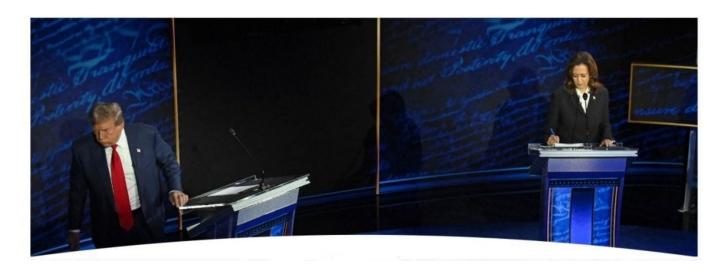# An Anatomy of the Post-Debate Detritus

By Victor Davis Hanson

After the September 10, 2024, presidential debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, the Harris campaign became giddy.

And why not?

Pre-debate conventional wisdom had assured the country that underdog Harris would shock the nation with her endless wash/rinse/spin word salads of repeated phrases and memorized sound bites.

She supposedly would prove as shaky as Trump—the veteran of several presidential debates—would prove merciless in eviscerating her.

That did not happen. Post-debate polls of the first 24 hours showed clearly that the public felt Harris had won.

Why?
She stuck religiously to her pre-debate prep. It was not difficult to anticipate what her tripartite script would be. Joe Biden's failed debate with Trump offered a model, along

with the need to avoid Harris's own known linguistic and cognitive liabilities:

One, Harris was told to bait the touchy Trump with smears and slights about his failed rallies, his racism, and his shaky businesses. That way she could trigger him to lose his cool, go off-topic, rant, and turn off viewers.
And he did just that and often. Trump clearly did not prepare detailed answers, was not ready to be insulted, and was not reminded to relax—and smile, joke, and in Reaganesque fashion sluff off her certain slurs.

Two, she was not supposed to try thinking on her feet, no matter what the question asked.
Instead, Harris was always ordered to plug in her prepped and canned anecdotes, banalities, and bio-stories regardless of the topic or question. And she followed that off-topic boilerplate to spec.

Three, the campaign apparently knew they could rely on the moderators for four givens:

a) they were to fact-check Trump but never Harris. And they did that at least five times;
b) they were to demand follow-up answers from Trump to make him specifically answer the question addressed. And they did that numerous times, but not on a single occasion to Harris;
c) they were to ask Trump provocative questions to force him to deny that he was a racist, an insurrectionist, and an election denialist. But they were never to do so with Harris, whose many past outlandish statements, prevarications, flip-flops, and padded bio would have given the moderators similar rich fodder for cross-examination;

d) they would interrupt Trump to get him off tempo, but never Harris.

The result was that a cool, if not smug, Harris mostly smiled while an irate Trump scowled and raged.

Thus, to the millions who watched the slugfest, Harris seemed more "presidential" and therefore "won" the debate.
When the size of the huge television audience—some 67 million watched the debate—was announced, team Harris naturally assumed her win might bounce her even higher than did her initial July surge after the forced abdication of President Biden from the ticket.

But then strange post-debate developments followed.
Either a Tiny or No Bounce?

Harris did *not* receive the anticipated large bounce.
In fact, the polls still remain mostly even. She may have arrested Trump's pre-debate surge a bit, but otherwise, a debate that polled so heavily in her favor oddly still seems to have made little difference in the still up-for-grabs race.

Stranger still, Harris, the supposedly clear winner, almost immediately asked for another debate. Her handlers suggested that this demand displayed newfound confidence from her win—as if an assured, second knockout debate would ensure her permanent pull away.

But Trump and others countered that it might have instead indicated the very opposite: that her pre-debate internal polls had shown the race was even or even had Trump leading and thus she still needed a second shot at derailing him, given her own team was not sure her single and transitory debate favorability would translate into any real lead.
The Debate Reset
Then in a day or two, other and far more significant realities emerged, resetting the debate—like a first date's favorable first impression beginning to sour a day later upon further reflection.

As the debate clips were endlessly replayed on television, radio, and the blogosphere over the ensuing week, few, if any, favorable Harris soundbites popped up.

Harris, remember, was a veritable political unknown who was

running a stealth campaign of media avoidance and running out the clock.

She had never really answered any questions addressed to her in the campaign. And in the debate, she presented her nothingness in confident fashion. But she ignored and snubbed both the toadish moderators and Trump at every turn.
Yet the public had tuned in only to receive just three answers from her that she had never previously offered them since her July anointment:

1) Why are you flipping—temporarily or permanently?—on almost every issue from your past positions?
2) If you are the candidate of change, why did you and President Biden as incumbents not make these changes the last three years—or at least promise now to make them in the next four months of your remaining tenures?

