

Column: How to give the GOP debates meaning

By James Reston Jr.

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There was a time in America when debate mattered. It was a period when declamation was standard fare of a youngster's education, when people knew about disputation and rhetoric and dialectics, when beyond a mastery of a subject, how one expressed an opinion, whether with wit or humor or insight, was important.



photo by Chris Carlson, AP - Republican presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Rick Perry speak during a debate in October.

In the mid-19th century, for example, a national phenomenon called the Lyceum Movement flourished, especially in [New England](#) and the Midwest. In houses across the land, citizens gathered, often less than 20 at a time, to debate not only the burning political issues of the day, but also important questions of philosophy, racial and sexual equality, finance, and international relations. Over the years such notables as [Mark Twain](#), [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#), [Susan B. Anthony](#), and Henry Thoreau took up the cudgels in their local lyceums. After the debate a vote would be taken, and there could be no doubt afterward which side of the question prevailed, and who personally had won.

The Republicans would do well to look back on this American institution of old, if they want to enliven their standoffs and get us to listen.

Big issues

I know about the Lyceum Movement, because a few years ago, a house in Edgartown, Mass., built in 1836, came into my family's possession. Called the Davis Academy, after its owner [David Davis](#), it has a lyceum — a large, airy, sunny room off the kitchen, large enough to accommodate a quorum of neighbors. I found the topics that were debated there in the 1830s and 1840s amazingly relevant today.

In 1840, they thrashed out this question: "Which has caused more bloodshed in world history, religion or politics?" The vote then was one for politics, 12 for religion. Given their appeal to the evangelicals, how would [Rick Santorum](#) and [Rick Perry](#) argue that? A year earlier, the academy had considered this: "Which is a greater incentive to human action: fear or hope?" In the era of attack ads and China-baiting, how might [Jon Huntsman](#) and [Mitt Romney](#) differ in their approach?

The organizers of these Republican debates seem to have forgotten the purpose of their exercise. As voters we want to judge fairly whether a candidate is worthy of the office (and of our vote), whether she or he possesses the intelligence and moral fiber to hold that exalted office, whether the aspirant has an agreeable world view and sound character. But with this format — like this Saturday's ABC debate in Manchester, N.H., with the candidates arguing from essentially the same more-conservative-than-thou ideology — we get statements not debate, and statements that are repeated over and over, from one forum to the next. The process needs variety. It needs spontaneity. It cries out for something more entertaining and elevating.

Why not this from the Davis Academy in 1849: "Judging from the history of past Republics and the present condition of our own, is it probable that the [U.S.](#) will continue to flourish as a nation?" Wouldn't it be fun to see Santorum and [Newt Gingrich](#) square off on that one?

Rhetoric, not dialectic

And squaring off is exactly what we're not getting here. When the GOP aspirants stand like stick figures behind podiums in front of a stage set awash in red, white, and blue, and wait for few minutes to repeat their well-known position on the same subjects, we get rhetoric but no dialectic. We get no insight into character or measure of intelligence or political skill. The spectacle is not only boring after a while, but also profoundly unfair. Now that the field has settled to these major six candidates, why should fickle poll numbers determine whether a candidate stands in the middle or on the fringe, or the degree of attention each gets? Was it fair last month in Iowa to exclude Huntsman, their only true internationalist, when his poll numbers — there and at that time — did not "qualify" him for the stage?

In the past two months wouldn't it have been more revealing to have a tournament of one-on-one debates. Give each candidate a chance to take on another, *mano a mano*. Make them go through a series of David Academy-like topics over a period of an hour and a half. Have more audience participation like the British Parliament or the [Oxford Union](#). And afterward, make the audience of the uncommitted vote on who won the debate and why. At the end of the season of gabble we would know who the true champion was. Like a baseball statistician we could calibrate hits and errors, saves and strikeouts and home runs. We would know more than merely Perry's "oops" moment, Romney's \$10,000 bet, and [Ron Paul](#)'s facial expressions. And it would be fair.

My lyceum would reprise the pre-Civil War debates in Edgartown. Huntsman vs. Romney: "Are corporations injurious to individuals?" (1845) Gingrich vs. Santorum: "Is the intellectual education of women conducive to domestic happiness?" (1845) And Paul vs. Perry: "Is party spirit beneficial?" (1838)

Now *those* are debates I would watch.

James Reston Jr. is the author of 15 books. His latest, The Nineteenth Hijacker, will be published later this year.

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