

Kerry narrows the gap

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DAWN

AS in previous election campaigns, this year's closely fought presidential election in the United States will, it seems, be heavily influenced by the presidential debate. In the past, one or the other candidate has approached these debates with trepidation and has sought to restrict its freedom.

This year it was President Bush who believed, rightly, that he was at a disadvantage and insisted, therefore, in the course of hard negotiations, on limiting the number of debates (three between the presidential nominees and one between the vice-presidential candidates) and on securing a format in which there could be no direct debate between the two contenders and in which Bush's lack of fluency would not be apparent.

The Bush campaign managers also spent a lot of time and effort portraying Bush as the under-dog, as the candidate to be judged by his deeds and not by his mangled English or his relatively low speaking skills. For the most part this did not work. Pre debate polls showed that 44 per cent of the voters expected Bush to win as against 32 per cent who thought Kerry had a better chance of doing so.

If Bush had problems with fluency, Kerry's supporters were equally fearful that Kerry would not remain focused and would indulge his penchant for qualifying to death every statement that he made. They were apprehensive

for Tuesday evening will have concluded. Typically, in US elections the vice-president debate has rarely had an effect on the final outcome but this time it may be different. Cheney is perceived as the "eminence grise" of this administration, the man more responsible, perhaps, than the president himself for the false allegations about the Iraqi possession of WMD, for the pressure on the intelligence agencies to tailor their assessments to support this assertion, and above all, for the decision to go it alone, ignoring the UN Security Council's reservations.

He, more than any other administration figure, has been tainted by the assertion that big business, chiefly Halliburton, a company from which Cheney continues to draw benefits, has been the principal beneficiary of the contracts bonanza in Iraq. He

the middle class unchanged and using the money to reduce the deficit and to finance programmes for the poor has great appeal.

On the other hand, however, the economy is no longer the issue of greatest importance to the American electorate having been replaced by concerns about the ongoing war in Iraq and terrorism. It is possible that the rules of the debate notwithstanding, Bush will attempt to return to the theme of terrorism and to his greater trustworthiness in fighting this menace and making "America safer".

By and large, it is my anticipation that by the time the debates end, Kerry will have moved ahead but not by the sort of margin that would ensure his election. In the end, this closely contested election may turn on the success attending the drive launched by both parties to register new voters and by the voter turnout on Election Day itself.

Voter registration is at all time high this year. The close election of 2000 has apparently convinced people that their vote really does count and that registering is worthwhile. Do the Democrats have an edge? It is difficult to say but it does appear that the minorities, the Black Americans and the Hispanics, traditional bastions of democratic support, are registering in larger numbers than in the past.

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Conventional wisdom has it that the registered Republican is more committed and therefore more likely to cast his vote. This year, however, in a deeply divided electorate the Democrats are more fired up and have had more money available to finance their voter turnout drive. The turnout this year will be higher than it has been in decades, but for the Democrats it is essential that their voters have an incentive other than a visceral hatred for Bush and his policies.

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death every statement that he made. They were apprehensive that the alarm system set up under the rigid rules of the debate would remind Kerry repeatedly that he was exceeding his time limit. There was another problem. The spike in Bush's favourable rating in the polls, which touched 11 per cent after the Republican Convention at the end of August, had settled by mid-September at about a clear 6 per cent lead.

For Kerry the debate was crucial if his flagging campaign was to be kept alive. If there was hope in the Kerry camp it was engendered only by the belief that a study of the Democratic candidate's record of fighting elections for public office showed that he was at his fighting best when he was behind, and this was certainly the case on the eve of the debate.

The debate in Miami was focused, as agreed upon by the two sides, on foreign policy. There were pointed and serious arguments about Iraq, the threats from Iran and North Korea, US alliances, and the meaning of the war on terrorism. After some initial efforts to portray the results as otherwise, even the most die-hard Republicans were prepared to concede that Kerry was the clear winner of the debate, while the Democrats started celebrating within minutes of the end of the debate and with a swiftness that can only happen in America had prepared a new ad campaign showing a grimacing and unpleasant looking Bush, squirming under the eyes of the camera during the debate as Kerry dispassionately and succinctly made the case that Bush had been guilty of colossal misjudgments in Iraq.

Typical perhaps of the Republican reaction was the remark made by a conservative Republican in his newsletter, "I reluctantly agree with overnight polls that suggest that, by a plurality, voters believe that Senator John Kerry won his debate with President Bush Thursday night. Both candidates did well. But Senator Kerry got away with murder and that is why it is frustrating."

