

Last Night's Presidential Debate Was Wack - Here's Why

Written by Davey D ID4138

Tuesday, 22 January 2008 05:27 -

So last night after doing a whole lot of hustling and string pulling I got a chance to attend the big presidential debate in South Carolina. The pomp and circumstances surrounding it and leading up to it was a story on to itself. The way it was framed is that it was a debate designed to force the candidates to talk specifically about key issues important to the African American community.

The fact that this debate was taking place on the Martin Luther King holiday in Myrtle Beach, -a place that once upon a time was the site for numerous lynching of black people made this symbolic. The fact that the African American Congressional Whip Congressman James Clyburn who is from South Carolina along with the Congressional Black Caucus Institute was putting this on made this even more symbolic.

Adding to the backdrop of this debate was the ugly squabble and controversy between front runners Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. We heard all sorts of talk ranging from Obama not being Black enough to Martin Luther King not being "all that" compared to former president Lyndon B Johnson to former President Bill Clinton unfairly maligning Obama which was rubbing a lot of Blacks the wrong way including Clyburn who publicly called for Bill to "tone it down".

I attended a number of events including a community gathering for MLK at the House of Blues and a pre-debate dinner at some super fancy Beach and Golf resort and people were excited. Last night was the night that the candidates were gonna get down and really drop some gems and bring crucial attention to our plight and give it a national platform. I spoke to people like Congress people like Jim Clyburn and Barbara Lee of Oakland prior to the debate. They seemed excited that finally key issues resonating with the Black community, like Katrina, Africa HIV Aids, or the prison industrial complex would be spoken about. With Lee, issues like Haiti and Africom were important, but she wasn't so sure that they would come up in the debate although she felt they were important and should.

Clyburn told me that he and the Congressional Black Caucus had partnered with CNN and had given them a number of questions to raise up to the candidates. He said that he and others would be listening and watching carefully to make sure that the news outlet didn't sanitize and soften up some of those tough questions. The issue of race was a front and center topic with everyone speculating whether or not Obama would pull the Black vote from Hillary whose husband has strong roots with the political black establishment in the south. Topping off this whole scenario was word that some white supremacist group was going to be marching in Jena,

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Louisiana on the King Holiday. The bottom-line was it was gonna go down last night.

Getting into the Debate was a Hassle

Now getting a ticket to last night's debate was damn near impossible. Although there were close to 3000 seats at the Palace Theater, this event was like a Mike Tyson prize fight from back in the days. All sorts of celebrities had shown up. I saw Chris Tucker, Dave Chappell, Dr.Cornel West, folks from American idol, folks from Nickelodeon, MTV, BET, former Mayors, ambassadors, NFL players etc. You name them and they seemed to be there. Everybody who was anybody was trying to score a ticket with many left in the cold for this big time event.

CNN was a trip as they made sure to have this on lock. Let me explain. First no cars were allowed anywhere within walking distance. If you did drive your car, parked it half a mile away and walked you were not allowed in. You had to be on one of the buses assigned to transport people. So on our bus we wound up picking up a couple of people who begged to be let on the bus because they were turned away at the door even though they had tickets. When they came on our bus, the police and secret service boarded our bus to check things out.

If you were press, you were not allowed into the debate hall. They had you sequestered away in some back room where you could view this on TV. So the magic and excitement and the banter that was going on inside the packed palace was lost to many journalist. Many had no idea all the folks who were on hand last night. They couldn't feel the energy and get a true pulse of what was taking place, what came across on TV was not the same as what went down in the debate hall.

If you came in with a wrist band and a ticket, you were not allowed to bring in cell phones, cameras, pdas or anything with metal. They did not want anyone texting or communicating to outside world during the debate. They wouldn't let former SF Mayor Willie Brown come in with his cell phone. Democratic Party chair Howard Dean who was scheduled to speak was jammed up for having a phone and not allowed in. They would not let you in with a box of altoids or even gum. That's how tight it was.

The Secret Service was vigorously enforcing these rules but I later found it all this wasn't over homeland security concerns. It was CNN who put all these restrictions in place. They wanted to

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have exclusive rights to all this. They didn't want folks interviewing any of the celebrities who were in attendance. They didn't want other media cats like me getting information out before they could put their spin on things. It was really on lock in a big way.

