

DO THE DEBATES MATTER? AN EXAMINATION OF THE PROGRESSIVELY INFLUENTIAL ROLE OF MAJOR PARTY DEBATES ON AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: 1960-2008

INTRODUCTION

There were fifty-six American presidential elections from 1788 to 2008.¹ Only ten of the elections, however, included debates between the major party candidates. These occurred from 1960 to 2008, and there were none before that time.² In 1960, John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon, who were nominees of the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively, participated in a series of four debates. Television first became a significant factor in presidential politics in 1960 and the appeal of the Kennedy-Nixon debates was that they would be televised.³ Television's presence, however, overshadowed the even greater phenomenon that the Kennedy-Nixon debates were not only the first televised presidential debates, but they were also the first debates between major party candidates ever to take place.⁴ From that point until 2008, another twenty-two debates were held between the major party presidential candidates, one between the Republican and Independent nominees, and eight between their running mates.⁵

¹ Irwin Unger, *These United States*, 2nd Ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999, 2003, A18-A21. Unless otherwise noted, a "debate" as defined in this thesis refers to a major party presidential debate, one held between two or more candidates of opposing parties, where at least one of which belongs to a major party (*i.e.*, Democrat or Republican). Not included are debates between intraparty candidates (such as, among Democrats during the primary season) or general elections held exclusively among non-major party candidates (such as debates among the Constitution Party's, Green Party's and Libertarian Party's nominees), but they do include general election debates between major party vice presidential candidates.

² No debates were held prior to 1960, and none were held in 1964, 1968, or 1972.

³ Sidney Kraus, *Televised Presidential Debates and Public Policy*, 2nd Ed., Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000, 10.

⁴ Newton N. Minow and Craig L. Lamay, *Inside the Presidential Debates*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 1. Notably, 1860 presidential candidates Abraham Lincoln and Steven A. Douglas did not debate; their "Lincoln-Douglas" debates were in 1958, during their campaign for a United States Senate seat from Illinois. For more discussion about the Lincoln-Douglas debates, see James L. Huston and Robert W. Johannsen (Ed.), *The Lincoln Douglas Debates of 1858: 150th Anniversary Edition*, New York, NY: Oxford, 2008; and Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

⁵ Republican Ronald Reagan debated against Independent John Anderson in 1980; Jimmy Carter, the incumbent president and Democratic nominee, declined to participate.

This thesis asks the question “do the debates matter” and answers it with a resounding “yes.” It is important to note, however, what “matter” means in this context. Although there is ample evidence to link debate performances to election outcomes, the debates matter a great deal more than in their capacity as election determinants. They matter to the candidates, to the media and the pundits, and to the voters. Moreover, there were occasions when a particular candidate’s debate performance was assailed by observers and reflected in post-debate polls, followed by subsequent debate performances within the same season that reversed the candidate’s downward trajectory. Significantly, although some argue against the debates being election determinants, there is no contention within the scholarship, to date, that the debates do not matter in the broader definition of the word, as applied in this thesis.

The 1960 debates served as an experiment that Lyndon Johnson in 1964 and Richard Nixon in 1968 and 1972 did not care to repeat.⁶ Johnson did not fare particularly well in televised appearances, and Nixon, haunted by his painful experience in the 1960 debates was reluctant to debate again, and so the debates did not resume until 1976, when Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford were eager to revive them.⁷

At first glance, the realization that the first debate did not take place until 172 years after the first presidential election might lead indicate that the debates are merely a trivial component of a campaign. On the contrary, as this thesis establishes, debates have, consistently since their inception, played a key role. Both Nixon and Kennedy attributed the 1960 election outcome to the debates, the latter emphasizing the power of

⁶ Alan Schroeder, *Presidential Debates: Fifty Years of High-Risk TV*, 2nd Ed., New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008, 16. Schroeder wrote of Johnson’s lack of effectiveness as a speaker on television.

⁷ Schroeder, 16-17.

television, ceding that “I never would have had a prayer without that gadget.”⁸ Dwight D. Eisenhower, in his final year as president in 1960, understood that as well, questioning the wisdom of Nixon, who was the incumbent vice president at the time, for agreeing to debate, because debates are inherently disadvantageous to incumbents.⁹ Jimmy Carter attributed both his presidential election victories in 1976 and loss in 1980 to the debates.¹⁰ Ronald Reagan, who defeated Carter in 1980, was extremely thankful for the televised debates, as he understood their impact.¹¹ The *Wall Street Journal's* Daniel Henniger, who wrote about the debates that year, concluded that “the presidency of the United States essentially could be decided by a 90-minute show.”¹² Reagan and his 1984 opponent, Walter Mondale, also conveyed how much the debates mattered: Reagan described how nervous he was after a subpar performance in the first debate, prompting speculation that at age seventy-three he was too old to be president.¹³ Mondale, in turn, described Reagan’s triumphant performance in the second debate as “the end of my campaign.”¹⁴

By 1988, a single question asked by moderator Bernard Shaw to Michael Dukakis about Dukakis’ wife hypothetically being raped and murdered, was deemed the “killer question” insofar as Dukakis’ lackluster response perpetuated his passionless image. His opponent, George H.W. Bush, won the election.¹⁵ In 1992, Bill Clinton deemed the

⁸ Schroeder, 137.

⁹ Boston Globe Staff, “Bay Stater Quotes Ike: Debates Don’t Help Nixon, *Boston Globe*, October 13, 1960, 1.

¹⁰ George Farah, *No Debate*, New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2004, 2.

¹¹ Martin Schram, “After the Debate, the Pollsters Scramble,” *Washington Post*, October 30, 1980, A1.

¹² Daniel Henniger, “The Great Debate and Electronic Democracy,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 30, 1980, 30.

¹³ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1990, 326.

¹⁴ Jim Lehrer, *Tension City*, New York, NY: Random House, 2011, 27-28.

¹⁵ Jack Germond, and Jules Witcover, *Whose Broad Stripes and Bright Stars? The Trivial Pursuit of the Presidency*, 1988, New York, NY: Random House, 1989. The book’s first chapter, based on that question, is titled “A Killer Question” because, as the authors explained, it destroyed Dukakis because of how he handled it. If he answered it with more emotion, they wrote, he might have helped his image quite significantly.

debates so important that he insisted on a town hall format, in which audience members asked questions of the candidates directly, so that he could showcase his conversational prowess.¹⁶ Using a baseball analogy, the *Boston Globe*'s Robert Jordan wrote that Bush, who was the incumbent that year, needed a "miraculous last at-bat" in the final debate, thereby arguing that a masterful debate performance plausibly could salvage his campaign.¹⁷ Not wanting to take any chances with a poor debate performance, Clinton, the 1996 incumbent who had a comfortable lead, purposely negotiated one of his debates against Bob Dole to coincide with a baseball playoff game so that if Clinton made a gaffe, fewer people would be watching.¹⁸

The debates continued to matter in 2000 and 2004, which were the election years in which George W. Bush won very narrow victories, R.W. Apple of the *New York Times* described how in 2000 uncommitted voters were repelled by Gore's bullying tactics in the debates and gravitated toward Bush.¹⁹ By that year, the debates had become so prominent that third-party candidate Ralph Nader sued the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), which sponsored the debates, because he was excluded from them, as he believed they were his best chance to win the election.²⁰ In 2004, the role of the debates continued to grow: they were deemed as having a transformational effect on presidential races, and a split-screen camera intensified the need for candidates to be

¹⁶ Lee Banville, *Debating Our Destiny: Presidential Debate Moments That Shaped History*, Arlington, VA: MacNeil-Lehrer Productions, 2012, 31.

¹⁷ Robert A. Jordan, "Bush Needs a Miraculous Last At-Bat," *Boston Globe*, October 18, 1992, 77.

¹⁸ Schroeder, 34,

¹⁹ R.W. Apple, "Last Debate Clearly Left Some Voters Dissatisfied," *New York Times*, October 19, 2000, 1.

²⁰ Shelley Murphy, "Nader Sues over Debate Exclusion," *Boston Globe*, October 18, 2000, 18; Will Lester, "Ralph Nader Settles Lawsuit," Associated Press, April 17, 2002. The CPD settled the lawsuit with Nader on April 16, 2002, paying him \$25,000 for attorneys' fees and court costs.

continuously alert, telegenic, and not display any negative body language.²¹ Lastly, in 2008, the debates mattered, particularly beyond the ticket headliners. When presidential contenders Barack Obama and John McCain chose their running mates, Joe Biden and Sarah Palin, respectively, months ahead of the debates, pundits immediately speculated about the significant advantage Biden would have in the running mates' debate that season.²² Moreover, McCain agonized over whether or not he should forgo the first debate against Obama in order to remain in Washington and (as a United States Senator) help draft emergency legislation to aid an alarmingly erratic economy, thereby placing the debates on the same level of importance as a national crisis; in fact, he ultimately chose to adhere to the debate schedule.²³

In addition to the debaters themselves, members of the press who covered and analyzed the debates, indicated that the debates mattered, at times describing a particular candidate's performance as crucial to his campaign.²⁴ Post-debate polls demonstrated a correlation between candidate approval ratings and debate performances as perceived by the public.²⁵ No less an observer than the United States Supreme Court concluded that at no other time in an election season do the voters pay as much attention as during the debates.²⁶

²¹ John Harwood and Jeanne Cummings, "Debates Take Center Stage," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct 15, 2004, 4; Nick Anderson and Scott Collins, "Split Screen Wasn't Kind to Bush," *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 2004, 18. George W. Bush in the first debate against John Kerry was captured scowling by the split screen, as Kerry spoke.

²² John Heilemann and Mark Halperin, *Game Change*, New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010, 370.

²³ Michael D. Shear and Jonathan Weisman, "Debate Still in Limbo as Democrats Blame McCain for Interrupting Process," *Washington Post*, September 26, 2008, 1.

²⁴ Robert Healy, "Next Debate's Importance," *Boston Globe*, October 17, 1984, 23. Healy wrote that following Ronald Reagan's subpar performance in the first debate with Walter Mondale in 1984, the second debate was "crucial"; Robert A. Jordan, "Bush Needs a Miraculous Last At-Bat," *Boston Globe*, October 18, 1992, 77.

²⁵ Throughout this thesis there are various comparisons of candidates' approval ratings immediately before and after debate performances; the statistics are compared to the media's post-debate analysis, insofar as the analysts' perceptions of candidates' performances correlate to change in the candidates' approval numbers.

²⁶ Farah, 2.

A cursory glance at debate historiography might render it satisfactory, but a closer examination reveals a significant deficit of scholarship. There are some essays scattered among larger presidential election anthologies; behind-the-scenes revelations by debate insiders that are replete with entertaining tidbits but provide little information about electoral impact; acute debate subtopics such as the viewers' issue awareness and post-debate media coverage, which are examined too sporadically to establish a correlation between the debates and their ensuing elections, and calls for reforming what several writers consider a flawed debate process. As for the few examples that depict the impact of the debates on presidential elections, none extends beyond a few generalizations rather than what is necessary to substantiate the impact of the presidential debates. This thesis, though, provides a comprehensive analysis of every debate individually and collectively within a debate season, and comparatively among all seasons, along with providing supporting data that indicate reactive analysis of the events and public support of the candidates following each debate.

An early monograph that examined the debates was *The Great Debates*, an anthology that was edited by debates scholar Dr. Sidney Kraus.²⁷ That 1962 volume's most profound disadvantage in terms of assessing the impact of the debates was that it could not reference beyond the Kennedy-Nixon contests, as none of the others had yet taken place. A similar collection of essays was published in 1987, *Presidential Debates 1988 and Beyond*, but, like the earlier collection, it provided more of a historical background rather than an analysis, and was written so early in debate history that it spanned only four of the first ten seasons.²⁸ A particularly resourceful and

²⁷ Sidney Kraus (ed.), *The Great Debates*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1962.

²⁸ Joel L. Swerdlow (ed.), *Presidential Debates 1988 and Beyond*, Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1987.

comprehensive volume, *Inside the Presidential Debates*, by Newton Minow and Craig L. Lamay, included all of the debates up until 2004.²⁹ The authors proceeded to discuss the overall significance of the debates and described the sixteen-year hiatus before the debates resumed in 1976.³⁰ Although it spanned almost the entire debate era, the book did not provide comprehensive intra-season or inter-season analyses about how and why the subsequent debates impacted presidential elections.

Rivaling Minow's and Lamay's volume as a work that has provided extraordinary inside information about the debates is *Presidential Debates; Fifty Years of High Risk TV*, by Alan Schroeder.³¹ Packed with fascinating accounts that occurred beyond the television cameras' view, and the meticulous preparations that candidates endure, which seem to become more intense with each subsequent debate season, Schroeder's study reveals how important the campaign teams consider the debates to be. Virtually every aspect of the debate is negotiated, including the strategic positioning of live audience members, as Schroeder illustrated in the example of the 2004 vice presidential debate between incumbent Dick Cheney and challenger, John Edwards, where the challenger complimented Cheney for having accepted his daughter Mary's homosexuality.³² Some observers, not least of whom the Cheney family members in the audience, interpreted it as a backhanded attempt to disclose that information in order to sabotage Cheney's support among social conservatives.³³ At that point, unseen to the television audience but apparently in Edwards' line of view, Mary Cheney mouthed an obscenity to him, while her mother and sister, also facing Edwards, stuck out their

²⁹ Minow.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

³¹ Schroeder.

³² Schroeder, 223.

³³ *Ibid.*

tongues.³⁴ Schroeder's work provides an informative overview of the debates combined with compelling behind-the-scenes anecdotes rather than a focus on methodical examination of each debate in each season and on the debates' ensuing individual and progressive influence on the elections.

Also contributing to debate historiography is Jim Lehrer, the journalist who has moderated twelve debates to date, far exceeding any of his peers. In 1995, Lehrer wrote a novel, *The Last Debate*, which is about journalists who purposely tailored their questions to cause the favored presidential candidate to fare poorly and lose the election.³⁵ Lehrer has never claimed that the book's plot is based on historical fact. Indeed, an examination of the debates themselves and commentary about them confirms that moderators' and panelists' questions can hardly be considered attacking or one-sided. The all-fictional dialogue, regarding negotiations between the major party candidates' staffs, selection of panelists, and reaction by the candidates, brought to life the real-life elaborate behind-the-scenes pre-debate preparations to which Schroeder later referred in *Presidential Debates*.³⁶

Lehrer's nonfiction book about the debates, *Tension City*, encompassed all of the first ten debate seasons, thereby presenting not only a perspective on the 2008 debates, but also offering a more current retrospective of the entire era.³⁷ Like Schroeder, however, Lehrer provided extensive background but little substantive analysis. Lehrer adopted the premise that the debates do impact elections in a matter-of-fact manner, without ever fully explaining how or why. For instance, Lehrer concluded that McCain conceivably

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Jim Lehrer, *The Last Debate*, New York, NY: Public Affairs, 1995.

³⁶ Schroeder.

³⁷ Lehrer, *Tension City*.

lost the 2008 election in the opening debate against Obama because McCain looked tired and sounded angry.³⁸ That is valuable insofar as analysis of that still-recent debate season remains rather scant, but the conclusion that Obama won the debate season because of McCain's opening-night crankiness is an oversimplification.

More common are monographs and scholarly journal articles that refer to debates either indirectly, or focus only on a narrow aspect within them. Gilbert Seldes, who was Dean of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communication at the time, contributed an essay to *The Great Debates* titled "The Future of National Debates."³⁹ With only the 1960 debates as hindsight, Seldes predicted that future incumbents inevitably would be at a perennial disadvantage, and hinted that they consequentially might be hesitant to agree to debate at all. Time has proven otherwise, as all seven incumbent presidents since Nixon debated, and four of them won reelection.

Other scholars emphasized the role of post-debate media coverage, in itself a significant factor that augments the influence of the debates. To the extent that the media does influence voter perception – and this thesis demonstrates that it does indeed – post-debate media coverage is possible only because there are debates to cover in the first place. Much of the scholarship discloses, often critically, the media's role in placing its own spin on the debates rather than reporting objectively. To that point, the plot of Lehrer's novel is relevant, if exaggerated. Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang identified post-debate media coverage as a "sleeper factor" as early as 1962,

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

³⁹ Gilbert Seldes, "The Future of National Debates," *The Great Debates*, 163-169, The Annenberg Foundation currently operates the political fact-checking organization, factcheck.org.

when debates were in their infancy,⁴⁰ Michael Pfau described the media's role as a "comingled influence," as compared to newspapers' involvement in debates in years past, which was limited to printing the transcripts, contemporary journalists interject their own perceptions, which at the very least comingle with the debate viewers' own impressions and certainly influence prospective voters who did not watch the debates.⁴¹

William L. Benoit and Heather Currie made similar observations about the debates, particularly that they attract more viewers than any other campaign event and therefore are significantly influential.⁴² Like Pfau, Benoit and Currie concurred that the media's interpretation of the debates is to a great extent as influential as its coverage of them, and went so far as to proclaim that debates "may have become the single most important influence on voters."⁴³ In a 2004 essay, Benoit all but declared the impact of the debates on elections a foregone conclusion, and so he focused on examining whether media coverage of the debates was accurate.⁴⁴ Benoit's point was that of the millions of viewers influenced by the debates, some actually watched them firsthand, whereas others learned about them through the media.⁴⁵ Benoit contended that because debates are usually held after the evening network news, those news presentations would not have a chance to report about the debates until almost twenty-four hours later.⁴⁶ By that time, newspapers and other television programs already

⁴⁰ Edwin Diamond and Kathleen Friery, "Media Coverage of Presidential Debates," *Presidential Debates and Beyond*, 43-59, 46-49.

⁴¹ Michael Pfau, "The Subtle Nature of Presidential Debate Influence," *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Volume 38 No. 4 (Spring 2002), 251-261, 256.

⁴² William L. Benoit and Heather Currie, "Inaccuracies in Media Coverage of the 1996 and 2000 Presidential Debates," *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Volume 38 No. 1 (Summer 2001), 28-39, 28.

⁴³ Benoit and Currie, 29.

⁴⁴ William L. Benoit, "Newspaper Coverage of Presidential Debates," *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Volume 41 No. 1 (Summer 2004), 17-27.

⁴⁵ Benoit (2004), 25.

⁴⁶ Benoit (2004), 17.

shaped the public's view about what happened during the prior evening's debate, emphasizing more a critique than an account of the substantive issues discussed.⁴⁷ Benoit focuses on the media's role in post-debate coverage, not on the impact of the debates on voting behavior. Accordingly, his assessment of the debates' impact as a foregone conclusion provides little evidence to support that assumption.

Whereas Pfau, Benoit, and Currie focused on the narrow topic of media coverage vis-à-vis the debates, George Farah was more emphatic in condemning the entire process.⁴⁸ Farah, who is the founder of Open Debates, a nonprofit organization committed to debate reform, wrote a book in 2004 exposing the CPD as a "bipartisan cartel" that ensures the debates will exclude third-party candidates systematically.⁴⁹ Debates have a greater impact on American politics, Farah contended, than any other electoral event.⁵⁰ In a formidable exposé about the CPD's heavily bipartisan nature, Farah effectively underscored the impact of the debates on the elections. Nonetheless, he portrayed the influence of the debates more as a generally known maxim than a theory proven by supporting data. The overwhelming majority of Farah's findings were devoted to exposing activity by the CPD that he considered biased, rather than systematically establishing why the debates are important in the first place.

Even the cognoscenti who emphasized the impact of the debates did so only perfunctorily. George Gallup, Jr., of the Gallup Poll, which was founded by his father, George, Sr., contributed an essay that examined the effect of the debates on deciding

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Farah, 7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Farah, 1.

whom to vote for and whether to vote at all.⁵¹ In describing the four debate seasons to that point, 1960, 1976, 1980, and 1984, Gallup concluded that with the exception of 1984, in which Reagan's lead over Mondale was never in doubt, the debates undoubtedly impacted the election's outcome.⁵² Gallup's study is hardly exhaustive, as it covers fewer than half of the debates. Moreover, Gallup did not dissect each debate to evaluate every candidate's performance, and ignored the impact of the debates in 1984. Although Reagan's enormous lead in the polls was never in jeopardy, serious questions concerning his capacity to govern due to his advancing age were called into question after his first debate against Mondale, but were subsequently assuaged at the end of his second debate.

Edwin Diamond and Kathleen Friery wrote an essay in *Presidential Debates 1988 and Beyond* about how the media inevitably picks a winner and loser in each debate, and engages in creating issues out of nonissues, both of which contribute to the overall impact of the debates on elections.⁵³ Although they focused more on the influence of the debates than did many of their colleagues who wrote about media coverage, Diamond and Friery nonetheless did not provide an extensive accounting of the debates, either individually or aggregately.

Jaeho Cho, a communications professor at the University of California, analyzed the effect of the split-screen format used in debates, whereby the television audience simultaneously views the candidate who is speaking and the one who is reacting,⁵⁴ Cho

⁵¹ George Gallup, Jr., "The Impact of Presidential Debates on the Vote and Turnout," *Presidential Debates 1988 and Beyond*, 35-42.

⁵² Gallup, Jr., 34,

⁵³ Diamond and Friery.

⁵⁴ Jaeho Cho, "Disentangling Media Effects from Debate Effects: The Presentation Mode of Televised Debates and Viewer Decision-Making," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Volume 86 No. 2 (Summer 2009) 383-400, 386.

described the format specifically as used in the 2004 presidential debates between George W. Bush and John Kerry.⁵⁵ Cho's observation was that by airing the debate in a split-screen format, the media affects the televised audience's perception, and this in effect was underscored by the negative feedback Bush received for making peculiar facial expressions and appearing irritated during several segments when Kerry spoke.⁵⁶

What is most important to observe about that essay, however, is a dubious assumption that can be gleaned from Cho's words: "debate exposure often reinforces preexisting partisan predispositions rather than converting voter preference from one candidate to another...[nonetheless], at least for less committed partisans or independents, debates are still influential."⁵⁷ It seems that by identifying "still influential" debates as those that cause viewers to change candidate preferences, Cho implied that debates do not make an impact on presidential elections if viewers do not switch allegiances after watching the debates. Regarding the first Bush-Kerry debate, then, it would seem that Cho would consider that specific debate as making an impact on voters who, for example, intended to vote for Bush but changed their minds after watching Bush's scowling facial expressions and voted for Kerry instead, Cho's analysis does not take into account the possibility that voters who only had a slight preference for one or the other and might waver about whether they were even going to venture to the polls on Election Day altogether, strengthened their convictions as a result of watching one or more of the debates. For instance, some lukewarm Kerry supporters arguably were incensed at Bush's facial expressions and wanted Kerry to win all the more, whereas those who slightly preferred Bush might have intensified their support if

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Rutenberg, Jim: "The Post-Debate Contest, Swaying Perceptions," *New York Times*, Oct 4, 2004, 1.

⁵⁷ Cho, 385.

they identified with his irritation over what Kerry was saying, which was perceived as justifiably provoking Bush's ire. Accordingly, it is important not to assume that the impact of the debates on elections is limited to voters who change candidate preferences as a result of the debate.

