

Tom Still: Pence, Harris disagree without being disagreeable in VP debate

Posted on Thursday, Oct 8, 2020

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It felt better to be an American tonight.

After last week's chaotic confrontation – let's not call it a debate – between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, the Wednesday night encounter between vice presidential candidates Mike Pence and Kamala Harris was a relative exercise in civility.

Of course, Vice President Pence and U.S. Sen. Harris took turns dodging questions that begged for direct answers, and each violated time limits when it suited their interests. However, those are behaviors within the range of American televised debate traditions since Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy met on a grainy, black-and-white screen in 1960.

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In some ways, what didn't happen is as important as what did occur. Pence and Harris, while forceful at times, were also respectful of one another. Pence declined to take the tact of male sovereignty in a world long dominated by men; Harris eschewed the route of playing the female political victim.

Both deserve credit for leaving their viewers with the feeling that it was essentially about differences in policy, outlook and ideology; not that it was a gender test.

Harris successfully re-introduced herself to an electorate that may have two or three time zones away from knowing who she was and what she has accomplished.

That is no small test when, for most Americans, what they knew about Kamala Harris they had heard second-hand.

In an odd way, the same goes for Pence. He wasn't exactly a stranger after nearly four years in office - but neither was he viewed as an independent thinker. For many people, Pence was thought of as Trump's seconding motion ... someone who could be counted upon, no matter what, to defend his bombastic boss. On Wednesday night, Pence showed himself to be a loyalist, but also someone who could be trusted to assume command if need be.

Who won? Perhaps we all did, simply by the fact that regardless of their disagreements on many issues, Pence and Harris chose not to be disagreeable.

— Still is president of the Wisconsin Technology Council and a former associate editor of the Wisconsin State Journal.