

Chapter Five

THE QUESTIONERS

*T*o complement the stars, presidential debates feature cast members who function in key supporting roles: the moderators, panelists, and citizen-questioners who have been an on-camera presence in every general election debate since 1960. In some cases, these scene stealers may have affected outcomes. We can only wonder how 1988's debate series would have differed without anchorman Bernard Shaw's hypothetical question about the rape and murder of Kitty Dukakis. Or how Dan Quayle might have fared absent the sharp questioning of journalist-panelists who pressed him on his credentials. Or how George Bush would have come across had he better connected with the woman in the town hall audience who asked about his personal experience with the national debt.

In the tightly controlled world of presidential debates, the questioners and their questions function as rare, much-needed wild cards. Although the selection of moderators and panelists has always been subject to candidate approval, the interrogators have had free rein to pose whatever questions

they choose. This freedom generates much of the tension that attends live debates, interjecting the element of surprise into a heavily stage-managed milieu. Campaign staffs labor mightily to anticipate questions, but in the end, the power of the query rests less with the debaters' preparedness than the interlocutors' spontaneity.

New formats used in the series of 1992 and 1996 have revolutionized the nature of debate questioning. Two basic program structures have come into favor in presidential debates: the solo moderator and the town hall forum. Press panels, which dominated debates for thirty-two years, have at least temporarily been shelved, replaced by individual interviewers and audiences made up of uncommitted voters. To many journalists, this change constitutes a long overdue liberation.

PRESS PANELS AND THE QUESTIONS THEY ASK

"Reporters should ask questions at news conferences and interviews—but not in debates," asserts political columnist David Broder. Like others in the news media, Broder believes that journalists who appear on debate panels violate the separation of church and state by involving themselves as players: "Whether the question impales a candidate or offers him escape from the tight corner of the previous change, we are affecting history, not just writing its first draft."¹ Broder's *Washington Post* was one of the earliest news organizations to ban its employees from serving as presidential debate panelists. Others, like the *Wall Street Journal*, CBS, and NBC, are more recent converts to the cause. "We don't think the campaigns ought to have veto power over our people," explained Tom Brokaw. "Simple as that."²

Expressions of ambivalence are not uncommon among reporters selected for the panels. Jon Margolis of the *Chicago Tribune*, a questioner in the Bentsen-Quayle debate, said he had "mixed feelings" about being picked: "I knew you had to be approved by both campaigns, and that meant either they thought I was a harmless wimp or they thought I was fair and objective. I hope it was the latter."³ Peter Jennings recalled feeling "very honored" to be chosen for the first Bush-Dukakis debate. "It's a dubious compliment," he said, "but it meant we were acceptable to both the Republicans and Democrats, reaffirming our own belief that we were fair people."⁴

Others view the matter in a more positive light. Jim Lehrer makes the point that just as lawyers and doctors are called on to contribute to the pub-

lic good, so do qualified journalists have a civic duty to serve in debates. “If we see ourselves as professionals,” Lehrer says, “then we can’t say no to this kind of invitation unless there’s something that’s improper about it.”⁵

Some panelists have jumped at the chance to participate. Norma Quarles, a questioner in the 1984 vice presidential debate, received her summons shortly after being admitted to the hospital for surgery. Instead of proceeding with the operation, Quarles left her hospital bed in New Jersey to make the trip to Philadelphia. “I thought about saying no,” she recalled, “but I considered this an opportunity of a lifetime.”⁶

Jack White, a *Time* correspondent also selected for the 1984 Bush-Ferraro panel, felt pressure to accept on two fronts: as a magazine reporter and as an African-American. White saw himself representing *Time* but also standing in for black journalists, who had rarely been chosen for debate panels. “There were many things going on beyond ‘let me get up here and ask a dynamite question,’ ” he recalled. “There was also ‘how are you coming across representing these other groups that don’t get much chance to appear in these contexts?’ ”⁷

With the panel format out of fashion, the issue of journalistic participation has subsided, at least for the time being. But in the shift toward other structures, has the press ceded too much ground? In 1988, the last year in which media panels appeared in all three debates, political analyst Jeff Greenfield wrote a *New York Times* op-ed column defending journalists as questioners. “The much-maligned format,” Greenfield said, “produced the most significant glimpses we have had into the thinking and character of the candidates since the general election campaign began on Labor Day.”⁸

As one example, Greenfield cited a question from Annie Groer in the first Bush-Dukakis debate that forced Bush to address his murky stance on a woman’s right to an abortion. Groer pointed out that Bush had taken several positions on the issue over the years, including support for a constitutional amendment that would outlaw most abortions. “But if abortions were to become illegal again,” Groer asked, “do you think that the women who defy the law and have them anyway, as they did before it was okayed by the Supreme Court, and the doctors who perform them, should go to jail?”

Bush’s muddled response suggested that criminal sanctions indeed might be appropriate, sparking a quick postdebate clarification to the contrary by campaign manager James Baker. As Greenfield commented, “The exchange told us that in fact Mr. Bush hadn’t pursued the subtleties of the

abortion issue. It was exactly the kind of tough but fair prodding that debates are supposed to produce.”⁹

Complaints against debate panelists’ questions fall along several lines: the reporters are trying to play “gotcha”; the questions are convoluted and tententious; the topics focus too narrowly on the day’s headlines. The loudest objections have come from fellow members of the press, as in a scathing 1992 column by veteran *Washington Post* columnist Mary McGrory:

The professional training that encourages reporters to sharpen their questions and tighten their prose deserts them on the set. Somehow the encounter is not so much to elicit information from the questioned but to display the erudition of the questioner. It is to reveal one’s sophistication, one’s truly impressive range of knowledge, one’s exquisitely calibrated appreciation of the nuances of a question that clods might ask in two seconds.¹⁰

Over the years, panel members have exposed themselves to carping on several fronts. Charles Warren, panelist in the 1960 debate, received telephone calls from irate viewers after asking JFK why farms could not be operated like other businesses. One caller said, “I’m a farmer and you’re a sonofabitch for asking Senator Kennedy a loaded question like that,” and another warned, “You’d better watch out.”¹¹

