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Patrick Lawrence:

90 Min That Shook the Liberal World

CNN's spectacle made it clear that Biden and Trump present no sensible choice and stand as insults to those who persist in the act of voting.



Donald Trump – Joe Biden CNN debate on June 27. (C-Span still)

Give me a sec to think. I need to make a list. Two.

The genocide in Gaza, the Middle East tinderbox, Bezalel Smotrich, the lost proxy war in Ukraine, relations with Russia, the danger of nuclear war, the fate of NATO, China, the threat

of war with Iran, the emergence of a new world order, Europe's turn toward populism, third world debt, global inequality, the sharply worsening climate crisis: It is a start on the foreign side, in no particular order.

Inter the endless *alia* in these United States, I've got social and economic inequality, money in politics, our drift toward late-imperial bankruptcy, the corruption of the judiciary, the housing crisis from hell, Julian Assange and press freedom, the creeping censorship regime, widespread drug addiction, immigration, the price of eggs, the Pentagon budget: I will leave out Taylor Swift and stop here.

So, a brief précis of the imposing problems defining the tasks of all world leaders in 2024, and then another atop the first for the man or woman who sits behind the *Resolute* Desk in the Oval Office, as every president since Kennedy has. I settled last night at 8 Central time thinking I might hear a little something about, maybe, one or two items on each of these lists as Donald Trump and Joe Biden faced off — I decline the term “debate” — in a studio at CNN's headquarters in Atlanta.

Nothing. Not a usefully coherent thought to any of this. Nero should have been up there as an honorary third candidate — with his fiddle for the background music, of course.

When these two frightening people descended into a bickering exchange concerning Biden's golf handicap and Trump's girth, I knew this first and probably last direct exchange between two incompetents contending for the world's most powerful office was a lost cause. I lost 90 minutes of my time as it schussed down the chute. But never mind that.

And never mind the media “analysts,” who rated the event like theater critics according to who turned in the best performance. The American people lost and they lost big. And beyond Americans, the rest of the world lost, too.

I have regretted for years the extent to which elections in this country have come to be determined not by ideas, courage and imagination, guiding principles, or the articulation of wise ways forward, but by affect.

There is a history to this that goes back to the 18th century — sentimental politics, let's call it — but we can leave that for another time. We are on notice as of this CNN face-off that affect is all there is left in the matter of presidential politics.

Spectacle



“The Society of the Spectacle Guy Debord” video still, September 2009. (Marc Blieux, Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Guy Debord, the tortured sage of the 1968 *événements* in Paris, warned us all those years ago that public life in what used to be the Western democracies had lapsed into sheer spectacle. This is what we saw last week, but let us not stop there.

Our politics, our political process, our voting rituals: These were up on that studio stage last week right along with the two buffoons demanding our attention, and we must now see that these are all mere spectacle, too. Let us not speak of any such thing as oratory: Far too elevated, that, as it presupposes thought.

The best that might plausibly be said of the Biden–Trump encounter is that can be read as a confrontation between the populism on the rise across the Atlantic world and the liberal-authoritarian elites waging political, social, economic, and ideological war against it from the watchtowers of sequestered power. But this may be grasping at straws, I confess.

If Biden is a good-enough expression of what has become of American liberalism — or what it has been for at least a century, as I see it — Trump is an appalling representative of populism as it now revives, even its rightist stripe. I can take Jordan Bardella, who now carries the standard for Marine Le Pen’s National Rally, seriously. After Wednesday night, even those few worthy ideas Trump has had over the years — a new *détente* with Moscow, etc. — do not redeem him.

A blowhard who makes things up met a confused, addled man who is past it: This is the instant orthodoxy among mainstream media — how swiftly do they settle on what they will write and broadcast in boring unison—seems right but nothing like the right story. The right story is that we are in immediate, very serious, very consequential trouble.

In the immediate, we had better consider carefully the beyond-dispute, recorded-on-television reality that a demented man now stands (for however many hours a day he can stand) as the world's most powerful leader. And if human beings are at bottom sight animals, Americans most of all, they can now see, if they care to admit what they have seen, that these two men present no sensible choice and stand as insults to those who persist in the act of voting.

I have marveled for years as the Democratic machine, Wall Street and all those flaccid liberals in Hollywood put their faith and many millions of dollars into a man whose mental and physical capacities were failing. This made no sense, other than to suggest the Democrats operate according to whose turn it is or could find no credible candidate.