Particularly important to debate scholarship is a piece that Lydia Saad wrote for the Gallup Poll in 2008, just before that year's debates were about to begin.⁵⁸ Saad contended that debates are rarely "game changers" in terms of who wins presidential elections.⁵⁹ Saad's contribution is important, not because of the accuracy of its conclusions, but because the points that Saad makes provide an opportunity to underscore the electoral significance of the debates. Saad argued that the debates impacted the ensuing elections only in 1960 and 2000.⁶⁰ The 1976 and 2004 debates, Saad wrote, made the races more competitive, but did not change the fundamentals, as the candidate who led prior to the debates won the election.⁶¹ The 1980 and 1992 debates, according to Saad, had an impact on the third party candidates, but not on the Democratic and Republican debaters.⁶² Saad also claimed that the debates had little to no impact at all in 1984, 1988, and 1996.⁶³

Saad's article exemplifies the inaccurate determinations that exist throughout the historiography about the influence of the debates, typically resulting from overbroad assumptions and perfunctory overviews. That Jimmy Carter was in the lead prior to the 1976 debates and proceeded to win that election ignores Gerald Ford's significant

⁵⁸ Lydia Saad, *Gallup Poll*, September 25, 2008, retrieved May 30, 2011, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/110674/Presidential-Debates-Rarely-GameChangers.aspx#1>.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

comeback as a result of that season's first debate, and his subsequent plummet in the polls due to a monumental gaffe in the second debate. To diminish the impact of the debates simply because the same candidate led before the debates began and also won the election would be like looking at the score of a basketball game seconds after it started and concluding that just because the team in the lead at that moment won, the remainder of the game was inconsequential. If there were several lead changes between the teams throughout the game, that theory would be particularly unpersuasive. The 2004 race was a virtual deadlock throughout most of the season, far too close to identify either candidate as definitively leading.⁶⁴

Saad is correct that the 1980 and 1992 debates did, in fact, impact the third party candidates, John Anderson and Ross Perot, respectively, who were both independent candidates, actually, not representing any particular party, but the debates certainly impacted the election on a broader level. That Carter opted out of the first debate, leaving Ronald Reagan and Anderson to debate one-on-one, both hurt Carter and helped Reagan, who was able to showcase his formidable communication skills, Perot's debate performances in 1992, in which he was successful at portraying himself as an outsider who repeatedly lambasted the *status quo* – were consistent with his rise in the polls, and resulted in his achieving nineteen percent of the popular vote on Election Day, which was a number considerably larger than the difference by which Bill Clinton defeated the incumbent, George H.W. Bush.

Saad's assertion that the 1984, 1988, and 1996 debates had little to no impact on the respective elections overlooks certain events. Even though Ronald Reagan had a large

⁶⁴ *Gallup Poll*, October, 2008. A day before the start of the debates, Bush and Kerry were tied at 49 percent, retrieved on May 11, 2015, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/110548/gallup-presidential-election-trialheat-trends-19362004.aspx>.

lead over Walter Mondale before the debates began, and Reagan proceeded to win that election by a landslide, his uncharacteristically poor performance in the first debate left many wondering whether at seventy-three, already the oldest president in American history, he had become too old for the job. It was not until his comeback in the subsequent debate against Mondale that Reagan regained the nation's confidence and the panic surrounding his competence subsided. The George H.W. Bush victory in 1988 was hardly uncontested. He fell behind in the polls to Michael Dukakis in the summer and his controversial choice of Dan Quayle as a running mate did not help matters. It took a particularly strong performance by Bush in both debates, coupled with Dukakis' stoic reaction to the hypothetical example about his wife being raped and murdered, to secure his victory. Although it is true that in 1996 Bill Clinton led the entire time against Bob Dole and never looked back, the debates did impact that election, as Clinton's poll numbers rose after each of his debate performances against his opponent. That the debates did not appear to alter the outcome is not the same thing as having little or no impact at all.

Saad is not the only observer to determine that the debates did not impact the election outcome. In their 2012 book *The Timeline of Presidential Elections*, Robert S. Erikson and Christopher Wlezien evaluated the net effect of debates by analyzing polls before and after, but not during, entire debate seasons.⁶⁵ George Washington University political science professor John Sides wrote an essay for *Washington Monthly* in 2012 titled "Do Presidential Debates Really Matter?" and he concluded that they do not because in his estimation, they generally do not change the outcome of elections.

⁶⁵ Robert S. Erikson and Christopher Wlezien, *The Timeline of Presidential Elections*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012, 80.

Tellingly, James Stimson in his 2004 book *The Tides of Consent*, also argued that debates do not matter in election outcomes,⁶⁶ In the book's second edition, published in 2015, however, Stimson partially reversed himself, acknowledging that "debates don't matter very much or very often."⁶⁷ Stimson attributed his altered view to debates that took place after 2000, but this thesis points to frequent instances where the debates did in fact matter prior to 2000, even by Stimson's narrow definition. This thesis also argues that the role of the debates has been progressively influential from season to season. Perhaps more scholars like Simpson will attribute influence to them vis-à-vis the elections.

More generally, the historiography addressed the influence of the debates on elections superficially at best. None of the aforementioned references approach the level of detailed analysis set forth in this thesis, which provides both a comprehensive and interrelated analysis of all thirty-five debates, with a specific focus on their impact on the ensuing elections.⁶⁸

The chapters are arranged by debate season, and the debates are examined within each season and in a wider context, how they served as a lens through which to view American and social culture at the time. Preceding the debate season chapters is Chapter 1, which explores some of the themes prevalent in multiple debating seasons. Chapter 2 (1960) explains how the first debate set the example by which future debates would be measured, juxtaposed with the emergence of television as the dominant

⁶⁶ James Stimson, *The Tides of Consent*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 114.

⁶⁷ James Stimson, *The Tides of Consent*, 2nd Ed., New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, xiv.

⁶⁸ John Sides, "Do Presidential Debates Really Matter?" *Washington Monthly*, September/October 2012, retrieved on December 26, 2015, http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/septemberoctober_2012/ten_miles_square/do_presidential_debates_really039413.php?page=all.

medium. Chapter 3 (1976) further explores the evolution of television technology, and analyzes the risks and consequences of the first incumbent president participating in a debate. Chapter 4 (1980) notes the significance of the first non-major party candidate participating in the debates, and the effective use of communication. Chapter 5 (1984) exemplifies how even seemingly insurmountable advantages can falter, and examines the larger issue of how Americans react to aging. The “issueless campaign” of 1988 is examined in Chapter 6, an election year in which image and personality played heightened roles.

Chapter 7 covers the revolutionary 1992 season, which featured three-way debates and the first town hall format, and an incumbent who faced two challengers, each of whom conveyed his own version of populism. Chapter 8 (1996) emphasizes the restoration of civility to the debates and, in the wider context, to the campaign itself. Chapter 9 (2000) examines body language, particularly in the campaign and in the debates themselves. Finally, Chapters 10 (2004) and 11 (2008) feature debate analysis that addresses the larger issues of decisiveness and change, respectively.

This thesis demonstrates how the debates matter in a number of ways: such as, through news stories and polls during a particular election season and before the election, which depict the impact of a particular season’s debates on the ensuing election. The media also refer to lessons from past debate seasons learned in subsequent seasons, thereby underscoring the increasing impact of the debates on American presidential elections.

There is ample evidence to make a plausible argument that the debates matter to the candidates and their campaigns, to the media, and to the election outcomes. That they

also matter to the voters can be determined not only through specific phenomena, such as when in 1992 incumbent President George H.W. Bush was hesitant to agree to debate, voters began attending his rallies dressed as chickens (to indicate that Bush was too “chicken” – *i.e.*, frightened, to debate), but also because in the broader sense, candidates depend on the voters to elect them, and so if the debates matter to the candidates, it is presumably because the candidates realize that the debates matter to the voters. Rather than focus on a single aspect of the significance of the debates, however, this thesis examines the overall picture, therefore making the case that, unequivocally, they matter a great deal.

**DO THE DEBATES MATTER? AN EXAMINATION OF THE PROGRESSIVELY
INFLUENTIAL ROLE OF MAJOR PARTY DEBATES ON
AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: 1960-2008**

**CHAPTER 1: PREVALENT RECURRENT PATTERNS IN THE FIRST TEN DEBATE
SEASONS – A THEMATIC OVERVIEW**

The first ten debate seasons, which are all addressed in this thesis, are compartmentalized chronologically, with a chapter devoted to each one. The purpose of arranging them in that manner is to approach them collectively within a single season and to establish that they mattered *via-a-vis* the ensuing election.¹ Nonetheless, there are certain themes and patterns that transcend individual seasons. The more prevalent ones are discussed in this chapter.

A central component of every debate – to varying degrees – is that of incumbent versus challenger. In some instances (1976, 1980, 1984, 1992, 1996, and 2004) the incumbent debater was the sitting president of the United States. In 1960, 1988, and 2000, the incumbent debater was the sitting vice president. The only debate season among the last ten in which neither the president nor the vice president was seeking the presidency was 2008. In that case, “incumbency” extended to the political party of the sitting administration.²

Through the first three debate seasons, all three incumbents debated and lost, and so it appeared that it was a highly improbable task for an incumbent to debate and prevail in the ensuing election. Compared to the forty-five elections that did not include debates, the incumbent presidents, vice presidents, or parties won twice as often as

¹ As noted throughout the thesis, whether the debates “matter” includes but is not limited to whether they influenced the outcome of a particular election.

² David Leip’s Presidential Atlas, retrieved on June 1, 2013, <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS>.

they lost, thirty victories compared to fifteen defeats. Those statistics by themselves do not confirm that incumbents are at an inherent disadvantage when they debate, but then-incumbent president Dwight Eisenhower seemed prophetic in 1960, when he thought it unwise for his vice president, Richard Nixon, who was running for president, to participate in debates, because Eisenhower thought that debates provided an opportunity for the man in office to be second-guessed by a man on the sidelines, one who was not holding office.³ Indeed, by agreeing to debate, Vice President Nixon elevated his opponent, Massachusetts Senator John Kennedy, to equal status insofar as they shared the same debate stage and were treated equally by the debate panelists in terms of being given the opportunity to share their points of view about the country's issues. President Gerald Ford did the same in 1976 by sharing the debate stage with his general election opponent, Jimmy Carter, who although he had been governor of Georgia was not recognized when he appeared on a television game show.⁴ Four years later as the incumbent president, Carter did not want to extend the same courtesy to independent candidate John Anderson.⁵

Another obstacle incumbents face is having negative aspects of their administration's (or party's) record dissected by their opponents in front of millions of viewers. Nixon at times had difficulty reconciling instances where his views contradicted Eisenhower's, Bob Dole in the 1976 running mates debate was asked to choose between Ford and the Republican Party platform, and John McCain in 2008 said he was a different kind of candidate than incumbent President George W. Bush, yet fully supported the War in

³ Boston Globe Staff, "Bay Stater Quotes Ike: Debates Don't Help Nixon," *Boston Globe*, October 13, 1960, 1. Eisenhower said the man in office is in a position to be second-guessed by a man on the sidelines, one who is not holding office.

⁴ Gerald Pomper, *The Election of 1976*, New York, NY: David McKay Company, Inc., 1977, 10.

⁵ Jim Lehrer, *Tension City*, New York, NY: Random House, 2011, 20

Iraq that the Bush Administration initiated and escalated.⁶ Bush's father, George H.W. Bush, however, used his position as an incumbent to his advantage. Rather than distancing himself from Ronald Reagan in any way, he referred to Reagan as an American hero, and one of his own personal heroes.⁷

Inextricably linked to the incumbent-challenger dynamic is the respective expectations placed on each type of debater. Generally, incumbents are already doing the job (of president or vice president) and are therefore expected to be more knowledgeable on America's domestic and foreign issues and to articulate them with greater proficiency than challengers. The challenger enjoyed that advantage from the very first debate season, in which Kennedy was considered to have less gravitas than Nixon.⁸ In the second season, 1976, Jimmy Carter enabled low expectations of him by self-identifying as an outsider whose knowledge of national politics did not come close to matching that of Gerald Ford, who spent close to three decades in Washington.⁹

Expectation levels also played a role in debates other than regarding the level of political experience. In 1984, for instance, although Reagan was the incumbent president, it was not as if his opponent, Walter Mondale, was a political novice; he had been vice president under Carter. Instead, it was Reagan's storied oratorical prowess, particularly his strong showing in the 1980 debates, which resulted in high expectations for a powerful repeat performance, and which made his actual performance in the first

⁶ Kennedy-Nixon Debate 2, October 7, 1960, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library DVD, retrieved on May 11, 2010; Mondale-Dole Debate, October 15, 1976, C-SPAN, retrieved on May 4, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/75693-1>; Obama-McCain Debate 3, October 15, 2008, C-SPAN, retrieved on March 25, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebate4>.

⁷ Bush-Dukakis Debate 2, C-SPAN, October 13, 1988, retrieved on September 23, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/4256-1>.

⁸ Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, Boston, MA: Little Brown, 2003, 232.

⁹ Alan Schroeder, *Presidential Debates: Fifty Years of High-Risk TV*, 2nd Ed., New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008, 106.

debate seem all the more disappointing.¹⁰ Jack Kemp did not live up to expectations against Al Gore in the 1996 running mates debate, and Gore gained respect as a formidable debater.¹¹ That gain, in turn, caused Gore to enter the 2000 debates with high expectations placed on him, which he did not meet; his opponent, George W. Bush, did better against Gore than expected.¹² Bush also exceeded expectations insofar as he entered the debate as a political outsider to Washington (he was the governor of Texas at the time), whereas Gore was in his eighth year as vice president. John Kerry, though a strong debater in his own right, attempted in 2004 to downplay expectations of his own performance and elevate those of his opponent, Bush, by describing him as someone who never lost a debate.¹³ Finally, in 2008, Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin was expected to fare quite poorly in her debate against her Democratic counterpart, Joe Biden, particularly after an interview with *CBS News*' Katie Couric that caused many to think she was woefully underqualified for the job, but after the debate, the media implied that she won because she did not fail miserably.¹⁴

The role of the media played a vital role in the first ten debate seasons, and no medium was more prevalent than television. During the 1950s, sales of televisions in

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Lydia Saad, "Clinton and Gore Sail through the First Two Debates," retrieved on March 31, 2013, <http://www.uiowa.edu/policult/politick/smithson/961012.htm>.

¹² Richard L. Berke and Kevin Sack, "In Debate 2, Microscope Focuses on Gore," *The New York Times*, October 11, 2000, 1.

¹³ Anonymous, "1st Debate Offers Americans a Chance to Fill in the Blanks on Bush, Kerry," *Chicago Tribune*, September 30, 2004, 8.

¹⁴ E.J. Dionne, "McCain's Lost Chance," *Washington Post*, September 29, 2008, retrieved on June 13, 2013, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2008-09-29/opinions/36802834_1_words-middle-class-john-mccain-dial-group; Editorial, "The Vice Presidential Debate," *New York Times*, October 3, 2008, 24; Editorial, "Free Sarah Palin," *Wall Street Journal*, October 3, 2008, 20.

the United States soared.¹⁵ When the decade began, fewer than 10 percent of American households contained a television, but that number soared to almost 90 percent by 1960, the year of the first debates.¹⁶ What that statistic does not confirm, however, is that owning a television at that time did not necessarily mean that television was always chosen over radio as the medium by which to obtain the news.¹⁷ That notion is underscored by the fact that as much as a third of the audience in the first Kennedy-Nixon debate listened to it on the radio.¹⁸

As one medium – radio – was on the decline in 1960, another was on rise by the mid-1990s: the Internet. It was not until the 2008 election, however, that the Internet, and to a broader extent social media, became a significant campaigning tool, one that was used effectively by that election year’s winner, Barack Obama.¹⁹ Accordingly, in all but the first and last of the first ten debate seasons, television was almost exclusively the medium for accessing the debates, and even in 1960 and 2008 was overwhelmingly dominant as the medium of choice.²⁰

Though perhaps the most recalled example of the damage television can inflict upon a debater is that of Richard Nixon’s pallid appearance in the very first debate, the debates have been impacted by the technological advancements in television during those forty-eight years, and, in turn, have served as lenses through which that technology can be observed. A juxtaposition of the Kennedy-Nixon debates in 1960, for

¹⁵ “The History of Television,” TV History, retrieved on June 20, 2014, <http://www.tvhistory.tv/facts-stats.htm>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ For more discussion on the evolution of television over time as the medium of choice, see Gary Edgerton, *The Columbia History of American Television*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009.

¹⁸ Lehrer, 10.

¹⁹ David Carr, “How Obama Tapped into Social Networks’ Power,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2008, retrieved on June 4, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/10/business/media/10carr.html?_r=0.

²⁰ Edgerton.

instance, against the Obama-McCain debates of 2008, instantly reveals the vast improvements in the technology.

Not only were the images in the 1960 debates black and white, and grainy, but the camera angles were such that the audience was exposed to the backs of the panelists' heads.²¹ Conditions noticeably improved by 1976, the year of the second debate season. The debates were broadcast in color, and there were cameras from multiple angles, so the audience did not look directly at the back of anyone's head. Nonetheless, with all but approximately ten minutes left in the ninety-minute debate, the sound malfunctioned for almost a half hour, with Carter and Ford awkwardly remaining motionless at their podiums for the entire duration.²² Precautions to prevent such a calamity in the future were immediately taken, with multiple sound systems available as backup.²³ Otherwise, though the technology improved with each ensuing season, the next major breakthrough came in 2004, with the advent of the split-screen camera, which showed both debate participants – the one speaking and the one not speaking – simultaneously.²⁴ George W. Bush was the first victim of the split-screen camera: he did not anticipate that he would be on screen while his opponent John Kerry was speaking, and the camera captured his often-contorted facial expressions, wincing, and scowls.²⁵

Four years earlier, Bush was the beneficiary of the television camera's intense scrutiny, as it captured sighs, scoffs, and encroachment of personal space by his

²¹ Roger E. Ailes, Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, CA, May 4, 1970.

²² Carter-Ford Debate 1, September 23, 1976. C-SPAN, retrieved on April 10, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33353-1>.

²³ Schroeder, 211.

²⁴ Dietram A. Scheufele, Eunhyung Kim, *et al.*, "My Friend's Enemy: How Split-Screen Debate Coverage Influences Evaluation of Presidential Debates," *Communication Research*, Volume 34 No. 1 (February 2007), 3-24.

²⁵ Jaeho Cho, "Disentangling Media Effects from Debate Effects: The Presentation Mode of Televised Debates and Viewer Decision-Making," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Volume 86 No. 2 (Summer 2009) 383-400.

opponent, Al Gore, all which would have gone unnoticed by those listening to the debate on radio or reading the transcript in a newspaper.²⁶ An overriding theme in that debate season in particular was body language, and television provided dimensions of it that no other medium could capture so effectively.

Another catalytic characteristic of television is its ability to reach tens of millions of viewers, *i.e.*, potential voters. Because of the nature of the medium, multiple television networks could cover a particular debate and then rebroadcast the footage on their news programs for days and weeks to follow. That phenomenon, for instance, allowed millions of Americans to watch for themselves the rebroadcast of how incumbent president Ford infamously and erroneously proclaimed in the second debate with Carter that there was no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, even though they had not tuned in for the debate in live time.²⁷

Also evident is that debaters who seemed to understand the substantial impact of television – such as Kennedy and Reagan – used the medium to their advantage in the debates.²⁸ Kennedy meticulously prepared for the debates, his team emphasizing staging, lighting, and other aesthetic details, and Reagan – in his 1980 debates – used the airtime effectively to deliver humorous and poignant one-liners that were tailor-made for rebroadcasts on evening news segments.²⁹

Beyond only television, the role of the media as a whole evolved from merely delivering the debates to the people to analyzing them. In each debate season, an

²⁶ Bush-Gore Debate 1, October 3, 2000, C-SPAN, retrieved on November 14, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/159295-1>; Bush-Gore Debate 3, C-SPAN, October 17, 2000, retrieved on December 22, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebate>.

²⁷ Carter-Ford Debate 2, October 6, 1976, C-SPAN, retrieved on April 19, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33210-1>.

²⁸ Schroeder, 137; Sidney Kraus, *Televised Presidential Debates and Public Policy*, 2nd Ed., Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000, 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

increasing number of media outlets – of both print and broadcast format – editorialized about which candidate “won” the debates. As early as 1962, with only the first debate system as a frame of reference, the media’s influence in shaping public opinion of the debates based on the post-debate analysis was gaining attention among political scholars.³⁰ By 2002, forty years later, the media’s role as evaluator rather than messenger increased tremendously, from asking questions to answering them, from providing the means by which viewers could access the information to providing summaries of who prevailed in the debates, and why.³¹ With the media drawing conclusions about the debates, it reduced the need for voters to watch for themselves.³² Even if people who missed the debate live watched a subsequent rebroadcast at a later date, they were by that point already exposed to whom the media said “won” the debate and who “lost.”³³

Closely connected to the extent of the media’s influence is the element of trust. Since 1972, when Gallup began tracking what percentage of the American population trusted the media, the number has sharply declined.³⁴ In June 1976, three months before the start of the second debate season, 72 percent of Americans trusted the media either a great deal or a fair amount, an all-time high. Only 6 percent did not trust the media at all. By the time of the Bill Clinton-Bob Dole debates in 1996, the number who trusted the media fell to the mid-fifties, and those who said they did not trust the media in the least rose to nearly 15 percent. Those numbers held fairly steady until 2004, the year of the

³⁰ Edwin Diamond and Kathleen Friery, “Media Coverage of Presidential Debates,” *Presidential Debates and Beyond*, 43-59, 46-49.

³¹ Michael Pfau, “The Subtle Nature of Presidential Debate Influence,” *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Volume 38 No. 4 (Spring 2002), 251-261, 256.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Gallup Poll, September 28, 2015, retrieved on January 10, 2016, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/185927/americans-trust-media-remains-historical-low.aspx>. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

Bush-Kerry debates, when only 44 percent trusted the media a great deal or a fair amount, and 16 percent did not trust the media at all. In the tenth and final debate season examined in this thesis, 2008, the numbers were 43 percent and 21 percent, respectively.

A poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2012 showed similar results insofar as a high perception of bias and mistrust for the media, particularly given the emergence of cable news channels.³⁵ The Fox News Channel and MSNBC in particular, were considered by respondents to be right of center and left of center, respectively, fueling ³⁶skepticism that they could be objective in analyzing the debates. A rare exception is the C-SPAN cable network, whose main purpose continues to be to broadcast entire events without providing commentary or analysis. It stores podcasts of those events in their entirety, including the debates, on its website.³⁷

With the explosion of social media like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other formats, available at any time of day not only on computer screens but also on smartphones, the news is now more directly accessible to the public than ever. For instance, from a computer or a cellular telephone, anyone can now access a full speech given by a candidate, or a complete debate instantly. Whereas those who missed a debate live in previous years may have been exposed to post-debate analysis prior to a rebroadcasting of the debate being made available for viewing, those debates can be accessed on YouTube almost immediately after they are initially broadcast, and are

³⁵ Pew Research Center Poll, August 16, 2012, retrieved on January 10, 2016, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/08/16/further-decline-in-credibility-ratings-for-most-news-organizations/>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ <http://www.c-span.org>.

available at all times.³⁸ Nonetheless, that aspect of the technological revolution did not become a significant component of society until after 2008, and so its impact is not reflected in the debate seasons that are the focus of this thesis.

