Part I

PREPRODUCTION

Chapter One

THE PREDEBATE DEBATE

A few weeks after losing the 1960 election, Richard Nixon went for a sail off the coast of Florida with a group of associates that included a trusted adviser named Leonard Hall. As David Halberstam recounted in a 1976 essay on the Kennedy-Nixon debates,

> There were just a few old friends around and they all went out on a boat. Finally, Hall asked the question he had always wanted to ask—Why did you decide to debate? For a long time Nixon simply looked up at the sky, his eyes closed, his face drawn and tense. And Hall waited, but there was never an answer.[1]

In retrospect, the participation of Richard Nixon in the 1960 debates qualifies as one of the great political miscalculations in campaign history. Even at the time, the vice president seemed to be acting against his instincts. Early in the race, Nixon assured his handlers that debates with Kennedy

were out of the question. "In 1946, a damn fool incumbent named Jerry Voorhis debated a young lawyer and it cost him the election," he reminded staffers, citing his own experience.[2] Nixon obviously understood what later front-runners and incumbents would come to regard as gospel: TV debates favor the underdog.

In the summer of 1960 John F. Kennedy, by far the lesser known contender, immediately accepted the invitation of the broadcast networks for a series of televised debates. A few days later, over the objections of President Eisenhower and Republican advisers, Richard Nixon followed suit. Press secretary Herbert G. Klein recalled that his "mouth dropped open" when Nixon announced at a news conference in Chicago that he would debate JFK; senior campaign aides had not been notified. "I could attribute his reversal only to the fact that he did not want his manhood sullied by appearing as if he were afraid to win such an encounter," Klein wrote.[3] According to Nixon biographer Earl Mazo, "The vice president could find no way of rejecting the television network offers."[4]

By the end of the Kennedy-Nixon series, provocative new lessons about television and politics had come into focus; but on the future of presidential debates, opinion split down the middle. The more optimistic observers saw debates as inevitable. Walter Lippmann predicted that "from now on it will be impossible for any candidate . . . to avoid this kind of confrontation with his opponent." Others, like Eisenhower press secretary James Hagerty, reached a different conclusion: "You can bet your bottom dollar that no incumbent president will ever engage in any such debate or joint appearance in the future."[5]

As it happened, the pessimists came closer to the mark than the optimists, and another sixteen years would pass before candidates for the White House again agreed to debate. It is interesting to note that before his assassination President Kennedy had verbally committed to a second round of appearances in 1964. Furthermore, according to Republican nominee Barry Goldwater, Kennedy and Goldwater had seriously discussed a plan to barnstorm the country together in a series of matches around the country. "We even talked about using the same airplane and doing it the old-fashioned way—get out on the stump and debate," Goldwater reported.[6]

But the 1964 election rolled around with an unanticipated Democratic nominee. Lyndon Johnson, nobody's idea of a glittering television personality, gave campaign debates a wide berth as the incumbent president. In 1968 and 1972 once-burned Richard Nixon likewise refused to meet his

opponents for a joint appearance. "The 1960 Great Debates had taught him a bitter lesson," wrote the authors of a Twentieth Century Fund study of presidential debates. "He would take no more chances with programs that might show him in an unfavorable light, literally or figuratively."[7]

Both Nixon and Johnson hid behind a legal technicality that blocked the TV networks from airing candidate forums: Section 315 of the Communications Act, which granted all participants in a race, even those on the fringe, "equal opportunities" to television time. Since the 1950s, broadcasters had been lobbying against this restriction. Their original hope in sponsoring the Kennedy-Nixon debates was to rid themselves of Section 315, but Congress agreed only to a temporary suspension for the 1960 campaign.

In 1975, in the so-called Aspen ruling, the Federal Communications Commission finally exempted debates from the equal access requirement. Incumbent President Gerald Ford, badly trailing Jimmy Carter in the polls, departed from his acceptance speech during the 1976 Republican convention and challenged his opponent to a face-to-face TV debate. Using one live media event to advance another, Ford declared, "The American people have the right to know where both of us stand."[8] Carter quickly signaled his acceptance, and in each election since, presidential debates have occurred in one form or another.

Gerald Ford resurrected the institution of presidential debates not out of a sense of civic duty but for political advantage. "The Ford campaign needed something dramatic," said Republican adviser Michael Duval. "We needed something that would cause the country to reserve its judgment. The debates seemed to be the answer."[9] As this remark indicates, the decision to meet one's opponent comes down to self-interest. Debates hinge on the assumption that the presidential nominees will see fit to take part, but in fact only tradition and political pressure require them to do so. As veteran CBS news producer Lane Venardos says, "The candidates have all the high cards, including the ultimate high card—whether to participate."[10]

From Richard Nixon to Jimmy Carter to George Bush, the ambivalence of politicians toward engaging in live debates is not difficult to comprehend. Even for battle-scarred presidential nominees accustomed to the relentless scrutiny of the cameras, the perils can be enormous. "In no other mode of presentation," wrote communications scholar Walter Fisher, "does the candidate risk or reveal so much of his character."[11] Debaters understand that the lens will magnify their every word, gesture, and facial expression, not just for the duration of the broadcast but for the ages.

Ford and Carter managed to revive the debate tradition because, as competitors, they were fairly evenly matched. In subsequent elections a different dynamic has taken hold: The campaign in the lead, which is to say the one with the most to lose, seeks either to shirk debates or to participate only on highly favorable terms. Candidates thus adopt an attitude of petulance that creates a contentious climate in the weeks leading up to a debate series. Unfortunately for the public, as long as presidential debates are controlled by their stars, the leading players will have license to behave as prima donnas.

DEBATES IN DOUBT

In 1980 disagreement over the inclusion of independent John Anderson gave President Jimmy Carter and challenger Ronald Reagan a pretext for cutting short that year's debate series. Only two matches would take place: an inconsequential meeting in late September between Reagan and Anderson that Carter boycotted and a climactic debate with Carter and Reagan one week before the election.

