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Crowd Control: Audience Acts As Second Moderator In Vegas Debate

Posted November 18, 2007 | 08:18 PM (EST)

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The following piece was produced by HuffPost's [OffTheBus](#).

LAS VEGAS - Las Vegas political activists aren't known for polite listening and conservative behavior. Two days before the presidential debate on Nov. 15, UNLV students gathered to watch a mock debate between college Democrats and Republicans. It was a blood bath. Question and answer time with the audience showed no mercy.

With baited breath, we waited outside of the Cox Pavilion Thursday afternoon for similarly provocative discussions. As a UNLV alum, I was eager to see the media circus and if we would turn up the heat.

Inside, big wigs in Nevada politics meandered along the blue carpet. State Senator Dina Titus chatted with students. Lou Dobbs strolled on-stage for a brief segment. We were apparently in the "Situation Room." It's kind of cramped in the situation room.

Howard Dean smiled broadly at the incoming crowds. Nobel Peace Laureate and advisor for the new UNLV Black Mountain Institute Wole Soyinka was one of 100 chosen to sit in the "red zone." Wolf Blitzer sat at his clear plastic podium, looking grumpy and serious.

The 800 of us campus representatives climbed into our seats all along the right side of the stage. The other 26,200 students strolling across campus were wholly unaware that UNLV was making history.

The university and CNN kept the whole affair mum. Students and faculty were picked out of a lottery to win seats. There was little to no press presence on the campus itself - the campus was split between chaos and oblivion. Those lucky few took advantage of the opportunity.

Once the debate began, it was evident that the crowd would be the second moderator. John Roberts' second question on the attacks on Hilary Clinton received loud jeers. "Get to the issues!" shouted someone across the hall.

In the middle of the debate, Obama was booed for criticizing Clinton. Some think the audience was stacked with Clinton supporters, but the attacks went on for way too long. It may be uncivil, but it's a message to other candidates to move on and actually answer some questions. Albeit, loaded questions.

Driver's licenses for illegal immigrants - yes or no? Human rights or national security? Merit-based pay for better teachers - yes or no? Litmus test for Supreme Court justices - yes or no? Senator Chris Dodd was right about having debates solely on education - and maybe all other issues too.

William S. Boyd Law School professor Scott Burnham was against the yes or no format. "It's a matter of balance. " But he did feel this debate was a good opportunity to get to know the candidates personality.

Senator Joseph Biden seemed to be a crowd favorite. He showed humor without being rehearsed. He gave insightful answers without digressing. Kucinich couldn't get a word in edgewise. Governor Bill Richardson's Latino thunder got stolen by Dodd's shout out to his service in the Dominican Republic with the Peace Corps.

Questions from the audience didn't have the bite we were looking for either. Normally, long, drawn-out questions referring to very specific legislation passed and injustices incurred would be thrown at speakers. CNN chose softball questions from Iraq veterans and mild-mannered citizens. Where was the usual fire lit under asses?

A collective groan could be heard from the UNLV side of the Pavilion after the last question, asked by a student, to Clinton - "Diamonds or pearls?" Way to represent!

Many students were undecided on who they supported. Senior anthropology major, Angeline Caballero, is one of them. At the end of the debate she was still unsure. "No, I still don't know. But it gives you a lot to think about."

Pasted from <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/aisha-obrien/crowd-control-audience-a_b_73189.html?view=print>