

Point/ Counterpoint: The Gore Perspective

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In 1988, Al Gore championed the revitalization of the College Democrats of America and argued for a bold image for the Democratic Party. In 1992, Clinton-Gore helped "Rock The Vote" with MTV. Yet, today, Gore has stepped away from spearheading social activism in an imprudent effort to present himself as a pre-packaged statesman. The first Presidential Debate in Boston was a condensed illustration of this unwise marketing effort. As in his earlier political days, Gore needs to harvest his native political passions and help build a politics of sincerity--not reserved political distance. The Gore team's strategy of branding the candidate as a distinguished tenured incumbent is as ineffective as if they would attempt to paint the vice president as not an "insider." The consequences are that Gore failed to engage the First Presidential Debate of the 21st Century with the same level of success as Clinton enjoyed in 1992 and 1996.

Gore may lack the intuitive political charm of his eight-year executive-branch partner, yet the vice president does command a spirit of real empathy for issues that he has not developed during the Presidential debates thus far. Politics is an emotional art as much as it is a science of polls, focus groups, and demographics. Gore needs to address issues he cares about, like the environment, education, government waste, and urban empowerment, and showcase his ability to lead with a heart.

Why is this important? Much of the appeal that Bush has mustered from the First Presidential Debate came from his staged appearance of sincerity. Gore has the real capacity to deliver a beating heart to the American people, yet he stumbles to do so. Bush gained traction with voters who observed the debates not because he expressed a Presidential competence on issues (this may not be feasible for him to ever accomplish), but because he illustrated a much hyped "compassionate conservative's" demeanor.

Given the press and population's zeal for "entertainment politics," Gore should acknowledge the inevitable pragmatic reality that his superior knowledge on sophisticated policy details is impressive to establishment pundits, but of low impact to mass audiences. Without converting to an extremist's strategy of puff-filled sound-bites, Gore needs to articulate the general themes of his future administration in simple, straightforward language that marries policy content with general accessibility. People need to walk away from the debates with the understanding that Gore has a Presidential vision, in addition to an impressive archive of pedantic political analysis.

Substantively, Gore needs to hammer Bush for being a fake centrist politician. The Philadelphia Republican Convention was a sham, not a testimonial to the GOP's political transformation. Gore needs to help the American people ask themselves "Who is the Real George W. Bush?" The shell game of pretending to be an inclusive "uniter, not a divider" should be exposed in the same way the Wizard of Oz was exposed from behind the curtains.

For example, Bush's rhetoric of not appointing judges to legislate from the bench does not exactly square with his father's record as President, nor George W.'s perspectives in Texas. The Supreme Court matters, and Gore needs to make this point more accessible to the American public.

Gore needs to show that uniting people is different from dancing the Potomac two-step. Avoiding difficult issues in order to appear like you agree with people is not Presidential, but a core strategy for Bush. Gore needs to press home the uncertainty that voters get with Bush, someone who is unfaithful to confronting difficult issues. The vice president's record of challenging his boss when he had principled disagreement should be showcased, not obscured. If Gore wants to be his own man, he needs to show how he is willing to take tough stands regardless of partisan politics--this stance will also show him to be more of a man with the people and less a political inbreed.

Al Gore needs to recognize that his real debating opponent is not George W. Bush, but the public's apathy and disinterest in American politics. How else could a terrible debater like Governor Bush rise to claim the Republican nomination and create a dead heat for the first presidential election of the third millennium. Gore needs to create a sense of urgency and underscore that Democratic voting is important (Bush is praying for a low voter turnout, a consistent tricky Republican strategy this is ultimately un-democratic). The vice president has been hoping to be President for more than half of his life, yet he still has not learned how to instill the feeling of hope in people as his would-be predecessor who claimed the idea of hope as his home.