

Part III

POSTPRODUCTION

Chapter Seven

POSTDEBATE NEWS COVERAGE

When the first Kennedy-Nixon debate signed off the air at 10:30 P.M. Eastern Daylight time on September 26, 1960, the broadcast networks did not follow the event with news analysis. Instead, they resumed their regular programming: the *Original Amateur Hour* on ABC; *Jackpot Bowling with Milton Berle* on NBC; and, on CBS, a prerecorded interview between Walter Cronkite and Lyndon Johnson that ran as part of the *Presidential Countdown* series. For the duration of the 1960 debates, television scrupulously refrained from instant commentary and postevent news specials. Remarkable as it may seem to contemporary audiences, the millions of Americans who tuned in for the 1960 debates had to wait until the next morning's newspapers to catch the reviews.

In 1976 this programming isolation ended, and today no presidential debate exists in a vacuum. Starting with the Ford-Carter matches and continuing to the present, a live debate has come to represent only the centerpiece of the larger media marathon that begins weeks before air time and

ends well after the program fades to black. The power of the press reaches its apogee in the aftermath of a debate, when two things happen: First, the pundits have their say in the period immediately following the broadcast, and, second, the ninety-minute event is reduced to a collection of sound-bite highlights that will be played over and over as a kind of shorthand for the complete program. The news media thus create a parallel version of the debate that may overtake the audience's original perception of what it saw.

This was hardly the case in 1960. That year, for the first and last time, the debate story belonged not to television but to the pencil press. At the time of the Kennedy-Nixon debates, TV news scarcely registered in the national consciousness, much less as the country's primary conduit of political news. The day after the first event, none of the three network newscasts led with the debate. CBS ran only a brief mention of the joint appearance as the tenth story in its lineup, after such items as the arrival in Washington of Japanese Crown Prince Akihito and Crown Princess Michiko, Nigerian independence preparations, and a plane crash in Moscow.¹

TV news outlets approached the 1960 debates warily, perhaps because the programs were produced and sponsored by the very networks that would then have to provide objective coverage. By today's standards, television's underplaying of the events seems almost irrationally circumspect. Not a single newscast excerpted sound bites from the Kennedy-Nixon broadcasts. Neither the candidates nor their surrogates came forth with any on-camera spin, and anchormen and reporters studiously avoided anything but the most cursory debate references.

Newspaper accounts were considerably less diffident. Richard Nixon's anemic performance handed print reporters a story line that would sustain momentum for the remainder of the series. The morning after the Chicago debate, the *Christian Science Monitor's* Richard L. Strout was among the first to assess the effect of the reaction shots: "The cameras showed close-ups of the listening candidate's face while the other talked . . . Nixon looking to many weary from endless campaigning, with chin perspiring under the hot TV lamps." Peter Lisagor, in the *Chicago Daily News*, wrote that Nixon's face "looked drawn, and beads of perspiration on his chin were plainly visible as he spoke." The *Boston Globe's* Percy Shain also used the word *drawn* to describe Nixon, and added, "Kennedy was almost chubby by contrast."²

In the days that followed, journalists had no difficulty keeping this tale alive. Nixon's people did their part by issuing hasty proclamations of their candidate's vitality. Press secretary Herbert Klein announced that "Mr.

Nixon is in excellent health and looks good in person.” Patricia Nixon told a reporter that she didn’t know if her husband had lost weight “because Dick and I aren’t the types who weigh in every day.” Nixon himself said, “I think I lost a couple of pounds, and it may show up in my face.”³

Three days after the first debate, the *Chicago Daily News* goosed the narrative with a copyrighted front-page article that ran under the headline “Was Nixon Sabotaged by TV Makeup Artist?”⁴ The story quoted an official from the Makeup Artists and Hair Stylists union in New York as saying that he believed Nixon had been worked on by a Democrat. “They loused him up so badly that a Republican couldn’t have done the job,” the union rep told the paper. Although no evidence was advanced to support this claim, the *Daily News* nonetheless used the quote to trump up the possibility of a conspiracy. Network officials denied the charge, and the vice president’s aides stepped forward to admit that they had done their own cosmetic work.

The matter of Nixon’s camera presence snowballed in the press. By the time the weekly news magazines published their accounts of the first debate, the conventional wisdom had been set in concrete. “Within minutes after the candidates went off the air,” wrote *Newsweek*, “the whole country seemed to be chattering about who did what to whom. But the one question that was on almost everyone’s lips was: Why did Nixon look so haggard, so worn, and so grim?”⁵ Even Nixon himself got into the act. During a visit to the set of the TV series *77 Sunset Strip*, the vice president joked to actor Efrem Zimbalist Jr., “How come you look like yourself with makeup and I don’t?”⁶

The tale of Richard Nixon’s on-camera visage illustrates the highly self-referential nature of postdebate news coverage. Today, as in 1960, the cumulative effect of journalistic reporting is to reinforce existing perceptions and perpetuate particular story lines. In each debate reporters hope for an angle that will provide grist for the news mill; the best stories are those with a whiff of controversy and a prolonged shelf life. In Nixon’s lack of preparedness, the political press corps of 1960 found a narrative thread with which to weave a veritable tapestry. Even now, forty years after the fact, the disparity in appearance between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon remains the legacy of history’s first televised debate.

But an even bigger headline to come out of the 1960 debates is one that eluded the news media of the day, perhaps because the story was too close at hand to be properly observed. Russell Baker, who covered the Kennedy-

Nixon debates for the *New York Times*, would write nearly thirty years later of the significance of the first broadcast. “That night,” Baker said, “television replaced newspapers as the most important communications medium in American politics.”⁷ Indeed, few such transitions in the nation’s history have been so clearly demarcated. Not only newspapers were knocked off their throne; so was radio. And so, for that matter, was the accepted formula for waging a presidential campaign.

At the time only a few journalists sensed the shifting ground beneath their feet. “Both sides have found that television has added a new element to politics—one that is not yet fully appraised,” wrote a contributor to *U.S. News and World Report*.⁸ *Atlanta Constitution* publisher Ralph McGill confessed, “We and the candidates are up against the fact that we do not understand all we would like to know about the impact of television.” McGill recounted the outcome of an informal experiment he had conducted, one that would quickly enter the received wisdom of presidential debates. He had arranged for “a number of persons” to listen to the first Kennedy-Nixon debate on radio, to see if they would react differently than television viewers. “It is interesting to report they unanimously thought Mr. Nixon had the better of it,” McGill concluded. Despite later, more scientific data to the contrary, this early finding took root as a shibboleth.⁹

McGill’s poll, specifying neither sample size nor methodology, reflects the casual approach the news media of 1960 took toward the audience reaction story. Instead of slavishly collecting and reporting survey data, journalists favored random “man-on-the-street” roundups of public opinion. The *Los Angeles Times* published one of the more commendable examples of this genre, devoting a full page to viewer responses the morning after the first debate. Next to each comment, the article featured a photo of the interviewee watching television. A brief introduction stressed that “in this effort to learn what people said and thought during and after the first of the Great Debates, the *Times* deliberately ignored political leaders, candidates, and active party workers.”¹⁰

In years to come this same constituency that the newspaper so assiduously shunned would be dubbed “spinners,” and their comments, along with those of the journalists themselves, would dominate the postdebate agenda. Sixteen years after the Kennedy-Nixon series, when TV news had grown up, debate coverage underwent a radical change. Presidential debaters no longer played to win just the audience at home; they played to sway the media as well.

