

Part II

PRODUCTION

Chapter Four

THE DEBATERS

Walter Mondale called it “the longest walk I’ve ever taken”: the approach to the podium in the fateful moments before a presidential debate.¹ For the layperson, it is difficult to imagine the stress that accompanies candidates as they venture onto this battlefield. A host of factors converge to intimidate: enormous stakes, vast audiences, historical implications—all under the magnifying glass of live television. For debaters, the risks could scarcely be higher.

As unscripted performances, presidential debates transcend the months of negotiation, preparation, and speculation leading up to the featured event. Once a debate begins, all previous maneuvering yields to a superior force: the on-camera prowess of the candidates. As shown by the diverse experiences of the seventeen men and one woman who have competed at this level, no strategy memo, no negotiated agreement, no amount of rehearsal can thoroughly condition a debater for the exigencies of a live television performance.

“It’s like a championship fight,” notes presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin. “You feel a sense that you’re watching these candidates under pressure. And what matters even more than what they say is how they respond to that pressure.”² Each debater appears before the nation as a solo act, succeeding or failing in an utterly personal way. For an hour and a half the support systems and defensive armor of a presidential campaign are stripped away, leaving only the mystical bond between audience and star.

The rules of debate performance defy easy explanation, and, in the last analysis, it may be impossible to articulate why viewers respond favorably to some on-screen personalities and unfavorably to others. At bottom, debates are exercises in alchemy, subject only to the hazy laws of television. With this limitation in mind, let us evaluate the individuals who have taken the “longest walk” in a presidential or vice presidential debate. What advantages and disadvantages did they bring to their matches? What sort of reviews did they draw? And what is the legacy each of the members of this elite club has left to the institution of TV debates?

JOHN F. KENNEDY (1960)

A single hour of live television was all it took to canonize John F. Kennedy as the patron saint of presidential debates. Though Kennedy would appear three more times with Richard Nixon before the 1960 election, it was that first meeting in Chicago that conferred on JFK the iconic status he maintains even today among political debaters. Subsequent candidates might outshine him in technique, but none has better understood debates as the ultimate star turn.

Like Nixon, Kennedy had proven himself in the broadcast arena well before the “Great Debates.” In 1952 the young JFK successfully grappled with senatorial opponent Henry Cabot Lodge in a joint appearance that aired live in Massachusetts. Eight years later, in the West Virginia presidential primary, Kennedy met Hubert Humphrey for a televised matchup that served as a dress rehearsal for the general election debates against Nixon. Media historian Erik Barnouw wrote that Kennedy “impressed viewers with the brevity and conciseness of his replies, an engaging wit, and apparent grasp of local issues.”³ Kennedy also briefly debated his rival for the 1960 Democratic nomination, Lyndon B. Johnson, in an informal exchange that was broadcast during the party convention in Los Angeles.

In view of his less than dazzling delivery before live audiences, the senator's skill as a television communicator might not have been expected. Political scientist Harvey Wheeler wrote that the same characteristics that worked against Kennedy on the stump benefited him in the TV debates:

His unadorned style of delivery fitted well into the viewer's living-room. And although his rapid rate of speech prevented much of his content from being assimilated, what did come through was the picture of a bright, knowledgeable young man of great earnestness, energy, and integrity.⁴

As the famous White House press conferences would later attest, Kennedy's verbal dexterity and natural wit played particularly well on live television. In an effort to seem more mature, JFK deliberately restrained his sense of humor in the 1960 debates, though occasional flashes of cleverness nonetheless peeked through. In the third debate a panelist asked Kennedy if he owed Nixon an apology for a remark Harry Truman made suggesting where the vice president could go. Answered Kennedy, "I really don't think there's anything that I could say to President Truman that's going to cause him, at the age of seventy-six, to change his particular speaking manner. Perhaps Mrs. Truman can, but I don't think I can."

The most valid criticism of Kennedy's debate performances is that they lack the common touch. Not surprisingly, some viewers interpreted Kennedy's air of detached confidence as patrician arrogance. Adviser Clark Clifford, in a memo after the first debate, suggested that "attention must be given to adding greater warmth to your image. If you can retain the technical brilliance and obvious ability, but also project the element of warm, human understanding, you will possess an unbeatable combination."⁵

Offsetting JFK's deficiency in chumminess was an abundance of attitude. "From the start," wrote Seymour Hersh, "the campaign was orchestrated by Joe Kennedy, who as a one-time Hollywood mogul understood that his son should run for president as a star and not as just another politician."⁶ In every important way, the younger Kennedy approached the presidential debates from this leading-man perspective. The emphasis paid off, in the debates as in the overall campaign: presumed stardom led to genuine stardom.

Compounding his other advantages, Kennedy was blessed with fortuitous timing. The Kennedy-Nixon debates took place against a backdrop of media calm, in an era when audiences had not grown cynical about the

merger between television and politics. Like no subsequent debater, JFK was given an unfiltered opportunity to connect with voters on his own terms, and he was smart enough to seize it. Reviewing a tape of his broadcast appearances after the election, Kennedy said, “We wouldn’t have had a prayer without that gadget.”⁷

RICHARD M. NIXON (1960)

Thirteen years before Richard Nixon met John F. Kennedy in Chicago for the first televised presidential debate, the two then-freshman congressmen held their first in-person debate in a hotel ballroom in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. Before a boisterous crowd, Nixon and Kennedy, both members of a subcommittee that had drafted the Taft-Hartley employment bill, argued the fine points of labor-management relations. That night, on the train ride home to Washington, the lawmakers shared a sleeper compartment, drawing straws to see who got the bottom berth. Nixon won.

By the 1960 campaign the career of Richard Nixon had eclipsed that of his rival, owing at least in part to Nixon’s relationship with television. A riveting nationwide broadcast—the 1952 “Checkers” speech—had helped the candidate retain his slot as Dwight Eisenhower’s running mate. In 1959 Nixon strengthened his anticommunist credentials in the equally famous “kitchen debate” with Nikita Khrushchev in Moscow, shown to approving audiences in the United States. As vice president, Nixon commanded the media spotlight for eight years, his tenure in office neatly coinciding with the exponential growth of American television.

Given this head start, how did Nixon go astray in the 1960 debates? As we have seen, the Republican nominee arrived in Chicago physically ill, overfatigued, and otherwise unprepared to meet his rival. But beyond poor health, Nixon had fundamentally misconceived the event, viewing it as a rhetorical exercise, whereas Kennedy approached it as a TV show. “His varsity instincts at the ready,” wrote political communication expert Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “the vice president marshalled his facts against Kennedy’s, contested points, and defended his ground. He instead should have showcased himself against the backdrop Kennedy provided.”⁸

Harvey Wheeler speculated that the “Checkers” experience had deceived Nixon into adopting a similar style for the debates. “But the ‘Checkers’ speech was over a moral issue, not policy questions,” Wheeler wrote. “And in

that speech he was by himself on television—unchallenged by opponent or reporters.”⁹ Indeed, a major explanation for Nixon’s failure in the 1960 debates is the relative lack of charisma he exudes alongside his co-star. Eugene Patterson, in an *Atlanta Constitution* column after the second debate, stated the matter bluntly: “The medium is good to Kennedy and most unkind to Nixon. It makes Kennedy look forceful. It makes Nixon look guilty.” In Patterson’s opinion, Nixon’s demeanor on the small screen was that of a “salesman of cemetery lots.”¹⁰

Visual factors conspired against Nixon in another way. Six years after the Kennedy-Nixon debates, network news producer Wallace Westfeldt had occasion to observe the former vice president as he was being interviewed on a Miami talk show. From the vantage point of a TV control room, Westfeldt watched Nixon on a pair of side-by-side monitors, one color, the other black and white. The difference was “stunning,” Westfeldt recalled. “Nixon looked good in color. He looked like hell in black and white.”¹¹ In 1960, of course, black-and-white television was the only option.

