

Chapter Six

THE PRODUCTIONS

With less than ten minutes remaining in the nation's first presidential debate in sixteen years, Jimmy Carter was wrapping up his final answer of the evening, talking about a breakdown in the trust between government and the people. Mid-sentence, in tens of millions of homes across America, a static buzz suddenly knocked Carter's voice off the air. Unaware of the problem, the candidate continued to speak. Seconds later, anchormen on all three networks materialized on-screen to announce the unthinkable: Audio from the program had been lost. On ABC, the network charged with pool-producing the debate, Harry Reasoner reassured viewers, "It is not a conspiracy against Governor Carter or President Ford, and they will fix it as soon as possible."¹ "As soon as possible" turned out to be twenty-seven minutes, an eternity for live television.

"I don't think I've ever been in a situation more tricky than that," moderator Edwin Newman would recall. "I immediately thought to myself, what in God's name am I going to talk about? I can't talk about what they've said,

or review it, or evaluate it, since I'm the moderator and I'm supposed to be impartial." Exacerbating the awkwardness of the situation was the all too apparent discomfort of the debaters themselves. Neither man wanted to make the first move, so, for the duration of the gap, both stood in place like statues. "When I suggested that they sit down because there were chairs onstage, not only did they not sit down, they did not acknowledge that I had suggested it," Newman said.²

Carter and Ford would reminisce about this most stilted of public moments in a joint interview with Jim Lehrer for the Commission on Presidential Debates's Oral History Project:

CARTER: I watched that tape afterwards, and it was embarrassing to me that both President Ford and I stood there almost like robots. We didn't move around. We didn't walk over and shake hands with each other. We just stood there.

FORD: I suspect both of us would have liked to sit down and relax while the technicians were fixing the system. But I also think both of us were hesitant to make any gesture that might look like we weren't physically or mentally able to handle a problem like that.

CARTER: But the fact is we didn't know at what instant all of the power was going to come back on and the transmission would be resumed. So it was a matter of nervousness. I guess President Ford felt the same way.

FORD: Because that was twenty-eight (*sic*) excruciating minutes. You're on TV nationally, and yet you're not doing anything.³

In the *New York Times*, Joseph Lelyveld called the sound failure a "great equalizer": "Presidents and presidential candidates normally ride with sirens and motorcycle escorts to insure that they don't have to wait for anything. But there they were, for all the nation to see, alone with their thoughts like ordinary citizens caught in a traffic jam."⁴ The episode also demonstrated to a nationwide audience that neither Ford nor Carter had a knack for improvisation.

The breakdown would be traced to a tiny piece of electronic hardware valued at less than a dollar. David Brinkley began the next evening's NBC newscast by holding up an example of the errant part whose malfunctioning had been responsible for "plunging President Ford and Jimmy Carter into unaccustomed silence" and "irritating maybe ninety million people."⁵

A new chapter had entered debate lore, one that even today serves as an object lesson for the men and women who stage presidential debates.

The audio breakdown of 1976 underscores the fragile nature of live television. Although debates are pure choreography, they also operate according to the iron rule of spontaneity, meaning that even the most carefully laid plans will sometimes be subverted. Debate technicians strive for a program whose execution calls no attention to itself; when the production becomes the story, unhappy television functionaries result. Elliot Bernstein, the ABC pool producer in charge of the Ford-Carter debate, described himself as “very depressed” after the incident. “For a couple of weeks after that I felt really awful,” he said. The morning after the broadcast, President Ford invited Bernstein and a production colleague for a conciliatory cup of coffee. “The meeting with the president was like taking two aspirin,” Bernstein said. “I felt better for about two hours.”⁶

On the heels of the audio problem in Philadelphia, technicians outfitted the subsequent debate site in San Francisco with a triply redundant sound system. “We had to add backups to backups,” recalled CBS pool producer Jack Kelly,⁷ and in every presidential debate since, caution has been the watchword. Debate producers make elaborate preparations for worst-case contingencies: extra cameras at the ready, candidates and questioners on multiple microphones, carpeting and drapes that are thicker than normal in order to muffle ambient sound. For 1976’s final debate on the campus of the College of William and Mary, student volunteers oiled all 650 seats in Phi Beta Kappa Hall to prevent squeaking during the telecast.

Producers of presidential debates do whatever it takes to ensure a smooth-running production. In the middle of a rehearsal for the 1988 vice presidential match, Omaha’s City Auditorium lost electrical power when a bird flew into an auxiliary power supply. Determined to avoid a repeat of this during the live broadcast, executive producer Ed Fouhy placed a strongly worded phone call to an official at the local power company. The official’s perfunctory reassurances did not satisfy Fouhy, who countered with a threat to distribute the man’s home phone number to all fifteen hundred journalists covering the event should anything go wrong. The next day crews arrived to double-wire the facility, which, according to Fouhy, “cost them so much power that people who live in that part of Omaha weren’t seeing a full picture on their television sets. They were getting about a two-inch picture on their eighteen-inch monitors.”⁸

Not every potential disaster is technical in nature. Annie Groer, one of

the questioners in the first Bush-Dukakis debate, remembers spending the hour-and-a-half broadcast terrified that she and her fellow panelists would fall off the set. “Our chairs were all on casters which were literally about eight inches from the apron of the stage,” Groer said. “So one false move and we all would have been pitching backwards.”⁹ Four years later producer Fouhy had similar worries during the split-format debate in East Lansing, in which the panelists were required to walk onto the set halfway through the telecast. “My greatest fear,” Fouhy wrote, “was that one of the three—all debate rookies—would walk onto the stage . . . and literally fall flat on their faces, coming from the backstage darkness and having to negotiate two steps to get to their table in the blazing onstage lights.”¹⁰

During the 1992 vice presidential debate, Admiral James Stockdale gave producers a scare when he began wandering away from his podium. Richard Berke of the *New York Times* monitored this drama-behind-the-drama from an on-site production truck, where he was able to observe the full range of cameras simultaneously. Berke described the scene:

As the ninety-minute event wore on, Stockdale ventured farther and farther away from his spot on the podium, as if he had had enough give-and-take and was ready for his daily constitutional.

