

Nov 04, 2016 by [Gordon Robison](#)

## Watching the Debates <sup>[1]</sup>

Los Angeles

If you are an American living overseas – particularly in the Middle East – coming back to the United States for a visit inevitably entails a single question, one you will encounter from seemingly every person you meet: Is it safe over there?

Do you feel secure?

Can you go out?

Aren't you worried?

I thought about this as I walked onto the USC campus this morning, where the first thing I encountered was a kiosk selling pepper spray (Last Day! Campus Special: \$11.50 / 2 for \$20!), a product I am nearly certain is illegal in Jordan (and a lot of other places).

People are stunned when I tell them my teenage daughter is in many ways freer to roam Amman than she was to roam Atlanta (her last stateside address). Why? Because in almost every respect Amman is a lot safer than Atlanta. Or, it would seem, Los Angeles. There is something hugely inward-looking about we Americans when we are at home.

All this occurred to me while reflecting on this week's final presidential debate. After watching the earlier debates slumped in a chair at 4am it was refreshing to have the program start at a sensible hour of the evening. More fascinating, however, was the way the American broadcast media covers these things.

Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya treat them as high political theater, according them the sense of gravity their American counterparts reserve for the State of the Union, or Presidential addresses delivered at moments of grave crisis. CNN, in contrast, dubbed the final debate the "Tussle in Tempe". Its main pre-debate package on the issues expected to come up featured a graphic of boxing gloves hitting each other. It is not an accident that internally the news channels refer to their pre-debate and post-debate coverage as "pre-game" and "post-game". After watching the earlier debates from the Middle East the contrast was jarring.

Ironically, I took in this final debate in a sports bar. Two hours before it began the bartender assured me that the big TV would be turned to the debate, but as the appointed hour approached it was tuned to Game Two of the American League Championship Series between the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees (after the debate Larry King began his interview with Rudy Giuliani by congratulating him on the evening's Yankee victory). An argument between several of the bar's regulars ensued when it was time to change channels, but even the pro-baseball faction of the crowd mostly paid attention once the debate began. The bar, and crowd, were pretty well-heeled and, I sensed, rather Republican. I had the odd

sensation that most of the room intended to vote for Bush, while frequently snorting with derision in a way that left little one doubt these same people believed very little of what he said. As the 90 minutes went on there was a slow drift away from the big screen and toward the TV at the bar, where the baseball game still held sway.

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