

## Chapter Three

### PREDEBATE NEWS COVERAGE

On the morning of the first Kennedy-Nixon debate in 1960, the *Washington Post* devoted not a single news story to the broadcast that would become a seminal event in American politics. The main debate article in the same day's *New York Times* ran four short paragraphs on page 22, while the predebate edition of *Time* magazine failed to note the candidates' meeting altogether. Even the host medium of television paid scant attention; with only hours to go before the opening statements, the three network newscasts mentioned the debate only briefly, and not as a lead.

By contemporary standards of coverage, the first meeting between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon caught the press napping. As if to compensate, journalists in subsequent years have pursued these events with messianic fervor, casting off the shackles of subtlety that restrained the reporting of 1960. This heightened interest has accompanied a seismic shift in debate journalism, as the locus of coverage has moved, with profound consequences, from print to television.

To be sure, a few journalistic outlets grasped the importance of the first 1960 debate. The *Los Angeles Times* and *Boston Globe*, each with a hometown contestant in the race, ran front-page debate-day stories, as did papers in Chicago where the event took place. In general, however, little of the momentousness that routinely attends modern presidential debates preceded this landmark telecast.

Several factors explain why the press underplayed the story. First, as with all events lacking a precedent, the novelty of joint appearances by presidential candidates presented journalists with an institutional challenge: how to report an event that had not yet occurred. Reporters in 1960 took refuge in history; a favorite predebate news angle was to compare the Kennedy-Nixon broadcasts to the 1858 senatorial debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. On the eve of the televised debate, the *Chicago Tribune* ran two such stories in its Sunday edition. "It is fitting that the Kennedy-Nixon duel should kick off Monday in Chicago, the heart of Lincoln-Douglas land," one article noted. "The series of clashes between the giants of a century ago started at Ottawa, Illinois, scarcely eighty miles from today's TV studio in Chicago."<sup>1</sup> With no other signpost to guide them, writers sought comfort in the familiarity of a 102-year-old analogy.

Other observers cast their gaze not backward at the nineteenth century but ahead toward the twenty-first. *Boston Globe* political editor John Harris accurately forecast the gravitas of the event: "Both Nixon and Kennedy, and their staffs, busy with final preparations, are keenly aware of the high stakes. . . . They well know, skilled as each is in handling impromptu questions, that they risk losing the White House prize on the drop of an ill-chosen phrase."<sup>2</sup>

CBS president Frank Stanton, who for years had lobbied to bring presidential debates to television, told the *New York Times* that the discussion would create "a whole new sense of values" for the American electorate. Each candidate "will be peeled right down to the man himself," Stanton predicted, adding that televised debates would forever alter the practice of presidential campaigning.<sup>3</sup> What must have seemed like hubris at the time turns out to have been trenchant analysis.

For each of the 1960 debates, the networks took out advertisements in major newspapers around the country. Here, as in journalistic accounts, the tone of the promotional copy is muted: "The Television and Radio Networks and their affiliated stations throughout the United States urge you to be present during the first in a series of historic face-to-face discussions between Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard M. Nixon.

Tonight from 9:30 to 10:30.”<sup>4</sup> The word *debate* never appears. According to Don Hewitt, producer-director of the first Kennedy-Nixon program, the networks consciously avoided the term so as not to promote a win-loss expectation among viewers.<sup>5</sup>

The cautious mood of advance coverage in 1960 reflects a code that no longer obtains between campaigns and the media. Audiences today expect candidates and the press to act as eager partners in establishing a predebate climate; in 1960 no such arrangement existed. One of the rare instances in which a principal player even mentioned the debates came not in a news setting but during an interview on the *Tonight Show* between Jack Paar and Richard Nixon a month before the first event. Paar asked the candidate if he looked forward to the so-called Great Debates. Presciently Nixon answered that the broadcast would be a “very rugged experience—it will be for Senator Kennedy, it will be for me.” But beyond this, he was unwilling to speculate.<sup>6</sup>

Other factors contributed to the subdued coverage of the first 1960 debate. In the hierarchy of news stories, the telecast took a backseat to another groundbreaking event concurrently under way at the United Nations: the gathering, at the height of the cold war, of fifteen communist bloc leaders, including Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev. The Soviet premier arrived in the United States exactly one week before the presidential candidates met in Chicago. Castro had already reached New York, making headlines by vacating his posh midtown hotel in a dustup over the bill and conspicuously relocating to Harlem. The every move of both leaders attracted microscopic scrutiny from the press, reducing the presidential candidates to the status of second leads in the nation’s newspapers.

On the afternoon of the initial debate, even as Kennedy and Nixon underwent their preshow paces in Chicago, Castro was wrapping up a four-and-a-half-hour anti-American peroration to the U.N. General Assembly that would run alongside the next morning’s debate stories. Castro’s speech to the international body included an unsolicited assessment of the White House candidates: both Kennedy and Nixon, he said, “lack political brains.”<sup>7</sup>

Probably the best explanation for the sedateness of advance debate coverage in 1960 is the higher standard of objectivity to which journalists of that era held themselves. Political scientist Thomas Patterson, in a study of the front page of the *New York Times* between 1960 and 1992, found a ten-fold increase in the proportion of interpretive election stories and a concomitant reduction of descriptive stories. In the race between JFK and

Nixon, only 8 percent of front-page election stories in the *Times* could be called interpretive; in 1992 the level jumped to 80 percent.<sup>8</sup> By definition, most predebate reporting tends to involve speculation; the main event has not yet transpired, and observers have few concrete facts with which to work. In the absence of reportable data, the press corps of 1960 largely resisted the temptation to engage in the speculative analysis that is now *de rigueur*.

Television news, then in its infancy, had its own problems with advance debate coverage. Network newscasts, which at the time ran only fifteen minutes, were geared less to “futures” stories than to events that had already happened, events that could therefore be illustrated. The combination of television’s visual demands and the reluctance of reporters to postulate made presidential debates an unlikely subject for advance TV coverage in 1960.

The story got a somewhat higher profile on radio, where the personalized nature of the storytelling lent itself more readily to commentary. Lowell Thomas on CBS Radio noted in the hours before the first debate, “The series that begins tonight, I suppose, could also determine the next president of the United States.” Fulton Lewis on MBS Radio offered a skeptical preview: “Whether or not the occasion has been so hamstrung by artificialities and rules and red tape as to take the life out of it remains to be seen.”<sup>9</sup>

One of the most incisive pieces of predebate journalism came from a newspaper reporter who would serve as a panelist in the third Kennedy-Nixon debate, syndicated columnist Roscoe Drummond. Drummond stressed the responsibility of the *audience* in the debate-viewing transaction: “If the candidates are prepared to encounter each other face-to-face and to let the public hear both sides simultaneously at no small risk to themselves—then we ought to be prepared to weigh, examine, compare, and ponder their arguments as free from partisan prejudice and pre-judging as we possibly can.”<sup>10</sup> Heading into the 1960 debates, it was still possible for Americans to do this, thanks to the low-key media atmosphere that prevailed. After the fact, as journalists realized the degree to which they had underreported the story, the nation’s press would quickly shift course.

