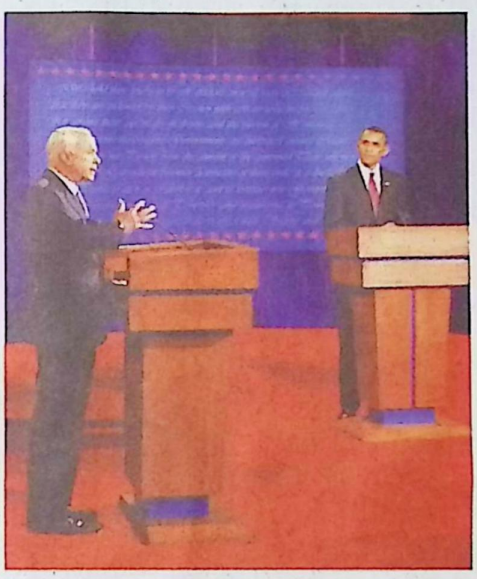
US Presidential Debates 2008

An Epic Battle of Words (Not Facts)

Ridwan Karim



THEY say that the 2008 US presidential election will have far-reaching consequences throughout the globe. I can see why they say that. The world's economy hangs on the balance, global peace is at stake, and, oh yes - it has caused me to revive the 'Debater's Diary' column. Now, I am not going to write about which presidential candidate was right about what issue-debaters hardly care about that. What debaters do care about is winning at any cost, even if they don't have any idea what they are talking about. In that respect, the recently concluded presidential debates offer priceless lessons to young and aspiring debaters.

The very first lesson that debate teaches you is that you do not have to be right; if you can prove your opponent wrong, you automatically become right-a lesson that both the presidential candidates seemed to have taken to heart. Predictably, Barack Obama lambasted the current administration in the debates for the 'catastrophic' failures in handling the Iraq War, the fumbling over Hurricane Katrina, the failed economic policies, issues related to health care and taxes; and for causing untold misery in the lives of US citizens in general. In retrospect, one would have to wonder why he was so reserved in his criticisms. McCain, for his part, tried his best to distance himself from the current administration and launched a counter-attack on how Obama has demonstrated his lack of judgement in the past (except for the small matter of voting against the Iraq War). It was fascinating to see how issues after issues were swept aside to be replaced by vicious personal attacks.

A lot has been said about the skin colour of the candidates; but when it comes to statements-the ones made by Obama can hardly be labeled black *or* white. If anything, his contentions belong to the grey area, i.e. the unclearly defined area. Harry Truman famously said, 'If you can't convince them, confuse them,' and Obama's flip-flops on issues like withdrawal of troops from Iraq, offshore oil drilling, decriminalization of marijuana (the list goes on for a while) is nothing short of baffling. Lesson for debaters: When you change your earlier statements, you are not being 'indecisive', neither are you 'kniving' yourself; you are being 'flexible' and 'accomodating.' It makes your opponent's job much harder, as can be seen from McCain's performance in the debates.

Obama demonstrated an uncanny ability of shifting the spotlight from himself to the weaknesses of his opponents throughout the debates. When McCain argued that a president should be thoughtful about his remarks by pointing out the rash comments made by his rival concerning the unilateral invasion of Pakistan; Obama calmly replied that McCain, who has talked about bombing Iran and bringing North Korea to the brink of extinction, is hardly a capable authority on what is appropriate and what is not. When asked whether the government needs to take a bailout measure to rectify the current financial crisis, Obama replied, 'Yes, we do need remedies, but *not* only in the event of a crisis,' - and then proceeded to went on a rant about how McCain has supported the failed economic policies that are responsible for the disaster to begin with. So, debaters, remember that you can justify your own conviction simply by condemning your opponents.

When I first began to debate, a senior debater once told me not to walk about too much in the podium, because it diverts the attention of the audience from the contents of the speech. Having seen McCain roam around aimlessly on the stage like a lost soul during the entire second presidential debate, I now realize the full wisdom of those words. Then again, maybe McCain *wanted* to divert people's attention from the words that he had to say. If that was his intention, it totally worked on me.

One of the hardest things a debater has to do is to establish an argument when he knows that the facts are otherwise. But both the presidential candidates, master debaters as they are, made it seem much easier than it really is. Warped facts and exaggerations were the order of the day. On issues of healthcare and taxes, both the candidates used liberal estimates of data to support their policies, and extremely conservative estimates when it came to opposing their rival's policies. It was a mesmerizing application of Einstein's infamous theory: If the facts don't fit the theory, change the facts.

Maybe Bangladesh is ready to hold similar debates as well. Our politicians have already mastered the crucial debating skills outlined in this article.