The first ten debate seasons may also be examined in terms of particular demographics, some considerably more so than others. Race, for instance, though undoubtedly woven into the fabric of American history, was hardly a prevalent theme throughout most of the debate seasons. The possible exception is 2008, the year in which Barack Obama, the son of a Caucasian mother and an African father, became the first African-American to win a major party (Democratic) presidential nomination, and then proceeded to win the general election. But as he is also the only person of color ever to take part in the debates, the issue of race has not been much of a factor throughout the first ten debate seasons, except for the noticeable absence of racial diversity. Ironically but purely coincidentally, the years during which race relations in America were particularly contentious, throughout most of the 1960s, and could have led to considerable discussion in the debates were years during which the debates did not take place at all.³⁹

The issue of sexual orientation also received some, if minimal, exposure during the first ten debate seasons. Although none of the debaters was homosexual or bisexual, the issue of sexual orientation arose in 2004, because one of incumbent Vice President Dick Cheney's daughters is gay. The Bush Administration at the time supported a Constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage, and the issue was raised during

³⁸ YouTube is a host website of all sorts of videos that can be uploaded by the general public. <http://www.youtube.com>.

³⁹ For more discussion on race relations in the 1960s, see Maurice Isseman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: the Civil War of the 1960s*, 2nd Ed., New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003.

the running mates debate.⁴⁰ Both presidential tickets – Republicans Bush and Cheney and Democrats Kerry and John Edwards – proclaimed that a marriage should only be between one man and one woman. Four years later, both major party tickets repeated that sentiment, though the candidate who won the election, Barack Obama, later changed his position.⁴¹

Another demographic that was present in some campaign seasons, though not particularly prominent in the debates, was religion, beginning in 1960. Although Kennedy was, like every president who preceded (and succeeded) him, a Christian, he was not a Protestant, as all of the others were.⁴² During the nineteenth century there had been considerable negative sentiment by Protestants toward Catholics in the United States because of the latter group's waves of immigration, which were not large enough to usurp the Protestants as the predominant Christian denomination in America, but nonetheless sizable enough to cause concern among Protestants.⁴³ In fact, a quarter of the American population in 1960 proclaimed they would not vote for a candidate who was Catholic.⁴⁴

It was twenty-eight years until another non-Protestant became a major party presidential nominee, Michael Dukakis, a Greek Orthodox Christian. His non-Protestant status was not an issue in the campaign at all, nor was the fact that his wife was

⁴⁰ Cheney-Edwards Debate, October 5, 2004, C-SPAN, retrieved on February 4, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/FullSc>.

⁴¹ Phil Gast, "Obama Announces He Supports Same Sex Marriage," May 9, 2012, *CNN*, retrieved on June 1, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/05/09/politics/obama-same-sex-marriage>.

⁴² Dallek, 232.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Jewish.⁴⁵ Just as a potential first lady's Jewish faith was not an issue in 1988, the Judaism of a potential vice president – Joe Lieberman – was not relevant in 2000.

The issue of religion in the presidential campaigns during the debate seasons was not limited to the religious affiliations of the debaters, however. In 1976, Carter, known for his devout faith, in an interview with *Playboy* magazine admitted that he had looked upon other women with lust and “committed adultery in my heart” many times.⁴⁶ His faith was never brought into question; the only reference to the interview was in the choice of the magazine itself.⁴⁷

In the 1984 vice presidential debate, Democratic challenger Geraldine Ferraro alleged that the Reagan-Bush administration was going to permit Christian Evangelical minister Jerry Falwell to select two Supreme Court justices.⁴⁸ Though the comment was not discussed any further in that debate or in the subsequent debate of that season (between Reagan and Mondale), it spoke to the concern among some Americans that religion was being injected excessively or otherwise inappropriately into politics.

In the second Clinton-Dole debate in 1996, an audience member asked what the candidates would do to restore the religious principles set forth by the Founding Fathers.⁴⁹ Clinton discussed how he had signed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, making it extremely difficult for the government to interfere with religion, and Dole hardly addressed the issue at all, which was considered surprising since his party – the

⁴⁵ Associated Press, “Greek Orthodox Commander-in-Chief Would Be a First,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 1988, retrieved February 1, 2016, http://articles.latimes.com/1988-10-01/local/me-4251_1_greek-orthodox.

⁴⁶ Anonymous, “Playboy Interview – Jimmy Carter,” *Playboy*, Volume 23 No. 11 (November 1976), 85

⁴⁷ Bob Dole in that year's vice presidential debate quipped that it would gain Carter the bunny (Playboy nude model) vote.

⁴⁸ Bush-Ferraro Debate, October 11, 1984. C-SPAN, retrieved on August 20, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33136-1>.

⁴⁹ Clinton-Dole Debate 2, October 16, 1996. C-SPAN, retrieved on November 11, 2010, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?74273-1/presidential-candidates-debate>.

Republicans – had become the major party of choice for Christian Evangelicals, who are often referred to as the “religious right.”⁵⁰

George W. Bush proudly campaigned as that type of Christian, unapologetically running strong on “family values” in both 2000 and 2004.⁵¹ But his faith was not an issue in the debates. Neither were the questions raised about Barack Obama’s faith in 2008, namely, whether he agreed with the views of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, whose church he attended for many years, and who often sparked controversy by strongly criticizing the United States, and from another angle, whether Obama was a Christian at all, and not in fact a Muslim, like his Kenyan-born father, Barack Obama, Sr.⁵² Accordingly, although religion was a factor even to a minor degree in many presidential campaigns from 1960 to 1988, it did not play a significant role in the debates from season to season.

The issue of age was a factor in some of the debate seasons, beginning with the third one, in 1980, when Reagan at age sixty-nine would become the oldest person to be elected president of the United States if he won the election (he did). Notably, what rendered Reagan’s comparatively advanced age particularly significant was how much older he was than any of his predecessors. Until Reagan became president, the oldest person elected president was William Harrison, who had turned sixty-eight just a few weeks earlier.⁵³ But Harrison died after only 32 days in office, and so other presidents who were younger than Harrison when elected at some point in their presidency

⁵⁰ *Ibid*; Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012.

⁵¹ Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, New York, NY: Penguin, 2003, 151.

⁵² Associated Press, “Obama Sets Record Straight on His Religion,” Associated Press, October 21, 2008, retrieved on September 25, 2015, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/22767392/ns/politics-decision_08/t/obama-sets-record-straight-his-religion/#.V6Z7AO7Qe00.

⁵³ Biography, retrieved on February 12, 2016, <http://www.biography.com/people/groups/political-leaders-us-presidents>.

became the oldest sitting president.⁵⁴ The oldest of that group was Dwight Eisenhower, who left office seventy years and ninety-eight days old. Within fewer than four months of taking office, Reagan broke Eisenhower's record. Therefore, by the time Reagan sought reelection in 1984, he was already seventy-three years old.

It was during Reagan's reelection campaign that age became a factor for him, particularly because of his poor performance in the first debate against Walter Mondale, causing concern that he had become too old for the job. "Some voters were beginning to imagine grandpa – who can never find his reading glasses – in charge of a bristling nuclear arsenal, and it was making them nervous," wrote his son Ron, years later.⁵⁵

Within two weeks of the first debate, Reagan redeemed himself, in his second and final debate against Mondale, with a single line: "I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience."⁵⁶

Long before the 2008 election, however, when John McCain won the Republican nomination and if elected, would have become president at age seventy-two, America learned the truth about Ronald Reagan: he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1994 and died in 2004 – four years before McCain won the nomination – but there was speculation that the early stages of Alzheimer's affected Reagan even during his White House years.⁵⁷ This caused some concern about McCain among voters, particularly when he chose as a running mate Sarah Palin, whom many felt lacked the experience to step in as president at a moment's notice should McCain suddenly die or become

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Ron Reagan, *My Father at 100*, New York, NY: Penguin, 2011, 205.

⁵⁶ Reagan-Mondale Debate 2, October 21, 1984. C-SPAN, retrieved on August 9, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33260-1>.

⁵⁷ Lesley Stahl, *Reporting Live*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1999, 256.

incapacitated.⁵⁸ Although McCain did not seem disoriented like Reagan did in his first debate against Mondale, McCain appeared, courtesy of an unfortunate camera angle, to walk around aimlessly at the second (town hall) debate, while Obama spoke, and made two slips of the tongue in the third debate: first, he referred to then-Senator Obama as “Senator government,” and then, in attempting to say “breath of fresh air,” said “bresh of freth air,” though he immediately corrected himself.⁵⁹ Under different circumstances, those would have been dismissed as unimportant imperfections. However, because McCain was close to becoming the oldest president ever, with considerable doubts about his running mate, they were not so easily ignored.

In between Reagan and McCain was another debater who projected age-related disorientation during the debates: Admiral James Stockdale, the running mate of Ross Perot, who in 1992 pursued the presidency as an independent. Perot and Stockdale were invited to the general election debates against the Clinton-Gore and George H.W. Bush-Dan Quayle tickets. In his debate against Gore and Quayle, Stockdale seemed entirely out of sorts in terms of the timing and rhythm expected of politicians on television. The sixty-nine-year-old magnified the impression of how out of place he was at one point when he commented that he did not have his hearing aid turned on.⁶⁰

Ironically, age did not seem to hamper the person who, if elected president, would have been the oldest of them all: Bob Dole, who on Election Day 1996 was seventy-

⁵⁸ Rick Klein, “Sarah Who? Why John McCain picked VP Palin,” *Washington Post*, August 29, 2008, retrieved on June 3, 2013, http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/Conventions/story?id=5686244&page=1#.Ua4SVEDVD_g.

⁵⁹ Obama-McCain Debate 2, October 7, 2008, C-SPAN, retrieved on March 19, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebate3>; Obama-McCain Debate 3.

⁶⁰ Gore-Quayle-Stockdale Debate, October 13, 1992. C-SPAN, retrieved on October 2, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33086-1>.

three years and three months old.⁶¹ He seemed kinder, softer, and more statesmanlike than he did twenty years earlier, when he was more forceful and acerbic as Ford's running mate. Accordingly, while there were instances of age being detrimental to the debaters' images, voters did not become deterred from nominating candidates who were older than average.⁶²

Of the twenty-seven individuals who participated in the debates from 1960 to 2008, twenty-five were men and only two – Geraldine Ferraro (1984 Democratic vice presidential nominee) and Sarah Palin (2008 Republican vice presidential nominee) were women.⁶³ American politics was dominated by men since the nation's creation in 1776 and to a great extent continues to be. Women, after all, were not guaranteed the right to vote until the ratification of the Twentieth Amendment to the United States Constitution, in 1920. Nonetheless, steps toward greater gender equality over the near-half century that spanned the first ten debate seasons was evident both within the debates and beyond them.

In the 1960 debates, Nixon referred to a president generally as "he," whereas Kennedy used gender-neutral pronouns in such situations.⁶⁴ In the second debate season, Pauline Frederick of National Public Radio became the first woman selected to moderate a debate.⁶⁵ She moderated the second Carter-Ford debate, and twenty days later, the final debate between that year's frontrunners was moderated by another

⁶¹ Biography.

⁶² In 1996, the Democrats nominated Hillary Clinton for president, and the Republicans nominated Donald Trump, who were sixty-nine and seventy years old, respectively, at the time.

⁶³ Leip.

⁶⁴ Kennedy-Nixon Debate 3, October 13, 1960, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library DVD, retrieved on May 14, 2010.

⁶⁵ Carter-Ford Debate 2.

woman, Barbara Walters of *ABC News*.⁶⁶ There continued to be at least one woman on every debate panel since then, including in the second Bush-Dukakis debate in 1988, in which the only male, CNN's Bernard Shaw, moderated, accompanied by a panel comprised of Ann Compton of *ABC News*, Andrea Mitchell of *NBC News*, and Margaret Warner of *Newsweek*.⁶⁷

The debate format changed in 1996 from a panel to a single moderator, and Jim Lehrer of the PBS moderated eight of the fifteen debates from that point through 2008. In fact, he was the sole moderator in the 1996 season, and moderated three of the four debates in 2000.⁶⁸ In the ninth and tenth debate seasons – in 2004 and 2008 – Lehrer moderated one in each year, and a woman – Gwen Ifill of PBS – moderated two of them.

Moreover, the debates themselves were sponsored by the League of Women Voters (LWV) in 1976, 1980, and 1984, but the organization withdrew from sponsorship in 1988, citing that the campaigns wanted too much control over the process.⁶⁹ The LWV was replaced by the bipartisan Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), and although the change had nothing to do with gender, Carol Simpson of *ABC News*, who moderated the first town hall debate in 1992, criticized the CPD for selecting too many male moderators.⁷⁰

Despite sharing the historical distinction of being the only two female debaters to date, Ferraro and Palin were quite unlike. Ferraro was a Congresswoman from New

⁶⁶ Carter-Ford Debate 3, October 22, 1976, C-SPAN, retrieved on April 30, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33391-1>.

⁶⁷ Bush-Dukakis 2.

⁶⁸ Newton N. Minow and Craig L. Lamay, *Inside the Presidential Debates*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 161-163. Bernard Shaw was the only moderator besides Lehrer in 2000.

⁶⁹ George Farah, *No Debate*, New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2004, 56.

⁷⁰ Carole Simpson, interview on MSNBC, October 15, 1992, retrieved on February 22, 2013, <http://video.msnbc.msn.com/jansing-and-co/49418030#49418030>.

York, Palin the Governor of Alaska. Ferraro was a Democrat, Palin a Republican. Ferraro appeared at the debate in earth tones and rosy, pinkish glasses, whereas Palin, whose nickname growing up, based on her ferocious competitive play in high school sports, was “Sarah Barracuda,” wore power black.⁷¹ The contrast in the two women’s personas was not as great a factor on the impact they made as was the twenty-four-year gap of time between their debate appearances. By 2008, there was less concern about the male debater having to be extra careful not to seem as if he was bullying the female. In the 1984 post-debate analysis, Ferraro was hailed for standing up to George H.W. Bush, forcefully chastising him for his “patronizing” attitude toward her regarding foreign policy.⁷² Though many chided Palin from the moment that McCain selected her to be his running mate, Joe Biden, her debate rival, was careful not to mock her for lack of qualifications, as Bentsen did to Quayle in the 1988 vice presidential debate, telling him: “senator, you’re no Jack Kennedy.”⁷³ Ultimately, Palin’s gender had less to do with how she was received – positively or negatively – by the public. Millions found her plain-spoken conservative anti-establishment populism appealing, while millions of others strongly criticized her for her lack of experience on national issues.⁷⁴ Finally, it is worthy to note that in 2016, Hillary Clinton became the first woman to be chosen as a major party (Democratic) presidential nominee.

The last theme present in enough of the debate seasons to warrant mention in this chapter is tone. The first debate season is a microcosm of the entire period between

⁷¹ Bush-Ferraro; Biden-Palin Debate, October 2, 2008, C-SPAN, retrieved on March 3, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/VicePresidentialCandidate>; Dan Beucke, “McCain’s VP Choice, Sarah Barracuda,” *Business Week*, August 29, 2008, retrieved on June 13, 2013, http://www.businessweek.com/election/2008/blog/archives/2008/08/mccains_vp_choi.html.

⁷² Schroeder, 152.

⁷³ Biden-Palin; Quayle-Bentsen Debate, October 5, 1988. C-SPAN, retrieved on September 24, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/4127-1>.

⁷⁴ Beucke.

1960 and 2008. The very first debate began with Nixon being so cordial and deferential to Kennedy that it prompted Nixon's running mate to proclaim in disgust that Nixon's excessive politeness was bound to cost them the election.⁷⁵ As the debate season wore on, Nixon became increasingly forceful, but it was Kennedy who was clearly the aggressor, particularly in the final debate, often shifting his body to confront Nixon directly rather than maintain eye contact with the panelists.⁷⁶

Carter and Ford, the respective Democratic and Republican presidential nominees in 1976, were predominantly cordial to one another throughout their debates. In that year, it was the vice presidential nominees, Mondale and particularly Dole, who established the role of "henchman" for the running mates, taking liberties to attack the opposing party's frontrunner more forcefully.⁷⁷

In 1980, with the incumbent Carter refraining from participating in the first debate, the challengers Reagan and John Anderson presented a contrast in styles, with the latter exuding anger and irritability, the former affability and good humor.⁷⁸ Most emblematic of that debate season and especially in terms of tone was Reagan's one-line criticism of what he considered Carter's misstatement of the facts: "there you go again."⁷⁹

In the following debate season, fully recognizing that Reagan most likely would have won reelection without debating, Mondale thanked the incumbent president during their first debate for agreeing to do so.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Schroeder, 7.

⁷⁶ Kennedy-Nixon Debate 4, October 21, 1960, DVD, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, MA.

⁷⁷ Mondale-Dole.

⁷⁸ Reagan-Anderson Debate, September 21, 1980. VHS, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA.

⁷⁹ Reagan-Carter Debate, October 28, 1980. C-SPAN, retrieved on June 5, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33229-1>.

⁸⁰ Reagan-Mondale Debate 1, October 7, 1984. C-SPAN, retrieved on August 6, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33459-1>.

In 1988, George H.W. Bush administered a “public scolding” on the debate stage, admonishing Michael Dukakis for comparing Reagan to a rotting fish.⁸¹ The vice presidential contest was no friendlier, as Bentsen’s mockery of Quayle’s self-comparison to John Kennedy, magnified by the audience’s loud laughter, caused Quayle to appear visibly irritated and embarrassed.⁸² Bush campaign manager Lee Atwater engaged in blistering attack ads against Dukakis throughout the summer and fall months, and was described as the person “who invented the negative political game.”⁸³

The negativity increased in 1992, particularly in the vice presidential debate, with Gore and especially Quayle criticizing each other so aggressively that their debate was described as more of a schoolyard shouting match.⁸⁴ If 1992 was the nadir of civility among debate seasons, 1996 was the zenith. Clinton and Dole set the tone immediately, proclaiming to the audience that they personally liked one another and their differences were limited to policy.⁸⁵ Their running mates were every bit as cordial and collegial. Jack Kemp described Clinton and Gore as his and Dole’s opponents, not their enemies, and noted that the debate should serve as an example of civility, respect,

⁸¹ Bush-Dukakis 2.

⁸² Quayle-Bentsen.

⁸³ Tara Hunt, “The Lee Atwater Legacy and Attack Ads,” January 4, 2013, retrieved on March 29, 2013, <http://tarahunt.com/2013/01/04/the-lee-atwater-legacy-and-attack-ads/>.

⁸⁴ Cathleen Decker and Sam Fullwood, “Quayle and Gore Trade Angry Barbs on Character Issue Debate,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1992, 1; Adam Pertman and John Alosious Farrell, “Quayle, Gore Stage a Slugfest,” *Boston Globe*, October 14, 1992, 1; Charles Krauthammer, “Schoolyard Debate,” *Washington Post*, October 15, 1992, 31.

⁸⁵ Clinton-Dole Debate 1, October 6, 1996. C-SPAN, retrieved on November 1, 2010. <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/74271-1>.

decency, and integrity.⁸⁶ Gore, in turn, promised a debate focusing on an exchange of ideas, not on personal attacks.⁸⁷

The 2000 and 2004 debates were not particularly negative in terms of verbal attacks, but the body language evoked tension and irascibility. Al Gore's incessant audible sighs in 2000 and George W. Bush's scowls in 2004 provided a glimpse into the window of two intense, hard-fought, and often caustic campaigns.⁸⁸

Finally, 2008 took a turn back to civility, even if not as sharp a turn as in 1996. Reminiscent of Clinton in 1992 and particularly 1996, Obama rarely confronted McCain directly, and never raised his voice. McCain, in turn, while on the campaign trail told a crowd personally hostile to Obama that "he's a decent family man [and] citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues and that's what this campaign's all about."⁸⁹

Although the 2012 and 2016 debates are not examined in this thesis, Obama blamed his lackluster performance in his first debate against challenger Mitt Romney on the fact that Obama was "too polite," and Romney subsequently was criticized for not being more aggressive against Obama in the debates.⁹⁰ In 2015, during the first Republican prudential primary debate for the 2016 election, Donald Trump, who was the frontrunner throughout the primary season and won the party nomination, in response to the

⁸⁶ Gore-Kemp Debate, October 9, 1996. C-SPAN, retrieved on November 9, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/75772-1>.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Bush-Gore 1; Bush-Kerry Debate 1, September 30, 2004. C-SPAN, retrieved on December 27, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/DebateCan>.

⁸⁹ Jonathan Marin and Amie Parnes, "McCain: Obama Not an Arab, Crowd Boos," *Politico*, October 10, 2008, retrieved on January 24, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2008/10/mccain-obama-not-an-arab-crowd-boos-014479>.

⁹⁰ Anonymous, "Obama on Debate Performance: I Was too Polite," *USA Today*, October 10, 2008, retrieved on January 24, 2016, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/theoval/2012/10/10/barack-obama-tom-joyner-mitt-romney-debate-election-2012/1624549/>; Tony Lee, "Romney Lost the 2012 Election to Obama Because of Tactical Failures," *Breitbart*, June 29, 2013, retrieved on January 26, 2016, <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2013/06/29/rove-romney-lost-election-due-to-tactical-failures/>.

criticism that he was too divisive, said there were too many problems to solve and so “we don’t have time for tone.”⁹¹

The thematic patterns set forth in this chapter do not by themselves demonstrate why the debates mattered in each season, and as a whole. That argument is most evident in the remainder of the chapters, in each of which the focus is on a specific debate season. Nonetheless, in beginning with an overview of the themes that were most prevalent throughout the first ten debate seasons, the subsequent focus on the debates within each season and their progressive influence over the years becomes more effective.

⁹¹ Anonymous, “Donald Trump Quotes: the Best and the Worst of the GOP Debate,” *The Guardian*, August 7, 2015, retrieved on February 4, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/aug/07/donald-trump-in-the-gop-debate-his-best-lines-and-the-most-cringeworthy>.

**DO THE DEBATES MATTER? AN EXAMINATION OF THE PROGRESSIVELY
INFLUENTIAL ROLE OF MAJOR PARTY DEBATES ON
AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: 1960-2008**

**CHAPTER 2: 1960 – DEBATES AND TELEVISION CONVERGE TO CONVEY
PRESIDENTIAL IMAGE**

Democrats John F. Kennedy (US Senator – MA) and Lyndon B. Johnson (US Senator – TX) v. Republicans Richard Nixon (Incumbent Vice President) and Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. (Former US Senator – MA). The vice presidential candidates did not debate. Kennedy-Nixon 1 (66.4 million), Kennedy-Nixon 2 (61.9 million), Kennedy-Nixon 3 (63.7 million), Kennedy-Nixon 4 (60.4 million).

