

Introduction

THE FIRST PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

I should say the most important thing about the business of government and politics is not to bore the people.

—Richard Nixon to Jack Paar on the Tonight Show, 25 August 1960

26 September 1960. At exactly 7:30 P.M., a shiny Oldsmobile carrying Vice President Richard M. Nixon pulled into an interior drive at the CBS broadcast facility in downtown Chicago. As with other details surrounding the first presidential debate in history, the timing of Nixon's arrival at this skating rink-turned-TV station had been meticulously plotted. Like dueling divas, Nixon and his opponent, John F. Kennedy, would reach the studio a comfortable quarter hour apart.

For Richard Nixon, the evening began almost as unpromisingly as it would end. Stepping out of the backseat of the car, he banged his knee sharply and painfully against the door; bystanders waiting to greet him saw the color drain from his face. Just two weeks earlier, the vice president had concluded twelve days of hospitalization for a knee infection caused by a similar mishap with a car door. Almost immediately after his release, Nixon had bounded back onto the campaign trail, hoping to make up for lost time with an intensive schedule of cross-country travel. Now, heading into the

most critical media event of his life, he looked exhausted, underweight, and wan—“better suited for going to a funeral, perhaps his own, than to a debate,” in the view of journalist David Halberstam.¹

At the WBBM loading dock, Nixon quickly composed himself and started through a high-power receiving line. Gathered to greet this first of the star debaters were the titans of American broadcasting: fierce competitors like William Paley of CBS, Robert Sarnoff of NBC, and Leonard Goldenson of ABC, momentarily allied in their patronage of the 1960 debates. Working the line, Nixon came to Oliver Treyz, the president of ABC News, who greeted the candidate by asking what no one else had dared: “How do you feel?”

At a dinner commemorating the debate twenty-five years later, Treyz would recall the moment: “I asked the question because he looked ill. And he said, ‘Not so well. I have a temperature of a hundred and two degrees.’” When Nixon pulled from his pocket the bottle of Terramycin he was taking, Treyz asked if he wished to cancel. Nixon declined, saying he did not want to be seen as a coward.²

Poor physical health and a freshly injured knee were only the beginning of Richard Nixon’s troubles. For weeks, a more vexing problem had been brewing: a lack of appreciation by campaign decision makers for the momentousness of the occasion. “Nixon knew the power of television very well,” said Ted Rogers, Nixon’s TV adviser, “but I don’t think the people around him did.” According to Rogers, Kennedy’s staff handled their candidate as a thoroughbred, while Nixon’s treated theirs like a mule, “working him to death.”³ Nixon had turned down an invitation from debate producer-director Don Hewitt for a preproduction meeting; Kennedy used his session to grill the director about staging details. As Hewitt saw it, for Nixon the debate was “just another campaign appearance.”⁴

To prepare for the broadcast, Vice President Nixon studied briefing books alone, dismissing suggestions that he rehearse with aides. Senator Kennedy, by contrast, brought an entourage to Chicago two days ahead of schedule and spent much of the weekend holed up in a hotel suite practicing his responses out loud. In the hours immediately before broadcast, members of Kennedy’s campaign team were still lobbying questions at him.

Fifteen minutes after Nixon’s arrival at WBBM, the network executives reassembled to greet the man who would emerge as the evening’s undisputed champion. Unlike his Republican counterpart, John F. Kennedy arrived fit, rested, and ready. Weeks of open-air campaigning around the country had left Kennedy bronzed and glowing. Journalist Howard K. Smith, who

moderated the first debate, would compare JFK to an “athlete come to receive his wreath of laurel.” Said Nixon adviser Rogers, “When he came in the studio I thought he was Cochise, he was so tan.”⁵

As Kennedy strode down the long corridor linking the driveway to Studio One, Nixon was already on the debate set, posing for cameramen with an air of jocularly that would quickly evaporate. “Have you ever had a picture printed yet?” Nixon teased one of the photographers, getting a laugh from the group. “You’re always taking them, I never see them printed.” Kennedy’s entrance into the studio a few moments later immediately siphoned attention away from Nixon. “I assume you two guys know each other,” Hewitt cracked, as the rivals extended their hands in greeting. The cameramen clamored for shots of the pair shaking hands; over and over they obliged, their chit-chat muffled by the sound of flashbulbs.