Carter's refusal to join Reagan and Anderson in a three-way debate irked the sponsoring League of Women Voters, which retaliated by announcing its intention to place an empty chair onstage at the Baltimore Convention Center as a reminder of the candidate's absence. Editorial cartoonist Pat Oliphant sketched this as a baby's high chair, while Johnny Carson wondered in his *Tonight Show* monologue, "Suppose the chair wins?"[12] Under pressure from Democrats and the White House, the League eventually withdrew its threat, and no extraneous furniture materialized on the Reagan-Anderson set.

At least in the short term, Carter sustained little damage by skipping the debate. "Despite some predictions to the contrary," said the *Christian Science Monitor*, "no widespread, high-intensity wave of criticism against the president has emerged."[13] Instead, the media found a new narrative thread: the will-they-or-won't-they possibility of a two-way Carter-Reagan encounter. Publicly both candidates maintained a posture of favorability, but in private neither side could muster much enthusiasm for a debate.

Although Carter dismissed Reagan as his intellectual inferior, other Democrats were understandably apprehensive about the former California governor's performing prowess. Carter at first sought a schedule of multiple debates, hoping that "over a more extended period of time, [Reagan] and I

would have to get down to specific issues, where my knowledge of foreign and domestic affairs would give me an edge."[14] Like Nixon before him, Carter mistakenly assumed that substance would prevail over image.

By the time the two campaigns agreed to debate, only a single appearance could be scheduled before Election Day. "If we're going to debate him," said Carter pollster Patrick Caddell, a staunch opponent of any face-to-face meeting with Reagan, "it's damn important that we get rules that increase the possibility that he'll say something dumb or screw up." Caddell drafted a strategy memorandum a week before the debate that warned of the dangers ahead, calling the event "fraught with great risk" and cautioning that "the risks far outweigh the possible advantages."[15]

Reagan handlers had reasons of their own to fear a debate. The Republican candidate had made a number of ill-advised statements during speeches and press conferences. According to Reagan aide Michael Deaver, a debate proponent, "It was particularly the international subjects that we felt we would have a problem with."[16] Among the strongest dissenters was pollster Richard Wirthlin, whose data indicated that Reagan could be elected without debating. "One of the keys to winning a campaign is that you deal to those things you can control," Wirthlin said, "and, quite frankly, a debate is a game of roulette. There's no telling which way that marble will bounce."[17]

What turned the tide for Reagan was the white-tie Alfred E. Smith political banquet in New York City, attended by both presidential candidates in mid-October. Concerned that Carter would use his platform to issue an impromptu debate challenge, Reagan's people armed their man with a four-hundred-word acceptance speech. When Carter failed to mention the subject, Reagan instead delivered a program of self-deprecating jokes that sharply contrasted with the humorless tone of the incumbent. In the words of columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "genial Ron" bested "uptight Jimmy" in this, their only joint appearance of the campaign other than the debate.[18] The next morning the die was cast. After listening to his aides weigh the pros and cons, Reagan said, "Well, everything considered, I feel I should debate. If I'm going to fill the shoes of Carter, I should be willing to meet him face-to-face."[19]

In the end, after one of the most successful debate performances in history, Reagan knew he had made the right call. Just as Richard Nixon got scorched by the heat of JFK's stardom, so did Carter find himself singed by the superior media presence of the former Hollywood actor. Asked after-

wards if he had been nervous sharing the stage with the president of the United States, Reagan gave a response that put the matter in perspective: "Not at all. I've been on the same stage with John Wayne."[20] Beneath the humor lay a simple truth: In TV debates, star power carries the day.

If presidential debates can be said to have a savior, the honor goes to Ronald Reagan. By agreeing to appear with Walter Mondale in 1984, then-president Reagan shored up campaign debates as a permanent institution. The popular incumbent stood so far ahead in the polls that he most likely could have survived the fallout from not participating that year, a course many advisers recommended. William F. Buckley Jr. wrote,

> I am glad Reagan has scheduled a debate because I like circuses and gladiators and drums and cymbals and roller coasters. But if I were Reagan, I'd say no. I'd say, "Let's get it straight: Debates between presidential contenders should be restricted to debates between men who have not served as president. Men who have served should be judged by what they have done."[21]

Why, then, did Reagan debate? According to Deaver, "I think he believed in debates. I think he just decided, in fact I can hear him saying, you have to debate, people expect it now, it's become part of our system."[22] Furthermore Reagan had reason to be confident. As the "Great Communicator," he approached the event with five decades of experience at the microphone and an undefeated track record as a political debater.

At the first 1984 debate in Louisville, Ronald Reagan would turn in the worst performance of his long career, appearing disengaged, disjointed, and discombobulated against Walter Mondale, an opponent whom voters and the press had largely written off. Not since Richard Nixon had a presidential debater stepped off the stage so battered. That such misfortune could befall a speaker of Reagan's stature proves the riskiness of debate participation. If a star performer like Ronald Reagan can stumble, what tribulations await a candidate of lesser skills?

THE DEBATE INSTITUTION TAKES SHAPE

By 1988 debates had more than ever become a public expectation. That year negotiators for incumbent Vice President George Bush played hardball at

the bargaining table, giving the Democratic campaign of Michael Dukakis a take-it-or-leave-it offer: two presidential debates and one vice presidential match in the standard press conference format. Bush, no fan of presidential debates, emerged unscathed; even a maladroit performance by running mate Dan Quayle did not adversely affect Republican prospects.

Four years later, when foot-dragging by the Bush campaign cast doubt on the 1992 debates, the price of nonparticipation had gone up. The case of George Bush offers an object lesson for any candidate seeking to shirk what the press and the public now consider a presidential aspirant's obligation to debate. In September 1992 the chief executive of the land found himself being chased around America by chickens—more accurately, humans in chicken costumes, offering themselves as metaphors for Bush's reluctance to debate Bill Clinton.