THE BIRTH OF INSTANT ANALYSIS

In a wholly unplanned way, the twenty-seven-minute audio gap that interrupted the first 1976 presidential debate begat the era of punditry that viewers now take for granted. Network anchors and reporters, desperate to plug the hole caused when the sound failed, started their coverage with predictable filler: sketchy statements about the technical problem and cautiously worded, well-balanced summaries of the debate to that point. But as the minutes ticked on, the on-air personnel found themselves drifting further into uncharted waters in an attempt to stay afloat.

A review of NBC's coverage during the audio gap demonstrates the pitfalls of off-the-cuff reporting. A few seconds after the problem arises, David Brinkley comes on-screen to repeat the obvious: The cause of the failure is unknown. After a bit of vamping, Brinkley throws to reporter Douglas Kiker inside the debate hall, and the two of them kill time. Brinkley asks if his colleague has a screwdriver and a pair of pliers, and Kiker launches into a lengthy recap of the debate, which ends when Ford press secretary Ron Nessen steps into the lobby where Kiker is standing. Kiker collars Nessen for an impromptu interview, asking, "How is your guy doing so far?" "It's a clear-cut victory for the president," Nessen says, adding that Ford had come across as "being in command of the situation, being in control." Kiker, trying to soften Nessen's partisan tone, points out that the same could be said of Carter.

Next, Kiker insinuates himself to a nearby interview in progress between CBS's Lesley Stahl and Democratic National Chairman Robert Strauss, who calls it a "good night for the American people and a great night for Jimmy Carter." Kiker listens, then grabs Strauss for himself. A few seconds into the questioning, Kiker gets a cue to return to the candidates. Announcing that the audio is back, he throws to the debate stage, where in fact the problem has not been fixed.

David Brinkley reappears and, continuing to stretch, adds his judgment to that of the campaign managers. Brinkley calls it a "pretty lively debate, each one landing a few blows on the other, though I don't think anyone was permanently disabled, politically speaking." After yet another recap, Brinkley tosses back to Douglas Kiker, who interviews Republican adviser James Baker about Ford's debate preparations. Baker tells Kiker, "I think the president did an excellent job."

Kiker then commandeers Carter press secretary Jody Powell, again away

from Lesley Stahl. Kiker follows up Powell's pro-Carter spin by asking if he knows why the microphones went dead. Powell demurs: "I assume it was a technical problem, as sometimes happens." Strangely, Kiker then proceeds to raise the possibility of "a conspiracy at work," telling Powell, "It's been my experience in a situation like this that there's always a theory held by a lot of people that, oh, there was a conspiracy to cut him off. We have no proof of that, it was just simply a technical foul-up as far as we can determine, isn't that correct?" Powell's comeback is biting: "Not only do you have no proof, but nobody's brought up the subject that I know of, have they?"¹¹

The 1976 audio gap, with its twenty-seven minutes of ad hoc political spin and reporter commentary, marks a turning point in media coverage of presidential debates. Even without the technical malfunction, however, changes were poised to happen. The networks that had been so averse to postdebate programming in 1960 now inaugurated a tradition from which there would be no retreat: instant analysis.

Roger Mudd of CBS was among the first reporters to offer his opinion when the opening Ford-Carter debate came to an end. "It certainly wasn't the most scintillating television that we've ever witnessed," Mudd declared. "In fact, I think we could honestly call it dull." Though the TV pundits of 1976 were willing to pass general judgments of this sort, they steered clear of outright proclamations of winners and losers. "To some measure," said Walter Cronkite in a characteristically tactful observation, "each probably succeeded."¹²

In the years since the Ford-Carter debates journalists have overcome their shyness about calling victors. With the help of instant polls, on-camera reporters now routinely assess the performances within minutes of the closing statements, and print analysts, like theater critics, rush to write their accounts for the next day's papers. Even though presidential debates are nowhere near as conclusive as football games or beauty pageants or awards shows, the press cannot resist the impulse to attach resolution to conflict, to wrap up the yarn with a definitive ending.

The problem with declaring winners and losers, according to David Broder of the *Washington Post*, is that, more often than not, the outcome is murky. "I thought that Clinton in Richmond was an easy one to be confident about," Broder said, "although by way of self-criticism I did not notice and therefore did not remark upon what everybody remembers from that debate, which was George Bush looking at his watch. That went right by me."¹³

As this comment of Broder's points out, even seasoned journalists can

miss things. In his book *Behind the Front Page*, Broder outlined the difficulties of rendering postdebate judgments:

A reporter has to jump three hurdles to handle the debate assessment well. We are trained to make a balanced judgment, so we score the debate by rounds, as if it were a prize-fight: we say A did well on Points one, four, six and seven, but B probably came out ahead on Points two, three, five and eight. As a result our verdicts tend to be cautious and fuzzy.

Second, being somewhat familiar with the issues, we are inclined to give some weight—perhaps undue weight—to the candidates’ accuracy and skill in answering policy questions. Ironically our performance as instant analysts is handicapped by qualities our critics say we lack: a desire to be fair and an interest in substance.

The third point—which took me a long time to understand—is that our overall assessment of the debate must be based on who seems more in command. That is the test. And if you realize that television news shows will quickly capsule the whole debate into that moment or two when one candidate or the other takes command, your attention can focus on recognizing that moment and can put it into the context of the campaign situation.¹⁴

Scholars like Diana Carlin have noted that journalists evaluate debates differently from regular viewers. “Many of the people who do the critiquing of debates . . . are far more knowledgeable and involved than the average voter,” Carlin said at a debate symposium in 1992. “Most voters are not that intimately involved in the process until the last few weeks. So for most . . . this is the first time they really know what someone’s position might be.”¹⁵

The audience’s perception of debates as informational would appear to conflict with the criteria by which reporters pass postdebate judgments. As Bob Schieffer, a CBS analyst in every debate series since 1976, explained, “The first thing I always try to do is see if there’s any news there. Did one of these candidates say something he hadn’t said before? Next you ask, did one guy get the better of the other one, and how’s this going to play on the eleven o’clock news, and what impact is it going to have on the campaign?”¹⁶ The general public may watch for information, but journalists watch for different things: departures from the norm and strategic maneuvers.

Critics have long charged reporters with prizing performance over substance. Scholar James B. Lemert found that, in 1976, 38 percent of postdebate journalistic statements about the first two Ford-Carter debates pertained to issues. Four years later that amount dropped by more than half. By 1988 the percentage of content coverage had dipped to less than 10 percent of all the postdebate reporting on television news. Over the same period the number of references to performance and tactics rose dramatically.

