Washington Sketch
Dana Milbank, Columnist

Is It Wise to Be So Smart?

By Dana Milbank
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A capacity crowd of 1,500 people jammed into Lisner Auditorium at George Washington University last night for Al Gore's speech and book-signing. But the numbers don't matter: Even if Gore were speaking before a sellout crowd at Verizon Center, he would still be the smartest guy in the room.

He reminded his listeners of this repeatedly last night.

"Were it possible to summarize this book in only 15 minutes, it wouldn't be the book it is, but I'll do my best," he announced en route to a 34-minute talk.

He waxed esoteric about the ancients: "Both the Agora and the Forum were foremost in the minds of our Founders. . . . Not a few of them read both Latin and Greek, as you know."

He waxed erudite about the Enlightenment: "Gibbon's 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire' was first published the same year as the Declaration of Independence and Adam Smith's 'The Wealth of Nations. '"

And he waxed informed about the Information Age: "One of the challenges in discussing the premise of this book is to establish as a concrete reality the importance of this virtual space, forgive the phrase,

Al Gore, joining the League of Extraordinary Gentlemen. (By Stephanie Kuykendal -- Bloomberg News)

WASHINGTON SKETCH
A national political reporter for the Post, Milbank writes Washington Sketch, an observational column about political theater in the White House, Congress and elsewhere in the capital. He covered the 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns and President Bush's first term. Before coming to the Post as a Style political writer in 2000, he covered the Clinton White House for the Wall Street Journal.

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within which the conversation of democracy takes place."

Gore practically oozes gray matter.

"He's the smartest guy out there," said a former Gore volunteer named Andy Williams, who snagged a coveted front-row seat.

"He's very smart," concurred Alan Schwartz, wearing a T-shirt with President Bush's image and the words "Worst President Ever."

"He's the smartest guy in the pack," said Eugenia Ayers, who was one of the first in line. And therein lies a problem for the Gore '08 bubble.

Publication this month of Gore's jeremiad against Bush, "The Assault on Reason," has fed fervent hopes among environmentalists and others on the left that he will run again for the presidency -- an unlikely prospect, but one Gore does not completely dismiss. Yet reading Gore's book, or listening to his speeches, may remind some of those same supporters what they liked least about him the first time he ran, in 2000. Gore is usually smart and sometimes prophetic -- but, all too frequently, pedantic.

"It's the biggest problem he's got," said Schwartz, from Germantown. "People don't want somebody who makes them feel stupid."


"The new technology called 'Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging,' or FMRI, has revolutionized the ability of neuroscientists to look inside the operations of a living human brain and observe which regions of the brain are being used at which times and in response to which stimuli," Gore writes.

Still with him? Try this: "The architectural breakthrough associated with massive parallelism was to break up the power of the CPU and distribute it throughout the memory field to lots of smaller separate 'microprocessors' -- each one co-located with the portion of the memory field it was responsible for processing."

Not that you'd doubt Gore on these points, but, just in case, there are 273 endnotes.

Gore's main points are powerful, if not obvious: The Bush administration has manipulated the facts on the Iraq war and a range of other policies, the public has been easily manipulated,
and Americans watch too much television. As in 2000, it's the way he makes his points that causes him trouble.

Of course, the passionate Gore fans who flocked to last night's speech wouldn't have been annoyed if he had opted to read from an organic chemistry textbook. The 1,500 tickets, at $16 a pop, were sold out days ago, and Politics and Prose sold books by the case.

Outside, a group called DC Draft Al Gore distributed stickers, buttons and petitions telling Gore that "Americans from every corner of our nation are calling on you." One opportunist worked the line with playing cards, saying, "In case Gore doesn't run, does anybody need a deck of Obama or Hillary cards?"

Professor Gore used a roving microphone and paced back and forth, pausing thoughtfully and looking upward at times, putting one hand in his coat pocket and gesturing with the other. He began by expressing his concern about the American public's knowledge. "How could it be that 70 percent of the American people genuinely believed that the person responsible for attacking on 9/11 was Saddam Hussein?" he asked. As for the Bush administration's false claims about Iraq's weapons, he called it "shocking and much more troubling to me that our nation fell for it so easily."

He spoke of Adam Smith and Thomas Jefferson and John Stuart Mill, only briefly mixing up his patriots: "James Madison wrote -- no, Thomas Paine, I'm sorry." He gave a brief history of the printing press's spread through Northern Europe. He used social science phrases such as "the collective process" and the "marketplace of ideas" and the "exchange of goods and services" and "guided by the role of reason." And he threw in a New Age feel when he discussed the Internet: "It is simply that we have to conjure the full importance that it has in our lives in ways that go beyond what we can see and hear with our senses."

The crowd loved it. But would the "average American," the one who, Gore said in disbelief, "now watches 4 1/2 hours of television per day?" (He felt compelled to add that "some of us are not watching it nearly that much.")

"I want the smartest guy around to be president," said Schwartz, in the "Worst President Ever" T-shirt. But, he added, "how do you convince people it's okay to feel inferior to their leaders?"
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