The *Washington Post*, whose front page had contained only a two-sentence programming advisory the day of the first debate, came back for the second Kennedy-Nixon encounter with a full-length, morning-of story on page 1. The tone of this article by Robert J. Donovan demonstrates the rapid metamorphosis in predebate reporting: “The drama of the Nixon-Kennedy

debates will go into its second act tonight when the candidates square off," the story began. Donovan wrote of the "enormous tension" building up over the confrontation and noted that Vice President Nixon "is under particularly heavy pressure to make up for a shaky start in the first debate . . . due in considerable measure to ill-advised lighting or makeup or both, which distorted his image on television screens."

The article proceeds in this vein:

Republican leaders have been working night and day with technicians to avoid a repetition of this calamity. Furthermore, many party leaders from different parts of the country are reliably reported to have urged Nixon to be much more aggressive toward [Kennedy] than the vice president was in the first debate.

They have pleaded especially that he drop the tactic he used then of expressing agreement with the senator on various basic goals. Not many expect that Nixon will be telling Kennedy tonight that he agrees with him on anything.<sup>11</sup>

To a remarkable degree, this report in the *Post* presages the sensibility that would come to typify most predebate news coverage. Brashly predictive, the writing addresses issues of performance and strategy and cosmetics that other press accounts in 1960 either downplayed or avoided completely. Sixteen years later, when the next round of presidential debates came to pass, the emergence of television as a mature news medium transformed the rules of the game for journalists and sources alike. All predebate reporting would sound more like the story by Robert Donovan in the *Washington Post*.

#### FINDING THE ANGLE

Just as Kennedy and Nixon drew comparisons to Lincoln and Douglas, so did the 1976 debaters enter the arena under the shadow of their television predecessors. The news media now had a precedent to follow, a navigational chart with which to plot coverage of the first debate series in sixteen years. The iconographic images of JFK and Nixon would hover over Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter like gods gazing down from the video pantheon.

A month before the first 1976 debate, Joseph Lelyveld of the *New York Times* screened the first two Kennedy-Nixon broadcasts in search of clues to

the upcoming Ford-Carter debates. "In one way," Lelyveld wrote, "the experience was similar to that of sitting through an old movie that was considered bold and exciting in its day but now seems mannered and coy." Lelyveld, like others before him, concluded that "the interplay of personalities, not ideas" was what had figured most strongly in the 1960 debates.<sup>12</sup>

Conventional wisdom from the Kennedy-Nixon series informed much of the predebate coverage in 1976. Jules Witcover, in the *Washington Post*, noted that, for Ford and Carter, substance would most likely matter less than "how each candidate looks, sounds, and handles himself vis-à-vis his opponent. That is the one clear lesson that came through in the only previous televised presidential campaign debates."<sup>13</sup> On NBC Douglas Kiker revisited the Kennedy-Nixon matches with a series of clips that contrasted the Democrat's grace under pressure against the Republican's unfortunate brush with reaction shots. Interestingly, among the excerpts was a 1960 debate sound bite in which JFK offered a rhetorical litany of typical American voters, a list that included "a peanut farmer in Georgia."<sup>14</sup>

In *The New Yorker* Elizabeth Drew sought to deflate the buildup of the 1976 debates, attributing the anticipation to a "retrospectively distorted view" of the 1960 series. "A number of people now see those debates as events in which a good guy in a white hat met and bested a bad guy in a black hat," Drew wrote. "I wonder how much enthusiasm there would be for debates this year if Kennedy were deemed to have 'lost' in 1960?"<sup>15</sup>

All these stories use 1960 as a touchstone, just as future reports would feed off the 1976 series and its successors. With each new round of candidates, the body of debate lore expands, making presidential debates an ever more self-referential genre. Television, always keen to relive its classic moments, has been an especially effective medium for sustaining the highlights of debates past, a collection that functions as a sort of "greatest hits" reel to be trotted out with each new run for the White House.

In 1976, when the predebate story uprooted itself from newspapers to television, a reliable pattern of coverage took hold: The narrative line would begin at the negotiations; move to an intense period of expectations-setting, both by campaigns and journalists; touch briefly on candidate preparations; and conclude with debate-day photo opportunities amid a flurry of last-minute handicapping. Every four years, from the Ford-Carter debates to the present, this process has repeated itself like clockwork. The occasional wrinkle may vary the plot from race to race but essentially the press strays little from its familiar script.

To each series reporters assign a story line that sets the agenda for that year's predebate coverage; thus the emphasis in 1976 on the restoration of the debate tradition after a sixteen-year hiatus. Once a series is in motion, events in one program dictate the narrative through the remaining installments. The first Ford-Carter debate set the tone for its successor when, just as the candidates were wrapping up their final answers of the night, the sound got knocked off the air for an excruciating twenty-seven minutes.

Going into the follow-up match two weeks later, the press exhibited a sudden interest in the previously eye-glazing particulars of TV audio production. Jack Kelly, CBS's pool producer for debate number 2, recalls being "driven crazy" by media inquiries about audio arrangements. "That's the only thing people cared about," Kelly said. "I'd get calls in the middle of the night from radio stations. And it was always the same question."<sup>16</sup> All three networks aired footage of Jimmy Carter personally inspecting the sound board in San Francisco's Palace of Fine Arts during his tech check the afternoon of the debate, with NBC reporting that "Carter gave close attention to the maze of audio equipment and its backup system."<sup>17</sup>

That same day Carter furnished ABC's Sam Donaldson a sound bite that would prove prophetic in defining the next chapter of the debate saga. "If one of us makes a mistake," the Democratic challenger said, "that will be damaging."<sup>18</sup> Hours later Ford committed his verbal blunder about Soviet influence in Eastern Europe, giving the press an angle not just for the final Ford-Carter encounter but for the ages: the imperative not to err. Into the stone tablets of debate knowledge, journalists would carve this new message, just below the lesson about Richard Nixon's makeup.

On the morning of the last 1976 debate David Broder, in the *Washington Post*, wrote, "Both Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter have been told by their top advisers that they can win the presidential election if they avoid a serious misstep in tonight's final television debate." ABC's Barbara Walters said, "Both sides agree that the most important element in winning is to make sure that a major mistake is not made either in fact or style." Bob Jamieson on NBC reported that another error "could be fatal" to Ford's campaign.<sup>19</sup>

This journalistic obsession with mistakes has colored all predebate coverage since Ford-Carter. The issue returned with a special vengeance in 1984, when Ronald Reagan's disjointed performance in the first encounter handed the press one of the most dramatic plot twists in debate history. Advance coverage of the second and final Reagan-Mondale debate two weeks later

converged on a single point: Would the seventy-three-year-old Republican nominee survive the evening with his dignity intact?

Reagan's preparations for the debate in Kansas City sparked fervent media interest, as did the altered stakes for both candidates. On ABC's Sunday morning talk show *This Week*, White House correspondent Sam Donaldson raised what he called "the senility factor." Said Donaldson, "People will be watching tonight because of Louisville, to see whether the president stands up, makes sentences that make sense from the standpoint of not stammering and stuttering, and doesn't drool." (Before the first debate, in a *Los Angeles Times* interview, Donaldson had erroneously predicted a Reagan victory. "He'll get his facts wrong and his figures wrong. But so what?")<sup>20</sup>

Perversely the poor showing by Reagan in Louisville hurt Walter Mondale in advance coverage of the subsequent debate. As *Newsweek* put it, "Once more Mondale will look the camera in the eye, trying to project forceful leadership. His problem is that in Louisville his success was surprising; in Kansas City it will be expected. In Louisville, his style of respectful dissent seemed to take Reagan aback; in Kansas City, Reagan will be ready."<sup>21</sup> Clearly the debate with the strongest fascination for the press was not the president against Mondale but the president against himself.

