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Herschel Walker, Butcher of Language

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I have written that political debates have outgrown their utility, and I stand by that.

They are now more about theater than substance. They are more about making moments than making points. The cameras and the commentators wait for the zingers and the flubs, the clippable, quotable passage, the 10 seconds that stand out for their dramatic effect rather than for their deeper meaning.

Debates have become a choreographed dance of managing expectations, of setting individual hurdle heights for individual candidates, so much so that on debate stages the candidates cease to compete against each other and simply compete against the expectations set for themselves.

Debates have been bastardized beyond belief.

And debate prep has followed suit: Candidates are trained to remember and regurgitate attack lines — and ignore the rules.

What's the worst that can happen? You can be admonished, but only briefly, because every minute of admonishment detracts from precious live TV time.

So there is no incentive to be an honorable actor other than to avoid appearing to viewers like a bully and bulldozer, and unfortunately, that works in a Donald Trump era.

Republicans now want a fighter above all, even if the fighter is of questionable character and of loose allegiance to the truth. Aggression is attractive. You may be wrong, but if you're loud, it returns you to right.

Friday night's debate between Senator Raphael Warnock of Georgia and his Republican challenger, Herschel Walker, was no different. It was a stage play loosely based on policy. It didn't change the fundamentals of the race — that Warnock is the only candidate of the two qualified to be a senator — nor should it have.

And yet I am still stuck in the position of analyzing the debate because it is a major event in a race I care about. So I'll begin with Warnock because his performance was the easier of the two to analyze.

He didn't answer directly when asked what limits he favored on abortion, whether he would back President Biden if he runs again in 2024 or whether he would support expanding the Supreme Court.

The preacher has become a politician.

And his wavering left him open to attack. When he didn't answer directly, Walker made sure to mark the moments.

Equivocation, as a strategy, was a miscalculation for the Warnock campaign, but it pales in comparison to the staggering ineptitude that Walker presented.

First, we just must come at this directly: Herschel Walker is an absolute butcher of the English language.

When challenged on reducing the cost of insulin, Walker responded: "I believe in reducing insulin, but at the same time, you got to eat right, because he may not know and I know many people that's on insulin, and unless you have a eating right, insulin is doing you no good."

Say what? English translation: "Healthy diets can help treat and prevent Type 2 diabetes." The nearly two million people suffering from Type 1 diabetes, not caused by diet and for which insulin is needed to stay alive? Oh, well.

When Warnock accused Walker of pretending to be a police officer, Walker whipped out a badge and said, "You know what's so funny? I am worked with many police officers." A moderator then chastised him for bringing the "prop" to the event.

At another point, Walker said: "Well right now, people have coverage for health care. It's according to what type of coverage do you want because if you have an able-bodied job, you're going to have health care. But everyone else have health care, it's the type of health care you're going to get. And I think that is the problem. And what Senator Warnock wants you to do is to depend on the government. What I want you to do is get off the government health care and get on the health care he's got."

Huh? As a United States senator, Warnock's health care is government health care.

I could do this for the rest of the column, but I won't. The point is this: I find myself straining to understand what he's saying, my mind filling in the words he leaves out or fixing the ones he uses incorrectly.

Walker is devastatingly inarticulate. That is the fact of the matter, and a disqualifying one. This is not a dialect issue, of which I am more understanding. Regional and cultural dialects are real and not a measure of intelligence.

That's not what's happening with Walker. With him, there is a base inability to convey his ideas in complete thoughts or sentences. And like a child, when his words fail, he fills in the gaps with energy and emotion, hostility and humor.

This cheap rhetorical trick works for Republicans. They want the fighter more than the philosopher, the class jock over the class president. As long as the candidate is on their side, it doesn't matter if he's up to par, because at the end of the day, they are voting for the power over the person.

They will elect a man without command of the English language or the issues if it gives them command of the seat and the Senate. Walker's debate performance was just designed to allay their fears, to make them think better about doing the unthinkable.

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