

ROUND 3 A TISS-UP

Gore more assertive, Bush still low-key in final debate

by Naftali Bendavid
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ST. LOUIS -- In their final and most contentious debate, Vice President Al Gore and Texas Gov. George Bush argued animatedly Tuesday night about whether Gore is a big spender or whether Bush is too closely tied to big business as they clashed on a wide range of issues including taxes, health care and education.

With three weeks to go until Election Day, Gore aggressively sought to draw sharp distinctions between his policies and those of his rival, while Bush spoke in broad terms about his philosophy of "trusting people" as opposed to the government.

Gore, who believes the public supports many of his positions on key issues, repeatedly used phrases such as, "We have a huge difference on this question." Bush, for his part, spoke more philosophically, saying at one point, "I wish we could spend an hour talking about trusting people."

The debate was set up as a town hall meeting, with 150 undecided voters from the St. Louis area asking questions of the two candidates at Washington University. Most of the questions were hardly surprising, giving the candidates the opportunity to repeat phrases from their stump speeches.

Still Gore, considered by many to have performed badly in the first two debates, was more assertive this time, especially on such subjects as foreign policy, and he appeared to throw Bush on the defensive.

One of the feistier exchanges involved the two candidates' spending plans, with Bush blasting Gore for what he called the vice president's big-government ways. "This is a big spender," Bush said of Gore. "He ought to be proud of it. It's part of his record."

Gore vigorously disputed the notion that he is a big spender. "Absolutely not. Absolutely not," Gore said. "I'm so glad I have a chance to knock that down ... I'm not just saying this, I'm not just talking. I have helped to balance the budget for the first time in 30 years."

This was the last of three debates between Gore and Bush, all held within a compressed two-week period to avoid overlapping with the Olympics. It unfolded under the considerable shadow cast by the death of Missouri's Democratic Gov. Mel Carnahan in a plane crash Monday night.

Stunned by Carnahan's death, the Commission on Presidential Debates briefly considered cancelling the presidential face-off in his home state. But the short time before the election left little room to reschedule, and the commission decided to proceed after consulting with the two campaigns and the university.

Before the debate, Lehrer asked for a moment of silence in Carnahan's memory, and Gore and Bush paid brief tribute to Carnahan, who had been enmeshed in a heated, extremely close race against incumbent Sen. John Ashcroft.

Many believed Gore won the first presidential debate Oct. 3, but he was also seen as aggressive and even rude, sighing loudly during many of Bush's answers. Following this criticism, Gore toned himself down for the second debate, but that allowed Bush to seize control and prevail in



PHOTO BY CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Texas Governor George W. Bush, left, and Vice President Al Gore, right, speak at the last of three presidential debates in campaign 2000. It was held at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, on October 17, 2000.

the eyes of many.

That left Bush confident -- and ahead in the polls -- before Tuesday's debate, with Gore facing pressure to retake the initiative, and he clearly tried hard to do so. Gore's goal was a middle ground between the aggressiveness of the first round and the quiescence of the second.

Gore was clearly more animated than in the second debate, and he regularly pointed toward Bush with sweeping gestures while talking derisively about his plans. But he refrained from the more aggressive interruptions that marked the first encounter.

Gore did seem mindful of his need to change the campaign's dynamic, and the debate at various points became lively. Bush on one occasion became frustrated when Gore questioned him directly on affirmative action and Lehrer did not intervene.

"There are certain rules in this that we all agreed to," Bush said. "Evidently the rules don't matter."

Another striking moment came when audience member Leo Anderson said that in the second debate, Bush seemed to "overly enjoy" his state's record of executing large numbers of inmates, and asked if Bush was in fact proud of that record.

"If you think I was proud of it, I think you misread me," Bush said. The candidates were perched on tall chairs, wearing similar dark suits and red ties, with the audience arrayed in a semicircle. But both candidates stood and walked toward the audience or each other as they delivered their answers.

Throughout the night, Bush hammered on the theme that he is a uniter,

and that he would work across party lines to get things done.