“He’s going for a walk!” came the voice of a nervous network producer in New York over a squawk box in the control room here. “I don’t know if anyone can suggest something be done—he’s got bad legs from the war, and he’s going to fall down!”

Nothing could be done, but luckily for the anxiety-ridden producer, as well as for Stockdale, he never fell.¹¹

DEBATE VENUES

Although presidential debates were hatched in the sterile environment of a television studio, 1960 was the first and last year the programs took place in this kind of setting. (WBBM’s Studio One in Chicago, the birthplace of debates, would later become home to another form of televised joust: the weekly movie review show featuring dueling critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert.) Since 1976, all fourteen presidential and five vice presidential debates have been produced before live audiences at auditoriums and arenas throughout the country.

Just as campaigns shape other production decisions, so do they influence the selection of debate cities. “The role of different regions is a political factor that you have to take into account,” says Janet Brown, executive director of the debate commission. “I think it’s reasonable to assume that you would not choose a place where the candidates are going to balk about spending any time, because these are big stops on their schedules.”¹²

In laying the groundwork for debates, sponsors face the Herculean task of having to anticipate the wishes of the campaigns. Venues for presidential debates must be booked well ahead of schedule, which is to say months before candidates have committed themselves to participate. The down-to-the-wire timing of debate negotiations means that campaigns routinely thwart the sponsors’ carefully laid plans. More years than not, beleaguered sponsors have been left to mop up the negotiators’ mess when political wrangling forced last-minute cancellations and facilities substitutions.

On paper, the process for site selection seems fairly straightforward. The sponsoring organization invites cities to bid for a debate based on a list of logistical criteria. Obviously a suitable hall is needed, but so are the accommodations that come with the traveling circus of a presidential debate: transportation, hotel space, a press center with room for two thousand working journalists. To offset expenses, sponsoring cities must also make a financial contribution, five hundred thousand dollars in 1996.

Debates take place in two types of on-location facilities: theaters and field houses, each with its benefits and drawbacks. “A modern and well-equipped theater means almost a turnkey operation,” says Brown of the debate commission. “You can move in and a great deal of the equipment is there. By the same token, our crew brings in a great deal of the equipment from scratch. I think in many cases it surprises them that we bring in as much equipment as we do.” Even state-of-the-art facilities undergo adjustments. Beyond the needs of debate producers, network news operations require major remodeling efforts to accommodate their on-site anchor booths for pre- and post-debate analysis.

In contrast to a production-ready theater, the field house setting means building a stage from the ground up; the advantage for producers is that they can create whatever space suits their needs. For the Richmond town hall debate, for instance, crews constructed a facility-within-a-facility in the middle of a fifteen thousand-seat basketball arena, exactly to the desired specifications. But field houses also present a liability: an atmosphere that encourages the live audience to approach the debate as an athletic competi-

tion. Says executive producer Fouhy, “You put people in a sports arena, and they behave like they’re at a sporting event.”¹³

No better illustration of this exists than the 1988 Bentsen-Quayle match, whose spirited in-house spectators constituted the rowdiest debate audience in history. Democratic campaign officials later confessed that they had imported three hundred partisan supporters to make noise and generate pro-Bentsen energy inside Omaha’s City Auditorium. For each row, a designated leader cued applause and led cheers for the Texas senator.

“That was an attempt to take advantage of television,” strategist Tom Donilon acknowledged at a symposium two years after the fact. “Because if you look at that tape, you can give people the sense that all of America is supporting your man’s position when you have a kind of roar behind him.”¹⁴ For the next round of debates, campaign negotiators put an end to such shenanigans by stipulating that “the supporters of each candidate be interspersed among supporters of other candidates.”¹⁵

According to Brown, a live audience of several hundred is ideal for a presidential debate; “over a thousand is where you get into a problem.” UCLA’s Pauley Pavilion, site of the final Bush-Dukakis debate and home court of the basketball Bruins, regularly seats fourteen thousand. Reconfigured for the debate, the space held only fifteen hundred. Still, Brown said, “people realize they’re in a cavernous space and it does change the feel of the event.”

