***At Least the Nats and the Os Won That Night***

By John Clayton

Do you notice that things seemed different last week? They truly were. It might be because the Washington Nationals were in the postseason. The same goes for the Baltimore Orioles, which may have been even more of a surprise. On the national political scene, specifically last week’s presidential debate, that president that looked so upbeat in the Hope poster a few short years ago looked grumpy and out of sorts. I wasn’t sure whether he needed a shot of scotch or a shot of Metamucil—maybe both. The guy wearing the big smile that was annoying him so effectively was none other than that good old Massachusetts Moderate I used to like. I thought we lost him when he outflanked all those right wingers last winter, but he’s back, or at least he’s back for now. Like I said, much was different last week.

More recently, I had a dilemma. I ask you, who’s rotten idea was it to schedule the vice presidential debate opposite the New York Yankees/Baltimore Orioles playoff game? Where are the priorities? I have to assume that this was some sort of Republican plot. After all, New York and Maryland are pretty solidly blue states, for the most part, so it wouldn’t surprise me that such mischief might occur. In any event, it made for a busy if not particularly substantive night.

The whole debate concept needs revitalization. These two recent debates are good examples of the march of style and gamesmanship over substance. This is not to say there was a time when debates were purely high-level and principled exchanges of opinion. For example, during the Republican primary Newt Gingrich called for “Lincoln-Douglas style debates” which he characterized as unfettered exchanges of rhetoric on an intellectual plane that could not be achieved in our present-day format. His concept spawned a flurry of articles by various historians who generally suggested that the Lincoln-Douglas debates were not the lofty, idealized debates that one might think they were. Debates were never perfect, but they’ve gotten worse.

Political debating strategy has always involved stretching the truth, or at least tailoring it for maximum effect, but as I sift through my memory of past presidential and vice presidential debates—and I probably watched all of them—I see a steady decline. The standard for truth seems to be—and I’m not pointing any fingers here because they all do it—making statements that have a shred of truth to them but on balance are either patently false or totally evasive. These people rarely answer the questions. Each question pushes a policy button that emits focus group-tested policy statements. Then again, with our emphasis on The Gaffe as the decider of presidential elections, can we really blame them?

I don’t mean to suggest that all debates are wastes of time (I do watch them, after all) and I think almost all (no, not all) candidates of my lifetime have distinguished themselves more often than not. That arena is a pressure cooker, and I respect the people that walk into it, but I still hold that the quality moments are occurring less often, not more. They’re just talking past each other, despite the best efforts of the moderator.

The best debate I remember personally, where I really found myself feeling good about both candidates (at the time, at least) was the vice presidential debate between Dick Cheney and Joe Lieberman, who were running on tickets with George W. Bush and Al Gore, respectively. I recall they had a cordial and extremely informative exchange of opinions on a variety of subjects. I was not the only one, by far, who thought, Why aren’t these two men on top of the ticket instead of those other two clowns?

The first 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debate is always remembered for two things: Kennedy won because he looked better than Nixon on television, and Nixon won based on the opinion of those who heard the debate on the radio. Be that as it may, if you ever get the chance to listen to some of those debates, you will be impressed by how well-informed and erudite both men were on the issues they discussed. It is impressive.

I think at least some of the candidates who have made the final round in recent years are capable of the same. Why isn’t it happening? Why isn’t it worth it for them to take the risk and talk to us as intelligent adults? Is this not something we value in our political leaders anymore?