Lemert made another interesting observation: In 1976 and 1980 the networks followed the debates with only brief remarks from the anchors, waiting until after the local newscasts had aired to return with full programs of postdebate commentary.¹⁷ More recently an increasing share of follow-up analysis has taken place immediately after the event, giving reporters little or no time to collect thoughts and contemplate judgments before communicating them live on the air. The stepped-up rhythm of modern television demands glib, on-the-spot analysis.

Perhaps the least savory example of postdebate punditry occurred in 1980, when George Will of ABC went on camera after the Reagan-Carter debate and praised Reagan's "thoroughbred performance," neglecting to disclose that he had helped prep the Republican candidate. "Far from resulting in Will's losing his job, the controversy only added to the Willian lore, further blurring the lines between the watchdogs and the watched," wrote media critic Eric Alterman. "By the end of the controversy, Will's political status was so great he was also beyond virtually all accepted journalistic rules and practices."¹⁸ Nearly two decades later George Will remains a high-profile debate commentator.

THE EARLY YEARS OF POSTDEBATE SPIN

In the hours after the first 1960 debate Nixon press secretary Herbert Klein gathered up a handful of aides and made the rounds of Chicago's hotel bars to talk with some of the reporters who had covered the event for the morning papers. "I thought it was highly important to put on a confident front and to find out what they really thought," Klein wrote. "Most of them had concentrated so much on the content of the debate that they offered few opinions on the outcome, and the initial stories generally treated the "joint appearance" with balance."¹⁹ Interestingly Klein and his team made no

attempt to directly influence journalistic opinion; by the time the conversations took place, the reporters had already filed their stories.

Compared to today's tarantella of spinning, the political establishment of 1960 exercised admirable restraint in its postevent dealings with the press. Of course the absence of follow-up programming by the TV networks erased the need for on-air spinners. The debate reaction story belonged to newspapers, which focused on matters other than how campaign aides felt their candidates had fared. For the most part the journalists and the handlers maintained a respectful distance from each other.

In the *New York Times's* morning-after account of the first debate, an unusual sidebar story on page 30 did deal with reactions from the Kennedy and Nixon camps. JFK's brother and campaign manager, Robert F. Kennedy, said that the Kennedy team had been "tremendously pleased," and Nixon press secretary Klein allowed that the vice president "presented the issues, and when he does that he always comes out very well." The story went on to note, "Some Kennedy aides, asking not to be quoted, said they felt their candidate had scored more points and over-all had made the best impression."²⁰ The air of modesty conveyed in this sentence would soon become a relic of the past.

The candidates themselves offered virtually no comment in the press about their debate performances, leaving behind a woefully slim record for historians. After the first debate Kennedy was quoted only as saying that the exchange had been "very useful." Nixon told reporters, "A debater never knows who wins. That will be decided by the people November eighth. I thought he presented his case very well."²¹ Later debates in the 1960 series produced similarly tepid candidate reactions in the media or no reactions at all.

Over the years the public has come to expect its presidential debaters to deliver a pithy postevent sound bite, either at a rally that evening or the next day on the campaign trail. At the end of the first 1996 debate NBC's Tim Russert conducted the fastest postdebate interview in history by nabbing Bill and Hillary Clinton just seconds after the program concluded. Materializing at the apron of the stage, Russert stuck a microphone in the president's face and asked for a self-assessment. "I did the best I could," said the grinning Clinton. Russert then asked the First Lady how the next day's headlines would read. "President outlines his vision for America in the twenty-first century," Mrs. Clinton replied. A few minutes later, Russert

returned with quick sound bites from Bob and Elizabeth Dole, though only Elizabeth's made it on the air.²²

Russert's postdebate floor interviews touched off an angry protest from campaign representatives and competing journalists, who complained that NBC had violated the ground rules—as, in fact, they had. Without permission from the sponsors, technicians had strung an audio cable from backstage to the front of the house, where Russert was seated. Just as the debate went off the air, a crew member hooked up the microphone and handed it to Russert. “In the annals of spin,” wrote media critic Howard Kurtz, “this was a new indoor record.”²³

In 1976, when the Ford-Carter audio breakdown prematurely initiated the practice of organized spin, the two campaigns were well positioned to supply representatives to plug the silence. As part of their press strategies, both operations had assigned key individuals to appear on the networks' postdebate specials with the goal of creating a positive buzz. According to Ford press secretary Ron Nessen, Republican aides held a conference call before the debate ended to agree on a “line” they would follow in talking to reporters. “We decided to declare flatly that the president was the clear winner—decisive, specific, in control of the situation and in command of the facts. Our theory was that our own enthusiasm would sway the judgments of voters and press commentators trying to decide who won.”²⁴

Larry Speakes, press secretary to 1976 Republican vice presidential candidate Bob Dole, deployed a trio of spinners to go on the networks immediately after the Dole-Mondale debate: the candidate's wife, Elizabeth; Texas governor John Connally; and Vice President Nelson Rockefeller. “As the debate ended they were to get out of their front-row seats, go straight to an assigned camera, beating the Mondale aides to the airwaves,” Speakes wrote. “Each one claimed debate victory for Dole on each of the three networks, so we had nine at-bats.”²⁵

Speakes and his team also contrived a made-for-TV telephone call in which President Ford publicly congratulated Bob Dole on his performance. Dole took the call in his backstage holding room, where network cameras had been set up. Ford's side of this staged-managed conversation, heard but not seen by television viewers, is a classic of transparent postdebate spin:

FORD: Bob?

DOLE: Yes, Mr. President?

FORD: You did great. And Betty and I on our anniversary are very, very grateful for the anniversary present because your performance was superb and we all are applauding and very, very proud of your accomplishments.

DOLE: Well, I'm very proud of you, Mr. President. I hope I did a good job. I had a bad cold, but I guess my voice held out long enough.

FORD: You were confident, you hit hard but hit fairly and you differentiated the issues, I think very effectively between their platform and ours, between our promises and theirs, where we have consistently said that taxes ought to be reduced and they have, as we all know, played both sides of the street. You've done a fine job in showing that they're the big spenders and we're the ones that think we should spend responsibly and effectively.