“You get that tan the way I do?” Nixon asked Kennedy, prefiguring post-debate interest in the candidates’ appearance. “Riding around in open cars? It’s the wind, you know, not the sun.” Though Kennedy’s answer is not recorded, it is apparent from the question that the vice president was struck by how well his opponent looked. Did Nixon sense that his own posthospital pallor was no match for Kennedy’s summer glow? For weeks, TV consultant Rogers had urged Nixon to use a sunlamp. Like most of Rogers’s advice, the recommendation went unheeded.

After shooing away the photographers, Don Hewitt ushered Kennedy and Nixon to their seats on the debate set for a quick orientation. Footage of this meeting shows Nixon casting his glance at a monitor off-screen, uncomfortably shifting positions in his chair, seeming to pass in and out of a daze. Kennedy, who does not deign to look at Nixon, occupies his side of the studio set with the casual presumption of a lion in his den.

To both debaters Hewitt offered the services of CBS’s top makeup artist, imported from New York for the occasion. When Kennedy said no, Nixon quickly followed suit, in a show of machismo that proved to be a serious tactical blunder. “What I tried to explain to Dick,” Rogers later recalled, “was he has a certain characteristic of his skin where it’s almost transparent. And it was a very nice thought to say ‘I don’t want any makeup,’ but he really needed it in order to have what we would call even an acceptable television picture.”⁶

Nixon himself knew this. Two weeks before the first debate, he spoke of the cosmetic peculiarities of his skin in a TV interview with Walter Cronkite: “I can shave within thirty seconds before I go on television and

still have a beard, unless we put some powder on, as we have done today.”⁷ Instead of a proper predebate makeup job, an aide slathered Nixon’s face with an over-the-counter cosmetic called “Lazy Shave,” the same product the vice president had worn in his “kitchen debate” with Nikita Khrushchev a year earlier. Meanwhile, unknown to Nixon, Kennedy got a touch-up from his own people.

In the technical checks that followed, each debater took a final opportunity to sit before the lens for last-minute adjustments. Kennedy advisers examined the shade of their man’s dark suit to make sure an appropriate contrast would be achieved on camera, and a staff person was dispatched back to the hotel for a blue shirt, which the senator donned for the broadcast. Another handler had brought along a pair of long socks, in case regular socks looked too short when the candidates were shown sitting on the set.

If JFK’s tech check was obsessive, the other side’s was fatalistic. Alarmed by Nixon’s on-screen appearance, Hewitt asked Ted Rogers if he approved of the way his debater looked. Although Rogers pronounced himself “satisfied”⁸—“resigned” might have been a better word—Hewitt felt concerned enough to press the matter with his CBS boss, Frank Stanton. Stanton again asked Rogers if the shots of Nixon were acceptable, and again Rogers said yes.

Exacerbating his misfortune, Nixon had selected a light gray suit which, according to CBS News president Sig Mickelson, “blended into the background and, if anything, exaggerated his pale appearance.”⁹ At the Republicans’ insistence, stagehands repainted the gray backdrop several times in the hours before the debate, but each new coat dried lighter than Nixon’s people had anticipated. As air time approached, the backdrop was still moist from the latest application.

With less than half an hour to go, both candidates retired to their dressing rooms.

In Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, Jacqueline Kennedy, six-months pregnant with her second child, was hosting a debate-watching party. About thirty people had gathered in the Kennedys’ summer home on Nantucket Sound, where the guest list included Jackie’s sister, Lee Radziwill; Professor and Mrs. Archibald Cox; Professor and Mrs. Arthur Schlesinger Jr.; Democratic committeewomen from around New England; and, last but not least, about a dozen journalists.

The Kennedy “Listening Party,” as the newspapers would anachronisti-

cally term it, offers further evidence of how differently the two political camps regarded the debate. While the wife of the Democratic candidate used the occasion for public relations, Patricia Nixon spent a quiet evening watching at home with her two daughters in Washington, out of sight of reporters until the next day, when she would be enlisted for damage control.