3) And what exactly will be your policies as president and the details of their proposed implementation?
Every time these questions in the debate were either stumbled upon by the moderators or demanded by Trump, Harris evaded by plugging in her memorized, smiley, and stonewalling non-answers.

Even leftist media outlets could not find video clips that would show a dominant Harris mastering any of these questions.

Furthermore, in the recycled visuals of the campaign, when Trump blustered and ranted, viewers now noticed that Harris had deliberately turned to him in scripted posturing. She pantomimed as if she were prepped by Hollywood actors—not just on memorizing canned trivialities but also giving fake moves and poses.
At times, Harris was a Rodin-like "Thinker," looking contemplative with a strutting chin and propping it up with a closed hand. At times, with a wink-and-nod, she privately communicated to the audience their supposedly shared exasperation at her outrageous opponent. And at times she rolled her eyes, batted her eyelids, raised her eyebrows, and lip-synched her cynical disdain to 67 million viewers.

The net result?

The longer the debate was discussed, the more the far larger audience who had not watched the debate heard about it from friends or saw regurgitated media takes, so all the more the public came away thinking Harris was certainly slick and smooth, but otherwise empty, shallow, and smug.

And the more they saw clips of the scowling, snarling, and raving Trump, all the more they heard him blast an unresponsive Harris for the border, crime, the economy, and foreign policy—precisely the issues about which she was now failing to offer any of studied expertise.

The result was Trump, albeit in sometimes obnoxious fashion, reassured the country he could repeat what he did in 2017-21, while Harris confidently and professionally offered them little but sugary bios and platitudes.

Post Debate Meltdowns

After the debate, a now cocky Harris forgot her directions and thus only confirmed her pre-debate no-no's. So, at a post-debate rally, the recidivist Harris reverted to what her handlers had told her was taboo: cackling and word salads.
In her first solo media interview in over 50 days with a preselected, left-wing local Philadelphia TV anchorman, Brian Taff, Harris actually plugged in her exact memorized debate riffs from a few nights earlier—even when they had nothing to do with the questions Taff asked.

When Harris realized that she could not answer a single one of his questions in the brief 10-minute softball interview, then, in deer-in-the-headlights fashion, she simply smiled, hand gestured, giggled, and sought refuge in her accustomed platitudes and circularities.

The net result was again reminding viewers of her debate inanity a few days earlier.

Yes, Harris has a good memory to recite prepped banalities and to bait and smear opponents while keeping cool with the help of moderators.

But otherwise, she shows no ability to think or speak on her feet—and zero knowledge of the key challenges facing any president.

The Immoderators

It was bad enough that the moderators intervened in the debate—and only on one side—to fact-check. But their fact-checks on at least three of their five occasions themselves needed to be fact-checked for mistakes, especially as the post-debate furor rose.

Moderator Linsey Davis went after Trump for his accurate claim that partial-birth abortions and the killing of a baby as it leaves the birth canal were legal.

Or as Ms. Fact-Checker arrogantly put it, "There is *no* state where it is legal in this country to kill a baby after it's born." That was not true.

At least six states make no restrictions of any kind on abortion, and thus, admittedly, on rare occasions, infants can be terminated who leave the birth canal.

Protection to ensure that such deaths never happen was vetoed by Democrats in Congress. Worse still, Harris's own running mate Tim Walz as governor stopped Minnesota state legislation that would have outlawed the killing of an infant delivered viable and alive during or after an abortion procedure.

The moderators also fact-checked Trump's assertion that crime was higher under Biden Harris than during his tenure and his allegation that many large cities do not fully or timely report crime statistics to federal tabulators.

Yet Trump was right on both counts. And only days later, the nation was reminded of just that when the Biden-Harris Department of Justice released recent crime statistics showing

crime is still elevated—and still quite higher than when Biden-Harris took office.

The post-debate outrage further increased. It was further remembered that the two fact-checkers sat mum while Harris spun her own whoppers: that no military personnel were posted abroad in combat zones (just ask those often attacked in bases in Syria and Iraq, in Africa, or on patrol in the Red Sea).

And the two partisans kept silent when Harris repeated the long-ago fact-checked lies about Charlotteville, "bloodbath," Project 2025, and Trump's supposed support for a federal abortion ban.

Journalists after the debate tried to rescue Harris by jumping on Trump for other supposed lies, such as alleging Harris had supported government-provided transgendered conversion treatments for illegal aliens and prisoners. But then, post-debate, Harris's own prior written endorsements for just that appeared.