#### EXPECTATIONS-SETTING BY THE CAMPAIGNS

In 1976 Carter pollster Patrick Caddell boasted to the *New York Times* of his candidate's television prowess. Carter "is very good with the camera," Caddell said. "He treats it like a person—one person. It's his strength."<sup>22</sup> This quote is remarkable in its braggadocio. Today we have come to expect campaigns to shade their predebate comments, deliberately lowering the standing of one's own candidate while raising the bar for the adversary.

In 1976 Jimmy Carter himself pooh-poohed his skills in a lunch interview with a trio of prominent political writers several weeks before the first debate. Over milk and a bologna sandwich at his home in Plains, Georgia, Carter offered this partisan preview: "I think President Ford is expected to know a great deal more about domestic programs and foreign programs than I do. He's been in Washington twenty-seven years. And to the extent that I come out equal to him in my apparent knowledge of issues, I think that would be equivalent to a victory for me."<sup>23</sup>



By the second debate Ford aide Michael Duval was arguing the opposite case, telling an ABC reporter that it was the *president* who would be operating at a disadvantage, because “when he speaks, it’s the policy of the United States of America, and that is a major constraint.”<sup>24</sup> With a single sound bite Duval sent a double-edged message: lowering the standards for Ford while reasserting his status as chief executive.

In the Duval and Carter quotes we discern competing press strategies at work, as each side jockeys for position in the media. Beginning in 1976 and continuing through the present, journalists have been coconspirators in this game of brinksmanship, serving as a kind of political message board that keeps the story alive and kicking up until airtime. This practice marks a radical shift from the cautiousness of Kennedy-Nixon coverage, when neither the campaigns nor reporters had much to say in advance of the first presidential matchups.

Today, in the weeks before a debate, politicians and the media link hands in a feverish dance of expectations-setting. Each side has something the other wants: Campaigns have information; the press has an audience. Individually these commodities are of limited value; together they form a symbiotic juggernaut with the power to predispose public perceptions. For both parties, the trick is finding an acceptable level of reciprocity in the merger.

In 1980 the campaigns’ desire to position themselves favorably against the opposition assumed particular urgency, thanks to the presence of Hollywood veteran Ronald Reagan. For Reagan’s two opponents, the strategic objective could not have been clearer: In the face of the Republican nominee’s overwhelmingly superior media skills, the only logical choice was to prepare the audience for the worst.

“I, of course, was not the emcee for the twenty-mule team Borax,” John Anderson reminded a reporter, “and I was not the host on the *General Electric Theater*.”<sup>25</sup> President Carter told the *Washington Post*, “I’m a careful enough observer to know that Governor Reagan is a professional in dealing with the media. He’s articulate and I don’t underestimate him.”<sup>26</sup> In a television story on ABC Carter ventured hopefully that the audience would not be deciding “who is the most professional debater or the best orator or the most professional television performer. The reason for the debate is to draw a sharp distinction on the issues and let the American people decide who will be the best president for the country during the next four years.”<sup>27</sup>

In recent debate cycles the ritual of expectations-setting by the campaigns has grown ever more entrenched. In 1988 George Bush's handlers took greater than usual pains to portray their candidate as an ineffectual debater, especially in contrast to Michael Dukakis, who had moderated a public affairs series called *The Advocates* on Boston's prestigious WGBH-TV. "We capitalized on that, frankly," Bush campaign manager James Baker later admitted, "and the vice president was perfectly willing for us to do that. It wasn't an insult to his manhood for us to go out and say, 'Hey, wait a minute. Our guy's not that good a debater.' He basically let us go out and trash his debating ability, but it paid off."<sup>28</sup>

So contrived had the machinations become that Bush himself found it impossible to sustain the charade. At a predebate news conference, Bush went through the motions of playing up Dukakis's debating prowess, then proceeded to point out that he was "lowering expectations. My wife, Barbara, when I practice debating, she falls asleep and I have to do something about that."<sup>29</sup> As Dukakis press secretary Dayton Duncan commented, "When your candidate comes out and says it, there's not even any pretense to it."<sup>30</sup>

By contrast, members of Dan Quayle's team sought to goose their man's notoriously low standing in the 1988 predebate analysis. Perhaps the most impassioned spinner was the candidate's wife, Marilyn. Appearing on ABC's *Good Morning America* the day of the vice presidential debate, Mrs. Quayle predicted that viewers would be "incredibly surprised" by the Republican nominee. "Quite frankly," she said, "the pressure is on Lloyd Bentsen. He's been the one going around the country actually trashing Dan Quayle."<sup>31</sup> But however gamely Marilyn Quayle defended her husband's reputation, the worst was yet to come.

Four years later Democrat Al Gore pounced on the issue of predebate handicapping, complaining to a rally of supporters that he was at a "terrible disadvantage" in the upcoming 1992 vice presidential debate. "Dan Quayle's expectations have been pushed down to such an unreasonably low level that the news media has declared him the winner in advance," Gore grumbled.<sup>32</sup> Quayle attempted to protect his underdog status by drawing a tongue-in-cheek class contrast with Gore. "He has a big advantage over me," Quayle told reporters. "He grew up in Washington, D.C., and I'm a product of the public schools." As the *New York Times* pointed out, "Mr. Quayle himself had a privileged upbringing as the scion of a wealthy newspaper family."<sup>33</sup>

In 1996 expectations-setting reached new levels of inanity, with first-class debater Bill Clinton portrayed by the opposition as superhuman and by his own side as woefully out of practice. Bob Dole's people had the easier mission, and in raising the stakes for Clinton, they spared no rhetorical excess. Former Reagan press secretary Marlin Fitzwater, on the *Today* show, called Clinton "the greatest television performer in American presidential history." Dole spokesman Scott Reed said, on CNN, "We all know Bill Clinton is a great debater. He's capable of charming the birds out of the trees every day." Dole himself said, "He is so good, if I show up, I think I will win."<sup>34</sup>

During breaks in his debate rehearsals, Clinton tried valiantly to lower his standing. "I'm badly out of shape on this," the president lamented to reporters in Chautauqua, New York. Hillary Clinton did her part in an appearance on the syndicated TV talk show *Live with Regis and Kathie Lee*, claiming, "For more than thirty-five or so years [Dole] was in the Congress and was a very good debater, so I expect it will be a very tough debate for my husband." Press secretary Mike McCurry reported that Clinton "feels like he has not had the time he had allotted" for debate preparation.<sup>35</sup> All these lines were delivered—and reported in the press—with a straight face.