As part of the audience warm-up in Los Angeles, debate cocommissioners Frank Fahrenkopf and Paul Kirk went through their regular preshow paces of exhorting those in attendance to comport themselves civilly. According to Fahrenkopf, a particularly defiant guest at Pauley Pavilion was the actress and Dukakis supporter Sally Field. “She just turned around and stared at me, giving me the finger with her look,” Fahrenkopf said. “I’ll never forget that as long as I live.”¹⁶

Perhaps the best-behaved audiences have been those in the town hall debates in Richmond and San Diego, where a seat in the hall meant the possibility of active participation. For the latter event, moderator Jim Lehrer enlisted the support of audience VIP Gerald Ford in enforcing proper decorum. In his predebate warm-up, Lehrer informed the crowd he was appointing Ford “hall monitor,” and told Ford, “You can discipline anybody who gets out of line.”¹⁷

Except for the town hall forums, tickets for debates are equally split among the sponsor and the campaigns, which then parcel them out to supporters. Often the candidates invite high-profile guests from the worlds of

politics and entertainment; in the final 1976 debate, for example, singer Pearl Bailey sat with First Lady Betty Ford. With tickets in high demand, average citizens have almost no opportunity to be part of a presidential debate audience. When the first Bush-Dukakis meeting in 1988 took place on the campus of Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, only thirteen seats were earmarked for a student body of five thousand. (The students did receive a consolation: Because the school cafeteria was commandeered for use as a media center, dorm residents received breakfast in bed.)

However exclusive the ticket, a spot inside the auditorium does not offer the best vantage point for debate watching; after all, the production is designed as a TV show and not a theatrical event. Acoustics and sight lines can be poor, and temperatures in the brightly lit hall are often uncomfortable. Describing the second 1976 meeting between Ford and Carter, James Wooten in the *New York Times* referred to San Francisco's Palace of Fine Arts as "the largest sauna in the country." Unseasonably hot weather had turned the hall into an oven; spectators fanned themselves with their programs "like ladies at a country church in the deep of summer."¹⁸

The two candidates had no such worries. Production crews had gone to great lengths to keep Ford and Carter comfortable, installing an ad hoc air conditioning system in the otherwise uncooled theater. According to debate scholars Seltz and Yoakam, "Large flexible ducts, looking like elephant trunks, wound their way onto the stage and the debate set, where they were suspended from the light grid and aimed at the lecterns."¹⁹ Taking no chances, technicians diffused the air blowing out of these hoses so as not to tousle the debaters' hair.

This image—Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter standing onstage beneath separate but equal air ducts—offers a useful visual metaphor for presidential debates. In the never-never land of TV debates, where reality intersects with contrivance, it is fitting that each candidate existed in what amounted to his own microclimate. Temperature-controlled and wind-free, these artificial zones of perfection underline how exacting a pursuit debate production can be.

ON-SITE NEGOTIATIONS

Once at the debate site, the campaigns intensify their efforts to anticipate the unexpected. This task begins about a week before the debate and involves

anywhere from a dozen to twenty people per campaign, headed by one or two lead representatives on each side. Also on hand are the nonpolitical personnel who will execute most of the production specifics: the debate sponsors and their team, plus the crew from the pool network assigned with getting the program on the air. From 1960 on, the major networks have shared responsibility for televising presidential debates, drawing lots to see who stages which event. The network in charge supplies a director, a technical crew, and, in the end, a fully produced feed of the program that is sent out for use by all members of the pool.

The relationship among the various entities at the debate site is not one of equals. As is true throughout the process, campaigns maintain the upper hand in the on-location dealings, leaving sponsors and television networks in a reactive posture. With the negotiated memorandum of agreement as their charter, the handlers set about converting the dry prose of the contract into a live television show. Until this point, the debate has been all theory and bluster; now it becomes three-dimensional.

The differing requirements of each physical setting make it impossible for the drafters of the debate agreement to foresee every contingency. For this reason, campaign representatives continue to hammer out production details even as the hall is being set up. The goal on each side is simple: to protect one's candidate. "The stakes are such that you do literally everything you can think of to maximize the advantage, even if it's point-zero-zero-one percent," says Brady Williamson, an on-site negotiator for Democratic candidates in the past four elections. "Sometimes in hindsight, the trivial turned out to be sublime, and the sublime turned out to be trivial."²⁰

At the debate venue, negotiators must settle a variety of issues, both procedural and production-related. Coin tosses determine many of the procedural questions, things like which candidate speaks first; the sequence of the candidates' arrival at the hall; the order in which the spouses take their seats; and so on. More complicated staging points may call for a session at the bargaining table—or, when practical, on the set itself.

As production arrangements come into focus, the handlers on site maintain close contact with their counterparts involved in candidate preps. The objective is to communicate details about the location that can be incorporated into the mock debates. Bill Clinton's advance teams in 1992 and 1996 were particularly effective in conveying production minutiae that was then applied in the practice sessions. For the logistically complicated town hall sessions, the Clinton prep operation received precise measure-

ments of the debate stage that were used to lay out an accurate replica for rehearsals.

Depending on the situation, and the dynamic between opposing handlers, on-site negotiations may or may not be thorny. Generally the campaign representatives on both sides are experienced hands at presidential debates, and many of the key figures have worked with one another in the past. “I think it’s fair to say we’ve become good acquaintances, and come to respect each other along the way,” Williamson says. “If we didn’t have each other’s mutual respect, and dare I say trust, it wouldn’t work.”²¹

Still, relations have not always been smooth. On rare occasions when campaigns cannot reach agreement, the disputes never do achieve reconciliation. In 1976 advisers for Ford and Carter battled for weeks over how blue the backdrop on the set ought to be, an argument that persisted even as the four-debate series was under way. According to Seltz and Yoakam, “The Carter people . . . wanted the background to be less blue—or warmer, as they put it. The Ford handlers wanted it to be more blue.” Imero Fiorentino, a veteran lighting director hired by the League of Women Voters, ended up mediating the disagreement. Said Fiorentino, “The blueness of the background changed all the time. Now if there was anything that was of interest to the candidates’ representatives, and befuddled me to death, it was the blue background.”²²