The phenomenon began with a single freelance protester in East Lansing, Michigan, a city that had been selected as the site of the season's first debate. When stalling by the Bush campaign caused the event to be canceled, Clinton showed up anyway, and so did the prototype "Chicken George." Lansing TV stations jumped on the story, airing video of the costumed demonstrator on their evening newscasts. Inspired by this example, Clinton "counterevents" forces set up an operation called "Get on TV," and soon a veritable flock of imitators around the country started turning up at Bush rallies, and on television. Craig Smith, national field director for the Clinton campaign, told the *New York Times*, "You know what they say: Let a thousand flowers bloom. This one bloomed pretty nicely."[23]

When President Bush took to addressing the chickens personally, the Clinton people knew they had scored a hit. One of the more bizarre vignettes of the 1992 presidential campaign featured George Bush squabbling with a giant fowl during a whistle-stop tour of the Midwest. The protester's sign—"Chicken George Won't Debate"—caught the president's eye and precipitated this classic example of Bush-speak: "You talking about the draft-record chicken or you talking about the chicken in the Arkansas River? Which one are you talking about? Which one? Get out of here. Maybe it's the draft? Is that what's bothering you?"[24] Inevitably the exchange made the newscasts: the leader of the most powerful country on earth having it out with an anonymous citizen in a poultry outfit.

However goofy, 1992's "Chicken George" episode shows the pressures facing presidential candidates as they ponder the pros and cons of participating in TV debates. George Bush discovered that even the appearance of hes-

itation was enough to give the opposition a toehold. The news media, unable to resist any story that combines conflict with visuals, eagerly played its role in the drama, promoting the perception that the president did not want to debate. Eventually Bush's high command concluded that they had no choice but to commit.

In a backhanded way, the Republican delays may have served a positive purpose. By waiting until late in the game to fix a schedule, negotiators were forced to bunch up the debates on the few available dates that remained, creating a tournament-like sequence of four telecasts within nine days. The unforeseen result was to build audience interest from one program to the next, a trend further enhanced by the introduction of experimental formats.

The 1992 series brought another important innovation, the first three-way debates. When Ross Perot reentered the presidential race in early October, representatives for Clinton and Bush were applying the finishing touches to their two-man debate agreement. With approval from the sponsoring Commission on Presidential Debates, the campaigns quickly expanded the cast of characters to include the picturesque Texan and his running mate, Admiral James B. Stockdale. Although the Reform Party candidates were given no say in the negotiations, the invitation delighted Perot. "Basically, they resurrected him by letting him in the debates," said Perot adviser Dan Routman.[25]

In 1996 the Bob Dole campaign struggled to avoid a repeat of three-way debates, touching off a brief controversy over whether Perot merited an invitation. According to criteria established by the debate commission, an independent or third-party candidate had to demonstrate "evidence of national organization, signs of national newsworthiness and competitiveness, and indicators of national public enthusiasm or concern" in order to qualify for inclusion. In the judgment of an advisory committee that surveyed opinion among academics, journalists, and political professionals, Perot did not have a "realistic chance" of being elected in 1996. On this basis he was deemed ineligible to participate.

A headline in the *New York Post* told the story: "Perot Gets Heave-Ho." In a San Francisco speech, an angry Perot compared himself to a "cur dog" among "registered puppies." "As a result of this commission's ruling on the presidential debates," Perot said, "I expect that we should bring in Bosnia and Haiti to send poll watchers to help us clean up the election process in the U.S."[26]

With Perot's exclusion resolved, the 1996 wrangling took on a perfuncto-

ry quality. Negotiators for Bill Clinton and Bob Dole quickly settled on a schedule of two debates at the presidential level and one for the running mates. In view of Clinton's formidable skills as a television performer, for the first time debates were not viewed as an inherent risk for the incumbent.

Approaching the election of 2000, as presidential debates enter their fifth decade, a case can be made that de facto institutionalization of the tradition now exists. Each successive round of debates would seem to solidify the likelihood of future joint appearances. According to this argument, avoiding debates would exact too heavy a political toll on a reluctant candidate. No amount of spin could offset what voters and journalists would interpret as an unacceptable subversion of the norm.

On the other hand, no guarantees exist. James A. Baker 3d, the former Republican adviser and a key shaper of presidential debates, believes that joint appearances can still be avoided, "but there would be a big political price to pay." In Baker's view, the stronger candidate in an extraordinarily lopsided race might be able to escape debating, though "it will be more difficult as time goes by."[27] Clinton debate negotiator Mickey Kantor likewise sees some wiggle room. "I think it depends on the candidate—what is perceived to be their strengths and weaknesses, and how their opponents are perceived," Kantor says.[28]

Naturally candidates prefer to keep debates optional. Republican adviser Charles Black believes it is "absolutely essential" that nominees call their own shots about participating. "It's simply too important a part of your campaign to let someone else decide or to make those decisions in advance," Black told a 1990 symposium,[29] echoing the general belief of political pros. Increasingly, however, this point of view may be anachronistic. An entire generation of American voters has grown accustomed to debates as a standard feature of the presidential campaign. Woe to any candidate who attempts to deprive the public of a television spectacular it now regards as an expectation.

THE DIFFICULTY OF DEBATE NEGOTIATIONS

Even in years when both sides want to debate, the ritual known as the "debate over debates" plays out as a kind of promotional trailer for the main event to come. Like the debates themselves, preproduction negotiations have winners and losers, surprise moves and tactical blunders, high stakes

and colorful characters. Each round of presidential debates generates a victor not just on the battlefield of television but also at the bargaining table. It is generally believed that Kennedy's team won the 1960 negotiations; Republicans and Democrats more or less tied in 1976; Reagan's handlers triumphed in 1980 and again in 1984; Bush's took the 1988 talks; and the Clinton staff prevailed in 1992 and 1996. In every instance the successful side in predebate negotiations has gone on to carry the vote.

With so much riding on the outcome, candidates and their surrogates have from the outset been fiercely protective of preproduction decision making. Here is where the functions of campaign handler and television producer merge. Because the issues in question—structure, schedule, timing, staging, and so on—are political as well as programmatic, the campaigns take control of this agenda with a vengeance.

