



**Tell the Truth! 2004**

# Media Reality ✓ Check

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*Forget the Fuss About Debate Rules: Will Bush and Cheney Get a Fair Shake from Four Liberal Anchors?*

## Lehrer Favored Liberal Questions in 2000

While the media elite fret about the debates being too bogged down in rules and restrictions, the better question is whether George Bush and Dick Cheney will get a fair shake from four liberal news anchors.

First up is Jim Lehrer, who fits comfortably into the media elite, even in the subsidized liberal enclave that is PBS. He shares all the ideological assumptions. During the GOP convention, Lehrer came out of a tribute to Ronald Reagan by reciting the liberal take on Reaganomics: "He gets a lot of credit for the tax cuts, but, of course, the tax cuts resulted in a huge deficit, and people do not remember."

But Lehrer is rarely a target of public complaints by conservatives, because of his anchorman style — sticking to brief questions and avoiding long, indulgent elaborations of his opinions on the world. Critics joke he has the courage to be dull and boring.

This would explain how he became the consensus choice of the candidates in 2000 to moderate all three presidential debates. (CNN's Bernard Shaw questioned the vice presidential nominees.) In the first 2000 debate on October 3, Lehrer's questions generally avoided betraying a point of view. (In fact, Lehrer was attacked the next day from the left by *Washington Post* TV critic Tom Shales for using the word "pro-life" to describe Bush's stand: "reputable journalistic organizations do not use this term," Shales huffed.)

But after Shaw peppered the vice presidential nominees with liberal questions, Lehrer echoed that performance in the second presidential debate on October 11. His questions were either neutral or liberal. None of them challenged the candidates from an explicitly conservative viewpoint.

Lehrer asked if the candidates would support a federal ban on "racial profiling by police and other authorities at all levels of government." He asked if they would support "a national hate crimes law." He asked, "Do you believe in general terms that gays and lesbians should have the same rights as other Americans?"

He asked, "What about the more than 40 million younger Americans who do not have health insurance right now? What would you do about that?" And: "How do you see the connection between controlling gun sales in this country and the incidence of death by accidental or intentional use of guns?"

In the third, town hall-style debate on October 17, Lehrer chose which of the more than 100 "uncommitted" voters would ask the candidates questions. Out of 15 questions from the allegedly undecided, eight leaned left. The only two questions that might be designated as coming from the right were one about an overcommitted military, and one about parents struggling with Hollywood entertainment.

Among the liberal questions Lehrer approved were: "Would you be open to the ideal of a national health care plan for everybody?" And: "How will your administration address diversity, inclusiveness? And what role will affirmative action play in your overall plan?"

Lehrer found no time to challenge the two candidates from a conservative direction on the divisive effects of racial quotas or the failures of gun control, for example. Can we hope for a more balanced slate of debate questions in 2004?

— Tim Graham

### Lehrer: How Much I Loved Watergate

"If it hadn't been for that [Watergate] burglary, and all the subsequent trimmings, it is quite probable there would be no public broadcasting anymore. It is an absolute certainty there would be nothing called *MacNeil/Lehrer*. So for the record let me say (in italic type for emphasis): *Thank you, Nixon. Thank you, Messrs. Liddy and Hunt, Dean and Colson, Haldeman and Ehrlichman. We could not have done it without you.* It's a lovely story of how good triumphed over evil. More or less." — **PBS anchor Jim Lehrer in his memoir *A Bus of My Own*.**

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**To schedule an interview with an MRC spokesman, please contact Tim Scheiderer at (703) 683-5004**