A telling photo op in 1996 showed Bob Dole blithely tossing his debate briefing papers off the balcony of his Florida condominium. Long-time Dole observers saw in this playful gesture a striking departure from the "mean Bob Dole" of yore, who twenty years earlier had approached his 1976 debate against Walter Mondale with outright hostility. Dole's preproduction press strategy for that debate is one that no candidate has dared repeat: bad-mouthing the event. "I assume the audience will be smaller," Dole quipped to one TV reporter in 1976, "but I think we can put them to sleep quicker than the presidential candidates did." In another broadcast interview Dole could scarcely contain his peevishness: "It really bugs me to have to interrupt our campaign here for a week to prepare for this. I don't think it means all that much." And: "I think we both have a mission in this debate. I haven't quite figured out what it is."<sup>36</sup>

More typically candidates use predebate media coverage to taunt their opponents, not the audience. Democrats in 1984 portrayed Geraldine Ferraro as itching for a debate with George Bush, a theme the press seized on. In campaign appearances around the country Ferraro repeatedly brought up the impending match. Before an Italian-American audience she needled Bush in Italian, asking, "George, are you ready to start the debate?" At another event, claiming to have gotten hold of Bush's briefing book, the

congresswoman previewed what she said were her opponent's preppy-flavored attack lines: "Gosh," "Gee whiz," "Zippity-doodah," and "Let's win, win, win!"<sup>37</sup>

Ferraro's antics apparently succeeded in unsettling the Bush campaign, as demonstrated by a pair of incidents that occurred shortly before the 1984 vice presidential debate. In a conversation with two news agency reporters aboard Air Force Two, Barbara Bush referred to her husband's opponent as "that four-million-dollar—I can't say it, but it rhymes with rich." Mrs. Bush later said that she believed the comment had been off the record and that the word she had been thinking of was *witch*.<sup>38</sup> The future First Lady telephoned Ferraro to apologize, interrupting a debate rehearsal. "I was dumbfounded," Ferraro would write in her memoirs. "The issue of rudeness aside, it was an astonishing thing to say to the press. And, of course, they jumped on it."<sup>39</sup>

Just as the controversy began to subside, Bush press secretary Peter Teeley took aim at Ferraro in a *Wall Street Journal* story that ran the morning of the Bush-Ferraro debate. Said Teeley, "She's too bitchy. She's very arrogant. Humility isn't one of her strong points, and I think that comes through." Compounding the insult, Teeley offered a "clarification" in the next day's *Washington Post*: "What I meant by that is that . . . essentially she has to come across as not being screechy or scratchy. If you have to use the word 'bitchy,' that's adequate."<sup>40</sup> The press, always a sucker for conflict, had found an irresistible predebate sidebar.

#### COVERING NEGOTIATIONS AND REHEARSALS

The metronomic predictability of electoral reporting has made it easy for campaigns to anticipate, and thus cater to, the preproduction needs of the press. Still, two key chapters of the predebate story—negotiations and candidate preparations—take place behind tightly closed doors. To cover them, journalists must depend on morsels of information from inside sources. Television, with its addiction to pictures, has particular difficulty addressing these nonvisual portions of the tale. Cameras do not record the deal making for later excerpting; no newscast has ever aired video of a debate practice. Still photos of rehearsals are almost as rare, and those that do run exude all the spontaneity of a military parade.

It is interesting to note that in the 1976 campaign journalists criticized

Gerald Ford for staging mock debates before his televised meeting with Carter. Tom Jarriel on ABC disparaged the “top-secret coaching” the incumbent president had received: “They’ve told him what to wear, where to look, and have carefully edited his answers to fit into the three-minute debate format.”<sup>41</sup> Ford press secretary Ron Nessen would write in his memoirs, “I could never figure out why reporters made such a fuss about the president rehearsing. TV correspondents and anchormen rehearsed to polish their performance for a big program. Why shouldn’t the president rehearse before the debates? The stakes on a good showing were enormous.”<sup>42</sup> After 1976 the press no longer bothered to register its astonishment at the preparation process. Today candidate warm-ups are another routine stop on the predebate trail, accepted unquestioningly by a campaign press corps excluded from covering them.

More attention is accorded the negotiation process, particularly by print journalists, who are better suited than their TV compatriots to disseminate the mostly tedious details that emerge from the talks. Although reporters lack direct access to the bargaining table, highly placed members of the press can depend on leaks from the principal players to round out the picture. “Every side wants to get out that they were less worried than the other side, so they’ll leak out details,” says Richard Berke, a political writer for the *New York Times* who has broken a number of negotiation stories. “And you just sort of work them against each other.”<sup>43</sup>

In certain years—1980, most notably—negotiations constitute a driving force of the predebate narrative. In that race campaign officials argued for weeks about the conditions under which debates would take place or if they would take place at all. Carter’s refusal to participate in any forum that included independent candidate John Anderson generated extensive media coverage, but after a short-term burst of negative publicity for the president, the fallout dissipated. In the *Washington Post*, Robert G. Kaiser described press reaction to Carter’s decision as “the furor that wasn’t.” For three days, Kaiser wrote, debate developments dominated the evening news programs and the papers. “Once the news was conveyed and initially analyzed, it seemed there was nothing more to say. In the days since, the debate story has been mentioned in passing or not at all.”<sup>44</sup>

When Carter and Reagan opened negotiations for a two-way match, media interest reignited. Reporters camped outside the closed doors of the meeting room, hungry for a breakthrough. No scrap of information was too inconsequential to be passed along. “Roast beef and turkey sandwiches were

brought in as the talks dragged on through the afternoon,” wrote *New York Times* reporter Terence Smith of one session. Smith and other journalists at one point overheard—and reported—Democratic negotiator Robert Strauss through the conference-room door exasperatedly telling his opponents, “I don’t think you’ve heard anything I’ve said since we came in here.”<sup>45</sup>

The press did gain access to the sanctum sanctorum for a brief photo opportunity. According to an ABC account by Susan King: “Verbal gamesmanship dominated the picture-taking ceremony, and it was clear not just the date but the debate idea itself was up for grabs. Both sides agreed on one thing: to answer no questions.”<sup>46</sup> Negotiators in later years stopped providing even this much of a stage-managed photo op.

By tradition, campaigns zealously guard the barrier between what actually goes on in the bargaining sessions and what gets shared with the news media. One of the rare violations of this longstanding policy occurred in 1996 on CNN’s *Inside Politics*, a television program tailor-made for the daily arcana of the debate over debates. Side by side on the studio set, Clinton representative Mickey Kantor and Dole representative Donald Rumsfeld conducted what amounted to a live negotiating session in front of anchorwoman Judy Woodruff and millions of viewers.

What stood out from this exchange was the sheer pettiness of the bargaining. Taking place one day after Ross Perot’s official exclusion by the debate commission, the session began with a dispute over whether Perot might still be allowed to participate. Kantor did not rule out this possibility, while Rumsfeld did. The negotiators argued over the length and number of debates: Dole wanted four presidential and two vice presidential debates; Clinton wanted longer debates compressed into a shorter timetable. Woodruff asked when the next negotiating meeting would happen. Kantor said it would have to be earlier than Saturday because he had already “canceled a lot of meetings” to accommodate the Dole team. Rumsfeld responded that it was Kantor who had inconvenienced the other negotiators. “This is just plain politics,” Rumsfeld said. “I think the American people are tired of that.”<sup>47</sup>

From a public relations standpoint it is difficult to surmise why these two sophisticated campaign players agreed to go on live television to discuss arrangements, though sources on the Clinton side say they were hoping to put pressure on Dole’s camp to “do the debates the way we wanted to do them.”<sup>48</sup> Both campaigns came off as niggling and self-motivated, more

concerned with winning their own narrow game than serving the broader public interest. Still, for voters, the appearance on *Inside Politics* provided unusual insight into the debate negotiating process. As Judy Woodruff later put it, “Even though you’re not getting the whole thing, you’re getting a little peek through the window.”<sup>49</sup>

Several days after Kantor and Rumsfeld appeared on *Inside Politics*, Kantor and a different Dole representative, Carroll Campbell, answered journalists’ questions outside the Washington office building where the bargaining sessions took place. The specifics of the negotiators’ remarks are less significant than the scene as portrayed by C-Span cameras: a sidewalk stake-out by about a dozen reporters and photographers, with microphones set up for impromptu news conferences as the aides came and went. By 1996 every development in the debate over debates merited a news conference, as the media beast demanded a stepped-up schedule of feedings.