While Harris's campaign and liberal influencers were claiming that the moderators were not fact-checkers, one of the two, Linsey Davis, admitted she was not only a proud fact-checker, but along with her co-moderator David Muir had become one.
The reason was because of ABC's desire to not let Trump supposedly promulgate falsehoods as he had in Joe Biden's disastrous and career-ending June debate.

ABC apparently felt the earlier CNN moderators on that occasion were seen as too neutral and that being disinterested was a bad thing. Instead, in the Muir/Davis warped view, Biden lost that debate not because of his visible dementia but supposedly due to Trump's exaggerations (which Biden himself matched if not exceeded).

In other words, Davis inadvertently admitted that after Democratic nominee Biden had crashed his career in a debate with Trump, ABC would now correct CNN's supposed laxity in

being too disinterested.

So, ABC's moderators would become actively involved in the debate—and did so as the debate postmortem showed in clear partisan fashion.

Translated? One could take the Davis confession to mean the Democratic-Media fusion lost one debate by playing by traditional debate rules of moderator non-interference—*and learned from that loss never to be so fair again.*

Debate Incest?

The post-debate detritus mounted.
Senior Disney executive Dana Walden—who helps oversee ABC—is known as one of Harris's "extraordinary friends" and, as reported, has been for at least 30 years. Their respective husbands have been close pals for even longer. Walden has been a steady contributor to Harris's state and federal campaigns for over twenty years.

And it was disclosed that Harris and moderator Davis were national sorority sisters, a connection that sounded terrible, but after a fair debate, no one would have known what to make of it.

So, in normal times, no one would have noticed these conflicts of interest. After all, in the incestuous corporate/politics/media ecosystem of the bicoastal left, everyone either went to school, knows, does business with and profits from, dates, or is married to everyone else.

But given the clear bias of ABC in the post-debate environment, these relationships only further tainted the debate's credibility.

Prairie-fire Madness
As the embarrassments of Harris's debate and her post-debate evasions became better known, the moderators' bias more fully

exposed, the incest of ABC aired, and the lack of a debate "victory" bounce acknowledged, the irate right-wing blogosphere struck back.

On the rationale that if the left-wing network had "rigged" the debate and the moderators tipped the scales, then it too would reply in like kind. The result was a barrage of post-debate rumors, conspiracies, and false revelations—the discredited fact-checkers be damned.

Within days, fables floated by bloggers and often Trump himself that Harris was wearing high-tech receiver-earrings to facilitate stealthy prompts and directions from her off-stage handlers. Other rumors spread that her calmness was only a symptom that she had been given the debate questions in advance, or so an anonymous source claimed. Trump and his supporters then insisted that he was widely recognized by the public as the "winner" of the debate.

No evidence has yet emerged to prove any of these allegations.

Harris was likely wearing earrings that only remotely looked like a brand that doubles as a receiver.

There is no proof, at least yet from ABC or the Harris campaign, that Harris, in Donna Brazile/Hillary Clinton/CNN fashion of old, had received either the topics or the general outlines of the debate questions in advance.

And the polls uniformly really did show that Trump was felt *by the public* to have lost the debate—even though Harris had not really profited much from it.
But what was missed by the left's outrage over the swirling rumors of conspiracies was that its own behavior had seeded such hysterias.

When moderators are not just biased but proudly explain why they are biased, and when such favoritism does demonstrably warp a presidential debate, then those on their receiving end

naturally fire back with conspiracies of their own.

An interesting question arises over which is worse: the founded and proven conspiracy of the moderators in undisclosed but preplanned determination to hammer only Trump, or the frenzied reaction to believe fables consistent with the demonstrable bias of ABC and its moderators' intention to warp the debate?

The Way Not Forward?

What is the result of this debate mess?
No sane conservative will or should ever do another national debate on any ABC venue.

If they were wise, Republicans should never agree to *any* televised debate moderated by ABC, NBC, CBS, MSNBC, CNBC, PBS, NPR, or CNN again, given the history of liberal moderator bias. The names of Donna Brazile, Candy Crowley, David Muir, and Linsey Davis should serve as sufficient warnings.

If the presidential candidates still insist on debating their opponents, they then should agree only to the classical rules of debating—and with only mute timekeepers present instead of loud-mouth, egocentricmoderators in the following fashion:

An opening 5-minute statement;

A 3-minute rebuttal of opponent's similar statement;

A 2-minute rebuttal of the rebuttal;

All to be repeated over eight or nine topics in a 90-minute debate, with mouth-shut timekeepers keeping each candidate within his time limits.

So, no more of these televised travesties, even when, as in this case, they boomerang on their fixers.

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