

Kerry Should Challenge Bush to Print Debate

- By John Connolly
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President Bush has brushed aside Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry's challenge to a series of televised debates. What if the presumptive Democratic nominee challenges President Bush to a "national print debate"?

A presidential print debate would take the form of a series of specially formatted and defined sections within just a handful of major newspapers. All of this information would, of course, be available online.

Just as the bipartisan Presidential Debates Commission has set rules for presidential TV debates, a similar bipartisan committee could endorse a set of terms, parameters and specialized sections for this new form of presidential debate.

My organization, the Print Debate Project, will be marketing this campaign process to state and local candidates across the country. We have developed a set of simple terms, creating a level playing field between competing candidates, which can easily be extrapolated to a presidential print debate. Our company has formally waived any payment for the use of the Print Debate in a presidential campaign.

This is a very different process than a TV debate because this plan proceeds regardless of whether this challenge is accepted. It is also different in that the print debate may yield a far more substantive analysis of issues than can be expected in a televised debate.

Consider a precedent: In 1787 and 1788, the authors of the Federalist Papers and the Anti-Federalist Papers engaged in a 10-month print debate that ultimately led to the ratification of the Constitution.

The views of James Madison, John Jay and Alexander Hamilton triumphed over the Anti-Federalists in this deliberative and public dialogue that went back and forth more than 80 times in newspapers of the day.

If the two candidates agree in advance, both of their print debate presentations will be featured simultaneously. Then, in the case of a monthly print debate, every two weeks one candidate and then the other would put forth his response.

The first section of a print debate would prioritize and summarize issues.

A second section would call for the candidate to provide a context prior to asking a question of the opponent. Still another section would call for a pool of reporters to ask questions of each candidate. Follow-up rebuttals in subsequent rounds of the print debate process should yield a greater public recognition of truth than we commonly receive in a political campaign.

This debate would formally create a central and historical record of a presidential campaign that would be reported upon extensively by the TV networks, cable, newspapers, radio and other media. It would also cause citizens to focus more on real issues rather than the shrill cacophony of personal attack ads and fear mongering created by campaign spin doctors.

If Bush rejected this challenge to debate, Kerry could proceed absent any agreement whatsoever. As Kerry's first print debate presentation was being published around the country, he would undoubtedly contrast his substantive approach to the president's, thus potentially influencing public opinion. Hence, if Kerry initiated this challenge, given the electoral risks not to respond in kind, we would undoubtedly see the first presidential print debate.

While televised debates encourage brief exchanges and catchy sound bites, print is better suited to exploring complex issues and presenting comprehensive arguments. A debate in print would also elevate the quality of future presidential TV debates, because citizens would already have a common foundation of information in their hands.

This debate would increase the accountability of leaders because citizens would receive a defined series of statements that many will keep permanently. Yet if a candidate prefers to avoid committing to an issue, he could spell out the reasons during the print debate.

A five-month national print debate would be in the range of 3 percent to 4 percent of the projected cost of the race for the presidency. If the public embraces this step-by-step process, the total cost of future national campaigns may come down sharply, while the nature and tone of our political discourse would rise.

The 2004 race for the presidency, perhaps the most important in a generation, will highlight very different directions for America.

Wouldn't the American public benefit from a truly substantive and deliberative debate, harkening back to our Founding Fathers, at this crucial time in our history?

John Connolly is president of the Print Debate Project (www.debateproject.com) based in Sausalito, Calif.