In both appearance and performance, Richard Nixon got considerably better over the remaining three debates of 1960. To combat his skeletal visage in the first encounter, he embarked on a “milkshake diet” and recovered his normal weight and collar size. He agreed to wear makeup, and a certified Republican cosmetic artist was added to the campaign entourage. Still, improvement in the later debates could not counteract the profoundly negative impression left in the first.

Although Nixon’s refusal to debate in 1968 and 1972 may be understandable, the lack of these events is history’s loss. Imagine Nixon in a three-way match against Hubert Humphrey and George Wallace, or one-on-one with George McGovern. As it happened, 1960 represented both the beginning and the end of Richard Nixon as presidential debater. Eventually Nixon would find bitter humor in the experience, describing himself as “a dropout from the Electoral College—because I flunked debating.”¹²

GERALD FORD (1976)

As the first incumbent to meet his challenger on the playing fields of television, Gerald Ford made a significant contribution to the institutionalization of presidential debates. But even if Ford had not shot himself in the foot with his claim that Eastern Europe was not under Soviet domination, the

1976 matches would have offered this accidental president little gain against Jimmy Carter. Ford did not exactly hurt himself by debating, but neither did his lackluster performance rouse much support.

Two factors operated against Gerald Ford the debater: a loud, monotonous voice and a narrow range of facial expressions. Together, this combination rendered Ford spectacularly unscintillating on TV; by comparison, the low-key Carter leaped off the screen. Ford's relentless delivery had a narcotic effect, like the drone of a didactic speaker at a chamber of commerce luncheon. "He is forceful in his way of speaking, but he doesn't say very much," observed Elizabeth Drew, one of the panelists in the first 1976 debate. The president's debate coach warned Ford that "many viewers perceive you to be shouting." Communication scholars clocked Ford's speech rate as so slow that he needed almost thirty extra minutes to match the total number of words spoken by Jimmy Carter.¹³

President Ford's three debates with Carter cast him in the role of solid, upstanding burgher. Every inch the Midwestern Republican, Ford even wore a vest beneath his suit jacket in the first debate, as though to underscore his conservatism. In a more animated individual, Ford's lack of theatrical pretense might have seemed disarming; instead, he came off more as a local businessman than the leader of the free world. Compared to later such performer-presidents as Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, Gerald Ford looks and sounds like a relic from some preelectronic age.

Ford did bring one visual asset to the debate: like Reagan, he had a commanding physique that contrasted favorably with the slighter build of Jimmy Carter. James Gannon of the *Wall Street Journal*, a panelist in the first 1976 debate, described Ford as "an imposing presence" who looked as though "he could lift [the podium] over his head and throw it at me." Jules Witcover wrote that Ford gripped his lectern "like some big, menacing bear straining to leap at his adversary."¹⁴

Ford's track record as a klutz, reinforced in the public consciousness by Chevy Chase on *Saturday Night Live*, may have handed the incumbent president an inadvertent advantage. According to press secretary Ron Nessen, Ford "had the image of being a plodding speaker, slow-witted and clumsy. Thus, when he did not trip or bump his head, when he spoke with style and clarity, he appeared to be doing even better than he really was."¹⁵ All the same, aides took no chances. A strategy memo drafted before the first debate addressed the specifics of Ford's stage exit at the end of the event. The memo stressed that the president would be attached to a microphone cable con-

nected to the base of his podium, information the memo's recipient has hand-bracketed for emphasis.¹⁶

Videotape of one of Ford's practice sessions shows the debater in a rare candid moment, finishing up his pipe just before a run-through begins. In this footage he appears to be the very picture of relaxation and fatherly wisdom. Unfortunately for Ford, once he looked into the lens and began to speak, this easy grace devolved into dullness—and dullness is the enemy of television.

JIMMY CARTER (1976, 1980)

After the media-wise presidencies of Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, it is easy to forget that in 1976 Jimmy Carter was regarded as an accomplished television communicator. But strategists for Republican nominee Gerald Ford found cause for concern in their opponent's track record in three primary debates. A predebate memorandum described Carter as "controlled," "confident," and "resolute." A Ford TV adviser warned, "He does not offend anyone, either through his answers or visually. He is an appealing figure who comes across as smooth and calm."¹⁷

Like John F. Kennedy before him, Carter entered the 1976 debates the lesser-known commodity. Unlike Kennedy, Carter seemed subdued, even intimidated during his first encounter with Ford. "I didn't know exactly how to deal with the fact that Mr. Ford was president," Carter confessed afterward.¹⁸ For the second debate, Carter adopted a more confrontational stance, intensified his preparations and, with unexpected assistance from Ford's Eastern Europe gaffe, emerged the clear victor. "Self-confident and acerbic, he fired aggressive and sometimes pointed charges at Gerald Ford," wrote Richard Steele in *Newsweek*.¹⁹ Carter drew even better reviews in the third and final debate of the series. "If you were scoring by rounds," said William Greider of the *Washington Post*, "Carter seemed to be the clear winner. His presence, which was steady and confident, was less abrasive than at the second debate, more self-assured than in the first."²⁰

Against the lackluster Ford, Carter had little trouble prevailing as 1976's star debater. Four years later, with Ronald Reagan as his opponent, the tables were turned. The Reagan-Carter match provided viewers with one of the sharpest polarities in debate history. An editorial in the *New York Times* saw it as a case of Carter winning on words, Reagan winning on music—and in presidential debates, music counts more. "Carter comes across like a teacher

we don't really want to listen to," wrote Elizabeth Drew in *The New Yorker*. "He's not interesting to listen to, it's not fun to listen to him, he doesn't engage us."²¹ Ironically Carter's strength—his command of facts and issues—became his undoing, making him seem didactic instead of commanding, humorless instead of reassuring.

Physically, too, Carter suffered by comparison with Reagan. David Broder, in the *Washington Post*, noted that while individual close-ups showed both men looking equally composed, Reagan "was the dominant figure with his greater height and bulk in the longer-range shots." According to NBC's Tom Brokaw, "When Carter bumped up against Reagan, he seemed small, and kind of wonkish."²²

In the evening's most ridiculed moment, Carter made an ill-advised reference to his thirteen-year-old daughter. "I had a discussion with Amy the other day before I came here," Carter told the audience, "to ask her what the most important issue was. She said she thought nuclear weaponry and the control of nuclear arms." In the crowd at Cleveland's Music Hall, scattered snickers could be heard. Far more damning was the postdebate commentary, not just by journalists but by comedians and even Reagan himself, who told a rally in Milwaukee, "I remember when Patty and Ron were little tiny kids, we used to talk about nuclear power."²³

In the end, the so-called Amy gaffe was merely a symptom of Carter's larger problem in debating Reagan. "The optimism in Carter's camp was always misplaced," said Broder. "People were ready to elect a new president, and all they needed was some assurance that Reagan was not going to be some sort of crazy person."²⁴

Like other debate victims before him, Jimmy Carter believed that he lost the 1980 match not on content but on theatrics. The night after the event, he dictated some thoughts about the Cleveland debate for his diary. Said Carter of Reagan, "He has his memorized lines, and he pushes a button and they come out." Carter then added what might be read as an epitaph for the 1980 debate: "Apparently made a better impression on the TV audience than I did."²⁵

WALTER MONDALE (1976, 1984)

Walter Mondale's career as a debater brought him up against both ends of the personality spectrum: Bob Dole's prince of darkness in 1976 and Ronald

Reagan's sunny optimist eight years later. Largely on the basis of not being Dole, Mondale won history's first vice presidential debate. Against Reagan, Mondale had a mixed record: a remarkable, well-conceived victory in the first 1984 debate and a second debate that rendered him not so much a loser as a footnote.