As early as 1960 it became apparent that the sponsoring organizations—the stagers of the event and payers of the bills—would be relegated to a secondary role in the planning. The "Great Debates" of 1960 may have been the brainchild of ABC, CBS, and NBC, but when it came to setting terms, these powerful institutions got foreclosed. Negotiating sessions for the Kennedy-Nixon debates started off with all parties at the table, but in the second meeting the politicos asked the broadcasters to leave the room. "When we came back in again," recalled CBS's Mickelson, "they laid down the pattern for the debates."[30]

To one degree or another this has been the procedure ever since: The campaigns hammer out an agreement that suits their own purposes, which then gets presented to the sponsoring institution as a done deal. "It is to the everlasting credit of the television networks that the debate programs were presented in the 1960 campaign, but the evidence is overwhelming that they relinquished essential control of the programs to do so," concluded debate scholars Seltz and Yoakam shortly after the Kennedy-Nixon events.[31] The same lament can be applied to every debate sponsor since: the League of Women Voters in 1976, 1980, and 1984, and the nonpartisan Commission on Presidential Debates in 1988, 1992, and 1996. At the campaigns' insistence, sponsors exist not to make substantive decisions but to add legitimacy, do the grunt work, and pick up the tab.

In the years since Kennedy-Nixon, debate negotiations by presidential campaign staffs have gotten only more Byzantine. The 1960 debates left political handlers with a heightened sensitivity to the volatile nature of live TV; in every debate since, the objective has been to install an invisible safe-

ty net that keeps the tightrope artists from crashing to the ground. Campaigns engage in what can best be described as a mix of talent management and preventive damage control, doing whatever it takes to stabilize an inherently combustible production situation for the leading players.

As Ford and Carter prepared to resume the debate tradition in 1976, strategists for both candidates looked to the 1960 series for inspiration. In a planning memo, a Carter adviser expressed admiration for the squabbles of his predecessors: "The constant bickering between the candidates' staffs and with the production crews about studio temperature, candidate facilities, furniture, sets, lights, etc., serves an important purpose: It tells the opposition that you do not trust them and that you are tough enough not to be walked over."[32] In this quote can be discerned the prevailing philosophy that has guided debate negotiations from 1960 on: Never give an inch.

James Karayn, who served as producer of the 1976 Ford-Carter series, saw great danger in leaving debate negotiations to the campaigns. "If the candidates' representatives do the planning," Karayn warned in an op-ed piece before the 1988 debates, "it won't be with the goal of informing the electorate uppermost in their minds. Their main concern is—has to be—to ensure that their respective candidates get the maximum exposure and the minimum risk."[33] Lee Hanna, Karayn's successor, took an even dimmer view based on his experience in the 1980 negotiations: "The candidates' representatives were pathetic in their desire to protect what they saw as their candidates' interests. The negotiations were exercises in frustration and hilarity."[34]

Jody Powell, who as press secretary to Carter participated in the 1976 and 1980 talks, calls debate negotiations a process of "bluff and counterbluff, scheming, conniving, and hard-nosed horse trading." According to Powell, the bargaining sessions offer campaign professionals "the opportunity, so rare in political contests, to sit down face-to-face with your adversaries. It is a chance to take their measure, assess their intelligence and flappability."[35] This comment suggests a reason apart from candidate protection that campaigns so reliably indulge in extensive predebate negotiations: They enjoy checking out their opponents eyeball to eyeball.

One of the opponents Powell was checking out in 1976 would emerge as a legend in presidential debate bargaining: James Baker, who, as the Republicans' lead negotiator in the 1980s, crafted highly favorable rules for Ronald Reagan and George Bush. Among other negotiating triumphs, Baker is credited with scheduling the last-minute Carter-Reagan debate in 1980 and whittling down the 1984 Reagan-Mondale series to two presidential

matches. The 1988 negotiation, in which Baker teamed up with Roger Ailes against Dukakis managers Paul Brountas and Susan Estrich, is regarded as one of the most lopsided in debate history. Bush's team got essentially everything it wanted; the Democrats' consolation prize was an elevated podium for the shorter Michael Dukakis.

So persuasive was Baker's negotiating rhetoric that it boomeranged back at the Republicans in the "Baker-less" talks of 1992 and 1996. Mickey Kantor, lead debate negotiator for Bill Clinton, reiterated many of Baker's hard-line positions, even some of the same language, in ironing out agreements with his counterparts. Like Baker, Kantor got most of what he was seeking, especially in 1996, against Bob Dole's all-rookie negotiating team. Already disadvantaged by low poll standings, the Dole representatives compounded their trouble by introducing a number of irrelevant issues, at one point asking if the live audience could be made to abide by a dress code.

By 1996, as the naivete of Dole's negotiators demonstrated, these talks had become too highly specialized to be handled by neophytes. Debate negotiations are a blood sport, played under arcane rules by a cast of experienced Washington insiders. Recent predebate bargaining sessions have involved as many as five or six people per campaign, each with a particular area of expertise, drawn from the elite ranks of political strategists, media advisers, and high-dollar law firms. Directing the efforts is a lead negotiator, who doubles as press spokesman. Out of sight, but never out of mind, are the candidates, whose degree of involvement varies.

Depending on the vicissitudes of the political season, the negotiating advantage shifts from one side to the other. Back-and-forth maneuvering over the years has created an ongoing rivalry that ups the ante for each new round of debate talks. Says Janet Brown, executive director of the Commission on Presidential Debates, "It really is a machismo duel that has to do with the question of who bested the other guy . . . because each side felt that in an earlier cycle they got had."[36]

Debate negotiations typically stretch over several meetings: a preliminary session insiders describe as "mostly posturing," and perhaps two follow-up sessions at which the nuts and bolts of the agreement are finalized. These discussions can be lengthy and arduous. A 1992 negotiating meeting that began at 9:30 in the morning did not end until 3:45 the next morning.[37]

As the bargaining over debates has intensified, negotiators have increasingly resorted to the language of the courtroom to codify rules of engagement. A by-product of the past few debate negotiations has been a quasi-

legal document called a memorandum of understanding, or memorandum of agreement, that governs every conceivable point of scheduling, format, and staging. This contract initially appeared in an abbreviated form in 1984, when the Reagan and Mondale campaigns drew up and signed a three-page document covering the rudiments of debate production.