The 1960 presidential debates were not only the first ones televised, but also the first such contests between major party candidates. Those two transformational events, the debates themselves and television's rise as the predominant political medium, emerged simultaneously, and their impact on American presidential elections can be better understood within the broader context of their ultimate purpose: to convey image. The media, broadcast and print alike, as well as the candidates and their campaigns, all used the debates as a vehicle to inform and/or persuade the electorate. As the first of eleven debate seasons (to date), the 1960 debate season was inevitably a novelty, attracting all the expected attention of a new phenomenon. Its specific characteristics, however, were also catalytic in their impact on the candidates' images, and thereby on the election, and the first opportunity to consider the question: do the debates matter?

There is considerable, if not comprehensive, scholarship about the 1960 debates especially their establishment, preparation, political implications, and their function as lenses through which to view image and American culture. In this chapter, the 1960 debates are not only analyzed collectively, but also individually, emphasizing crucial moments and turning points, and showing not only that the debates impacted the

election, but also why and how. The use of synchronous polls and newspaper reports provide the sequential evidence that explains the story in greater detail and with more vivid contemporary authenticity than do the monographs described herein.

Inside the Presidential Debates is particularly significant, as author Newton Minow was instrumental in establishing the debates in 1960.¹ *The Great Debates* is an anthology of essays written in the months following the 1960 debates by political and communications scholars who presented divergent points of view on an array of topics, including the quality of the specific debates, their influence on the electorate, and the likelihood of there being debates in future election seasons.² As there was only one debate season to evaluate, it is not surprising that the assessments were indecisive. Alan Schroeder's *Presidential Debates* focused on the elaborate preparations for subsequent debate seasons that were undertaken as a result of lessons learned from the debates in 1960.³ Examining Fred Kaplan's *1959: The Year Everything Changed*, which discusses cultural changes in 1959 – the year before the first debate season – from various aspects, including entertainment and technology, is useful for understanding the 1960 debates within the larger context of American political culture.⁴ More pointedly, Walter R. Zakahi and Kenneth L. Hacker specifically examined how the debates affected presidential image in their 1995 essay, "Televised Presidential

¹ Newton N. Minow and Craig J. Lamay, *Inside the Presidential Debates*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008. As a confidant of Adlai Stevenson, Minow labored to establish the debates in 1956 to help Stevenson's presidential campaign, so that Stevenson could showcase his detailed knowledge of the issues as a way of closing the gap against his opponent, Dwight D. Eisenhower; the plan was not realized until the 1960 election.

² Sidney Kraus, ed., *The Great Debates*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1962. Charles A. Siepmann discussed the perils of the electorate's overemphasis on debate performance; Jeffery Auer criticized the debates for not providing adequate time to the candidates; Gilbert Seles speculated that if President Eisenhower were eligible for a third term (in 1960), the debates never would have taken place; and Richard F. Carter wrote that although Kennedy won the battle of image, the debates helped both candidates insofar as the voting public got a better look at them.

³ Alan Schroeder, *Presidential Debates: Fifty Years of High-Risk TV*, 2nd Ed., New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008.

⁴ Fred Kaplan, *1959, The Year Everything Changed*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2009.

Debates and Candidate Images.”⁵ While this literature establishes sufficient background about the first debate season, this thesis provides evidence of the contemporary reactions, primarily from newspaper articles, and a more detailed analysis of how the candidates’ performances in the debates themselves affected their images in the voters’ eyes, which are aspects that are essential to the discussion.

American presidential image, whether strategic or serendipitous, traces as far back as the very first chief executive, George Washington. Ironically, although Washington lost most of his teeth and bone in his jaw, by the time he became president his face was perceived as evoking firmness and statesmanship.⁶ That contrast of perception and reality underscores that the significance of image is in the eye of the beholder, not the conveyor. John Quincy Adams, who considered public campaigning to be utterly undignified, and particularly unbecoming of an incumbent president, refrained from contact with the public in his unsuccessful 1828 reelection bid.⁷ William Henry Harrison, who at sixty-eight in 1840 was the oldest person at the time to be elected president, stubbornly refused to wear a hat and coat on a bitterly cold inauguration day in order to demonstrate his vigor.⁸ He fell ill that evening, was subsequently diagnosed with pneumonia, and died within a month.⁹ Franklin Roosevelt, the only president elected to more than two terms (he was elected to four), captivated Americans with his Fireside Chat radio broadcasts, though few realized that the strong, reassuring voice belonged

⁵ Walter R. Zakahi and Kenneth L. Hacker, “Televised Presidential Debates and Candidate Images,” *Candidate Images in Presidential Elections*, Kenneth L. Hacker, ed., Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1995, 99-122.

⁶ Libby Copeland, “Buffing up the Image of George Washington,” *Washington Post*, August 30, 2005, C1.

⁷ Robert V. Remini, *John Quincy Adams*, New York, NY: Times Books, 2002, 122-123. Remini wrote that Adams’ reluctance to campaign was a contributing factor to his defeat.

⁸ Mark Bennett, “William Henry Harrison Taught Us How to Campaign,” *Tribune-Star*, February 9, 2012, retrieved on December 8, 2013, <http://www.tribstar.com/news/x980632567/B-SIDES-Harrison-taught-us-how-to-campaign>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

to a man stricken with polio and confined to a wheelchair.¹⁰ Levin invited reporters from all over the country to Washington, DC for press conferences on a regular basis, and used his connections with Paramount Pictures to feature Roosevelt's face in films, concealing the wheelchair in which he sat.¹¹

Presidential image was cultivated in a whole new manner in 1960, with the two-pronged effect of television and the debates. The physical challenges that Washington and Roosevelt endured, as well as the poorly-conceived strategies of Adams and Harrison, were not likely to withstand the scrutiny of face-to-face debates on national television in front of millions of viewers.

This chapter examines televised debates as they contributed to the trials, errors, and lessons of the first debate season. It explores how John F. Kennedy not only gained equal footing with Richard Nixon via the debates, but surpassed him in the polls by the time the debates concluded. Moreover, it depicts how the debates were instrumental in the election's outcome, which was acknowledged by both Kennedy and Nixon, and raised the question about whether any future presidential candidates would take such a potential risk. This chapter, though focusing primarily on the debates' role in the election, also addresses how the debates provide a wider lens through which to view various aspects of American social and political culture.

Americans in 1960 had to bid farewell to a popular and long-serving president and elect a new one, all the while concerned about growing tensions in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.¹² In 1952 Dwight D. Eisenhower, who

¹⁰ Linda Lottridge Levin, *The Making of FDR*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² For more discussion about how the Cold War was the prevalent issue on voters' minds in 1960, see Liette Gidlow, "The Great Debate: Kennedy, Nixon, and Television in the 1960 Race for the Presidency," *History Now*, Fall 2004,

was the supreme commander of the Allied forces in Europe during World War II, became the Republican Party presidential nominee and won the general election by a landslide over Democrat, Adlai Stevenson.¹³ Eisenhower defeated Stevenson again in 1956 by an even wider margin, and remained very popular in 1960 as his presidency came to a close.¹⁴ Despite his abundant appeal, the seventy year-old Eisenhower was at the time the oldest sitting president ever, and the nation was hoping for a younger leader.¹⁵ Historian Paul Johnson wrote about a universal cry for youth, particularly at the dawn of the youth-driven countercultural 1960s. Eisenhower's vice president, Richard Nixon, and his Democratic opponent, Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy, ages forty-seven and forty-three, respectively, each combined dynamic and energetic youth with significant political experience.¹⁶

Both Nixon and Kennedy enjoyed distinguished naval careers, and both had reputations as staunch opponents of communism.¹⁷ Grippled by Cold War agitation, the nation in the 1950s was concerned about the eruption of hostilities with the Soviet Union that had been festering since the end of World War II.¹⁸ Historians argued that in 1959, much attention was paid to the looming threat of nuclear war. Fred Kaplan, in his study of the era, notes how Herman Kahn of the Hudson Institute think tank embarked on an exhaustive countrywide tour in 1959, informing Americans about the magnitude of

retrieved on September 4, 2012, <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/sixties/essays/great-debate-kennedy-nixon-and-television-1960-race-for-presidency>.

¹³ Perlo J. Pusey, *Eisenhower the President*, New York, NY: MacMillan, 1956, 46. Eisenhower won 442 electoral votes to Stevenson's 89, and 33.9 million individual votes, the most ever by a presidential candidate at the time.

¹⁴ Tom Wicker, *Dwight D. Eisenhower*, New York, NY: Times Books, 2002, 77, 2. Eisenhower won 457 electoral votes to Stevenson's 73, and averaged over a 60 percent approval rating over his eight years as president.

¹⁵ Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People*, New York, NY, Harper-Collins, 1997, 845.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* In addition to Nixon's vice presidency and Kennedy's tenure in the Senate, both had served in the House of Representatives for a number of years.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Johnson, 831; David Halberstam, *The Fifties*, New York, NY: Random House, 1993, 59-62. Americans were so obsessed with the Cold War that popular fiction changed their principal antagonists from gangsters to Communist spies.

damage that was likely to occur in a nuclear war, focusing on increasing the possibility of survival.¹⁹ The skittish nation prompted numerous governors to propose a program requiring every homeowner to build a nuclear fallout shelter.²⁰ Though the plan never became law, millions of Americans remained concerned about maximizing their protection against nuclear war.²¹

Thus, conditions were tense, even under Eisenhower's steady hand, and Americans had the prospect of entrusting command of the Cold War to someone new, which was a significant concern considering the country was in the last of a twenty-eight-year reign of three of the most highly ranked presidents in American history.²²

Small-government conservatives such as Brent Bozell were skeptical of Nixon, as he seemed to have trouble pinpointing his political ideology.²³ They were fearful of his public comments about being generous with foreign aid, and even more so about his support of a federal health insurance plan.²⁴ In fact, the editors of the nation's leading conservative magazine, *The National Review*, and most notably, its high-profile founder and publisher, William Buckley, declined to endorse him.²⁵

¹⁹ Kaplan, 64-65.

²⁰ Kaplan, 64.

²¹ Kenneth D. Rose, *One Nation Underground: The Fallout Shelter in American Culture*, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2001, 20-21. Rose wrote that despite President Eisenhower's reluctance to commit additional government funds to building bomb shelters, many selected to have them built privately.

²² James Taranto and Leonard Leo, (eds.), *Presidential Leadership*, New York, NY: Free Press, 2005, 11. From March 1933 to January 1961, America's three presidents were Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Dwight Eisenhower, who in a 2005 poll among historical, political, and legal scholars ranked third, seventh, and eighth, respectively, among American presidents. The country had been used to Eisenhower in a supremely powerful position – first as Allied Commander then as president, for almost 20 years.

²³ David Pietrusza, *1960: LBJ vs. JFK vs. Nixon*, New York, NY: Union Square Press, 2008, 269. Pietrusza wrote that Nixon had not been a vocal supporter of conservative icon Robert Taft, and was an ardent backer of Eisenhower's internationalist foreign policy outlook, which caused him to lose the support of noted conservatives; for more discussion about conservatives' opposition to Nixon in 1960, see Mary C. Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Pietrusza, 270.

Liberals, in turn, such as Helen Gahagan Douglas, who is credited for coining the phrase Tricky Dick, often attributed clandestine self-serving policies to Nixon and characterized him as a shifty man devoid of principles.²⁶ Some labeled his fierce anti-communist credentials as McCarthyism redux, even though some conservatives criticized him for not backing Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy during his difficult moments.²⁷ Democratic icons Adlai Stevenson and Eleanor Roosevelt expressly identified Nixon as the politician they most hated.²⁸ Liberals were even repulsed with the way Nixon looked. As historian David Greenberg noted: “the thick curls of black hair, the bushy eyebrows, and the five o'clock shadow enveloped Nixon in an aura of gloom.”²⁹

Many observers did not have a great deal of confidence in Kennedy either, perceiving him as an “ambitious but superficial playboy” with little more going for him than his charm and good looks, and who bore the political obstacle of being Roman Catholic; until that time, no one had been elected president who was not Protestant.³⁰ Martin E. Marty described Protestantism as the dominant religion in America at the time of the 1960 election.³¹ Historian Robert Dallek, writing about the anti-Catholic sentiment that had been prevalent in America at the time, noted that twenty-four percent of voters proclaimed that they would not vote for a Catholic for president, even if the candidate appeared to be well qualified. Much of the xenophobic reaction was leftover suspicion

²⁶ Douglas lost to Nixon in their 1950 race for the US Senate from California. Irwin Unger, *These United States*, 2nd Ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003, 719; for more information about the Nixon-Douglas campaign of 1950, see Greg Mitchell, *Tricky Dick and the Pink Lady*, New York, NY: Random House, 1998.

²⁷ Johnson, 848. Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin was ultimately censured by the Senate for contempt and abuse regarding his communist investigative pursuits.

²⁸ David Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow*, New York, NY: Norton, 2003, 37. Stevenson was the Democratic Presidential Nominee in 1952 and 1956, and Roosevelt was the wife of President Franklin Roosevelt.

²⁹ Greenberg, 38.

³⁰ Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, Boston, MA: Little Brown, 2003, 232.

³¹ Martin E. Marty, *A Nation of Behavers*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 11. Protestantism is actually a denomination of the religion of Christianity, but Marty's use of the term “religion” to describe it signified that Americans were by and large Protestant, more so than any other denomination, or religion.

from the previous century, when the overwhelmingly Protestant nation reacted with alarm to mass Catholic migration.³²

Moreover, Kennedy was only a mediocre legislator and was not held in particularly high esteem by his colleagues in Congress.³³ Throughout his first five years in the Senate, Kennedy did not promulgate any significant piece of legislation.³⁴ Nonetheless, the press supported Kennedy from the early moments of his presidential candidacy. He worked as a correspondent during his naval service in World War II, and the media was quite loyal to their fellow journalist, so much so that at times, journalists often labored to maintain their objectivity in light of their favoritism.³⁵

Unlike debates and television, the role of the press in presidential campaigns certainly was not a phenomenon of first impression.³⁶ It obliged the candidates to seek positive media coverage. In contrast to Kennedy, journalists were averse to Nixon from the beginning of his presidential quest, and Nixon was convinced that reporters hated him.³⁷ They relished fodder such as Eisenhower's response when asked to name one major idea Nixon had regarding the Administration's policy: "if you give me a week I might think of one."³⁸

Whether or not Nixon was accurate in his assessment of media bias against him, which ran contrary to analyses showing that coverage of both candidates was overwhelmingly positive, he perpetuated the self-fulfilling prophecy by keeping reporters

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Unger, 719.

³⁴ Dallek, 219. In 1959, Kennedy began to propose legislation at a faster pace, but it was not evident that he did so in order to enhance his chances of being elected president the following year.

³⁵ Richard M. Perloff, *Political Communication*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998, 49.

³⁶ For more discussion about the role of the press in the presidency, see Graham J. White, *FDR and the Press*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

³⁷ Perloff, 20.

³⁸ Wicker, 118.

at arm's length and exuding anger and resentment toward them which, in turn, did not help him in terms of making friends in the press.³⁹ The media, of course, included television, and when Nixon agreed to a series of four televised debates, he would face an entirely new challenge that, in many ways, proved to be his undoing.

Kennedy-Nixon 1 is best remembered not for any discussion of substance, but rather for how one of its principals fatally damaged his campaign because of his unbecoming appearance on television. The technology of that first debate season was of poor quality. All of the footage is black and white, and somewhat grainy. The audiovisual quality is nowhere near that of contemporary levels. The camera showed the backs of the panelists' heads and often alternated between close-up and panoramic shots, creating aesthetically awkward imbalance.

The candidates themselves differed considerably in their preparation: Nixon relied solely on briefing books, while Kennedy held simulated debates with staffers asking him questions.⁴⁰ That stark contrast points to Nixon's near-exclusive concern with substance, whereas Kennedy relied greatly on style. Perhaps Kennedy understood the impact of television much sooner than Nixon did, which ultimately benefitted him tremendously.

The television production staff asked Kennedy if he wanted to wear makeup for the televised event; he declined. Because Nixon's skin tone was not telegenic at all, he was not merely asked, but strongly urged to do so. In what must have been a machismo reaction (Nixon heard Kennedy say he was not going to wear any, so why should he?),

³⁹ Greenberg, 134. Nixon viewed the press as a monolithic foe, and would often leave on a campaign trip without them if they were late. "F**k them, we don't need them," he would say; Gabi Wolfsteld, *Media & Politics*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2011, 76. Wolfsteld wrote that only 25 percent of coverage had been negative.

⁴⁰ Schroeder, 2.

he refused.⁴¹ Ultimately, Nixon opted for a dose of Lazy Shave, while Kennedy, unbeknownst to Nixon, had a small amount of makeup applied by his own people.⁴² In fact, Kennedy's handlers were overly meticulous about taking every precaution to ensure that they would maximize their candidate's appearance on television.⁴³ Adding to the excitement, Democratic National Chairman Henry Jackson predicted on the eve of the debate that the debate would "play a very important" part in deciding the election.⁴⁴

Howard K. Smith of *CBS News* moderated the debate, which was broadcast live from Chicago.⁴⁵ Smith was both enigmatic and omnipresent in the early days of presidential campaign broadcasts. Though famous for his conservative leanings and for generally supporting Republicans over Democrats, including his vigorous defense of Spiro Agnew's rants against liberal media bias, Smith displayed a bias against Nixon.⁴⁶ Years after the 1960 debates, when the Watergate scandal unraveled in Nixon's second presidential term, Smith became the first major television commentator to call for Nixon's resignation.⁴⁷ The panelists were Sander Vanocur of *NBC News*, Stuart Novins of *CBS News*, Charles Warren of *Mutual News*, and Bob Fleming of *ABC News*.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Schroeder, 3.

⁴² Schroeder, 4. Lazy Shave was a type of face powder used to conceal beard stubble.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Editorial, "TV Debate Held Vital to Election Outcome," *Los Angeles Times*, September 26, 1960, 30.

⁴⁵ Kennedy-Nixon Debate 1, September 26, 1960, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library DVD, retrieved on May 4, 2010.

⁴⁶ Albert Auster, *Howard K. Smith*, The Museum of Broadcast Communications, retrieved on March 17, 2012, <http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=smithhoward>. Agnew was Vice President of the United States under Nixon, from 1969 to 1973.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Kennedy-Nixon 1.

The candidates were allowed to make eight-minute opening statements, noticeably lengthy by today's standards.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, the openings afforded each candidate the opportunity to introduce himself and convey his message without being overly concerned about time expiring. Kennedy spoke first, and began by referring to Abraham Lincoln's question in 1860 about whether the nation could exist half-slave or half-free, and now 100 years later Kennedy wondered whether the world could exist half-slave or half-free.⁵⁰ All the while, Kennedy pronounced "half" in his heavy New England accent, as "hoff," something that clearly distinguished him from the Kansan Eisenhower and Missourian Truman, to whom the nation had been accustomed to listening for the previous fifteen years. Kennedy proceeded to describe America as a great country, but one that clearly ought to be doing better. "I'm not satisfied," said Kennedy repeatedly and passionately, emphasizing a criticism that only a challenger could make: that the *status quo* was just not good enough.⁵¹

Above all, Kennedy emphasized that the reason America had to succeed was so that freedom would prevail over Soviet-dominated tyranny. He insisted that Soviet aggression was the nation's number one concern and that everything the United States would do would have to be measured in terms of the worldwide battle against the Soviet Union for the preservation of freedom. Kennedy's criticism, perhaps indirectly, was aimed at the nuclear missile gap that many Americans at the time feared had tilted in the Soviets' favor.⁵²

⁴⁹ Nowadays, debaters often rush to complete their remarks in order to avoid a flashing light, bell, buzzer, or a verbal warning by a moderator that their time is up. For more discussion about the structure of time limits in debates, see Jim Lehrer, *Tension City*, New York, NY: Random House, 2011.

⁵⁰ Kennedy-Nixon 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Kaplan, 105-106. The rumors, Kaplan wrote, started by military personnel, angered President Eisenhower, who deplored unnecessary military buildup stemming from baseless innuendo.

Nixon began his opening statement by very graciously pointing out that “[t]he things that Senator Kennedy has said many of us can agree with.”⁵³ The vice president’s polite manners may have resulted from advice he received from his running mate, Henry Cabot Lodge, to “take the high road” and not get down in the mud with his opponent.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, Lodge was later heard to say that due to Nixon’s overly courteous and almost demure performance, “[t]hat son of a bitch just cost us the election.”⁵⁵ Perhaps Nixon simply treated Kennedy like a friend. The two were rather close as Congressional colleagues, even sharing the same sleeper compartment on a train once, drawing straws to see who would get the bottom bunk.⁵⁶ Nixon disagreed with Kennedy’s contention, however, that the United States was stagnant in the Eisenhower years, but remained very gentlemanly by emphasizing that where the two men differed was not in what America’s goals ought to be, but in the means by which to achieve them.⁵⁷ The opening statements set the tone of Kennedy as the aggressive challenger, and Nixon as the amiable quasi-incumbent.

Much has been made about how poor Nixon looked on television, compared to Kennedy, who looked tanned and rested. Television camerawork was in its infancy, however, and during much of the debate, close-ups of both candidates’ faces were so extreme that it was easy to notice imperfections in both of their appearances. For example, although Nixon was notorious for his inability to control his perspiration, the image of Kennedy’s face was so close to the camera that saliva could be seen forming

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Schroeder, 7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy, *The Presidents Club*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2012, 105. In fact, when Kennedy was near death in 1954, following a post-surgery infection, a distraught Nixon wept: “Oh, God, don’t let him die.”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

in his mouth and sticking to his teeth; undoubtedly an unattractive image to the discerning viewer.⁵⁸ That example of haphazard camera work exemplified the fledgling state of the very early stages of the debates-television marriage.

As the debate progressed, however, the camera pulled back a bit, displaying Kennedy's tanned, dark-suited silhouette, which contrasted with Nixon's pasty, sickly appearance. Kennedy's and Nixon's respective representatives, Bill Wilson and Ted Rogers, complained about how long the camera focused on each candidate.⁵⁹ The puzzled camera crew wondered why Wilson had protested, as the camera was on Kennedy longer than on Nixon. Wilson replied that he wanted the camera on Nixon, as Wilson thought it more valuable to display Nixon's unflattering appearance than Kennedy's attractive one.⁶⁰

Pointing out that Nixon had referred to Kennedy as "naïve and immature," Fleming wanted to know why Kennedy thought Americans should vote for him instead of the incumbent vice president.⁶¹ Kennedy replied that both he and Nixon were elected to Congress in the same year, 1946, and were part of the federal government for the same amount of time, fourteen years, and that he had seamlessly transitioned into being a product of the same Democratic Party that produced twentieth century presidents such as Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Harry Truman, whereas Nixon was a Republican, which is a party that opposed federal aid for education and medical care for

⁵⁸ Roger E. Ailes, Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, CA, May 4, 1970. Even after Nixon had been elected president, then-political consultant Ailes wrote a memorandum to Nixon aide H.R. Halderman regarding among other things Nixon's profuse sweating, commenting that the president was so irritated at Ailes for insisting that Nixon always carry a handkerchief that he deliberately ignored Ailes' advice.

