The Debates

By Mel Lavine

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If, as polls suggest, the race for the White House remains a virtual dead heat after the conventions, the focus of the campaign shifts to the debates. And that raises questions since much is left in the hands of the moderators, the people who ask the questions. They are familiar faces on the news, safe and trust-worthy.

PBS' Jim Lehrer moderates the first 90-minute debate between President Obama and former governor Romney on October 3 at the University of Denver. Domestic issues are the subjects. Lehrer's an old hand, done presidential debates before. In picking Lehrer for the first and possibly the most important debate, both sides are playing it safe.

Martha Raddatz, ABC News' chief foreign correspondent, moderates the next debate – the only one between the vice presidential nominees, Joe Biden and Paul Ryan. It is set for October 11 at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky. Domestic and foreign affairs are the topics. Raddatz is known for her reporting overseas but is no stranger to Washington politics. She may well find herself presiding over the most contentious ninety minutes of all the debates.

The president and Romney meet for the second time on October 16 at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. It is a town hall meeting format with questions from undecided voters. Candy Crowley, CNN's chief political correspondent, will field the questions. I don't often watch CNN but when I've caught her she's struck me as scrupulously non-partisan.

Bob Schieffer of CBS News moderates the third and final presidential debate on October 22 at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Florida. Foreign affairs is the bone of contention. Schieffer's an old hand and, like Lehrer, has lasted a long time.

My concern is simple: these fine journalists are Washington insiders. It can't be helped. The press depends on the politically powerful for information and the political class needs favorable news to promote its own interests. In a manner of speaking, they live off one another every day.

In the Reagan years I remember walking into a Washington restaurant and finding prominent

journalists and important officials having a merry old time together. In Eureka, where I'd started out in the news biz, a reporter would have had a lot of explaining to do if he was seen having lunch with the mayor. It took some getting used to how the pros operated in the big time.

Now that I've got all that off my chest, I'll be watching all four debates. May the moderators pull no punches!

Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: mellavine@aol.com.