

Why Bush Lost The Debates

By Brent Filson

The three presidential debates were an unmitigated disaster for President George Bush. There's one reason why. And it has nothing to do with the issues.

Throughout the debates, George Bush failed to give leadership talks on a consistent basis.

Leadership talks are a far different and more effective means of leadership communication than speeches and presentations.

Speeches and presentations primarily communicate information. Leadership talks, on the other hand, have the speaker make a deep, human, emotional connection with the audience.

Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton were masters at giving leadership talks.

Up until that first debate, both George Bush and John Kerry had not been giving leadership talks but speeches, canned speeches to canned audiences. But that debate and the subsequent two debates changed all that in Kerry's favor.

The turnabout was all the more dramatic because on the eve of that first debate, Kerry's campaign was dead in the water.

John Kerry had made three serious leadership mistakes during the summer. Number one, in July, he said he would have given George Bush the authorization to go to war even though he knew weapons of mass destruction didn't exist. Number two, in August, he did not respond quickly enough to the swift boat veterans attack on him. Their ads came out on August 4th, and Kerry didn't respond until August 19th; and then it was a lame response in that he said their book should be banned and their ads pulled from the air. And number three, he led a Democratic Convention that by the most important measure of all (the post-convention bounce) was a failure. If a party's convention doesn't get at least a 10 point bounce, it's in trouble. The Democrats only got a four point bounce. Added to these mistakes was the successful Republican convention, which garnered a double-digit bounce in the polls. All of this helped put Kerry behind Bush by eight to 10 points on the eve of the first debate.

The first debate changed the game. For the first time in the campaign, John Kerry began giving leadership talks, began connecting emotionally and decisively with the audience. George Bush, on the other hand, was ineffectual. He slumped on the podium. He looked flustered, petulant and indecisive. And he wasn't as articulate as Kerry. In short, Kerry demonstrated presidential bearing, George Bush didn't. The polls show that viewers clearly saw this as Bush's big lead was erased, and now the race is a statistical dead heat.

Though having a better performance in the subsequent debates, George Bush never recovered from his dismal showing in the first.

Look at all the presidential debates from Kennedy/Nixon up till the present. Every one of them was won or lost not on issues but on the ability of one candidate to react spontaneously and from the heart to unexpected questions and/or situations. In short, the winners were able to give leadership talks, while the losers were mired in presentation/speech communication.

Brent Filson's latest books are *The Leadership Talk: The Greatest Leadership Tool* and *101 Ways To Give Great Leadership Talks*. He is founder and president of The Filson Leadership Group, Inc. Sign up for his free leadership magazine: www.actionleadership.com