As Walter Cronkite reported at the end of the exchange, "President Ford, in congratulating him, got in some more campaign licks of his own tonight."²⁶ Meanwhile ABC's Hal Bruno was among the reporters present in Dole's green room during the call. "They hung up," Bruno recalled, "and Dole turned to me and said, 'I wonder what *he* was watching.'"²⁷

By contemporary standards the spinning in 1976 seems measured, balanced, and lacking in the desperation that makes later political reaction so excruciating to sit through. Audiences today are accustomed to shameless ballyhooing by everyone from running mates and spouses to the lowliest aides. But spinners did not burst onto the scene fully formed; instead, their profile as players in the postdebate drama has advanced incrementally. "We had three or four people who'd go out and talk to the media afterward," said Michael Deaver of the campaigns of 1980 and 1984, in which he served as an aide to Ronald Reagan, "but it was nothing like it is now."²⁸

As early as the Reagan-Mondale debates of 1984 network analysts had begun to openly disparage spinning, even as they gave it a thorough airing. NBC's postevent coverage of the 1984 Bush-Ferraro vice presidential debate featured a three-way interview between Roger Mudd and a handler from each of the two campaigns that began with Mudd asking his guests to "raise your right hands and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." After dutifully complying, the predictable propaganda kicked in. At the end of the chat, Mudd said, "I'm going to get indictments of perjury on you two guys," and the three shared a laugh, united in appreciation

of the fatuousness of postdebate gamesmanship, yet unable to break themselves of the habit.²⁹

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SPIN DOCTOR

Although the word *spin* appears to have come into common use around 1984, the Bush-Dukakis election of 1988 is generally considered the “year of the spin doctor.” Media researcher James Lemert and colleagues found a threefold increase in spin doctor references between 1984 and 1988, the year partisan endorsements reached the level of an art.³⁰ As Tom Brokaw said on NBC after the 1988 vice presidential debate, “There was so much spinning going on here tonight it’s a wonder that the Omaha Civic Auditorium didn’t lift off into orbit.”³¹

Michael Oreskes, analyzing the trend in the *New York Times*, wrote, after the first 1988 match, that the campaigns “spent almost as much time and effort trying to influence what was said after the debate as they spent deciding what [the candidates] should say in the debate.” Oreskes likened the spinners’ arrival in the press facility at the end of the program to an “invasion landing force,” and added: “A decade ago campaign staff members were evicted from press rooms on occasion for interfering with reporters at work on debate stories. But tonight they were quickly surrounded by reporters, cameramen and photographers recording their views.”³² As Oreskes’s comment suggests, the collusionary aspect of postdebate spin is what makes the whole custom so creepy.

Listen to what the journalists themselves have to say: “I think it’s a format that we ought to kill off” (Tom Brokaw of NBC); “it’s an embarrassing, horrible zoo” (Richard Berke of the *New York Times*); “the spinning has become a self-parody” (CNN political director Tom Hannon); “it’s useless, preposterous” (CBS’s Bob Schieffer);³³ and so on. Almost to a person, reporters profess disgust at postdebate spin, but in fact the press has allowed the practice to thrive. According to political journalist Roger Simon: “Spin fulfills two essential purposes: It fills stories with official “react,” and it is an excuse for reporters to leave home. Consider: Reporters fly hundreds of miles, staying in expensive hotels, eating expense account meals, to watch an event on TV that they could just as easily watch from their newsrooms or at home.”³⁴

On some level, members of the media regard postdebate spinning as a

show staged for their own amusement. The external audience, the public, gets almost nothing out of the spectacle except, perhaps, a perverse strain of secondary entertainment. But postdebate spin is not about the television viewers of America, it is about the cast of characters—the journalists and politicians—who inhabit Spin Alley. “I’ve never known anybody who in any way was influenced by the spinning,” says ABC’s Hal Bruno. “It’s sort of a ritual that we all do together—it’s kind of fun if you don’t take it seriously.”³⁵ Unfortunately for viewers, some of the most amusing spin never makes the air waves: In 1988 a Dukakis operative told Jeff Greenfield that Bernard Shaw’s “raped and murdered” question had allowed the candidate to “humanize himself” because he had not flinched at the query.³⁶

With every election cycle Spin Alley undergoes a population explosion. For the first debate in 1960, 200 reporters were expected at WBBM; 380 showed up, and a second press room had to be installed in an adjacent studio. By the 1980s each presidential debate could expect to draw as many as fifteen hundred accredited journalists. In 1996 that figure topped two thousand. The more reporters, the more spinners; like an arms race, the numbers escalate as each side piles on. “It’s always been bad,” says Bill Nichols, White House correspondent for *USA Today*, “but I think now it’s almost a separate event from the debate itself, with its own separate set of rules and expectations and clichés.”³⁷

In recent years Spin Alley has gotten so big it has moved out of the debate hall and into an off-site facility. “It’s an amazing scene,” says Richard Berke of the *New York Times*. “You see five people sitting side by side on stools, each talking to different affiliates and saying the same thing. It’s like a factory.”³⁸ With factory expansion has come a stepped-up production timetable. In 1996 Clinton operatives handed journalists in the press center a six-page set of talking points called “Prebuttal: Dole versus the Facts” twenty minutes before the first debate began.³⁹

To its credit, the elite national press, especially the written press, has largely backed away from covering spinners. According to David Broder of the *Washington Post*: “It’s been a problem for us, in fact, to the point that we generally take a copy aide or somebody out just to stand guard and keep people away from the reporters who are writing the debate on the scene. Because the spinners are very aggressive.”⁴⁰ Some of the TV networks have also banned live political interviews after presidential debates, offering viewers a “spin-free zone” that is long on reporter commentary and short on partisan cheerleading.

As network and print journalists grow more wary of the practice, spinners have successfully sought to ply their wares to regional news organizations. “In an era when the national media have become more skeptical in their attitude toward the candidates, technology and the growing appetite of local news is allowing the presidential campaigns to simply bypass them,” wrote Thomas Rosenstiel in the *Los Angeles Times* during the 1992 campaign.⁴¹ Much of the action has moved to local television newscasts, which remain fertile ground for political spin, particularly from a hometown celebrity like a governor or senator. Before the 1996 San Diego debate Clinton press secretary Mike McCurry had this advice for his troupe of spinners: “The national press, talk to them, but as quickly as you can, get to regional press—that’s where you are likely to get more coverage.”⁴²

In rare instances, when it is used to undo damage incurred during the live broadcast, postdebate spin may actually qualify as news. In the wake of Gerald Ford’s verbal slip about Eastern Europe, campaigns learned that a candidate’s misstatements must be rectified as hastily as possible. During the first debate of 1988 George Bush implied that women who obtained illegal abortions might be considered criminals; the next day campaign manager James Baker appeared on the morning news shows to announce that, after reconsidering, Bush did not believe that a woman seeking an abortion should be deemed a criminal. As Brit Hume said on ABC, “This was fast action to head off political trouble, something this campaign is good at.”⁴³

Handlers face a more daunting hurdle when the task requires putting a good face on a bad performance. In the wake of Ronald Reagan’s stumbling loss in the first 1984 debate against Walter Mondale, Baker did a live interview with Roger Mudd on NBC in which Mudd suggested that “the president was off his form . . . At times he seemed to get lost and he was not as sharp as past debate experience would have led us to believe.” Baker, without missing a beat, replied, “All of us felt unanimously that he was relaxed, confident, in command both of the issues and the debate.” Four years later Dan Quayle’s abysmal showing in the 1988 vice presidential debate was too much even for the silver-tongued Baker. “When you think about what could have happened,” Baker said on CNN, in a remarkably unguarded comment, “we have to be pretty happy.”⁴⁴