The Boston press breathlessly reported every detail of Jacqueline Kennedy's party on this cool Cape Cod evening: the coffee and pastries in the dining room; the lemon-yellow couch where the hostess perched next to Professor Cox; two-and-a-half-year-old Caroline sleeping upstairs; Jackie's pearl necklace and coral-colored, silk maternity dress. Sensitive to recent press reports about her expensive wardrobe, Mrs. Kennedy assured reporters that the outfit had been sewn by a local seamstress.

Jacqueline Kennedy had rented a sixteen-inch portable television set for the debate. "I own one in Washington," she told her guests, "but we don't have one here. I guess I'll have to break down and buy one." A *Boston Globe* photo showed the TV set incongruously situated atop a piece of antique furniture identified as an "early American Governor Winthrop desk."¹⁰

As the program drew nearer, Jacqueline confessed to being nervous. "I'm not apprehensive," she said in the debutante voice the whole country would soon recognize. "But I'm always nervous before he speaks. I must say I have no reason to be." With partygoers scattered around the room in chairs and on the floor, the moment approached. Mrs. Kennedy herself clicked on the set, took a deep breath, and sat down to watch.

"The candidates need no introduction," began moderator Howard K. Smith. And for the next hour the country's first televised presidential debate unfolded, attracting the largest audience that had ever assembled for a political event. An estimated seventy million Americans watched on TV, while several million more listened on radio.¹¹

The issues Kennedy and Nixon addressed were familiar to anyone following the news in 1960: communism and national security; labor and farm problems; the candidates' leadership experience. Though the substance of their remarks would account for most of the ink in the next day's papers, it was the debaters' personal characteristics that resonated most strongly with the viewers. "Within hours," wrote David Halberstam, "no one could recall anything that was said, only what they looked like, what they felt like."¹²

In his landmark book *The Making of the President*, campaign chronicler Theodore White famously limned the contrast between performers:

Kennedy “calm and nerveless in appearance,” Nixon “tense, almost frightened, at turns glowering and, occasionally, haggard-looking to the point of sickness.” For Richard Nixon, White concluded, “everything that could have gone wrong that night went wrong.”¹³ Media historian Erik Barnouw noted that Kennedy’s “air of confidence” came across not only in his statements and gestures but more crucially during the cutaway reaction shots: “A glimpse of the listening Kennedy showed him attentive, alert, with a suggestion of a smile on his lips. A Nixon glimpse showed him haggard; the lines on his face seemed like gashes and gave a fearful look.”¹⁴

What viewers at home could not know was that these same images were igniting a parallel debate in the control room of WBBM-TV, where the issue was not public policy but visual aesthetics. Candidate cutaways had been a flashpoint in the lengthy and contentious predebate negotiations between the campaigns and the networks, but no firm guidelines emerged as to how the program would be shot. By prior agreement, the candidates’ television representatives sat in the control room during the program: Ted Rogers for Nixon and, for Kennedy, a former WBBM producer named Bill Wilson. With the debate under way, Wilson chided Hewitt that he “owed” Kennedy more reaction shots.

“What do you mean?” Hewitt asked. “I’ve cut away from Kennedy more than I’ve cut away from Nixon.”

But the reaction shots Wilson wanted were of Nixon. The two advisers got into a heated argument with each other and with Hewitt, each side demanding more reactions of the other’s candidate, each keeping a running count of the cutaways. Hewitt was hollering at them both to stop interfering with his work, which, as he saw it, was to serve as a surrogate for people watching in their living rooms. “I didn’t try to catch the candidates in a grimace,” Hewitt later explained. “I listened to the comments and tried to anticipate the public—to switch to a reaction shot when I thought viewers would expect one.”¹⁵ Although Nixon’s close-up cutaways would loom larger in the national perception than Kennedy’s, postdebate tallies showed eleven reactions of Kennedy running a total of 118 seconds, compared to nine of Nixon totalling 85 seconds.

