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McCurry: Pres. debates will change

By Tammy Haddad

The general election presidential debates can elect a candidate or send one home. So, it was standing room only at Café Milano as politicos gathered to watch the transfer of power from long-time Commission on Presidential Debates Democratic Co-Chairman Paul Kirk to former Clinton White House press secretary Mike McCurry.

“We’ve got to make [the debates] more relevant so that young people enjoy watching them; that’s what we’re going to be working on between now and 2012,” McCurry told POLITICO Monday.

Specifically, McCurry suggested, the Internet would play a critical role in future debates because of its interactive opportunity, saying, “I encourage people to actually participate, give us ideas and talk about how could the web make the presidential debates in 2012 more accessible to you.”

Republican Co-Chairman Frank Fahrenkopf welcomed McCurry, while paying tribute to the audience of political operatives, TV personalities, network producers, former debate staff – including past anchors Bob Schieffer and Sander Vanocur.

Fahrenkopf reminded the crowd that he and Kirk came together after being the leaders of their respective parties to make the election process stronger through a non-partisan organization. And Fahrenkopf thanked Kirk, now a senator from Massachusetts, for his service and reminisced about their 23-year partnership on the campaign frontlines.

To those who have worried about the level of political acrimony, Kirk cautioned, “Don’t despair.”

Though it was before the debate commission was formed, “Frank and I decided that there was something larger than political success – something enlightened and informed.”

Added McCurry, “We should look at [the debate commission] as the model of setting aside differences.”