

## *Chapter Two*

### STRATEGY AND PREPARATION

*I*n the seconds leading up to the 1980 presidential debate, President Jimmy Carter and challenger Ronald Reagan strode onto the stage from opposite sides of the Cleveland Music Hall to assume their positions at the lecterns. Instead of stopping at his podium, Reagan bounded across the set, directly to Carter, whose hand he unexpectedly shook. “Carter’s look of surprise suggested that he thought he was about to be knifed,” wrote communication scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson.<sup>1</sup>

As with all political kabuki, such moments are part of a candidate’s master strategy—in this case, to knock the president of the United States off his game just before a live debate. Again at the end of the program, in violation of the agreed-upon rules, Reagan marched over and shook hands with Carter, this time on camera, under the watchful eye of the largest television audience ever assembled for a presidential debate. The move served a dual purpose: making Reagan look amiable and flummoxing Carter.

The 1980 handshakes epitomize a fundamental quest of debaters on live

TV: seizing control of the narrative. In an unscripted setting like a presidential debate, candidates attempt to impose their own story line through the use of calculated gestures, prepackaged sound bites, and audience-tested messages. What makes debates compelling in spite of their choreography is the skill with which the leading players apply these tools. Debaters operate simultaneously as competitors and collaborators, coauthors of a work in progress that each wishes to steer in a different direction. Any small narrative edge, such as Reagan's on-camera handshake at the end of the Cleveland debate, can affect the audience's perception of which star deserves top billing in the drama.

But an obverse tendency tempers this principle: Live television creates its own momentum, apart from the strategic desires of the candidates. Presidential debates have thus spawned a litany of gaffes both serious and mild: Richard Nixon declaring that "America can't stand pat," inadvertently making a double entendre of his wife's name. Gerald Ford's erroneous claim that Eastern Europe was not under Soviet domination. Bob Dole blaming the country's war dead on the Democratic party. Jimmy Carter's discussion of nuclear weaponry with daughter Amy. Ronald Reagan, meandering down the Pacific Coast Highway in a closing statement that had to be curtailed by the moderator. Michael Dukakis reacting dispassionately to Bernard Shaw's question about the hypothetical rape and murder of Kitty Dukakis. Dan Quayle venturing unwisely into the land of Camelot for a JFK analogy. George Bush looking down at his watch during the 1992 town hall debate.

Though debaters strive to inoculate themselves against blunders of this sort, the high-combustion nature of live television renders such incidents impossible to prepare for. Candidates instead devote their predebate energy to planning *positive* tactical moments, moments that will play favorably during the live telecast as well as in postdebate media coverage. Says long-time Democratic debate coach Tom Donilon, "You hope in a debate there will be a moment . . . where your candidate can make an impact. You don't know when it's going to come."<sup>2</sup> The savvy debater does not wait for the high points to occur naturally; he manufactures them, polishes them, and finds a way to deploy them.

#### CLASSIC DEBATE MOMENTS

Like Reagan's surprise handshakes, most classic debate moments share a common heritage as the products of careful plotting. At the end of that same

1980 debate with Carter, Reagan asked the audience a question that struck its target with the accuracy of a heat-seeking missile: “Are you better off now than you were four years ago?” The line, scripted by speechwriter David Gergen, had the feel of folk wisdom, like the insightful query of a common-sense neighbor. In fact, the language stemmed directly from polling data: by a two-to-one margin, Americans considered themselves in worse shape than they had been at the beginning of Carter’s presidency.

Obviously opening and closing statements lend themselves particularly well to strategic planning. But Reagan’s other, seemingly more spontaneous rejoinders were also devised ahead of time, albeit by the candidate himself. In the Reagan-Carter debate, Carter tartly reminded the audience that his opponent had begun his political career campaigning around the country against Medicare. “There you go again,” Reagan replied, more in sorrow than in anger. This simple line accomplished two Reagan objectives: diminishing Carter by questioning his veracity and bolstering Reagan’s own standing vis-à-vis health care. According to Reagan biographer Lou Cannon, “The reply was the Great Deflector’s high point of the debate and perhaps of the campaign itself. It seemed such a wonderful, natural summation of an opponent’s excess that overnight it became part of the political language.”

Cannon described the phrase as having “all the careful spontaneity of a minuet.”<sup>3</sup> During debate rehearsals Reagan had resisted advice that he bone up on issues and instead concentrated on one-liners, which he believed the viewing public would be more likely to remember. According to debate coach Myles Martel, Reagan was urged to use lines that could “dramatically differentiate” himself from Carter, a tactic Carter had successfully employed against Ford in the 1976 debates. Martel noted, “‘There you go again,’ crafted by Reagan himself and practiced on (mock debater David) Stockman two days earlier, successfully elevated Reagan without projecting him as unduly strident or defensive—indeed a formidable challenge when refuting an incumbent president.”<sup>4</sup>

Of the 1980 presidential debate, Reagan wrote that the event “may have turned on only four words.”

They popped out of my mouth after Carter claimed that I had once opposed Medicare benefits for Social Security recipients.

It wasn’t true and I said so:

There you go again . . .

I think there was some pent-up anger in me over Carter's claims that I was a racist and warmonger. Just as he'd distorted my view on states' rights and arms control, he had distorted it regarding Medicare, and my response just burst out of me spontaneously.<sup>5</sup>

Four years later Reagan would make the same dubious claim of spontaneity for his response to a panelist's question about whether he was too old to handle the presidency. The line became another instant classic: "I want you to know that I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience." In his memoir Reagan wrote that the words "just popped off the top of my head. I'd never anticipated it, nor had I thought in advance what my answer might be to such a question."

Reagan continued,

Well, the crowd roared and the television cameras flashed a shot of Mondale laughing. I'm sure that if I had been as stuffed with as many facts and figures as I was before the first debate, I wouldn't have been able to come up with that line; your mind just isn't flexible enough if it's saturated with facts because you've been preparing for an examination.<sup>6</sup>

Reagan aide Richard Wirthlin recalls the story somewhat differently: After a practice session, Wirthlin reminded the president that he would surely be asked a question on age. "His eyes twinkled, and he said, 'Don't worry, Dick. I've got a way to deal with that question, and I'm just waiting for it to come up.' Now he said that it just popped off his head—and it did. But when that thought came to him it was at least two days before the actual debate."<sup>7</sup> Whatever the timing, observers agreed that the riposte hit its target. Wrote David Broder, "It well may have been that the biggest barrier to Reagan's reelection was swept away in that moment."<sup>8</sup>

The unforgettable line of 1988—Lloyd Bentsen telling Dan Quayle "you're no Jack Kennedy"—also had a less than spontaneous provenance. In an August appearance at the Missouri State Fair, Quayle boasted to his audience, "I'm very close to the same age of Kennedy when he was elected, not vice president but president."<sup>9</sup> The remark, like others from Quayle's stump speeches, was duly recorded by Bentsen's campaign staff and passed along to headquarters. In debate rehearsals, when Quayle surrogate Dennis Eckart

drew a JFK comparison, Bentsen responded, “You’re no more like Jack Kennedy than George Bush is like Ronald Reagan.”<sup>10</sup> In the televised debate, Bentsen omitted the Bush-Reagan reference, and another catchphrase entered the political lexicon.

