

THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

Intelligence Squared U.S.'s Talking Heads

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A reporter checks out a live taping of the cult podcast hit, whose new season starts tonight.



Courtesy of Intelligence Squared

Stepping into the lobby of the Kaufman Cultural Center in New York City on a recent balmy fall evening was a bit like entering a cocktail-party scene from a Nora Ephron romantic comedy of the late 1990s. A crowd—mostly middle-aged and black-clad, many of its members looking like competitors in a glasses fashion show—milled around the bar, sizing itself up over short-stumped stemware. A man sporting a graying ponytail explained to a woman with a platinum bob the importance of the next president's Supreme Court appointments. Two guys in navy sport coats sipped \$7 brews in companionable silence. The buzz in the room, both conversational and alcoholic, was palpable. Then the lights dimmed, and there was a rush toward the theater doors. The latest taping of Intelligence Squared U.S., the debate series that has become something of a cult podcast hit on iTunes, was about to begin.

Americans are not a shy and retiring people—we talk with great passion about the inefficacy of substitute NFL referees and the glossy, entrancing emptiness of Kim Kardashian. We're not quite as comfortable talking about our national problems. Our presidential debates are roundly criticized for their poll-tested applause lines and skillful pivots away from substantive answers. The rest of our political discourse consists largely of shouting on radio and cable news; at gatherings of people with different views we observe a code of omerta.

Intelligence Squared U.S. has taken on the lofty goal of trying to transform all that. The New York-based enterprise, funded by the Rosenkranz Foundation and distributed by National Public Radio, aims to create a forum for down-in-the-muck discussions of ideas and policies—a flat place somewhere on middle ground from which to speak. The formula is simple: Declare a provocative motion: “Legalize Drugs” or “Obesity Is the Government’s Business,” to name a couple of recent examples. Then pair off high-profile public intellectuals, journalists, experts, and self-proclaimed “big thinkers” (often with book deals in tow) arguing the pro-and-con case in two teams of two, and set the hounds loose. Winners are determined by a poll of the audience before and after the debate that asks which side they agree with.

The man behind the notion that a debate series can elevate the tone of American public discourse is financier Robert Rosenkranz, CEO of the insurance holding company Delphi Financial Group. According to his bio on the Intelligence Squared website, he “lives in Manhattan in an apartment that reflects his interests in Asian art and modern design,” which makes sense since his wife is the senior curator of Asian art at the Guggenheim Museum. Rosenkranz is also a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and started his career as an economist at RAND.

In 2006, Rosenkranz brought the debate series to New York from London, where it was originally conceived in 2002 by two British media men as an audience-friendly version of a more venerable oratory tradition: the classic Oxford debate, which mimics the rhetorical styling and rules of engagement of the British Parliament. Think of prime minister’s question time, the weekly Wednesday appointment at the House of Commons during which members of Parliament are free to pepper the head of government with queries and watch him squirm or respond in kind. Skills are honed in places like the Oxford Union, the members--only club of the ancient university, and the form’s birthplace.

The original Oxford style features a lot of extemporaneous speaking, eloquent B.S., and quips volleyed back and forth by ambitious future journalists and politicians (Christopher Hitchens and Tony Blair at Oxford, Arianna Huffington at Cambridge) and tweedy nerds (imagine the kind of kid that Prince Harry might have wheeled into doing his homework at Eton). The Brits like their debates cutting (conservative London Mayor and Oxford Union alumnus Boris Johnson once said of the rival Lib Dems that they’re “not just empty. They are a void within a vacuum surrounded by a vast inanition”), and so Britannia’s version of Intelligence Squared is, like a country garden or Rebekah Brooks’s hair, a bit untamed. British hosts announce each speaker politely, then let the snark and the savaging go on unchecked.

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Intelligence Squared U.S. takes its civic duty with more gravitas. The idea is that American attitudes have grown more entrenched and insular thanks to the Internet and to TVs with more than three channels. “We want to help people understand the facts behind the emotion,” Rosenkranz explained to an interviewer when the show

launched. “Force people to have a greater respect for civil discourse, not trying to be bland, but appreciating how complicated the issues are.” The result lacks some of the gladiatorial fun of its British cousin. Host John Donvan, a former foreign and White House correspondent for ABC News, is an interventionist moderator who treats the debate more like a multi-person interview, interjecting questions, shushing the dominant, and congratulating guests at the end on their integrity.

Still, thanks to the combative syntax and theatrical framing favored by producers, the subject matter is often sexed up to incite passions. Consider “Don’t Give Us Your Tired, Your Poor, Your Huddled Masses” or “Ration End of Life Care”—recent Intelligence Squared U.S. motions—and try not to have a visceral, gut reaction.

