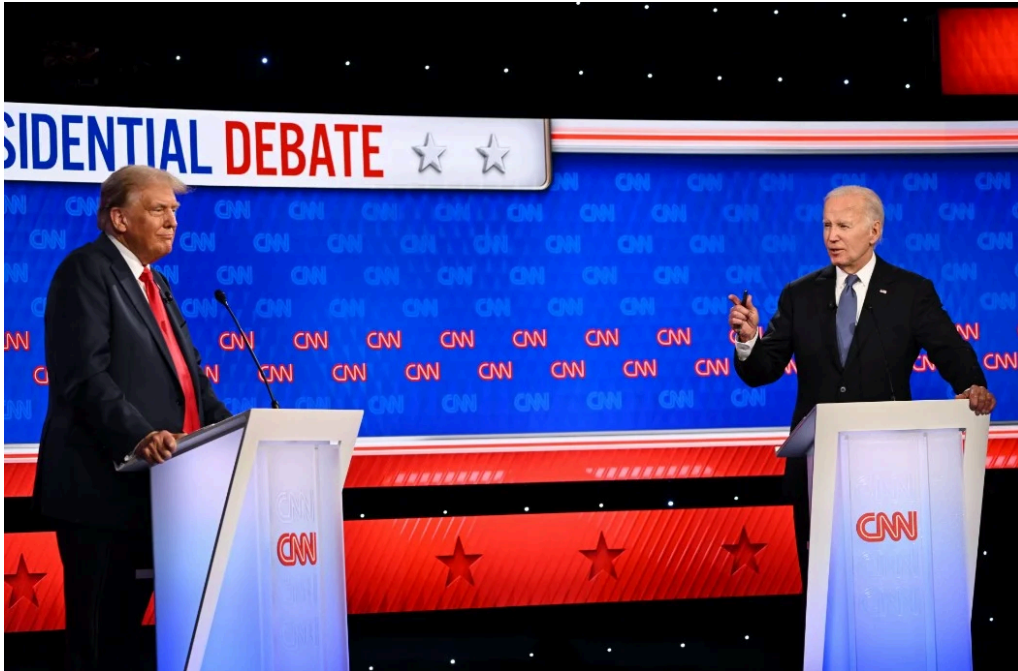


# Atlanta Redux: Including What You Didn't See and Hear Around the Debate

July 1, 2024 by **Dan McCue**



(CNN Photo)

ATLANTA — They stood on both sides of the exit ramp leading from the Interstate 75/85 corridor and cresting at the intersection of 14th Street and Techwood Drive.

Smiling, expectant, they knew, barring any extended traffic delay, that former President Donald Trump's motorcade would likely be passing, headed to the CNN studios just a hundred yards or so from where they stood.

Undeterred by a late afternoon downpour that had left the air thick and as sodden as a wet towel, about 80 of the MAGA faithful, most of them White, with a few Black faces here and

there, waved flags and banners. Most held up some kind of homemade sign.

“I don’t like to speak ill of anyone, but I can’t wait until Biden’s gone, out of office,” said a tall gentleman holding a placard that read, “Joe Biden, You’re Fired.”

“He’s just done terrible things to this country,” he added.

A few feet away, a short Black woman with joyful eyes spiritedly waved a large American flag.

As the crowd continued to wait, officers from the Atlanta City police department looked on attentively from a barricade that cut off the CNN portion of Techwood Drive from the rest of the neighborhood.

On any other Thursday night, this intersection would be busy with commuters trying in some way to weave their way home through Atlanta’s notoriously heavy traffic.

But as a large billboard hovering above the scene made clear, this wasn’t just any early summer night in Georgia.

In just a few hours the first presidential debate of the 2024 campaign, a critical face-to-face encounter between Trump and President Joe Biden would begin.

### **In the Eye of the Storm**

A lot has been written and said about the meeting in the hours since the debate was held, but little of the commentary has captured the mood of the city — a flashpoint in the wake of the 2020 election — as it once again shouldered the role of epicenter in American politics.

In the days leading up to the big event, the vibe was definitely mixed. Most Atlantans appeared to simply be carrying on with their lives.