The campaign documentary *The War Room*, by D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus, offers a rare behind-the-scenes journey into one of the most impressive of all spin machines, the 1992 Clinton operation. In the film Clinton aide George Stephanopoulos is seen sprinting toward Spin Alley to

take part in the postevent feeding frenzy just as one of the TV debates is wrapping up. Poking his head into a backstage staff room, he energetically exhorts aides to remember the party line: “Bush was on the defensive. Keep repeating, ‘Bush was on the defensive.’ ” When Stephanopoulos finally makes his way onto the set and goes on air, the first words out of his mouth are, “Bush was on the defensive all night long.”⁴⁵

Shortly after the 1992 election, at a debate postmortem at Harvard University, Stephanopoulos admitted that “one of the lessons we learned from this campaign is that spin after debate doesn’t matter because of the preponderance of polling and focus groups.” According to Stephanopoulos, the networks’ postdebate poll results have impeded campaign efforts to shape the media agenda. In the future, he said, spin “may not matter at all.”⁴⁶ Even so, given its entrenchment, the custom does not appear likely to go down without a fight.

POSTDEBATE POLLING

The morning after the first Kennedy-Nixon debate the *New York Times* contacted a Mr. and Mrs. John F. Kennedy of Stuyvesant Town, New York City, for their comment on the big event. “What show you talking about?” asked Mrs. Kennedy. “Oh, the television show. We didn’t get around to it. We were out visiting.”⁴⁷ This quote, included in a larger roundup of viewer opinion, typifies the down-home nature of audience-reaction coverage in 1960. Individual reactions counted more than either aggregate numbers or professional pundits.

Press emphasis was not so much on who had won the debate but on whether people had changed their minds. In a *Times* survey of several hundred Americans after the first debate, only one viewer reported shifting his allegiance, a “Negro janitor” in Topeka, Kansas, who went from Nixon to Kennedy. A “Baptist housewife” from Tallahassee, Florida, said, “I just can’t bring myself to vote for a Catholic,” and a Republican Party worker in Austin, Texas, complained that Nixon had looked “too grim” and that he had been “trying to be too liberal.”⁴⁸

In the 1990s audience-reaction stories have come to rely less on quirky individual opinions than on broadly collected scientific data. Like so much in modern politics, viewer response to presidential debates is now a matter for polling. “These instant polls, which have all manner of flaws to them, are

very important,” says Democratic debate strategist Tom Donilon. Donilon describes the surveys as “pernicious” because of their tendency to create a bandwagon effect among debate analysts. “Watch the postdebate coverage some night,” Donilon said. “The commentators will come on and they’ll be a little leery about who won. With the instant poll results, the commentators all go the way of the poll. Lock-cinch pattern.”⁴⁹

Polls give reporters an opportunity to render win-loss judgments that rise above personal opinion. “Quantifying an ambiguous situation imparts a greater sense of objectivity,” explains political scholar Christopher Arterton. Arterton has written that polls serve not the public but “the media’s need to reduce uncertainty by using numbers. The goal of debates, after all, is to present a discussion of the issues and the men themselves, not to provoke a discussion of how to win a debate.”⁵⁰

The most egregious example of debate polling by the media happened in 1980, when ABC commissioned a telephone survey that immediately became mired in controversy. Viewers were invited to call in and vote for their favorite candidate at fifty cents a pop. Some seven hundred thousand did so, naming Reagan the winner over Carter by a two-to-one margin. Even as ABC disclaimed the poll as “strictly unscientific,” results were projected on a map of the United States whose graphics resembled election-night returns.⁵¹

The next day newspapers reported that the system set up to tally the votes had not properly functioned. As Robert G. Kaiser said in the *Washington Post*, “The lines jammed and clogged, tens or hundreds of thousands of Americans never got through, and some who thought they were registering a pro-Carter sentiment apparently got counted in the Reagan column.” Kaiser dismissed the poll as a “nonfunctioning nonsample of nonrepresentative Americans,” a sentiment widely shared.⁵²

John J. O’Connor, in the *New York Times*, wrote that ABC tellingly opened its postevent coverage not from the debate site “but with a remote pick-up from Bell Laboratories in New Jersey. This above all in electronic coverage: technology marches on.”⁵³ Indeed, ABC’s analysis, presented in the *Nightline* time slot and anchored by Ted Koppel, is a singularly silly demonstration of media gimmickry. Throughout the program, in a series of eight updates, Koppel returned to the AT&T operations center in New Jersey where reporter Ron Miller would pull the latest numbers off a machine and announce them on the air. At one point Koppel informed viewers that people in urban areas were having difficulty getting through, adding, “There is

the possibility that some of you are trying to stack the deck.” The results were being disavowed even as they were being reported.⁵⁴

Hal Bruno, then political director of ABC News, recalled arriving at LaGuardia Airport in New York the morning after the 1980 debate with Barbara Walters, who had moderated the program. When Bruno saw the pack of reporters waiting at the gate, he assumed they wanted to interview Walters. Instead, they were there for Bruno; the phone-in poll had become big news. Looking back on the episode, Bruno admitted, “Sometimes you think you have a good idea, and you don’t know what the unforeseen consequences are.”⁵⁵

After the pounding ABC took in the press for its 1980 experiment, media polling became more efficient, if only somewhat less whimsical. Among other innovations, news organizations borrowed a survey technique from the campaigns that allowed viewers to indicate their ongoing, real-time debate reactions by pressing buttons on a handheld measuring device. For the second debate of 1988, local station KHQ in Spokane, Washington, pioneered the technique on television, gathering a studio audience of ninety voters and displaying their live reaction by way of a superimposed graph.

CNN adopted the gimmick for its 1992 debate coverage, creating a “living graph” that showed the unfolding responses of uncommitted voters on a moment-to-moment basis. Howard Rosenberg, in the *Los Angeles Times*, called the poll “goofy,” and said, “If you thought Perot was sidesplitting, then you should have caught CNN commentator William Schneider trying to explain what it all meant.” Four years later NBC carried its own moment-to-moment graph, which *Washington Post* critic Howard Kurtz termed “incomprehensible.”⁵⁶

However clumsy, these efforts at postdebate polling at least give the public a voice in the national reaction. To the press’s further credit, journalists in recent elections have attempted to go beyond the faceless numbers-crunching of audience surveys and cover presidential debates in a more personal way. The *Washington Post* is one of several news organizations that assembles small groups of debate watchers and sends its reporters to write about them. Still, media accounts of citizen reaction to presidential debates often feel perfunctory, added to the mix in order to mute the louder, more insistent voices of the pundits and the spinners.