The first substantial memorandum of understanding was drafted in 1988 by a Republican debate adviser named Robert Goodwin. Goodwin had cut his teeth as an aide to George Bush in the 1980 primary debates, then served as Bush's on-site negotiator in the 1984 vice presidential match with Geraldine Ferraro. Out of these experiences he devised a production agreement that has served as a template for the past three rounds of presidential debates.

What began as a sixteen-page contract in 1988 grew to thirty-seven pages in 1992, when untested formats and the presence of a third participant complicated events. Clay Mulford, counsel for the Perot campaign, remembers being astonished when he read that year's agreement. Said Mulford, "It was like the Internal Revenue code."[38] The documents anticipate every contingency, from what form of address the debaters will use with each other to where the candidates' spouses will sit in the audience.

The language of the contract betrays the mutual suspicion that exists between presidential campaigns. Among the particulars of the 1992 agreement: "It is agreed that neither film footage nor video footage from the debates may be used publicly by any candidate or candidate's campaign." "All other candidates and their representatives shall vacate the debate site while another candidate has his private production and technical briefing and walk-through." And: "No candidate shall have any staff member in the wings or backstage later than five minutes after the debate has begun nor sooner than five minutes before the debate concludes."[39] Clearly each side is on guard for the unanticipated competitive stunt.

Before hashing out such minutiae, however, negotiators tackle more fundamental issues. The first order of business is establishing a calendar: How many debates will take place? How far apart? How long will each program run? Next, formats are decided, along with such specific staging points as whether reaction shots can be taken, what type of microphones will be used, and how close the candidates will stand to each other onstage. Finally, with the rules in place, campaign negotiators select the moderators and questioners. Each of these steps in the planning process is a matter to be contested and resolved, another hand in the political poker game that shapes what the audience will see.

THE DEBATE OVER SCHEDULING

In his 1976 vice presidential match, Bob Dole claimed there were three presidential debates that year because Jimmy Carter "has three positions on everything." Though the quip was intended for laughs, it does get at a serious point of disputation in debate negotiations: scheduling. In their capacity as TV producers, campaign officials also become programmers, creating a calendar for the joint appearances that has more to do with political realities than the needs of either the public, the debate sponsors, or the networks.

Mindful of the lessons of the past, campaign strategists attach talismanic significance to the issue of timing. Conventional wisdom about the scheduling of presidential debates coalesces around several points: First, whoever is ahead wants fewer debates; whoever is behind wants more. Second, candidates in the lead will insist on as much distance as possible between the final debate and Election Day, in case time is needed to rebound from a disaster. Third, the busy autumn sports schedule must be navigated in choosing debate days, lest the public be tempted to watch something else. And finally, once announced, debates tend to freeze a campaign, as candidates go into rehearsal hibernation and voters wait to assess the performers side by side.

The "freeze" theory was first promulgated by James Baker, who, in 1980, worked the principle to his advantage by scheduling the single eleventh-hour debate between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter one week before the election. "They do freeze a campaign," Baker says, "but they also have the ability to move the numbers. So the front-runner is always going to be more hesitant to extend the period of time for the debates, and the number of debates, and even the fact of debates."[40]

In 1980 this campaign paralysis hardened Reagan's lead at a critical point in the race. "After the debate was agreed to," wrote Reagan biographer Lou Cannon, "press coverage and the candidates' speeches became virtually perfunctory, with everyone waiting for the big event. The beneficiary was Reagan."[41] In postmortems of the 1980 race, Carter campaign officials admitted they had been outfoxed. "That late debate was the worst thing that happened to us in the campaign," a Carter aide told journalists Germond and Witcover. "When we wanted to debate Reagan, I think they very smartly suckered us into the late debate."[42]

The schedule might have been even worse for Carter. Baker's initial pro-

posal called for a debate on November 3, the night before the election, "when most voters are making up their minds," as Baker told reporters. Predictably Carter's camp nixed this idea. Jody Powell said that a debate so late in the season "would leave no time for anybody to be called for misstatements, contradictions, or inaccuracies," a not-so-subtle hint that Reagan played loose with his facts.[43]

Negotiating for Reagan in 1984, Baker won the reverse concession, denying Walter Mondale's wish for a debate close to Election Day. Baker told the *Washington Post* that his side preferred an earlier encounter so as to avoid "undue impact on voters' decision."[44] At the bargaining table for George Bush in 1988, Baker got an even better deal: The last debate of the season took place more than three weeks before the election. "Though Baker did this out of concern for his own man, it's also better for the country," concluded journalist Elizabeth Drew.[45] Drew, like other observers, feared that a debate too close to the vote could have dangerous electoral implications.

In 1992, after the "Chicken George" issue forced Bush's hand, the Republicans came back at the Clinton campaign with an unprecedented counterproposal: four debates to be televised on the last four Sundays of the campaign. The final debate would air November 1, two days before the election. Paul Brountas, Dukakis's negotiator in 1988, told the *New York Times*, "The minute I heard about Baker's proposal, I recall his sitting with me and saying, 'Paul, there is no way I will let my candidate debate in the last week or ten days of the campaign, because if a statement is made that's incorrect, he won't have time to correct it.' " Four years later Brountas continued, "Something has changed—it's an interesting twist."[46]

As it turned out, the "Four Sundays" plan gave way to an even more revolutionary timetable: four debates held in rapid succession between October 11 and 19. The compressed sequence fulfilled the prophecy of Hollywood producer Harry Thomason, a debate negotiator for Bill Clinton, who predicted that the schedule would play out like a TV miniseries.[47] "Americans everywhere are wild about the drama," wrote David Von Drehle in the *Washington Post* during the 1992 debates. "All day, they speculated with the urgent palaver of a klatch of soap-opera fans. What would happen next?"[48]

In 1996 Democratic negotiators won a schedule that deliberately slotted the second and last Clinton-Dole debate against a baseball play-off game. After the election, journalist Roger Simon asked Clinton aide George Stephanopoulos why the president's team had insisted on competing with a major athletic event. Stephanopoulos's reply is a classic of convoluted elec-

tion-year reasoning: "We didn't *want* people watching the debates. We wanted the debates to be a metaphor for the campaign. And we didn't want people to concentrate on the campaign."[49]