The potency of these images may unintentionally have been enhanced by improvements in TV technology. The day before the debate, CBS engineers outfitted the studio cameras with new tubes that delivered a sharper than normal picture. “This was unfortunate for Nixon,” CBS’s Mickelson concluded. “The cameras exaggerated his paleness and heavy beard, but it was a

break for Kennedy, who looked robust and healthy. As the cameras had exaggerated Nixon's apparent ill health, they likewise enhanced Kennedy's rugged vitality."¹⁶ An additional visual factor must be considered: as black and white broadcasts, the debates exuded a documentary crispness that verged on the hyperreal. Especially when compared to debates from later, color-TV years, the 1960 debates offer the clarity and punch of a *Life* magazine photo essay come to life.

Beyond production considerations, an eleventh-hour phone call from running mate Henry Cabot Lodge apparently helped steer Nixon onto the wrong tactical course. Lodge, who had debated Kennedy in their senatorial race in 1952, advised Nixon to take the high road and "erase the assassin image" that had dogged him throughout his political career.¹⁷ And so it was that Richard Nixon adopted a posture of conciliation, even deference, to his fellow debater. "The things that Senator Kennedy has said many of us can agree with," Nixon declared in his opening statement. "I can subscribe completely to the spirit that Senator Kennedy has expressed tonight."¹⁸ At one point, the Republican nominee chose to forgo a response altogether, passing up the opportunity to rebut his opponent's remarks.

"Thank you, gentlemen. This hour has gone by all too quickly." With this coda from Howard K. Smith, the historic encounter drew to a close. In Texas, Henry Cabot Lodge, the running mate who had counseled gentility in his predebate phone call to Nixon, was heard to say, "That son of a bitch just cost us the election."¹⁹

Before leaving the studio, Kennedy and Nixon posed for a final round of photographs, making small talk about travel schedules and weather as the shutters clicked away. Afterward, JFK told an aide that whenever a photographer prepared to snap, Nixon "would put a stern expression on his face and start jabbing his finger into my chest, so he would look as if he was laying down the law to me about foreign policy or communism. Nice fellow."²⁰

Outside the TV station, a crowd of twenty-five hundred political enthusiasts had gathered in the street. Asked by a reporter to estimate the ratio of Democrats to Republicans, a Chicago police officer quipped, "I'd say it's about twenty-five hundred to zero."²¹ As Nixon slipped out the back, Kennedy triumphantly emerged at the main entrance of the building to greet his supporters. "When it was all over," Don Hewitt said, "a man walked

out of this studio president of the United States. He didn't have to wait til election day."²²

In what history records as the first example of postdebate spin, Jacqueline Kennedy turned to her guests at program's end and exclaimed, "I think my husband was brilliant."

For most of the hour, Mrs. Kennedy had watched the debate "almost immobile," as one observer put it, though she did get up several times to adjust the picture on the temperamental TV set. Others in the highly partisan Kennedy living room broke into laughter when Nixon misspoke and declared, "It's our responsibility that we get rid of the farmer," before correcting himself and saying, "the surpluses." The hostess concealed her reaction to this verbal slip behind a "Mona Lisa-kind of smile."²³

Fifteen minutes after the debate ended, the phone rang at the Kennedy home in Hyannis Port: The senator was on the line. Jacqueline took the call upstairs, away from the guests, and reappeared a few minutes later. Her husband had asked about the listening party, she said; otherwise their conversation remained private. One of the reporters present wrote that after the call Mrs. Kennedy was "as flushed with happiness and suppressed excitement as a schoolgirl."²⁴

Richard Nixon's first indication that the debate had not gone his way came from long-time secretary Rose Mary Woods, a woman he counted among his most honest critics. Shortly after the broadcast, Woods got a call from her parents in Ohio, who asked if the vice president was feeling well. When the debate aired in California, Nixon's own mother phoned with the same question. And so the reaction went. "I recognized the basic mistake I had made," Nixon would write in *Six Crises*. "I had concentrated too much on substance and not enough on appearance. I should have remembered that 'a picture is worth a thousand words.'"²⁵