"There's too much bitterness in Washington. There's too much wrangling. It's time to have a fresh start," Bush said. "One of the reasons I was successful as the governor of Texas is because I didn't try to be all things to all people." That was a shot at Gore, whom the Bush campaign asserts will say anything to get elected.

Typically, while Gore insisted there was a big difference between the two candidates' positions on a "patients' bill of rights" to regulate HMOs, Bush said, "The difference is I can get it done. I can get something positive done on behalf of the people. That's what the question in this campaign is about. It's not only what your philosophy is and what is your position on the issues, but can you get things done?"

Gore, for his part, stressed the theme that the nation is far better off than it was before the Clinton administration, a message Gore aides privately say he has not communicated well enough.

"If you want somebody who believes that we were better off eight years ago than we are now, and that we ought to go back to the kind of policies that we had back then, emphasizing tax cuts mainly for the wealthy, then he is your man," Gore said, indicating Bush.

At another point Gore declared, "We've heard a lot from Governor Bush about a lot not being done in the last eight years, as though the promises I made eight years ago have not been kept. I think the record shows otherwise."

The audience members, when called

on by Lehrer, addressed their questions to a specific candidate, who then received two minutes to respond. Then his opponent mounted a two-minute rebuttal.

An audience member named David Norwood asked Bush why the governor would be better qualified to handle the crisis in the Middle East.

"I've been a leader," Bush said. "I've been a person who set a clear vision and convinced people to follow it." He added, "I believe our nation should speak with one voice, and I applaud the president for working hard to defuse tensions."

Gore responded by reciting his foreign policy credentials: serving on the House Intelligence Committee, studying arms control in Congress, sitting on the National Security Council as vice president.

"We're going to face some serious new challenges in the next four years," Gore said. "I've worked on that long and hard."

The two also tangled over education. Responding to a question about how to make parents more accountable, Bush said, "It's hard to make people love one another. I wish I knew a law, because I'd darn sure sign it."

Bush also sought to frame the issue as one of federal versus local control. "I'd worry about federalizing education if I were you," Bush told the audience. "I believe strongly that the federal government can help. ... But don't fall prey to all this stuff about money here and money there."

The town hall format has become a standard part of the presidential debates. In 1992, President George Bush, the governor's father, famously looked

at his watch during the town hall session, while then-Gov. Bill Clinton appeared empathetic and accessible.

Many believe that session sealed the election for Clinton. Before Tuesday's debate, staffers from both campaigns joked about the candidates not wearing watches.

Both candidates have experience holding town hall meetings. Gore has conducted the informal sessions since his first election to Congress in 1976; during the recent Democratic primaries his meetings would sometimes last four hours.

Policies aside, both candidates tried to convey an image of themselves to voters. Gore in particular has been plagued by the criticism that he changes himself and his message for political advantage, and he sought to re-introduce himself yet again Tuesday.

"Let me tell you something about me: I keep my word," Gore said in his closing statement. "I kept the faith with my country. I served in Vietnam. I kept the faith with my family. Tipper and I have been married 30 years."

He added, "I have not spent the last quarter-century seeking personal wealth. I have spent the last quarter-century fighting for the working men and women of America."

Bush repeated a line he has used throughout the campaign, raising his right hand as though taking the oath of office. "When I put my hand on the Bible, I will swear to uphold the laws of the land, but (also) swear to uphold the honor and dignity of the office to which I've been elected," he said.

Debate rhetoric sometimes obscured truth

by Chris Mondics
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WASHINGTON -- George W. Bush and Al Gore clashed Tuesday night on subjects ranging from health care to education and expansion of federal government. As they spelled out competing visions their rhetoric sometimes obscured the truth and promoted confusion. Here are some clarifying facts and context.

EDUCATION

ASSERTION: Gore said that Bush "proposes to drain more money, more taxpayer money, out of the public schools for private school vouchers than all of the money that he proposes in his entire budget for public schools themselves."

FACTS:

Bush would require publicly funded vouchers for students in public schools that don't move toward meeting state-set academic standards within three years. The vouchers would enable the students to afford private school tuition. It's not clear how much that would take away from public school funding.