Compared to both his opponents, Mondale lacked a clearly defined on-camera presence. Earnest but unexciting, Mondale had a way of seeming graceful at the lectern without leaving much of a mark. In 1976, when Dole gave perhaps too colorful a performance, this worked to Mondale's advantage. The 1984 series with Reagan cast Mondale in the role of underdog, hopelessly inferior to his opponent both in popular appeal and on matters of style.

"The public would especially expect Reagan to be glib and adroit," wrote William Henry of the first debate, "while Mondale had built up a reputation for being dull; measured against those expectations, Mondale had every chance to offer a pleasant surprise to the electorate."²⁶ And surprise the people he did. Mondale's performance in the Louisville debate presented a political variation of the tortoise-and-hare parable. This time, strategic preparation overtook presumptive ability.

Early in the program Mondale established a tone that shrewdly combined aggression with respect. "His principal purpose was not to explain himself," said Hugh Sidey in *Time*, "but to confuse, anger, and outscore his opponent." John Corry in the *New York Times* noted that for the first time since taking office Reagan was being openly patronized: "His strength has been in the strength of his convictions, but Mr. Mondale was suggesting that the convictions didn't amount to much."²⁷

The Louisville debate, which marked Reagan's worst public performance, briefly lifted Democratic spirits. "Walter Mondale flew into New York today," reported ABC's Brit Hume the next evening, "but the way he was feeling after last night's debate, he probably didn't need the plane."²⁸ Needless to say, such euphoria could not last. Heading into the second and final debate of 1984, Mondale found himself trapped in a no-win situation: The bar for Reagan had been set unbelievably low.

"I believe if it hadn't been for the first debate," Mondale told journalists Germond and Witcover, "the reports on my performance in the second debate would have been far better. But I think the contrast between the two—all he had to do was stay on his feet the second time around."²⁹ Edwin Newman, who moderated the second debate, described Mondale as so nerv-

ous that “when he came on stage, he did not even say hello to me and the questioners.”³⁰ Postdebate commentary suggested that the two candidates had reversed roles, Mondale seeming old and tired and Reagan sparkling with vitality.

In a news conference the day after his defeat at the ballot box, Mondale lamented the inordinate power of television in presidential campaigns. “Modern politics today requires a mastery of television,” the candidate told reporters. “I’ve never really warmed up to television. And in fairness to television, it’s never warmed up to me.”³¹

BOB DOLE (1976, 1996)

A candidate as naturally witty as Bob Dole faces a dilemma in the risk-averse setting of a presidential debate: whether to curb his humor or direct it at the opposition like artillery. In 1976 Dole’s refusal to sugar-coat his acerbic personality led him into a series of verbal miscalculations; twenty years later, against the masterful Bill Clinton, the long-time Kansas senator reined himself in to the point of blandness.

The earlier Dole, appearing with Walter Mondale in history’s first vice presidential debate, approached the event with unconcealed disdain. No other performer in the annals of debating has been so openly contemptuous of the exercise or so loath to prepare for it. According to Dole biographer Richard Ben Cramer, the candidate delayed rehearsals for the Mondale debate until the day of the broadcast, “but by then he was so offhand (or trying to look offhand), he’d just toss off wisecracks.”³²

During the debate, Dole’s proclivity for one-liners manifested itself in remarks that seemed ill-considered at best, and mean-spirited at worst. Announcing at the outset that “tonight may be sort of a fun evening,” the Republican candidate went on to needle his opponent: “We’ve been friends . . . and we’ll be friends when this election is over—and he’ll still be in the Senate.” Dole dismissed the vice presidency as a job that is “mostly indoors and there’s no heavy lifting.” He insulted his hosts, the scrupulously fair-minded League of Women Voters, as being “a little bit liberal.”

Most damaging, however, was Dole’s offensive reference to the 1.6 million Americans killed in “Democrat wars.” This charge led the laid-back Mondale to rebuke his opponent in uncharacteristically sharp language: “I think Senator Dole has richly earned his reputation as a hatchet man

tonight.” Wrote William Greider in the *Washington Post*, “Dole was relentlessly loose, a man whose wit is irresistible in one moment and outrageous in the next.”³³

Two decades later, when Dole made an improbable comeback as his party’s nominee for the White House, the nimbus of the 1976 debate hovered over him still. In a pair of joint appearances with Bill Clinton, Dole seemed to be battling his own reputation as much as his opponent. Postdebate analysis of the first 1996 match stressed Dole’s personality overhaul. Tom Shales, in the *Post*, called the Dole strategy an “attempt to dispel his image as Snidely McNasty, the meanest man in American politics.” Sam Donaldson, on ABC, allowed that the candidate had not come off as a “dour troglodyte.”³⁴ Others mentioned Dole’s failure to take advantage of the opportunity that moderator Jim Lehrer had provided for a critique of Clinton’s character.

Ten days later, in the second and final presidential debate, predictions that Dole would hammer the “character issue” once again failed to pan out. In the setting of a town hall forum, before more than one hundred uncommitted voters in San Diego, Dole had an even narrower window of opportunity to question his opponent’s moral rectitude. “There weren’t the kind of fireworks that Bob Dole promised,” said NBC’s Jim Miklaszewski the next morning, “because every time he lit the fuse, President Clinton managed to snuff it out.”³⁵ Although Dole did sneak in a few references to Clintonian ethics, he got no assistance from audience members, whose own questions pointedly excluded issues of personal conduct.

By all rights, a candidate with Bob Dole’s verbal agility and straight-shooting appeal ought to have been a natural in the arena of a live presidential debate. Instead, the necessity for debaters to confine themselves within a tightly delineated safety zone defanged this most watchable of politicians. Regrettably for Bob Dole, caution proved to be just as misguided a strategy as insouciance.

RONALD REAGAN (1980, 1984)

Could any presidential debater have been better prepared for the task than Ronald Reagan? The cumulative experience of fifty years as a radio announcer, film actor, television host, corporate spokesman, and political celebrity gave Reagan an edge in debates other candidates could only dream

of. He started his broadcasting career at a Des Moines radio station in the 1930s, vividly describing baseball games he had not actually seen. In 1955, after a long stint in movies, Reagan served as co-host of one of early TV's riskiest live telecasts, the grand opening of Disneyland; in the face of one embarrassing technical disaster after another, the future California governor maintained an admirably cool head. Reagan more than held his own in a televised debate with Robert Kennedy in 1967, defending an unpopular stance on the Vietnam War before a hostile group of international students. Leaving the set at the end of the program, RFK warned an aide, "Don't ever put me on with that sonofabitch again."³⁶

By the time Reagan entered the presidential primaries of 1980 he was completely at home in the pressure-cooker of unscripted television. That year, at a forum in Nashua, New Hampshire, Reagan demonstrated how formidable a live performer he could be. The event, sponsored by the *Nashua Telegraph* but underwritten by Reagan's campaign, had originally been scheduled as a two-man confrontation with fellow front-runner George Bush. At the eleventh hour the Reagan organization saw political advantage in extending invitations to the other Republican primary contenders, four of whom appeared at the hall at the appointed hour, ready for a showdown.