“They told us to expect to work late on Thursday, but that’s about it,” a waiter said with a slight shrug of his shoulders at Grille 35, the ground floor restaurant at the Atlanta Marriott Suites Midtown hotel.

Even as he spoke, however, a foursome at the next table, two of whom were wearing “Women for Biden” t-shirts, were absorbed in the planning of what seemed to be a debate watch party.

Staring intently into their laptops when not randomly adjusting lists on a spreadsheet, words like “volunteers” and “swag” occasionally emanated from the gathering; meanwhile outside, under the hotel marquee, a lone film crew shot a quick “hit” for the early evening news.

Similar scenes played out around the city. An occasional bold face media name might show up at the midtown Whole Foods, but in

a city in which CNN, Superstation WTBS and The Weather Channel were all institutions, the sight of a few additional TV celebrities barely raised an eyebrow.

What did eventually begin to emerge however is that whatever diversity of opinion might exist here, Atlanta is a mighty blue city in a deeply red state.

That feeling was heightened by the paucity of GOP-sponsored events in the run-up to the debate, and the number of invites to Democratic events that popped up in emails both Wednesday and Thursday.

And it became even more evident after the Democratic National Committee bought space on five billboards in high-traffic corridors across Atlanta to welcome Trump to Atlanta “for the first time since becoming a convicted felon.”

The DNC added, with a bit of snark, “Congrats — or whatever.”

The prime billboard was the one the party managed to secure on I-75 near Lakewood Blvd., the route Trump’s motorcade was likely to take into town from Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport.

But none of these signs was anywhere near the corner of 14th and Williams Street, where a short, friendly woman got stuck at the crosswalk leading to one of the interstate’s entrances.

Wearing a faded concert t-shirt — so faded it was impossible to tell the band it commemorated — and jeans nearly as faded, she used a tissue to dab sweat from her brow as she waited for the “don’t walk” light to change.

“It’s not so bad unless you get caught on a corner like this,” she said chattily as she squinted toward the setting sun.

Just steps away a mural on the side of Dean's Midtown Shell station featured a pair of what, at that moment, seemed like very alluring Coca-Cola bottles.

The light changed and the chatter continued, mostly about the traffic passing below, beneath the overpass, when the woman learned she'd fallen in step with a reporter.

"Oh  
no,  
no,  
no,"  
she  
said,

stepping slightly aside while maintaining her forward momentum toward the gathering of Trump faithful.

"Don't worry. I don't even know your name," the reporter replied.

With that, she merrily resumed talking.

"So, I guess it's a given, you'll be voting for Trump in November," the reporter observed.

"I plan to, but I'm not really sure," she admitted. "The truth is, I'm kind of tired of both these guys. I'd really like somebody new to be running."

Up ahead, a group of young Black protesters was approaching the Trump contingent from a neighborhood on the west side of the bridge.

“Do not engage them,” a woman wearing a red MAGA hat called out.

In fact, the young protesters, many of whom carried signs reading “Protect Women of Color” and “Fearless Freedom,” had no intention of confronting anyone.

When they reached the stand of Trump supporters on the corner, they merely turned and crossed the street and headed on their way.

### **The Longest Mile**

The logistics of getting to the press center on Thursday evening were a bit more complicated than they'd been on Tuesday and Wednesday.

On those days, one could easily walk from any of the area hotels, past CNN's headquarters, and move on to the McCamish Pavilion on the campus of the Georgia Institute of Technology, where a press filing center had been established for the more than 600 reporters who'd been credentialed to attend.

By the time President Biden and former President Trump had arrived in Atlanta, several blocks had been cordoned off, adding an extra half mile of so to the journey.

At 8th and Spring Streets, small groups of protestors of several different stripes took up positions on three of the intersection's four corners.

About two dozen young people protesting the war in Gaza were posted on one of these corners. Among them was a young woman

who

identified herself as “Queen K.”

She was dressed all in black, from the bandana that covered her hair down to her sneakers. Her t-shirt bore the logo “silent moves, loud results,” while the sign in her hand urged passersby to “Stand with Palestine.”

“Do you really think the war in Gaza is going to continue to be an issue ... all the way through November?” she was asked.

“I think this administration’s treatment of Black and Brown will be,” she said.

“So you don’t think you, or the Black and Brown community has benefited from the Inflation Reduction Act or the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill?”

