

# Governor's race: Moral fuming vs. Bill Clinton flair

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By DANIEL STURM

"We're pleased to offer you the opportunity to cover the first debate between Michigan's gubernatorial candidates," wrote Wood-TV's News Director, Patty McGettigan. I and roughly 50 other journalists were the only guests at the televised debate between the Democrat Jennifer Granholm and the Republican Dick Posthumus at the station's studio in Grand Rapids on Monday evening.

Taking my seat in the dark basement room, with media colleagues to my left and right, I reflected on a situation that had taken on a surreal quality. The voters stood outside, holding up their poster signs, and I sat in the basement as part of an exclusive audience of political journalists who watched the two candidates "live" from (yes) a small television screen. Well, the people outside didn't seem ready to conquer the Bastille. Never mind. And, after all, they were only missing out on some mediocre snacks, and there were no sofas for real boob tubing, anyway.

Upstairs four celebrity-class journalists began to question the candidates' positions on taxes, education and health. Jennifer Granholm impressed me as having the kind of Bill Clinton/Tony Blair flair that makes you know that she's smart, but well, that you're not dumb either.

Dick Posthumus' energy seemed to move in the other direction. At the beginning of the debate, when asked about his stand on abortion, he immediately fell into attack mode, calling his opponent an extremist for supporting late-term abortions and taxpayer-funded abortions. He closed his statement with moral fume: "It is about life!"

Of course, what Posthumus did not point out was that as attorney general and acting on Gov. John Engler's order, Granholm wrote a legal brief urging the U.S. Supreme Court to uphold Nebraska's partial-birth

abortion ban.

Granhholm followed an analytical style of rhetoric throughout the evening. She responded to the subject of abortion by explaining why she believed abortion did not contradict her identity as a Roman Catholic. She said one shouldn't legislate Jewish faith, Christian faith or Muslim faith for women. "The United States is not a theocracy." Then shifting into an ethical discourse, Granhholm accused Posthumus for opposing abortion in cases of rape and incest.

Language, body and otherwise

It's not hard to play with statistics or dramatize your voice, but even with the best coach, I imagine manipulating facial expressions must be difficult. I always wondered if Germans would have elected Hitler if more of them had seen his terrible facial expressions on television. Unfortunately, the vast majority only had access to radio.

Clearly, Granhholm, once an aspiring actress, won the body language round of this televised battle. As she talked, she sorted her thoughts for the audience with synchronized hand movements, which seemed to strengthen the rationale of her arguments. She smiled to be nice and kept a friendly facial expression even on the tough questions. Posthumus didn't seem to have the same mastery of image, so important in this televised virtual reality: his face frozen in a super-friendly expression seconds before his statements ended as if preparing for a photo shoot and waiting for the camera flash. Polls say smile, you know. The voters/audience outside the studio likes it when politicians smile.

Rhetoric is another interesting point. Posthumus rarely ended his statements on a positive note, whereas Granhholm almost always did. Posthumus instead used rhetorical questions to disparage his rival's reputation, such as: "Who is the real Jennifer Granhholm?," or "Who is telling the truth?" or simply interjections such as "Jennifer, Jennifer, Jennifer" - as if to say "Tsk, tsk, tsk, naughty girl." It would have been funny if Granhholm had responded, "Dick, Dick, Dick," but I imagine that's not her style.

She stuck with criticizing her opponent's agenda and elaborating what she wanted to do in the future if elected. She discussed examples of how other states had managed to solve certain problems, such as lowering prescription costs (Maine). By rhetoric, too, she seemed to outmatch her opponent.

There was one situation where Granhholm clearly became defensive - and looked nervously at her notes. This was when Posthumus questioned the depth of her idealism in fighting big business interests. He mentioned her ties to Wayne County Executive Ed McNamara, with whom she served as lead attorney during a time when he was accused of granting no-bid contracts to friends, family and political contributors, and accused Granhholm of not having called for an investigation into county contracting practices. Posthumus used the word "corruption." Granhholm rejected this accusation, saying she'd forwarded the case to Michigan State Police. She called the issue a "distraction" raised by Republicans and the media.

The show's over.

After the show the live coverage immediately switched to Cincinnati, where President Bush said that the Iraqi regime is the single gravest danger confronting humanity. Some of my colleagues stopped counting the "Jennifers" in Posthumus statements, in order to watch the presidential speech. The rest of us were led upstairs, to speak with the candidates. In a post-televised moment, Granhholm commented: "Unfortunately, the question about war wasn't asked."

She also criticized that none of the journalists asked questions on environmental issues. To liven up the next debate, on Oct. 15, perhaps the Economic Club of Detroit should invite the Green Party candidate, Douglas Campbell. When the Green candidate appeared (uninvited) at an environmental forum in Brighton, state troopers handcuffed him and hauled him out by his arms and legs - a different body language altogether.

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