⁵⁹ Schroeder, 6.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Kennedy-Nixon 1.

the elderly, among other things.⁶² The choice, as Kennedy described it, should not be based on a matter of being qualified to lead, but on which point of view and which party ought to lead the United States.⁶³

Every moment that Kennedy stood on equal footing with Nixon in the internationally-televised debate, viewed by over sixty-five million people, benefitted him and narrowed any credibility gap presumed beforehand. Kennedy appeared behind a podium just as large as Nixon's, was asked just as many questions, and had just as much time to answer them. That alone evened the contest, as status, name recognition, number of supporters, and amount in the campaign coffers were all neutralized.

Nixon's disinclination to challenge Kennedy's competence to be president underscored Kennedy's elevated status, and the fact that Kennedy identified the choice as being one about ideology rather than competence to lead also helped him in effectively placing himself on par with the incumbent vice president. From that point on, as long as he did not make any major blunders, Kennedy could take advantage of low expectations of his performance and could at the very least secure a draw simply by not being outdebated.

Vanocur addressed Eisenhower's remark about needing a week to think of one of Nixon's major contributions to the administration. Nixon's response was to smile and refer to his own campaign slogan: "it's experience that counts." Vanocur then asked the loaded question: "I'm wondering, sir, if you can clarify which version is correct – the one put out by Republican campaign leaders or the one put out by President Eisenhower?"⁶⁴ Considering the media attention surrounding the Eisenhower remark, Nixon presumably

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Kennedy-Nixon 1.

expected that question.⁶⁵ He continued smiling and suggested to Vanocur that “if you know the President, that was probably a facetious remark.” By taking the position that Eisenhower was being playful and clowning with the press, Nixon did not need to disagree with his boss. He went on to say that he had given Eisenhower numerous ideas over the years, some of which the president accepted and some not. Moreover, Nixon added, it would be inappropriate for the president to be specific about what Cabinet members thought of particular policies that he ultimately advanced.

Fleming’s and Vanocur’s questions about Kennedy’s experience and Nixon’s accomplishments, respectively, were the first two “gotcha” questions in debate history.⁶⁶ Panelists’ attempts to remain even-handed and above-board notwithstanding, gotcha questions persevered in debates well beyond 1960.⁶⁷ That Fleming specifically asked Kennedy to rebut Nixon’s “naïve and immature” slight created a direct, adversarial atmosphere that was a lot less comfortable than if the two combatants been in different cities at the time, or even different rooms. The debates created a pressure situation that would demonstrate how the main contestant for arguably the world’s most stressful job would react. Although the pressure of being Commander-in-Chief is arguably far greater than the ability to perform well in a televised debate, the debates are even more useful in gauging the converse: if, for instance, the debaters could not rise to the occasion of

⁶⁵ Duffy, 107. Eisenhower’s remark was even more poignant when read alongside his rather lukewarm endorsement of Nixon, specifically, that he was “not dissatisfied” with Nixon as the Republican presidential nominee.

⁶⁶ A “gotcha” question, is designed to trip up a candidate, either by asking a question whose answer the candidate is unlikely to know, or one for which any of the expected answers are disadvantageous to the candidate. For more discussion about “gotcha journalism” and the common usage of the term in political campaigns, see Wolfsteld, 75; William Safire, “Gotcha,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 18, 2008, retrieved on October 27, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/18/magazine/18wwln-safire-t.html?_r=0.

⁶⁷ Schroeder, 179. One example includes a question to George H.W. Bush in 1988, to explain his conflicting positions on abortion.

absorbing tough questions from journalists, how could they be expected to perform well under the pressure of, say, threat of nuclear war?

Nixon's closing statement was as gracious as his opener; he used the word "respectfully" to qualify his criticism of his opponent.⁶⁸ With the final word, Kennedy used the opportunity to emphasize that the American people should vote for the party they trusted most to lead the country. Essentially, it was as if Kennedy suggested that his top quality was that he was a Democrat, and that being John Kennedy was secondary.

Americans experienced their first major party presidential debate, and a televised one at that. The candidates and television crews alike were still experimenting with the best formula for success in the fledgling medium. In that first glimpse of a revolutionary new method of delivering presidential campaigns to the public, Kennedy scored most significantly simply by sharing the same stage as his heavily favored opponent and not making any notable mistakes.⁶⁹

Some observers were disappointed that the debate did not live up to expectations in terms of drama and substantive discussion.⁷⁰ Perhaps not knowing what to make of it all, the *Chicago Tribune* did not even refer to it as a debate, instead labeling it a "discussion," and the *New York Times* placed qualifying quotes around the word "debate."⁷¹ Others in the media were impressed with the content, however, they

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Schroeder, 138.

⁷⁰ Los Angeles Times Staff, "Nobody Won Votes," *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 1960, 3. The article focused on viewers who described the debate as dull.

⁷¹ Chicago Tribune Staff, "How Viewers Sized up First TV Discussion," *Chicago Tribune*, September 27, 1960, 1; Editorial, "The Debate," *New York Times*, September 27, 1960, 38.

described both candidates at the onset as being “stiff as tailors’ dummies.”⁷² Others believed the event itself, with both candidates on a single platform, contained an element of drama that was not possible to be replicated by any other aspect of the campaign.⁷³ By most accounts, Kennedy was perceived more telegenic than his somewhat ill-looking opponent, and seemed to more than hold his own on substance.⁷⁴ Oliver Treyz, then president of *ABC News*, recalled that Nixon told him that evening that he had a temperature of 102 degrees, but declined to cancel the debate so as not to be perceived as a coward.⁷⁵ It is no surprise then, that Theodore White, in his book *The Making of the President*, observed that Nixon looked not only fearful, but also haggard to the point of sickness.⁷⁶ After the event, the debate’s producer and director, Don Hewitt, remarked of Kennedy’s performance: “[w]hen it was all over...a man walked out of this studio President of the United States. He didn’t have to wait till Election Day.”⁷⁷ Jim Lehrer, who moderated more debates than anyone else, noted that Kennedy told Howard K. Smith after the first debate that essentially he won the election that night.⁷⁸ As Nixon himself acknowledged, he should have remembered that “a picture is worth a thousand words.”⁷⁹ Practically overnight, Kennedy acquired a celebrity quality usually reserved only for television and movie stars.⁸⁰

⁷² Carroll Kilpatrick, “Debaters Show Equanimity, Confidence, and Exceptional Grasp of Subject Matter,” *Washington Post*, September 27, 1960, 1.

⁷³ Jack Gould, “The Great Debate,” *New York Times*, September 27, 1960, L1.

⁷⁴ Wall Street Journal Staff, “Most Viewers Give Kennedy Edge in Debate,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 28, 1960, 1. Many voters thought Nixon looked thin and sickly, and were impressed with Kennedy’s memory and substantive knowledge, and said they would switch their support from Nixon to Kennedy, accordingly; Wall Street Journal Staff, “Nominees Meet Face to Face Before Huge Audience, but High Drama is Lacking,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 28, 1960. Nixon noticeably wiped his brow repeatedly during the debate.

⁷⁵ Schroeder, 1-2.

⁷⁶ Theodore White, *The Making of the President 1960*, New York, NY: Athenium, 1961, 289.

⁷⁷ Schroeder, 8.

⁷⁸ Jim Lehrer, *Tension City*, New York, NY: Random House, 2011. 9-10.

⁷⁹ Schroeder, 9.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Over sixty-six million viewers watched the first debate, which was more than saw any of the subsequent three.⁸¹ Smith said that Nixon looked pale and sickly, whereas Kennedy looked like a young athlete.⁸² Although Lehrer, like Smith, concluded that television provided Kennedy with a tremendous advantage, he noted that most of those who listened to the debate on the radio (roughly one third overall) believed that Nixon won.⁸³ That could have been because Nixon's rich, baritone voice resonated better on radio than Kennedy's comparatively harsh and even shrill tone. Nixon sounded better, but Kennedy looked better. Perhaps if the inaugural debate season were delivered only by radio, the United States might have elected a different president in 1960. Television clearly was the more dominant medium.

A Gallup Poll taken two days after the first debate showed Kennedy overtaking Nixon as the preferred candidate, 49 percent to 46 percent.⁸⁴ The previous poll, which was taken before Kennedy-Nixon 1, showed Nixon with a 47 percent to 46 percent advantage.⁸⁵ These statistics were the beginning of why many observers, not least of all the two candidates themselves, placed so much emphasis on how the debates impacted the election result, and how visual images impacted the debates. Kennedy's surge notwithstanding, more than a month remained before Election Day and three more debates would follow.

Trailing Kennedy in the polls, Nixon was under pressure to rebound in the second debate, and he did, but not enough to compensate entirely for his poorly reviewed

⁸¹ Minow, 153-154.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Lehrer, 10. Lehrer noted that Nixon regretted having paid too much attention to what he was going to say, and too little to how he was going to look.

⁸⁴ Lydia Saad, Gallup Poll, September 25, 2008, retrieved on May 30, 2011, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/110674/Presidential-Debates-Rarely-GameChangers.aspx#1>

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

previous performance. The second debate took place a week and a half after the first, which gave the candidates some time to prepare, the pundits some time to analyze the impact of the first one, and the American people the appetite to devote another evening to the next installment of a televised phenomenon that again was watched by tens of millions. The media had an unprecedented opportunity in the age of television to repeat and rebroadcast the first debate's main talking-point, Nixon's appearance, simply by showing footage of how Nixon looked. For those who did not see the debate during its original airing, the cycle of news stories, in print and on television, which stemmed from it, caused the issue of presidential image to remain relevant and even gain exposure. The second debate's producers went to great lengths to avoid a similar occurrence.⁸⁶ It seemed the more the story was in the news, the more negatively the press described Nixon's appearance.

On the eve of the second debate, the *Los Angeles Times*' Bill Henry called Nixon in the first debate, "as haggard as a man waiting to get his teeth pulled without the solace of an anesthetic."⁸⁷ At one point, the television studio temperature was so cold, in an effort to control Nixon's profuse perspiration, that Kennedy complained until the temperature was raised.⁸⁸ Although Nixon's appearance dominated the pre-debate

⁸⁶ Russell Freeburg, "For Nixon and Kennedy Show," *Chicago Tribune*, October 7, 1960, 5. The background stage was sharper in order to avoid the bleak background present in the first debate; Robert J. Donovan, "How Will Nixon Look Tonight?" *Washington Post*, October 7, 1960, A4. Republicans also held strategy sessions to prevent Nixon from looking "thin, gaunt, nervous, and haggard" on television as he did in the first debate (even though "he look[ed] perfectly fit in the flesh").

⁸⁷ Bill Henry, "All Shook up over Debate," *Los Angeles Times*, October 7, 1960, B1.

⁸⁸ W.H. Lawrence, "Kennedy Protests Lighting and Cold and Wins on Both," *New York Times*, October 8, 1960, 1.

hype, there was also discussion of his demeanor. Would he be overly agreeable again, or would he be more assertive, even combative?⁸⁹

Frank McGee of *NBC News* moderated the debate, which was broadcast from Washington, DC. Richard Reeves, who wrote monographs about both the Kennedy and Nixon presidencies, considered McGee to be an exemplary journalist and among the best in the business.⁹⁰ There were four panelists again: Paul Niven of *CBS News*, Edward P. Morgan of *ABC News*, Alvin Spivak of United Press International, and Harold R. Levy of *Newsday*. Nixon fielded the opening question: would he accept responsibility for the United States losing Cuba to Communism during the Eisenhower Administration, much as Nixon laid blame for the loss of China under Eisenhower's predecessor, President Truman?⁹¹ Dressed in a dark suit, Nixon looked considerably more distinguished and impressive than before. His baritone voice sounded richer and more presidential. He did not smile, which accentuated his gruffness somewhat, but on the whole made him seem more authoritative. Inevitably reeling from the first debate and its aftermath and sensing the need to take the offensive, Nixon immediately set a more forceful tone by saying "first of all, I don't agree with Senator Kennedy," in stark contrast to his ultra-conciliatory demeanor in the first debate.⁹² He denied that Cuba was lost, vowed to defend Guantanamo if attacked, and chastised Kennedy for taking a "defeatist" position.⁹³ In response, Kennedy artfully asserted that he did not believe

⁸⁹ Samuel Lurell, "Will Nixon Come out Swinging," *Boston Globe*, October 7, 1960, 11; Robert J. Dovovan, "Nixon, Kennedy to Meet in 2d Debate Tonight," *Washington Post*, October 7, 1960, A1.

⁹⁰ Richard Reeves, "Politics and Television, Who's Using Whom?" *New York*, Volume 5 No. 26 (June 26, 1972), 28.

⁹¹ Kennedy-Nixon Debate 2, October 7, 1960, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library DVD, retrieved on May 11, 2010.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

Cuba was lost forever, just lost in the present Eisenhower-Nixon years.⁹⁴ By making that point, Kennedy simultaneously thwarted any notion that he was a pessimist, yet kept Nixon on the defensive by attacking the Eisenhower Administration's policies. Nixon's more spirited tone suggested that he realized his hyper-deference in the first debate did not serve him well. Perhaps reports that he looked sickly made him think that sounding more animated made him seem for vigorous.

Kennedy received a little help from the panel. Five months earlier, the Administration was embarrassed on the world stage when the Soviet Union shot down a CIA spy plane and reported the wreckage.⁹⁵ Believing the pilot, Francis Gary Powers, had either perished in the crash or had taken his own life in order to keep the mission a secret, Eisenhower told the world that the plane had been a weather aircraft that flew off course.⁹⁶ When the Soviets produced Powers, alive and captured, a few days later, the Administration was humiliated and in uncharacteristic disarray.⁹⁷ Morgan asked Kennedy whether the United States should have expressed regret or apologized to the Soviet Union.⁹⁸ The senator cited various other times when the United States expressed regret and when other nations expressed regret to the United States. Kennedy described that as a longstanding diplomatic tradition, and that Eisenhower's departure from that tradition was unfortunate.

In one of his finer moments to that point, Nixon countered that the United States would gladly express regret if it did something wrong, but gathering intelligence for the purpose of defending the nation's security was not wrong, and so the United States

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Wicker, 126.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Wicker, 127.

⁹⁸ Kennedy-Nixon, 2. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

should never apologize for it. Nixon added that it did not matter whether the United States and the Soviet Union were in negotiations at the time, because the defense of national security should not cease during negotiations.

Nixon used the spy plane incident to segue to the broader issue of how the United States was faring in the Cold War. He suggested that things were going well, but as long as Communism existed the United States could always do better. He maintained that America's prestige was at an all-time high, not at an all-time low, as his opponent suggested. Kennedy knew the significance of the Cold War as a political issue full well and took a very harsh approach in his rebuttal, announcing that the relative strength of the United States, as compared to that of the Soviet Union and China, "has deteriorated in the last eight years and we should know it, and the American people should be told the facts." Kennedy continued to emphasize his theme that the United States could not afford to coast: it must be dynamic in competing against Communism for its own survival. He deliberately set a tension in motion that was markedly different from Nixon's comparatively complacent approach. In a larger sense, the Cold War issue exemplified two of the disadvantages that an incumbent debater held: having to defend the status quo, and elevating the challenger's status by sharing the same debate stage with him.⁹⁹

Niven asked Kennedy why was he so critical of Nixon rather than Eisenhower who, after all, was the president? Unperturbed, Kennedy responded forcefully: "Well, I understood that this was the Eisenhower-Nixon Administration according to all the Republican propaganda that I've read." In a single sentence, Kennedy managed to mock the Republican strategy of elevating Nixon as if he was a co-president, which was an important point to make given Eisenhower's criticism of his vice-president. But

⁹⁹ Nixon was vice president at the time, not president. Nonetheless, he was part of the incumbent administration.

Kennedy went further, reminding the viewers that it was more important to think about the future than the past. Because Eisenhower was leaving office, the real issue was who would be a better president: Kennedy or Nixon? At the same time, Kennedy attacked Nixon for being part of failed policies, but when it suited him, he also separated Nixon from Eisenhower's popularity. The tactic was not lost on Nixon, who insisted that Kennedy should make up his mind whether Nixon was responsible for the Eisenhower Administration's policies or not. Another important example of Nixon going on the offensive more in the second debate, was his sharp criticism of Kennedy for speaking out about what was wrong in the United States while Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev was visiting. He chastised Kennedy for attacking American foreign policy, and for stating that seventeen million Americans went to bed hungry every night (which Nixon said was false). Instead, Nixon argued, Kennedy should praise the United States for having the best-fed and best-clothed people in the history of the world. "It isn't necessary to run America down in order to build her up," Nixon added, and assailed Kennedy for misstating the case. By being bolder in criticizing his opponent, Nixon sounded more authoritative than in the first debate. In the second debate, he evoked a comparatively more powerful image.

One of the most-discussed topics of the 1960 debates concerned the islands of Quemoy (now Kinmen) and Matsu, near Mainland China. Since the end of World War II, the United States had sent financial aid to China's leader, Chiang Kai-shek.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, Chiang had lost the support of the people, and Mao Tse-Tung's Communist army had taken over Mainland China, causing Chiang to flee to the nearby island of Formosa (now Taiwan), and re-establish the Republic of China there, not to be

¹⁰⁰ Wicker, 78-80.

confused with Mao's People's Republic of China, which now controlled the mainland.¹⁰¹ By 1955, Mao's forces began shelling the two neighboring islands that remained under Chiang Kai-shek's control, Quemoy and Matsu.¹⁰² Eisenhower pledged to defend Formosa and the nearby Pescadores against Communist attack, as well as "such other territories as may be determined," which implicitly but not explicitly included Quemoy and Matsu.¹⁰³

Kennedy promised to defend Formosa, but not necessarily to extend that defense to Quemoy and Matsu.¹⁰⁴ Nixon forcefully disagreed, a rarity for him on the debate stage, insisting that the United States should not give up Quemoy and Matsu to the Communists quite so easily.¹⁰⁵ As debate analyst Newton Minow emphasized, however, the viewers remembered far more about how the candidates looked and how effective or ineffective their respective debating styles were than the topics they actually discussed.¹⁰⁶ For all of the time devoted to that issue in the second, third, and fourth debates, in the end its substance was little more than an incidental afterthought. Don Hewitt, a producer for CBS at the time, said "the only thing anyone remembers [about the debates] is Nixon's makeup...where are Quemoy and Matsu and who said what and who cares?" That observation underscores the primacy of image, rather than substantive detail, that the debates, complemented by television, evoked.

Similar to the end of the first debate, Kennedy spoke about the virtues of political party identification in the second debate, reminding the viewers that Abraham Lincoln

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Wicker, 78.

¹⁰³ Wicker, 79.

¹⁰⁴ Kennedy-Nixon 2.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Minow, 1. The entire issue was forgotten shortly after the election.

was “a great president of all the people; but was selected by his party at a key time in history because his party stood for something,” and then proceeded to identify the Democratic Party as the party of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Harry Truman, and the Republican Party as that of William McKinley, Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Thomas Dewey, and Alfred Landon (the latter two were Republican presidential nominees, but never president). Conveniently, Kennedy omitted two Republicans who were part of that sequence: the iconic Theodore Roosevelt and the consistently popular Dwight Eisenhower.¹⁰⁷ Despite any advantage he might have felt from his performances in the two debates, especially the first debate, perhaps Kennedy remained concerned about Nixon riding the popular Eisenhower’s coattails, and so posited the election as a choice more about parties than individuals.

Nixon was perceived to have markedly improved in his second debate performance whereas Kennedy, who did well the first time, was not seen to fare any worse.¹⁰⁸ *New York Times* Washington correspondent James Reston described the vice president’s performance as a clear comeback.¹⁰⁹ Nixon’s vastly improved aesthetics, from his wardrobe to his demeanor – might have given him the edge, as both Democratic and Republican leaders acknowledged.¹¹⁰ A *Washington Post* editorial agreed that Nixon looked considerably better, but added that Kennedy’s delivery was improved as well.¹¹¹ A *Chicago Tribune* reporter noted that, while Nixon looked confident, Kennedy seemed

¹⁰⁷ Roosevelt is typically ranked as one of America’s great presidents, and is one of only four (the others are George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln) whose images are carved on Mount Rushmore in South Dakota.

¹⁰⁸ Schroeder, 139.

¹⁰⁹ James Reston, “Vice President Apparently Came out Ahead in a More Informative Show,” *New York Times*, October 8, 1960, L1. Reston reported that the consensus was that Nixon was more composed and assertive than he had been in the first debate.

¹¹⁰ John J. Lindsay, “Both Parties Note Gain for Nixon,” *Washington Post*, October 9, 1960, A1. Republican strategists were jubilant, and Democratic leaders conceded that Nixon had a strong showing.

¹¹¹ Editorial, “Mr. Kennedy’s Round,” *Washington Post*, October 8, 1960, 13.

“irritated” and “anxious to get away.”¹¹² It seemed that more viewers, however, thought not only that Nixon did better the second time, but that Kennedy also did better.¹¹³

More importantly, though the second debate was much closer, it was not enough of a factor to erase the effects of the first. If it were a sporting event, Kennedy’s sizeable lead in, say, the first quarter would not be neutralized if both competitors had an equally impressive second one. In the third and fourth debates, Nixon had to do more.

The second debate, unlike the first, was not identified by a single issue. The third debate, however, was remembered less for its substance than for the complaint by the Nixon campaign that Kennedy had used cheat notes. That debate was distinctly different from the first two and, though anyone hardly imagined at the time, different from any of the thirty-two debates that followed, because the participants were not in the same room. In fact, Kennedy and Nixon were at opposite ends of the country, in New York City and Los Angeles, respectively.¹¹⁴ Without the candidates standing in the same room only a few feet apart from one another, the camera could not capture as effectively as it did during the first two debates one candidate’s body language while the other candidate spoke. From the viewers’ perspective, it was more of a teleconference than a direct confrontation, and it was up to the candidates to remember to treat one another as if they were physically in the same room.

¹¹² Willard Edwards, “Clashes Sharper,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 8, 1960, 13.

¹¹³ Richard L. Lyons, “‘A Fine Exchange,’ Says Kennedy; Debate Pace Faster, Nixon Thinks,” *Washington Post*, October 8, 1960, A1; Peter Lisagor, “Leadership Issue in Center State after Kennedy-Nixon TV Round 2,” *Boston Globe*, October 9, 1960, 10; Editorial, “The Pictures Become Sharp,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 1960, G4.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* The candidates had conflicting campaign schedules, and it was decided by both campaigns as well as *ABC News* that the split-screen, dual city broadcast was the most viable solution.