Panelists draw even more notice *before* the debates, when they are inundated with suggestions for questions. A telegram delivered to the theater just before the first 1976 debate urged a questioner to ask, “How soon do you think it will take for a complete Soviet takeover of the United States?” Annie Groer was offered a hundred dollars to pose a “nasty question about the personal life of one of the candidates.” Andrea Mitchell’s stint as a debate panelist in 1988 coincided with the dawn of fax machines, making for a sleepless predebate night at her hotel in Los Angeles. “Special interest groups were faxing suggested questions and ideas and background papers all night,” Mitchell recalled, “and the hotel kept stuffing this rolled-up fax paper under the door and waking me up. It was like having hamsters in your room.”¹²

Moderators and panelists routinely discard most over-the-transom suggestions. Occasionally, however, one finds its way into the broadcast. John Mashek, a panelist in the first 1992 debate in St. Louis, used a question he had read in a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* article in which citizens revealed what they would ask if they were on the panel.¹³

In deference to the gravity of the occasion, most journalistic participants have worked hard to polish their debate questions. Elizabeth Drew of *The New Yorker*, the first woman to serve on a debate panel, prepared for the first 1976 Ford-Carter appearance much as the candidates themselves did. With the help of a research assistant, Drew put together a notebook of information about various subjects that might come up. “And then I worked on and refined and refined the questions,” she said.¹⁴ Many other panelists report a similar process: organizing background materials by topic area, then honing specific questions.

“We all overprepared,” recalled Peter Jennings. “We prepared to death. I remember an inordinate amount of constructing and deconstructing sentences, which I knew before and know subsequently is never the way to interview anybody.” According to Andrea Mitchell: “The preparations are tough because what you’re trying to do is come up with something that will elicit a revealing answer that hasn’t been asked before and that they’re not prepared for. And there’s so much at stake.”¹⁵

Sometimes a question is asked simply because it cannot be avoided. In the second debate of 1984, after Ronald Reagan had come under intense scrutiny in the wake of his faltering debate performance in Louisville, it fell to Henry Trewhitt of the *Baltimore Sun* to raise the issue of presidential competence. Because the stated theme of the debate was foreign policy, Trewhitt deliberately couched his query within that framework:

You are already the oldest president in history, and some of your staff say you were tired after your most recent encounter with Mr. Mondale. I recall, yet, that President Kennedy . . . had to go for days on end with very little sleep during the Cuban missile crisis. Is there any doubt in your mind that you would be able to function in such circumstances?

Reagan, as we have seen, rejoined with what is regarded as a classic debate sound bite, leaving Trewhitt to deliver a less celebrated but no less amusing riposte: “Mr. President, I’d like to head for the fence and try to catch that one, but I’ll go on to another question.” In retrospect, Trewhitt wondered if he ought not to have pursued his original line of inquiry. “I did not respond as I should have,” Trewhitt later noted. “I just let him go when I really should have said, ‘Okay, fine, that’s a wonderful line, Mr. President, but I really think you should try to address the question.’ I didn’t do that because I thought it was such a good line.”¹⁶

Beginning with the first question ever posed in a presidential debate, the tone of journalists' queries has often been aggressive. Bob Fleming of ABC News opened the 1960 Chicago debate by asking JFK for a response to Nixon's characterization of him as "naive and at times immature." Minutes later, Sander Vanocur questioned Nixon about a remark President Eisenhower had made at a news conference a month earlier; when pressed to name an idea Nixon had contributed to his administration, Eisenhower told reporters, "If you give me a week I might think of one."

In *Six Crises*, Nixon was still smarting from the Vanocur question, which he dismissed as being "of no substantive importance" and something that would "plague me the rest of the campaign." Nixon wrote that Eisenhower had phoned him to apologize the day the remark was made.

He pointed out that he was simply being facetious and yet they played it straight and wrote it seriously. I could only reply to Vanocur's question in the same vein, but I am sure that to millions of unsophisticated viewers, this question had been most effective in raising a doubt in their minds with regard to one of my strongest campaign themes and assets—my experience as vice president.¹⁷

Questions relating to a candidate's personal qualities have propelled some of the sharpest exchanges in presidential debates. In 1984 Fred Barnes asked President Reagan (and Walter Mondale as well) for a description of his religious beliefs. After Reagan delivered a homily that invoked Mother, God, and Abraham Lincoln, Barnes moved in for the kill: "Given those beliefs, Mr. President, why don't you attend services regularly, either by going to church or by inviting a minister to the White House, as President Nixon used to do, or someone to Camp David, as President Carter used to do?" Reagan never did answer the question.

The 1988 vice presidential debate, in addition to its exploration of Dan Quayle's fitness for office, offered other examples of pointed, personal interrogatories. Brit Hume asked the candidates to identify a work of literature, art, or film that had had a strong effect on them. Both debaters gave what seemed like well-coached responses that quickly segued into attacks on the opposition. But as CNN media analyst Frederic Allen pointed out: "When a debate panelist says to a candidate, 'Read any good books lately?' it's not a friendly question. It's asked with a certain degree of malice. It's asked in the secret hope that the answer will be 'I can't remember ever opening a book.'"

Hume defends the query as one he had hoped would be “revealing of character.” “I spent a lot of time trying to think of questions that might take them off the script, to illuminate something beyond the rap they have predigested and prememorized,” he said.¹⁸

Tom Brokaw’s first question to Quayle dealt with the plight of American families living in poverty: “I’d like for you to describe to the audience the last time that you may have visited with one of those families personally and how you explain to that family your votes against the school breakfast program, the school lunch program, and the expansion of the child immunization program.” Unconvincingly, Quayle cited a stop at a food bank in Fort Wayne, Indiana, during which no one had asked him about those votes. Brokaw later explained, “I came to that question because one of the things I’m struck by is that so many politicians are isolated from real-life experience. I thought, looking at Quayle’s experience and how he lived his life, it’s worth finding out. I did think it was a legitimate question.”¹⁹

In the first 1988 Bush-Dukakis debate, Peter Jennings took a similarly prosecutorial approach to Bush, reminding the vice president that he had said he was “haunted” by the lives of inner-city children. “If it haunts you so,” Jennings asked, “why over the eight years of the Reagan-Bush administration have so many programs designed to help the inner cities been eliminated or cut?” Bush’s fuzzy reply fell far short of the question. Soon after the debate, Jennings said, “George Bush took a disliking to me.”²⁰

Not all panelists have defined their role adversarially. Max Frankel, the *New York Times* reporter whose question to Gerald Ford led to the Eastern Europe gaffe, saw his task in a different light. “I wasn’t so much trained to fish for news on television, or to play any kind of game of ‘gotcha,’” he said. “My thought always was that the purpose of these things is to elucidate views.”²¹ In the San Francisco debate, after Ford prematurely liberated Eastern Europe, Frankel gave the president an opportunity to dig himself out, an opportunity Ford did not take.