#### EXPECTATIONS-SETTING BY THE PRESS

We have seen how campaigns assume the role of debate producers; in the period before a presidential debate, journalists turn the tables and play political strategists. Since 1976, debate analysis has developed into a cottage industry in the press, accounting for an ever increasing share of pre-event coverage. With assistance from their campaign sources, reporters fix a conventional wisdom that departs from the standard journalistic mission of factual storytelling; in turn, this predebate “morning line” becomes the yardstick by which postdebate judgments are rendered.

Handicapping the horse race has long been a fixture of campaign journalism, but where live debates are concerned, the impulse to speculate is particularly tantalizing. Political journalists approach the debate story the way sports reporters approach a major athletic event. “This reminds me a lot of the Super Bowl,” said columnist George Will on ABC the morning of the first 1992 debate. “Each year the hyperbole and rubbish and pageantry and marching bands surrounding the little kernel of football in the middle gets larger and larger.”<sup>50</sup>

The accelerated pace of predebate coverage mirrors the explosive growth of the American news media over the past quarter-century. From three networks in 1976, each with a single daily newscast, the business has expanded to multiple journalistic outlets, twenty-four-hour news cycles,

and the overheated competition of a crowded marketplace. Pressure to generate stories is enormous, particularly for television, where the dependence on visuals further complicates advance coverage of an event like a presidential debate. Because most predebate events are pictorially lacking, TV instinctively fills the gap with pundits. These talking heads cram the airwaves, spouting predictions, analyzing strategy, and revisiting debates past.

In the view of Thomas Patterson, as television news extended its influence, print journalism began taking more of its cues from the tube, with substantive reporting yielding to interpretive stories. "The television model gradually affected the print media, to the point where the difference in the styles of television and newspaper reporting is now relatively small," Patterson wrote after the 1992 election.<sup>51</sup> In practice this has meant more predebate stories about tactics and performance, and fewer reports that link debates with candidates' stands on the issues.

As Patterson's study shows, the shift toward interpretive analysis has been an incremental one. When presidential debates resumed in 1976, coverage was considerably more speculative than it had been for Kennedy-Nixon but considerably less speculative than what it is today. With every election, the border gets spongier between fact and opinion, description and interpretation.

In 1980, when a truncated debate season heightened the stakes, journalists handicapped the candidates' odds as enthusiastically as professional bookies. Coverage of the single Carter-Reagan debate focused on the "high noon" riskiness of the event. The *Christian Science Monitor* called it a "one-to-one shootout . . . which could decide the outcome." "A single roll of the dice with the White House at stake," said the *Washington Post*. In comments just before the debate began, CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite said, "It is not inconceivable that the election could turn on what happens in the next ninety minutes."<sup>52</sup>

Political analyst Jeff Greenfield, in a book critical of press coverage of the 1980 campaign, lamented the extent to which strategic considerations colored that year's predebate reporting: "So heavily was the tactical element of the confrontation played up by newspapers and television that the average voter might have been forgiven for believing he needed a scorecard or a tout sheet, rather than an informed mind, to judge the debate."<sup>53</sup> Also unhappy with the media's fixation on predebate maneuvers was President Carter. "Less than a month before the election," he wrote, "the press continued to



ignore the substantive issues in the campaign and to concentrate almost exclusively on who might debate whom, Reagan's "blunders," and my "meanness" to my opponent."<sup>54</sup>

A 1980 memorandum written by Carter strategist Patrick Caddell shows the importance that was being attached to press coverage not just in the follow-up analysis after the debate but also in the days preceding the event. The goal: to tie pre-debate expectations-setting to postdebate verdicts. Caddell wrote,

[Journalists] have an inordinate role in convincing the public not only who won on "points" but more critically, on the nature of the debate itself. Thus we cannot let the press go into the debate with the single notion of looking just for a winner and loser. Not only must we "win" on points, more importantly we must win substantively and have the press judge the debate on that criterion.<sup>55</sup>

Implicit in Caddell's memo is an acknowledgment of the incestuous nature of campaign-press relations. At its worst, the alliance functions as a closed conversation between insiders that only secondarily benefits the electorate. Handlers dispense pearls of wisdom to reporters; reporters dispense pearls of wisdom to handlers. Both sides fundamentally mistrust each other, but, like mutually dependent partners in a bad, indestructible marriage, neither can go it alone.

The game-playing between campaigns and the press got meaner in 1984. In a memorandum to colleagues in the Mondale campaign, Patrick Caddell ratcheted up his adversarial tone and proposed engaging journalists in a "pantomime of deception." Caddell said, "If expectations are to be overturned, then they must be built up to a maximum degree. The strategy must be protected by a 'Bodyguard of Lies.'"<sup>56</sup> Caddell's antagonistic language mirrors the intrinsic testiness of the campaign-press interaction. To political handlers, the press is putty that needs molding. Meanwhile, journalists regard *themselves* as the rightful sculptors of predebate expectations; campaigns merely supply the raw materials.

If hostility toward the media increased in 1984, so did the reporters' willingness to shed their reliance on campaign sources in predebate coverage. In a piece on NBC two days before the first Reagan-Mondale match, Roger Mudd delivered a classic example of insider analysis, presenting what he described as "the book" on each of the two presidential debaters. The story

abandons the traditional use of interviewees, consisting instead entirely of the journalist's opinions.

According to Mudd, Reagan was expected to be camera-savvy, cavalier with numbers, a whiz with one-liners—and “from time to time he will not make sense.” Mondale would have a “sharp edge” from his appearances in the primary debates and would be combative and specific. “So the contrast will be sharp,” Mudd offered in his closing comment, “Mondale trying to nail Reagan with a mistake that accentuates his age and isolation, Reagan trying to make Mondale look shrill and frantic by exuding his ‘Aw, shucks’ optimism.”<sup>57</sup> That Mudd was largely correct in his assessment does not lessen the radical nature of the story: predebate reporting had leapfrogged over the longstanding journalistic insistence on external sourcing.

For better or worse, Mudd's style of interpretive journalism has become the norm in contemporary predebate reporting. The press does its own expectations-setting, separate from, yet influenced by, the spin of the campaigns. For the inside players, tactical considerations and performance measures are what count.

In 1988, an exceedingly negative campaign by any standard, the journalistic weakness for speculative analysis may have hit bottom. High on the list of that year's predebate media fixations was the weightless matter of Michael Dukakis's likability. This nonissue, which mushroomed in the press beyond all reason, represents an unfortunate episode in presidential debate reporting. The story surfaced before the first Bush-Dukakis appearance but gained strength going into the second, after news analysis and polling determined that Dukakis had won the first debate on substance but lost on heart.