Painstaking preparations were made to ensure that the two stage sets were identical.¹¹⁵ Each candidate was instructed to wear clothing of similar shades and textures, and the temperature was set to seventy-two degrees in both studios.¹¹⁶ Clearly no longer taking the debates for granted, Nixon spent the previous day preparing.¹¹⁷ James Reston opined that the candidates' roles were reversed from the opening debate: Kennedy emerged as the favorite, Nixon the underdog.¹¹⁸

Bill Shadel of *ABC News* moderated, and the panelists were Frank McGee, of *NBC News*, who moderated the second debate, Charles Von Fremd, of *CBS News*, Douglass Carter of *Reporter* magazine, and Roscoe Drummond of the *New York Herald Tribune*.¹¹⁹ Along with McGee and Howard K. Smith, Shadel was one of television news' pioneers, and was largely admired by a wide audience.¹²⁰ Not known for being outspoken politically, Shadel nonetheless seemed embarrassed that early in his career he edited magazines for the National Rifle Association, which was an organization traditionally supported by Republicans rather than Democrats.¹²¹

McGee began by commenting on Kennedy having referred to Nixon's position on Quemoy and Matsu, in the second debate's aftermath, as "trigger-happy," and then asked the senator whether he would take military action if necessary to defend Berlin

¹¹⁵ Los Angeles Times Staff, "Third Great Debate Slated for Tonight," *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 1960, 1. Even a can of paint used to paint a desk for Kennedy in New York was flown to Los Angeles so that Nixon's desk would be painted the same exact color.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Los Angeles Times Staff, "Nixon to Spend Day Planning for Debate," *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 1960, 32.

¹¹⁸ James Reston, "Kennedy Said to be Switching Roles with Nixon on Approach to Questions," *New York Times*, October 14, 1960, 23

¹¹⁹ Kennedy-Nixon Debate 3, October 13, 1960, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library DVD, retrieved on May 14, 2010.

¹²⁰ David Postman, "Broadcast Pioneer, Retired UW Professor, Reported History," *Seattle Times*, Jan 31, 2005, retrieved on March 26, 2012, http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2002165509_shadel31m.html

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

from succumbing to Soviet control.¹²² Kennedy wasted no time saying yes. He cited the United States' "contractual right" to be in Berlin, and promised that the nation would meet its commitments to maintain West Berlin's freedom and independence. Although Kennedy's response was steadfast in pledging to defend West Berlin, he made no mention of Quemoy and Matsu, or of his "trigger-happy" comment.

Nixon responded forcefully in his own right, in arguably his strongest opening remarks yet. He blasted Kennedy for the "trigger-happy" remark, and challenged his opponent to "name one Republican president who led this nation into war [over the previous fifty years]." Nixon added that during that time, three presidents led the United States into war, all of them Democrats. Wisely, Nixon attested that although he did not suggest that one party was for peace and the other for war, in looking at the record it was wrong for Kennedy to label the Republicans as "trigger-happy." As the debate season progressed, Nixon's language became bolder and more forceful regarding his opponent's positions. Just as George Washington's prominent jaw, William Henry Harrison's jacketless inaugural address, and Franklin Roosevelt's reassuring radio voice projected strong presidential images, so did Nixon's heightened boldness in confronting his opponent. Albeit somewhat late in the debate season, Nixon realized the debates' usefulness as tools through which to convey strength.

Von Fremd then asked Kennedy whether he owed Nixon an apology because of fellow Democrat (and former president) Harry Truman's outburst about "where the Vice President [Nixon] and the Republican Party could go" (to hell, the former president said publicly). Kennedy, not unfamiliar with Truman's abrasive quips, very diplomatically stated that his style differed with the ex-president's insofar as Kennedy would not even

¹²²Kennedy-Nixon 3. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are to this source.

think about trying to change the feisty seventy-six-year-old ex-president's speaking manner. "Perhaps Mrs. Truman can, but I don't think I can," Kennedy added, to emphasize how futile any attempt on his part might be.

Although Nixon defended Truman's right to an opinion, he reprimanded the ex-president for lacking the composure to maintain his temper in public. Ironically, Nixon publicly lost his temper years later, as president, even physically shoving his press secretary.¹²³ Nixon went on to commend Eisenhower for having restored dignity to the presidency, implying that such dignity was missing during the Truman years, and proclaimed that every parent ought to be able to look at the president and say: "there is a man who maintains the kind of standards personally that I would want my child to follow."¹²⁴ That statement was even more ironic, as fourteen years later, Nixon became the only president to hold the humiliating distinction of having resigned from office.¹²⁵ In arguably his most poignant comment of the evening, Kennedy illustrated the paradox that Nixon was concerned about a couple of islands five miles off the coast of China falling into Communist hands, but did not really protest very hard when the Communists seized Cuba, ninety miles off the coast of the United States.¹²⁶ Kennedy demonstrated again the advantage a challenger often has in presidential debates: he knew Cuba was a weakness for Nixon's candidacy, and he made sure to work it into his responses whenever he needed a surge. It is also important to note that although the substance of the Quemoy and Matsu argument was largely inconsequential, it provided an

¹²³ Greenberg, 256.

¹²⁴ Kennedy-Nixon, 3.

¹²⁵ Unger, 771.

¹²⁶ Kennedy-Nixon, 3. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

opportunity for each candidate to make more general sweeping criticisms about the other.

Nixon's reference to a president as "he" (as opposed to "he or she") was a sign of the times. Although women were certainly legally eligible to become president long before 1960, politics, particularly presidential politics, overwhelmingly remained a man's professional field.¹²⁷ Interestingly, however, Kennedy avoided exclusively masculine pronouns to refer to gender-neutral situations. Kennedy's progressive terminology epitomized the forward-looking theme of his campaign, as compared to the Eisenhower-Nixon *status quo*.¹²⁸

Nixon, meanwhile, behaved less like the incumbent vice president and more like a candidate seeking change every bit as much as Kennedy. Essentially, then, Kennedy's original theme (change) seemed more effective than Nixon's (stay the course), even to Nixon himself. Beyond any telegenic advantage Kennedy enjoyed, the fact that Nixon changed strategy midstream pointed to Kennedy's substantive prowess.

The most significant factor about the debaters being 3000 miles apart was the accusation from the Nixon campaign that, in clear violation of the rules, Kennedy used notes during the debate.¹²⁹ The *New York Times*' front page described Nixon as angry and "shocked" over the incident.¹³⁰ Kennedy's aides immediately denied the charges, and his press secretary told the *Los Angeles Times* that the only note Kennedy had on

¹²⁷ The right of women not to be barred from voting based on their gender was guaranteed nationwide by the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, ratified in 1920.

¹²⁸ In fact, Kennedy did not wear a hat as a rule and, as president, the trend caught on with American men – usually around Kennedy's age (43 at the time) and younger following course. That a president changed the course of men's fashion in America, however, was far more the exception than the rule. For more discussion about the generic use of masculine pronouns, see John Gastii, "Generic Pronouns and Sexist Language," *Sex Roles*, Volume 23 Nos. 11/12 1990, pp. 629-643.

¹²⁹ Lou Fleming, "Nixon Charges Kennedy Used Notes in Debate," *Los Angeles Times*, 1; Willard Edwards, "Nixon Blasts Kennedy for Violating Rule," *Chicago Tribune*, October 14, 1960, 1.

¹³⁰ W.H. Lawrence, "Nixon is 'Shocked' by Kennedy Notes," *New York Times*, Oct .14, 1960, 1.

his desk was a letter from Eisenhower, which he brought along in order to quote the president precisely.¹³¹ *New York Herald Tribune* reporter David Wise, however, who was present in Kennedy's studio during the debate, said that Kennedy had "seven or eight sheets of paper which appeared to be arranged by subject matter."¹³² After conferring with Kennedy, Salinger added that Kennedy did, in fact, have other pieces of paper on the desk, which were quotations from former Army Chief of Staff General Matthew Ridgeway, and former Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Meade Alcorn, the Republican National Committee general counsel, likened Kennedy to a schoolboy using cheat notes during an exam.¹³³ Alcorn said Kennedy was not as well versed in the topics at hand and was able to be on par with Nixon as a result of the notes. He pointed out that only when Kennedy thought he was not on the air did he look at the notes.¹³⁴

The debate footage conclusively determines that Kennedy had at least two pieces of paper in front of him. He clearly read from one directly, when quoting Eisenhower, and glanced down at the papers occasionally throughout the evening. The glances, though lasting barely more than a second at a time, were unmistakable. On each occasion, not only did Kennedy lower his eyes from the camera, but also let his head swing downward. There does not seem to be a plausible reason for him doing that other than to glance at one or more pieces of paper. Other than to quote Eisenhower, and to a lesser extent Ridgeway and Dulles, Kennedy certainly did not read from the paper. It is

¹³¹ Fleming.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ UPI, "GOP Hits Kennedy for TV 'Cribbing,'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 1960, 1. Also, see Raymond Moley, "Television Debates Fail to Instruct Us," *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 1960. In the edition the morning of the debate, Moley wrote how important it is to have a good memory when debating on television, in order to recall information.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

entirely possible, however, though not necessarily probable, that he wrote a word or two in the margins, perhaps as a reminder of certain points that he wanted to make.

Despite the use of notes that suggested lack of preparedness – similar to a stage actor reading from a script at a live performance – the evidence does not suggest that the issue materially affected either candidate’s campaign. As every subsequent debate to date has taken place with all participants in the same room, there was never again even the opportunity for something similar to occur.

Meanwhile, Nixon appeared to grow stronger. His voice was confident in the third debate, and his appearance distinguished. Gone were the beads of sweat that routinely formed on his face, and which were made more conspicuous in the first debate by the unflattering camera close-ups, as was his infamous five o’clock shadow. As much as Nixon appeared more relaxed, smiling still seemed uncomfortable for him. In a painfully unnatural manner, Nixon flashed brief smiles from time to time, almost as if there was a tiny alarm that sounded in his head every few minutes or so, reminding him to smile at random moments. Kennedy, by contrast, did not smile at all. However, Nixon came across as more serious and uptight and Kennedy as more relaxed. Purely from an aesthetic perspective, it seemed that Nixon had to try hard to look good, whereas for Kennedy it seemed effortless.

Appearances aside, Nixon had a stronger showing in the second debate than the first, and was even stronger in the third. Moreover, the debates had become increasingly contentious. To his credit, Nixon did not appear annoyed or frustrated by his upstart opponent. Rather, his strength seemed to be his hardness. In the first debate, when he tried to be the perfect gentleman, he clearly appeared uncomfortable

in that role. Whether or not Nixon's resurgence was enough to erase the boost Kennedy received from their first encounter remained uncertain, as the contestants had one more opportunity to confront each other face-to-face.

The final debate took place on October 21.¹³⁵ It proved the most forceful of the four, highlighted by Kennedy's use of direct confrontation. Quincy Howe of *ABC News* moderated.¹³⁶ Like the previous debate moderators, Howe was widely respected for his straightforward "no-nonsense" commentary.¹³⁷ The panelists were Frank Singiser of *Mutual News*, John Edwards of *ABC News*, Walter Cronkite of *CBS News*, and John Chancellor of *NBC News*. Cronkite was a particularly celebrated panelist, and in 1972 topped the Quayle Poll as "the most trusted man in America."¹³⁸

Kennedy again successfully negotiated for a rather warm studio. At seventy-one degrees, it was around ten degrees warmer than Nixon would have preferred, but the vice president did not seem bothered by it. Properly shaven and wearing a distinguished dark suit, it appeared that Nixon never again would make the mistake of showing up to a debate in a light suit and exhibiting a five o'clock shadow. Nixon placed himself on a diet of milkshakes to gain back some weight he lost due to the health setbacks he experienced during the first debate, and his suits and shirt collars were a much better fit. Although Nixon intentionally saved his best for last, believing that more viewers would tune in to watch the final debate than the previous three, he had it exactly wrong: the first debate attracted the most viewers and the final one the fewest.

¹³⁵ Kennedy-Nixon Debate 4, October 21, 1960, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library DVD, retrieved on May 29, 2010.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Edward Bliss, *The History of Broadcast Journalism*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1991, 308.

¹³⁸ CBS News, July 17, 2009, retrieved on March 17, 2012, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/walter-cronkite-dies>.

The first debate was the most-viewed in only half of the subsequent eight debate seasons (1976-2008) that included more than one debate between the major party nominees, so there seems to be no particular interest toward the first of every season. Kennedy-Nixon 1 being the first instance of a debate arguably rendered it a particularly intriguing phenomenon.¹³⁹ In this first-ever debate, for the first time in history two major party candidates confronted each other directly, and were visible from the comfort of one's home in live time, without limits associated with merely hearing it on the radio or reading about it in the following morning's newspaper, and this set of circumstances surely rendered the event irresistible.

"I know Mr. Khrushchev," Nixon began the third debate, thereby distinguishing his level of experience from Kennedy's, "[and] I...have had the opportunity of knowing and meeting other Communist leaders in the world." Nixon proceeded to explain how Communism flourished throughout the world while Truman was president, but did not fare nearly as well under Eisenhower. When he and Eisenhower assumed power, Nixon added, they ended the Korean War. Nixon also managed to balance praise for all that Eisenhower had done to fight Communism, with a pledge to do even more. This Richard Nixon appeared far more formidable from the one in the first debate.

Kennedy's counter essentially asked Americans to choose between the *status quo*, which a majority preferred, and a gamble on an even better future. Nixon, in turn, advised Americans to stick with what they knew and liked. Nonetheless, Kennedy was not prepared to concede that the *status quo* was reasonably good. Instead, he pointed out that there were plenty of warning signs that Cuban leader Fidel Castro was being

¹³⁹ In 1980, there was only one debate between the major party nominees, Democrat Jimmy Carter and Republican Ronald Reagan.

influenced by the Communists, and that the Republican administration ignored those signals. He gave examples of how the United States was lethargic in Latin America and Africa, where the Soviet Union was winning the hearts and minds of the people there at a faster rate. As in the first debate, Kennedy evoked a sense of urgency. His tenor voice ringing with emotion, Kennedy insisted that Americans were determined “to be first – not first if, and not first but, and not first when – but first.”

Nixon characterized Kennedy’s approach to the dictator as “dangerously irresponsible,” because it violated the provisions of the United Nations Charter, insofar as one nation could not interfere in the internal affairs of another.¹⁴⁰ Nixon, therefore, justified the administration’s response to Castro’s open embrace of Communism not as passive, but as diplomatic and respectful. Nonetheless, Nixon exclaimed that the United States had effectively quarantined Castro. Kennedy, in turn, explained that a unilateral quarantine on Cuba would be ineffective, and that a successful quarantine could only be achieved by including Western Europe, Canada, Japan, and other nations. Kennedy concluded by reminding Nixon of his admission that if the United States had provided the type of economic aid to Latin America five years earlier, “we might never have had Castro.” Then, Kennedy looked directly at his opponent, breaking from the pattern of the debates thus far, and asked him: “Why didn’t we?” Clearly, both candidates were growing bolder in their debating style, perhaps becoming more accustomed to the process and reacting to the press clippings about their more tentative previous performances, but Kennedy took matters further by facing Nixon and responding to him, head on. As 1960 was the inaugural debate season, there were bound to be a great deal of firsts. Kennedy’s facing and confronting Nixon was one of the more significant.

¹⁴⁰ Kennedy-Nixon, 4. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

Cronkite asked Nixon to comment about Kennedy's allegation that America's prestige overseas was diminishing. Nixon discounted Kennedy's comments that the country was second in space, second in science, and had the worst slums and the most overcrowded schools. Resuming his sharp counterargument, Kennedy again turned his body toward Nixon, pointed a finger at him, and began speaking to him directly. The senator responded to each of Nixon's comments, insisting that he never said the United States had the worst slums, but too many slums; not the worst education in the world, but that the Soviet Union took the lead in producing scientists and engineers. "[Y]ou yourself said to Khrushchev, 'you may be ahead of us in rocket thrust but we're ahead of you in color television' in your famous discussion in the kitchen," referring to Nixon's "Kitchen Debate" exchanges the previous year with Khrushchev. Kennedy added, "I think that color television is not as important as rocket thrust." Clearly showing no signs that he would grant Nixon extra deference because of the vice president's quasi-incumbent status, Kennedy continued to take full advantage of the opportunity to confront his opponent directly, and to an audience of tens of millions of television viewers.

Yet another exchange about Quemoy and Matsu prompted Kennedy to look straight at Nixon and say: "I challenge you tonight to deny that the Administration has sent at least several missions to persuade Chiang Kai-shek's withdrawal from these islands." For the third time in as many series of questions, Kennedy directed his response to Nixon, not to the questioners themselves. The emerging pattern ostensibly indicated either that Nixon was following the debate's rules, remaining cool and dignified under fire, while Kennedy was getting rankled, or that Kennedy spoke the truth, which is why

he dared to look his opponent in the eye, and Nixon was less than forthright, hiding behind the podium and refusing to address Kennedy directly. In any event, the substance of that exchange was dwarfed by the candidates' respective tones.

In closing, Kennedy spoke of the previous eight years under Republican rule as a time of economic stagnation, a time when the country lost its edge in education, and when ambassadors were appointed to countries whose language they did not even speak, only as a reward for their campaign contributions. Conveying a phrase used by Franklin Roosevelt before him and by Ronald Reagan after him, Kennedy contended that the United States had a "rendezvous with destiny" to be the defenders of freedom, and that there was nothing that the country could not do.

Kennedy set the tone and Nixon took the bait. Rather than utilizing the final word of the four debates to tell the world what he, second-in-command in a popular administration for the past eight years, intended to do as the nation's leader, he spent his time refuting Kennedy's remarks. Granted, he made positive points in defense of his and Eisenhower's record, a technically proficient tactic from a debating perspective, but they were all counterpoints to Kennedy's attack. Consequently, in his attempt to connect with the audience, Nixon appeared defensive and apologetic.¹⁴¹ One of the notions to consider about 1960, then, is that a bond with the viewers can be more beneficial to a candidate's image than being adept at debating minutiae.

Howe ended the evening by praising Kennedy and Nixon for their character and courage, confirming that they had set a new precedent, and wondering if they also established a new tradition. The answer to that question was not determined until many years later.

¹⁴¹ Pietrusza, 310.

Far from behaving complacently because of his perceived victory in the opening debate, Kennedy had saved his best for last, perhaps surprising Nixon by talking to him directly, which was possibly a tactic that Kennedy saved and displayed, strategically in the fourth and final debate, as Nixon did not have the luxury of countering in a future debate. The *Chicago Tribune*, which notably referred to the debates as shows, rejoiced that the final one was indeed a debate, at last.¹⁴² The *New York Times* also noticed the intensity, describing it as a “clash.”¹⁴³ No one could be sure if debates would take place in 1964, or ever again, but if the last one of the 1960 season was any indication, the public and the media alike seemed to prefer them to be combative.

Kennedy won the election, by a narrow margin. Gallup Poll results showed Nixon ahead before the debate season began and behind once it was concluded.¹⁴⁴ Although there is no direct evidence linking the candidates’ debate performances to the election’s outcome, the pre- and post-debate season polls along with the consistent post-debate analysis, and the lack of any other factor being identified as the reason for the change in poll numbers strengthens the notion that the debates can be election determinants and that certainly they matter.

Moreover, there are other important lessons to be gleaned from the first debate season in American political history. Would the presidential candidates in 1964 and beyond also agree to debates? Would incumbents inevitably be at a disadvantage? Would television continue to play a vital and unforgiving role in exposing unflattering physical appearances? If there had been presidential debates prior to 1960, would the

¹⁴² Willard Edwards, “TV Encounter Finally a Debate,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 22, 1960, 5.

¹⁴³ Russell Baker, “Nixon and Kennedy Debate Cuba; also Clash over Quemoy Issue, Atom Testing, and U.S. Prestige,” *New York Times*, October 22, 1960, 1.

¹⁴⁴ Gallup Poll, October 1960, retrieved on March 27, 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/110548/Gallup-Presidential-Election-TrialHeat-Trends-19362004.aspx#3>.

1960 debates have made important views just for being the first ones televised?

Conversely, were the 1960 debates not televised, would they be noteworthy as the first debates? Arguably, that there were two “firsts” rather than one magnified the public’s intrigue.

Shortly following his defeat, Nixon lamented that he went against his better judgment when he agreed to debate Kennedy. The incumbent vice president had ignored that debates inevitably favor the challenger.¹⁴⁵ Eisenhower said that it was a bad idea for Nixon to debate, which is an opinion not based on any personal qualities or lack thereof, but because the debates in general were, in Eisenhower’s view, disadvantageous to the person in office.¹⁴⁶ Years later, political columnist William Safire noted that the challenger prevails in a debate that is essentially a draw, because the incumbent loses by not winning and the challenger wins by not losing.¹⁴⁷ Even when the frontrunner is the challenger and not the incumbent, it is generally considered a risk for someone considerably ahead in the race to legitimize an opponent’s chances by agreeing to a face-to-face debate.¹⁴⁸

Moving forward, would the 1960 debates cause any future candidate clearly ahead in the polls to consider debating too risky a proposition to dare entertain? Time would tell. Moreover, an actual incumbent president (Ford in 1976, Carter in 1980, Reagan in 1984, Bush Sr. in 1992, Clinton in 1996, and Bush Jr. in 2004) is typically out of practice

¹⁴⁵ Schroeder, 15.

¹⁴⁶ Boston Globe Staff, “Bay Stater Quotes Ike: Debates Don’t Help Nixon,” *Boston Globe*, October 13, 1960, 1. Eisenhower said the man in office is in a position to be second-guessed by a man on the sidelines, one who is not holding office.

¹⁴⁷ William Safire, “Clinton Doesn’t Lose,” *New York Times*, October 12, 1992.

¹⁴⁸ Kathleen Hall Jamieson and David S. Birdsell, *Presidential Debates – The Challenge of Creating an Informed Electorate*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988, 85.

debating; his opponent, however, benefits from undertaking various intra-party debates during the primaries.¹⁴⁹

Kennedy intended to run for reelection in 1964, and, as the first president to be elected in the debate era, agreed to a series of debates once again.¹⁵⁰ According to Barry Goldwater – who eventually became the 1964 Republican presidential nominee, and who was favored to attain that status even while Kennedy was still alive – he and Kennedy planned a series of debates throughout the country.¹⁵¹ Kennedy's death by an assassin's bullet on November 22, 1963 put an end to those plans.

As a result of Kennedy's death, Vice President Lyndon Johnson became president and was the Democratic nominee in 1964. “[N]obody's idea of a glittering television personality” and far ahead in the polls against Goldwater, Johnson declined the opportunity to debate his opponent.¹⁵² As Johnson's Democratic Party continued to control Congress, the president made sure that the legislators were not particularly ambitious about resolving the equal time barrier to televised presidential debates.¹⁵³ Richard Nixon, the 1968 and 1972 general election winner, was elected to the presidency both times without partaking in debates. Apparently remembering the sting of the 1960 series, Nixon saw no reason to tempt fate again.¹⁵⁴ In fact, both Johnson and Nixon benefited from the Communications Act of 1934, which continued to prohibit televised debates, except for the one-time exception in 1960.¹⁵⁵ If they were particularly interested in debating, they might have done more to make the debates a permanent

¹⁴⁹ Schroeder, 60.