These and other debate triumphs stand out not just for the rewards they bestow on a particular candidate but for the damage they inflict on the opponent. As journalist Sam Donaldson points out, “It’s not just the clever line, it’s the reaction. Had Jimmy Carter come back with a line that topped ‘There you go again,’ Carter would have the headlines. Had Dan Quayle . . . been able to handle ‘You’re no Jack Kennedy,’ that would have made it, too.”<sup>11</sup>

In fact, Walter Mondale used just such a tactic in 1984, turning Reagan’s “There you go again” around on its speaker. Attempting to invoke past glories, Reagan walked right into a Mondale trap by using the line again. “Remember the last time you said that?” Mondale asked, and Reagan nodded. The effect on camera was unsettling: Suddenly the president seemed vulnerable. “You said it when President Carter said that you were going to cut Medicare . . . And what did you do right after the election? You went out and tried to cut twenty billion dollars out of Medicare.” The bit that had worked so beautifully in 1980 now came flying back in Reagan’s face.

Then there are the debate moments that never were, strategic maneuvers contemplated but not executed. After Mondale’s win against Reagan in the first 1984 debate, Democratic advisers briefly considered dropping a bombshell in the follow-up encounter. In the course of the debate, Mondale would produce a letter the president had written in 1960 to Richard Nixon, a letter that compared John Kennedy’s ideas to those of Karl Marx and Adolf Hitler. Mondale himself dismissed the suggestion as undignified.<sup>12</sup>

The threat of another mystery document surfaced in 1992, when aides to Bill Clinton fretted that George Bush might flourish a letter in which the collegiate Clinton had weighed renouncing his American citizenship. “They’re signaling like crazy that they have something dramatic,” Democratic strategist James Carville warned his candidate before one of the 1992 debates. “But I think it’s a seventy-five percent chance they’re just playing mind games with us.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, no such letter materialized.

The Bush team did discuss a different surprise involving Bill Clinton and a letter. In this scenario Bush was to send his opponent a debate-day

demand that he honor an earlier promise to release his complete draft records. During the telecast Bush would then challenge Clinton to set the matter straight. “The handlers liked the idea,” wrote *Newsweek*, “but Bush, worrying about op-ed types fussing over McCarthyism, decided the ploy would only worsen his press.”<sup>14</sup>

In 1988 Bush advisers feared that Michael Dukakis would break format at the beginning of one of the programs by challenging the vice president to dismiss the press panel and debate him one-on-one. When a Bush aide overheard a rumor to this effect from a member of the technical crew, the Republicans cobbled together a last-minute counterstrategy: if the governor abrogated the rules, Bush would step out from behind his lectern and ask Dukakis to come down from his podium. Viewers would then see that the shorter Dukakis had been perched atop a height-enhancing riser.

During the technical rehearsal preceding the second Bush-Dukakis debate, Bush aides checked their man’s microphone to see if it could be disengaged and swung around in case Bush needed to move out in front of his podium. This repositioning caught the attention of Democratic handlers in the hall. Assuming that *Bush* was planning to break format, they cautioned Dukakis to expect the worst, possibly even the presence in the debate audience of the victims of Willie Horton, the Massachusetts prisoner who jumped furlough during Dukakis’s tenure. The governor’s aides thought Bush might ask his opponent to justify himself to the victims in front of the nation.

“This is the level of obsession, I guess, that presidential campaigns go through in these things,” Dukakis coach Tom Donilon later said of the incident. Republican strategist Charles Black agreed: “Part of the problem is you get there the last afternoon and evening, and there’s nothing to do, so you think up all these cute things.”<sup>15</sup>

Before the final 1992 debate, Democratic operatives got word that the Bush campaign was planning to seat Clinton paramour Gennifer Flowers in the debate audience, next to Barbara Bush. “The notion was preposterous,” wrote Jack Germond and Jules Witcover, “but the fact the rumor was circulating at all was an indicator of the high stakes in the debate.”<sup>16</sup> In 1996 Bob Dole’s campaign actually did plant an antagonistic figure in the audience: Billy Dale, who, in a minor dustup at the beginning of the Clinton presidency, had been fired from the White House travel office. Dale’s presence at the Hartford debate was supposed to disconcert Clinton; in fact, the president had no idea what Billy Dale looked like.

## UNDERSTANDING THE OBJECTIVE

Debate strategy is situational: A participant must deliver not just a memorable moment but the precise memorable moment that the circumstances require. Every candidate comes to a debate with a distinct objective. The 1980 Reagan-Carter match offers a textbook instance of a debater making the most of his opportunity. In that encounter Ronald Reagan dispelled voter concerns that he was a trigger-happy warmonger.

Of course no candidate steps before the camera an unfamiliar commodity. “By the time they engage in presidential debates,” wrote political communication scholar Robert V. Friedenberg, “most presidential candidates are reasonably well known and already have firmly established images with the public. Consequently presidential image goals often involve modifying existing images.”<sup>17</sup> Friedenberg dates this trend back to 1960, when Nixon sought to change his “political assassin” image while Kennedy tried to offset doubts about his lack of executive experience.

Candidates lose debates when they fail to shake off a negative perception: Bob Dole as a hatchet man in 1976, Ronald Reagan as too old for the job in 1984, Dukakis as unfeeling in 1988, Bush as disconnected from voters in 1992. Candidates win when they manage to overcome a bad rap, as Reagan did in 1980. According to Richard Wirthlin, “We knew that Ronald Reagan was a lot more powerful than he had ever been judged, which was a real advantage. It’s always nice to be underestimated and exceed expectations.”<sup>18</sup>

The Reagan-Carter match illustrates the risks incumbent presidents face in TV debates. In five election years—1976, 1980, 1984, 1992, and 1996—sitting presidents have appeared alongside challengers, in an admirable tradition of democratic sportsmanship. With the exception of Bill Clinton in 1996, the incumbent is generally thought to have faced the more difficult task. Says political scientist Austin Ranney, “Most pundits naturally believe that either the challenger or the underdog has an inherent advantage—the biggest advantage, of course, going to an underdog challenger. Challengers allegedly have that advantage because they get to stand next to a sitting president, increasing their credibility and their visibility.”<sup>19</sup>

Carter strategist Patrick Caddell has defined debates as “the vehicle of challengers. . . . They are the best device for a challenger to reach and cross the Acceptability Threshold.”<sup>20</sup> Until Bob Dole took on Bill Clinton, one could argue that just such a threshold was crossed by every upstart candi-

date. For these would-be chief executives, understanding the moment meant positioning oneself as equal in stature to the most powerful individual on the planet.

In 1976, when Jimmy Carter became the first challenger to debate a sitting president, Carter's team properly identified its mission as isolating Ford from the trappings of his office. Still they feared a backlash if the upstart candidate appeared overly antagonistic toward so revered a figure as an American president. According to journalist Jules Witcover, "Carter himself was uncertain what the chemistry would be at that moment when he finally stood on the stage with President Ford and matched wits, statistics, and barbs with him. He had no sense of awe toward Gerald Ford the man . . . But separating that man from the presidency was vexing."<sup>21</sup>

For their part, Ford handlers took pains to frame their candidate's participation in the 1976 debates as an act of political noblesse oblige. Media consultant Doug Bailey wrote that the debates were "not between two candidates but between one candidate and the president. Everything said, done, and projected by the president should emphasize that fact. If the president is consistently, persistently presidential, Carter (no matter what he does) will not measure up."<sup>22</sup>

Four years later incumbent President Carter staked out this same territory for himself against Reagan. In a 1980 memorandum, Caddell wrote, "The president's role is not to debate Ronald Reagan. We are letting the American people compare responses to similar questions. Reagan is the foil for the president."<sup>23</sup> As it happened, executive aloofness afforded no protection against the potent Reagan charm, and Carter's attempt to marginalize his opponent backfired.