Another reporter from the old school was Harris Ellis of the *Christian Science Monitor*, a panelist in the lone Carter-Reagan debate of 1980. Ellis said he purposely shaped his debate questions to emphasize his own neutrality. “In those days, when TV on that scale was still relatively new, that is the way more journalists would have acted,” he said. “Today I have the real feeling that many journalists distort their role before the television camera in challenging a president or candidate.”²²

PANELIST STRATEGIES

In their predebate meetings, panelists have tended to preview one another's questions in order to avoid duplication. But not always. Sander Vanocur, a questioner in the initial Kennedy-Nixon debate, recalls fearing someone else would preempt his question about President Eisenhower's putdown of Vice President Nixon.²³ The four newsmen in that debate had no idea what topics the others would raise, which has also been true in several subsequent programs. Essentially the matter of sharing questions is something each panel decides on its own.

Panelists in the 1976 vice presidential debate not only read their questions to one another ahead of time, they helped edit one another's copy. "We are to my knowledge the only panel that conspired to write the questions and to establish an order we wanted to ask them in," said Hal Bruno, a participant in that debate.²⁴ Bruno and his colleagues agreed to limit their questions to thirty seconds and pledged to avoid unnecessary follow-ups that might bog down the discussion.

Just before the telecast, the panel's prearranged sequence of questions bumped up against a last-minute obstacle. According to panelist Walter Mears of the Associated Press, two of the questioners decided to trade seats in order to maintain the order of topics they had agreed on beforehand. "But when Dole's people heard about the switch, they objected, saying they had been preparing on the basis of the original order of questioning. I never did figure out how Dole could prepare for questions I might put as opposed to those Marilyn [Berger, another panelist] might ask."²⁵

The three panelists in 1976's final debate carried the concept of collaboration one step further. In a meeting before the debate, they agreed that when the broadcast reached the sixty-minute mark, whoever had the floor would yield and ask the candidates to break format and directly question each other. Five minutes before air time, Jack Nelson of the *Los Angeles Times* informed moderator Barbara Walters of the plan. "We had not told her in advance because we didn't want her to maybe scotch the idea or tell any of the producers of the program," Nelson said. "Of course, she didn't try to scotch it, but what happened was we didn't get the time cue." Thus was avoided what might have been one of the most spontaneous episodes in presidential debates. According to Nelson, "We intended to do that because we thought it would be better to have an actual exchange between the two

candidates rather than what amounted to three separate press conferences.”²⁶

Perhaps the most unified group of questioners in debate history were the panelists in the 1988 Bentsen-Quayle match. The journalistic quartet of Judy Woodruff (PBS), Tom Brokaw (NBC), Brit Hume (ABC) and Jon Margolis (*Chicago Tribune*) functioned in a way debate panels almost never do, as a synchronized interrogation machine that hammered away at Dan Quayle’s qualifications for the vice presidency. In their predebate gathering, the panelists discussed the value of follow-up questions and decided to join forces to hold the candidates’ feet to the fire. According to Brokaw, at one point in the planning sessions, Woodruff proposed a question about Quayle’s collegiate academic record. “Margolis and Brit and I all said, ‘No way, somebody’s liable to look into ours,’” Brokaw recollected. “We discovered that we had as checkered a past as undergraduates as he did.”²⁷

Hume said that by following up one another’s questions, the panel hoped to circumvent the deliberately restrictive structure the campaigns had imposed. “I was last in the rotation, and it was agreed that I would keep my eye on questions that had been asked by my colleagues that might have gone unanswered,” he explained.²⁸ In this capacity, Hume returned to Woodruff’s opening question to Quayle about his qualifications for the job. Later Hume followed up his own follow-up; each time, Quayle offered a response that did not satisfy the panel.

Finally the rotation came back to Brokaw. “I had real mental anguish,” Brokaw recalled. “I don’t think Quayle’s people will ever appreciate that, but I remember as it came around to me, I thought, ‘Oh, God, do I want to ask this again?’ But he was so inadequate in the first two answers, I thought in a way he deserved the third crack at it. Also I thought the country deserved to hear one more time what he would do as president. That’s why we were there.”²⁹ Brokaw’s rephrasing led Quayle to liken himself to John F. Kennedy, which led to Bentsen’s “You’re no JFK” line.

At the end of the day, how much difference have panelists’ questions made in presidential debates? As Walter Mears points out, “For all the self-importance a lot of us like to put in our questions, debates have been more driven by things that were beside the point.”³⁰ Mears cites Ford’s Eastern Europe gaffe and Dole’s “Democrat wars” statement as examples of debate moments that sprang only indirectly from a panelist’s question.

Furthermore, no matter what the question, clever candidates will always shape answers that match their political objectives. Robert Boyd of Knight-

Ridder Newspapers, a questioner in the Bush-Ferraro vice presidential debate, called the candidates' responses in that event a "classic dodge and feint." "They're pros at this," Boyd said. "There was no question they hadn't answered probably scores of times already before and there was no real way, and no desire, to trip them up."³¹

In a *Newsweek* column about her experience, Jane Bryant Quinn, a panelist in the Reagan-Anderson debate of 1980, lamented the candidates' lack of responsiveness. "When reporters put a question to a politician they don't really expect a full and frank reply," Quinn wrote. "There are, however, some general rules of the game—one of them being that even an irrelevant response should contain, somewhere, some faint indication that the original question has at least been heard."³²

MODERATORS OF PRESS PANEL DEBATES

Under the old press panel format, some of television journalism's most venerated names stepped up to the microphone to moderate presidential and vice presidential debates. Barbara Walters, Bill Moyers, Judy Woodruff, Bernard Shaw, Howard K. Smith, Sander Vanocur, and Pauline Frederick are a few of the individuals who presided over press conference-style debates. Given the strictures of the format, their talents went largely underutilized.

