

Things left out of the debate:

The presidential debates were theater, good – even gripping – theater, but theater nonetheless. Though it would be naïve to think that modern presidential debates have ever been otherwise, it is still a shame that the debates are not part of a real national conversation.

Much was left out, but here's a sampling of the issues I wish had been addressed.

#### One: Oil and the Built Environment

If we as a country are serious about weaning ourselves from dependence on oil, we need to start talking about how we get around and how we build communities. Simply raising fuel standards or investing in hydrogen fuel cells will not solve our problem.

There needs to be a drive to take what is best about cities and transplant it to suburbs and exurbs. We will not get people out of their cars by simply building light rail or adding bus lines. The only way to get people not to drive to the dry cleaners or to the grocery store for a gallon of milk is by making it easy for them to walk or cycle there.

But this requires political will to confront voters in the suburbs, and there's no votes in that.

#### Two: Government Surveillance and Police Powers

Senator Kerry says he wants to revisit parts of the Patriot Act, while President Bush cites the law as key to the fight against terrorism.

But neither man referred to any specific provision, whether that be the FBI's use of self-issued subpoenas, sneak-and-peak searches or roving wiretaps.

Instead they use the Patriot Act as shorthand for a wide range of government surveillance and anti-terrorism proposals. These include the use of computerized screening systems to keep terrorists off airplanes and the increased use of commercial databases by federal, state and local police.

But there has been no real discussion about the kind of society we want to live in, and how these programs create both real and unfounded fears of a Big Brother society.

#### Three: Government Secrecy

Democracy cannot exist without openness, for no citizen can vote truly without knowing what the government does in his name.

Yet, we have a government obsessed with secrecy.

The Transportation Security Administration refuses to acknowledge in court that it requires airlines to ask passengers for identification, even though everyone knows they do. The Federal Communications Commission ruled that data on cell phone outages will now be kept secret as a way to thwart terrorism. Government employees react to Freedom of Information Act requests by using thick black markers to blacken out any information that might embarrass their agency.

Government secrecy is not new – the CIA, citing national security, still refuses to release its budgets, even those from the 1960s.

But the Bush Administration has embraced secrecy, and there has been no discussion by either candidate about the necessity of such secrecy or its costs to America's political culture.

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