material?

It's time to replace the phony process we have now, where most voters will choose their candidate based on a 30-second television commercial, and the candidate who can run the most commercials will probably win. It's time to require that all candidates for national office go through the crucible of a real debate process. It's time to give voters more than sound bites and unchallenged commercials from which to make the most important choices of their lives.