Incumbent status does offer certain advantages to a presidential debater. As Reagan adviser Richard Wirthlin suggests, "Incumbency helps in terms of the simple accrual of knowledge that a president gets." High-level briefings, meetings with foreign leaders, unfettered access to a broad range of information—all these represent valuable assets for an incumbent debater. Furthermore, sitting presidents typically hold a strong hand in the negotiation process.

But there are negatives, Wirthlin warns: "When a president sits in the Oval Office, in most cases, he lives in a White House cocoon. Everyone is deferential to him. Very seldom is he attacked one-on-one. And suddenly he is put in a position where not only his issues are being questioned, but his motives are being questioned as well." In the first debate of 1984, Wirthlin said, this



sense of isolation bedeviled Ronald Reagan: “He wasn’t used to someone talking to him as forcefully as Mondale did, and it took him off balance.”<sup>24</sup>

Despite the windfall of Reagan’s poor performance in the first 1984 debate, Mondale could not accomplish what every challenger must: persuading the electorate to trade in its president for a new model. The next time an incumbent participated in a TV debate this mission proved less daunting. George Bush, rarely a lucky man in debates, found himself doubly threatened in 1992, having to defend against both Bill Clinton and Ross Perot. Bush’s failure to understand what was required of him until too late in the process greatly benefited the opposition.

Like other presidents before him, Bush allowed personal disdain for his competitors to blind him to the attraction Clinton and Perot held for much of the electorate. By underestimating the threat, Bush got left at the starting line, particularly in the town hall debate that so heavily abetted Clinton. Clinton, meanwhile, used the 1992 debates to “close the deal” with voters. Said Clinton campaign manager Mickey Kantor, “In a sense, we had a Ronald Reagan 1980 problem; the final sale had to made that Bill Clinton was credible.”<sup>25</sup>

Because they usually have recent experience in primary forums, challengers tend to be better toned for debates than their out-of-practice competitors. Such was the case with Clinton, who had shown his prowess in breaking from the pack in the crowded Democratic primaries of 1992. At an Illinois appearance, Clinton took command when he rebuked former California governor Jerry Brown for questioning Hillary Clinton’s professional probity. “I don’t care what you say about me,” Clinton snapped, “but you ought to be ashamed of yourself for jumpin’ on my wife.” Gwen Ifill in the *New York Times* described this as a “calculated but seemingly genuine explosion of anger”<sup>26</sup>—which is to say that Clinton understood the moment and availed himself of it.

As the first of her gender to participate in an executive-level debate, Geraldine Ferraro stepped up to the lectern both blessed and disadvantaged. On the plus side, as Ferraro told campaign journalists Germond and Witcover, she “could hit (George Bush) as hard as she liked, and he would not be able to return her fire in kind for fear of being cast as a bully.”<sup>27</sup> At the same time enormous pressures fell on Ferraro, not only as a political standard-bearer but as a symbol of womanhood. According to Ferraro’s debate coach, the candidate “could be ladylike, which would make her appear unin-

formed and too delicate to do the job; or she could be assertive, which would make her appear bitchy.”<sup>28</sup>

Opponent Bush had his own hobgoblins to tame. As debate scholar Judith S. Trent wrote, “He needed to find the acceptable “twilight zone” between being perceived as an unacceptably aggressive attacker or an unacceptably passive lap dog.” Moreover, Trent added, Bush aides worried that Ferraro’s assertive style might unhinge him, “and thus reveal the kind of high-strung and nervous manner that had hurt him in other debates.”<sup>29</sup> Bush was advised to win but not to have Ferraro lose. Observed Bush, “I don’t think they would have said that if I had been debating Tony Coelho.”<sup>30</sup>

Beyond gender, the Bush-Ferraro debate embodied a second strategic consideration, one that applies to all encounters between vice presidential candidates: “junior” debaters have substantially more room for maneuver. As political scientist Michael J. Robinson wrote of the Dole-Mondale encounter, “Small stakes make for more fun and quicker moves.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, this first vice presidential debate in 1976 proved far livelier than any of that year’s Ford-Carter programs; the 1984, 1988, and 1992 vice presidential matches also surpassed the bigger-name broadcasts for sheer entertainment.

Part of what makes second-string debates more watchable is the latitude the running mates have to “go negative,” particularly against the opposing presidential candidate. This freedom has generated sparks in vice presidential debates that could not ignite in the more rarefied air of the top-of-the-ticket appearances. In 1992, for example, Dan Quayle proved to be a formidable attack dog on the issue of Bill Clinton’s character; four years later, Jack Kemp was criticized for failing to do the same. Debate researcher Diana Carlin explains that second bananas can be more aggressive “because they aren’t expected to be presidential the way the presidential candidates are. And they can say things about their own candidate that the candidate cannot say about him- or herself.”

As a baseline requirement, vice presidential debaters must reassure voters about their suitability for stepping into office. “This is not just another presidential debate with surrogates,” says Carlin. “There should be a question in every single vice presidential debate about why you are qualified to take over—the Dan Quayle question.”<sup>32</sup> A running mate who can demonstrate his or her presidential timber passes the test.

In the end, even successful vice presidential debaters bump up against the political equivalent of a glass ceiling. “The truth of the matter is that the vice presidential debates are really unimportant in the big picture,” says James

Baker. "It's great theater, but it doesn't matter. People aren't making their voting determinations based on who's vice president."<sup>33</sup>

In a 1980 *Washington Post* column, television consultant Jack Hilton offered a series of suggestions to that year's presidential debaters. High on the list was the imperative "Be Liked." As Hilton saw it: "The emotional content of the debate will remain in the viewers' memories for longer than the ideas expressed. A candidate can fail in all of his objectives for the debate and still win if the viewers at home feel empathy or sympathy for him."<sup>34</sup>

The ethos of television demands that its star performers be "likable"; hence the cookie-cutter joviality of TV news anchors, commercial spokespersons, game show hosts, and sitcom actors. For presidential debaters, likability functions as a wild card, a commodity much prized yet impossible to generate on cue. Those lacking charisma, charisma as defined by television, face an uphill battle.

Such was the case with 1988 Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis, whose strategic objective entailed, in effect, a personality overhaul. To the candidate's credit, but also to his misfortune, Dukakis did not attempt to remake himself into Mister Congeniality in order to please the audience and the press. According to biographers Oliphant and Black, "Dukakis was more serious than Bush, more articulate, more overtly aggressive, scored many more debating points, and, ultimately, was less likable."<sup>35</sup>

This supposed deficiency became a discussion topic during the debates themselves. "Wouldn't it be nice to be perfect?" Bush asked viewers sarcastically. "Wouldn't it be nice to be the Ice Man so you never make a mistake?" Margaret Warner, a questioner in the second 1988 debate, put the issue directly to Dukakis: "Governor, you won the first debate on intellect and yet you lost it on heart . . . The American people admired your performance but didn't seem to like you very much." By way of reply, Dukakis declared himself a "reasonably likable guy." But when a candidate must publicly defend his appeal, the matter has already been decided.