Miranda Devine, the right-wing columnist at *The New York Post*, reported in *The Laptop from Hell*, her 2021 exposé, that those in Biden's inner circle were remarking on his incipient dementia as far back as 2012.



Trump and Biden during the CNN face-off. (C-Span still)

Beyond this, the Man from Scranton simply did not present himself as presidential timber, as it is put. It is one thing to roll logs in Congress, where small-time horse trading and corruption are more or less part of the routine, and altogether a mistake to think a long-serving senator who has his teeth whitened can import these habits into the White House and make them work there. Could no one see the mismatch?

Last Wednesday night, not to be missed, finally shook Biden's clerks in the media awake. James Carville, the barb-tongued Southerner who has advised Democrats for decades, remarked before the debate that all the mainstream liberals would watch the debate hearts in mouths hoping there would be no fatal slip or silence. There were a few, but all in Biden's 90 minutes before however many millions tuned in were one-start-to-finish slip.

The New York Times published an astonishing opinion page in its Friday editions. No fewer than six regular contributors, all of them Biden devotees for years, now say he must step aside. Tom Friedman’s headline: “Joe Biden Is a Good Man and a Good President. He must Now Bow Out of the Race.” Paul Krugman: “The Best President of My Adult Life Needs to Withdraw.” Ross Douthat, in one of those back-and-forth “conversations” the *Times* stages in its pages: “Is Biden Too Old? American Got Its Answer.”

Something curious in the Krugman case. His piece, in which he argued that Kamala Harris would make a fine replacement should Biden drop out — amazing, Krugman — was pulled from the page a few hours after it was published. I’m not even going to speculate why the economist-turned-Democratic-ideologue took this decision.



Harris speaking at a primary rally in Orangeburg, South Carolina on Feb. 20. (Eric Eloffson/Biden For President, Flickr, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

I decline to mark this down to wisdom (always a safe course when corporate journalists are at issue). To me this sudden volte-face reflects nothing so much as years of irresponsibility, ideological conformity, and a lemming-like march to what turns out now to be a tumultuous political sea.

“No one respects us,” Trump insisted severally during the fateful 90 minutes. “The world laughs at us.” I seriously doubt another Trump presidency would improve matters in this line, but his reminder of how American politics looks beyond American shores was right.

“I am worried about the image projected to the outside world,” Sergey Radchenko, an international relations man at Johns Hopkins, wrote on “X.” “It is not an image of leadership. It is an image of terminal decline.”

I’ll say. What’re they thinking, I wondered while watching Wednesday evening. What thinking in Paris, Moscow, Brasilia, Beijing, Mexico City, Pretoria? The question kept ringing in my mind like some awful case of tinnitus of the brain.

I have heard and read various answers, all to be expected, none good. I do not get many foreign observers laughing, but many or most worrying or worse. Here is one from the eye of the storm.

Mazin Qumsiyeh is a professor at Bethlehem University and an energetic publisher of a privately circulated newsletter. He wrote Thursday morning, and I will leave the harsh language as it is:

“The U.S./Israel empire marches on with some successes and some setbacks. Zionist-picked Conman Trump faced off against Zionist-picked Genocide Joe in a presidential debate with no public moderator by two committed Zionist Jews, Jake Tapper and Dana Bash.... It gives the U.S. public a distraction to keep the delusion that they still have democracy instead of dealing with real challenges like climate change, rich getting richer and poor getting poorer, the madness of war, etc....

Israel as an apartheid regime must end or the US/Israel killing machine goes on and will lead us to global catastrophic war thanks to the lobby/special interests. We need to focus efforts on stopping the addiction to war (and genocide) for profit and to work to build a sustainable future.”

Just a few words to remind ourselves of what people sound like in the imperium’s distant reaches. Professor Qumsiyeh founded and directs the Palestine Institute of Biodiversity and Sustainability. He signs his newsletters, “Stay human and keep Palestine alive.”

Patrick Lawrence, a correspondent abroad for many years, chiefly for the International Herald Tribune, is a columnist, essayist, lecturer and author, most recently of *Journalists and Their Shadows*, available from Clarity Press or via Amazon. Other books include *Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century*. His Twitter account, @thefloutist, has been permanently censored.

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By Patrick Lawrence

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