

OPINION PAGES

Election '96 There's no business like show business

From the San Diego Union-Tribune.

Remember the rhetorical question: What if they gave a war and no one showed up? The same might be asked about this year's presidential election, which is failing to generate much enthusiasm among cynical voters.

The cynicism is reinforced by the degree to which presidential politics has been reduced to show business, with handlers and focus groups basically dictating what the candidates say.

This contrivance was especially evident during the presidential and vice presidential debates. Any resemblance between a bona fide debate and the parallel press conferences that television viewers were subjected to was purely coincidental.

Anyone who watches these spectacles is struck by how adept the candidates are at bobbing and weaving whenever they are asked tough questions. The charade recalls the classic line from the 1972 movie, "The Candidate," when the Senate hopeful portrayed by Robert Redford was reminded by his wily campaign manager on the way to the television studio: "Now remember, whatever the questions, give them our answers."

Little wonder TV viewership for the debates has declined by more than one-third this year compared with 1992. Or the show-down in San Diego scored a record-low rating in debate viewership.

The process was not nearly so sterile 36 years ago, when Richard Nixon and John Kennedy pioneered TV debates before a national audience. Both candidates were relatively free to engage one another as they presented their cases to the voters.

Today's debates, on the other hand, are so carefully controlled by the candidates and their handlers that viewers looking for some spontaneity might just as well turn to the Shopping Network.

What can be done to breathe some life into the debates?

For starters, there should be far more give and take between the candidates. Someone has to be a timekeeper, to be sure. But a rigid format in which candidates are constantly worrying about exceeding their time limits is counterproductive. Better to allow plenty of intellectual roughhousing than to treat the people aspiring to the world's most powerful office like three-minute eggs.

The questions should be asked by people who have a keen understanding of the issues and will ask pointed follow-ups whenever the candidates begin to change the subject. Otherwise, the entire exercise veers off into a smarmy personality contest that rewards showmanship over substance. After all, we're electing president, not auditioning a talk-show host.

Presidential debates should help voters make informed decisions about which person is best qualified for the Oval Office. Today's tightly scripted affairs are simply turning people off.

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Kasey
KERBER

Holiday spirit is selling out

Just about everyone says that the holidays are too commercial.

But seldomly, do I hear well, anyone, say *why* they are so evilly capitalistic?

Therefore, it was my personal *calling* to find out if the holidays are truly too money-oriented — and if they are, to find out why.

So, where do you go to discover the universal meaning of capitalism and Christmas?

Hmmm....

Kmart and Hy-Vee, of course.

And why not? There are plenty of holiday decorations, holiday costumes, and more importantly, an abundance of food when I get hungry from research.

So off I went to a grocery and discount store. I was in search of those retail items that truly represent the spirit and essence of holiday spirit.

But they were pretty boring. Instead, we'll talk about my other finds.

First, Halloween stuff, since it happens to be the holiday which is nearly upon us.

There was an abundance of Halloween "essence" gifts at Hy-Vee, including the "Pumpkin Masters Scraper Scoop."

This tool will do an effective job of removing pumpkin slop during the carving process. So will a "spoon" for that matter, but here's the catcher — a spoon is not "patented."

Keeping with the pumpkin theme, there's "Pumpkin Dunk'n," a \$4.95 formula that will preserve your pumpkin so it doesn't rot.

It's a decent idea, until you make it to the produce department, where the price of pumpkins is two for \$4.

Hmmm... buy two pumpkins and have \$3 to spare or blow \$7 bucks and pray that "Pumpkin Dunk'n" is also patented.

I'll go with option No. 1.

But I might have a harder time resisting the Halloween goods at Kmart.

Here I have a wide range of costume and makeup options.



First are my makeup essentials. Do I want to start gentle, with the "My First Makeup" kit or hit the hard core with the "Scarfaces" kit?

Maybe my choice of a costume will simplify the options.

But then I have to figure out whether I want to wear an "alien exoskeleton" costume from the movie "Independence Day," slip into a "Crypt Keeper" costume from "Tales from the Crypt" or become Kevin Sorbo in my very own Hercules costume, from "Hercules, the Legendary Journeys."

However, we shouldn't forget a holiday that's a good two months away.

Kmart certainly hasn't. They've devoted four aisles of red and white merchandise to remembering the birth of Christ — just don't forget to bring along your green stuff.

You'll need it for Christmas "essences" like Christmas ornaments. No, not your normal ornaments — ones with a little more life to them. Ones with...

...Bugs Bunny lying on top of a giant television, eating carrots and milk. It's worth \$4.95!

And so is the ornament with Mickey Mouse clinging to a huge computer, whose screen says "Merry Christmas." Another \$4.95 well spent....

But what Christmas tree would be complete without the Garfield Christmas ornament, featuring an imposing Garfield giving a fake "stiff-arm" on top of a giant red football?

Yet there's more to Christmas than ornaments.

Take, for example, the "Rappin' Santa" doll.

Yes, for \$9.99 Santa sways back and forth and sings "Paper wrap! Take it all away! Take a wrap! Take it all away!"

Frosty the Snowman and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer are also available.

But why stop there?

For \$5 more, you can be the proud owner of a "Singing Puppy" wearing a Santa hat.

The puppy barks (and I mean *barks*) each note of "Jingle Bells," "Silver Bells" and "We Wish You a Merry Christmas."

You'd better hurry though — Kmart only has 31 puppies left. If you have trouble finding the highly sought-after, holiday-essential puppies, 24 are hidden for some reason in the back of the garden center.

Lastly, the Christmas gift to end all Christmas gifts. This is the one that wraps around your heart and fills it with the essential holiday spirit and remembrance.

It's the official "It's a Wonderful Life" wrapping paper.

Get your \$3.99 ready and you too can wrap Jimmy Stewart around that "Singing Puppy" you had to search so hard to find.

So this ends my look at the holiday decorations, gifts and costumes that intertwine with the holiday spirit.

And I'm sure that you'll agree with me — we don't need to buy a single one of them.

I guess the holidays might be too commercial after all.

I guess people might be trying to make a buck off of holiday cheer.

I guess it may be wrong.

I guess I better take off this Kevin Sorbo "Hercules" costume and take it back.

Too bad, I really liked how it contoured my muscular frame.

Now why is the "Singing Puppy" laughing at me?

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