#### ATTITUDE TOWARD OPPONENT

Democratic media consultant Tony Schwartz has described the presidency as "the only job in the world for which all of the applicants show up at the interview and attack each other."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the nakedness of the clash is a

distinguishing feature of TV debates. Presenting one's own case will not suffice; one must also bash the opposition, and do so in a way that passes the smell test of tens of millions of viewers. Each debater walks a tightrope between disparaging the competition and being properly respectful. Balancing these contradictory imperatives calls for a good deal of tactical forethought.

"At all times be courteous, respectful, friendly in manner, even when vigorously disagreeing or criticizing, even when unfairly attacked," Theodore Sorensen counseled Jimmy Carter in 1976. Sorensen had been brought into the campaign as an adviser because of his experience in the 1960 debates with John F. Kennedy. "Do not call your opponent names or slur his character or criticize his wife. But beware of appearing too agreeable to the point of passivity; be vigorously assertive and positive; take the initiative, avoid being on the defensive."<sup>37</sup>

Before the Cleveland debate in 1980, Reagan's campaign brain trust advised their candidate to "show righteous indignation" in responding to suggestions that he was dangerous or that questioned his California credentials. "Looking directly at Carter in such instances can be very effective," Reagan's coaches told him. "Humor or a confident smile can also disarm Carter when he thinks he's got you where he wants you."<sup>38</sup>

In 1984 Mondale made the decision to surprise Reagan by treating him with gracious deference. Strategists devised what they called the "gold watch" approach: The popular incumbent had done his job, but now it was time to move on—"sort of embracing a grandfather and gently pushing him aside," in the words of Democratic adviser Caddell.<sup>39</sup> Caddell suggested that Mondale begin the exchange with an informal greeting to Reagan, perhaps even present his opponent with a humorous gift. Mondale did not go that far, but in the opening debate he conceded that the president had "done some things to raise the sense of spirit and morale—good feeling—in this country," and added, "I like President Reagan." According to Elizabeth Drew, although Mondale had not planned the latter remark, he ad-libbed the extra compliment when he realized his affability was rattling Reagan.<sup>40</sup>

"The critical element to making the debate an overwhelming success is surprise," Caddell had written in advance of the first Reagan-Mondale debate. So successful was this strategy in unnerving Reagan that Caddell recommended still bolder moves for the second debate. "Mondale must not simply beat Reagan, he must take him apart. . . . The key for Mondale is to convince voters that Reagan has 'lost it' and that he ought to be retired."<sup>41</sup> As

it happened, a perfectly delivered one-liner by the supposedly senile Reagan shattered Mondale's plan. "It was clear in the first fifteen minutes of the debate that Reagan was much more in command," said Mondale aide Richard Leone. "Nothing was going to come out of it except a reassurance people needed to vote him in for another four years."<sup>42</sup>

In 1988 Democratic adviser Tom Donilon articulated a definition of victory for Michael Dukakis that would seem to apply to debaters across the board: Whoever emerges the "appropriate aggressor" wins the match. Being an appropriate aggressor means going on the offense without being offensive; making moves that are bold but not reckless; appearing confident but not prosecutorial. "If he could be nice, okay," Donilon said, but the top priority for Dukakis was to answer Bush's attacks on his character. "To the degree that we had to sacrifice likability for that, we did."<sup>43</sup>

George Bush, by contrast, faced not a deficit but a surfeit of niceness. Fearing their candidate's good manners would be misconstrued as passivity, Republican debate coaches in 1988 worked to uncork Bush's repressed competitive juices. According to adviser Lee Atwater, Bush needed to be a "counterpuncher." Said Atwater, "The nature of the man is such that he does not go out and start a fight, he doesn't start controversy or confrontation, but if he gets hit, he hits back."<sup>44</sup>

In the 1992 election, incumbent President Bush continued to resist an aggressive stance. His complacent posture in the first debate allowed Bill Clinton to pull off a maneuver that dominated postevent coverage. When Bush questioned Clinton's patriotism in the first debate—a ploy Bush had also executed against Dukakis—the Arkansas governor forcefully reminded his opponent that Senator Prescott Bush, the president's father, had led the fight against Joseph McCarthy during the communist witch hunts of the 1950s. "Your father was right to stand up to Joe McCarthy," said Clinton. "You were wrong to attack my patriotism." For most of this exchange, Bush self-consciously scribbled notes, as Clinton stared him down. According to George Stephanopoulos, the confrontation played out "word for word, the way we wanted it."<sup>45</sup>

As though surrounded by a protective force field, Bill Clinton never got stung in any of his five presidential debates. In 1996 predebate hype called for Bob Dole to assail Clinton on the "character issue," but no such lambasting took place. "Dole could not attack his opponent's character at the eleventh hour without bringing his own character disastrously into question," concluded *U.S. News and World Report*.<sup>46</sup> Politically Dole's decision

made sense. Studies of debate audiences conducted by Diana Carlin found that voters are put off by candidates who launch personal broadsides. “They don’t mind attacking,” Carlin says, “but they want people to attack ideas.”<sup>47</sup>

Twenty years after the fact, Bob Dole still bore the scars of his abrasive, misconceived performance in the 1976 vice presidential debate. A *New York Times* headline from October 1996 indicates the pressure Dole faced vis-à-vis his own reputation: “Searing Images from Debates Past Are Continuing to Haunt Dole.” The story revisited not only the infamous match with Walter Mondale but also Dole’s controversial 1974 Senate debate in Kansas. In that encounter the candidate was booed by an audience at the state fair for snarling at his opponent, a Topeka obstetrician, “I want to know how many abortions you’ve done.”<sup>48</sup>

Although he exceeded 1996 expectations by not devolving into “the mean Bob Dole,” the senator could make little headway against the gilded television persona of President Clinton. If anything, observers were disappointed that the irascible Bob Dole of old had gone soft. Political writer Joe Klein said, “Dole seemed to be a halfhearted gladiator, too decent (and no doubt wary) to be a very effective hatchet man and too limited a political performer to provide a very compelling alternative to Bill Clinton.”<sup>49</sup> Like every born entertainer, Clinton understood the first rule of stardom: Grab the lead role for yourself, and the other fellow gets cast as second banana.

The examples of Clinton, Reagan, and Kennedy suggest that the public responds favorably to debaters who display a high degree of self-possession. As Michael Deaver, Reagan’s long-time media adviser, observed, “What is important is how comfortable the person is with himself. (David) McCullough, in his book about Truman, said there was nobody in the world he’d rather be. That’s what we’re looking for. If you can get that across in the debate, that’s what people are hungry for.”<sup>50</sup>

By virtue of their competitive structure, television debates provide a natural forum for the expression of leadership. This is why candidates struggle to control the narrative; when a debater takes ownership of the event, audiences are witnessing executive ability in action. “What wins a political debate,” says Democratic strategist Richard Leone, “is if one candidate seems in command—of himself, of the environment, of his opponent.” Republican adviser Roger Ailes expresses it another way: “People reduce it down to fairly simplistic language: I want a president who can hit a home run.”<sup>51</sup>

## RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

Like soldiers armed with hand grenades, candidates march into televised debates bearing an arsenal of rhetorical ammunition. Whatever the question being asked, debaters are instructed to answer with the desired, predetermined response. This goal of staying on message, borrowed from the world of advertising, ties debaters to a set of narrowly conceived themes, themes that have been audience-tested and painstakingly rehearsed.

