

The Debates of Loathing: Trump and Clinton at Hofstra

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"It's all words, it's all soundbites." — Donald Trump, Hofstra University, Sep 26, 2016

It really doesn't matter that these two creatures loathed and feared in varying degrees should even be conducting a debate. What, after all, is there to dispute? Both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump inhabit worlds of the disparately dislikeable, and reaped the bounty of the US with varying degrees of ruthlessness.

Of course, the assessment from the pundits resembled everything that had transpired before. Take the NBC live coverage, filled with the tepid, the unsure and the stunned. The presidential debate had been "surreal"; Clinton was "overly prepared" yet pleasant, placing Trump on the defensive at points.

For The Donald, he was reactive, filled with emotion, using shock as substitute for substance. "Not a knock-out evening." The Donald then resorted to "bombast". The NBC crew suggested that he was pugilistic – and could not help but refer to those pugilistic voters.

What did matter on this occasion was that neither candidate could manage matters quite as they had hoped. Clinton had had her coaching sessions, but, as the German military theorist Helmuth von Moltke made clear, the eventuality one is prepared for is exactly the one that does not happen on the field of battle. The skill will always lie in dealing with the unanticipated.

Nothing in this entire affair had been anticipated. Clinton at stages could not remove that sense of disbelief around her conduct, visibly taken aback by seeing a character who refused to remain a peripheral creation. Yet this peripheral phenomenon has shrunk the advantage she has in the polls, having toned down elements of his frequent outrage and capitalised on her mistakes.

Trump did his usual business trick, treating the United States as a pawnshop business gone wrong, and in need of a general audit. The industrious Chinese, of course, were doing better. Then came the Mexicans with their various advantages on tax in sending goods back into the country.

Regulations were attacked as lethal for US business, and there was the pressing issue of the jobs situation. "How do you bring the jobs back?" asked the moderator Lester Holt, losing a grip on the unmanageable Donald.

Fantasy then intruded, wearing The Donald's mask. "The first thing you do," he shot back, "is not let them leave." The protectionist instinct kicked in, one entirely at odds with

neoliberal orthodoxy – if such companies are to manufacture products outside the US and then export to the United States, they must, in turn, pay a tax.

He then played the “Secretary Clinton” card – “Is that okay with you?” (The Donald would subsequently claim that he was being all too soft on Clinton, as he did not “want to hurt anyone’s feelings.”)

Debates that take place in the realm of the hypothetical suit Hillary Clinton. Her arguments offer a layer cake of false projections bolstered by an army of fact checking soldiers: plans for clean energy, a green vision with a modern electric grid, sound accounting and a promise for a more secure world in face of threats. “I have tried to be specific on what we can and what we do.”

On energy, Trump brought matters back to business, ever his default position. Investing in solar panels had been disastrous. Naturally, he did not stay at that terminus, moving rapidly to the issue of the ballooning debt. The focus, again, was always “keeping jobs” and “companies to build companies”. Shadows chasing shadows; mirages breeding mirages.

Then, his interest was piqued by the comment about how “my husband did a good job”. NAFTA and the issue of trade deals came into the debate with some punchiness, with Clinton finding herself having to avoid the issue of that “devastation” it had caused. Refusing to accept the social calamity of NAFTA, Clinton put on an air of balance, claiming that she had been discriminatory about such deals.

As for the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, Clinton had to explain the gyrations of her approach. Again, having initially considered it the “gold standard,” the good Secretary had to veer away from Trump’s suggestion that she could not be trusted on it. She had seen the material, and was not convinced it was good for the United States.

A deal of the debate focused on that now redundant entity known as “facts”. Clinton spoke about checking facts in “real time” with plans that would avoid creating debt, and streamline regulations for small business. Raising taxes on corporations and the wealthy were matters she believed in, and anything Trump said in response to that could be “fact checked”.

Such false meticulousness, masquerading and reliability, is the hallmark of the Clinton technique. Trump might have reaped more from that aspect, but chose not to, succumbing to such dismissive remarks as “No wonder you have been fighting ISIS all your adult life!” Yes, it was true that Clinton was the “typical politician” but his procured dagger remained at the surface.

An example of this caution was Trump’s counter on the “law and order issue”. Trump openly spoke of police endorsements, while Clinton was more cautious. She preferred to back the black community, a point that Trump only capitalised on in reminding her about those “super predators” that were stalking the land during the 1990s. Was Madame Secretary’s mind slipping?

The cynical metre of the entire proceeding was well caught by a catty language of bartering. If Clinton released those valuable emails that had been sent on a private server, he would release his tax returns. Clinton’s response focused on his potential deceptions. Was he truly as wealthy as he claimed? She, it must be said, is a rather adept hand at this,

being rather practised in the field of mendacity.

Racism, often in the closet of presidential campaigns, was trundled out on wheels laced with venom. There was sniping over the birther issue (“hurtful” to the President, according to Clinton); racial discrimination by Trump and his comments on Mexico.

Whether any of these comments actually registers an advantage at all is impossible to say. In an environment of polarising, untrustworthy candidates, prejudices tend to be re-enforced rather than alleviated. Come November, Trump is guaranteed a decent showing. Whether that showing of loathing is enough to push him across the line is not necessarily something these debates will change. That battle will be won off the screen, and will not necessarily be helped by any degree of “fact checking”.

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