Not all audience-reaction stories have been unimaginative. After the first Ford-Carter debate in 1976 NBC reporter Jack Perkins filed an unusual person-on-the-street piece that started at one end of the country and ended at

the other. Perkins began his report on the campus of UCLA, where he interviewed a series of students, two of whom confessed to being more confused after the debate than they were before. The crew then hopped a midnight flight heading east from California, recording mid-air debate reactions from fellow passengers and a flight attendant. In Arlington Heights, Illinois, Perkins boarded the 6:42 A.M. commuter train for downtown Chicago, collecting more responses before proceeding to the bluegrass country of Kentucky for interviews with a farmer in his field and a woman in her garden. Perkins ended his cross-country trek soliciting opinions in the New York City subway.⁵⁷ If not the most methodologically advanced of audience survey stories, this certainly ranks among the most creative.

KEEPING THE STORY ALIVE:
THE EASTERN EUROPE GAFFE

Reporters covering presidential debates pray to the news gods that the encounter will produce a follow-up story that extends into the days beyond. The shelf life of most debates is less than twenty-four hours: recaps later that night in local news programs and network specials, and again on the next day's morning shows and newscasts. Debates then vanish into the mists of history, memorable only if they contain a transcendent clip for the "greatest hits" reel. As with so many big-ticket TV events, like lackluster Super Bowls and long-winded Oscar shows, presidential debates often deliver less than they promise.

In 1960, and again in the first debate of 1976, production problems—Richard Nixon's appearance, the audio gap—dominated postdebate coverage. The first major *performance* story to break from a televised presidential debate was Gerald Ford's Eastern Europe gaffe, committed in the second program of 1976 and kept alive by a combination of Ford's stubborn refusal to retract the misstatement and media insistence on an apology.

In the initial postdebate television coverage, commentators were slow to recognize the error. On CBS, Walter Cronkite's first summation of the event failed to note what *Time* magazine would call "the blooper heard round the world."⁵⁸ Harry Reasoner also ignored the issue in his close-of-program remarks on ABC. Only during the later news specials did the subject crop up. CBS diplomatic correspondent Marvin Kalb held that the president's comment would "come as a great surprise to the people in Eastern Europe,"

and Bob Schieffer called it “a major blunder.” David Brinkley of NBC speculated that Ford’s “rather curious statement . . . may have been a slip of the tongue. We think he may have meant Western Europe.”⁵⁹ As Brinkley’s line suggests, reporters at this point were more baffled than derisive.

In the next morning’s newspapers the story evolved from curiosity to folly. The *New York Times* devoted a front-page sidebar exclusively to Ford’s slip of the tongue. The *Boston Globe* quoted exultant Carter aides, one of whom described it as an “incredible statement.” A *Washington Post* account included a prescient observation from Hamilton Jordan, Carter’s campaign manager, who said of the error, “You will hear a great deal about that in the next few days.”⁶⁰

Just as Jordan forecast, within twenty-four hours the story had exploded. The gaffe dominated network newscasts the evening after the debate, leading all three networks. Coverage was extensive, including reaction stories from Eastern European ethnic communities in the United States, as well as response from around the world. Jimmy Carter used the occasion to say his opponent had “disgraced our country,” and vice presidential candidate Walter Mondale joked that after the telecast he had gone looking for a Polish bar, certain that drinks would be on the house for Democrats.⁶¹

The day after the San Francisco debate, Ford embarked on an ill-fated odyssey of clarification that for the better part of a week effectively brought his campaign to a standstill. At an event at the University of Southern California the president offered a lukewarm amendment to his original declaration. “Last night in the debate I spoke of America’s firm support for the aspirations for independence of the nations of Eastern Europe,” Ford stated, then added that the United States “has never conceded and will never concede their domination by the Soviet Union.” As Marilyn Berger said on NBC, “It was a stab at correcting a costly impression.”⁶²

For the news media, it was also insufficient. Again the next day Ford labored to explain himself, first at a breakfast appearance before business supporters in Los Angeles. Recalling a 1975 trip to Poland, the president said that Polish citizens “don’t believe they are going to be forever dominated—if they are—by the Soviet Union. They believe in the independence of that great country and so do I. We’re going to make certain, to the best of our ability, that any allegation of dominance is not a fact.”

Things got even fuzzier in an impromptu statement to the press a few hours later, just after a midday rally in Glendale. Bizarrely Ford read his explanation into a walkie-talkie, sound from which was transmitted to the

press buses via the handlers' walkie-talkies. Speaking in the third person, Ford said, "President Ford does not believe that the Polish people over the long run—whether they are in Poland or whether they are Polish-Americans here—will ever condone domination by a foreign force."⁶³

Finally, on October 12, six days after the debate, a chastened Ford flatly admitted, albeit off-camera, that he had made a mistake. In a meeting with ethnic leaders at the White House, the president finally spoke the words the news media had been waiting to hear. "Let me be blunt," he said. "I did not express myself clearly when this question came up in the debate. The countries of Eastern Europe are, of course, dominated by the Soviet Union."⁶⁴ The apology was duly reported, and the press moved on to greener pastures.

Why did Ford take so long to perform his ritual act of contrition? According to press secretary Ron Nessen, advisers urged the president the morning after the debate to acknowledge that he had misspoken, but he refused. "I can be very stubborn when I think I'm right," Ford wrote in his memoirs, "and I just didn't want to apologize for something that was a minor mistake."⁶⁵

On the same day he issued his final apology Ford took the press to task in a meeting with New York newspaper and broadcasting executives, lamenting that 90 percent of reporting on the San Francisco debate involved the single remark about Soviet domination. "There was such a concentration on that one point, ignoring virtually everything else, that I think the news media didn't give a full and accurate picture of the substance in many of the questions and many of the answers," Ford said.⁶⁶

What may at first appear to be an effort to shift blame is, on closer inspection, a legitimate complaint. Why should journalists have fixated on Ford's mistake to the exclusion of almost everything else? Why was the president of the United States hounded into issuing an apology when he felt none was required? Is it the proper function of the news media to demand atonement from public figures? As political scientist Thomas Patterson notes: "The candidate usually has no choice but to respond to the press's demands for a *mea culpa*. The price of silence is crippling news coverage for days on end." Ford aide Richard Cheney described the 1976 incident as a case of reporters extracting their "pound of flesh."⁶⁷

Media coverage of the Ford gaffe offers a case study in the power of the press to alter perceptions. Right after the debate, between eleven at night and one o'clock the next morning, Republican pollster Robert Teeter conducted a poll of viewers who named Ford the winner by a percentage point.