The debate began with an announcement from the publisher of the *Telegraph*: The last-minute arrivals, now standing onstage, would be allowed only to give closing statements. When Reagan protested, the moderator ordered the candidate's microphone turned off. "I am *paying* for this microphone," Reagan retorted, lifting a line from Frank Capra's political comedy *State of the Union* and drawing cheers from the crowd. Although the other candidates did not ultimately join the debate, Reagan's act of bravado instantly became the stuff of campaign legend. David Broder of the *Washington Post*, who was seated in the hall, called it "one of the most electrifying moments I've ever known in covering politics."³⁷

In his two general election debates in 1980, first with John Anderson, then with incumbent President Carter, Reagan deftly accomplished a critical objective: to dispel his image as a right-wing warmonger by seeming trustworthy, avuncular, and optimistic. Reagan's closing statement in the Anderson debate, in which he described America as "a nation which is for all mankind a shining city on the hill," ranks among the Great Communicator's finest rhetoric. Said F. Richard Ciccone and Jon Margolis in the *Chicago Tribune*, "Reagan delivered his answers with the entertainer's aplomb that has made him one of the best political speakers of his time."³⁸

The higher-stakes debate with Carter proved even more beneficial. Reagan's naturally cheerful disposition contrasted sharply with Carter's pinched demeanor; the difference seemed most pronounced when Reagan chided his opponent with the rueful line, "There you go again." According to historian Gil Troy, Carter unwittingly found himself cast as Richard Nixon to Reagan's John F. Kennedy. "The Carter-Reagan debate marked a clash between two styles," Troy wrote, "between a linear, formalistic print culture and McLuhan's blurry visual culture, between a politics of issues and a politics of images."³⁹

As in the Anderson debate, Reagan delivered a powerful closing statement, asking Americans, "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" Broder wrote in the *Post*, "Reagan used all the skills acquired in forty years before the cameras—shrugs and smiles and easily inflected small jokes—to tell the viewers that the portrait of him Carter was drawing . . . was a political caricature." Daniel Yankelovich, pollster for *Time*, saw a radical shift in public opinion after the telecast. "The dissatisfaction with Carter was there all along," he said, "but people couldn't bring themselves to vote for Reagan. The debate changed all that."⁴⁰

Four years later, in the first of two joint appearances with Democrat Walter Mondale, Reagan would suffer his greatest humiliation as a public figure. The seventy-three-year-old president gave a performance so disconnected that it caught his competitor off guard. "This guy is gone," Mondale commented to an aide immediately afterward. "It's scary. He's not really up to it." Reagan's defeat inspired a tidal wave of negative press. "The old actor, a ghost of his 1980 self, missed cues, flubbed lines, lost his place," wrote columnist Mary McGrory in a typical account. "He seemed lonely and afraid, just another politician clinging to his job."⁴¹

Reagan came into the second 1984 debate keenly aware of his mission. This time his aides agreed to "let Reagan be Reagan," a decision that accrued to the president's advantage when one of the panelists brought up the inevitable age issue. With a perfectly detonated joke—"I refuse to make my opponent's youth and inexperience an issue in this campaign"—Reagan succeeded, perhaps too easily, in silencing his critics. Even a semi-coherent closing statement, halted in progress by the moderator for running too long, did not hurt Reagan. The old magic had cast its spell.

As critic William Henry observed, "In politics, there is one gift that outshines all others, and that is the gift of luck."⁴² Among presidential debaters, no one exemplifies this maxim better than Ronald Reagan.

JOHN ANDERSON (1980)

The 1980 debate between John Anderson and Ronald Reagan illuminates the problem that such events pose for independent and third-party candidates. Like Ross Perot twelve years later, Anderson upset the political appletart by threatening the traditional one-on-one structure of debates; unlike Perot, Anderson failed to win a seat at the grown-ups' table. Jimmy Carter refused to share the stage with both Anderson and Reagan, creating a lopsided, lack-luster exchange between a pair of unevenly matched challengers. As Hedrick Smith in the *New York Times* put it, "The Reagan-Anderson confrontation had all the trappings of a full-fledged presidential debate except for the president."⁴³

Badly trailing both his opponents, Anderson entered the event under intense pressure. "For John Anderson," reported CBS's Bob Faw, "the debate is a make or break proposition. He must not only do well but well enough to show he's a genuine contender and that a vote for him is not wasted." Anderson, who had debated Reagan in the primaries, fell far short of his opponent in the charisma department. As Faw pointed out, "The trouble is that the public John Anderson tends to sound preachy and self-righteous."⁴⁴

Anderson's performance in Baltimore did little to dispel his advance billing as a morally superior technocrat. The candidate's closing statement makes the point:

Do you really think that our economy is healthy? Do you really think that eight million Americans being out of work and the fifty percent unemployment among the youth of our country are acceptable? Do you really think that our armed forces are acceptably strong in those areas of conventional capability where they should be? Do you think that our political institutions are working the way they should when literally only half our citizens vote? I don't think you do think that.

Compare this with Reagan's closing statement in the same debate, in which he painted a word-picture of America as a "shining city on a hill."

The appearance with Reagan represents both the zenith of the Anderson campaign and its swan song. Within days, poll numbers for the former Illinois congressman began a slide from which they would not recover. By the time the Carter-Reagan debate rolled around a month later, Anderson's

candidacy had fizzled into irrelevance. CNN, then a struggling news operation seen in only a fraction of the nation's homes, electronically inserted Anderson into a three-way version of the debate, but by this point the third man in the race had become an also-ran.

In the end, Anderson could not capitalize on the sixty-minute window of opportunity his single debate afforded. "Anderson failed in part because he did not understand debates," wrote Democratic strategist Patrick Caddell. "He was more interested in promoting his own ideas in a vacuum than in challenging Reagan. In retrospect only a total destruction of Reagan offered Anderson any hope—looking all right was fatal."⁴⁵

GEORGE BUSH (1984, 1988, 1992)

No other presidential candidate of the twentieth century debated more, or enjoyed it less, than George Bush. After an eccentric debut in the 1984 vice presidential match against Geraldine Ferraro, Bush went on to five top-of-the-ticket debates, two with Michael Dukakis in 1988 and three against Bill Clinton and Ross Perot in 1992. His erratic track record in these encounters spanned a dizzying spectrum, from flashes of brilliance to moments of near-incoherence.

Failing to comprehend that American voters *like* evaluating their potential leaders side by side, candidate Bush never learned to mask his fundamental testiness toward debates. Bush viewed debates as irritants, roadblocks to be gotten around as quickly as possible. According to Republican adviser Mary Matalin, Bush was "generally cranky about the whole process."⁴⁶ And his crankiness showed.

