

WASHINGTON POST - In Debate, Kerry and Bush Stand Firm for 90 Minutes

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In the end, it was a real debate: sharp, scrappy and defining, just what the nation seemed to be yearning for during a wartime election campaign. Again and again, [President Bush](#) defended his conduct of the war in Iraq, insisting, "there must be certainty from the U.S. president." Over and over, [Senator John Kerry](#) asserted that Mr. Bush had led the country into a debacle in Iraq and it was time for a "fresh start, new credibility" in foreign affairs.

From the very first question last night, Mr. Kerry was determined to show, as he put it, that "I can make America safer than President Bush has made us." He was cool, respectful, rational in offering a detailed brief that Mr. Bush had embarked on a diversion from the war on Al Qaeda and global terror by invading Iraq, and his answers never exceeded the time limits.

By the time the debate ended, Mr. Kerry appeared to have accomplished his primary goal for the evening: establishing himself as a plausible commander in chief.

Mr. Bush, who seemed defensive and less sure of himself at the outset, quickly gained his footing, counterpunching effectively by repeatedly charging that Mr. Kerry was inconsistent and lacked the resolve to defend the nation against terrorism.

He was just as relentless as Mr. Kerry, and perhaps more emotional, never ceding ground in his insistence that he had used every available means to defend the nation after Sept. 11. At times, he seemed to lean into the camera, pursing his lips, at some pains to disguise his apparent exasperation at Mr. Kerry's attacks, insisting, as he did at the outset, "People know where I stand."

At one point, Mr. Bush burst out a spontaneous answer to a question that Mr. Kerry had posed only rhetorically, declaring before the moderator, Jim Lehrer, had recognized him, "Of course we're doing everything we can to protect America." At another point, after Mr. Bush justified his use of pre-emptive military action by saying "the enemy attacked us," Mr. Kerry pointed out that that enemy had not been Saddam Hussein, leading Mr. Bush to jump in to say, "Of course I know Osama bin Laden attacked us."

The two agreed that the threat of unconventional weapons in the hands of rogue actors would be the biggest challenge facing either of them as president, and that Mr. Hussein had seemed to pose such a threat. They agreed that the United States could not pull out of Iraq precipitately. But they disagreed on virtually all else, from how to handle what both called genocide in Sudan to nuclear proliferation in North Korea and Iran.

Perhaps their sharpest disagreement on future actions came over North Korea, with Mr. Kerry favoring direct talks with Pyongyang intended to halt its development of nuclear weapons and Mr. Bush contending that two-party talks would be unwise and wreck the regional six-party talks in which the United States is counting on China's leverage to pressure the north.

Facing by far the largest national audience of the campaign to date, with polls suggesting that something between one-fifth and one-third of voters might be influenced by last night's encounter, Mr. Kerry was at pains to rebut the Bush campaign's portrayal of him as a fickle flip-flopper who has repeatedly changed his position on the war in Iraq and would cede too much control of the nation's defenses to foreign allies.

When Mr. Bush noted that Mr. Kerry had voted against an \$87 billion appropriation for military and reconstruction operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, then said he had initially voted for another version, Mr. Kerry's rebuttal could hardly have been crisper.

"Well, you know, when I talked about the \$87 billion, I made a mistake in how I talk about the war," Mr. Kerry said. "But the president made a mistake in invading Iraq. Which is worse? I believe that when you know something's going wrong, you make it right. That's what I learned in Vietnam. When I came back from that war, I saw that it was wrong. Some people don't like the fact that I stood up to say so. But I did. And that's what I did with that vote. And I'm going to lead those troops to victory."

Mr. Bush was just as blunt in his insistence that Mr. Kerry's criticism of the conduct of the war had demoralized the troops and the interim Iraqi leaders struggling to impose some stability on that country.

"What kind of message does it say to our troops in harm's way 'wrong war, wrong place, wrong time,' " Mr. Bush said, echoing Mr. Kerry's recent formulation. "That's not what a commander in chief says when you're trying to lead troops."

After the debate, each man's backers claimed victory, with Mr. Kerry's adviser Tad Devine declaring that viewers "saw somebody who could be president, and who could step into that role," and Ken Mehlman, Mr. Bush's campaign manager, declaring, "George Bush spoke plainly," and insisting that Mr. Kerry's "credibility gap became a chasm."

Indeed, each man was true to type, and gave his committed supporters comforting lines of argument to cling to, with Mr. Bush using tested lines from his stump speeches to argue that his course was simple and direct and Mr. Kerry doing the same to argue that only a greater awareness of complexities and more support from allies could keep the nation safe.

As the challenger, Mr. Kerry had the greater burden, and his performance was more disciplined and controlled than usual. He may well have struck undecided voters as not much like the Republicans' worst caricatures. He spoke plainly, politely, but did not shrink from direct and pointed criticism of Mr. Bush's policies.

"You know, the president's father did not go into Iraq, into Baghdad, beyond Basra, and the reason he didn't is he said - he wrote in his book - because there was no viable exit strategy," Mr. Kerry said. "And he said our troops would be occupiers in a bitterly hostile land. That's exactly where we find ourselves today." He added: "Almost every step of the way, our troops have been left on these extraordinarily difficult missions. I know what it's like to go out on one of those missions where you don't know what's around the corner, and I believe our troops need other allies helping."

Mr. Kerry did not explain how he would secure international help, beyond calling an international conference, and by not being Mr. Bush. Mr. Bush's response was skeptical.

"What's the message going to be?" he asked. "Please join us in Iraq for a grand diversion? Join us for a war that is the wrong war at the wrong place at the wrong time? I know how these people think. I deal with them all the time. I sit down with world leaders frequently, and talk to them on the phone frequently. They're not going to follow somebody who says this is the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time."

The more immediate question is whether voters will continue to follow a president who insists the war was right, in the face of polls suggesting widespread doubt about whether it was worth the cost. Mr. Bush is banking almost everything on his belief that they will, as long as they believe he is clear and resolute.

It is too soon to know whether Mr. Kerry, trailing in pre-debate polls, accomplished what Mr. Bush did four years ago when he came out of his first debate against Al Gore stronger than when he went in (or what Ronald Reagan did when he leapfrogged ahead of Jimmy Carter). But he is hoping that voters will agree with his own succinct assessment of Mr. Bush last night: "It's one thing to be certain, but you can be certain and be wrong."