In 1976 Gerald Ford's "basic message" was divided into seven points. According to press secretary Ron Nessen, "No matter what specific question was asked, the president was to answer it briefly, then slip into one of the seven points." Each of the seven points came equipped with its own one-liners: "A president cannot be all things to all people"; "There is no button in the Oval Office marked 'maybe'"; "Surely Mr. Carter understands why vetoes are necessary. As governor of Georgia, he vetoed his own legislature one hundred thirty-eight times in four years"; and so forth.<sup>52</sup>

Carter, meanwhile, chose a strategy of identification with "the people." Scholar Stephen R. Brydon noted that Carter used the word *people* more than seventy times over the three encounters, compared to Ford's thirty. "The challenger claimed that the people were the source of his own strength and knowledge," Brydon wrote. "Carter portrayed himself as one of the people, representing their needs, hopes, and aspirations."<sup>53</sup>

In 1980, running against Reagan, incumbent President Carter shifted to a top-down, leaderly approach. The Democratic candidate was coached to "leave personal and policy footprints" during the debate, using definitive language to enforce his air of authority: "I strongly believe . . ."; "I have always stood for . . ."; "I have always had a firm commitment to . . ." Carter strategists devised phrases that would paint Reagan as too much of a simpleton to serve as president: "You make it sound as easy as one, two, three"; "You make it sound as easy as apple pie"; "That sounds good but nostalgia won't solve our problems."<sup>54</sup>

For his part, Ronald Reagan's verbal strategy in 1980 called for the repeated use of a single reinforcing word: *peace*. In his first response of the 1980 debate, the Republican candidate got straight to the point: "I'm only here to tell you that I believe with all my heart that our first priority must be world peace," Reagan said, informing viewers that "I have seen four wars in my life-

time. I'm a father of sons. I have a grandson." Wrote Lou Cannon, "Reagan mentioned 'peace' so often it sounded like he had invented the word."<sup>55</sup>

Throughout his career, Reagan's rhetorical deftness vexed his competitors. Before the 1984 debates the Mondale campaign sought advice from former California governor Pat Brown, who had debated Reagan in the 1966 gubernatorial race. "Everybody who had experience with Reagan had essentially the same story, which was, there's only so much you can do," said Mondale aide Richard Leone. "You can't draw him into an intellectual tennis match at the net, and his lobs are going to drive you nuts because you can't really pound them back." According to Leone, Brown's advice to the Mondale campaign was grim: "Don't think there's anything you can do that will get him off his script."<sup>56</sup>

As it turned out, Reagan's rustiness gave Mondale an unexpected edge in the first debate of 1984. Mondale spooked Reagan, causing him, in essence, to forget his lines. In the wake of this disaster, media coach Roger Ailes urged the president to get back to rhetorical basics: "You didn't get elected on details," Ailes reminded Reagan. "You got elected on themes. Every time a question is asked, relate it to one of your themes."<sup>57</sup> This advice apparently worked, for in the second debate, Reagan discarded the flawed facts-and-figures approach for what scholars Smith and Smith described as "his familiar cinematic language."<sup>58</sup>

Audience researcher Diana Carlin says that voters strongly approve of debaters who, like Reagan, are able to translate abstract issues into the language of everyday lives: "They like the metaphors, they like the stories."<sup>59</sup> On this count, Bill Clinton fared particularly well in the audience participation debates of 1992 and 1996. Clinton psychobiographer Stanley Renshon saw evidence in these town hall performances of the candidate's gift for "strategic empathy,"<sup>60</sup> a skill highly prized among television audiences weaned on confessional talk shows.

At the opposite end of the strategic empathy spectrum is a debater like Michael Dukakis. Democratic adviser Frank Mankiewicz aptly defined the problem when he told *Newsweek*, "Dukakis has a tendency to say things like 'We must be concerned about health care for the elderly.' He needs to say, 'What about your ninety-year-old mother?'"<sup>61</sup> In practice sessions before the 1988 debates, Mario Cuomo encouraged Dukakis to tell stories, while Bill Clinton exhorted him to get angry.

Democratic coach Sam Popkin instructs debaters to bone up on the price of simple consumer goods, in case such a question comes up. "The single



defining moment of Francois Mitterand's defeat of Valery Giscard D'Estaing was when Mitterand asked in a debate 'Do you even know the price of a metro ticket?' and Giscard hadn't a clue," Popkin wrote in a 1996 memo for Clinton. "Knowing the prices people pay for products and services every day is important evidence for continued connectedness."<sup>62</sup>

Staying connected to the audience also means not insulting them. In the 1976 vice presidential match Bob Dole's disdain for the entire debate process unwittingly extended to the body politic. Dole referred to the viewers as "those who may be still tuned in" and "those who may still be with us." As political communication scholar Kevin Sauter wrote, "The implication that those watching the debate should probably have tuned out earlier may not have been a direct affront . . . but after an evening of Dole's sharp attacks on the Democrats, to make an unflattering remark about the audience was not an astute rhetorical move."<sup>63</sup>

Dole's intemperate 1976 performance serves as a warning to other candidates about the perils of too much spontaneity. In a television debate, contrived moments seem to play better than unplanned ones: Reagan's "There you go again" and the joke about his opponent's "youth and inexperience"; Bentsen's "You're no Jack Kennedy"; Clinton feeling the audience's pain—these are the strategies that have triumphed. A candidate of the old school, Dole held fast against the phoniness of predebate gamesmanship—the play-acting, the rehearsing, the cosmetics—and said what popped into his head. Admirable as such resistance might be, Dole paid a price for repudiating the rules of presidential debates.

Dole's 1976 debate also highlights the riskiness of wisecracks as a rhetorical device. In that program Dole let loose with a steady flow of sharp-edged remarks. He accused Mondale of enlisting union leader George Meany as his makeup man. Referring to Jimmy Carter's controversial *Playboy* magazine interview, Dole said, "We'll give him the bunny vote." And so on. The net effect of the sarcasm was to turn viewers off. According to James Hoge, who moderated the Dole-Mondale debate, "Humor is a very dangerous thing in politics, particularly if it's ironic or sarcastic. With that huge an audience, most good politicians tend to avoid it."<sup>64</sup>

Natural wit being a rare commodity among presidential contenders, debaters have relied heavily on scripted zingers. This practice hit rock bottom in 1988, when George Bush dropped all pretense a few minutes into the first debate and asked, "Is this the time to unleash our one-liners?" Bush then proceeded to unleash: "That answer was about as clear as Boston

Harbor.” Michael Dukakis had prompted Bush’s outburst with his own creaky one-liner: “If he keeps this up, he’s going to be the Joe Isuzu of American politics,” Dukakis said, invoking the prevaricating star of a series of popular TV commercials. In both cases one could almost hear the grinding of the gag writers’ gears.

