

Public Domain

by Steve Krulick, Senior Civics Columnist

Don't Swallow De Bait!

"I can think of nothing more boring for the American people than to have to sit in their living rooms for a whole half hour looking at my face on their television screens." – Dwight D. Eisenhower

Is it a waste of time to expound on and criticize a waste of time? Is it worth ten minutes for you to read a detailed but scathing review of a bad film if it saves you from wasting two hours seeing that bad film?

Let me suggest that the hours you might spend watching the three so-called "presidential debates" (and one for two VP candidates) are a complete waste of time, will make you *less* aware about what is important, and will make you complicit in a massive fraud designed to cripple democracy and stifle public questioning of serious issues.

First, some history. The presidential debates used to be run by a genuinely non-partisan organization, the League of Women Voters. The League consistently resisted the major party's candidates' efforts to manipulate the debates. In 1980, the League invited independent John B. Anderson to participate in a debate despite President Jimmy Carter's objections. In 1984, when the Republican and Democratic campaigns vetoed 80 proposed moderators, the League chastised them for trying to eliminate difficult questions.

In 1986, tired of the League standing up to their candidates, the two parties ratified an agreement "to take over the presidential debates." In 1987, they created the Commission on Presidential Debates, a private corporation primarily financed by Anheuser-Busch and other major corporations. The Commission absurdly claims to "have no relationship with any political party," yet was (and still is) headed up by one honcho from each major party! In 1988, when the two parties drafted a secret contract severely constraining the debate format, the League refused to implement it, publicly blasting them and walking away from the proposed scam:

"The League of Women Voters is withdrawing its sponsorship of the presidential debate scheduled for mid-October because the demands of the two campaign organizations would perpetrate a fraud on the American voter. It has become clear to us that the candidates' organizations aim to add debates to their list of campaign-trail charades devoid of substance, spontaneity and honest answers to tough questions. The League has no intention of becoming an accessory to the hoodwinking of the American public."

Having forced a sponsorship vacuum, the Commission permanently seized control of the debates in 1988 and implemented the very contract the League rejected. Every four years since, negotiators for the major party nominees meet behind closed doors to draft secret contracts to dictate much of how the debates will be structured. The CPD then gives "official" cover and sanction to this chicanery.

A secret contract between George W. Bush and John Kerry in 2004 shows just how the two parties rig the debate process. Both parties agreed they would: (1) not request any additional debates, (2) not appear at any other debate or adversarial forum with any other presidential or vice presidential candidate, (3) not accept any television or radio air time offers that involve a debate format, (4) not ask each other direct questions but only rhetorical questions, and (5) clear any questions from the audience by their chosen moderator prior to the debates. (Were this pact between two business corporations, they could be prosecuted for criminal violation of the antitrust laws!)

Without a sponsor willing to challenge the Republican and Democratic campaigns, the debates are often structured to accommodate the needs of risk-averse candidates, not

the voters. Thus, fewer debates are held, they employ poor formats, and viable third-party candidates are excluded, even when a substantial majority of voters support their inclusion. Perot's exclusion in 1996 defied the wishes of 75% of the electorate. In 2000, Ralph Nader and Pat Buchanan were excluded, though 64% of voters supported their inclusion, the only way non-billionaires could reach tens of millions of voters. In fact, no third-party candidate has been allowed to participate in a presidential debate for the last 20 years. Since any candidate excluded from the debates is instantly branded marginal and unworthy of substantial media or voter attention, the debates operate as self-fulfilling gatekeepers to electability... which is just what the two major parties (the duopoly uniparty) want.

Sure, third-party candidates are a long shot, but independent Jesse Ventura, for example, once he was allowed into debates, went from 10% in the polls to winning the Minnesota governor's race. When asked how he triumphed, Ventura simply said, "I was allowed to debate." Even when third-party candidates don't win, they can introduce important, popular, or groundbreaking issues that are eventually co-opted by the major parties.

Yeah, opening up the debates won't change the likely outcome, but it would bring in issues that are otherwise ignored (the uniparty duopoly can't allow that!), and show the Republican-Democrats to be the hypocritical puppets they are. Meanwhile, this is simply another attempt by the greedy media to inject artificial life into this already-decided EC landslide in order to keep interest in the horse race high, to keep viewers watching, to keep ad revenue high, particularly from the money-drenched candidates.

Back to the present, and my "scathing review":

I didn't watch the first so-called "debate" (actually, extended infomercials for defective products, or parallel interviews, as Ralph Nader described it). I wouldn't watch the 24/7 spin and commentary and analysis. I won't watch the sequels. From what I read online about Flop #1 (a case of serial lying and bullying vs. serial lethargy and wimpiness), if this had been at the Apollo Theater, the hook would have been employed early on.

All the media and internet hand-wringing and heated cogitation over what was essentially a Kabuki performance in PeeWee's Political Playhouse reminds me of nothing so much as the detailed evaluation of flickering shadows on the walls of Plato's cave. It would be like a 1000-word NY Times op-ed on whether Hamlet or Fortinbras would be better for the Danish middle-class, or analyzing the economic impact of Senator Palpatine's Death Star proposal on the Naboo budget and GDP. Treating a puppet show as something more than that is a waste of critical faculties and powers of observation. All we need to summarize this farce is a political cartoon simply showing a clichéd capitalist fat cat, with top hat and money bags, with arms up the butts of the corporatist a\$\$hole puppet and the corporatist a\$\$kisser puppet.

Yes, endlessly discussing these trivial and hollow performances (harping on gaffes, "zingers," "gotchas," flubs, or missed opportunities) gives them more weight and legitimacy than they deserve, in much the same manner as voting in corrupt, rigged, illusory (s)elections gives them more perceived power and legitimacy. That even I am taking time to comment ON the commenting, pointing out the waste of time it is, is a waste of time... but it might get some to think and dehypnotize themselves. That is my goal, to emphasize just what a phony-baloney exercise in theater of the absurd it all is. That anyone would base their civic decisions on this over-rehearsed, carefully-regimented, cynical, empty infomercial is incredible and pathetic.

It has nothing to do with WE the People, except to give the illusion of democracy, and give a veneer of legitimacy to the oligarchic kleptocracy that owns and runs the show.