The debate-day edition of the *New York Times* addressed the subject in two articles. The first cited a poll in which voters named Bush the more likable candidate by a margin of 47 to 37 percent—close enough, and irrelevant enough, that one might have expected the *Times* to ignore the finding altogether. The second story, by Bernard Weinraub, dealt exclusively with Dukakis's public image as a cold fish. “There is no master plan to warm up the Massachusetts governor, whose performance in the first debate was considered skilled but rather chilly by many reviewers,” Weinraub wrote.<sup>58</sup> Television journalists made similar points, sounding more like meteorologists than reporters with their descriptions of Dukakis's “icy” personality and need to project “warmth.”

In the end, when the candidate fulfilled expectations by giving a techno-

cratic response to the question about his wife's hypothetical rape and murder, journalists may have felt vindicated. But the test the press had applied to Michael Dukakis was a false one. How could a fifty-four-year-old man—how could anyone—suddenly make himself more likable on national television? And what did such a transformation have to do with one's fitness for the job in the first place?

#### DEBATERS AS CHARACTERS

The Michael Dukakis likability issue betrays a problem inherent to campaign coverage in general and debate coverage in particular: the journalistic penchant for glorifying colorful characters and punishing dullards. Sober-minded debaters like Dukakis, Carter, and Gore operate at an automatic disadvantage in such a universe, where winning smiles and clever ripostes are the coin of the realm. Reporters prefer their candidates to fall into brasher, more stereotypical categories: stars (Reagan), buffoons (Quayle), or star-buffoons (Perot).

The press also puts a premium on novelty, as evidenced by the intense attention to 1984's precedent-setting vice presidential debate between Geraldine Ferraro and George Bush. Journalists relished the prospect of this first male-female debate, eagerly laying out each performer's objectives along gender lines. In a debriefing on ABC's *World News Tonight* hours before the telecast, reporter Carole Simpson summed up the conventional wisdom for Bush: "He's really got to be careful not to attack her too much for fear of being accused of beating up on her, and yet he can't be too polite to her for fear of being called patronizing." Lynn Sherr identified Ferraro's hurdle as "proving she is qualified to be president."<sup>59</sup>

Beginning with Bob Dole in 1976, vice presidential debaters have almost always made better copy than candidates at the top of the ticket. In 1988 journalistic speculation about Dan Quayle built to a crescendo as his joint appearance with Bentsen approached. "For all practical purposes, the debate now features Dan Quayle versus Dan Quayle. Will he be as "bad" as expected?" asked *Newsweek* magazine, the quotation marks around "bad" supposedly softening the question.<sup>60</sup> A *New York Times* story by Gerald Boyd reprised Quayle's remark that he "did not live in this century" and quoted an unnamed "top official" in the Bush campaign as saying that the Indiana senator was no "rocket scientist." Boyd wrote, "The assessment explains why

Senator Quayle goes into the debate . . . as one of the most thoroughly managed running mates in history and why the contest is regarded as perhaps pivotal for the forty-one-year-old senator.”<sup>61</sup> And these stories ran *before* Quayle had been eviscerated by Lloyd Bentsen.

The vice presidential debate of 1992 whisked Dan Quayle back to the epicenter of media attention. “Expectations for his performance tonight are so low that the vice president is almost bound to do better than expected,” said Mary Tillotson on CNN. Kevin Sack in the *New York Times* wrote, “Mr. Quayle and his staff believe that the vice president is beautifully positioned because low expectations could transform a mere draw into a victory. But they recognize that Mr. Quayle will have little margin for error because of the public’s perception of him as a bumbler.” An op-ed piece in the *Washington Post* by Lloyd Bentsen’s 1988 campaign manager argued that “Dan Quayle is in the driver’s seat.” “He is the only candidate who can’t lose,” wrote Tad Devine, “and thus will most likely emerge as a real winner when all the spin has been spun.”<sup>62</sup>

Beyond the return of Dan Quayle, the groundbreaking debate series of 1992 offered a rich selection of story lines: three candidates for each event; the debut of the town hall and single-moderator formats; the schedule of four debates compressed into nine days. From the standpoint of news coverage, this last circumstance loomed particularly large. In previous years debates had existed as isolated events, demarcated by distinct periods of being built up and winding down. The abbreviated run of the 1992 programs threw this familiar rhythm out of whack, obliging reporters to rethink their approaches both before and after the individual broadcasts.

A *Washington Post* story headlined “Punditocracy Faces Dizzying Spin Cycle” captured the journalistic mood heading into the series. “For the men and women who fill America’s airwaves with spin and opinion, this could be Gallipoli,” wrote reporter David Von Drehle. Jeff Greenfield was quoted in the article as saying, “I picture guys opening booths: an epiphany, two historical analogies, and a movie reference—package deal, one hundred bucks.”<sup>63</sup>

In deference to the timetable, advance coverage of the first 1992 match dealt not just with that encounter but with the collective effect of all of them. “The stakes are very, very high because we have this truncated debates period,” said Ken Bode on CNN immediately before the first meeting of Bush, Clinton, and Perot. “This is the beginning of a dialogue that will dominate the news cycles over that period of time.”<sup>64</sup> And indeed it did.

Journalists being suckers for larger-than-life personalities, the immediate beneficiary of 1992's predebate coverage was Ross Perot. Through his previous TV appearances, most notably on CNN's *Larry King Live*, Perot had become a familiar presence—if not exactly endearing, then compulsively watchable. How his participation would affect the debates caused much rumination in the press. Bush spinners stressed the potential negative fallout for their man. “It becomes Clinton and Perot versus Bush,” Republican Lynn Martin said on the David Brinkley program, promulgating the incumbent president's party line.<sup>65</sup>

Journalistic observers tended to view Ross Perot as a *wild card*—a term that was picked up by the press like a mantra. “With Perot the wild card in the deck,” said Brit Hume on ABC, “some kind of peculiar new chemistry could emerge here.”<sup>66</sup> Although Perot was judged the winner of the first debate, his whimsicality lost luster over the course of the nine days. “While he scored well with viewers during the first outing,” said CNN's Tony Clark, “by the second, his stories and one-liners seemed to wear thin.”<sup>67</sup> Perot had committed a mortal sin of journalism: He allowed his act to get stale.

In the 1992 vice presidential debate, Admiral James Stockdale briefly inherited the “wild card” label from running mate Perot. CNN referred to Stockdale as “the stealth candidate.” On ABC, reporter Mike Von Fremd, noting the admiral's credentials as a scholar of Greek philosophy, mused that Stockdale “could make it more of a highbrow affair.”<sup>68</sup> The paucity of footage of this little-known candidate left TV producers scrambling, especially when Stockdale himself went into what was described as “virtual seclusion” in the days before the debate. No candidate had ever stepped onto the debate stage with so cryptic a media image, or left so pummeled.

Over the years the press's interest in redefining the story has led journalists down the occasional blind alley. CBS had egg on its face after a story that aired the day of the first Ford-Carter match in 1976. During an interview with Ed Bradley, Carter press secretary Jody Powell slyly alluded to a potential twist in the evening's plot. “In order to go beyond what's assumed and make this a dramatic point in the campaign,” Powell said, “something has to happen—and perhaps some sort of an off-the-wall announcement or whatever would be a way to do it.”<sup>69</sup> No such “off-the-wall announcement” took place, but a precedent had been established. This would not be the last time campaign staffers sought to unsettle the opposition by planting red herrings with journalists eager for a scoop.