With a few notable exceptions, moderators of press panel debates have made only a limited contribution to the content of the discussion, serving less as interrogators than traffic cops and timekeepers.

In 1988, for the first time, debate moderators were given the opportunity to begin the telecast with a question to each candidate. This change in rules made possible what is undoubtedly the best-known exchange between a debate moderator and a presidential candidate, Bernard Shaw's opening query to Michael Dukakis in the Los Angeles debate: "Governor, if Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?" Equally shocking to the audience as Shaw's question was Dukakis's dispassionate reply.

In the predebate meeting with fellow panelists Andrea Mitchell of NBC, Ann Compton of ABC, and Margaret Warner of *Newsweek*, Shaw had been reluctant to share his question, "petrified" that it would become known to Dukakis in advance. When the panelists pressed him, Shaw relented and read it to them precisely as he would read it on the air. Taken aback, Mitchell

asked him to consider substituting the words “your wife” instead of citing Kitty Dukakis by name. The other panelists supported Mitchell—“delicately,” according to one—but Shaw held fast. “We thought it was a little unseemly, a little undignified,” Mitchell said. “And you have to think back to the context. This was before shock radio, tabloid television, the blurring of lines within the multiplicity of media, so we were a little uptight and stuffy.”³³

Shaw hoped that his question would be a “stethoscope” to probe Dukakis’s attitude toward capital punishment. “Bush had been beating Dukakis severely about the head and shoulders, charging he was soft on crime. Many voters perceive seeing and hearing Dukakis but not feeling him. I asked that question to see if there was feeling.” The idea had come to Shaw at 2:00 A.M. on the day of the debate. His initial worry was that Dukakis would “hit it out of the park,” making Shaw seem too easy on the candidate. “I didn’t know how he was going to answer. What surprised me was that he didn’t stop to reflect at all before answering. It was as if he didn’t hear the question.”

At the end of the debate, Shaw recalled, “an eerie thing” happened: As he made his way from the stage to the CNN anchor booth, the audience silently parted to let him walk past. “Nobody said ‘thanks’ or ‘good debate’ or anything like that,” Shaw said. “And then I realized I had walked through the Dukakis side of the hall, through his supporters. And that’s when it struck me what impact my question must have had.”³⁴

Reaction to the question ran heavily against Shaw. Kitty Dukakis herself called it “inappropriate” and “outrageous.” In *Time* magazine, Walter Shapiro wrote, “The question was in ghoulish taste, but it proved revealing.” ABC’s Hal Bruno, who had been at the debate, found himself seated next to Shaw the next day on the plane back to Washington. “He’s a good friend, we were police reporters together in Chicago,” Bruno said. “Bernie started talking about why he asked the question. And after my second scotch I said, ‘Bernie—it was a shitty question.’”³⁵

Though it is the Kitty Dukakis question that most viewers remember, Shaw had a similarly gruesome opener for George Bush. Quoting the Twentieth Amendment to the Constitution on the issue of presidential succession, Shaw asked Bush to comment on the possibility of Dan Quayle becoming president in the event of Bush’s death. Midway through the question, after the words “if you are elected and die before inauguration day,” Bush interrupted and exclaimed in mock horror, “Bernie!” The difference

between this and the mechanical Dukakis response underscored Bush's relative humanity.

Less notorious than Shaw's question to Dukakis was moderator Judy Woodruff's opening volley to Dan Quayle in the 1988 vice presidential debate in Omaha. Woodruff got the program off to a memorable start:

Senator, you have been criticized, as we all know, for your decision to stay out of the Vietnam War, for your poor academic record. But more troubling to some are some of the comments that have been made by people in your own party. Just last week former secretary of state Haig said that your pick was the dumbest call George Bush could have made. Your leader in the Senate, Bob Dole, said that a better-qualified person could have been chosen. Other Republicans have been far more critical in private. Why do you think that you have not made a more substantial impression on some of these people who have been able to observe you up close?

Quayle's programmatic, unsatisfying response started him down what would soon become a disastrous path. According to Woodruff, the decision to query Quayle about his qualifications was obvious. "I came to Omaha pretty much persuaded that I wanted to go to that first," she later recalled. "It was particularly relevant in Quayle's case because there were outstanding questions about his background and his selection."³⁶ Woodruff's sharply worded opener paved the way for her fellow panelists in the Omaha debate to pursue the issue.

It is interesting to note that all presidential debate moderators but one have come from the world of television. The exception is James Hoge, who, as editor of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, pulled duty at the 1976 vice presidential debate between Walter Mondale and Bob Dole. Hoge is also unique in representing a news organization based neither in Washington nor New York.

As moderator, Hoge found himself making a decision that would affect the substance of the event. According to Hoge, the debate sponsors had encouraged him to mediate if one of the candidates attempted to "demagogue" a response. "And when Dole gave his answer, the gist of which was that Democrats were responsible for all wars, his face screwed up and nasty, I was seconds away from saying, 'Excuse me, Senator Dole, but you really didn't answer the question. Would you take another stab at it?'" In his peripheral vision, Hoge could see Mondale signaling with a vigorous shake

of the head that he did not want Dole interrupted. "I made a split-second decision," said Hoge. "It's their debate, they're the ones who are going to get elected, so I didn't intervene that way."³⁷

Barbara Walters, moderating the first 1984 debate between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale, began her opening remarks with a crisp rebuke of both camps' imperious tactics in selecting press representatives for the panel. Tersely explaining to the viewing audience the difficulties encountered in the process, Walters said: "As moderator and on behalf of my fellow journalists I very much regret, as does the League of Women Voters, that this situation has occurred."