Now, I should've known better. I should've known that something wasn't quite right, but when you're in the middle of all this its hard not to raise your expectations. It's hard to dampen your enthusiasm when you see so many people who are excited about the all the possibilities. The possibility of change and relief from 7 years of Bush was major. The possibility of having key issues that have impacted Black South Carolinians finally coming to the fore front was big. The possibility of having a woman president was resonating with many. The possibility of the "good ole Clinton years returning was what were getting many in the Democratic-both Black and white excited.

The possibility of this nation having an African American president had gotten everyone amped. As I came across South Carolinians either at the hotels or local restaurants you could see that the pride. The thought of us having Black president means a lot to folks. It runs deep. People feel a sense of hope especially young people. For many this is good news that's been a long time coming.

Lots of Fireworks But No Real Hits

When the debate opened up and Obama and Hillary started exchanging verbal blows everyone was on the edge of their seats. I was seated in the Clinton area so when Obama threw his jabs you could hear people moaning and see folk's eyes rolling or people exchanging smirks while the Barack crowd was enthusiastically cheering. When Hillary hit back you saw the high fives being exchanged and people looking smugly at one another. It was really like a boxing match.

As the evening went on I realized that the candidates had only focused on one topic- the economy and precious time was spent snipping at one another. When we the first break came, I kept asking myself, is anyone gonna talk about Jena, Katrina, police brutality or Africa?

When thing resumed and the candidates were seated homeboy from CNN Joe Johns, could've directed the conversation so the candidates would address more substantive issues, instead he asked the tired question about whether or not Barack felt Bill was the first Black president. It

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was a ridiculous question which Obama managed to answer well while keeping things light-hearted. He said he would have to check out Bill's dancing abilities before calling him a brother. The other facet to this question is that I feel it will for ever be attached to the legacy of author Toni Morrison. In 2008 more people seem to know her more for making that infamous assertion of Clinton being the first Black president then they do her brilliant works like "Beloved", "Bluest Eye" or 'songs of Solomon".

Before you knew it the debate ended and folks were ushered out into the cold onto the waiting buses. From the chatter I gathered in the audience, John Edwards left the strongest impression and for many actually hit upon the most issues. Many chuckled at what I described as his attempt to get a vice presidency slot when he suggested that he was the only one on stage who could win the south. Although not stated, the clear implication was that he as a white male could deliver votes from that region which for years has gone to the Republicans. Obama came back at him and in so many words reminded Edwards that he has gotten more white support then he has.

Lots of Spin for the Lack of Issues

Backstage in the spin room I got see first hand how the Clinton machine works. Everywhere I turned there was some sort of Black congressman or woman or some pundit ready to give anyone from the media key talking points about Hillary. Homegirl was rolling deep and she has a lot of powerful people on her team.

I talked to all sorts of folks including Congresswoman Stephanie Tubbs from Ohio, Congressman Meeks from New York, Congresswoman Laura Richardson from Long beach and Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee from Texas. Many tried to explain why it was Hillary's night. I kept coming back over and over again by asking them why key issues that many of us talk about on street corners, in barbershops and other social settings wasn't addressed.

I got into a back and forth with Congresswoman Tubbs who led the charge for voter disenfranchisement in 2004. We spoke about what went down and how Black voters were kicked to the curb through shady suppression attempts by the GOP. I asked her if she thought that issue had been resolved. She said "No". I then asked her why her candidate Hillary didn't bring that issue up during the debate. She blamed it on the rules set up by CNN. She then went on to talk about legislation that she and Hillary had crated over the years that they attempted to get passed. Again I asked her whether she thought Clinton should've brought that up, after all

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the voting drama of 2000 and 2004 which got us Bush still haunts many. Again her answer was to basically blame it on the CNN restrictions.

Tubbs went on to talk about she has always brought key issues like police brutality and discrimination to the forefront and that Clinton has addressed many of those issues. I then asked if she could use her influence and friendship with Senator Clinton to hold a separate press conference to address those key issues so those of who care would know that she's really down for us. I was told to check the website and come to some of her rallies and I would definitely hear those things addressed.