¹⁵⁰ Schroeder, 16.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Anthony Corrado, *Let America Decide*, New York, NY: Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1995, 56. The equal time barrier is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Schroeder, 16-17.

fixture in presidential politics. It became apparent that debates provided the best opportunity for candidates to reveal their character, which, depending on the voters' perception, could be quite a risk.¹⁵⁶ Kennedy understood the power of television in American politics as well as anyone, and in gratitude for its role in the debates, acknowledged that he “wouldn't have had a prayer without that gadget.”¹⁵⁷

Television theorist John Fiske wrote of the basic codes of television language, among the most fundamental of which, he posited, are appearance, wardrobe, makeup, speech, and expression.¹⁵⁸ Kennedy recognized the benefits of television earlier than Nixon did, and used it successfully throughout his presidency. One such instance was the painstaking meticulousness paid to virtually every detail in First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy's televised White House tour in 1962. Nixon's change of suit colors, insistence on cool room temperatures that would curb his excessive perspiration, and crash weight-gaining regimen to appear more robust indicated that his understanding of television's image-building importance was just as strong. The vital difference, however, was that Kennedy had already understood that importance in the critical first debate.

The 1960 debates are instructive not only because they were the first of their kind, but also because the principals, Kennedy and Nixon, were diametrical opposites in terms of their approach and delivery. By virtually unanimous consensus, Kennedy bested Nixon in terms of image, not only in physical appearance, but also in elevating his own status by sharing a stage viewed by an international audience with the incumbent vice president. The advantage gained from this strong image overshadows

¹⁵⁶ Schroeder, 17.

¹⁵⁷ Schroeder, 137. Kennedy's remark was also telling in that it would be difficult if not practically impossible for future presidential contenders to succeed without the medium of television.

¹⁵⁸ John Fiske, *Television Culture*, London, England: Methuen & Co, 1987, 3.

any considerations about who was superior in terms of substantive content and debating technicalities. That, in turn, underscores the primacy of image in presidential debates.

For the foregoing reasons, the debates of 1960 did in fact matter. The prevalent trials, errors, and lessons of the first debate season were that telegenic appearance counts, that an incumbent can spend a lot of time on the defensive, and that a great many observers, including the candidates themselves, can attribute outright victory or defeat to the debates. Moving forward to future debate seasons, these considerations would impact whether subsequent debates would take place and to what extent they might be influenced by the debates in 1960.

**DO THE DEBATES MATTER? AN EXAMINATION OF THE PROGRESSIVELY
INFLUENTIAL ROLE OF MAJOR PARTY DEBATES ON
AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: 1960-2008**

CHAPTER 3: 1976 – TELEVISION TARNISHES ANOTHER INCUMBENT’S IMAGE

Democrats Jimmy Carter (Former Governor – GA) and Walter Mondale (US Senator – MN) v. Republicans Gerald Ford (Incumbent President) and Bob Dole (US Senator – KS). Carter-Ford 1 (69.7 million), Carter-Ford 2 (63.9 million), Carter-Ford 3 (62.7 million), Mondale-Dole (43.2 million).

The most significant aspect of the Kennedy-Nixon debates, which served as examples from which subsequent aspiring presidential debaters might learn, was their effect on the candidates’ image. Nixon’s poor appearance and obsequious disposition in the opening debate contrasted strongly with Kennedy’s powerful, image-building telegenic presence, which put him on equal footing with the sitting vice president, and caused many – not least of all President Eisenhower himself – to proclaim a challenger’s inherent advantage in such contests.¹ That Nixon led Kennedy in the polls prior to the start of the debate season and trailed him by the end of it does not by itself confirm that the debates were the cause of that shift, but it is a difficult statistic to ignore.² Given the lessons of 1960, then, why would an incumbent, or any candidate for that matter, who was holding a lead in the polls, risk debating? The 1976 election between Republican President Gerald Ford and challenger Jimmy Carter sheds some light on that question, and that year’s debates reaffirmed the power of television, the press, and how one mistake could impact image and even decide the outcome of the debate season.

¹ *Boston Globe* Staff, “Bay Stater Quotes Ike: Debates Don’t Help Nixon,” *Boston Globe*, October 13, 1960, 1. President Eisenhower said that the challenger can always attack an incumbent’s record, thereby placing the latter in a vulnerable position.

² Lydia Saad, Gallup Poll, September 25, 2008, retrieved on May 30, 2011, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/110674/Presidential-Debates-Rarely-GameChangers.aspx#1>.

Because the 1960 debates were the first of their kind, there is considerably more written about those contests than their 1976 counterparts. Comprehensive monographs address numerous debate seasons, including, of course, 1976, but the most informative sources on that season, beyond the newspaper articles written during nearly every day of the campaign, are a number of books on the election itself. *Marathon: The Pursuit of the Presidency 1972-1976* by Jules Witcover focused on the post-Watergate political climate in America in 1976; in another example of the debates' impact, the book's focus on the fall presidential campaign almost exclusively concerns the debates.³ In *A Time to Heal*, Ford's 1979 autobiography, he wrote about the debates three years after they took place and after the end of his presidency, and his impressions are useful in analyzing his strategy and performance from the perspectives of time and personal experience.⁴ *Write it When I'm Gone* is a compelling account of off-the-record conversations Ford had with the author, longtime Ford biographer Thomas DeFrank, on the condition that DeFrank could publish the comments only after Ford's death.⁵ *Electing Jimmy Carter*, by Carter speechwriter Patrick Anderson, depicts the 1976 campaign on the road, from the author's perspective. In *Inside the Presidential Debates*, Newton Minow, who was instrumental in establishing the 1960 debates (having laid the groundwork in 1956 for Democratic Presidential Nominee Adlai Stevenson), emphasized Ford's decision to debate because he was far behind in the polls and needed to do something drastic to inject new life into his campaign.⁶ Although those books and others like them are authoritative accounts of the 1976 campaign, they

³ Jules Witcover, *Marathon: The Pursuit of the Presidency 1972-1976*, New York, NY: Viking Press, 1977.

⁴ Gerald Ford, *A Time to Heal*, New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1979.

⁵ Thomas DeFrank, *Write it When I'm Gone*, New York, NY: Putnam, 2007.

⁶ Newton N. Minow and Craig J. Lamay, *Inside the Presidential Debates*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

provide barely more than glimpses of the debates themselves, and of their impact on the candidates and the voters. This chapter, however, analyzes the impact of the debates individually and collectively, focusing on the influence, both positive and negative, of television, the perils of incumbent debaters, and the ghosts of Watergate, all against the backdrop of the emerging role of women in American politics.

Before turning to the 1976 debates, it is useful to note that there were none held in 1964, 1968, and 1972. Only the second season of its kind, then, and after a sixteen-year gap, the debates' permanence was not necessarily cemented in 1976. That the 1960 debates had such an effect on the election overall is precisely why some of the candidates in the ensuing three presidential elections preferred to avoid them. The official reason was commonly known as the Equal Time Rule. A significant impediment to the debates that was temporarily suspended in 1960 but conveniently used as an excuse to avoid debates in 1964, 1968, and 1972, the Equal Time Rule was Section 315 of the Federal Communications Act of 1934.⁷ It prevented the broadcasting of any debates that did not provide every candidate with equal time, *i.e.*, with the opportunity to appear in that broadcasted debate.⁸ If the rule was not temporarily suspended in 1960, the Kennedy-Nixon debates could be broadcast only if every other presidential candidate were permitted to take part as well. Among the dozen or so additional candidates that would have been able to share the same stage with Nixon and Kennedy were Lars Daly, Clennon King, and Merrit Curtis, of the Tax Cut, Independent Afro-American, and Constitution Parties, respectively, each of who ultimately received fewer than 2,000 votes nationwide, and collectively garnered less than one half of one percent

⁷ Minow, 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*

of the total vote.⁹ The logistical difficulties in accomplishing such a task, assuming that Kennedy and Nixon had even agreed to it, probably would have thwarted the entire debate initiative.

Recognizing that further clarity was needed regarding the equal time rule vis-à-vis presidential debates, Congress agreed to suspend the requirement temporarily for the 1960 election, thereby permitting Kennedy and Nixon to debate without having to invite any of the other candidates – much less all of them – to the forum.¹⁰ The Federal Communications Commission defined the debates as “*bona fide* news events” in 1975, and lifted the equal time restriction permanently.¹¹ As for the presidential elections between 1960 and 1975, Congress was not inclined to make another exception given that the candidates, did not proactively seek such a ruling.

Based on his commanding lead in the polls in 1964, President Johnson did not deem it necessary to debate the challenger, Barry Goldwater.¹² Four years later, Nixon was the Republican nominee again, running against Democrat Hubert Humphrey.¹³ Though neither was the incumbent, Nixon did not forget the debate sting of 1960, and believed he could defeat Humphrey – correctly, as it turned out – without the risk of entering the debate fray.¹⁴ As president and with an even more formidable lead against challenger George McGovern, Nixon had even less reason to debate in 1972.¹⁵ By that point, the

⁹ 1960 Presidential General Election Results, retrieved on November 23, 2011,

<http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?year=1960&minper=0&f=0&off=0&elect=0> .

¹⁰ Suspension of Section 315 of the Communications Act of 1934 for the 1960 Presidential Campaign, June 8, 1960, retrieved on November 23, 2011, http://transition.fcc.gov/Bureaus/OSEC/library/legislative_histories/449.pdf.

¹¹ Minow, 44.

¹² Susan A. Hellweg, Michael Pfau, *et al.*, *Televised Presidential Debates*, New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1992, 3.

¹³ Hellweg, 3-4.

¹⁴ Hellweg, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

landmark debates that debuted twelve years earlier were more of an aberration than the beginning of a political tradition.

In 1976, however, the candidates reinserted debates into the presidential campaign. Two years after its denouement, the Watergate scandal loomed over the 1976 election with Jimmy Carter centering his campaign on “exorcising [the ghosts of Watergate] and welcom[ing] friendlier spirits.”¹⁶ Watergate began with a break-in into the Democratic National Committee’s headquarters in Washington D.C.’s Watergate Hotel and Office Complex.¹⁷ In June 1972, months before Nixon’s landslide reelection, the Federal Bureau of Investigation discovered that all of the men involved in the break-in were members of Nixon’s Committee to Reelect the President (CRP, or often disparagingly referred to as CREEP).¹⁸ Further examination revealed that the CRP was involved in numerous other crimes involving abuse of government power for political gain.¹⁹ Although the evidence did not suggest that Nixon himself knew about the break-in, his own tape recordings, which the United States Supreme Court directed him to relinquish, revealed that he attempted to obstruct justice by covering up the investigation.²⁰ Facing near-certain impeachment and conviction, Nixon resigned, and was succeeded immediately by Gerald Ford.²¹

¹⁶ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President*, New York, NY: Bantam, 1982, 27. Carter wrote that after winning the election, he was so compelled to erase the memory of an imperial presidency that he even ceased the playing of “Hail to the Chief” at his public appearances for a while.

¹⁷ Irwin Unger, *These United States*, 2nd Ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999, 2003, 768-770. Hence, attributing the name “Watergate” to the scandal.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *United States v. Nixon* 418 U.S. 683, 716 (1974).

²¹ Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People*, New York, NY: Harper & Collins, 1997, 905.

When Nixon resigned on August 9, 1974, his vice president, Gerald Ford, became the nation's thirty-eighth president, without a single ballot cast.²² Ford granted a "full, free and absolute" pardon to Nixon on September 9, 1974, exactly one month after taking office, which disappointed the many Americans who viewed Ford as a chaste outsider untainted by the poisonous Nixon Administration.²³ Although Ford was not directly implicated in the scandal itself, pardoning Nixon caused his popularity to plummet. Ford emphatically declared that he pardoned Nixon for the good of the country. He considered that had Nixon been put on trial, a prolonged, bitter, and convoluted legal process would have unfolded, and it could have taken years for a judge to be satisfied that an impartial jury could be assembled.²⁴ Nonetheless, Ford's image was damaged. Watergate had marred the prestige of the presidency in general, Nixon in particular, and, by association, Ford.²⁵

Besides Watergate, the political mood of the times reflected a slow psychological recovery from the decades-long conflict in Vietnam, and the challenge of dealing with simultaneously high inflation and unemployment.²⁶ Neither of those phenomena affected the candidates nearly as much as Watergate. Whatever strain the Vietnam War put on the national psyche, by 1976 the effect both on popular culture and political impact began to wane significantly, particularly as neither Ford nor Carter was involved

²² Nixon selected Ford to replace Vice President Spiro Agnew, who resigned on October 10, 1973 amid accusations of tax evasion and accepting bribes in return for political favors.

²³ Douglas Brinkley, *Gerald Ford*, New York, NY: Times Books, 2007, 67-68.

²⁴ Ford's issuance of Proclamation 4311, granting a pardon to Nixon, September 8, 1974. University of Texas Library, retrieved on February 4, 2009, <http://www.ford.utexas.edu/LIBRARY/speeches/731206.htm>.

²⁵ Gerald Pomper, *The Election of 1976*, New York, NY: David McKay Company, Inc., 1977, 18.

²⁶ Henry A. Plotkin, "Issues in the 1976 Presidential Campaign," *The Election of 1976*, Gerald M. Pomper (ed.), New York, NY: David McKay, 1977, 35-53, 35-37.

in that war's origin or perpetuation.²⁷ As for the economy, Ford was not president long enough (only two years) to be blamed for it, and Carter had not yet arrived in Washington. Watergate, though, became Ford's scandal by inheritance, as he had pardoned Nixon, and Carter's weapon to wield, as he represented political catharsis.

Ford trailed Carter by thirty-two points in July, just four months before the election, and, as Minow wrote in *Inside the Presidential Debates*, desperately needed to inject a positive variable into his campaign.²⁸ Expecting Carter's enormous lead to disappear without a major change in strategy seemed implausible, and so Ford realized that the perils of debating as an incumbent paled in comparison to remaining inert when trailing in the polls so badly. Also, the circumstances that most harmed Nixon in the debates pertained to his physical appearance, not his incumbent vice presidential status, and Carter, not accustomed to the national stage, could have been susceptible to the same problem.

Even if Ford had to debate to reduce the thirty-two point deficit in the polls, why did Carter agree to debate and risk losing that enviable lead? The main reason was that the challenger suffered from lack of name recognition and wanted more Americans to know who he was.²⁹ Although the incumbent governor of Georgia in 1973, Carter was unrecognized when he appeared on *What's My Line?* a television game show in which the object is to detect the contestants' occupations.³⁰ Carter understood that being a Washington outsider while voters were averse to insiders had its advantages, but to the

²⁷ Paul Buhle, "Popular Culture," *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture*, Christopher Brisby (ed.), Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 392-410, 404. Buhle wrote that the promise of a sustained counterculture of youth movements advocating peace yielded to a grimmer, more pragmatic approach by the mid-1970s.

²⁸ Minow, 47.

²⁹ Minow, 48.

³⁰ Pomper, 10.

extent that too much obscurity was more likely a liability than an asset, he needed the debates as well. As a little-known challenger, however, he used the debates, as Kennedy had done in 1960, to show America and the world that he had the gravitas to be the nation's chief executive. Ironically, television both confirmed Carter's anonymity and was the communications medium he relied upon to overcome it.

Carter's and Ford's first debate took place on September 23, 1976.³¹ Ford resonated as presidential, Carter as tentative, and both as listless, which was a perception magnified by a long and unintended period of silence due to a lengthy technical malfunction. Ford prepared by rehearsing, analyzing his own television appearances, and watching footage of the Kennedy-Nixon debates.³² Carter, in contrast, preferred to stay home without any aides present and study the issues.³³ On the day of the debate, however, Carter asked his staff to sit in the panelists' chairs and ask him questions, which he fielded from the podium, to get a genuine feeling for the event.³⁴ Determined not to reenact Nixon's sickly appearance in 1960, a lighting expert was hired for both candidates.³⁵ Those meticulous pre-debate preparations underscored both debaters' appreciation for the pivotal role that the debates could play in the race.

Carter shrewdly downplayed high expectations of a successful performance, proclaiming that he fully expected Ford, the incumbent president and a twenty-seven-year veteran of Washington, to know considerably more about both domestic and

³¹ Carter-Ford Debate 1, September 23, 1976, C-SPAN, retrieved on April 10, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33353-1>.

³² David Nyhan, "How Ford Prepared," *Boston Globe*, September 23, 1976, 1.

³³ Curtis Wilkie, "How Carter Prepared," *Boston Globe*, September 23, 1976, 1.

³⁴ Anonymous. "TV Cameras Don't Capture Scene around Debaters," *New York Times*, October 23, 1976, 12.

³⁵ Nyhan.

foreign policy than he did.³⁶ To the extent that he could hold his own with the president, Carter added, he would consider it a victory.³⁷ That was another important “first” in presidential debate history: manifesting low expectations in order to exceed them and high expectations for the opponent to fail to meet. That debates can serve as the vehicles through which candidates can be measured as compared to pre-debate expectations is another important reason why debates matter.

The nonpartisan League of Women Voters (LWV) sponsored the debate. The LWV was founded in 1920, which was the same year women were guaranteed the right to vote.³⁸ Since the time of its founding, in furtherance of its mission to encourage women to take their new responsibilities as voters seriously by helping to shape public policy, the LMV organized local, state, and national debates.³⁹ Edwin Newman of *NBC News*, who was known for his fairness and accuracy as a journalist, served as the debate’s moderator.⁴⁰ Newman joined a panel of three journalists: Frank Reynolds of *ABC News*, James Gannon of the *Wall Street Journal*, and Elizabeth Drew of the *New Yorker*, who, as the first female debate panelist further underscored how far the influence of women in American politics had progressed since 1960.

Neither candidate was given the opportunity to make an opening statement. The challenger immediately seized the offensive, and attacked the nation’s high unemployment statistics and the lowest rate of productive capacity since the Great

³⁶ Alan Schroeder, *Presidential Debates: Fifty Years of High-Risk TV*, 2nd Ed., New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008, 106.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Minow, 166.

³⁹ *Ibid.* Though it had organized numerous other national debates in previous years, the first debate that LWV sponsored was in 1976; League of Women Voters website, retrieved on November 23, 2013, <http://www.lwv.org/history>.

⁴⁰ Reuters, September 15, 2010, retrieved on March 29, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/assets/print?aid=USN1519575920100915>.

Depression.⁴¹ Ford resisted becoming defensive and instead emphasized that Carter was not specific about any proposed solutions, which was a theme that he used against Carter consistently.⁴²

It became evident early in the debate that both candidates were well-prepared to respond to complex questions substantively, and usually without hesitation. From an aesthetic perspective, however, both debaters were lacking. Carter sounded as if he was mumbling, and was hard to understand, while Ford, in turn, spoke awkwardly, slowly, and loudly.⁴³

Carter seized the populist mantle and portrayed Ford as the candidate of the elite establishment. Far from being an elitist, Ford had trouble getting into the US Capitol building when first elected to Congress because he showed up in overalls in order to clean his office.⁴⁴ Even when president, he was known to cook his own meals.⁴⁵ Carter exclaimed that “[t]he present tax system is a disgrace to this country; it’s just a welfare program for the rich.”⁴⁶ However, the reality that Ford was somewhat of a populist and that Carter was a prosperous peanut farmer paled against the debate images the candidates conveyed, some of which were intentional, while others were not.

About a third into the debate, Reynolds raised the inevitable topic of the Nixon pardon, which Ford defended, maintaining that in order to be able to devote 100 percent of his time to solving inflation amid a recession, and dealing with the United States’

⁴¹ Carter-Ford 1. Challengers have often used the debates to compare the economy under their incumbent opponents’ administrations to the Great Depression, which spanned the 1930s and caused unemployment to rise as high as 25 percent nationwide. For more discussion the Great Depression’s effect on unemployment, see Ben S. Bernanke, (ed.), *Essays on the Great Depression*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Schroeder, 140.

⁴⁴ Brinkley, 14.

⁴⁵ Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy, *The Presidents Club*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2012, 302.

⁴⁶ Carter-Ford 1.

continued involvement in Vietnam, he needed the Nixon debacle to simply go away once and for all.⁴⁷ For the good of the country, Ford proclaimed, he had to pardon Nixon. But then, in a risky maneuver, Ford insisted that by resigning in such a humiliating fashion, Nixon had already suffered enough. Ford implied that Nixon had paid for his transgressions and there was no need to inflict any more punishment on him.⁴⁸

Ford's contention that solving inflation, the recession, and Vietnam were far more important uses of a president's time than to satisfy the American public's appetite for retribution against Nixon, might have resonated more effectively without this contentious claim. The nation was still dealing with the Watergate aftershock and was not particularly ready to accept that a president on the verge of impeachment and conviction who had not even spent one night in jail as a result, had "suffered enough." Ford's poor choice of words possibly reopened that recent wound and reminded the voters why they veered away from him after the Nixon pardon, when they had trusted and admired him early on.⁴⁹ Ford, to his own detriment, cultivated his image as a Nixon apologist.

During the next round of questions, Carter boasted about the economic successes during the previous two Democratic administrations, Kennedy's and Johnson's, and how the Republican Nixon and Ford Administrations fared much less favorably by comparison.⁵⁰ Then, in one of his sharpest attacks against Ford, Carter sarcastically

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Gallup Poll, retrieved on September 27, 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx> A Gallup Poll taken before and after the Nixon pardon showed that Ford's approval rating dropped from 71 percent to under 50 percent and continued to fall.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* The misery index exacerbated under Carter's presidency, and Ronald Reagan used that against him in their 1980 debate.

quipped: “He’s learned how to match unemployment with inflation. That’s right. We’ve got the highest inflation we’ve had in twenty-five years right now, and...the highest unemployment since the Great Depression.”⁵¹ The debates, then, crystallized two images: tying Ford to Nixon and Carter to Kennedy and Johnson. In the early post-Watergate period, being associated with the latter was more politically advantageous.

Reynolds then followed up astutely with a question asking whether Ford would be prepared to work with a Democratic Congress from 1977 forward, and Ford replied effectively by pointing out that the American people want a Republican president to check Congress’ power. In arguably his most biting attack on Ford, Carter retorted that if Ford was going to hold him responsible for the Democratic Congress, of which he was not a part, then Carter, in turn, would hold Ford responsible “for the Nixon Administration in its entirety, of which he was a part [emphasis added].” Carter noted that: “except for avoiding another Watergate, [Ford] has not accomplished one single major program for this country.” Adopting the same type of forceful strategy that Kennedy used in his final debate with Nixon, Carter assumed the role of aggressor.

The evening’s final question proved to be the highlight, not because of its nature, but because of what transpired. Drew asked Ford what he would do as president to establish laws to govern the FBI and other intelligence agencies better, rather than to leave their operation to the discretion of the particular president in office at the time. Ford responded that he was the first president in thirty years to reorganize intelligence agencies in the federal government, and that his administration took steps in the right direction to ensure proper operations of those agencies.

⁵¹ Carter-Ford 1. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

Carter's response began: "[W]ell, one of the very serious things that's happened in our government in recent years, and has continued up until now, is the trust among people in the – " and then, complete silence. The debate's audio system failed.