In the chaotic debate negotiations of 1980, Bush managed to escape a face-to-face meeting with his opponents. Four years later he became an unwitting guinea pig in a new political tableau: the first male-versus-female debate. This juxtaposition disconcerted Bush, and against Ferraro, he gave an almost comically hyperactive performance. "In a reversal of stereotypes," wrote syndicated columnist Ellen Goodman, "Ferraro was subdued, lawyerlike, and cool . . . while Bush was shrill, strident, and, gasp, hysterical."⁴⁷

The Ferraro debate may have been the "nadir" of Bush's career, said David Hoffman in the *Washington Post*, "in part because it spawned the notion that he was a whiny and awkward communicator in comparison

with [Reagan].”⁴⁸ Emerging from Reagan’s shadow in the first debate of 1988, the incumbent vice president got off to a shaky start, mangling an abortion question, demonizing Dukakis, and regularly lapsing into semi-intelligible “Bush-speak.” Wrote *Post* columnist George Will, “Tracing a Bush thought back from its manifestation in speech to its origin in his thinking is like seeking the source of the Blue Nile.”⁴⁹

In the second 1998 debate Bush reaped an unexpected windfall from the unfeeling response Dukakis gave to Bernard Shaw’s question about the theoretical rape and murder of Kitty Dukakis. “Bush’s performance was hardly hall of fame material,” observed *Newsweek*, “but he was steady, commanding and, measured against the governor, an appealingly mortal man.”⁵⁰

This “mortal man” may have been mortally wounded in his final round of debates, the 1992 series with Clinton and Perot. Just as Bush advisers had feared, the three-way structure set up a two-against-one dynamic. After the first encounter, Michael Kelly wrote in the *New York Times*,

With both Mr. Carter and Mr. Perot taking shots at him, the president spent much of the debate playing variations on the theme that things were not as bad as they seemed. He drew mostly modest applause, and on several occasions actually finished speaking to a dead silence, a surprising thing given that a quarter of the people in the hall were friends, family, and selected Republican guests.⁵¹

The second 1992 debate, the Richmond town hall forum, was even more disastrous. Bush joked to an unappreciative audience that his wife would probably make a better president than he would. Then, in the night’s signature moment, Bush got caught on live TV stealing a glance at his watch. When a young African-American woman asked how the national debt had affected Bush personally, his response was, “I’m not sure I get it.” Clinton strategist James Carville, watching backstage at the debate hall, was heard to say, “Bush just lost the election.”⁵²

Recovering in time for the last installment of the 1992 series, Bush turned in the best debate performance of his career. Still, a late, isolated victory could not stop the momentum that had been gathering for Bill Clinton. “This won’t be enough to give Bush the win,” Richard Nixon told a colleague, “but at least he will have gone down fighting.”⁵³

Although Bush’s inconsistent, inelegant delivery ranks him in the lower tier of presidential debaters, an endearing genuineness redeems all his per-

formances. “Bush was not a good debater in the natural sense,” said veteran Washington reporter Brit Hume, “but there was a slightly goofy goodwill that came through. You could tell he was a real person.”⁵⁴ For George Bush, authenticity may have been an asset, but it was insufficient to win debates.

GERALDINE FERRARO (1984)

As the first woman on a major-party presidential ticket, Geraldine Ferraro entered 1984’s vice presidential debate under microscopic scrutiny. Could she hold her own against George Bush? Would she rattle him? Would she dispel doubts about her suitability for office? “I was doing two things,” Ferraro said of the match. “I had to not only debate George Bush on substance, but I had to let the public know that a woman—this woman—was able to take over the job of president.”⁵⁵

The congresswoman from Queens, selected by Mondale at least in part for her TV skills, had been dubbed by the media as “scrappy” and “feisty” and “acerbic.” Hoping to soften this image, Ferraro’s handlers sanded away at the sharper edges of her personality. But in their attempts to craft a stateswoman, they may have imposed too many checks. “Ferraro was in a bit of a box,” wrote Elizabeth Drew in *The New Yorker*, “and her discomfort there showed.”⁵⁶

In the debate’s flashiest moment, Ferraro’s fighting spirit surfaced when Bush offered to help her understand the subtleties of international diplomacy. Looking directly at her opponent, Ferraro let him have it: “I almost resent, Vice President Bush, your patronizing attitude that you have to teach me about foreign policy.” Was the moment planned? “Absolutely not,” Ferraro said in a CNN interview twelve years later. “He kept talking down to me.”⁵⁷ Particularly irritating, said the candidate, was Bush’s habit of calling her “Mrs. Ferraro,” despite an earlier agreement that she be addressed as “Congresswoman Ferraro.”

Boston Globe reporter Robert Healy, who had covered the 1960 debates, praised Ferraro, likening her to John F. Kennedy. “Ferraro has the unusual faculty of being able to talk to the television audience as if she were sitting in their living room having a cup of coffee,” Healy wrote.⁵⁸ Indeed the candidate seemed remarkably at ease before the vast viewership, especially in contrast to her opponent’s high-strung zippiness.

But the general response to Ferraro was less enthusiastic, most notably

on matters of style. Perhaps the salient image from the Bush-Ferraro debate was of the Democratic candidate looking not at the camera but down at her lectern, either jotting or referring to notes on a legal pad. “She had fallen back on the body language appropriate to a court of law,” said campaign authors Peter Goldman and Tony Fuller. According to William R. Doerner in *Time*, “The down-and-low delivery was such a departure from her brassy style on the stump . . . that some observers thought she came across as cowed.”⁵⁹

As is so often the case in presidential debates, Geraldine Ferraro’s performance could not live up to its advance hype. Although she acquitted herself admirably on content, in the end Ferraro was punished for not having mastered the stylistic niceties of TV debating. “But in terms of the substance and my handling of the issues,” Ferraro wrote in her memoirs, “I think I did extremely well.”⁶⁰

MICHAEL DUKAKIS (1988)

If television is a cool medium, then Michael Dukakis ought to have been the most blessed of presidential debaters. Instead, in his two 1988 matches with George Bush, Dukakis’s natural reserve functioned as an audience turnoff. Dukakis was widely thought to have won his first debate and lost his second, but in the end the distinction mattered little: win or lose, neither viewers nor the press could warm up to the unemotive governor of Massachusetts.

The first encounter gave Dukakis a much-needed opportunity to counter Bush’s relentless campaign of ad hominem attacks, attacks that extended into the debate itself. Early in the program, within a single sixty-second rebuttal, Bush called his opponent a “liberal,” a “card-carrying member of the ACLU,” and “out of the mainstream,” disingenuously adding in a follow-up, “I’m not questioning his patriotism.” In what would become the evening’s defining sound bite, Dukakis fired back: “Of course the vice president is questioning my patriotism. I don’t think there’s any question about that. And I resent it.”