This was the typical exchange I had with many people including Congressman Meeks who allowed me to engage him a bit longer. I asked the Queens based congressman about police brutality since the infamous Sean Bell shooting took place in his borough. I explained to him that we both know police misconduct is really big deal with all these young voters of color who are showing up at the polls. With that in mind why wasn't it addressed. He explained that Senator Clinton does care about that issue and has addressed it, but the CNN rules prevented her from bringing up these other issues. I asked Meeks like I asked Tubbs if he would use his influence and get her to address that issue outside of the debate. He pointed me to the website and rallies.

As I toured the spin room and listened in on other interviews I kept hearing reporters asking why more issues weren't touched upon and the response from Edward's people to Obama's people to Clinton's people all blaming CNN Debate rules.

Dr Martin Luther King Would Be Pissed

As I took all this in, I reflected on the last question of the night when the candidates were asked who Dr. Martin Luther King would endorse for president. I think Obama answered it correctly when he said King wouldn't have endorsed anyone. He then went on an erroneously suggested that King didn't wanna lock himself behind one candidate and that he was better as an agitator who pushed for change from the outside.

The truth of the matter is this. King wouldn't have endorsed any of those candidates last night because they weren't showing no heart. Oh yes, they had lots of swagger and flava upon that

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stage but no heart. You see the question that ran through my mind was "How in the hell are you gonna be the leader of the free world, when you aren't free to speak your mind on CNN?" Media is an industry these candidates in their position as Senators helped regulate.

At anytime during the debate when the candidates chastised moderator Wolf Blitzer for not allowing them to complete their answers, they could've also chastised him for not allowing them to speak on other issues.

Imagine if Obama had interrupted the moderator and said "Hold on partner let me take a moment and say I think we need to raise other issues like White supremacist marching in Jena on Dr King's birthday. As President, I would make sure that Black people would not have to fear homegrown terrorists.

Imagine if Hillary had said; "Hold on I just wanna make sure that young and first time voters can rest assured that since the Democrats have the majority in both houses they can rest assured that no one will be messing around with their votes in 2008". Imagine if she brought that to the forefront?

Imagine if Edwards instead of telling me how he wants to end poverty, how he can win the south and that he launched his campaign from New Orleans, took some time out and said as president he would not allow the horrific scenes we saw the other week of young African men and women getting arrested trying to prevent public housing from being demolished.

Like I said earlier, I think Edwards came closest to bringing up some of those topics that impact the majority of us, but they were limited to short sound-bites and not connected to a larger continuous discussion. I could go on and on with examples. The bottom-line is that none of the things I routinely hear us talking about was addressed in last night's debate. It was mad disappointing.

I caught up with Reverend Yearwood and his folks over from the Hip Hop Caucus and saw that they were just as concerned and angry as I was that such a big opportunity was squandered. I hope they put out some sort of press release denouncing last night's events. We talked at length about how these candidates allowed the issues to be dictated to them by corporate media folks and not the other way around. It wasn't something that Dr King would've allowed

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post "I Have a Dream".

The Dr. King we know who risked his funding and political support by speaking out against the war in 1967 at Riverside Church would've been furious that none of these folks who dared to hold a debate on his holiday and invoke his name didn't live up to his ideals. He would've expected all of them to say with a sense of urgency, "the Hell with your rules-people are dying, people are suffering and we need to address these issues".

A lot was learned last night. First, the CBC who were partners with CNN ideally should've either removed their names from the mask-head or demanded that those issues get addressed.

Second, we need our own networks that are committed to dealing with these issues day in and day out and are not irrevocably compromised like the way many see outlets like BET and Radio One.

Third, all of us are gonna have to take up the challenge and keep raising these issues and holding people accountable. Now's not the time to get comfortable. Now's the time to push and demand more. We should also be looking at other candidates.

As Reverend Yearwood pointed out Barack isn't the only Black person running for President. Hillary isn't the only woman. We have Cynthia McKinney who is an African American woman who has been followed in the footsteps of the late Shirley Chisolm in the sense that she is "Unbought and Unbossed"... and while she may not get all the press attention that the others do within the mainstream, we can get behind someone like her if for any reason to force the

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mainstream folks to move closer to our issues.