

The DLC Update COMMENTARY

The Democratic Leadership Council

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Debate Default

Since Dole Cannot Articulate the Conservative Agenda, Perhaps the President Should Use the Second Debate to Challenge the Country

According to the polls and the pundits, Sunday night's first presidential debate was a wash, having virtually no effect on the standing of either candidate.

Many observers gave Bob Dole credit for displaying a quick wit, a friendly demeanor, and plain-spoken Midwestern candor to perhaps the largest single audience of his career. Given universally low expectations about Dole's debating skill, some of his supporters expressed relief and even cheer that he did not self-destruct.

But when you are the representative of a conservative political movement that claims to be the dominant force in American politics, and running well behind an incumbent President at a time of peace and prosperity, then surviving a debate or proving you are not dark or evil is an insufficient goal.

What struck us most about the debate was not Bob Dole's performance as a technical debater, a stand-up comedian, or a regular guy—but his single failure to articulate anything like a consistent philosophy of government, a compelling rationale for turning Bill Clinton out of office, or a coherent view of where Dole would take the country if elected President.

Given the opportunity to define his political philosophy, he did not mention such pillars of the conservative faith as free-market economics, limited government, federalism, or social traditionalism. Instead, he made an oblique reference to the Tenth Amendment, without explaining its language or significance.

Dole voluntarily discussed the supposed centerpiece of his campaign, the 15% tax cut, only once (the President brought it up three times on his own), and then switched rationales for it virtually in mid-sentence: from a spur to faster economic growth to a direct redistribution of income from (bad) government to (wise) individual taxpayers.

He alternated constantly between acknowledging the positive impact of government in his own life to doubting its positive impact on others.

After weeks and weeks of arguing that Clinton-appointed "liberal judges" and posh prisons were generating intolerable levels of crime, Dole seemed to concede the crime issue—other than a strange back-handed attribution of New York's lower crime rates to the less-than-

conservative Mayor Rudy Guiliani.

On entitlement reform, supposedly the GOP Congress' red badge of courage, Dole weakly proposed a bipartisan commission to deal with the problem in some undefined way—also his solution to campaign finance reform.

On his potentially strongest issue, education reform, Dole seemed to argue that private school vouchers were necessary solely to give all kids the opportunity to go to Chelsea Clinton's school. Desperately needing to appeal to Catholic voters, Dole managed to talk about private schools for two minutes without mentioning the superior performance of Catholic schools, while taking a cheap shot at the President that allowed him to mention his own attendance of Catholic schools.

After forcing poor Jack Kemp to reverse himself on affirmative action and immigration to placate social conservatives in the GOP ranks, Dole did not mention either subject. Neither did he mention Kemp's favorite subject—the failure of traditional liberal prescriptions for entrenched poverty in the inner cities.

Dole spent about one-fifth of the debate addressing international affairs and defense policy, without a single mention of the missile-defense proposal that has been the centerpiece of Republican defense strategy for 15 years.

Perhaps Dole's strategists really do believe he can win without defending the record of the 104th Congress, and without providing a coherent alternative to the New Democrat course—that he can win by attacking the President's character and dwelling obsessively on the tax increase of 1993 and the health care plan of 1994. Yet even on those stunted terms, Dole did not deliver, cloaking his character attacks in weird innuendoes and criticisms of the pre-1994 Clinton record in a blizzard of Beltway shorthand and parliamentary references.

Given Dole's strange shadow-boxing, you can hardly blame the President for playing rope-a-dope during Sunday's debate, announcing a few key New Democrat themes but essentially defending his record on conventional "right track" grounds. President Bill Clinton should consider using the second debate not to spar with Dole, but to begin educating the public about the real challenges the country will face beginning November 6.

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