

# US Presidential election

USA  
9/8/04

I am on a tour of USA and find myself smack in the middle of the campaign for electing the President of USA. Every shop, every store is adorned with posters of either Bush-Cheney or Kerry-Edwards. Not surprisingly, the Presidential debate was watched by millions of viewers over TV. The lobby of the hotel I was staying in in Washington DC was jam packed with viewers.

The Presidential debate gave a slight edge to Kerry and narrowed the gaps between the two challengers to the presidential chair. The debate by the Vice Presidential candidates however was a different affair. For most of the 90-minute encounter with his rival, Senator John Edwards of North Carolina, Mr. Cheney tried to reassure Republicans unsettled by President Bush's debate performance against Senator John Kerry last week, while hammering home the case against Mr. Kerry that polls now suggest Mr. Bush failed to make. In a strikingly personal and bitter debate, Vice President Dick Cheney defended the Bush administration's record on Iraq on Tuesday night as "exactly the right thing to do" and asserted that Senators John Kerry and John Edwards bent with the political winds on national security.

Mr. Cheney was defiantly unapologetic about the course of the conflict in Iraq, defending the administration against the charge that it had failed to provide enough troops to stabilize

Iraq, as the former top American official in Iraq, L. Paul Bremer III, said in a speech on Monday. Mr. Cheney said he would recommend the same course in Iraq if he had it to do over again, adding, "The world is safer today because Saddam Hussein is in jail, his government's no longer in power, and we did exactly the right thing." After what many viewed as a lackluster performance by Mr. Bush in last week's debate, Mr. Cheney returned to the harsh attacks of the Republican convention, asserting that Mr. Kerry was unprincipled on national security and could not be trusted to be as aggressive as the Republicans in protecting the nation. He asserted that the Kerry-Edwards ticket had shifted positions to suit its political needs. "Now, if they couldn't stand up to the pressures that Howard Dean represented, how can we expect them to stand up to Al Qaeda?" Mr. Cheney asked.

Mr. Edwards fired back with a wide-ranging assault on the administration's honesty and competence in foreign and domestic policy. "One thing that's very clear is that a long r\_sum does not equal good judgment," Mr. Edwards declared, in one of many sharp exchanges that spoke to the closeness of the race and the differences between the two tickets.

The New York Times, in its editorial sums it up by commenting: "Dur-

BY S.M. HALI

## Presidential elections are occasions for the nation to blow off steam.

ing the final summation in last night's vice-presidential debate, John Edwards focused on the new Kerry campaign theme: that a vote for George Bush and Dick Cheney would mean 'four more years of the same.' And Mr. Cheney, when his turn came, said it was important to re-elect the president so he could keep doing what he has been doing. It was a rare moment of agreement. Like the presidential foreign policy debate that preceded it, the clash of the vice-presidential candidates was 90 minutes of serious talk about the issues. It was also very hard-fought - the contenders managed to be remarkably aggressive for two men who were sitting next to each other at a small table. Mr. Cheney called Mr. Edwards's remarks so thick with misrepresentation that he hardly knew how to respond. Mr. Edwards, when talking about the economy, said, 'Mr. Vice President, I don't think the country can take four more years of this kind of experience.' Mr. Cheney, who won over many voters four years ago with

his grandfatherly demeanor during a debate with Joseph Lieberman, seemed tired and angry. He was particularly dyspeptic when he responded to criticism of his relationship with Halliburton by claiming that Mr. Edwards had a bad attendance record in the Senate."

Edwards hit below the belt when Mr. Cheney, who has a gay daughter, was asked about the administration's support for a constitutional amendment against gay marriage. Such a personal comment was definitely in bad taste but Mr. Cheney took it in a firm stride.

The newspapers have provided a full coverage of the event and some of it is unsavoury. As the following comment from The Washington Times columnist Barry Casselman says in his Op-Ed piece titled 'Campaign madnesses': "A month to go. Now the madnesses will be loosed on the voters.... A lot of folks on both sides of this campaign will be mad at me for saying that most of what is said loudly in the next 30 days by both sides is either false or grossly exaggerated. But I will defend this contention with three decades of observing national elections.... [Then] it has been repeated over and over again how much more hate-filled and venomous the 2004 contest is compared with those of the past. Yes and no. Presidential elections are occasions for the nation to

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blow off steam when voters are upset, and some voters are quite upset this year on both sides. Some of this arises from the bitter election aftermath of 2000, some of it from the war, and some of it from the social issues espoused by both sides."

The TV keeps blaring away with different statistics. ABC had Dick Cheney winning the debate while CBS thought John Edwards got the better of the Vice President. The exposure is so much that it is no doubt excessive.

All eyes are now on the next round of the debate between the two combatants for the Presidency on Friday. The latest opinion poll by CBS News and the New York Times put Mr. Kerry and Mr. Bush equal with 47% support each.

The findings showed a five-point boost for Mr. Kerry after the first debate and erased a month-long Republican lead. In three key areas for voters - protecting the US from terrorism, ability to handle an international crisis, and having strong qualities of leadership - Mr. Bush still led Mr. Kerry. But Mr. Kerry increased his standing in all three areas after the debate, the survey indicated. This could change the dynamics of the race, which for the month leading up to the debate had focused on whether Mr. Kerry could make a comeback. Will a different Mr. Bush show up to the next debate? Whatever happens, our hopes are for world peace and freedom from tyranny and terror.