"On reflection, I might have asked her not to do that," says Dorothy Ridings, then president of the League. Herself a newspaperwoman, Ridings sympathized with Walters's desire to stand up for journalists. "But for the historical record it probably would have been better if she didn't."³⁸ Ridings changed her opinion after screening the debate some ten years later with people who did not understand the context, and who found Walters's reference confusing. For their part, the campaigns scorned the moderator's impromptu editorial. "That was pretty badly received," recalled James Baker. "Everybody was a little pissed off," agreed a Mondale aide.³⁹

The tartness of Walters's opening statement was consistent with her overall moderating style, an attitude that brooked no nonsense. When Mondale raised the issue of Lebanon, Walters sternly reminded him, "Foreign policy will be the subject of the next debate. Stop dragging it by its ear into this one." At another point, Walters congratulated the candidates for heeding her admonitions, saying, "You're both very obedient. I have to give you credit for that." In the view of *Washington Post* TV critic Tom Shales, Walters outdistanced both Reagan and Mondale in demonstrating leadership qualities. "She's a toughie," wrote Shales. "She laid it on the line."⁴⁰

In some instances the influence of the moderator is not evident to debate viewers because it manifests itself behind the scenes. According to panelists in the first 1988 match between Bush and Dukakis, that program might have taken a dramatically different turn without the predebate intervention of moderator Jim Lehrer. Stories had appeared in the press speculating that the panelists might violate the format as a protest against the campaigns' high-handed tactics in choosing panelists. The *Washington Post* went so far as to suggest that the journalists "stand up at the outset, take off their microphones and tell Lehrer to launch a one-on-one exchange between the candidates—the one thing both campaigns have been trying to avoid."⁴¹

Joining Lehrer as panelists for that debate were Peter Jennings of ABC, John Mashek of the *Atlanta Constitution*, and Annie Groer of the *Orlando Sentinel*. In the group's preproduction meeting, Jennings pushed the idea of dispensing with the rules in order to force the candidates into direct engagement. According to those present, Lehrer steered the conversation back to an acceptance of the terms agreed to in advance. In the end, Jennings resigned himself to the inevitable. "You got hired by the rules and you played by the rules," Jennings said.⁴²

As in previous years, the panelists' frustration stemmed from the restrictive format conditions imposed by the two campaigns. "We had some difficult moments because of the agreement," Lehrer said. "There was some discussion there about 'to hell with the rules, we can do any damn thing we want to,' and I kept saying we had made an agreement to come and do something. I felt it just as a matter of function, a matter of giving your word."⁴³

The event came off as planned, and the panel stuck to its preassigned role. The discussions that took place among the journalists behind the scenes, however, would inspire Lehrer to write a 1995 novel called *The Last Debate*, in which a quartet of reporter-questioners deliberately undertakes to sabotage a presidential candidate during a live TV debate. The idea for the book came to Lehrer as he left the hotel en route to the debate site at Wake Forest University. He was carrying a folder that contained his opening questions; as he walked past campaign officials from both sides, Lehrer commented to his wife, "Boy, they would give anything to know what I've got in this folder. That's when I started thinking . . . what if you were the candidate and you knew what the questions were going to be?"⁴⁴

DEBATE MODERATORS IN THE 1990S

"A moderator is like a body at an Irish wake," observed Bill Moyers, who performed the function in the 1980 debate between Ronald Reagan and John Anderson. "You need it to have the party, but it doesn't say much."⁴⁵

With the demise of the panel format, Moyers's description no longer applies; the corpse has returned from the dead. Though single moderators now operate with a reasonable degree of discretion, their task remains tricky: they must run a program devised by the participants for the participants, while simultaneously, and overarchingly, addressing the needs of the

public. A moderator must be acceptable to each of the candidates and the debate sponsor, but also to constituent groups who lack direct veto power, namely, the voters and the press. Moderators must be judicious and informed, telegenic and leaderly.

Since 1992, only three individuals have held the job: Jim Lehrer of PBS, the most experienced presidential debate moderator in history; Carole Simpson of ABC, moderator of the Richmond town hall debate of 1992; and Hal Bruno, retired political director of ABC, who was at the helm of the boisterous 1992 vice presidential debate.

Lehrer has moderated six presidential debates, one in 1988, two in 1992, and all three of the 1996 matches. For his deft handling of the job, the PBS newsman has drawn overwhelmingly positive reviews. After the 1996 debates, *New York Times* television critic Walter Goodman reserved special praise for the subtlety of Lehrer's approach. "This man of modest mien keeps the spotlight on the person being questioned," Goodman wrote. "His somewhat halting conversational manner invites rather than commands. And his professional principles dispel any fears that he is out to get not just his guests' point of view but also the guests themselves."⁴⁶

Lehrer draws a distinction between moderating a debate and conducting a journalistic interview. "I am not there to do things which I normally do," he explains. "Moderating, in my opinion, is a separate skill. I learned how to do it functioning as a journalist on the *News Hour*, but as a moderator of a presidential debate I'm not sitting there as a journalist, I'm sitting there as a journalist functioning as a moderator." Lehrer's background as a Washington insider appears to work to his advantage. "I'm not dealing with a bunch of strangers," he said, "and they're not dealing with a stranger, which gives me a tremendous leg up. They've agreed to let me do this, so they have some level of trust in me that gives me a lot more latitude and a lot more confidence to do what I want to do."⁴⁷

Lehrer's first debate as moderator, the opening 1988 encounter between Bush and Dukakis in Winston-Salem, followed the traditional press panel format; four years later, at the initial Bush-Clinton-Perot meeting in St. Louis, he would repeat this format. Lehrer's maiden voyage as a solo moderator came in the final 1992 debate in East Lansing, Michigan. A clumsy compromise between the Bush and Clinton campaigns gave Lehrer a solo shot at the candidates for the first half of the debate; halfway through the program, the format switched, and a panel of journalists joined him onstage for the remaining forty-five minutes. It was the single-moderator half of this

debate that would supply a rough model for the 1996 series, in which Lehrer returned for three rounds as the lone questioner.