Although they avoided culture-war mainstay issues like abortion and gay marriage, the American debates were, over the year leading up to the recent presidential election, pointedly concerned with topical issues: the job-creating pluses and environmental minuses of fracking, the threat of Chinese capitalism, and any range of issues that highlight the fundamental divisions between conservative and liberal economic ideology—perhaps unsurprisingly, given the benefactor’s prominent position in the world of finance and his status as a donor to the pro-Mitt Romney super PAC Restore Our Future. “The Rich Are Taxed Enough,” “Two Cheers for Super PACs: Money in Politics Is Still Overregulated,” and “Grandma’s Benefits Imperil Junior’s Future,” are three motions that have been debated over the past year. Notably, all seemed framed in a way to put speakers arguing the progressive case, such as former Labor Secretary Robert Reich, anti-super PAC activist Jonathan Soros, and New York Times columnist Paul Krugman, on the defensive. Still, it says something about either the audience’s leanings or the dire straits of conservative economic orthodoxy that in all three instances, the audience started out inclined to agree with the progressives and finished more strongly convinced.

At other times, however, the crowd has been more easily swayed. Prior to a debate over the motion “Ban College Football,” a majority—53 percent—leaned against. After the power team of New Yorker writer Malcolm Gladwell and Friday Night Lights author Buzz Bissinger reeled off facts about the severity of injuries sustained by unpaid college players who will likely never make it to the NFL, the audience flipped.

The motion on the night I attended was “Better Elected Islamists than Dictators.” Arguing in favor were the strange bedfellows Reuel Marc Gerecht and Brian Katulis, of the conservative Foundation for Defense of Democracies and the liberal Center for American Progress, respectively. Gerecht, a neocon and former Middle East specialist at the CIA’s Directorate of Operations, sauntered to the podium with the supreme confidence of the tall and spent his allotted time constructing a slightly messy extemporaneous argument out of such tonally dissonant statements as “I was a student there at the American University at Cairo in 1980, and I can say that not a single woman at that school was veiled. And that was a good thing because they were babes. I mean, they were hot,” and “Under no circumstances in the Middle East are you going to create a liberal order without bringing along the faithful.”

Ice to this jolly fire was Daniel Pipes, who spoke next against the motion, coldly ravaging Gerecht’s seven or so minutes of bullish feelings about the future of Middle Eastern democracy. Pipes, president of the Middle East Forum and vehement defender of Israel, exhibited a verbal recklessness that belied his aura of academic precision. “Islamists of any sort whatsoever are barbarians, are totalitarians, are far worse than dictators,” he said. Pipes went on to compare the “ideological dictators,” as he defined all democratically elected Islamists, to Mao, to Stalin, and, yes, to Hitler, saying with a calm air of authority that they were capable of killing tens of millions of people.

The heart of the evening came in the rebuttal portion, when the two sides’ ideas could crash into each other

without the breaker walls of time constraints or the podium's formal armor. "I think the notion that we could work with dictators today in 2012 and pressure them is quaint," Katulis, a younger academic, said in response to Pipes. "It sounds like the Cold War."

"I see a population where women are being repressed as they never have before," Pipes shot back. "I see a country where Shariah, a medieval law code, is being dredged out and applied," he said, his voice rising from its cashmere-soft timbre. "And you call us quaint? You're advocating for a medieval code!"

The audience applauded.

Like one of those body-language experts in *Us Weekly*, I found myself reading the debaters' movements for signs of frustration or triumph. Katulis had a tendency to lean back in his chair. Dismissive. Pipes, self-contained, leaned into the microphone, hands on table. Relentless. Katulis and Gerecht offered a pragmatic approach to the conundrum of Islamists and an acceptance of the turbulent, imperfect realities of the Middle East in 2012. Pipes and his partner, Dr. M. Zuhdi Jasser, founder and president of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy, who brought his family's experience of living in Syria to the table but spoke in boilerplate, evoked scenarios existentially frightening to the West—the return of a caliphate-governed Middle East, and the trump card of widespread oppression of women's rights. Yet if the United States would step back in and work with malleable rulers, they argued, we might—eventually—see peace in our time.

The debate produced what was, to me, a surprising result from a well-educated New York City audience. Prior to its start, 38 percent of the audience agreed with the motion that elected Islamists are preferable to dictators, 31 percent disagreed, and 31 percent had no opinion. Afterward, 47 percent disagreed with the motion, 44 percent agreed, and 9 percent remained undecided. It was close, but from beginning to end, the opposition won more than twice as many viewers to its side.

As I stepped out into the nighttime bustle with the rest of the audience, I was nagged by uncertainty about the result I had just witnessed. Did those persuaded really prefer the steadfast tyrants of old to taking a chance on the sometimes-chaotic, alarming prospects of emerging democracies? Wasn't this demographic made up of people who dislike the casual xenophobia of cable-news hosts and abhor thinly veiled efforts to disenfranchise voters in their own country? Had their "point of view" been moved deeply and meaningfully? Or had it simply provided a glittering distraction, a bit of important discussion to have on the subway ride home or over a glass of pinot noir at a bar down the street?

The interactions onstage at the debate had ranged from amusing to overwrought to serious. What it came down to, in the end, was crystallization, digestibility, and the well-turned sentence. Tonight the side that won by hitting people where they felt as well as where they thought happened to stand, intellectually, on a phantom foundation. Fear was the easier sell. Still, on another night, with different speakers or other nuances raised, the wind might have blown in a different direction. This was an hour and 30 minutes, subject to debaters' prowess and 370 strangers' instincts on a particular Thursday night. How American to think that it could mean more.

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