At the same time Bush's senior advisers argued that the debate would not be enough to overcome what they described as voter concerns about Kerry, stirred by six months of Republican attacks. In one sense, these advisers are right. Even though one poll suggested that Kerry had, by the end of the week, managed to establish a slight lead over Bush when the same poll, two weeks earlier had given Bush a six-point lead, most other polls showed Bush still leading, albeit by a smaller margin.

By the time this article appears the vice-Presidential debate in Cleveland scheduled

has a mastery of facts and on this account could and probably would run rings around his less experienced and less knowledgeable opponent. But he has for the most part, a dour expression and, as he himself acknowledges from time to time, no charisma. If he is defeated in the debate, it will have an impact.

On the other hand his opponent, Senator John Edwards, is remarkably photogenic and has built his career, making a fortune in the process, on fighting populist court cases against big business. His success has flowed largely from his skills as a trial lawyer who has swayed juries and obtained large settlements for his clients. He is inexperienced in politics but his skills, of oratory as much as his personal appeal, make him a favourite in my view to win the debate even though he may not have the same high base of knowledge as Cheney.

The next two presidential debates — in St. Louis on Friday and in Arizona on October 13 — would focus mainly on domestic issues, and here Kerry can be expected to do much better. There are concerns about the economy and Kerry has been hammering away at the theme that the American economy has lost a million jobs under Bush, that the Bush administration favoured the interests of the powerful over the interests of the people.

One can anticipate that in states like Ohio, where more than 237,000 jobs have been lost and unemployment is rising Kerry will keep repeating the assertion that Bush is out of touch with middle class America and will keep reiterating the question, "does he (Bush) really see and know what is going on in the lives of middle-class Americans — people struggling to get into the middle class, people who are fighting for survival?"

The Bush camp says that it is prepared to debate domestic issues and is confident that it can survive the test but the fact is that this is Bush's weakness. The economy has not picked up as much as anticipated and even in the areas where it has done well, it has benefited the entrepreneur and not the worker. Impressive and uncontradicted studies have shown that 70 per cent or more of the remarkable increases in productivity have gone into higher corporate profits rather than to the worker.

The lower taxes on the very rich — those earning more than \$200,000 a year — have swelled the deficit and not brought the expected trickle-down effect. Kerry's proposal to restore these taxes to the original higher level while leaving the lower taxes on

Republican is more committed and therefore more likely to cast his vote. This year, however, in a deeply divided electorate the Democrats are more fired up and have had more money available to finance their voter turnout drive. The turnout this year will be higher than it has been in decades, but for the Democrats it is essential that their voter have an incentive other than a visceral hatred for Bush and his policies. This Kerry's performance in the debates may provide if he can at least match the one in the first debate. The chances of this happening are good. Kerry has always felt that his winning ground is domestic issues and he will probably bring more passion to his presentations on this subject.

Kerry's victory, if it comes will be welcome around the world. There are few countries in which either the leadership or the people would welcome a second Bush term. This is particularly true in the Muslim world. But will it make a difference? The Bush administration has jarred sensitivities around the world, more by the substance of its policies than by its style. Secretary Powell has worked hard to minimize the latter but it has still been a factor. With the Kerry administration, a new emphasis on alliance building, and therefore, a less abrasive go-it-alone style can be expected. However, there may not be any remarkable change in substance.

Kerry has spoken of a withdrawal from Iraq after engaging other nations more fully in the pacification and reconstruction of Iraq. We have heard nothing, however, that suggests a renunciation of interest in maintaining bases in Iraq or controlling Iraq's oil. Kerry has spoken of hosting a summit in the Middle East of Muslim countries to enlist their cooperation in the fight against terrorism. He clearly will support President Musharraf's "enlightened moderation" and will, as part of the battle against terrorism, provide funding for education and social services in the Muslim countries.

But it is not at all certain that he will be prepared to bite the bullet on the Israel-Palestine question. With an eye on the elections, the Bush administration has had no policy on this other than unstinting support for the Israeli position. Will Kerry and his foreign policy advisers accept that the political damage done to the Democratic party's standing with the domestic Jewish voter is an acceptable price for removing the canker that provides the main impetus for extremism and terrorism in the Arab world? Currently, it does not seem likely but there is a possibility that this may change.