This newly aggressive tone helped propel Dukakis to a forty-five to thirty-six victory over Bush in ABC’s postdebate poll. But the win was hollow, observed *Newsweek*, the triumph of the smartest kid in the class: “He had got A’s for his answers . . . and D’s in popularity.” As Dukakis biographers Oliphant and Black saw it, “Dukakis made substantive points while Bush scored with emotional and folksy ones.”⁶¹

By the second event any afterglow from Dukakis's opening performance had evaporated. The first question—Bernard Shaw's hypothetical query about the rape and murder of Kitty Dukakis—harpooned the Democratic candidate, and for the rest of the debate he suffered a slow, agonizing, on-camera demise. In the view of *Boston Globe* columnist David Nyhan, Dukakis “went into the hole on the very first question and never climbed out. As the night progressed, Bush got better, and the Duke got worse.”⁶² In her memoirs, Kitty Dukakis would describe Shaw's query as “the nail in the coffin” of the campaign. She wrote, “Michael made a mistake; he answered a question he should have hurled right back into the face of his questioner.”⁶³

Dukakis observers were surprised that this veteran politician failed to seize the opening Shaw had presented, especially since a response had been rehearsed. “I think I went through fifty-odd debates with Michael Dukakis,” said campaign manager Susan Estrich. “And he was very good in most of them; he wasn't good in every single one of them. Unfortunately, this was the most important one of the season, and it was a disappointment.”⁶⁴

Ten years after the fact, Dukakis looked back on this, his best-remembered and most damaging debate moment. “It was not an unfair question,” he said, “but I answered as if I'd heard it for the thousandth time. There is the danger that having done this over and over and over again, you forget that for most of the audience this may be the very first time they've watched you.” Added Dukakis, “I've listened to the response since—and it doesn't sound so bad.”⁶⁵

LLOYD BENTSEN (1988)

As David Broder of the *Washington Post* saw it, Lloyd Bentsen looked like “the reliable, white-haired corner pharmacist, with a store of experience as deep as his baritone voice.”⁶⁶ In his 1988 vice presidential debate against Dan Quayle, this kindly druggist administered the verbal equivalent of a lethal injection.

Before the debate Bentsen had been thought of as mild-mannered, even reserved. “Senator Bentsen is not a spellbinder and is unlikely to become one,” wrote Warren Weaver in the *New York Times* the morning of the event. “He projects sincerity, experience and a command of complicated factual

material, but he rarely has emotional impact on an audience.” *Newsweek* predicted “he may well prove boring and pedantic,” while Texas Democrat Ann Richards said, “He’s not going to be a standup comedian.”⁶⁷

Indeed, apart from the “You’re no Jack Kennedy” line, little stands out from Bentsen’s performance in Omaha. But that one exchange was all it took to stamp the debate with its signature moment. “Bentsen looked like the sorrowful uncle talking to the wayward nephew,” observed NBC’s John Chancellor,⁶⁸ and many viewers agreed.

Polls taken immediately after the program named Bentsen the overwhelming victor, and the candidate wasted no time savoring his moment of glory. Bentsen told postdebate audiences that Quayle “left Omaha with no forwarding address” and promised to “open the Quayle season a little early this year.”⁶⁹ Dukakis campaign advertisements, which had barely acknowledged Bentsen before the debate, now prominently featured the senator’s name. Political pundits wondered aloud if the Dukakis-Bentsen ticket might be more electable with the order reversed.

Though Bentsen’s performance in Omaha would give Democrats a badly needed shot of adrenalin, the effect was short-lived. The principal beneficiary turned out not to be Michael Dukakis but Lloyd Bentsen. According to Elizabeth Drew,

The emergence of this improbable star said some telling things about this election, and about how we choose candidates. Bentsen’s new glory came not because he had got off his now-famous line about Kennedy; it came about because he was the most—in fact, the only—authentic figure in the race. What people were responding to was that for the first time this fall they had seen a genuine, whole person, someone at ease with himself and his knowledge.⁷⁰

In the strange and bitter presidential race of 1988, these qualities placed Lloyd Bentsen in a class by himself.

DAN QUAYLE (1988, 1992)

Fairly or not, Dan Quayle will be forever remembered as the butt of Lloyd Bentsen’s putdown in the 1988 vice presidential debate: “Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you’re no

Jack Kennedy.” With these words, the young man from Indiana, who had been cautioned not to compare himself to the thirty-fifth president, went down in stunning defeat.

Descriptions of Quayle’s 1988 performance fell along two metaphorical lines: animal and schoolboy. Meg Greenfield saw “a deer caught in the headlights”; Tom Shales, “Bambi on ice”; Michael Dukakis, a “cornered chipmunk.”⁷¹ David Broder compared Quayle to the “senior class president of his high school or college,” and Elizabeth Drew likened him to “a young man hesitantly reciting his lessons and knowing little else.”⁷² Even friendly analysts like George Will could muster no enthusiasm. “Quayle was so overprogrammed it seemed someone backstage was operating a compact disc—a very small compact disc—in Quayle’s skull,” Will wrote.⁷³ So deeply did the words sting that Quayle called Will from the road to complain.

What stands out about these assessments is their uniformity. Indeed, Dan Quayle’s 1988 performance is one of the few in debate history to provoke an almost totally negative reaction. Quayle would attribute his problems to a bad night’s sleep and having spent the whole of debate day “just endlessly replaying those rote answers in my mind.” In his autobiography, Quayle recalled a conversation with Lesley Stahl of CBS about the peculiar effect the television camera has on certain people’s eyes: “In my case, she says, it captures some look of uncertainty, even though my demeanor in person reflects otherwise.”⁷⁴

Quayle’s opportunity for vindication came four years later in the three-way vice presidential debate with Al Gore and James Stockdale. “I threw away that campaign book,” Quayle said, “and I focused on themes. And I was more relaxed and far more in control. I learned a lot from the 1988 debate, believe me.”⁷⁵ Quayle’s rock-bottom expectations also handed him a considerable edge. As Tad Devine, campaign manager for Lloyd Bentsen put it, “Such low pre-debate standing is the political equivalent of an express elevator to the penthouse of debate victory.”⁷⁶

Indeed, the 1992 reviews read like citations for “most improved” debater. “Quayle may be no Jack Kennedy, but he was no stumblebum either,” wrote R. W. Apple Jr., in the *New York Times*.⁷⁷ Quayle was credited with hitting hard on the question of Bill Clinton’s fitness for office, a charge Gore let slide. Gore may have been expecting another deer in the headlights, observed William Safire, but what he got was a “grizzly bear climbing up over the hood. Quayle was an imperfect but effective debater in command of his basic message: Even if you’re unhappy with Bush, you can’t trust Clinton.”⁷⁸

The 1992 Dan Quayle was hardly an exemplary performer. He had not tamed the tendency toward excess energy, and occasionally his voice dropped into a self-consciously melodramatic stage whisper. "He did maintain good eye contact with the camera," wrote Tom Shales, "but he still seemed essentially the same as when Bush chose him for the vice presidency four long years ago: unstable as all get-out."⁷⁹ Others found Quayle's 1992 debate turn admirable, among them a fellow victim of the debate gods' disfavor, Richard Nixon. "They should bring him out more," Nixon said of the young vice president. "People will come out to see him in droves. For better or for worse, he's interesting."⁸⁰

BILL CLINTON (1992, 1996)

Bill Clinton's lasting contribution to presidential debates may well be the citizen participation format, a structure he pioneered in 1992 and successfully repeated in 1996. What Clinton dubbed the "people's debate" offered an ideal showcase for the Arkansas governor's vaunted television skills, uniting electoral politics and show biz in a way that perfectly suited this schmoozy Southerner's empathetic style. Working the crowd like a televangelist, Clinton redefined the relationship between debaters and debate watchers, and raised the standard for future nominees.