Lehrer found that the relaxed rules governing the first half of the 1992 East Lansing debate broke the tyranny of the clock that usually constrains presidential debates. "I was depending on my instincts and my experience to make sure it was fair, rather than time cues," Lehrer recalled. What Lehrer calls "the hardest moment I've ever had in a debate" occurred during this telecast, when Ross Perot interrupted the dialogue to complain about the distribution of time. "Is there an equal-time rule tonight?" a testy Perot asked. "Or do you just keep lunging in at will? I thought we were going to have equal time, but maybe I just have to interrupt the other two. Is that the way it works?" As Lehrer remembered the moment, "I looked at him and I said with my eyes, 'Don't you dare accuse me of being unfair,' and he backed off."

With three participants in the 1992 debates, another of Lehrer's challenges was devising questions of equal weight for each of the candidates. Lehrer explained, "I had to ask an apple, an apple, and an apple, always. If there was an edge to one, there had to be an edge to all of them. If there were lobs, they had to be lobs for all three." Lehrer was, he said, "free to choose every subject. There was no restriction on how much time was devoted to anything." This freedom both simplified and complicated his job.

Lehrer suffered a few anxious moments shortly before the East Lansing debate, when he read his opening questions over the telephone to his wife and sounding board, novelist Kate Lehrer. Because she was in the middle of a book tour, Mrs. Lehrer had remained at the couple's home in Washington. "I told her the three questions and there was silence," Lehrer recalled. "I said, 'What's the problem?' and she said, 'You've got two apples and an orange.' She was very reluctant to say anything because she knew this was the worst time in the world." Realizing she was right, but fearing he would not have time to rewrite his questions, Lehrer set forth for the debate hall. Although the Secret Service had worked out the route in advance, they did not account for Lehrer's limo being delayed at a railroad crossing, which unexpectedly gave the moderator the time he needed to fashion a last-minute substitution.

In 1996, with only two debaters per program, and the precedent of the single-moderator format under his belt, Lehrer faced new challenges at the first Clinton-Dole debate in Hartford. To begin with, the candidates had tightened the rules, giving the moderator less elbow room than he had had

in 1992. Furthermore, Bob Dole's twenty-point lag in the polls had led to press speculation about a debate "surprise," a dramatic gesture Dole might make in order to turn the race around.

With this possibility in mind, Lehrer devised a contingency plan. "If either candidate violated the rules—their rules, not my rules—I was not going to step on the event," he said. "Once they broke their own rules, I was going to let it play to its natural conclusion, then say, 'Gentlemen, you have violated the rules. We can negotiate some new ones right here in front of everybody or we can continue this wide open thing—your decision.' I was all prepared to do that. And of course, nothing like that happened."

Halfway through the Hartford debate, when Dole still had not touched on the widely discussed issue of Clinton's character, Lehrer made an "editorial decision" to introduce the subject himself. "I'd throw him a lob," Lehrer said, "but he was going to have to hit it. I wasn't going to hit it for him." Lehrer's query ("every word of this question I had down cold down") was an exercise in restraint: "Senator Dole, we've talked mostly now about differences between the two of you that relate to policy, issues, and that sort of thing. Are there also significant differences in the more personal area that are relevant to this election?"

Dole refused the bait, devoting most of his response to talking about tax cuts and then citing as a personal difference the fact that Clinton was "a bit taller than I am." According to Lehrer, "If he had said, 'Yes, I think there are matters of character involving this man,' then the whole rest of the debate would have been about character."

More puzzling to Lehrer than Dole's reticence was running mate Jack Kemp's avoidance of the character issue at the vice presidential debate several days later. Although Lehrer directly solicited Kemp's view of the "personal and ethical" differences between Clinton and Dole, Kemp offered only a tangential response. "He wasn't ready for that," Lehrer said, "which I just find weird. It's the only thing that had been talked about. He gave this stock answer, which was irrelevant to my question. I was astounded that he wasn't prepared for that."

Lehrer's raising of the character issue in the 1996 debates is consistent with his belief that a moderator should limit the discussion to subjects already in play instead of introducing new topics in a debate. "I also believe that this is not an opportunity for a moderator to show how tough he is," said Lehrer. "I feel very strongly about that, because it would be so easy to change the nature of the campaign. I could have, in Hartford, changed the

whole nature of the campaign by the questions I asked—for good, bad, or indifferent. I'm not sure I could have changed the outcome of the election, I don't mean that, but changed what they would have talked about.”

Lehrer makes a crucial point about the solo moderator: Anyone who serves in this role holds vast power. Given the volatile combination of live television, high stakes, and enormous audiences, such power could easily be abused.

The first single moderator of a general election debate was not Jim Lehrer but Hal Bruno of ABC News, who moderated the 1992 vice presidential match between Al Gore, Dan Quayle, and Admiral James Stockdale. Though deemed a “slugfest” and a “free-for-all” in the press, this debate also broke ground as the first to dispense with a panel of questioners. Minus any journalistic sidekicks, Bruno had his hands full with this freewheeling conversation, which is best remembered for two things: the aggressive posture of Quayle and Gore toward each other, and, more famously, the excruciating disconnectedness of Stockdale.

“About three or four minutes into it, I realized, oh my God, this is trouble,” Bruno recalled. Stockdale’s rhetorical opening questions, “Who am I? What am I doing here?” had caught the moderator, as well as the audience, off guard. “That’s when I realized how much out of his element he was,” Bruno said. “Somehow I established kind of a mystic eye contact, and I could tell when he wanted in or out. About halfway through, I really did feel that this poor guy had no business being there.”⁴⁸

As for Gore and Quayle, “They really were absolutely wild with each other,” Bruno said. “Gore was going after Quayle, Quayle was going after Clinton.” When Stockdale announced that he had missed a question because his hearing aid was off, Bruno stopped himself from blurting out, “You may be the luckiest man in America.”

Bruno’s performance as moderator drew mixed reviews. Some observers thought he ought to have been more forceful; others believed he was correct to let Gore and Quayle go at it. “It’s hard to judge when you’re sitting there,” Bruno said. “I took the attitude that as moderator I was to be like a potted palm, just simply steer the discussion, see that they got their time.”

