

Far from speechless

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Burlington Free Press, 17 October 2004

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When Sen. John Kerry and President George W. Bush faced off on television for the third and final time Wednesday, they were judged in the proverbial court of public opinion.

In one room at the University of Vermont, though, the candidates were up against something more like a star chamber. The local audience was full of hanging judges -- judges who happened to be eating pizza as they offered mostly scathing critiques of the presidential contenders.

But then, this audience was primed for such scrutiny. Eight members of UVM's prize-winning debate team, which includes alumni serving as coaches, had gathered to watch this phase of the democratic process. They also were sharing their veggie and pepperoni slices with Tuna -- as Professor Alfred Snider, the university's debate guru, is universally known.

It proved to be an ebullient gabfest. But some of the crowd's frequent interjections can't be found in the dictionary.

When Bush boasted about Afghanistan's election the previous weekend, sophomore Nick Landsman-Roos punctuated the president's remarks with a Texas-like: "Yee-haw!"

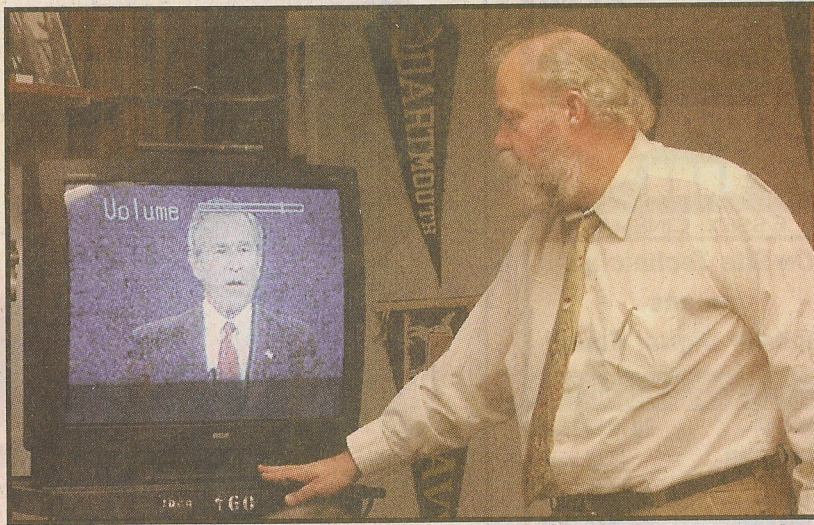
Later, Landsman-Roos greeted a familiar Kerry line -- about Bush being the only chief executive since Herbert Hoover to lose jobs -- with an emphatic "KA-DING!"

Like his students, Snider was sardonic. "Oh, spare me!" he said when Kerry pledged to uphold the Second Amendment. "Terrorists can go to a gun show and, without any background checks, buy assault weapons."

Snider tried to be fair and balanced, however.

"That's a good statistic," he observed after Kerry pointed out that about 82,000 Arizona residents lost their health insurance in the last four years.

Conversely, the president's reminder that Kerry voted against the first Gulf War in 1991 prompted Snider to acknowledge: "Bush kicked ass there."



Photos by ALISON REDLICH, *Free Press*

University of Vermont professor Alfred S. Snider turns up the volume on the third presidential debate, which he watched with students and alumni at the World Debate Institute in Burlington on Wednesday evening.

The structured format of college competition was missing from this event, but the UVM debaters had done at least some of the requisite research that they'd normally tackle before a tournament. Preparation for the minutiae of political wrangling did not eclipse their sense of humor. The evening's silliest moments might have been fueled by the bag of M&Ms being handed around the rectangular wooden table, which the participants periodically pounded for emphasis.

They were positively giddy when Bush delivered an especially snorting version of his trademark nasal laugh: "Heh, heh, heh."

Beyond the ridicule, these debate enthusiasts know life-and-death issues are at stake. Like most Americans, they're grappling with Iraq, terrorism, human rights, health care, the economy and the environment. Their assigned topic for 2004, argued at college tournaments all over the country, has to do with fossil fuels. Watching the Bush-Kerry match was voluntary and just for fun.

Among the crew was Greta Lockwood, 26, a paralegal and former UVM student who's now a debate coach. She grew up in the Northeast Kingdom, believing that "my opinion didn't matter."

But there she was Wednesday night, loudly expressing her views, along with other members of the university's Lawrence Debate Union.

Lockwood, class of 2000, favors the Democrat, but that didn't stop her from critiquing his performance. Despite the group's decidedly liberal leanings, both Kerry and Bush were both in for some withering scorn.

Long tradition

The UVM debate tradition dates back to 1899, when Edwin Lawrence, Class of 1901, got it started. "He became a banker, a lawyer and a railroad tycoon," Snider explained. "In the 1960s, he gave the university an endowment for a Debate Union."

Two decades ago, Snider helped revive the program, which had almost lapsed. He's not allowed to reveal how much Lawrence donated but says that it provides \$62,000 annually, with \$8,000 to \$9,000 more coming from the student government.