In 1992 a predebate buzz began building over Bill Clinton's alleged inabil-

ity to keep cool under fire. “There had been this idea developing in the press, about ten days before the debate, that Clinton couldn’t control his temper,” Clinton aide George Stephanopoulos recounted at a campaign postmortem at Harvard University.<sup>70</sup> In part the charge stemmed from an appearance Clinton made on the Phil Donahue television show a few days before the first debate, described by both the *Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times* as a “testy exchange.”<sup>71</sup>

As the “temper” story picked up momentum, Clinton’s handlers prepared for the possibility that President Bush would deliberately try to rattle the Arkansas governor, perhaps even provoke a fight on camera. In the newspapers and on television, media analysts recounted past instances in which Clinton had publicly vented his spleen. But in the actual debate, such journalistic speculation proved to be wholly unfounded, a triumph of wishful thinking over reality.

Again in 1996 reporter-strategists were deafened by the pounding of their own drums. Attempting to cook up an interesting angle in a spectacularly lackluster race, reporters touted the Gore-Kemp vice presidential debate as a preview of the presidential election of 2000. Repeatedly the pundits stressed this point, virtually anointing each candidate as his party’s nominee four years before the fact. “Gore-Kemp Debate Could Preview Race for White House in 2000,” read a typical *Washington Post* headline. “As of today,” said Peter Jennings on *World News Tonight*, “these are the leading candidates for their party nominations in the year 2000.” William Schneider on CNN said, “The next presidential race could start with tonight’s debate—and it looks like it’s going to be a corker.”<sup>72</sup> On both counts, Schneider missed the mark.

Similarly coverage of that year’s Clinton-Dole appearances hinged on the possibility that Dole would launch a character attack on his opponent. When such a stratagem did not materialize in the first debate, reporters reassigned the prediction to running mate Kemp, who was supposed to pursue the matter in the vice presidential match. But Kemp did not attack either, shifting the onus back to Dole in the third and final debate of the series—which once again failed to include the long-promised character attack.

In large measure this story-that-never-was reflected the journalistic fascination with Dole’s “prince of darkness” reputation, incubated, among other places, in the 1976 vice presidential debate. “The press is just waiting for him to say something nasty,” said Dole biographer Richard Ben Cramer

on *Meet the Press* a week before the first 1996 debate.<sup>73</sup> Heading into the second match, media analysis centered on the riskiness of a Dole attack in the town hall format. Said Phil Jones on CBS, “Mister Dole has never been able to shed that image of a hatchet man that he got back in his 1976 vice presidential debate, and the last thing he needs tonight is a boo, a hiss, a gasp from one of the questioners who thinks he’s being too mean.”<sup>74</sup> With the press on guard for any hint of audience disapproval, Dole found himself tethered to a short leash.

Lest there be any doubt about the journalistic proclivity for dabbling in predebate strategy, consider the editions of *Newsweek* and *Time* that hit the stands just before the first Dole-Clinton appearance. “Dole has no choice but to make it Bloody Sunday,” wrote Howard Fineman in *Newsweek*, fairly panting for carnage.<sup>75</sup> *Time*’s Michael Kramer, in the guise of an open letter to Dole, further eroded the distance between journalists and candidates:

This is it, Bob Dole, your final chance to move from loser to contender. The stakes couldn’t be higher. Nothing else has ignited your campaign. Follow your script this week: Get tanned, get rested, get ready. And take heart. Large swings are possible. Exceed the low expectations for you this Sunday in Hartford, Connecticut, and you just might begin to roll. For the country, a lofty, substantive discussion would be great. But we’re dealing with reality here. To win, you’ll have to use every tactic available, even the blunt ones.<sup>76</sup>

Predebate coverage had come a long way from the reticence of 1960.

#### DEBATE DAY: THE STORY CULMINATES

Weeks of predebate coverage culminate in a home-stretch sprint that has generated its own customs and folkways: the obligatory candidate photo opportunities, often in an athletic context; afternoon technical checks in the debate hall; down-to-the-wire saber-rattling by the campaigns; and a final frenzy of handicapping in the press. Debate-day news coverage, so circumspect in the era of Kennedy and Nixon, is now a thriving subspecies of political journalism, propelled by media expansion, the rise of interpretive reporting, and TV’s dominance in election storytelling.

With the predebate countdown under way, the story lines the press has

worked so assiduously to develop are whipped to a climax: Will Ford make another mistake? Will Reagan make sense? Will Dukakis become likable? Will Quayle humiliate himself? Will Dole revert to form? Or will some unforeseen happening spin the tale in a different direction?

The tradition of debate-day photo ops dates back to Kennedy and Nixon, who shook hands for photographers in the WBBM studio shortly before the first broadcast. In their enthusiasm to document this historic occasion, the cameramen knocked over a number of studio lights. The raucous spontaneity of that unplanned media moment contrasts sharply with today's controlled exercises, in which candidates carefully position themselves in packaged tableaux designed to maximize strengths and minimize deficiencies. For debaters, the pre-event photo op is a chance to claim one last vestige of audience sympathy.

Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter in 1976 appeared in the usual predebate contexts: poring over briefing books, arriving at the auditorium for tech checks, greeting crowds on the way back to the hotel. It was vice presidential candidate Walter Mondale who introduced the tradition of the athletic debate-day photo op. Newscasts the day of the 1976 Dole-Mondale match in Houston showed the Democratic nominee playing a round of tennis, pointedly unconcerned about the event at hand.

Dole's 1976 predebate coverage took a different tack, prominently featuring the senator's bride of less than a year, Elizabeth Hanford Dole. Mrs. Dole accompanied her husband to his technical check, posing next to him at the lectern for photographers. When Dole's handlers recommended a change of necktie for the television appearance, video crews followed the newlyweds to a Houston department store, where they went shopping for a substitute.

From wives to parents to children, candidates' family members have regularly turned up as characters in predebate coverage. In 1976 First Lady Betty Ford made her only debate appearance of the year at the third and final event in Williamsburg, Virginia. Mrs. Ford, described in a debate-day ABC story as "the campaign's secret weapon," joined her husband at his afternoon tech check in Phi Beta Kappa Hall on the campus of the College of William and Mary. There, as the president posed at his lectern, she stepped over to Carter's podium and scrawled a note. "Dear Mr. Carter," the note read, "May I wish you the best tonight. I am sure the best man will win. I happen to have a favorite candidate, my husband. Best of luck, Betty Ford." President Ford's press secretary displayed the note to reporters and promised to deliver it to



Carter later. On ABC, Tom Jarriel observed, somewhat cynically, “The pre-debate psychological warfare is under way.”<sup>77</sup>

Former Hollywood actress Nancy Reagan served as a reliable co-star in her husband’s predebate photo ops. For the 1980 Reagan-Anderson debate, the couple made a dramatic arrival at the Baltimore airport in a helicopter, deemed by the campaign to be a “more presidential” mode of transportation.<sup>78</sup> On the day of the 1980 Reagan-Carter debate in Cleveland, the Reagans maintained a low profile, deliberately staying out of the media glare.

