

The #VPDebate Faceoff (Op-Ed)

Pence was cool but the victory went to Kaine

✘ By *Virgil Scudder, President, [Virgil Scudder & Associates](#)*

This was perhaps a more important encounter than many vice-presidential debates in the past. Given Donald Trump's poor showing in the presidential debate and the many damaging stories about him that appeared in the last week, the pressure was all on [Mike Pence](#).

The Indiana governor had to somehow convince the country that Trump was stable, had some serious programs and policies, and was qualified to lead the nation. [Tim Kaine](#) only had to hold serve, calling attention to Trump's reckless statements and inconsistencies while touting Hillary Clinton's experience and her agenda for the nation.

Senator Kaine won, but not by a huge margin. This contest was much closer than the presidential debate on September 26 when Trump was blown away by Clinton. Pence performed so much better than Trump had that you can expect some whispers from Republicans that the ticket should be reversed.

Pence was working under a perhaps insurmountable handicap: the challenge of defending Trump's inflammatory attacks on women, Muslims, Mexicans, Gold Star parents, and an Indiana-born judge of Mexican heritage. He was playing defense all night. The senator kept demanding that Pence justify some of Trump's more outrageous comments, many of which are simply indefensible. Pence's response was to dispute that Trump had made some of those well-documented statements or to ignore the challenge and immediately attack the record and character of Secretary Clinton on another topic.

Kaine kept coming back to Trump's refusal to release his tax records, a topic for which Pence had no good response. Neither he nor the Trump campaign has disputed the speculation that the real estate developer has paid no federal taxes for 18 years.



(Photo Source: Twitter)

But, to his credit, the GOP candidate never lost his cool during the #vpdebate, even when he was clearly annoyed at his opponent's line of attack. Like Kaine and unlike Trump, he came into the debate arena well prepared. He projected a serious image even though it veered into sanctimonious territory at times.

The Democratic candidate was the more aggressive, frequently and annoyingly interrupting Pence when the Indiana governor strayed from the issue or dodged a question, especially in the early going. But, he dialed back the interruptions a bit in the last hour and was more effective as a result.

Kaine won the battle of [body language](#), making good use of his winning smile. Pence was fine when he was speaking but

sometimes seemed in pain when his opponent was talking. The split screen showed Pence mugging for the camera, grimacing and frowning, as Kaine laid out some of the more damaging charges against Trump.

Once again we had a moderator who was not up to the job. There was far more interrupting and talking over each other than a strong moderator would have tolerated and far too little follow-up to insist that the candidates answer the question before heading off to non-related matters. The public is ill-served by a long-winded, free for all environment.

Pence probably helped his ticket by laying out some specific policy proposals, something Trump has notoriously failed to do. It was a big improvement over Trump's "Trust me" approach. He also projected seriousness and conviction in his positions. Kaine, too, served his party and his ticket partner well with his performance.

But Pence was not destined to win. Though well prepared, knowledgeable, calm, and articulate, he simply faced too big a hurdle when called upon to defend Trump's rude and offensive statements or his refusal to release his tax returns. Pence gets an "A" for effort but the night belonged to the senator from Virginia.

***About the Author:** Often referred to as "The Dean of Media Trainers," Virgil is considered one of the world's foremost communication experts. In a 30-year career that has covered 26 countries on five continents, he has provided coaching and counsel to heads of some of the world's largest corporations and government leaders. Virgil is a prolific writer and speaker. His book, World Class Communication: how great CEOs win with the public, shareholders, employees, and the media, written with his son Ken, was named one of the 25 best business books of 2012. His column, In the C-Suite, appears*

in every quarterly issue of the Public Relations Strategist and is read by leaders of major public relations agencies and global heads of public relations of large companies. He has written or been featured in articles that have appeared in The New York Times, The International Herald Tribune, Reuters, Investors Business Daily, and numerous professional publications. Two of his speeches have been reprinted in the prestigious Vital Speeches of the Day. Prior to founding Virgil Scudder & Associates in 1990, Virgil headed the media training units of two of the world's largest public relations firms, Hill & Knowlton and Carl Byoir & Associates. Earlier, he was an award-winning news broadcaster at major radio and television networks and stations in New York City. He was a first-night Broadway drama critic for six years during that period, broadcasting reviews on NBC's all-news radio network and all-news WINS radio.