



Tell the Truth! 2004

Media Reality ✓ Check

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Networks Crown Kerry Winner of First Presidential Debate, Deride Bush as "Angry" and "Self-Pitying"

Media Decide Kerry Gets the "Momentum"

All of the networks awarded victory in Thursday night's debate to John Kerry over George W. Bush, and some journalists seemed excited by the idea that the strong performance could boost the Democrat's overall campaign. But an ABC poll found that even though a plurality of voters thought Kerry was the better debater, Bush lost none of his lead. Highlights from the networks' post-debate spin:

■ **CBS Crowns Kerry.** Instead of polling a cross-section of the country, CBS News polled a paltry 200 "uncommitted" voters, most of whom went into the debate feeling "the country was on the wrong track." But CBS touted the results — 44 percent saying Kerry won, 26 percent saying Bush won — as a huge boon to Kerry. "John Kerry was scoring better than George Bush, and he was scoring even better among women," reporter Anthony Mason cheered.

■ **Same Old George.** Former Democratic spinner George Stephanopoulos was the most celebratory on ABC, declaring that "by appearing calm and confident, for the most part, during this debate, he [Kerry] answered the flip-flopper charge with his demeanor even more than with his words." Later, Stephanopoulos touted the rival CBS poll as great news for Kerry: "He will be able to come out of here saying he has momentum and changing the dynamic of the campaign....I think Senator Kerry has momentum coming out of here."

■ **Beware the Angry Monarch.** ABC News Political Director Mark Halperin panned Bush's reaction to Kerry's attacks: "The President was remarkably angry-seeming a lot of the time...It's usually not a very becoming posture for a candidate." Over on MSNBC, *Newsweek's* Jon Meacham, who had earlier compared Kerry to Abraham Lincoln (see

box), said Bush seemed like "a king who is a little worried and a little tired....there was almost an element of self-pity there." NBC's Andrea Mitchell, also on MSNBC, agreed that "the reaction shots were very damaging....Bush was impatient, he smirked a little bit."

■ **Who's Biased?** On PBS after the debate, *Newsweek* Senior Editor Jonathan Alter scoffed that "there are not going to be a lot of people on Fox saying John Kerry won this debate, so they [Republicans] have one cable network which is gonna be spinning hard in their direction." But Alter was in error; FNC's Morton Kondracke, Fred Barnes, and Bill Kristol all said Kerry did well.

John Kerry, Another Great Emancipator?

"The greatest flip-flop in American history is Lincoln, [who] in his first Inaugural was not for emancipation and then two years later he was. Is that statesmanship or is that a flip-flop?"

— *Newsweek* Managing Editor Jon Meacham on MSNBC about an hour before the debate.

■ **Balanced Brokaw.** On NBC, Tom Brokaw posed tough questions not just to Republican Rudy Giuliani, but also Democratic vice presidential nominee John Edwards. "I'm compelled to point out that both you and Senator Kerry gave the President authority to wage that war," Brokaw told Edwards before listing the problems with Kerry's plan to enlist more international support. "It's easy for a challenger to make that promise, it's much more difficult to deliver on it."

■ **Kerry's "Minor Thing."** CNN's David Ensor thought it was fine that the candidates fact-checked each other, as when "John Kerry left off Poland as one of the allies that's in Iraq — a minor thing like that, but Bush caught him right away." Maybe it's not so minor to the Poles. But Ensor did point out two other Kerry goofs that eluded the broadcast networks: his claim that Osama bin Laden is in Afghanistan (the CIA believes he's in Pakistan), and Kerry's argument that North Korea got the Bomb while Bush was pre-occupied with the Iraq war.

— Brent Baker and Rich Noyes

**Read the Media Research Center's complete analysis of last night's debate at www.mrc.org.
To schedule an interview with an MRC spokesman, please contact Tim Scheiderer at (703) 683-5004**