Like other moderators before him, Bruno considered himself hamstrung by the “rigid structure” drawn up in advance by campaign negotiators. Both the major party candidates, he said, “were programmed to say certain things no matter what, so you let them do that and try to snap them back to the

question. But in that format there wasn't time to get them back." Bruno also felt constrained by the set, which placed the three debaters at individual podiums, physically segregated from the moderator and from one another. Bruno would have preferred gathering everyone around a table, an arrangement whose logic was too radical for the negotiators who drafted the memorandum of understanding.

These challenges notwithstanding, Bruno found the experience exciting. "I'm not blasé about it at all," he said. As a young reporter, Bruno had been present in the studio at WBBM in Chicago for the first Kennedy-Nixon debate. Thirty-two years later, he made debate history on his own.

Carole Simpson, Bruno's colleague at the ABC News Washington Bureau, also entered the history books when she moderated the first town hall debate in Richmond with George Bush, Bill Clinton, and Ross Perot. Simpson got the job, she said, because of a "flukey thing" that happened in 1992. The three broadcast networks had proposed a series of three debates that year, each to be hosted by a major network anchorman. When the Commission on Presidential Debates rejected this proposal, NBC and CBS barred its employees from participating as moderators or panelists, leaving ABC the only over-the-air network still in the mix. As a result, ABC News was represented in each of the four 1992 debates. "Things happen for a funny reason," Simpson said. "I'm sure had they come to ABC and said, 'Give us one of your anchors to moderate this debate,' I would not have been at the top of the list."⁴⁹

Simpson's experience was in some ways more taxing than that of either Lehrer or Bruno, since she was inaugurating a riskier, untested format. Recalled Simpson, "I had been watching presidential debates all my career, and of course they had always been panels of journalists questioning the candidates, so this was totally different. There wasn't anything to go back and look at to see how to do this." Simpson said she was surprised to see how much leeway the written debate agreement gave her. "The only things it said I had to do were to make sure they each had a closing statement of two minutes, that no one would dominate, that we would cover both domestic and foreign issues, and that I could follow up and press a question," she said. "I had all kinds of latitude to do things that I thought were necessary to get the people to question the candidates."

Though praised by many, Simpson did not emerge from the experience unscathed by criticism. In the days that followed, some Republican cam-

paign officials openly charged that Simpson had skewed the debate by the tone she set in her predebate audience warm-up and by her choice of on-air questioners. Simpson spent about half an hour with the town hall audience before the telecast began. “I said, ‘I want an idea of the kinds of questions you want to ask,’ and they wanted to stand up and read me their questions,” Simpson recalled. “And I’m going, ‘No, no, no, I don’t want to know your questions, I just want to get a sense of the issues you’re concerned about because my job is to see that you get answers from these candidates to the questions that concern you the most.’ ” The issues the audience raised, Simpson said, were considerably more substantive than those reporters and the campaigns had been focusing on.

Early in the debate, when President Bush attempted to bring up Bill Clinton’s draft status, Simpson invited the audience to share with the candidates what they had told her in the warm-up. “I thought, given the guidelines, that I had a perfect right to bring up my discussion with the audience in which they indicated that they did not want to hear about things like that. And I said, ‘Would some of you like to express to the candidates what you told me?’ and that’s when the man with the ponytail got up and said, ‘We want an end to the mudslinging, we’re tired of the negative campaigns.’ ”

Simpson’s critics charged that she had preselected the audience members whose questions ultimately made it on the air. In fact, the moderator did not choose the questioners; that task fell to producer Ed Fouhy, who communicated his instructions to Simpson through her earpiece. As Simpson described it, “He was just trying to balance the audience, so that we got men, we got women, we got minorities . . . We’d go from one side to another side. I had no control over that. I was being told who to go to, and purely based on where they were located, not because we knew what their questions were or anything like that.” Fouhy confirmed this. “I was in her ear throughout, and I was telling her who to go to next,” he said. “To suggest that somehow those questions were screened . . . it’s simply not true.”⁵⁰

Simpson said that the accusations of question-planting hounded her after the debate. “It was widely talked about on the Rush Limbaugh show,” she said, “and I even got death threats. The Republicans had put out this line that I was pro-Clinton and that I had tried to make George Bush look bad.” Bush himself sent Simpson a thank-you note, commenting that she had done a fair, professional job. “I have it framed,” she said, “because people were so accusatory that I had made George Bush blow it. I didn’t make George Bush blow it.”

In a campaign postmortem at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, Bush aide Fred Steeper criticized the "iron hand" Simpson exercised as moderator. His reasoning offers an insight into campaign thinking on whom debates should rightfully serve. "Her interest seemed to be more to get as many questions as possible out of the audience, rather than having the candidates speak," Steeper said. "Somehow the audience's interest was more important than the interests of the three campaigns. You could tell that she didn't want give and take among the candidates. She wanted to maximize questions from the audience."⁵¹ According to this view, even the "people's debate" belonged to the candidates.

Since the format changes of the 1990s, other, flashier television personalities have either been proposed, or proposed themselves, as debate moderators. In 1992 CNN talk show host Larry King actively pursued a slot in one of that year's debates. King's unsuccessful lobbying efforts became a running theme in a video documentary called *Spin*, in which experimental filmmaker Brian Springer spliced together footage downlinked from the CNN satellite. These scenes, never intended for public consumption, were recorded as King and the various candidates relaxed during commercial breaks in King's program. "I think I'd be a fair moderator," King tells Bill Clinton. "Yeah, I do, too," replies Clinton, ever the master politician. On a different show, King asks George Bush if the first panel had been selected; Bush says not yet, then adds, cryptically, "I did what I told you I would do."⁵² Eventually King did turn up on the Bush campaign's list of potential moderators.