In 1984 the placement of the podiums generated sparks between the Reagan and Mondale campaigns. Mondale negotiators sought a particular angle in order that their candidate might take a step away from the lectern, turn to his opponent, and address him directly in a dramatic on-camera maneuver dubbed “the pivot.” According to debate coach Tom Donilon, the plan was to showcase Mondale by having him make a physical move that had never been tried in a presidential debate. “When you actually turn your body, the whole picture of the thing changes into a much more confrontational event,” Donilon explained. “A little movement on television goes a long way.”²³

As a key element in Mondale’s strategy to unnerve Reagan, the placement of lecterns was a serious negotiating point for the Democrats, though obviously they could not reveal why. Victoria Harian, debate coordinator for the League, recalled, “There was a lot of discussion about exactly how those [podiums] were going to be canted—what angle, how many inches, from what point were they going to be measured. It ended up being a very silly thing to have taken up so much time and to have become such a big deal.”²⁴

For 1984's second debate the flashpoint was lighting—the “battle of the bulbs,” as the hometown *Kansas City Star* dubbed it in a news story devoted to the squabble. Mondale's people favored the lighting plot used in the previous debate in Louisville, where the Democratic nominee had been victorious; Reagan's people demanded changes. Among other things, the Reagan team wanted lights on the live audience. According to a spokesman for pool network CBS, the president's aides believed that lighting the audience would be less “stressful” for Reagan than “talking to a black hole.”²⁵

Eventually the Republicans got many of the changes they insisted on. Most significantly Michael Deaver, Reagan's television guru, made a last-minute alteration that worked to his candidate's benefit on the air. “I always lit Reagan from the top, never underneath,” Deaver explained, “because you get that full head of hair, you don't get any lines in the face, and you get a line across the broad shoulders.” Just before the debate, Deaver reconfigured the lighting according to this high-angle scheme—with the consent, he said, of the League of Women Voters and the Mondale campaign.

For Mondale, the results were disastrous: bags under the eyes, and a waxy pallor that added years to his appearance. “Mondale needed heavy lighting straight on,” Deaver said, “and I had changed it, but I certainly didn't do it on purpose.”²⁶ Frank Greer, Mondale's television consultant, later complained that the high angle of the lighting had been “extreme” and that the original setup would have been more advantageous to his candidate.²⁷ After this episode, campaigns took greater care to protect the lighting design from tampering by the other side.

Sometimes the site itself exacerbates tensions between campaigns. The 1996 town hall debate in San Diego took place in a theater so cramped that it obviated a rule in the contract giving each candidate his own onstage “zone.” Once the reality of the space became apparent, negotiators discussed a number of alternatives, including the possibility of painting a line down the middle of the set to create a border. In the end, against the wishes of the Dole camp, the concept of clearly delineated zones was abandoned.

“We spent more time on that than anything,” said Clinton representative Beverly Lindsey. “We wanted our candidate to be able to approach the audience on all sides, not just the side he was on.” Dole handlers, by contrast, feared that in so intimate a space the president might be tempted to instigate a confrontation. “I think they were concerned that Clinton would walk right up to Dole and put a finger in his shoulder or something,” Lindsey said.²⁸

In the end, the physical maneuvering in this debate proved to be one of its distinctive qualities. As Maureen Dowd wrote in the *New York Times*, “The president kept sliding out from behind his lectern, bearing down on Bob Dole and looking as if he were going to give him a good clip from the side.”²⁹ At one point in the program Dole stepped backed, muttering, “I’m going to get out of your way here.” Nothing, it appeared, could stand between Clinton and his need to bond with the studio audience.

The San Diego debate posed a second problem for on-site negotiators. Dole’s representatives made an unconditional demand that Elizabeth Dole be seated in her husband’s line of sight during the telecast. This same request had been easily accomplished at the previous debate in Hartford, which took place in a standard auditorium. But in San Diego, with its theater-in-the-round setup, Mrs. Dole would have had to sit among the town hall participants, a position Democrats feared might influence the tenor of the questioning.

Negotiators struck a compromise: A platform was built above the last row of the audience where Elizabeth Dole would be visible to the senator but separated from the questioners; Hillary Clinton got an identical stand on her side of the house. During the debate, Dole’s reason for wanting his wife in view became evident: Her job was to smile at him, and thus remind him to relax. For the duration of the ninety-minute telecast, observers said, Mrs. Dole never stopped smiling.³⁰

One of the most heavily negotiated production points from year to year is the assignment of candidate holding rooms. As Clinton aide Brady Williamson says, “Not all space is equally desirable.”³¹ From the outset, debate sponsors have been sensitive to this issue. Back in 1960, ABC constructed identical “dressing room cottages” for Kennedy and Nixon on the studio set of the New York City debate. Although each cottage had its own sink, the candidates were expected to share a toilet.

Today’s debaters no longer share much of anything. Backstage holding areas function as a traveling campaign headquarters, complete with private areas for the candidates and full-scale communications centers for the staff. Campaigns take extreme precautions to segregate the star participants physically from each other in the period before a debate begins. “You arrange their holding rooms so that they don’t intersect each other’s path,” says debate consultant Bob Goodwin.³² In some cases, curtains have been installed specifically to keep the competitors from catching an accidental glimpse of each other.