After news reports of the mistake appeared the next day, the surveys began to reflect a downward trend; Teeter's poll showed that 62 percent of those queried between 5:00 P.M. and midnight the day after the debate thought Carter had done the better job, compared to 17 percent for Ford. "Reports of the debate had reemphasized the president as a mistake prone, inept bumbler, exactly what we had spent six or seven weeks trying to get away from," Teeter said.⁶⁸

"The volunteered descriptions of the debate by voters surveyed immediately after the debate included no mentions of Ford's statement on Eastern Europe," wrote researcher Fred Steeper of the Republican study. "Not until the afternoon of the next day did such references appear, and by Thursday night they were the most frequent criticism given of Ford's performance." A voter who participated in a different research study said: "I thought that Ford had won. But the papers say it was Carter. So it must be Carter." As Ford press secretary Ron Nessen put it, "The average guy in his living room watching the debate didn't see the Eastern European comment as a monumental mistake. But after twenty-four hours of being told how bad a mistake it was, people changed their minds."⁶⁹

OTHER POSTDEBATE STORY LINES: THE "AGE ISSUE" AND BEYOND

The first presidential debate of 1984 ignited perhaps the biggest follow-up story in debate history: Was Ronald Reagan competent to lead the country? Like the Ford gaffe, the matter did not fully surface in the program's immediate aftermath. Bruce Morton, on CBS, hinted at a problem, saying that Reagan "floundered" more than usual and appeared "ill at ease." John Chancellor, on NBC, asserted that "the president got very tired at the end and seemed quite disorganized in his closing statements."⁷⁰ But none of the analysts came close to questioning Reagan's fitness for office.

Morning-after newspaper accounts also noted President Reagan's tentative delivery without linking the debate to a discussion of jobworthiness. "Mr. Reagan appeared less confident than he customarily does on television," wrote Howell Raines in the *New York Times*, in a typically subdued comment, and Tom Shales in the *Washington Post* joked, "Obviously, it's back to the old briefing books for the Reagan team."⁷¹

Ronald Reagan's inferior performance did not morph into the "age issue"

until two mornings after the debate, when the *Wall Street Journal* ran a story with the headline, “New Question in Race: Is Oldest U.S. President Now Showing His Age?” The article, by Rich Jaroslovsky and James M. Perry, got to the point in its fourth paragraph: “Until Sunday night’s debate, age hadn’t been much of an issue in the election campaign. That may now be changing. The president’s rambling responses and occasional apparent confusion injected an unpredictable new element into the race.”

The story went on to quote from a psychologist and Reagan supporter who said: “I’d be concerned to put him into a corporate presidency. I’d be all the more concerned to put him into the U.S. presidency.” Democratic congressman Tony Coelho of California told the *Journal*: “He created an issue that has not yet come in this campaign—age. He looked old and acted old.” The piece ended with thoughts on how other presidents had aged in office, interviews about the warning signs of senility, and a reminder that candidate Reagan in 1980 had pledged to undergo regular tests for senility if he became president.⁷²

The same day the story by Jaroslovsky and Perry ran, the *Washington Post* carried an op-ed column by influential political writer David Broder. Broder also candidly addressed the broader implications of Reagan’s performance:

He let the age issue emerge as it had not done in any of his previous campaigns. On the big screen in the press room where I watched the debate, the contrast in physical appearance between Mondale and Reagan was at least as great as the seventeen-year difference in their ages—probably the most startling contrast since that between the healthy John F. Kennedy and the infection-weakened, underweight Richard M. Nixon in the first 1960 debate.⁷³

The combination of the *Journal* article and Broder’s column seemed to unleash pent-up energy in the press, legitimizing the age issue as fair game for media scrutiny. “It was as if the men and women of the press felt they needed permission before they could truthfully describe what they had seen the night before,” wrote media critic Mark Hertsgaard. Hertsgaard castigated journalists for “poaching” off the *Journal* story instead of undertaking their own investigations into Reagan’s health.⁷⁴

The same day the newspaper pieces ran, the networks scrambled to air TV versions of the story. “This was one of those rare days in schizophrenic Washington when the whole town seemed to focus on one thing—Ronald

Reagan's age," said Jim Wooten on ABC. Wooten's piece included a series of unflattering shots: a debate sound bite in which Reagan sputtered and stumbled, a clip that showed the president nodding off during an audience with the pope, and an excerpt in which First Lady Nancy Reagan appeared to be prompting her husband in response to a reporter's question.⁷⁵

CBS ran a similar montage, a "worst-of" collection of Reagan bloopers that included some of the same moments ABC had used. As Thomas Rosenstiel wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*: "The abbreviated tape clips had an impact far beyond what they had in their original context. Reagan's debate fumbles in clip form seemed more drastic than they did live during the debate."⁷⁶ The networks also brought on doctors and psychiatrists to speak about the effects of aging on mental acuity.

At first the president's vaunted team of public relations experts appeared caught off-guard by the barrage of bad press. "I'll challenge him to an arm-wrestle any time," Reagan told reporters on the day the *Journal* and Broder stories ran, but for once the joke rang hollow.⁷⁷ The White House came back the next day with a statement about the president's physical health that said, "Mr. Reagan is a mentally alert, robust man who appears younger than his stated age." Reagan's personal physician, Dr. Donald Ruge, was trotted out to describe his patient as being in "excellent" health, though when asked if Reagan had lost any of his stamina over the past four years, the doctor replied, "I don't know, you have to ask him."⁷⁸

"I wasn't tired," Reagan informed the press corps, and to underscore the point Republican strategists made sure that their candidate was photographed getting out of his limousine at a campaign stop and taking an "impromptu" on-camera stroll. "The White House today did everything but put a Superman cape on President Reagan as it wrestled with questions about his age and fitness," said Tom Brokaw on NBC.⁷⁹

The relentless coverage took an obvious personal toll on Reagan. Displaying an uncharacteristic testiness, the president grumbled about his opponent, "If I had as much makeup on as he did, I'd have looked younger, too." Reagan insisted to reporters that he never wore makeup, even as an actor. This claim prompted a *Los Angeles Times* story that quoted one Hollywood makeup artist as saying Reagan had used cosmetics on TV's *General Electric Theater*, and another from the Warner Brothers film studio who said Reagan avoided makeup in the movies. Mondale himself joined the dialogue, telling a crowd in Pittsburgh, "Mr. President, the problem isn't makeup on the face, it's the makeup on those answers that gave you a problem."⁸⁰

Just as media reaction upended voter opinion after Gerald Ford's Eastern Europe gaffe, so did coverage of the "age issue" realign public thinking about the first 1984 debate. "The initial public response was that Reagan had won; with the passage of time and news media spin, his early victory turned into something approaching a historic defeat," wrote political scientist Austin Ranney. The first poll on ABC, taken during the final minutes of the telecast, had Reagan in the lead by three points. An hour later, after negative reviews came in for the president, the lead had shifted to Mondale by a point. Two days after the debate a CBS News–*New York Times* poll showed an edge for Mondale of forty-nine points. The unceasing media focus on the "age issue" had completely reversed public opinion about who won the match.⁸¹

The unprecedented drubbing of Dan Quayle in the 1988 debate with Lloyd Bentsen sparked a narrative line that would sustain several days of lively coverage. The specific impetus for the story was Bentsen's "You're no Jack Kennedy" sound bite, an irresistible snippet of videotape that was like catnip to television news producers. As Bob Schieffer predicted on CBS immediately after the broadcast, this was the bite the whole country would see, even those who had not watched the debate. When ABC's *Nightline* came on the air half an hour after the debate, the program opened with the clip. The next day NBC aired the exchange four times on its morning show, and all three major networks repeated it in their evening newscasts.⁸²

