

The real winner of the debate

by Nancy Spannaus, Contributing Editor

Who gained more from the prime time television debates sponsored by the League of Women Voters on Sunday evening Sept. 21? The answer to this simple question has appeared oh-so-complicated to the nation's media pundits.

Was it media creation John Anderson who benefited the most by being recognized as a major contender for the nation's highest office? Was it Ronald Reagan, who escaped the evening without any of his traditional displays of embarrassing ignorance?

There are even some who claim that the winner was Jimmy Carter, because he stood "above it all" in the Oval Office—although these pundits are hotly contested by those who argue that Carter's disdain for the show made him the actual loser.

The answer is *none of the above*.

The only significant winner from this dull and pretentious occasion was the policy grouping around the Council on Foreign Relations that has announced in print that it would prefer that electoral constituencies not get involved in presidential politics at all, now that the function of government is supposed to be "allocating scarcity and orchestrating sacrifice." It was an event of the media, by the media, and for the media—all of which is fully complicit in this CFR perspective.

And the definite loser was the voting public.

Reagan and Anderson couldn't have been less in control of the situation themselves. Both of them had had to go through weeks of bowing and scraping before the media—Anderson in order to win his coveted 15 percent poll to "qualify" for the debate, and Reagan in order to try to stanch the never-ending flow of abuse coming from the nation's major media.

Anderson—whom media like the *New York Times* openly acknowledge to be their creation—was naturally the best acclimated for this kind of propitiation of the press. Nothing made this more obvious than the first question, which parroted Anderson's own campaign rhetoric by asking what the candidate would do that was "unpopular" with the electorate in order to solve inflation.

Anderson did not disappoint his controllers one bit. With a strident tone reminiscent of a fishwife, he boasted of his intention to impose energy austerity measures such as the 50 cent per gallon gasoline tax that would help force Americans into a lifestyle coherent with "a new conservation ethic." It was all that the press panel could do to contain his enthusiasm sufficiently to keep him within the allotted time.

Reagan showed more obvious distaste with the degradation requested of him. But only once did he dare to disagree with the premise of the questions asked of him. This was to the first interrogatory—he simply asserted that he did not think the proper solution to the problem of inflation needed to be an "unpopular" one at all. Having been rebuked by the panelist who muttered a disparaging remark about how he wished that the two would refrain from simply repeating campaign speeches, Reagan did not veer from polite deference to his interrogators again during the evening.

The Republican candidate concentrated simultaneously on projecting a correct fatherly image, beginning each remark with a slow stiff turn of his head and a benign, if forced, smile.

The media panel chosen by the League of Women Voters, itself a creation of Anglo-American intelligence networks like the Aspen Institute, was not a particularly distinguished group of individuals. There were no Walter Cronkites or Barbara Walters there to awe the candidates, or the viewing audience. Only a selection of smug underlings from every major wing of the Eastern Establishment press: the *New York Times*, *Newsweek* (*Washington Post*), the *Baltimore Sun*, and so forth.

What was most striking was their arrogance and dead certainty that they were the only ones who would be determining the outcome of the November elections.

The program which the media found acceptable was blatantly obvious from the formulation of each question: harsh energy constriction; the need for economic austerity if the military were to be beefed up; the immense difficulty, if not impossibility, of solving the problems of inflation and the cities; and the irrelevance of religious values to an electoral campaign.

But the institutions running the media and these debates have another purpose in mind. As outlined in a recent policy statement written by Lloyd Cutler, in the Council on Foreign Relations' mouthpiece *Foreign Affairs*, the men who traditionally run presidential elections in this country have decided to junk the traditional process. They have determined that within their world of imposed scarcity, it will no longer be possible to satisfy the desire for improvements and progress of the American electorate.

If the Anderson-Reagan debate made you hopeless about a solution to the depression and America's political crisis, they accomplished precisely their purpose. ■