Just before the first 1992 debate in St. Louis, Ross Perot violated this long-standing protocol by paying an impromptu social call at the dressing rooms of his surprised opponents. Brady Williamson remembers standing outside Clinton's holding room, when "out of the shadow comes this small figure and it's Ross Perot. He walks up to me and says, 'May I say hello to the governor?'" Overcoming his shock, Williamson went inside and got Clinton's approval, and Perot proceeded inside for a brief predebate chat. Perot, said Williamson, "didn't approach this thing quite the way the other two did."³³

Perot's attempt to see President Bush was less successful. This time the Reform Party candidate did not get past the holding room door.

PREDEBATE TECH CHECKS

On the afternoon of a presidential debate, several hours before broadcast, the on-site process culminates with each debater's final preshow technical check. As with other production particulars, the order of the candidates' arrival for the walk-throughs, and how much time they are allotted on the set, have been decided in advance. At the appointed hour the hall is cleared of nonessential personnel, and the star and his entourage sweep in for a briefing session with producers and technicians.

In many ways this is standard show business procedure, like the sound check that takes place before a rock concert or dress rehearsal for a Broadway play. In other ways the tech check preceding a presidential debate has no parallel, thanks to the uniquely bifurcated nature of the event, the weighty stakes involved, and the intensely felt pressure of the rival camps. For each side, the on-site walk-through represents one last opportunity to counteract any perceived inequities.

Even more important, the point of the exercise is to get the candidate as relaxed as possible in the crucial hours before the debate commences. Says Brady Williamson, "It's like trying on a new suit. You just want to make sure that you're comfortable, that it fits."³⁴ During the tech check, debaters receive their final instructions on such key production details as camera placement, timing, and how they will enter from offstage. Cueing devices and microphones are tested. Makeup and clothing are examined under television lights so advisers can preview the candidate exactly as he or she will appear on the air. The last step, according to Democratic debate coach Tom Donilon, is to review ground rules with the producers, "to make sure they're

not going to do anything that's not to your advantage. You want to be there with the stage manager, the camera people, the director."³⁵

Technical checks may run smoothly, or they may fall victim to the intensity of the moment. Victoria Harian, debate producer for the League in 1984, described an unusually nerve-racking scene when Geraldine Ferraro came in for her walk-through before the vice presidential debate in Philadelphia. Campaign advisers were having "fits and tantrums" over a variety of minor matters, Harian said, "to the point you knew they weren't serving their candidate well. You could see Ferraro was getting too much exposure to all this nattering, and most of it was just absolutely a waste."³⁶

Tech checks have always had the potential to harrow. Robert F. Kennedy, accompanying his brother to NBC's Studio A in Washington for the second 1960 debate, voiced objections on two counts: lighting and studio temperature. Standing at Nixon's podium, RFK demanded to know why the Republican side of the set seemed brighter than the Democratic side. The candidate himself asked if the Nixon people had arranged the lighting for both debaters. "There's only one light pointing over here (at Nixon's lectern)," JFK said. "Let's not have four lights in my eyes."³⁷ Technical director Leon Chromak agreed to reposition a stand light on the studio floor, in what he later called a "psychological lighting change" to appease the Kennedys.³⁸

Mindful of Richard Nixon's on-camera perspiration in the first debate, Nixon handlers had requested that the air conditioning be set at a cooler level in Washington. As John Kennedy entered the studio, he commented, "I need a sweater." Bobby Kennedy asked an aide, "What are they trying to do? Freeze my brother to death?" The Democrats insisted that adjustments be made, and the temperature came up a few degrees.³⁹

For the transcontinental third debate of 1960, with Nixon in California and Kennedy in New York City, each candidate got his way: the temperature of Nixon's studio remained at fifty-eight degrees, while Kennedy's registered at seventy-two. Otherwise, ABC took great pains to create identical studio arrangements. The network purchased cloth for the two backdrops from the same mill run, in enough quantity to dress both sets. The same can of paint used on the New York set was hand-carried on a plane to Los Angeles so the colors would precisely match.

Even at that, physical distance and equal facilities did not prevent a long-distance tiff. After the debate Republicans charged that JFK had violated an agreed-on rule by bringing notes into the studio in New York. A few minutes before the program began, Nixon evidently caught a glimpse of

Kennedy on a monitor shuffling papers at his lectern. Once the program went off the air, Nixon discussed the matter with journalists, as reported in the *New York Times*:

“The vice president insisted that “I’m not angry about it,” but his face was rigid, his lips taut, and his voice rose as he continued talking about the use of notes.

“I’m not complaining,” he told reporters in the ABC studio. “I never complain about debates after they are over.

“But before the next debate we had better settle on the rules.”⁴⁰

More recently the paranoia over bringing notes onto the set has found its way into the negotiated memoranda of agreement. The 1996 contract lays out an explicit procedure for the campaigns to follow: “Each candidate must submit to the staff of the commission prior to the debate all such paper and any pens or pencils with which a candidate may wish to take notes during the debate, and the staff of the commission will place such paper, pens, and pencils on the podium of each candidate.”⁴¹ Astute debate viewers will observe that in the sixty seconds before air, when the candidates first walk to their lecterns, they use the time to scrawl final reminders to themselves with the officially sanctioned implements. The rules permit only this much pre-debate note taking.