Meanwhile President Carter turned up on the evening newscasts in an especially unflattering predebate photo op. Cameras captured Carter out for a waterlogged run in the cold rain; the pictures called into question the president’s common sense. Sam Donaldson made the point on ABC that “some people may not think it’s very smart to go jogging in the driving rain on the morning of a day when your presidency could be at stake.” NBC’s Judy Woodruff linked the soggy run to a recent Carter bout with laryngitis.<sup>79</sup> The footage diminished the candidate, making him look silly just hours before tens of millions of voters would evaluate his suitability for reelection.

A story that aired on CBS the evening of the Carter-Reagan debate sheds light on the ambivalence journalists feel toward covering this most contrived of political events. Dan Rather’s no-nonsense report on the *CBS Evening News* began on a barely concealed note of hostility: “There are the makings of high drama here. There also are aspects of what some see as a parody of true debate.” The piece then moved to the rules, overtly scolding the campaigns:

The candidates did, in fact, heavily influence, if not outright control, negotiations on format and arrangements. The candidates wanted an audience of only nine hundred-fifty, so there will be an audience of only nine hundred-fifty. The candidates wanted few if any reaction shots from the audience, so there will be only limited reaction shots of the audience. And the candidates were even instrumental in choosing the panel of reporters who are here tonight supposedly to ask them tough questions.<sup>80</sup>

However contemptuous the tone, Rather deserves credit for pointing out more frankly than most the truth behind campaign string-pulling.

Rather’s track record as a debate cynic extends into later years as well. Anchoring CBS’s coverage of the first 1984 debate, Rather offered viewers

this tart advisory just before the program began: “Inside the hall everything from the stage setting to the rules under which the candidates are appearing makes it clear that this will not be an actual debate.” Before the second debate, Rather reiterated his hard-line stance: “It will not be an actual debate, not with the rules set by the candidates themselves and with the candidates having a hand in selecting their own questioners. What it will be is a candidates’ forum—a kind of expanded joint news conference.”<sup>81</sup>

Rather’s comments betray an antagonism toward presidential debates that other journalists suppress. Reporters assigned to cover these events find themselves trapped in a paradox: scoffing at the manipulations of the campaigns on the one hand, while promoting their agenda on the other. As much as journalists resent being treated as puppets, they see little choice but to embrace candidate-devised rules of engagement. Occasionally, perhaps inevitably, the coverage turns nasty.

For a performer about to embark on a live TV debate, the least welcome media send-off is a last-minute round of negative press. Such was the fate of the hapless Dan Quayle heading into his appearance with Lloyd Bentsen. Two stories that aired on the evening of the 1988 vice presidential match thrust a harsh spotlight onto Quayle’s image problems, just as the public was preparing to tune in for the event.

The first, on ABC’s *World News Tonight*, featured uncharacteristically candid footage of the candidate inside Omaha’s Civic Auditorium during his predebate technical check. As Quayle was shown at the podium practicing his lines in a low voice, his obviously memorized words appeared in the form of subtitles on the screen. Reporter Jackie Judd narrated the scene: “On the most important day of his political career, Quayle turned often to his media handler, Roger Ailes.” “Hey Roger,” Quayle said to his adviser. “On this, if I decide I want to gesture over there—that’s all right? You don’t mind that?”<sup>82</sup> Quayle came off in this video clip as a human marionette, nervous and profoundly insecure, in need of guidance for even the simplest thought or physical movement.

The second, more devastating television story ran on PBS’s *McNeil-Lehrer News Hour*. In a report billed as a “Peer Review” of the two vice presidential candidates, correspondent Roger Mudd interviewed half a dozen senators from both sides of the aisle. The bulk of the thirteen-minute report was devoted to Quayle, who drew sharply incriminating comments from Democrat Alan Cranston. “I don’t think he has been taken seriously by his colleagues,” Cranston said. “Most senators have been laughing about the

nomination, Republicans with tears in their eyes, and they tell a lot of jokes about him. Their private remarks are quite different than their public remarks.” Without prompting, Cranston offered an example: “What were the three toughest years in Dan Quayle’s life? The second grade.”

Cranston continued, recalling a Republican senator’s description of Quayle as “two pounds lighter than a straw hat.” When Mudd asked why Cranston had chosen to break the rules of senatorial courtesy by publicly excoriating a fellow member, the California senator cited the significance of the vice presidency. Anyone with knowledge of “the capacities or incapacities” of a vice presidential nominee “has some responsibility to level with the American people,” he said. Mudd, in his closing comment, sustained the negative tone: “Privately the senior senators from both parties would not be too upset if young Dan Quayle falters tonight. It is, they say, dignity and maturity and seniority and reliability and comity which are to be admired.”<sup>83</sup> Implicit in this statement is Quayle’s perceived lack of all these attributes.

Lloyd Bentsen, by contrast, attracted considerably friendlier press from Mudd and other network reporters. Where the dominant visual of Quayle’s prebroadcast tech check showed the candidate consulting his TV coach, Bentsen was photographed on the debate stage playfully picking up his wife, demonstrating, in the words of an ABC story, “that at age sixty-seven he has the stamina of a man Quayle’s age, forty-one.”<sup>84</sup> With messages like these filling the air waves in the hours before broadcast, one could argue that Quayle had already lost the debate on the basis of unfavorable pretrial publicity.

Bentsen’s “he-man” photo op underscores the importance campaigns attach to pre-event visuals. For the second Bush-Dukakis debate several days later, Democratic handlers concocted a less successful picture. Hoping to melt Dukakis’s frosty image, the campaign arranged for photographers to take pictures of the governor tossing around a ball by the pool of his Los Angeles hotel, wearing a UCLA sweatshirt and striving mightily to look like a regular guy. But as Lesley Stahl pointed out on CBS, the visual setup left it unclear whom Dukakis was playing catch with, reinforcing a sense of isolation and loneliness.<sup>85</sup> Vice President Bush also selected a baseball backdrop for his preproduction photo session, attending game seven of the Dodgers-Mets playoffs on debate eve. In this venue, however, the candidate was surrounded by crowds, an undisputed man of the people.

The athletic settings in turn provided a handy theme for predebate commentary, inspiring journalists to conjure up playing-field analogies of their

own. On CBS, Bob Schieffer compared the Los Angeles debate to a “ball game where [Bush] is ahead. These are the late innings, he’s got to hold his lead.” ABC’s Sam Donaldson began his report on Dukakis’s technical rehearsal with a different comparison: “Day of game. And the Democratic quarterback is on his way to check out the field.” And, from Dan Rather on the *CBS Evening News*, still another sport: “Jump ball tonight here at Pauley Pavilion,” Rather began, referring to the UCLA basketball Bruins who normally inhabited the debate site.<sup>86</sup> If athletic metaphors were good enough for the candidates, they were good enough for the press.

Candidate photo ops in 1992 presented a three-way contrast in image management. On opening day of the series Ross Perot got a haircut, George Bush made a campaign stop, and Bill Clinton went to church. In each instance the candidate was using the press to send a not-so-subtle message: Perot is unflappable, Bush is a man of the people, Clinton is a God-fearing Christian.

Four years later Clinton was photographed arriving in San Diego for the final debate of his career. As ABC’s Brit Hume reported, Hillary Clinton was “conspicuously at his side, as she has been in the past when anyone attacked her husband’s character. They were very much the devoted couple at the airport here.”<sup>87</sup> The video showed the Clintons standing hand-in-hand on the tarmac, talking intimately and stealing a kiss, obviously aware of the camera’s gaze. In presidential campaigns, even romantic moments can be read as predebate spin.