Adjacent to Snider's Main Street office, the walls of a seminar room are lined with trophies, plaques and commemorative bowls that generations of UVM debaters have earned in national competitions. The Debate Union's team of 40 travels coast to coast -- though not necessarily all at the same time -- to compete in tournaments. This weekend, 38 from UVM have trekked to the University of Rochester. In early November, two students and a debate coach head for Oklahoma City.

Despite the endowment, tight finances determine how many debaters can go on the 17 or so annual road trips and what the accommodations will be. "They sleep six to a hotel room," Snider said.

Many educational institutions specialize in certain debate styles, ranging from personal narratives to policy-wonk declarations. New York State's Bard College students "speak slowly, tell stories, and focus on advocacy and activism," Snider says. "Dartmouth is a cold, calculated argumentation machine."

UVM, he noted, is free to be more eclectic. "Other schools have to show the dean they're winning trophies. With an endowment, we don't."

Each summer Snider also hosts the World Debate Institute, which is a series of two-week camps for about 200 high school, college and international students. During the school year, Snider offers an interesting array of courses. "Persuasion, argumentation, rhetorical criticism, the rhetoric of television evangelists," he says. "Every four years during the last 20, I've offered presidential campaign rhetoric. This semester, I'm teaching the rhetoric of reggae music. I initially tried to have unlimited enrollment, and 330 people showed up. Now, 30 is the maximum."

The Jamaican musical genre, in fact, is another important credential on Snider's resume. In the mid-1980s, he co-founded the Vermont Reggae Festival, a high-spirited summer concert that took place in various locations around the state. The annual event folded two years ago due to logistical problems. "All good things must come to an end," Snider mused.

The nickname Tuna dates back to his high school days in Los Angeles. "My debate partner and I were talking about organized crime, and he decided that I look like a Chicago mobster called The Big Tuna," Snider explained. "It's a good icebreaker. And it adds an air of mystery to my otherwise boring personality."

Oh yeah?

Snider's self-effacement was belied by his assertive attitude at the Bush-Kerry debate.

"Oh, yeah? What about gay marriage and (reproductive) choice?" he called out when the president patted himself on the back for "not telling citizens how to live their lives."

Both candidates kept saying "congressmen," and Snider invariably corrected them by shouting, "congresspersons!"

There was a collective groan whenever Bush mentioned his No Child Left Behind initiative in response to questions about the minimum wage or job loss. His ample use of "liberal" to label Kerry also drew criticism.

"Bush avoids addressing the issues by using ad hominem attacks," Lockwood suggested, referring to comments that appeal to prejudice rather than intellect.

"That's not to say we like everything Kerry talks about," Fletcher cautioned.

"But we're more in the range of Democrats to anarchists," Landsman-Roos, 19, said.

"Our Republicans didn't come tonight," Snider remarked, theorizing that those debaters might be catching the baseball game or studying for impending exams -- probably not boycotting the proceedings.

Chris Preble, an 18-year-old UVM freshman from Oregon, said she was tired of the repetition in presidential debates. "By now, everyone basically knows what each candidate stands for."

Debate coach Charlie Hoag, 25, denounced the "character assassination" he had witnessed.

Snider suspects that debate experience has given the UVM team a more mature perspective. "We once would have seen those ad hominems as zingers," Snider said. "As debaters, we're thinking, 'Dude, that's a mistake.'"

These scholarly debate enthusiasts pride themselves on having a different way of evaluating Kerry and Bush. "Most people think image is so important, but that doesn't affect us anymore," said sophomore Andrea Aeschlimann, 19.

Nonetheless, at one point, she made an image-conscious observation about the president: "Look at that smirk."

Several people noticed how much the president was blinking. (They weren't alone. Thursday's "Late Show with David Letterman" would feature a comedy bit, Blink Count, that clocked 19 involuntary Bush eyelid closings during one of Kerry's long-winded answers to a question from the moderator.)

Brady Fletcher, a 20-year-old junior, had another take on Bush's demeanor: "I think he's sedated this time." Maybe it was the M&Ms talking.

The students' own debate guidelines require good posture and concise statements. "We speak almost at auctioneer speed," Landsman-Roos said. "We engage each other and ask each other questions. For Bush and Kerry, it's really a scripted stump speech."

"I'd prefer more clash of idea," Lockwood lamented.

"I think they both lost this debate," Fletcher surmised.

When Bush rhapsodized about the importance of loving thy neighbor, Kerry prefaced his next remarks with, "I respect everything the president just said."

"But it's a load of crap," added Preble, as if she was reading Kerry's mind.

The candidates continued quoting the Ten Commandments. "Is this Sunday school?" wondered Hoag, a 2002 graduate.

Bush then revealed his prayer list: "I pray. I pray for strength. I pray for wisdom. I pray for my family. I pray for our troops."

"I pray Dick Cheney won't die," quipped Hoag, making a reference to Bush's considerable reliance on a vice president with heart problems.

The Big Tuna welcomed their wisecracks.

"I encourage them to talk back to the screen," Snider said. "I hate TV because it's makes us so passive. These students give me hope for the future. That's why I do this job. I want to insert more critical, creative thinking into this world."

Lockwood sees another benefit in debating. "I had no self-confidence before," she said. "It helped me find my inner voice."