“Those things are nice, but they don’t address the serious issues we’re still experiencing in our communities,” the Queen said.

“We still have serious problems with police brutality on our city’s streets, and other issues that make it tremendously

difficult simply to live my life,” she said.

“But could that really drive you to vote, say, for Trump, or sit out this election, which would be equally detrimental to Biden?” she was asked.

“I’m looking for a third-party candidate to support,” the Queen said.

With that she nodded to the dozen or so supporters of independent candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr., supporters who crowded the opposite street corner.

“Maybe Kennedy,” the Queen said. “I think he’s had some interesting things to say.”

Meanwhile, across the street, the Kennedy supporters waved signs and chanted slogans and otherwise attempted to make themselves obvious.

Parked next to their position was a large RV, painted mostly light blue, bearing a portrait of the candidate, along with slogans like “Kennedy Across America,” “The Remedy in Kennedy” and “Heal the Divide.”

As his volunteers and supporters issued rallying cries, loudspeakers blared a Kennedy campaign song ... only it wasn’t a rap or alt country, instead it was a jingle recorded more than 60 years ago for John F. Kennedy’s 1960 campaign for the White House.

“Kennedy, Kennedy, Kennedy, Kennedy ...”

“Kennedy, Kennedy, Kennedy’s the one for me.”

“We’re here because we don’t think CNN should be dictating who the nation’s president is,” said a bespectacled man of about



college age dressed in a campaign t-shirt and what appeared to be blue bathing shorts.

“It’s just not right,” a woman nearby said. “They should have had him on the debate stage.”

Leaning against a nearby lamppost was what could only be described as kind of a beefcake photo of the candidate himself, to which someone had affixed a piece of duct tape over the mouth.

It was a compelling piece of art. Sadly, once it blew over, nobody thought to pick it up.

But they weren’t the only Kennedy supporters standing between reporters and the press center Thursday night.

Another, much larger group, lined the sidewalk on 5th Avenue, the only route the press could take to reach the cordoned-off street amidst rows of fraternity houses that led to the press gate.

Robust, cheerful, and looking as if they ranged in age from their 20s to their 60s, this group had set up a refreshment stand under a sign reading “CNN Lemons = Kennedy Lemonade.”

In terms of sheer numbers, the Kennedy contingent was by far the largest to turn out in support of their candidate, whether that candidate had made the debate stage or not.

There were some Biden supporters — as evidenced by the large number of signs that had been posted around town — but there was nothing like the active signs of support for either Kennedy or to a lesser degree Trump.

And there was an anti-Trump contingent to be sure, including members of the so-called MadDogPac, who paid for an electronic sign truck emblazoned with slogans like “Nope, Not In America” and “Stop the Trump Vote.”

Among those taking it all in were three young women who set up a bench and chair in the shade of a large tree outside the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity house.

“I love everything political,” said Anna Freeman of Savannah, Georgia.

“It’s so fun to be around,” she added.

She and her friends, Caroline Van Sant, of Monroe, Georgia, and Abbey Nelson, of Helen, Georgia, all seemed in agreement on that, and asked a number of questions of passing reporters on what would be transpiring inside.

Where they parted company was in whom they supported. Freeman said she was staunchly in Biden’s corner, while Nelson seemed more inclined — though she wouldn’t say — to back Trump.

Symbolically, Van Sant, who sat between the two, said she hadn’t yet decided on a candidate.

## **Ground Zero**

In all, about 48 million viewers tuned in to watch Thursday's debate, a large number, but significantly below the 73 million people who watched Biden and Trump face-off in their final debate in 2020.

Later, in the red-carpeted "spin room" on the floor of the McCamish Pavilion, some posited that if the ratings were low for the debate, it could be due to low voter enthusiasm for both candidates.

On  
the

other hand, they said, lower viewer numbers could be attributed to how early in the campaign this debate was and the fact that many potential viewers might have already started their summer vacations.

The consensus view of the debate itself is that Biden "lost" by turning in a shaky, somewhat halting performance, while Trump "won" but being a bit more subdued version of himself, but one still capable of churning out false claim after false claim, exaggeration after exaggeration.

