

USA  
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# American president Two opportunities, or

After several weeks of conflicting polling data and speculative political analysis, this week's polls showed a clear shift in John Kerry's favour. This upsurge is attributable to Kerry's performance at last week's presidential debate in Miami, where he surprised many Americans by explaining in clear, unambiguous terms what ails US foreign policy today. In contrast, his rival, President George W. Bush, appeared flustered, pensive, and unable to describe in realistic terms the situation in Iraq, Afghanistan, or the broader world. His usual knack for being succinct backfired, and his frequent use of platitudes was unconvincing.

Even prior to the debate, Kerry had chipped away at the once daunting Bush lead, which some placed in double digits less than a month ago. Averaging ten national polls, Bush led Kerry by 3.8 percent in the week preceding the debate. The narrow gap, however, was subject to dispute due to the sizable discrepancies between polls using similar sampling data over identical time periods. This demonstrated a surprisingly high level of volatility among the electorate, which had been wrongly pegged as being largely static. The inconsistent polls were particularly troubling to Democrats, who hoped those showing the race a dead heat was accurate, but privately feared Bush held a formidable lead. After the 2000 Florida recount debacle, Democrats have good reason for pessimism.

But the post-debate polls suggest a new race. The seven polls taken after Miami show

that Bush's national lead has shrunk to 2.3 percent. More importantly for pundits and Kerry partisans, the poll-to-poll results are consistent. Bush may still be leading narrowly, but even CNN/USA Today, whose poll just two weeks ago had the president up by a lofty 13 percent, has the race tied, with each candidate garnering 49 percent. This represents quite a turnaround for Kerry, and suggests many wavering voters who disapproved of President Bush but were unimpressed with Kerry have now lined up behind the Massachusetts senator. Mighty momentum, seized by Bush after the Republican convention in early September, has swung at least temporarily toward the Democratic nominee.

Kerry needed a strong performance in the first debate to stay competitive. It was essential for Kerry to establish that he has what it takes to be president: The intellectual gravitas to manage the challenges facing the nation, as well as the communication skills to exhibit that knowledge in an un-conceited, reassuring manner. The latter factor is arguably the more daunting task, especially when facing Bush, a man even his critics concede personifies "down to earth." Moreover, because the debate focused exclusively on foreign policy, Kerry was given a golden opportunity to re-establish his national security credentials, which had been tarnished by withering attacks by the Bush-Cheney campaign and his own foibles.

Bush entered the Miami shootout in an unusual, if not uncomfortable position: The favourite. Through the course

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of his political career, George W. Bush has thrived when his opponents and the public underestimate him. As a public speaker, Bush has never been known for his allocution. His malapropisms are legendary. But far from damaging, Bush's stumbling and bumbling has become a source of strength. His advisors have relied upon his undistinguished speaking ability to lower expectations;

answers to policy questions enhances the notion that he is a man of the people rather than a silver-tongued professional politician.

Al Gore, like former Texas Gov. Anne Richards before him, fell prey to Bush's "low-expectation, aw shucks" strategy. Gore not only allowed himself to be built up by Bush operatives, but also exceeded their expectations by being over-

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they have simultaneously inflated their opponent's debating prowess. Thus, the very fact that Bush shows up and doesn't embarrass himself leads one to believe he has exceeded expectations. Additionally, Bush's penchant for using blunt, simple

whelmingly haughty and arrogant during the first Gore-Bush clash. Gore's now infamous sighing did not sit well with American voters, half of whom usually watch the debates.

Heading into Miami, Bush strategists once again attempted

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to dampen expectations and inflate their foe. But this year, the strategy proved ineffective. Gaffs and low expectations may be granted to challengers, but not to incumbent presidents. Moreover, there is an old saying about damning an opponent with faint praise. Going far beyond fulsome, one Bush aide, Matthew Dowd, suggested Kerry was the best debater since Cicero. Even the most gullible reporter had to roll their eyes.

It is not that Bush performed horribly, though many pundits have now jumped on the Bush-bashing bandwagon and are overstating just how poorly he performed. But Bush was unable to go beyond previously stated positions on Iraq, Afghanistan, the war on terrorism, and other international challenges. Instead, Bush clicked off one campaign talking point after another, often cloaking his lines with American buzzwords like "freedom." His performance provided voters no new insight or ideas, nor did they inspire or convince the unconvinced. Even worse, taking a page from Al Gore's book, Bush's pained and exasperated demeanor turned off voters.

Kerry, to be certain, is no Cicero. But the veteran senator had a strong and convincing showing in Miami. Kerry's Achilles heal has been national security. He momentarily topped Bush in the polls by focusing on these key issues during the Democratic National Convention in July, only to see his lead slip away in August. Key to this slide was waning voter confidence in his ability to handle national security. Thus, Kerry needed to re-estab-

lish his credentials in the international realm; he succeeded. Not only did Kerry proactively address his own weaknesses - such as why he voted to authorize Bush to invade Iraq and later voted against funding the occupation - but also effectively critiqued the president's "colossal misjudgement" of invading Iraq without a plan to win the peace and failure to pursue America's real enemy, Osama Bin Laden. Kerry also set the agenda by noting that nuclear proliferation was the No. 1 threat to the United States today. To this, Bush meekly agreed.

What changed in a night? Momentum. In a race this close, every event could prove momentous. Certainly for Kerry, the Miami debate was vital.

To use a sports metaphor, as Bush is apt at doing, Kerry needed to step up to the plate, and did. In so doing, he gave voters a reason to vote for him beyond the fact that he is not George W. Bush. Kerry has tightened the race, but he must now maintain momentum. Bush, for his part, failed last week primarily because he had the opportunity to deliver a knock out punch. Had he drubbed Kerry by delivering a memorable zinger or - even excluding Kerry altogether - made a better case in defending his own policies, he could have coasted to Election Day. Both candidates had opportunities last week, but only one seized the day. As a result, the Kerry campaign has new life.

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