Not all debate scheduling is driven by political logic. In 1984 Nancy Reagan's personal stargazer offered her input into the timing and location of that year's matches. Astrologer Joan Quigley would claim responsibility for President Reagan's stumbling performance in Louisville on October 7, calling the selection her "one important error the entire seven years I did the Reagans' astrology."[50] White House aide Michael Deaver confirmed that he routinely ran important dates on the political calendar past Quigley, "but if she had called back and said, 'My God, all the stars in the sky are coming together at that time,' there wasn't anything I could do."[51]

How many debates is too many? The most debates in any year were the four between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960; 1980 offered the fewest, one between Reagan and Carter, another between Reagan and Anderson. Never has more than a single vice presidential debate taken place in a given year; no vice presidential matches at all were held in 1960 or 1980, though consideration was given to having the 1960 running mates, Henry Cabot Lodge and Lyndon Johnson, appear together for ten minutes at the beginning of one program before yielding to the top-of-the-ticket nominees.

Even as the 1960 series was under way, Kennedy negotiators were pressing the idea of adding a fifth debate to the schedule. Five had been JFK's ideal number all along. "Basically, Kennedy wanted as many debates as possible to gain the television exposure, and we wanted as few debates as possible, possibly only one," said Herb Klein, Nixon's press secretary.[52] Through the end of October 1960, the issue of a fifth debate remained alive, sparking a flurry of bargaining sessions and accusations in the press; when agreement could not be reached, the series ended at four.

Nixon's team had already made a costly blunder about the debate schedule, wrongly reasoning that the final match of the series would draw the largest audience. As it turned out, nothing could wipe away the impression left by the first encounter. "When the debates were held," Nixon wrote, "at least twenty million more people listened to and watched the first than any of the others, including the fourth and final appearance. I turned in my best performance before the smallest audience."[53] Even today, political strategists believe that the first debate weighs most heavily and that the first twenty to thirty minutes of any debate are the most critical.

In 1984 Mondale negotiators initially proposed a whopping six presidential and two vice presidential debates. The outrageousness of the demand, particularly from an underdog campaign, illustrates how debate negotiations resemble haggling in a Middle Eastern carpet bazaar. According to Mondale aide Richard Leone, six was never a realistic consideration; the Democratic side hoped for three and settled on two, along with one vice presidential debate.[54]

Beyond number, another reliable point of campaign disagreement is program length. In 1960 each of the four debates ran only an hour, the shortest in history. They might have been even a few minutes shorter: NBC's Robert Sarnoff argued for "appropriate" commercial sponsorship of the debates, an idea quickly scuttled by debate co-sponsor CBS.[55] Since Kennedy-Nixon, all but two of the programs have been ninety minutes long; the exceptions are the sixty-minute 1980 Reagan-Anderson debate and the 1976 vice presidential debate, which at an hour and fifteen minutes represented a compromise between Dole, who wanted an hour, and Mondale, who wanted an hour and a half.

As President Reagan learned in his first 1984 match with Walter Mondale, one and a half hours is an extraordinarily long time for any individual to perform at capacity on live television. That event, which ran beyond its scheduled time slot, clocked in at one hundred minutes, making it the longest of all presidential debates. Reagan's doddering performance—"the worst night of Ronnie's political career," in the words of Nancy Reagan[56]—brought into the open a previously unmentionable topic: the seventy-three-year-old president's ability to withstand the physical and mental rigors of the office.

According to Elizabeth Drew, "Getting the debates to last an hour and a half was one of the Mondale negotiators' major strategic achievements, even though they held few cards; they figured that Reagan would not have sufficient stamina to last that full time in good form."[57] The Republicans wanted the debates to last sixty minutes, but swapped the extra half hour for the safety of a panel of questioners. In the trade-off, Reagan's own delivery posed more of a challenge than anything his opponent said.

THE DEBATE OVER FORMAT

Since format can be thought of as a presidential debater's security blanket, it comes as no surprise that campaigns obsess over how the programs are

structured. Functioning in their executive-producer role, political strategists design debates that are comfortable for the candidates first, and educational for the voters second. In practice, this meant that for three decades presidential debates remained locked in a single, candidate-friendly format: the joint news conference, with a panel of reporters posing a series of disconnected questions.

The press conference format endured because candidates took comfort in its strictures. By directing their answers to a panel, debaters could avoid confronting each other in ways that might prove unseemly in front of a viewing audience. Furthermore, with three or four reporters asking a succession of disparate questions, the discussion could not dwell on any single issue for very long, allowing candidates easy segues into their predigested campaign messages. Douglass Cater, a questioner in the second Kennedy-Nixon debate, complained that the panel's mission "was hardly more than to designate categories—animal, vegetable, or mineral—on which the two might or might not discourse."[58]

Thanks in large measure to the intercession of Bill Clinton, the 1992 debates inaugurated looser program structures: the "town meeting" or "people's debate," in which a studio audience full of uncommitted voters ask questions, and the "single moderator," used twice in 1992 and in two of the three 1996 debates. The original 1992 proposal by the debates commission called for a single-moderator format throughout the series. George Bush resisted this idea, telling CNN's Bernard Shaw, "I thought when you and others asked tough questions at the 1988 debates, it livened things up. I saw nothing wrong with the former format."[59]

Clinton himself suggested the town hall meeting that would produce the year's most talked-about debate. According to Mickey Kantor, the candidate raised the issue in a phone call during a break in one of the negotiating sessions. "He thought you'd probably get more substantive questions," Kantor said. "That had been our experience. He thought he'd do quite well in it, and that it would show the difference in his ability to relate to people and President Bush's. To my surprise, the Bush people accepted immediately." Recalled Clinton aide Paul Begala, "When the word came back that the president's folks had agreed to it, we were hooting and hollering. We couldn't believe it."[60]

Why did Bush negotiators go along with the Richmond town hall debate? According to 1992 debate producer Ed Fouhy, "They thought that Richmond, a conservative city, could be relied on to produce uncommitted

voters sufficiently in awe of the president to ask softball questions." James Baker said that Bush agreed because he was "really good with small groups. When we started his presidential campaign, we had something called "Ask George Bush" forums, and they were extremely successful."[61] In the end, Bush would have reason to rue the town hall debate.