The effectiveness of Clinton's delivery in the town hall debate stood in counterpoint to the less fluid performances of his older co-stars, George Bush and Ross Perot in 1992, and Bob Dole four years later. Clinton, a child of television, projected total ease in the audience participation setting. That Clinton had studiously rehearsed his apparently effortless on-camera maneuvers seemed not to matter. The proof was in the performance.

After the 1992 election, Clinton told journalists Germond and Witcover that he had given a great deal of thought to the town hall forum. Clinton explained,

It's a lot easier to be a good talker than a good listener. But in that format, with all that pressure, with one hundred million people watching, it's probably even harder to be a good listener. And one thing I thought about going into that debate was that these are real people. . . . I saw the American people sort of screaming for me to pay attention to them and listen to them.⁸¹

Clinton's debut as a presidential debater had been preceded by a rigorous roster of primary debates—three within a single thirty-hour period—and these encounters taught the candidate the value of a well-executed moment. But Clinton entered 1992's compressed round of general election debates with mixed expectations. An early October appearance on the Phil Donahue talk show provoked Clinton's short temper, making him look peevish. His voice had grown raspy and hoarse, and aides publicly fretted about the governor's well-known prolixity. "His defect is that he falls in love with his own rhetoric," political adviser Dick Morris told the *New York Times*.⁸²

Clinton soon put these concerns to rest. Strong performances in all three of the 1992 programs showed this candidate to be fully at home in the debate milieu. By 1996 Clinton's reputation as a television prodigy had assumed heroic proportions. The morning after the first Clinton-Dole debate, Lisa Myers on the *Today* show allowed that "the president could talk a dog off a meat wagon."⁸³

Fittingly the last debate of his career was another town hall forum, the 1996 San Diego debate with Dole; again, Clinton triumphed. As the *Boston Globe's* Thomas Oliphant said, "Clinton never strayed from his task during this game of twenty questions—a little of his record, a little diagnosis of remaining problems, and a script for the future."⁸⁴ Though Bob Dole valiantly tried to keep pace, the night belonged to the president.

An impromptu scene immediately after this debate went off the air may have better summarized Bill Clinton than any of his studied words and gestures. Viewers watching on C-Span saw Clinton talking with individual members of the studio audience who had remained in the hall. Jeffrey Rosen described the scene in *The New Republic*: "His eyes fixed single-mindedly on his target, he continued to argue animatedly for four minutes. All told, Clinton lingered for forty minutes, debating undecided citizens, one by one. If there's a better way for the president of the United States to conduct his final campaign, I can't imagine it."⁸⁵

AL GORE (1992, 1996)

"Debate is the perfect Gore forum," says political writer Joe Klein, "a structured setting that gives the appearance of spontaneity. It rewards creativity, but only within a context of discipline and preparation."⁸⁶ While Al Gore's debating career shows ample evidence of discipline and preparation, cre-

activity has been in shorter supply. Offsetting this deficit is an unusually wide range of experience: over four national campaigns, in both primary and general elections, Gore has toughened into a seasoned and savvy political debater.

After earning his stripes in 1988's crowded primary debates, Gore graduated to the freewheeling, three-way vice presidential match with Dan Quayle and Admiral James Stockdale in 1992. In his opening statement Gore came out swinging, promising Quayle, "If you don't try to compare George Bush to Harry Truman, I won't compare you to Jack Kennedy." Gore then turned to Stockdale and said, "Those of us who served in Vietnam look at you as a national hero," not so subtly reminding viewers that Quayle was the only one on stage lacking Vietnam credentials. Wrote Elizabeth Kolbert in the *New York Times*, "For the innocent tone and brutal implications of his opening statement, Mr. Gore probably deserves the evening's Eve Harrington Award for adroitly undermining a rival."⁸⁷

Other 1992 debate watchers found Gore less effective. Tom Shales in the *Washington Post* likened him to an "audio-animatronic figure at Disneyland, only less life-like," and said, "Even the TV lens glazes over whenever this guy starts to speak." Jeff Greenfield on ABC called Gore "programmed." William Safire of the *Times* preferred "android."⁸⁸

Four years later, against Jack Kemp, Gore drew still worse reviews. In postdebate analysis on ABC, George Will described the Democratic candidate as "relentlessly, robotically, Muzak-ly on message." In the *Boston Globe*, novelist George V. Higgins compared Gore to Fred Rogers, the soporific children's host of PBS's *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. David Broder of the *Post* watched the 1996 debate with a group of undecided voters in Ankeny, Iowa. "Many of them didn't like Gore at all," Broder said, "because they thought he was talking down to them. One woman said, 'He speaks to us like he thinks English is our second language.'" An observer inside the debate hall in St. Petersburg reported that even Tipper Gore, the candidate's wife, could be seen nodding off.⁸⁹

Gore's debate performances in the 2000 primary season, though inconsistent, suggest that the candidate has profited from past mistakes. In a series of two-man meetings with Bill Bradley, Gore assumed a more energetic and aggressive posture, deploying an arsenal of props, gestures, and facial expressions to put across his points. Among the liveliest of the Democratic co-appearances was a December 1999 broadcast of *Meet the Press* in which Gore took his opponent by surprise with a challenge for twice-weekly debates.

If Al Gore has mastered the art of executing tactical moments on TV, questions remain about his ability to connect more viscerally with the viewing audience. Just as George Bush suffered by comparison with Ronald Reagan, debater Gore has had to operate in the shadow of the tele-visually superior Bill Clinton. According to Brit Hume of Fox News, “Clinton can bring that private magic public—and it’s not easy to do for very many people. Gore, who is delightful privately, has a hard time doing it in public.”⁹⁰

Can Al Gore learn to channel his private charm into a presidential debate watched by one hundred million people? In 1993 Gore garnered widespread praise for his performance in a live debate with Ross Perot over the North American Free Trade Agreement. The program, which ran on CNN’s *Larry King Live*, represents Gore’s finest moment on television. In the intimate setting of a broadcast studio, absent a live audience and minus a rigid structure, Gore thrived. Should Al Gore become a presidential debater in 2000, his negotiators would be well advised to press for an informal setup in which their candidate can converse with his opponent, not speechify.

ROSS PEROT (1992)

After the first 1992 debate, Richard Nixon offered a particularly astute assessment of Ross Perot. “The guy is just interesting,” Nixon told an aide. “And I’ve always said that the only thing worse than being wrong in politics is being dull. If Perot weren’t there, it would have been dullsville.” Nixon then added the inevitable postscript: “It won’t affect a damn thing, though.”⁹¹

Ross Perot’s eminently watchable trio of performances in 1992 points up a curious dynamic in presidential debates: Unpredictability will almost always outmatch choreography, but unpredictability has its limits, too. Perot’s irrepressible sense of humor, along with his laudable refusal to be professionally packaged, breathed new life into the ritualistic debate genre. Before the novelty paled, Perot had shown the political pros that there is value in breaking the mold.