For the 1992 debates Bush was given a laundry list of suggested jokes, most of which, mercifully, he ignored: “That last answer was almost as inflated as prices would be in a Clinton presidency”; “I’d find broccoli easier to swallow than that last answer”; “Listening to Governor Clinton talk about integrity is like listening to Madonna talk about chastity.”<sup>65</sup> Roger Ailes weighed in with his own suggestion: “You can’t turn the White House into the Waffle House,” which Bush did manage to work into the second debate but not quite as Ailes had planned. Before delivering the gag, Bush was supposed to set it up with three prior uses of the word *waffle*; instead, he offered the punch line minus the appropriate set-up.<sup>66</sup>

As it developed, the scripted *bons mots* of President Bush were no match for the organic, almost relentless wit of rival Ross Perot. Perot’s skill with homespun one-liners reflected the candidate’s true personality and not the labor of anonymous jokesmiths. Addressing his lack of government experience, Perot declared in the first debate, “I don’t have any experience in running up a four trillion dollar debt,” as the audience roared with laughter. A few minutes later, he shot back with what would become the signature sound bite of the night. Asked about his proposal to offset the deficit by raising gasoline taxes, Perot said, “If there’s a fairer way, I’m all ears.”

What was the effect of Perot’s jocularities? As political communication specialist Dan F. Hahn pointed out, the zingers drew audience applause and gained extensive replay as sound bites in later media accounts. “Yet it is not clear whether these bites, successful in the short run, ultimately redounded to his benefit or came to be seen as just a little too simple for someone who would be president.”<sup>67</sup> By the end of the series the jokes had worn thin. In a focus-group discussion after the third debate, a Boston woman remarked, “It’s nice that someone has some humor and lightens things up, but now it seems like every opportunity he had to speak he had a quick one-liner.”<sup>68</sup>

The looser formats of recent debates appear to have lessened candidates’ dependence on scripted zingers; in 1996 only a handful of obvious sound bites emerged. Bill Clinton, anticipating questions about his character, got off a much-replayed line in the San Diego town hall debate: “No attack ever

created a job or educated a child or helped a family make ends meet. No insult ever cleaned up a toxic waste dump or helped an elderly person.” But by the usual standards of presidential debates, 1996 contained few moments of deliberately memorable rhetoric.

James J. Pinkerton, who covered the San Diego debate for *Newsday*, wrote that he “groaned out loud when Dole started to tell his little gag about the need for litigation reform.” Reminding the viewers of his tumble from a stage in Chico, California, Dole said, “Before I hit the ground, my cell phone rang and this trial lawyer says ‘I think we got a case here.’” As Pinkerton noted, Dole had used the line hundreds of times on the campaign trail—“and yet the bit got a healthy laugh. Real people, who pay only intermittent attention to the campaign, hadn’t yet heard it. The moral of this media story: repeat, repeat and repeat—and then repeat some more.”<sup>69</sup>

But repetition has its dangers. In the 1996 vice presidential debate Al Gore repeatedly referred to Bob Dole’s tax plan as a “risky scheme”—“a zillion times,” according to ABC’s Sam Donaldson, who said the vice president seemed to be “reading a teleprompter in his mind.” Lisa Myers on NBC described Gore as a “digitalized telephone operator,”<sup>70</sup> while other critics reached for unflattering metaphors of their own. Instead of reinforcing his point, Al Gore’s transparently predigested rhetoric became the object of ridicule.

#### DEBATE BOOT CAMP

A lasting legacy of the Kennedy-Nixon “Great Debates” is the immersion of candidates in debate boot camp as a prerequisite to the actual event. Since 1960, all but a handful of presidential debaters have followed John F. Kennedy’s lead in setting aside time to tone up for this most strenuous of telecasts. Although both staffs in 1960 compiled massive briefing books—JFK’s people called theirs the “Nixopedia”—only Kennedy practiced for the debate with his advisers. According to Nixon campaign manager Bob Finch, “We kept pushing for (Nixon) to have some give-and-take with either somebody from the staff . . . anything. He hadn’t done anything except to tell me he knew how to debate. He totally refused to prepare.”<sup>71</sup>

Where Kennedy’s predebate preps consisted of informal drills with aides reading questions off index cards, today’s candidates go through detailed simulations that duplicate the format, timing, and production circum-

stances of the televised program. Stand-ins for the moderators, panelists, and even town hall questioners grill the debaters in sessions that are videotaped, then played back for critiquing. Each campaign amasses a team of experts to attend to its candidate's every need: political strategists and policy specialists, speechwriters and voice coaches, lighting technicians and makeup artists.

From Nixon in 1960 to Bob Dole in 1996, nominees have ignored, at their peril, the preliminary conditioning presidential debates require. With so much riding on performance, only the most cavalier of candidates—or, like Perot and Stockdale, the most unorthodox—fail to subject themselves to a predebate regimen. The goal of rehearsal is simple: to ready the debater for any contingency. As Bill Carruthers, TV adviser to President Ford, put it, “When the president walks out onto that stage, nothing can be a surprise to him.”<sup>72</sup>

The lessons of Kennedy and Nixon loomed large for the candidates and their staffs in 1976. Aides on both sides pored over the 1960 preparation materials, while the star performers, like football players studying classic game footage, watched at least part of the historic broadcasts. In Plains, Georgia, Carter held a Saturday night screening of the Kennedy-Nixon debates for a handful of relatives, aides, and friends; included in the group was actor Robert Redford, who had recently starred in *The Candidate*.<sup>73</sup>

It is Gerald Ford, not an individual normally associated with theatrics, who became the first presidential contender to stage full-scale practice debates, complete with lecterns, stand-in questioners, cameras, lights, and makeup. Earlier in the year, Ford had used a video setup to rehearse his acceptance speech before the Republican convention, with positive results. Advisers now scheduled a series of predebate run-throughs to be staged, recorded, and dissected in the White House family theater.

Videotape of these rehearsals shows a no-nonsense, highly professional operation at work. The Ford team took advantage of its practice sessions to deal with both content and stylistics. At the end of one gathering, Ford crumples a paper at his lectern and says, “Okay, let’s see how the clothes look, and any other comments that you have.” When not practicing with a live Jimmy Carter stand-in, President Ford shares the stage with a television monitor set up to play sound bites from a Carter appearance on *Meet the Press*. The mock panelists ask questions of the monitor; Carter’s taped response plays back. As coached, Ford gazes forcefully at the TV version of his opponent during these replays.

The president does not always seem to be enjoying himself in the rehearsals. At one point he stops a session in progress, looks down at his watch, and announces, "I think this is enough," at which point the proceeding immediately ends. But reflecting on the experience later, Ford credited the preparation process. "Over a four-day period, I spent nine hours under the lights, and the grueling interrogation boosted my confidence," Ford wrote in his autobiography.<sup>74</sup>

Because rehearsals of this magnitude were unheard of in 1976, the White House sought to downplay Gerald Ford's debate preps. Carter forces, meanwhile, attempted to capitalize on what they viewed as efforts to program the Republican candidate. Of his own debate preparations, Carter pointedly assured a reporter, "I am not going to go off and practice against a dummy opponent or memorize any cute speeches or anything like that."<sup>75</sup>

True to his word, Carter at first would not even let his aides run questions by him, preferring instead to read his briefing books in private—the Richard Nixon approach. After the opening 1976 debate in Philadelphia, in which Carter seemed cowed by Ford and reticent to attack, he did agree to parry questions with his senior staff. But for the duration of the series, Carter steadfastly refused to participate in a mock debate.