The single-moderator format made its debut with the rollicking vice presidential debate of 1992. According to Fouhy, it was Dan Quayle who persuaded the Bush campaign to accept the idea. After suffering at the hands of a press panel in his 1988 debate with Lloyd Bentsen, Quayle had cause to favor a less rigid format. As Fouhy put it, "Quayle knew that his hopes for helping the ticket and building his own candidacy for the future were riding on his debate performance."[62] Indeed, Quayle improved considerably in the give-and-take of the single-moderator structure, though many critics condemned the program as a free-for-all.

The innovations of 1992 finally dragged presidential debates into the modern era. At the end of the series, *New York Times* political reporter Richard L. Berke wrote an analysis of how the three candidates had fared in the various formats: "Before the debates, President Bush's aides wanted a panel of journalists to pose questions; now they say that approach was least helpful to their man. Governor Bill Clinton's side wanted a single moderator to ask the questions but ended up preferring another format, too." Concluded Berke, "Presidential campaigns don't know what's good for them."[63]

THE DEBATE OVER STAGING

No detail being too small to attract the notice of campaign negotiators, a number of other production points bear mention in our discussion of predebate bargaining. One of the most negotiated matters in televised presidential debates is height. Because history shows that the taller presidential candidate tends to prevail at the ballot box, campaigns strive to mitigate a debater's relative shortness.

The height issue first cropped up in the 1976 series between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. Although Ford was only three and a half inches taller than Carter, negotiators for the Democratic challenger sought compensatory measures. The two sides reached what became known as the "belt buckle compromise": Ford's lectern was built to intersect his torso two and a half

inches above his belt buckle, while Carter's podium intersected an inch and a half below his buckle point. In exchange for this concession, the Carter camp agreed to let Ford's people choose the color of the backdrop, something the Republicans wanted in order to mask the incumbent President's thinning hair. "We worried about the height, they worried about the hair," Carter aide Gerald Rafshoon told *Newsweek*.[64]

George Bush's six-foot stature posed a height challenge to both of his first two debate opponents, Geraldine Ferraro and Michael Dukakis. In 1984 Ferraro's people demanded and got a riser on the stage that made her five-feet-four-inch frame appear less diminutive. The piece was designed as a gently sloping ramp so that Ferraro would not have to take a noticeable step up to her podium; instead, the candidate had to concentrate on staying in place once atop the riser, lest she appear to be listing.

Michael Dukakis, at a six-inch stature disadvantage, got a similar ramp four years later, though Baker and his team did not yield this concession until the final round of the debate talks. "What are you going to do when you have to negotiate with Gorbachev?" Baker taunted his opponents. "Call for a little platform?"[65] Not inaccurately, Bush aides referred to the riser as a "pitcher's mound"; at the second debate, a Republican advance man sneaked a softball onto the set intending to leave it on Dukakis's lectern, but no opportunity arose to make the drop. In the end, stratagems to downplay the Democratic nominee's relative shortness were of mixed value. At the close of the debate, when Dukakis stepped down from his podium to shake Bush's hand, the height difference between the two men seemed all the more pronounced.

Typically presidential debaters stand for the length of the program, though negotiators regularly revisit the question of whether they might be better off sitting down. In 1960 Kennedy handlers sought to have the candidates stand in order to exploit Nixon's knee injury. Said JFK aide J. Leonard Reinsch, "If Nixon had to shift his weight every now and then, it would give the impression that he was uncomfortable and ill at ease."[66] Reinsch was surprised when the Republicans raised no objections; Nixon did visibly shift his stance on the air, adding to his impression of physical debility.

Representatives for Carter and Ford argued at length over whether the candidate who was not speaking ought to be seated, as was the policy in 1960. According to debate scholar Sidney Kraus, this discussion "probably consumed more time than any other single point in the substantive or technical negotiations and necessitated a series of telephone calls to each of the

principals."[67] In 1996, after the successful introduction of sit-down formats in primary and state-level debates, the Commission on Presidential Debates again sought to seat the candidates, an effort that failed when both campaigns objected. According to co-commissioner Frank Fahrenkopf Jr., "Experts tell us that the nature and context of discussion changes when people are seated around a table. We threw it out—the candidates were not interested."[68]

Republican adviser Robert Goodwin, who has been involved in every round of presidential debates since 1984, strongly favors standing. Bush negotiators in 1988 originally planned for that year's debaters to be seated, until Goodwin intervened with an impassioned plea to keep them on their feet. Goodwin believes a candidate looks more statesmanlike at the podium. In a memo lobbying for stand-up debates, he wrote, "Having [Bush] seated at a table could invite hunched shoulders, leaning back in his chair, papers scattered on the table, and essentially the look of a city council debate rather than a presidential debate."[69]

This preference for lecterns has led debate negotiators to pay close attention to matters of podium design. The 1976 Republican team, mindful of Ford's reputation as a klutz, made sure to insist on a brace for securing the presidential water glass. Carter's people successfully demanded smaller than normal lecterns in order to display more fully their candidate's physical grace. "Jimmy uses his hands and body language beautifully," a Carter official told *Time* magazine. "The president [Ford] has zero body language."[70]

Carter negotiators also won the skirmish over whether Ford would be allowed to affix an official presidential seal to his lectern. Four years later, handlers for then-incumbent President Carter co-opted this tactic for themselves. According to a 1980 prenegotiation strategy memorandum, "The presidential seal should be on his [Carter's] podium. Obviously, we won't get this but it's something to trade away."[71]

In recent years podium design has been fixed by the predebate memorandum of understanding. According to the terms of that contract, lecterns have to be identical only from the perspective of the television audience. This allows campaigns to customize the interior of their lecterns however they see fit, while maintaining visual equality on the outside. Still to be settled with each new round of debates is the issue of which candidate stands where. George Bush's negotiators, for example, preferred the position on stage right, an angle that de-emphasized their candidate's receding hairline.