Indeed. In the days that followed, the thousands of words printed about the first Kennedy-Nixon debate would be no match for the pictures that had seared themselves into the nation's consciousness. Patricia Nixon, flying to her husband's side the next day, gamely told a reporter, "He looked wonderful on my TV set." Nixon himself assured interviewers that, despite a weight loss, he felt fine. Press secretary Herbert Klein lamented that "the fault obviously was television," while other Republicans voiced public displeasure with their candidate's kid-gloves approach to his opponent.²⁶

JFK, on the other hand, reaped an immediate windfall. Theodore White described the change in the crowds that turned out for Kennedy the next day in northern Ohio: “Overnight, they seethed with enthusiasm and multiplied in numbers, as if the sight of him, in their homes on the video box, had given him a ‘star quality’ reserved only for television and movie idols.” *Time* magazine wrote that before the debate reporters had amused themselves by counting “jumpers” in the crowds—women who hopped up and down to get a better look at Kennedy. “Now they noted ‘double jumpers’ (jumpers with babies in their arms). By week’s end they even spotted a few ‘leapers’ who reached prodigious heights.”²⁷

Although the mythology surrounding the first Kennedy-Nixon broadcast would greatly amplify in the years to follow, the moral of the story has never varied: presidential debates are best apprehended as *television shows*, governed not by the rules of rhetoric or politics but by the demands of their host medium. The values of debates are the values of television: celebrity, visuals, conflict, and hype. On every level, Kennedy and his team perceived this, while Nixon and his did not.

After Chicago, campaigns would have no choice but to school themselves in the subtleties of the small screen; eagerly have they taken to the task. “It didn’t matter whether the televised debate had been decisive in Kennedy’s victory,” wrote social critic Todd Gitlin. “What mattered was that the management of television was one factor that candidates believed they could control. The time of the professional media consultant had arrived.”²⁸

Today, with the merger of politics and television complete, presidential debates operate as a wholly owned subsidiary of the campaigns. Candidates and their handlers dominate every step of the process, from make-or-break issues like participation, schedule, and format to such arcana as podium placement, camera angles, and which star gets which dressing room. Nothing is unnegotiated, nothing left to chance.

Still, when the red light blinks on to signal the start of the program, the steamroller nature of live TV supersedes the campaigns’ stewardship. Spontaneity is the overriding determinant of presidential debates, and a major reason, perhaps *the* major reason, audiences continue to watch in such staggering numbers. “Modern debates are the political version of the Indianapolis Speedway,” says political scientist Nelson Polsby. “What we’re all there for—the journalist, the political pundits, the public—is to see somebody crack up in flames.”²⁹

Presidential Debates: Forty Years of High-Risk TV will take the reader on a

backstage tour through the fractious world of presidential debates, where the perils are enormous and the precautions illusory. We will meet the cast of characters in the behind-the-scenes drama: the candidate-stars, who perform under unimaginable pressure before the largest audiences of their careers; the advisers, who strive to protect them by whatever means necessary; the journalists, who narrate, and reinterpret, their story; the moderators and questioners, who serve as supporting players; the debate sponsors and production crews, who navigate a minefield of politics and egos to bring the programs to air; and the viewers, the ostensible beneficiaries of the exercise, who have been accurately labeled the “forgotten participants.”³⁰

We will approach presidential debates as their producers do, traveling along a chronology of preproduction, production, and postproduction, the standard time line by which all television shows are staged. By definition, the live telecast overshadows all else; but as the experience of 1960 shows, debates are also profoundly influenced by what happens before and after the fact—in the campaign, in the media, in the body politic. Thus our exploration begins with the predebate period, when rules are hammered out, candidates prepped, and press expectations set, and ends in the postdebate aftermath, when media interpretations and viewer reactions finally wrest control of the event away from the politicians.

The images of John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon that filled the air waves on 26 September 1960 can be read as harbingers of change. A revolutionary programming genre burst forth that night in Chicago, one that fundamentally realigned both politics and the media in America. In the forty years since Kennedy-Nixon, televised debates have lost none of their fascination for the press and the public, and none of their terror for candidates. Choreographed and unscripted, contrived and authentic, debates straddle the fault line between artifice and reality—like everything else on TV, only more so. With their clashing co-stars, enormous stakes, and “must-see” status, presidential debates are nothing so much as television writ large.