Reentering the race less than two weeks before the first debate in St. Louis, Perot gained instant credibility from his appearance with rivals George Bush and Bill Clinton. “Let’s call a spade a spade here—Ross Perot won this debate,” pronounced Cokie Roberts during ABC’s post-event

analysis. “He made the other two sound alike.” Wrote Michael Kelly in the *New York Times*, “Mr. Perot, with his hands clasped behind his back and his chest puffed out like a pouter pigeon’s, played a role that was a sort of Will Rogers–Mr. Deeds hybrid. At his best lines, and there were many, the audience laughed out loud, and even cheered a bit.”⁹²

But in the next debate, when Perot repeated the “I’m all ears” wisecrack that had been such a crowd-pleaser in round one, the joke fell flat—an indication of the larger problem that plagued this unorthodox candidate. In the view of NBC’s Tom Brokaw, “Perot didn’t have a second act.” Tom Shales of the *Washington Post*, describing the Texan as a “crabby Munchkin,” similarly held that “his act seemed to be growing increasingly stale.”⁹³

If Perot could never quite replicate his initial success, he did leave an intriguing legacy for other presidential debaters to ponder. Journalist John Mashek, a questioner in the first Clinton-Bush-Perot match and a panelist in 1984 and 1988, called Perot “the most relaxed of all the people I’ve watched debate.” According to Perot campaign adviser Clay Mulford, “He wasn’t unnerved by the debates or felt that he was doing anything different than whatever else he’d do on a given day.”⁹⁴ Perot’s straightforward self-possession should serve as a model for other candidates, who too often approach debates like actors at a casting call, willing to twist themselves into pretzels in order to land the part.

Ross Perot proved that in a star-driven vehicle like a presidential debate, an engaging personality goes a long way. Many observers directly attributed the high viewership for the 1992 debates to Perot’s presence as an offbeat character in the political drama. “He made everybody watch the debates,” said Tom Brokaw, “because they didn’t know when he was going to blow a gasket or say something really funny. He was great for the process because it really did bring people to the debates.”⁹⁵

JAMES STOCKDALE (1992)

“Who am I? Why am I here?” With these all too prophetic questions, Admiral James Bond Stockdale set sail on the oddest, most improbable odyssey ever undertaken in a presidential debate. *Newsweek* compared Stockdale to “a kindly old owl that had somehow blundered into a video arcade.” “Flustered and unprepared,” said Tom Shales. “The clear loser of the evening,” in the view of Germond and Witcover.⁹⁶

Stockdale's excruciating performance offered viewers a fascinating bounty of the unexpected. The candidate cut short an answer to a health care question by saying, "I'm out of ammunition." Stockdale missed another question because he had turned off his hearing aid. Moderator Hal Bruno had to encourage him to join the discussion. Standing mute as Al Gore and Dan Quayle jostled, Stockdale commented, "I feel like I'm a spectator at a ping-pong game."

With his shock of white hair and black, professorial glasses, this unlikely debater looked nothing like his telegenic competitors. At sixty-eight, Stockdale was a generation older and an atomic lifetime away from their experience in the national spotlight. On one level, Stockdale's babe-in-the-woods status enhanced his standing. As Gore and Quayle attacked each other's economic philosophies, Stockdale said, "I think America is seeing right now the reason this nation is in gridlock." According to Elizabeth Kolbert in the *New York Times*, Stockdale "seemed to be speaking for the frustrated viewer sitting powerlessly in front of the set, unable to intervene in an escalating squabble."⁹⁷

Amazingly Stockdale's debate appearance marked his debut on national television. The candidate had not even known he would be debating until running mate Ross Perot announced the surprise in an interview on the ABC News program *20/20*. Stockdale practiced for the debate not in a TV studio but on a home video camera set up by his son.

Stockdale's son, an elementary school principal in Pennsylvania, wrote an op-ed piece for the *Times* a few days after the ordeal that attempted to salvage the family honor. The younger Stockdale chided Gore and Quayle—and, by extension, the system that produced them:

Two children of privilege have been handed title and authority because they play by rules of insensitivity and blind ambition. Snarling like savage poodles on choke chains one minute, and smiling with smarmy rehearsed sincerity the next, they remind us always to doubt the motives of the man who is too well-groomed. Mr. Quayle and Mr. Gore epitomized modern anger, with its hair combed.

And then there is my father. A man of compassion, truthfulness, and sincerity. He is not interested in power. He is interested in goodness, honesty, and responsibility. His experience in a Vietnam prison brought out his wisdom, a quality our modern world spurns.⁹⁸

After the debate, Admiral Stockdale attributed his poor showing to being less packaged than the other candidates. "What I saw last night was an art form," the admiral told supporters at a rally, "an art form I've never been near before."⁹⁹ Hoping to contain the damage, Perot's campaign sent Stockdale around the country to meet with newspaper editorial boards, a setting in which this thoughtful man felt more at home. The debate, however, left an indelible mark; never had the audience seen anything like it.

The great lesson of James Stockdale for future debaters is clear: Experience has no substitute. As *Washington Post* columnist Mary McGrory put it, "Politics may seem incoherent, but it has its rules, too."¹⁰⁰

JACK KEMP (1996)

Like a new cast member added to a long-running series, Jack Kemp debuted in the 1996 vice presidential debate as the year's only nonveteran. The media widely touted Kemp's appearance with Al Gore as a dress rehearsal for the 2000 presidential race, a sneak preview of coming attractions for political connoisseurs to sit back and savor. As it happened, the Gore-Kemp meeting in St. Petersburg, Florida, received some of the lowest ratings and least enthusiastic reviews of any general election debate.

As an unsuccessful presidential candidate in 1988, Kemp had taken part in his share of primary debates. But in the 1996 telecast, this former football star left an overriding impression of nervousness, hardly a reassuring trait for a would-be national leader. "Kemp was winging it," said David Broder of the *Washington Post*. "I think he had not really sat down and said, okay, what are my strategic goals, what are the three points I want to make no matter what they ask me."¹⁰¹

Moderator Jim Lehrer's opening question to Kemp provided an easy opportunity for the Republican to score points on the Clinton character issue: "Some supporters of Senator Dole have expressed disappointment over his unwillingness (in the first debate) to draw personal and ethical differences between him and President Clinton. How do you feel about it?" Kemp responded that attacks on the president were beneath Bob Dole, effectively prohibiting Dole from pursuing a character strategy in the days to come.

Conservatives disdained Kemp's kid-glove handling of Clinton and conciliatory attitude toward Gore. Bill Kristol, editor of the *Weekly Standard*,

complained that “if you came down from Mars and saw this debate, you might think that Al Gore was the moderate Republican and Jack Kemp was the Democrat.” Even Bob Dole, cracking wise on *Nightline*, said, “It looked like a fraternity picnic there for a while.”¹⁰²

Several days after the debate, Sam Donaldson put the charge directly to Kemp on the Sunday morning program *This Week*: “A lot of Republicans are saying they wanted a lean, mean fighting machine to show up, and they’re saying that what showed up was a garrulous, unprepared wimp—you.” After a few minutes of obligatory face-saving, Kemp gave in, confessing, “I’m just not an attack dog.”¹⁰³

Not all observers disapproved of Kemp’s restraint. To Martin F. Nolan of the *Boston Globe*, this was “the best vice presidential debate ever, ninety minutes of serious issues rarely discussed.” But those expecting sparks to fly reacted with disappointment. “The debate left little material for video editors to regale us with in 2000, should these two men meet again as presidential candidates,” wrote Christopher Buckley in the *New York Times*. George Will made the point more bluntly in his postdebate analysis on ABC: “It seems to me that what happened tonight was the campaign 1996 came yet closer to being closed, and the campaign for the Republican nomination in the year 2000 opened wider.”¹⁰⁴