Gore opposes vouchers and says the money would be better spent trying to improve the public schools.

HEALTH CARE

ASSERTIONS: Gore accused Bush of backing a plan to reform health maintenance organizations that would benefit insurers. Bush asserted that Gore's prescription for national health care would give the federal government enormous control over the health care industry. Gore also alleged that under Bush, the state of Texas is ranked 48th in providing health care to children.

FACTS: Bush said he supports a national patients' bill of rights, apparently referring to legislation backed by Republicans in Congress. That bill is opposed by Gore and other Democrats who favor a version that gives patients the right to sue their health maintenance organizations if they are harmed by decisions regarding their health care. Republicans call for a much more limited right to sue HMOs.

Both bills calls for a special panel to hear patient appeals of health insurers' treatment decisions; but the two sides disagree on the composition of such a panel.

Gore said that he favored universal health care coverage phased in over a period of years. Bush said such a program would give the federal government inordinate power over the health care sector.

"I'm absolutely opposed to a national health care plan," Bush said.

In his first term, President Clinton proposed a national health care plan requiring all businesses to provide health insurance to employees. The plan died in Congress.

Gore charged accurately that Texas ranked 48th in 1999 in providing health care to children, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. What he did not say is that health insurance rates in Texas are affected by an influx of poor immigrants from Mexico. Other Mexican border states of Arizona, New Mexico

POLITICAL RHETORIC

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Coming out of debates, candidates gear up for stretch run

by Maria L. La Ganga
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LA Times and Washington Post

ST. LOUIS -- Forget the policy back and forth, the sighs, the smirks, the global free-for-all, the competing messages that Al Gore and George W. Bush would like voters to take away from the 270 minutes of prime-time discussion that just ended.

With 19 days of hand-to-hand campaign combat ahead, the choice facing the electorate on Nov. 7 is the same as it was entering the ballyhooed presidential debates: Change vs risk. Substance vs style. Ability vs likeability. Or as independent political analyst G. Terry

Madonna put it, "Do you want to trust and like the president -- is that more important -- or do you believe you have to vote for Gore to keep the peace and prosperity we've had the last eight years?"

The debates -- sometimes gentlemanly, more often not -- will now give way to an all-out sprint through the final weeks of an election that remains too close to call. While both candidates to some extent accomplished what they needed in their televised match-ups, neither was able to use the forums to pull sharply ahead in opinion polls or change the essential dynamic of the race.

At this point, Gore and Bush have distilled their competing messages to the essence. The

Democrat believes the choice facing voters revolves around the question of who should benefit from America's prosperity. The Republican feels the presidential options are "between big federal government or somebody who's coming from outside of Washington, who will trust individuals," as he said of himself Tuesday night in St. Louis.

But there is little time left to explain their differences to the American public. So what voters can expect next is "the usual pounding with adverting, who makes a mistake and whatever happens with external events," said Paul Maslin, a Democratic pollster unaffiliated with the Gore campaign, referring to everything from stock market fluctuations to the

crisis in the Middle East.

Bush aides said the Texas governor will focus on a short list of key states: He was in Wisconsin and Michigan Wednesday and plans to return next week. He will also visit Missouri, Florida, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Illinois and Tennessee, Gore's home state, in the days to come.

Bush has made it clear that he will spend much of the time that remains hammering away at what he says is the fundamental difference between the two camps, a difference that he spoke of throughout the day Wednesday: Gore is a big-spender, big government guy, while Bush believes in limited government and trusts the people with their own lives, decisions and money.

Gore campaign strategists declined to spell out their map for the closing days, though they insisted even states that recently seemed to tip Bush's way -- Ohio being the biggest among them -- remain targets.

Doug Hattaway, a Gore spokesman, said the vice president plans to lay out what he called "the big choices" facing Americans regarding how best to capitalize on the nation's record prosperity. Gore, returning to a favorite tack, will meet with a different family every day to

TARGET STATES

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