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**Capitol View**

***Commentary by J.L. Schmidt***

**Statehouse Correspondent**

**Nebraska Press Association**

**Pillen’s Decision Not to Debate Is Disappointing**

FULL DISCLOSURE: Decades ago, I was a member of a state high school championship debate team. And I was at the Nebraska State Fair debate between incumbent U.S. Senator David Karnes (1987-89) and Bob Kerrey when Karnes said, “We need fewer farmers.” He lost the race.

I like debate. I think it is an important tool for people to hear both sides of an argument. Better yet, it’s a great way for folks to get know a political candidate. Merriam-Webster defines debate as “to contend in words.”

That’s why it is puzzling, even disappointing, that Republican gubernatorial candidate Jim Pillen has refused to debate the Democrat candidate Carol Blood. If the Nebraska Examiner is right, Pillen could become Nebraska’s first governor since at least the 1970s to be elected without facing his opponents on a debate stage.

There have been plenty of examples of candidates probably wishing they wouldn’t have debated, but none that I can remember standing out like the Pillen-Blood race.

I can forgive long-time Republican Governor Dave Heineman (10 years) for saying no to a 2010 opponent. Mark Lakers won the Democratic primary in May and then dropped out of the race. The party replaced him in July with lawyer Mike Meister. He called for debates, but Heineman declined. I don’t fault him for not debating the latecomer.

But I can’t extend the same pass to Pillen, a Columbus farmer who also serves on the University of Nebraska Board of Regents. I am tired of listening to his campaign manager, Kenny Zoeller, tell the media that “Jim is a livestock producer, not a politician, and he doesn’t do political theater.”

Excuse me, he lost that “not a politician” status the first time he showed up in a TV commercial in his orange hunting vest with a shotgun on his shoulder. He lost any protected

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status when he made public comments about Critical Race Theory and tried to get his fellow Regents to adopt a policy prohibiting the teaching of it.

He jumped into the vortex of public controversy when he allowed his supporters to engage in negative campaigning against opponents Charles Herbster and Brett Lindstrom. That, Mr. Zoeller, is political theater. I’m sorry, that just makes you another politician, Mr. Pillen.

For her part, State Sen. Carol Blood of Omaha is frustrated. She’s been putting herself out there for a few years in the Nebraska Legislature. I know what her voice sounds like. I know what she stands for and I am able to decide if I agree or disagree with those stands.

I have heard Jim Pillen voiceovers say, I’m Jim Pillen and I support this message or approve this commercial. That makes it pretty hard to decide who he is and what he believes. I have neither the time to read nor the access to Board of Regents transcripts to know that for which he stands.

I agree with Blood’s comments to the media that voters statewide deserve a chance to see how the candidates answer questions that weren’t prepared by their handlers. Seeing people react under pressure is key to getting to know a candidate.

Heineman and former Democrat Governor Ben Nelson told the Examiner they agree. Nelson credited his last 1990 debate against then-Gov. Kay Orr in Lincoln for helping him win. When he got a chance to ask her a question, he said, he was ready to ask about why someone promising to cut spending hadn’t done so sooner.

“I think it was the difference maker for the outcome of the election,” he told the news outlet. “I got a chance to express my views of why I wanted to be governor and why I would be the better person to be governor … and you can’t do that with TV ads.” Heineman said it’s an important way to share your vision.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln political scientist Dona-Gene Barton said she thinks debates are most important during political primaries. Pillen didn’t debate then either.

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With the voter registration edge held by Nebraska Republicans – more than 258,000 – it’s easy to see why he doesn’t want to debate. Why would he want to open up any doors for the media to shed any light on any dark corners that he doesn’t want revealed to voters, Barton asked.

Nelson and Heineman both said they hope Pillen will change his mind because debating made them better governors, better prepared to deal with press conferences and the grind of managing state government.

Without the opportunity to see him and hear the ideas come out of his mouth, I can only assume that four years of Republican Jim Pillen would not be unlike the past eight years of Pete Ricketts.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for more than 20 years*.