The reality seems to be, despite CNN's best efforts, the broadcast really wasn't much of a debate at all — at least in the traditional terms of a candidate talking about ideas or explaining why their vision of the future is more attractive than that of their opponent.

Instead, Trump was able to do what he does best — appeal to the group identity of his MAGA followers by churning up their disdain or hatred for others, such as immigrants, liberal Democrats and supporters of the Paris Climate Accord.

In an exchange that may have defined the entire night, Trump described America as becoming a “rat’s nest” under the Biden administration.

“Because of his ridiculous, insane and very stupid policies, people are coming in and they’re killing our citizens,” he said.

“I call it Biden migrant crime,” Trump continued. “They’re killing our citizens at a level that we’ve never seen before ... We’re literally an uncivilized country now.”

The former president then transitioned to the military, claiming veterans are dying on U.S. streets because Biden doesn’t care about them.

“He doesn’t like the military. He doesn’t care about our veterans. Nobody has been worse,” he said.

In contrast Trump said, everything he did while in office, on any number of fronts, was the “best” and “most popular”; policies overturned, he said, “just because I approved it, which is crazy.”

Biden looked momentarily shell-shocked by the sheer volume of misinformation his opponent could spew in the two minutes

allotted for an answer to a moderator's question and the single minute allotted for rebuttals.

"Every single thing he said is a lie, every single one," the president said.

This posed a problem for those reporters trying to cover the exchanges in real time on social media, because there was no way to effectively fact-check the candidates.

Eventually, as one moved through the media filing center arranged around the perimeter of the complex, what one saw was row after row of reporters intently watching the exchanges and taking notes here and there.

If there was one moment of levity within the media filing center itself, it came when Biden launched into a fiery set of criticisms of Trump's legal problems, including his recent conviction following his hush-money trial in New York.

"You owe billions of dollars in civil penalties for molesting a woman in public, for doing a whole range of things ... Of having

sex with a porn star ... while your wife was pregnant,” Biden said, adding “You have the morals of an alley cat.”

“I didn’t have sex with a porn star, number one,” Trump said, the line inspiring a loud “ha!” from a woman in the hall, which itself inspired some laughter.

Trump was found guilty last month on 34 counts of falsifying business records related to a hush-money payment to an adult film star in 2016. And last year, a jury found that Trump sexually abused E. Jean Carroll in a luxury department store dressing room in the spring of 1996 and awarded her \$5 million for battery and defamation.

He attributed his travails to selective prosecution by “a very terrible, horrible judge, a Democrat,” and a prosecutor who was also a Democrat.

More than anyone, however, he blamed Biden, “a guy that’s going after his political opponent [in the courts] because he can’t win fair and square,” Trump said.

### **Frat Boy Fans**

Among those approving of Trump’s performance were members of the Kappa Alpha fraternity, who moved a large screen television out onto their front porch and polished off a number of 30-can cases of Busch Light as the debate unfolded.

“It’s all about making an informed decision,” one member said, but for the most part, the gathered minds seemed already made up.

To the left of the large screen, a cardboard cutout of Trump leaned against a flagpole, and not far from there, another

member of the fraternity waved a large Trump flag as he gave an interview to members of the Japanese press.

Earlier in the day the fraternity had raised a banner that said: “Felton,” though that was crossed out, replaced with “MAGA,” “2024” and “Trump.”

Among the few professed undecideds in the group was a young marketing major from the University of South Carolina, who kicked at one of the empties strewn along the walk and lawn as she sought to share her views.

“This is the first election that I’ll be old enough to vote in, so I’m particularly interested in learning about the issues and hearing what the candidates have to say,” she said. “It’s all so new to me.”

As she spoke, a member of the fraternity stood nearby, only turning his attention away when a member of another fraternity, Kappa Sigma, walked by, wrapped in what appeared to be a bedsheet.

“What’s it say?” the first fraternity brother asked.

Proudly, the passing fraternity spread his arms wide.

“Make America Drunk Again,” it said.

“It hung all day above our beer pong table,” he said.

“Who won?” he was asked.

“We all did,” he replied without a moment’s hesitation.

*Dan can be reached at [dan@thewellnews.com](mailto:dan@thewellnews.com) and at <https://twitter.com/DanMcCue>*





