

NEW YORK TIMES - The First Debate

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If Americans who tuned into last night's presidential debate were waiting for one of the candidates to catch the other in a fatal error, or leave him stammering, the event was obviously a draw. But if the question was whether Senator John Kerry would appear presidential, whether he could present his positions clearly and succinctly and keep President Bush on the defensive when it came to the critical issue of Iraq, Mr. Kerry delivered the goods.

George W. Bush is famous for fierce discipline when it comes to sticking to a carefully honed, simple message. Last night he reiterated this campaign message once again - that "the world is safer without Saddam Hussein" and that things are, on the whole, going well in Iraq. The confidence with which Mr. Bush has kept hammering home those points has clearly had an effect in the polls, encouraging wavering voters to believe that the president is the one who can best lead the country out of the morass he created.

But last night Mr. Bush sounded less convincing when he had to make his case in the face of Mr. Kerry's withering criticism, particularly his repeated insistence that the invasion had diverted attention from the true center of the war on terror in Afghanistan.

Mr. Kerry found the most effective line of argument when he told the audience that "Iraq was not even close to the center of the war on terror" and that the president had "rushed the war in Iraq without a plan to win the peace." It is the strongest and most sensible critique of the administration's actions. Of course, it left Mr. Kerry open to rejoinders by Mr. Bush that Mr. Kerry had sounded far more warlike about Iraq in his pre-campaign persona. That's a fair comment, and one the senator simply has to live with in this campaign. "As the politics changed, his position changed," Mr. Bush said.

But when Mr. Bush jabbed at the senator with a reminder about his infamous comment on voting for a war appropriation before he voted against it, Mr. Kerry had finally found an effective answer. While saying he had made a mistake in the way he had expressed himself, the senator added: "But the president made a mistake in invading Iraq. Which is worse?"

Both men made errors that appeared to be mainly a matter of misspeaking under the pressure of the moment. But Mr. Kerry scored an important point when the president made a more significant slip and talked about the need to go to war because "the enemy attacked us." The person who sent planes smashing into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Mr. Kerry reminded the audience, was Osama bin Laden, who was operating from Afghanistan, not Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

Meanwhile, Mr. Bush, whose body and facial language sometimes seemed downright petulant, insisted, again and again, that by criticizing the way the war is being run, Mr. Kerry was sending "mixed signals" that threatened the success of the effort.

Before last night's debate, we worried that the long list of rules insisted on by both camps would create a stilted exchange of packaged sound bites. But this campaign was starved for real discussion and substance. Even a format controlled by handlers and spin doctors seemed like a breath of fresh air.