Over the years negotiators have also grappled with whether to allow

debaters to bring notes or props onto the stage. John F. Kennedy used this trick in a 1960 West Virginia primary debate, producing a government-surplus food package to make a point about federal programs for the undernourished. Dan Quayle's aides sought approval to have props in the 1992 vice presidential debate; they planned for Quayle to read passages from a copy of Al Gore's controversial book on the environment. Gore negotiators agreed, on the condition that their man could bring a potato, the vegetable Quayle had misspelled in a widely publicized incident earlier in the year. The matter was quickly dropped.

THE DEBATE OVER QUESTIONERS

The television networks that sponsored the 1960 debates originally hoped to enlist a prominent jurist or university president as the program moderator. It was the campaigns' uneasiness with this idea that handed the job to journalists instead. Fearful that even a highly respected national leader could not suppress his bias, representatives for Kennedy and Nixon argued that members of the press would be less inclined to play favorites. The networks, recognizing an opportunity to promote their own personnel, gladly assented, inaugurating a longstanding tradition of journalistic participation in presidential debates.

In keeping with the general pugnacity of the 1960 deliberations, a new controversy soon erupted: the campaigns' demand that newspaper and magazine reporters be included in the debate panels along with TV people. After initial resistance from the broadcasters, an accommodation was reached that gave the networks all four panelist slots in the first and fourth debates, and two slots to print reporters in the second and third. When neither the networks nor the handlers wanted the responsibility of picking the print panelists, names were drawn at random from a list of the reporters traveling with the candidates.

Never again would campaigns take so lightly the task of selecting moderators and panelists. The resumption of presidential debates in 1976 brought a radical change in procedure: for the first time the participants had an active hand in choosing their questioners. When network news officials learned that the League of Women Voters had invited the Ford and Carter campaigns to submit suggestions for debate panelists, a brief public spat ensued. Again in 1980 media outlets objected to the League's collaboration

with the campaigns to pick questioners, but, as before, the journalists soon relented.

In 1984, when Reagan debated Mondale, panelist selection blew up in the campaigns' faces, erupting in the media as an ugly sideshow. On the eve of the first debate, the League of Women Voters broke the longstanding code of silence between sponsors and negotiators and called a news conference to denounce the campaigns' high-handedness in rejecting eighty-three journalists for the first panel. Dorothy Ridings, the organization's president, publicly chastised both sides for having "totally abused" the process.[72]

The League had initially supplied the campaigns with a list of twelve possible panelists for each of the year's three debates. All but one of the thirty-six names were rejected. League officials submitted more names, only to meet with further rejections. "It was one of those things that takes on a life of its own," recalled League debate producer Victoria Harian. "They weren't really legitimate concerns—it just became a game between the two campaigns." Ridings said journalists were stricken from the list for reasons "that had nothing to do with their professional capabilities."[73]

In protest, news organizations like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and CBS announced that their employees would not serve as panelists. (CBS let correspondent Diane Sawyer appear in the first debate because she had signed on before the ban.) Press reaction to the panelist selection story was predictably harsh. A piece in the *Post* compared the exercise to both a college fraternity rush and the Nixon enemies list.[74] Network newscasts the evening of the first 1984 debate showed footage of the panelists' desk being reconfigured after one of four participants resigned in a last-minute boycott. The shrunken desk provided a visual metaphor for the predebate tussle between campaigns and reporters.

The troubles of 1984 notwithstanding, Ridings defends the right of presidential campaigns to have a hand in selecting debate panelists. "We always had the opinion that it was appropriate for the campaigns to tell us" if they objected to a particular journalist, Ridings said. "We wanted to make sure that the candidates had the most comfortable situation for themselves in terms of feeling they weren't being sandbagged. We did not want the person asking the questions to be the story." The problem in 1984, she said, was one of degree.[75]

Like others on the political side of the fence, James Baker maintains that campaigns deserve veto power over moderators and panelists. "I've never been a believer that you turn all of this over to some allegedly nonpartisan, objective group. There's too much at stake," Baker said. "The campaigns

have a legitimate right in making sure they're not going into a debate with moderators or questioners who are biased. And don't tell me that these people don't have biases, because they do."[76]

Following the controversy over panelist selection in 1984, the campaigns tightened their grip, giving themselves a more active hand in the decision making. The debate agreement of 1988 devoted a full page to codifying the process for selecting questioners. The document's legalistic language illuminates the intricacy of the procedure:

> Representatives of each candidate will submit a list of at least six and not more than ten possible panelists to each other. Each side will then have the opportunity to approve or delete names from the other's proposed list. When two or more possible panelists on each side are agreed upon from each list, these final two names on each list will be submitted to the sponsor who will then select one from each list to be a panelist for the first presidential debate. If necessary, this process will be repeated until the agreed upon number of names are submitted to the sponsor.
>
> To select the third panelist, the sponsor will submit a list of ten possible panelists to representatives of each of the candidates. These representatives will then mutually agree on two or more possible panelists from the sponsor's list. The sponsor will then pick one panelist from this list and that individual added to the two selections from the process indicated in the previous paragraph will constitute the three panelists for the first presidential debate.
>
> The same process will be followed for each of the three debates.[77]

Recent changes in debate formats, particularly the phase-out of press panels, have simplified the negotiations over supporting players. In 1996 PBS's Jim Lehrer moderated all three of that year's debates, after proving his mettle as a moderator in both 1988 and 1992. Whether he will return in 2000 remains to be seen; like all debate questioners, Lehrer serves at the pleasure of the candidates.

Although predebate negotiations have become standard operating procedure in presidential campaigns, at the end of the day the nitpicking and deal making can provide only so much security. Democratic media consultant Robert Squier offered this advice to candidates headed into the debate arena:

"The first thing to remember in a debate is that once you're on stage, everything that's been negotiated is out the window. There are no rules, except the rules of fair play."[78]

In other words, presidential debates are live television. And, inevitably, live television trumps written contracts.