In 1980, against show business veteran Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter dropped his objections. The president's team scheduled a series of mock debates, first at Camp David and then at Carter's hotel in Cleveland just before the co-appearance with Reagan. For the ninety-minute, real-time session at Camp David, lights, cameras, and lecterns were installed at Hickory Lodge, and political science professor Sam Popkin arrived from California to portray the Republican nominee.

Popkin, an expert in the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, had come to Carter's attention with a strategy memo called "Popping Balloons," the aim of which was to help the president navigate the rocky shoals of Reagan's deceptively benign communication style. Among other suggestions, Popkin advised, "You don't beat a story with a fact—you beat a story with another story." In their first practice session, when the "stunt Reagan" trounced the president of the United States, Carter realized the challenge he would face against so folksy a rival. At the end of the practice, Popkin recalled, "I thought they were going to have the Marines break my kneecaps."

Of no small help to the Carter prep squad was the utter predictability of Reagan's language. The long-time conservative activist had spent many years on the hustings delivering essentially the same message, and for the

debates the script did not change. According to Popkin, “With one exception, every single Reagan speech I gave in every single practice was actually used.”<sup>76</sup>

In Carter’s final run-through before the Cleveland debate, the president told his aides about a conversation he had had with his daughter, Amy, on the subject of nuclear war; Carter wondered if this might be something to raise during the debate. “We had all argued against it,” said chief of staff Hamilton Jordan, “perhaps not as bluntly as we should have.” According to Sam Popkin, just as advisers were recommending against the Amy anecdote, an inopportune phone call distracted Carter, and the message never sank in. “That’s why when you watch the tape, he clutches when he brings it up,” Popkin said. “He knew he wasn’t supposed to.”<sup>77</sup>

To no one’s surprise, Hollywood candidate Ronald Reagan perfected the art of full-scale debate rehearsals in 1980, mounting elaborate mock debates at the Reagans’ rented home in the Virginia countryside. The Reagan campaign converted the garage into a professional quality television studio and signed on Michigan congressman David Stockman to play John Anderson, and later Jimmy Carter. Some twenty advisers attended these practice sessions, not counting the stand-in questioners.

Despite his years as a professional showman, Reagan was notoriously bad in rehearsal. After the first dry run for the Anderson debate, Stockman wrote, “You felt kind of sorry for the guy, but his lack of agility was disquieting.” As an outsider in Reagan’s campaign circle, Stockman was astonished to observe that none of the senior advisers wanted to take charge of the critique session. “The campaign staff treated him with kid gloves. . . . It was all on-the-one-hand . . . on-the-other-hand.”<sup>78</sup>

Stockman’s comment underscores one of the ongoing conundrums of debate preparations: Who will tell the emperor he has no clothes? Advisers involved in practice sessions have found it difficult to balance candor with deference, criticism with praise. Their diffidence is understandable. In order to execute the stunt at hand, presidential debaters must be able to draw from a deep well of self-confidence. Any hint of dissatisfaction during rehearsals, anything less than a full endorsement by one’s own campaign staff might rattle the star at just the wrong moment.

In 1984 Reagan advisers so miscalculated their candidate’s needs that they prepared him in exactly the wrong way before the disastrous first debate in Louisville. “Everybody forgot that he’d been president of the United States for four years, so we briefed him the same way we did in 1980,” said Michael

Deaver.<sup>79</sup> Instead of concentrating on broad themes, the debate advisers stuffed their candidate full of facts.

Reagan wrote in his memoirs that he was “hurt” by the people trying to help him in 1984:

Everybody around me started saying, “You have to know this . . . you have to know that”; then they fill your head with all sorts of details, technicalities, and statistics as if you were getting ready to take an exam on those topics. Finally, when you’re in a debate, you realize you just can’t command all that information and still do a good job as a debater.<sup>80</sup>

After the Louisville debacle, Nancy Reagan angrily confronted Deaver back at the hotel. “What have you done to my husband?” she demanded. “Whatever it was, don’t do it again.”<sup>81</sup> As the press delved into the particulars of Reagan’s preparations, Republican advisers began a round of finger-pointing. Senator Paul Laxalt, a Reagan intimate, told the media that the president had been “brutalized” and “smothered” by the briefing process.<sup>82</sup> Unnamed members of the debate prep team hinted that Reagan’s own indolence was to blame.

To avert another disaster, campaign commanders imported a high-power guru for Reagan: Roger Ailes, a New York communication consultant who, in the 1968 election, had served as Richard Nixon’s media adviser. In the words of Lou Cannon, “Ailes was to reassurance what Nixon was to foreign policy.”<sup>83</sup> The coach began his workout by putting Reagan through a quick question-and-answer exercise called a “pepper drill.” “Go back to your instincts,” Ailes counseled his student. “Just say what comes to you out of your experience.” For an hour, the drill continued. “Every time he’d start to stumble,” Ailes recalled, “I’d ask, ‘What do your instincts tell you about this?’ and he’d come right back on track. He was very good. Finally I said, ‘Mr. President, if you can do that Sunday night, you’re home free.’”<sup>84</sup>

Under Ailes’s tutelage, Reagan regained his confidence and showed considerable improvement. To boost the president’s spirits further, the staff staged a pep rally at his hotel in Kansas City immediately before the debate. Beneath a banner marked “Hail to the Kansas City Chief,” Reagan greeted supporters with an anecdote about a young American soldier who had relayed a message to him from Germany: “We’re proud to be here, and we

ain't scared of nothin.' ” Reagan thanked the crowd, looked down at his watch, and, with a self-effacing grin, said, “I guess now I’ve got to go to work.” Then, amid chants of “U-S-A, U-S-A!” the president departed for the auditorium.<sup>85</sup> According to Michael Deaver: “Reagan was always buoyed by something like that. He was, after all, an entertainer.”<sup>86</sup>

#### DEBATE PREPS: BEYOND REAGAN

The 1985 autobiography of Geraldine Ferraro offers a rare firsthand account of debate preparations from the candidate’s perspective. Like other debaters, Ferraro viewed her boot camp experience with mixed feelings. “It seemed like such a waste of my time, and everybody else’s as well,” she observed.