Intentionally or not, George Bush exacerbated Quayle's problems by not appearing in public with his running mate the day after the debate, as Michael Dukakis did with Lloyd Bentsen. Damage control instead fell to President Reagan, who called Bentsen's line a "cheap shot and unbecoming to a senator of the United States." Quayle himself attempted a belated response to the question about his qualifications for office. "There is no doubt I would maintain and build on the excellent policies of President George Bush," Quayle forcefully declaimed at a rally the next day in Joplin, Missouri.⁸³

Meanwhile, in half a dozen postdebate appearances, Bush failed even to mention his running mate, a fact that did not go unnoticed by the press. Two days after the event, reporters were still waiting for Bush to endorse Quayle's performance. Finally the vice president had little choice but to issue a statement of support. Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times* sketched the scene, which took place outside Bush's official Washington residence just after an unrelated press event:

Vice President Bush was walking back up the steps of his home . . . when someone called out a question about Senator Dan Quayle's much-debated performance as his running mate.

Mr. Bush, whose carefully managed campaign avoids press conferences for weeks at a time, spun on his heels and returned to the microphone to defend Senator Quayle in what seemed to be a planned expression of outrage.

"The concept that I see in some of these reports that I am not supportive of Dan Quayle are absolutely ludicrous," he said. "They are ridiculous. He did well in that debate, he has my full support, and he is getting strong support since the debate and before around this country."⁸⁴

The postdebate journey of Dan Quayle then veered off in a new direction. Angry at what he perceived as a lack of support from Bush insiders, Quayle made a display in the press of taking charge of his own fate—and, not coincidentally, seizing control of the narrative. "I got tired of all the publicity," Quayle told ABC's Jackie Judd on board his campaign bus. "I figured it couldn't get any worse, and I was going to take over." Quayle declared that from now on "I'm the person that's going to do the spinning." Bob Schieffer, in a report on CBS, questioned this new tactic: "It was all so unexpected, some wondered if Bush aides had planned the whole thing to show Quayle was his own man."⁸⁵

In a strange way the negative aftermath of the debate seemed to liberate Dan Quayle. As B. Drummond Ayres wrote in the *New York Times*, "Something happened to Dan Quayle in Omaha, or shortly thereafter, something besides that 'You're no Jack Kennedy' verbal leveling administered by Senator Bentsen. Mr. Quayle came away a changed campaigner."⁸⁶ At the very least the news media *perceived* him as a changed campaigner. Once he had acted out his little role in the drama and obliged reporters by offering up a fresh angle on the story, Dan Quayle started getting better press.

One week after Quayle's devastation in the 1988 vice presidential debate, Michael Dukakis suffered a mortal blow of his own at the hands of Bernard Shaw. Just as Dan Quayle continued to address the bungled question about qualifications in his postdebate appearances, so did Dukakis take to the air waves to recast his response to Shaw's hypothetical about capital punishment. As both candidates proved, a debater's second crack at a question cannot always undo the original answer.

Several days before Election Day 1988 Dukakis appeared in a CNN interview with Shaw, arranged at the request of Democratic handlers. Early in the exchange, before the anchorman had a chance to mention it, Dukakis brought up the notorious opening volley. Assuring Shaw that the question had been fair and reasonable, Dukakis added that he had been thinking about his response and how he might better have stated it.

DUKAKIS: Let me just say this: Kitty is probably the most—is the most—precious thing, she and my family, that I have in this world. And obviously, if what happened to her was the kind of thing that you described, I would have the same feelings as any loving husband and father.

SHAW: Would you kill him?

DUKAKIS: I think I would have that kind of emotion. On the other hand, this is not a country where we glorify vengeance.⁸⁷

As journalist Roger Simon observed, “This is what campaigning had come down to. Anyone who wanted to be the leader of a great nation and do great things . . . had to show emotion. And in order to be likable, he had to tell people that, yes, he would want to take a human life.”⁸⁸

We conclude our survey of postdebate media coverage with two tempest-in-a-teapot incidents that spawned a flurry of tongue-in-cheek reporting: President Carter’s reference during the 1980 debate to his daughter, Amy, and Vice President Bush’s assertion after the 1984 Ferraro match that he had “kicked a little ass.”

The so-called Amy gaffe, in which Carter recounted a conversation with his daughter on the topic of nuclear weapons, provoked an immediate wave of ridicule in the media. In ABC’s postdebate special *Barbara Walters*, who had moderated the debate, named Amy the winner of the match, and said, “I’m going home to my child, who’s the same age as Amy, and if she doesn’t tell me that nuclear proliferation is the major concern on her mind, she’s going to hear it from her mother.” Former secretary of state Henry Kissinger told a reporter, “I gag at that kind of stuff in general, although I like Amy.”⁸⁹

The next day ABC reporter Bettina Gregory turned up at Amy’s school in Washington and conducted an ambush interview with the thirteen-year-old First Daughter. Amy confirmed to Gregory and several other reporters that

she and her father had discussed nuclear war. From there, the conversation degenerated:

REPORTER: Does he talk to you often about your opinions?

AMY: Yeah.

REPORTER: What else is important?

AMY: I don't know.

REPORTER: Were you surprised to hear him mention that he had talked to you about it in the speech?

AMY: Yeah, kind of.⁹⁰

Four years later, in the George Bush episode, it was an indiscreet remark to a group of New Jersey longshoremen that got the media clucking. "We tried to kick a little ass last night," Bush told the dockworkers the morning after the 1984 vice presidential debate, just in time to notice that a sound man from a local TV station was standing nearby with a boom microphone. "Whoops—oh, God, he heard me!" Bush cried, then implored the news crew to "turn that thing off!" As the *Washington Post* pointed out, "Minutes earlier, Bush had described Ferraro to reporters as 'gracious' and declined to declare himself the winner."

After videotape of the putdown was made available to journalists, Bush called a news conference to extinguish the media brush fire. The vice president defended his comment as an "old Texas football expression," adding that he had no intention of apologizing. "I stand behind it, I use it all the time," he said. "My kids use it, everybody who competes in sports uses it. I just don't like to use it in public." The story led two of the network newscasts and ran prominently in the next morning's newspapers, though the *New York Times* primly identified the phrase only as a "locker room vulgarity." In an interview on NBC, Ferraro told Tom Brokaw, "I think Mr. Bush was about as accurate in his assessment of the result of the debate as he was in the facts and figures he put forth during the debate."⁹¹

Bush never did apologize, but in the context of other anti-Ferraro rumblings from the Republican camp, the slur seemed curiously ill-advised. *Time* magazine called it "one of the silliest blunders of the campaign,"⁹² as it most certainly was. What *Time* failed to add is that for the news media silly blunders are manna from heaven.