Over the years technical walk-throughs have grown increasingly off-limits to the media. Before the final Ford-Carter debate of 1976, Jimmy Carter’s closed rehearsal nearly became a news story when audio from inside the hall mistakenly found its way to the nearby press center. To make matters worse, Carter had decided to use his tech check to engage in a dry run, offering real responses to questions asked by advisers on topics like tax reform and foreign policy. NBC, the network in charge, spent the next several hours contacting people who might have heard the rehearsal, imploring them not to report it; apparently no one did.

At the 1996 San Diego site, sponsors ejected an Associated Press photographer whom they discovered hiding under a canvas in the balcony during one of the technical checks. The photographer had concealed an automatic camera inside a curtain and was snapping pictures of the rehearsal with a remote control device. The debate commission took away the man’s credentials and banned him from the premises.

One reason campaigns do not allow press coverage of the tech checks is

that the scenes can become volatile, in effect extending the bargaining into the hours immediately before the event. At the tech check preceding the first 1976 debate, President Ford roiled the waters by asking that the stool behind his lectern be removed. The League's production coordinator, "in the afterglow of meeting the president of the United States," honored this request, forgetting that campaign negotiators had spent hours haggling over the seating issue.

When Carter's people discovered the stool had been removed without their consent, they angrily demanded an explanation from the other side. "I got about thirteen phone calls in forty-five minutes," recalled Ford media adviser William Carruthers.⁴² The stool was returned to Ford's lectern, but moments before the telecast began, the president again signaled Carruthers to strike it. Carruthers dragged the stool a few feet away from Ford, where it remained on the stage throughout the program, forlornly turning up in some of the two-shots.

Stools recurred as a bone of contention sixteen years later in the three-way town hall debate in Richmond. According to director John LiBretto, at issue were the height and positioning of the seats, and whether each debater would have side tables on which to take notes. "That seemed to take hours to figure out," LiBretto said. "I kept saying you can't have [the candidates] hindered in any way from getting up—they have to be able to get up easily from the chairs and walk around—but that just seemed to go on forever."⁴³

A couple of hours after the debaters had completed their tech checks, LiBretto said, representatives from both the Bush and Clinton campaigns returned to the hall for yet another look at the floor layout. (Perot's people had pronounced themselves satisfied, even though the stools were too high for the diminutive Texan.) Deciding the stools were still too close together, the handlers requested an adjustment. LiBretto tried adding space between candidates, but the repositioning adversely affected his camera shots. After about an hour of tinkering, the director and the handlers agreed to split the difference. "I can say that when we were done I had the chairs back where they started," LiBretto said. "I don't know they were even aware that I ended up with the chairs back on their original marks."

The candidates themselves approach their tech checks with varying degrees of seriousness. Bill Clinton was renowned for being a highly engaged participant in his predebate walk-throughs. Before the 1992 town meeting Clinton peppered director LiBretto with questions about the physical con-

figuration of the set: “What if I did this, and what if I did that?” “Does this work?” “If I stand here and turn to the president, will that show on camera?” President Bush, LiBretto said, was far less interested in such arcana. Ross Perot did not even attend his session, sending a surrogate instead.

For the 1996 town hall debate in San Diego Clinton conducted a similarly thorough survey. “He got off the stage and walked the whole circumference of the theater,” recalled Bob Asman, executive producer for the debate commission.⁴⁴ Bob Dole, by contrast, never left the stage. Where Clinton used most of his one-hour allotment of time, Dole made quick work of his on-site briefings, taking less than twenty minutes.

Unlike Clinton, Dole always brought along his wife, who, according to one observer, remained “glued to his side” during the walk-throughs.⁴⁵ Twenty years earlier Mrs. Dole had been an equally visible presence at her husband’s predebate tech check before the vice presidential debate with Walter Mondale. During that session, when Dole expressed concern that the live spectators might present a distraction, Elizabeth Dole went out into the house so the candidate could see how the audience would look under the actual lighting conditions of the broadcast. Wrote debate historians Seltz and Yoakam, “The senator looked at Mrs. Dole for awhile and seemed satisfied that the problem had been solved.”⁴⁶

THE VISUAL STYLE OF PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

The controversy over reaction shots in the first Kennedy-Nixon match initiated a tradition of visual caution in presidential debates. This timidity of approach affected not only the remaining programs of 1960 but influenced debates across the decades. Now as then, campaign representatives attempt to favorably preordain the shooting and directing of debate telecasts, hoping to press the grammar of the medium into political service. These exertions ignore a fundamental reality: Live television is inherently at odds with visual proscription.

Mindful of the widespread attention Nixon’s cutaways had drawn in the opening encounter, the director of the second 1960 debate pointedly timed each reaction shot with a stopwatch as campaign handlers looked on. The third meeting of Kennedy and Nixon, potentially a gold mine of contrasting images, was even more buttoned-down. This program had offered an unprecedented opportunity for experimentation: with Nixon in Los Angeles

and Kennedy in New York, history's first and only split-screen presidential debate was, for its time, a technical tour de force. It took three studios to pull off the exercise, two in Los Angeles (one for Nixon, another for the panel) and a third in New York for JFK. ABC, the designated pool network, billed the production as "the most technically complicated broadcast in history."⁴⁷

Oddly, in spite of the intricate setup, viewers saw the split-screen of both candidates only once, in the opening moments of the program before the men began speaking. Director Sonny Diskin, whose regular assignments included *The Fight of the Week*, ABC's Saturday night boxing show, explained afterward that he did not want the side-by-side shots to be "distracting."⁴⁸ Not coincidentally, the third debate is generally regarded as Nixon's best; with John F. Kennedy a safe three thousand miles away, the vice president managed to relax and deliver.

