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Debate a telling test of character

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It was inevitable that the drama leading up to the first debate between presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama would impact on the substance of the debate and the demeanour and responses of the candidates.

So it was not surprising that a significant part of the debate that was supposed to be on foreign policy and international affairs focused instead on the economic crisis, how the candidates would tackle this and its consequences, and its impact on the roll-out of election policies.

And it was not surprising that McCain's gamesmanship over the preceding days left him looking bereft of economic leadership and, by his own admission, "not feeling great about a lot of things".

Was it a genuine concern for a bipartisan solution to the economic crisis, a strategic play to improve his ratings on economic policy, or simply an erratic misstep that led to John McCain's decisions to get involved, suspend his campaign and threaten not to attend the debate?

It's not clear at this stage whether McCain's intervention has contributed to, or detracted from, the chances of a swift bipartisan agreement.

However, last Friday's meeting showed that neither President W. Bush nor McCain can manage the Republicans in the Congress, a situation that does not augur well for a McCain presidency.

During the debate, McCain blamed the economic crisis on the policies of his own party but could offer only the time-honoured Republican solution, tax cuts, to help shore up the country's financial future.

Then, when pushed by moderator Jim Lehrer, there was a classic policy-on-the-run moment when McCain casually dropped the notion that he would consider a spending freeze on everything except defence, veterans' programs and entitlements.

Obama was the clear winner on economic issues, offering an analysis that acknowledged the concerns of Main Street ahead of the impact on Wall Street and tackling these concerns with a tax package that would benefit middle-class families rather than corporations.

Voters looking for reassurance that a Democratic administration would have their interests at heart are certain to have found comfort in Obama's considered and direct responses.

When the debate finally turned to foreign policy issues, primarily the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and the growing belligerence of Iran and Russia, McCain was on more familiar territory.

He looked more comfortable and gave stronger responses, particularly on the need for the control of nuclear proliferation in Iran and Russia.

On the other hand, Obama made a good case for tackling al-Qaeda-controlled international terrorism by boosting the military response in Afghanistan.

On overall foreign policy issues, the candidates were well matched in debate and did not stray from their previously established positions.

This being the case, it is likely that voters' opinions were reinforced rather than swayed.

It is clear that McCain sees Iraq as central to his approach to foreign policy.

While he would undoubtedly be more engaged than Bush, he sees the world through a lens clouded by militaristic and Cold War views.

McCain quoted the Ronald Reagan maxim for dealing with foreign powers, "Trust but verify", and there were times during the debate when, with his recollections and storytelling, he came across as Reaganesque.

Many times in the course of the debate it seemed that McCain was offering his travel schedule and meeting diary as the basis of his expertise in foreign affairs.

Obama, on the other hand, fully understands that, the way the US is perceived by the rest of the world, it cannot be a major player on the world stage and in conflict areas without revitalised efforts to rebuild trust.

Not all Americans will care for that approach, but it is persuasive to those who look to restore the US as an effective international force for democratic good.

The events of the past few days have provided a unique opportunity to see how both presidential candidates function when confronted with a crisis.

Obama was methodical and considered. McCain charged in, making decisions on the run, and was then forced to reverse them. To a considerable extent, these same characteristics were demonstrated in the debate.

Contrary to expectations, this debate was not a replay of 1960. That may come at the next debate, on domestic policy issues, on October 7 in Nashville, Tennessee.

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