I felt embarrassed sitting there, surrounded by three people the first afternoon and many more in subsequent sessions, giving thoughtful answers in such an artificial circumstance. All the candidates were doing it, of course. Mondale. Reagan. Bush. But that’s what has always made these debates so phony. You get to say too little, and what you do say is so well rehearsed that I’m not sure the public has any more idea of what the candidates really stand for than it did before the debates.<sup>87</sup>

Mondale campaign managers assigned a cadre of advisers to Ferraro. Some, like future secretary of state Madeleine Albright, dealt with matters of substance, whereas others concentrated on style. Ferraro was urged to speak slowly and enunciate; her rapid-fire delivery may have been acceptable to New Yorkers, but for the American masses it sounded too rat-a-tat. To reinforce this notion, Ferraro’s debate coach ordered the candidate to watch a videocassette of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. “Jimmy Stewart was relaxed and easygoing to a fault,” Ferraro said. “I fell asleep in front of the VCR and never got to see how it all came out.”<sup>88</sup>

In spite of her misgivings, Ferraro came to appreciate the value of preparation, especially after the sessions moved into a Manhattan television studio configured to replicate the debate site in Philadelphia. “My answers got clearer and more detailed,” Ferraro wrote. “People remember only those points made in the first two sentences, I had been told. By Wednesday morn-



ing everyone agreed that my replies were sharp and focused, with the key points in the first two sentences.”<sup>89</sup>

Ferraro, like others who have run the debate prep gauntlet, saw both pluses and minuses in extensive rehearsal: “All this preparation was essential, but at the same time it magnified the significance of the debate. I’m not one for butterflies in the stomach, but I will not deny that I felt a lot of pressure.”<sup>90</sup> As Ferraro indicates, the run-throughs designed to put a debater at ease may produce just the opposite effect.

With so many experts offering advice, debate preparations can lead a candidate to doubt his or her own instincts. “Over days of cramming and rehearsal,” Dan Quayle wrote of his 1988 experience, “there was only one general idea being pounded into me: don’t plow any new ground. Don’t make a mistake. If you feel unsure of an answer, just fall back on old rhetoric. In other words, don’t trust yourself.” In his autobiography, Quayle blamed Republican handlers for not preparing him better during mock sessions before the Bentsen debate, especially on content. “The real problem with the questions they anticipated was that they were too issue-oriented,” Quayle complained. “The staff didn’t seem able to imagine the more general, reflective questions that have become a part of these debates.”<sup>91</sup>

Others pointed out that Quayle himself had approached his debate preps too casually. Maureen Dowd, in the *New York Times*, reported that the candidate gave up one study session on a flight back to Washington in favor of an impromptu photo opportunity. According to Dowd, Quayle invited members of the press into his cabin “to watch and photograph him posing with sleeves rolled up and a serious expression, as if he was making notes on his briefing papers. Then he used his study time to amiably chat with the journalists about his hopes for the debate.”<sup>92</sup>

During his rehearsal sessions, Quayle received a spectacularly bad piece of advice from Bob Packwood, the senator who served as Lloyd Bentsen’s stand-in. After antagonizing Quayle in the run-through, Packwood assured him that the real debate would be less brutal. “I know Lloyd Bentsen,” Packwood said. “He won’t attack you the way I did today. He’s a gentleman.” At the same time Quayle ignored the counsel of his aides, who warned him not to make any references to John F. Kennedy. “I probably should have avoided it,” the candidate said, “but I only brought it up to make a single, valid comparison about our experience in the Congress.”<sup>93</sup>

Like Quayle, Michael Dukakis paid a toll for not heeding his coaches’ advice. Strategists had worked with Dukakis to devise a response to the

charge that he was soft on law and order—what the staff called “the crime question.” The answer, which Dukakis had gone through at least a dozen times in the prep sessions, involved a highly personal account of his own father and brother as victims of violent crime. When moderator Bernard Shaw asked the Massachusetts governor about his stand on the death penalty vis-à-vis the hypothetical rape and murder of his wife, Dukakis was supposed to plug in the rehearsed response.

“Every step of the way he fought me on this, and fought his campaign on this, because he didn’t like dealing with the crime issue this way,” recalled Susan Estrich, Dukakis’s campaign manager, at a 1996 debate symposium. Aggravating his problems, Dukakis had fallen ill with the flu just before the Los Angeles appearance. “And so feeling lousy that night maybe,” said Estrich, “or feeling a little resentful at the last hundred times your advisers had told you to look deeply into the camera when you talk about your brother, he just didn’t do it.”<sup>94</sup>

Four years later the next Democratic presidential nominee had no such misgivings. Both in 1992, and as an incumbent in 1996, Bill Clinton set a new standard for diligence in debate rehearsal. Clinton’s debate team, most of them veterans of previous Democratic campaigns, had never encountered so eager a pupil. Said Michael Sheehan, a media adviser, “For me, working with Clinton is like Kazan getting to work with Brando.”<sup>95</sup>

According to 1992 coach Tom Donilon, Clinton spent an “enormous amount” of time preparing. “He knew how important it was, he understood that it was a special skill that had to be practiced, that it was a point in the campaign when you really did get a chance to explain yourself, and if you were going to do it within the confines of the debate structure, you really had to work at it.”<sup>96</sup> With his elite group of debate strategists, Clinton ran drills on everything from physical posture to facial expressions.

For the first-of-its-kind town hall debate in Richmond, Hollywood producer and Clinton confidante Harry Thomason laid out the rehearsal stage in a grid so the candidate could learn to manipulate the space to maximum strategic advantage. Cameras were positioned just as they would be for the telecast, and doubles for Bush, Perot, and the audience took their places on the set. With the help of the grid, Clinton choreographed his moves so as to keep one or the other of his competitors in the camera shot at all times, a maneuver that circumvented the prohibition on cutaways of one candidate while another was speaking. According to journalist Roger Simon, the Clinton campaign hoped to catch Bush and Perot on camera with “bad

facial expressions.” When Bush was shown looking down at his watch, “the result exceeded their wildest expectations.”<sup>97</sup>

President Bush had not bothered to rehearse in the town hall format, opting instead for a desultory preparation schedule that marked a retreat from the more disciplined regimen of his 1988 preps with Roger Ailes. Ross Perot did not rehearse at all for any of the 1992 debates, other than to read background papers. According to Perot aide Clay Mulford, “I was delighted if I could spend thirty or forty minutes with him the day before the debate to go over a couple of things. I thought that was an unusual concession on his part.”<sup>98</sup>

In 1996 the Clinton debate-prep juggernaut was back in business, so methodical that rehearsal sessions for the San Diego debate took place in New Mexico in order to get the presidential body clock ticking on Western time several days before the event. The well-oiled Clinton machine provided a sharp contrast to the laissez-faire approach of competitor Bob Dole, who submitted to only the most minimal predebate conditioning. As Dole told reporters, “It’s like filling up your tank with gas. It can only hold so much.”<sup>99</sup>

However dismissive the remark, Dole does raise a valid question about debate preparations: How much better can any performer get? Modern presidential campaigns grind to a halt for days on end so that candidates may devote their full attention to test runs. Any drop of naturalness is squeezed out of the performers long before they plead their cases to the public. In all the strategizing and contrivance and plotting, what human qualities get lost?

On the eve of the 1996 San Diego town hall debate between Bob Dole and Bill Clinton, Dukakis campaign manager Susan Estrich was asked what advice she would give Dole in using the debate to stage a comeback. Her answer is eminently reasonable, if just as far-fetched:

I would tell him to get rid of all his debate advisers, to burn the briefing books, to kick out all the people who are scripting him. . . . What are the two things he cares most deeply about? Say them. And talk to people, not with a script and not with scripted attack points. If he’s troubled by Clinton’s character, say it. Say it the way you would say it to me if you were sitting here.

But nobody will do that because he’s off closeted with fifteen people who are now reviewing the tapes.<sup>100</sup>