Since 1976, when debates moved out of the television studio and onto remote locations, the trepidation over cutaways has expanded to include reaction shots of the live audience. Throughout the history of TV debates, campaigns have actively prohibited shots of the onlookers, fearful that such images might unduly influence the audience at home. In at least a couple of instances entire rows of seats were removed from the debate hall in order to prevent audience reaction shots. Only during the town hall debates have in-house spectators played a visible role in the proceedings.

Carter media adviser Barry Jagoda told *Newsweek* in 1976 that "one frown could color a whole public reaction."⁴⁹ Republican debate consultant William Carruthers, in a predebate strategy memo for the Ford campaign the same year, warned that a live audience represented "one of the most sensitive and potentially dangerous aspects of the debates. If there is any way we can preclude the appearance of an audience, we should do it."⁵⁰

At the behest of the campaigns, the sponsoring League of Women Voters agreed to forbid cutaways of spectators in the 1976 debates, a move that set off a nasty skirmish with the television networks. Likening the ban to censorship, the broadcasters contended that they should be free to cover the debate as they would any bona fide news event. "If someone falls out of the balcony, boos or cheers, falls asleep, well, that's part of the event and we have a right to cover it," said Walter Pfister of the ABC Special Events unit, the group overseeing television pool coverage for the first debate.⁵¹ After briefly hinting that they might refuse to carry the programs altogether, the networks backed down, and the series proceeded without audience cutaways.

From a production standpoint, the effect of this prohibition was to limit

artificially the way the event played out to viewers. As Seltz and Yoakam concluded about the 1976 vice presidential debate,

There was an obvious chance for audience reaction shots when the theater audience laughed at some of Senator Dole's remarks. A director, operating freely, might have considered taking a shot of the audience if there was enough reaction to make it a significant part of the story. To do that, he would have had to have a camera aimed at the audience, and sufficient light. Because of the no-shot rule, neither was available at that moment. To have faithfully reported the whole story of that debate, the director should have had the option of shooting the audience.⁵²

A similar violation of visual grammar occurred in 1988, when Bernard Shaw asked Michael Dukakis the infamous question about the hypothetical rape and murder of his wife. For the program's director, the logical move would have been a reaction shot of Kitty Dukakis herself, seated in the audience only a few feet away. One could argue that such a cutaway, by adding visual context, might even have humanized her husband's clinical response. But the terms of that year's memorandum of understanding specifically forbade the possibility: "In no case shall any television shots be taken of any member of the audience (including candidate's family members) from the time the first question is asked until the conclusion of the closing statements."⁵³

Even as the directorial style of presidential debates remained frozen in 1960, viewing audiences were learning to expect cutaways as a standard ingredient of live television programming. Sporting events, awards programs, interviews, and talk shows routinely use reaction shots to add visual depth and interest, but for most of their history, presidential debates did not follow suit. Looser formats in the 1990s have finally dragged debates into the modern visual era, particularly in the town hall forums, which, by definition, call for a variety of shots of candidates and audience members alike.

John LiBretto of NBC, who directed the landmark 1992 Richmond town hall debate, considered himself free to cut the program as he saw fit. One of the most memorable and remarked upon shots in that debate showed President George Bush looking down to check his watch; to many viewers, Bush appeared disengaged. "I was cutting to him for a reaction shot," LiBretto recalled, "and as I cut to him he looked at his watch. I remember my

reaction in the truck: What in the hell is he doing? That's exactly what came out of my mouth at that moment. The effect was devastating. I felt like here I just cut to a camera and cost the man the job, but I know that's not what happened."

LiBretto later wondered, would he have taken the shot had Bush looked at the watch *before* the camera change? "My instinct, especially as a sports director, is to go to that reaction shot," he said. "If it's there, if it's on camera, you go to it because you want to show everything that's going on."⁵⁴

Until recently only one version of a presidential debate was available to the various television entities that carried it: the program as directed by the designated pool network. Dissatisfaction with this practice dates back to 1976, when the sponsoring League of Women Voters refused to allow the broadcast networks to set up their own cameras in the debate hall. The pool was adopted as a practical solution to the problem of too much equipment competing for too little space.

In the last two rounds of debates, however, the pool network has fed not only its fully mixed version of the debate, with shots selected by the director, but also uninterrupted, "unilateral" shots of the individual participants. This allows each outlet, in effect, to direct its own version of the debate, at least to the limited degree isolated cameras permit. Flaunting the campaigns' negotiated agreement, the networks have used these so-called iso-cams to create split-screen shots of both candidates at once, a visual effect the handlers vigorously oppose.

According to debate producer Bob Asman, campaign advisers came to him after the first 1996 Clinton-Dole program "very upset" over the split-screens that turned up in some of the network coverage. Asman explained that the networks now had the technical capability to circumvent the pool feed.⁵⁵ "In hindsight," said Democratic negotiator Brady Williamson, "the Clinton campaign was not displeased, because the iso-cams ended up showing pictures that we found useful."⁵⁶ Still, the provision of these unilateral shots is an issue that politicians, sponsors, and networks will certainly revisit before the next round of debates.