Oprah Winfrey was among the Democrats' choices to moderate in 1996, according to *Broadcasting and Cable* magazine, though this notion apparently did not get very far. A Clinton aide told the magazine, "Oprah would clearly appeal to a broad spectrum of people who might not otherwise watch the debate."⁵³ Network news anchors have also been proposed as debate moderators, despite doubts that a "media bigfoot" is the proper person for the position. Said Paul Kirk Jr., cochairman of the debate commission, "Some of these anchors are so dominant that we were fearful they might upstage the merits of what was happening."⁵⁴

Political columnist David Broder stated the problem more bluntly: "I have to say that when television does stuff in presidential campaigns, it tends to be more for the promotion of the television personalities than it does about the candidates. That's why God invented Jim Lehrer. He's superb."⁵⁵

TOWN HALL QUESTIONERS

With the introduction of the town hall format, average citizens have become the newest breed of debate questioners. To the delight of some observers and the chagrin of others, these ordinary Americans have supplanted journalists in querying the candidates on a wide range of subject matter. The viewer appeal of this format seems to have guaranteed its future, at least for now. “The town meeting is always the most popular for one reason,” says Janet Brown, executive director of the debate commission. “People identify with the participants. They look and sound like most people who are watching.”⁵⁶

The elections of 1992 and 1996 each included a town hall debate, putting the power of the microphone directly into the hands of voters. The 1996 event, which brought together Bill Clinton and Bob Dole in San Diego, produced few memorable moments or interesting characters. However, the 1992 “people’s debate” in Richmond, featuring the trio of Clinton, Bush, and Perot, briefly thrust several individuals into the national spotlight:

- Marisa Hall, the twenty-five-year-old African-American woman who asked George Bush how the national debt had personally affected his life. Although Hall’s question was confusingly worded, Bush’s “I don’t get it” response contributed to the public perception of a White House out of touch and gave Bill Clinton ammunition that would last throughout the campaign.
- Kimberly Usry, a young single mother who early in the debate wanted to know why the candidates spent such a “depressingly large” amount of time “trashing their opponents’ character.”
- Denton Walthall, a ponytailed father of two, who followed up Usry’s question by asking the candidates to cross their hearts and pledge to “focus on the issues and not the personalities and the mud.”

In postdebate analysis on ABC, Jeff Greenfield emphasized the civilizing effect of the questioners. Greenfield credited two unanticipated reactions to the town hall participants: They knocked the candidates off their sound bites and kept attacks to a minimum. NBC’s John Chancellor was even more exultant, calling the debate “a shining example of how well things can work in presidential politics.” An editorial in the *Christian Science Monitor*

described what happened in Richmond as a “citizens’ arrest”: “The candidates had little choice but to be civil and engaging—not only because of the cautionary early questions, but also because they were compelled to look honest-to-goodness voting citizens in the eye and respond to their heartfelt concerns.”⁵⁷

Not everyone approved of the town hall forum. According to Monica Crowley, an aide to Richard Nixon, the former president was “horrified” by the Richmond debate. “Wasn’t that format miserable?” Nixon asked Crowley. “It made them all look bad. They claimed that it was an ‘audience of undecideds.’ Undecideds? Selected by whom? Come on. Undecideds don’t know very much because they don’t care!”⁵⁸

Nixon has a point. By choosing only uncommitted voters to pose questions, the organizers of town hall debates run the risk of dumbing down the intellectual content of the dialogue. Town hall audiences in both 1992 and 1996 were selected by the Gallup Poll organization, which started the process with a random sample survey, then winnowed the pool to registered voters who described themselves as uncommitted. The main criterion for participation was not having decided on a candidate. (In 1996 the Secret Service removed fourteen individuals from the list of possible questioners when background checks revealed they were convicted felons.)⁵⁹

No one claims that the town hall audiences truly reflect the national populace or even the populace of the debate city. Carole Simpson recalls meeting the Richmond questioners and being surprised to spot only five African-Americans in the group; given the town’s racial composition, she had expected a more diverse crowd. “How Gallup had chosen them was to go with people who were undecided. Most African-Americans had decided they were going to vote for Clinton, so that’s why they weren’t part of the audience,” she said.⁶⁰

As in other matters of debate production, it is the campaigns that have decided to fill the town hall audiences with uncommitteds. Uncommitteds are preferred over partisans in order to guarantee that the random selection of questioners will not inadvertently skew toward either candidate. In this, however, the candidates make a trade-off: Questions from undecided voters are less easily predicted and therefore less easy to prepare for.

In Richmond the town hall participants successfully steered the conversation toward substantive issues of general importance. Four years later the San Diego audience came closer to fulfilling the warning of government professor Michael Robinson that “there is nothing more self-centered than

an audience of untrained voters who ask the same question: me, me, me.”⁶¹ A military man asked Dole about the gap between military and civilian pay scales. A landlady wanted to know about capital gains cuts. A minister spoke about returning the country to Christian values. Two of the twenty questions dealt with gay rights. Moderator Lehrer had to actively solicit foreign affairs questions; only two were posed during the ninety-minute debate.

Carole Simpson, among others, defends the questioning of the town hall participants. “I’ve had arguments with my colleagues who thought the public’s questions were innocuous and inane, and I have just to yell back at them that this election is about the people and their questions. They’re not the questions that we might ask, but this is what they want to know, and I don’t think we should have any criticism of that.”⁶²

Lehrer, while acknowledging that the San Diego debate was “not as successful as it might have been,” believes town halls serve a separate purpose from other debates: letting voters see how the candidates respond to ordinary citizens. “There are a hundred different ways to show that, and maybe this is a good way, but that’s all it does,” Lehrer said. “You get questions that might not be asked by professionals, sometimes they’re a little off the wall, but so what—it’s a different function.”⁶³

The volatility of town hall audiences is one of their most intriguing qualities, not to mention one of the greatest challenges for producers. Officials from the debate commission tell the story of a member of the Richmond town hall audience who never made it on TV with his question. Shortly before air, the Secret Service informed Frank Fahrenkopf Jr., cochairman of the commission, that the man had been behaving erratically. “What happened,” Fahrenkopf recalled, “is he’d brought a flask in. They’d been there since three in the afternoon, so he was drunk and we had to remove him.”⁶⁴ We can only wonder how the candidates might have handled an average American citizen under the influence.