No doubt the strangest example of production tinkering in presidential debates occurred in 1980, when CNN electronically inserted uninvited independent candidate John Anderson into the Reagan-Carter debate. CNN, at that point an upstart operation with only three and a half million subscribers, saw the ambitious experiment as a publicity bonanza,

though the exercise turned out to be less a moment of glory than a technical farce.

As Reagan and Carter debated live in Cleveland, Anderson stood before CNN cameras at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., where an audience of twelve hundred had gathered to watch him shadowbox the big boys. Four producers, camped in nearby production trucks, recorded the Reagan-Carter debate on as many videotape machines. These tapes were then played back in sequence, with Anderson's answers edited in at the appropriate points. A stenographer listening to the live debate transcribed the panelists' questions from Cleveland, which were hand-delivered to CNN moderator Daniel Schorr, who read them to Anderson in Constitution Hall.

Several times the audio either failed or fell out of sync with the video. Because of an editing mix-up, Reagan was shown answering a question that had not yet been asked in the CNN debate, and moderator Schorr understandably lost track of the complicated timing. In the *New York Times*, John J. O'Connor wrote, "The effort was extremely awkward . . . But it was also an intriguing glimpse of a possible future when, armed with the multichannel capacities of constantly expanding cable, all third-party candidates will have access to a national forum that has proved impossible on limited over-the-air network television."⁵⁷

THE TV PROS TAKE OVER

Campaigns may function as executive producers of presidential debates, but once a program goes on the air, responsibility for its execution shifts from the the political establishment to the television establishment. The candidate representatives who draft the production agreements, plan the strategies, and oversee the on-site arrangements must now pass the baton to the TV professionals, if only for the duration of the event.

The battle-zone atmosphere of the Kennedy-Nixon control rooms taught the networks to be wary of campaign interference while the program is on the air, and, since 1976, political operatives have maintained a low profile during the broadcasts. The terms of the negotiated agreement allow each campaign to have one representative in the production facility during the debate and provide for phone lines between the control room and the candidates' holding areas. In practice, these privileges are seldom invoked; handlers do not stand over the director's shoulder as he carries out his job.

This has not always stopped campaigns from expressing their concerns while a debate is in progress. In 1992's first presidential encounter, Bush campaign chairman James Baker had one of his deputies telephone the control room with an urgent message for moderator Jim Lehrer. According to the language of the debate contract, the topic was supposed to shift from domestic to foreign policy halfway through the program; five minutes past this point, the switch had not occurred. Before the message could be communicated to Lehrer, the debate moved to foreign affairs anyway. Baker's phone call "didn't have any effect on what happened on the stage," Lehrer said.⁵⁸

More typically campaigns tend to back off during the actual telecast. For one thing, they know they are overmatched, not just by the professional experience of the crews but by the medium itself. A TV production is an organic exercise with its own energy and personality. Invariably live programming overpowers the prescriptive words of a document. As debate producer Ed Fouhy put it, "Trying to micromanage a television program with a lot of lawyers is something that's not going to work."⁵⁹

The negotiated documents that cause so much strife for the campaigns before the debate only indirectly affect the television crews who bring the program to life. John LiBretto, director of a 1992 debate, said that he did not even see the production guidelines that governed the town hall debate he directed in Richmond. "The thirty-six-page document is in the possession of the campaigns and in possession of the commission," said Janet Brown of the debate commission. "My sound guy who has done the Super Bowl and the Olympics and all this other stuff—trust me when I tell you he's not carrying a pocket copy of a thirty-six-page thing, even though microphones are usually mentioned." Brown added that this does not mean sponsors willfully ignore the wishes of the campaigns. "It just means that it's a television event, and you get on with doing the job."

The agreements deal out the specifics of camera shots in what Brown described as "excruciating detail." Instances have occurred during debates, she said, when campaign officials have complained that visual guidelines are being violated. "There are inevitably shots that end up mid-debate that some campaign guy, because he wants to sound important, is going to object to," Brown said. "Are you going to stop the debate and bring the director on stage and say, 'You abrogated the agreement'? I think not."

Brown notes that the highly skilled network directors chosen for this assignment understand and respect the seriousness of the occasion. From

the beginning, presidential debates have been staffed with top-flight professionals who operate comfortably in the high-pressure setting of live, big-ticket television. They come from newscasts and magazine programs, talk shows, sports, even the comedy series *Saturday Night Live*. Their mission is complicated: working within a tightly controlled political framework to create a TV event that will enter the archives of American history.

“The quality of our production staff is without peer,” says Janet Brown, citing the crews’ experience in producing inaugural coverage and summit conferences, high-profile sporting events, and Academy Awards shows. “If there’s something in television they haven’t dealt with,” she said, “I don’t know what it is.” According to Bob Asman, an NBC veteran who served as the debate commission’s executive producer in 1996, the pool network takes pride in putting on a polished program, “so the tendency is to really use your best people.”⁶⁰

“I don’t know how many times I went to meetings and demanded that the crew be absolutely the best crew NBC had,” recalled Richmond director LiBretto. “I told them about the sense of history I had about this—that we would be judged accordingly, and it had better be good. I insisted on an excellent crew and I got it.”

Shortly before the groundbreaking debate, LiBretto and his team sat down for a group dinner. “It was the first time I’ve ever seen any of these guys nervous in all the years I’ve worked with them,” he remembered. “Super Bowls, World Series—I’ve done major, major events with all these people.”⁶¹ Nothing in the world of television, he said, could quite match the pressure of a presidential debate.