The sound malfunctioned during the seventy-ninth minute; 88 percent of the debate was completed. All that remained was Carter's rebuttal, which was abruptly interrupted by the failed system before he finished his first sentence, and the closing statements. Until the broadcasters could provide that additional ten minutes of time, however, the moderator, the panelists, millions of television viewers in the United States and throughout the world, as well as the candidates themselves, who remained at their podiums stoically throughout the unplanned intermission, had to wait twenty-seven minutes for the problem to be resolved. The malfunction depicted the impact of television in a different light – a negative one. Had the candidates debated in front of a live audience with no sound to rely upon but that of their own voices, as politicians did before television and radio, then they would not have been placed in awkward and compromising positions resulting from failed technology.

In hindsight, Carter had twenty-seven minutes, an eternity by live television standards, to prepare an impassioned and highly effective rebuttal to the final question of the evening, which had been about regulating the intelligence agencies. Instead, after the debate resumed, he merely added the following: "There has been too much government secrecy and not enough respect for the personal privacy of American citizens."⁵²

It is entirely possible that Carter had already thought well beyond that question, which

⁵² Anonymous, "Faulty Amplifier Caused Silence," United Press International, September 25, 1976. Carter joked that because his remark right before the glitch was a criticism of the FBI and the CIA, those agencies pulled the plug on the debate.

on the whole did not seem especially compelling compared to inflation, unemployment, and the Nixon pardon, and simply used the spare time to hone his closing statements. But Carter did not utilize his advantage. After all, Ford had the same amount of time to think about perfecting his closing statement, too. If Carter mounted a final offensive against Ford in a rebuttal to the final question, Ford would be forced to do one of two things: pay little if any attention to the rebuttal, or spend a significant portion of his closing remarks addressing it. Either way, Ford would be in a predicament. If Carter's rebuttal were effective, Ford would look weak and unprepared if he simply shied away from it. If Ford mounted an equally potent counterattack, however, he squandered precious time from his overall closing statement discussing regulating intelligence agencies, rather than the issues in which most of the voters were interested. Accordingly, by limiting his response to merely eighteen words after twenty-seven minutes to think about it, Carter let Ford escape unscathed.

Perhaps timing had a lot to do with why Carter's failure to capitalize on Ford's disadvantage was not received negatively because the public was weary of Watergate and the political indecency it represented. By not exploiting an advantage obtained serendipitously by the technical malfunction, Carter, albeit inadvertently, evoked an image of integrity.

Years later, both Carter and Ford reminisced about the undeniably awkward period of silence near the end of that first debate between them. Carter acknowledged how embarrassing it was to watch Ford and himself virtually glued to their respective podiums, appearing to be robots.⁵³ Ford, in turn, attributed his and Carter's reticence to stepping away from the stage as nervousness, and so that they would not appear to the national

⁵³ Schroeder, 210.

audience as in any way ill-prepared, physically or mentally, to endure whatever unexpected circumstances had arisen.⁵⁴ The candidates were virtual prisoners to the technology of television, a medium that was being implemented for only the fifth time in a presidential debate.

The seemingly endless media malfunction served as a reminder that although the technology and its use had improved since 1960 – for instance, the panelists were no longer shown with the backs of their heads to the camera – the media clearly had not prepared for such a calamity. From then on, however, television broadcasters were more prepared for every subsequent debate.⁵⁵ With tremendous emphasis on caution, the crews have extra cameras on hand, and the candidates speak into multiple microphones.⁵⁶ These preventive measures underscored the impact of television on the debates, and the evolution of the medium through lessons learned from painful experiences.

Post-debate analysis was replete with Kennedy-Nixon comparisons. Jim Squires of the *Chicago Tribune* concluded that neither candidate came across as impressively as Kennedy had, but neither looked physically poor, as Nixon had.⁵⁷ Squires wrote another piece two days later, summarizing viewers' notions that the debate was dreadfully boring and the nation deserved better presidential candidates.⁵⁸ Perhaps because television was in great part associated with entertainment, viewers held debaters to a standard that demanded them to be not just informative, but also entertaining.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Split-scre

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Jim Squires, "Carter and Ford Spar to 'No Decision,'" *Chicago Tribune*, September 24, 1976, C14.

⁵⁸ Squires, "The Great Debate: How Many Viewers Stayed Awake?" *Chicago Tribune*, September 26, 1976, 18. One respondent remarked that panelist Frank Reynolds was the only one in the room who looked like a president."

Mike Barnicle, a *Boston Globe* columnist, was even harsher, wishing that the sound malfunction occurred at the start of the debate to spare the viewers the anguish of having to sit through it.⁵⁹ That newspaper's editorial page called the debate "dismally dull," and described the candidates as "[s]tiff, rehearsed, and unrevealing."⁶⁰ The *Los Angeles Times* cleverly titled its editorial "Finally, the Caboose," likening the debate to an endless string of cars on a freight train with no caboose in sight.⁶¹ Though neither candidate delivered a memorable performance, perhaps the lack of luster was intensified by the debaters' behavior during the silence. By standing virtually motionless rather than, say, walking around, smiling, joking with the panelists, or even having a friendly conversation with one another, Carter and Ford underscored the blandness of the entire evening. That each mirrored the other so well, as if their motionlessness had been choreographed and rehearsed, perhaps served as an unintentional reminder about how evenly-matched they were.

Neither candidate mounted or absorbed a formidable attack, but Ford was the one who gained momentum. The Associated Press reported that the president had a good showing in the debate and narrowed the gap against Carter.⁶² The Gallup Poll showed more viewers declaring Ford was the victor.⁶³ The *Washington Post* reported that another poll gave Ford an edge in the debate.⁶⁴ Yet another poll, taken in Chicago, showed Ford to be the winner. Interestingly, the article about that poll was written by

⁵⁹ Mike Barnicle, "Ford Won it on Points, But Who was Listening?" *Boston Globe*, September 24, 1976, 21.

⁶⁰ Editorial, "The Debate," *Boston Globe*, September 26, 1976.

⁶¹ Editorial, "Finally, the Caboose," *Los Angeles Times*, September 26, 1976. The editorial described the 27-minute period of sound malfunction as an escape from the mundane.

⁶² Anonymous, "Carter-Ford Gap Closing, Poll Shows," Associated Press, September 25, 1976.

⁶³ Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang, "Immediate and Delayed Responses to a Carter-Ford Debate: Assessing Public Opinion," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 42 No. 3 (1978), 322-341, 340.

⁶⁴ Anonymous, "Ford Given Slight Edge in Poll after Debate," *Washington Post*, September 24, 1976, 15. The poll, conducted by the Roper Organization, indicated that 39 percent thought Ford had prevailed, 31 percent chose Carter, and 30 percent were undecided.

David Axelrod, who became a chief advisor to two Democratic presidents, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama.⁶⁵ It is particularly telling that Axelrod, a lifelong Democratic activist, wrote that Ford, a Republican, prevailed in the debate.

Robert Healy of the *Boston Globe* summed it up best in his column's title: "Ford Plays President and Wins Round One."⁶⁶ One of the better indicators of its immediate impact was polling that suggested fifty-five percent of the voters were undecided, prior to the start of the debate, but by the time the debate ended, only ten percent still remained undecided; of the remainder thirty-five percent gravitated to Ford and only ten percent to Carter.⁶⁷ Because Carter had a commanding lead in the polls through the summer and into the fall, however, even a significant post-debate boost did not cause Ford to pull even.

As political communication scholar Gavi Wolfsteld wrote, the media is predominantly controlled by those in power.⁶⁸ To the extent, then, that the incumbent has greater influence over the media than does the challenger, debates, by providing equal time to each candidate, could play a role as a great equalizer for challengers. Television, helped Ford establish (or reestablish) his presidential image, while Carter, though he did nothing to damage his candidacy directly, might have done so by omission, that is, by failing to measure up to the standards of a candidate in whom the voters had entrusted a thirty-two point lead in the polls.

Because of the millions of viewers it attracted for the debate, television was even more catalytic in shaping the debate by its technological breakdown, leaving the

⁶⁵ David Axelrod, "Reaction in Chicago Shows Ford the Winner," *Chicago Tribune*, September 24, 1976, 5.

⁶⁶ Robert Healy, "Ford Plays President and Wins Round One," *Boston Globe*, September 24, 1976, 1.

⁶⁷ Axelrod.

⁶⁸ Gavi Wolfsteld, *Making Sense of Media and Politics*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2011, 23.

candidates soundless and awkwardly frozen at the podium. If they spoke individually to small audiences, it is difficult to imagine that they would remain completely still, standing on stage, while the crews worked on the problem, rather than step down and return once sound had been restored. As it was a live event, a face-to-face competition, and one viewed by millions around the country and the world, the image they sought to project became that much more vital, and so neither of them dared take the risk to step away, even from an inoperable microphone.

The second debate was held on October 6 in San Francisco, but, unlike the first, without technical malfunctions. Here, though, Ford made a monumental misstatement that defined the remainder of the debate season, if not the election. Pauline Frederick of National Public Radio was the moderator. The first woman to moderate a presidential debate, Frederick was less known for political ideology than for her pioneering role in and advocacy for women in journalism.⁶⁹ In 1976, women comprised only a fraction of all journalists in major roles, a prime example being *Newsweek's* masthead, which was comprised of three times as many men as women.⁷⁰ That a woman was selected to head as prominent a national media phenomenon as a debate was indicative of the impending narrowing of the gender gap in American media over the ensuing three decades. The panelists were Max Frankel of the *New York Times*, Henry L. Trewhitt of the *Baltimore Sun*, and Richard Valeriani of *NBC News*.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Louise Benjamin, *Pauline Frederick*, The Museum of Broadcast Communications, retrieved on March 30, 2012, <http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=frederickpa>. Frederick remained understated in the debate, not drawing any attention away from the candidates.

⁷⁰ Susan Antilla, "Why Do Women Still Lag in Journalism," *CNN*, September 18, 2012, retrieved on November 17, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/18/opinion/antilla-women-journalists>. Antilla wrote that even though the proportion of women in major media roles has increased since the 1970s, men still comprise a clear majority.

⁷¹ Carter-Ford Debate 2, October 6, 1976, C-SPAN, retrieved on April 19, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33210-1>.

Ford entered the debate with a purported double advantage, not only from the momentum of the first debate, but also because the second debate focused on foreign policy, an area where he had superior hands-on experience.⁷² On the other hand, Carter was expected to attack Ford's record on international affairs and to question whether Ford, or his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, was really in charge of his administration's foreign policy.⁷³ If Carter tried to criticize Ford about Vietnam, the president could effectively counter that he had not started the war, but he did end it, and the nation was at peace.⁷⁴

Carter began by portraying the Nixon-Ford approach to foreign policy as all style and no substance.⁷⁵ Next, Carter struck a powerful blow to Ford's image by proclaiming that in terms of foreign policy, Kissinger was the president of the United States and that Ford showed an absence of leadership.⁷⁶ Essentially, Carter planted the seed in voters' minds that Ford was an amateur in foreign affairs and was in over his head. Ford was never quite seen as the foreign policy giant that Nixon was, and when the latter visited China during Ford's presidency, the world's eyes were on Nixon as if he, despite his scandal-ridden presidency, was perceived as America's senior statesman.⁷⁷ Not even Carter himself could have realized just how prophetic that opening statement was, given a grave and unforgettable error that Ford made later in the debate, which became the 1976 debate season's most damaging mistake.

⁷² Squires, "Debate No. 2: Can 'Sominex Twins' Wake the Nation?" *Chicago Tribune*, October 6, 1976, 2.

⁷³ Bernard Gwertzman, "Ford Foreign Policy Record and Kissinger Expected to Be Central Themes in Debate," *New York Times*, October 6, 1976, 24. The article predicted, correctly, that Carter contended that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, rather than Ford, was in charge of foreign policy.

⁷⁴ Mary McGrory, "The Great Debates, Round 2," *Chicago Tribune*, October 6, 1976, B4. On April 23, 1975, Ford declared an end to the United States' involvement in Vietnam.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Gibbs, 317. Ford believed that his reelection campaign was damaged by international footage depicting the warm welcome Nixon received in Beijing.

The president seemed irritated by Carter's accusations. "Let me tell you this straight from the shoulder," Ford proclaimed – in a strong and sure voice, sounding folksy yet looking very presidential in his three-piece suit, "[y]ou don't negotiate with Mr. [Soviet Leader Leonid] Brezhnev from weakness."⁷⁸ The response that haunted Ford for the rest of the campaign, however, resulted from Frankel's seemingly innocuous question about Soviet Communism's success. Citing some of his administration's achievements, including a summit with Brezhnev in Vladivostok and the lucrative profitability of selling grain to the Soviet Union, Ford plainly said: "there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and there never will be under a Ford administration."⁷⁹

Apparently stunned by Ford's response, Frankel rushed to follow up: "did I understand you to say, sir, that the Russians are not using Eastern Europe as their own sphere of influence in occupying most of the countries there and in making sure with their troops that it's a communist zone?" Seeming completely unfazed by the apparent blunder that he had made moments earlier, Ford continued:

"I don't believe, uh- Mr. Frankel that uh – the Yugoslavians consider themselves dominated by the Soviet Union. I don't believe that the Rumanians consider themselves dominated by the Soviet Union. I don't believe that the Poles consider themselves dominated by the Soviet Union. Each of those countries is independent, autonomous: it has its own territorial integrity and the United States does not concede that those countries are under the domination of the Soviet Union. As a matter of fact, I visited Poland, Yugoslavia and Rumania to make certain that the people of those countries understood that the president of the United States and the people of the United States are dedicated to their independence, their autonomy and their freedom."

Carter, in turn, did not seize the opportunity to capitalize on Ford's colossal error. His only response to the president's comment was: "I would like to see Mr. Ford convince

⁷⁸ Leonid Brezhnev was the leader of the Soviet Union at the time.

⁷⁹ Ford's comment was widely perceived as a colossal error because Eastern Europe was in fact under Soviet rule until shortly before the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. For more discussion on this topic, see Serge Schmemmann, *When the Wall Came Down*, Boston, MA: Kingfisher, 2006.

the Polish-Americans and the Czech-Americans and the Hungarian-Americans in this country that those countries don't live under the domination and supervision of the Soviet Union behind the Iron Curtain." As Carter began the debate by contending that Ford lacked an appropriate grasp of American foreign policy, and that Kissinger was the *de facto* president vis-à-vis foreign affairs, it was an opportune time to refer to Ford's apparent error as a prime example of the president's lack of understanding of the world stage and, implicitly, his inability to function on it. As in the first debate, the post-Watergate nation, weary of political polemics, might have perceived Carter's reluctance to exploit Ford's mistake as an act of decency rather than a sign of weakness. Carter, therefore, could convey a positive image even as Ford, through his own words, perpetuated a negative one.

Carter argued that Democrats were better than Republicans at handling the economy, and Ford responded defensively, with his tone of voice indicating irritation. In the 1960 debates, Nixon never appeared flustered or irritated, despite other concerns about his demeanor.

Carter gave his closing remarks in a higher-pitched voice, one that at times seemed to evoke more passion than his usual monotonous and somewhat incomprehensible drawl. He challenged the nation to be a beacon for nations that strive for peace and freedom, and basic human rights. He stated that America's strength should not be comprised of bombast and threats, but ought to be a quiet strength based on integrity, founded in Constitutional principles, and "an innate strong will and purpose that God's given us in the greatest nation on earth – the United States." In contrast, Ford's closing remarks were notably brief and unremarkable. He continued to emphasize his

experience as president, but this was diminished whenever he referred to “the last two years,” which underscored his brief tenure in office.⁸⁰ Ford appeared irritated and defensive throughout the debate, and time revealed how his campaign fared as a result of those unforgettable eight words that he uttered: “there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe.”⁸¹

Jimmy Carter was “looser, leaner, and meaner,” wrote George Skelton of the *Los Angeles Times*.⁸² Carter acknowledged that he had been nervous for the first debate, but had emerged to think of Ford as equal, not superior, by the time of the second.⁸³ The *Wall Street Journal* described Carter as much-improved: tougher, confident, and with sharper rhetoric.⁸⁴ Ford, in turn, came across as overly defensive.⁸⁵

In the 1960 debates, Nixon, too, became more forceful in the second debate than he had been in the first, but, unlike Carter, he had an image problem (physical appearance) to overcome. In the second Carter-Ford debate, however, Carter’s newfound assertiveness was magnified by Ford’s “Eastern Europe” gaffe. In fact, that was the biggest factor of the debate. Recapturing the moment he failed to seize during the debate, Carter subsequently referred to the remark as “ridiculous.”⁸⁶ Carter particularly hoped that Ford’s remark would harm him with voters in major cities with large

⁸⁰ Carter-Ford 2. Had Ford said “my presidency” instead of “the last two years,” it probably would have sounded like a longer and more influential period of time.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² George Skelton, “If Looks Could Kill, Debate Was a Tie,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 7, 1976, 1. Skelton focused on how the candidates leered at each other on-camera.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Anonymous, “Ford vs. Carter II,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 7, 1976, 2.

⁸⁵ Curtis Wilkie, “Aides Celebrate Carter ‘Home Run,’” *Boston Globe*, October 7, 1976, 20; David Nyhan, “President Emerges on Defensive from Second Debate,” *Boston Globe*, October 8, 1976, 1.

⁸⁶ Anonymous, “Carter Accuses Ford of ‘Ridiculous’ E. Europe Error,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 7, 1976, 1. “If you tore down the Berlin wall,” Carter quipped, “which way would people move?”

populations of Eastern European-Americans, such as Chicago and Milwaukee.⁸⁷ The *Boston Globe's* Croker Snow, Jr. deemed it a "clear-cut" win for Carter, and two national polls both showed Carter as the victor.⁸⁸ Georgetown University Professor Stephen Wayne commented on Ford's remark, characterizing it as a "misstatement."⁸⁹

Wayne noted that because Carter did not persist in attacking Ford's comment immediately, then the general public did not react to it either. When the media made an issue of it, however, Ford suffered even more in the polls.⁹⁰ As the press continued to emphasize Ford's gaffe, the percentage of viewers who thought that Ford won the debate dropped from 31 percent to a mere 19 percent, whereas those who thought Carter had won climbed from 44 percent to 61 percent, a staggering three-to-one margin.⁹¹ Much like Nixon's appearance in 1960, Ford's misstep became an issue that the media held onto and repeated for weeks, to the respective candidate's detriment.

Ford's gaffe was perhaps even more damaging than Nixon's appearance. One was simply based on poor makeup and lighting, but the other strongly suggested that the president of the United States was not aware of the political conditions in Eastern Europe, which was a tougher obstacle to overcome. It was the media, then, Wayne argued, that created the impression that Ford did not know as much about foreign policy as he should, but it was the debate itself that exposed Ford's blunder in the first place, providing the media, in turn, with the opportunity to react.

⁸⁷ Squires, "Aroused Candidates May Have Awakened the Voters," *Chicago Tribune*, October 7, 1976, 2; Wilkie, "Carter Pounces and Ford Retreats on East Europe Remark," *Boston Globe*, October 7, 1976; James Naughton, "Carter Assails Ford on Serious Blunder," *New York Times*, October 8, 1976.

⁸⁸ Crocker Snow, Jr., "It's Carter on a Clear-Cut Decision," *Boston Globe*, October 7, 1976, 23; David E. Rosenbaum, "Polls Show More Viewers Rate Carter as Winner of 2d Debate," *New York Times*, October 8, 1976, 10.

⁸⁹ C-SPAN interview with Stephen Wayne regarding the October 6, 1976 Carter-Ford debate. C-SPAN, April 19, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33210-1>

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

The near-constant airing of Ford's remark is a prime example of the impact television played vis-à-vis the debates, as the medium was able to multiply viewership of debate footage, not only by transmitting anywhere in the United States, but also in doing so repeatedly. If the debate audience was limited to live attendees then the damage to Ford's campaign probably would have been a fraction of what it turned out to be. Political gaffes made in the age of television are apt to have a more significant impact than those made in the days before that medium became a standard item in homes across the United States.

Walter Mondale and Bob Dole, Carter's and Ford's running mates, respectively, were the first to assume the role of "henchmen" in the debates. The president and the challenger could only go so far in terms of attacking each other. The exalted position for which they vied required a certain amount of decorum. Their running mates, however, were free to muddle in the fray, to a certain extent. On the eve of the debate, Dole was glum, primarily because his proposed criticism of Carter's lack of expertise on the issues had been neutralized by Ford's Eastern Europe comment.⁹² Mondale described Dole as being in a tough position, having to defend Ford's gaffe, and in doing so was able to appear sympathetic, while reminding the voters about the Ford campaign's weakened position.⁹³

That first ever vice presidential debate was held on October 15, in Houston, Texas.⁹⁴ In the end, Dole played the henchman role more forcefully, but Mondale's civility

⁹² Rachelle Patterson, "Dole's Enthusiasm Wanes as Ticket Suffers Setbacks," *Boston Globe*, October 15, 1976, 10. Dole became dejected shortly after the debate, accepting that the campaign was in a slump.

⁹³ Linda Charlton, "Mondale Sees Opponent in a Tough Position as Apologist for Ford," *New York Times*, October 15, 1976. Mondale said he planned to press Ford's vulnerabilities, namely, the Eastern Europe gaffe and the ailing economy, during the debate.

⁹⁴ Quemoy

prevailed. James Hoge of the *Chicago Sun-Times* moderated, and explained to the audience that a debate between vice presidential hopefuls is important not only because of their potential role as vice president, but because they might have to serve as president.⁹⁵ A seasoned journalist, editor, and historian, Hoge has written for numerous liberal and conservative publications on domestic and foreign affairs.⁹⁶

Hoge reminded the viewers that three of the previous five presidents became president due to the death or resignation of their predecessor.⁹⁷ The panelists consisted of Hal Bruno of *Newsweek*, Marilyn Berger of *NBC News*, who was the third female member of the press in as many debates – and Walter Mears of the Associated Press. As the candidates stood at their respective podiums, the chairs placed behind them were plainly visible. Much like Carter and Ford, who barely moved during the twenty-seven-minute sound delay in their first debate, their running mates persevered through the entire ninety-minute session on their feet, with neither participant utilizing the option to sit down, perhaps in an attempt to convey strength and vigor.⁹⁸

Most of the estimated eighty-five million viewers in America and throughout the world did not notice Dole's physical disability. As a result of combat wounds suffered during World War II, Dole's right arm was paralyzed.⁹⁹ As a signal that he could not shake hands with his right hand, Dole often carried a pen in it. Eventually, he kept a pen in his

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Council on Foreign Relations, retrieved on March 30, 2012, <http://www.cfr.org/experts/national-security-and-defense/james-f-hoge-jr/b6800>

⁹⁷ Mondale-Dole. Actually, Hoge was mistaken, because if he meant the five presidents prior to Ford, they were: Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon. Only Truman and Johnson, two of the five, became president in that manner. Had Hoge meant the past five presidents *including* Ford, then Johnson and Ford would have been only two, not three, of the five. In any case, Hoge's point certainly illustrated that, statistically, it was not far-fetched to assume that one of the evening's two debaters, Mondale or Dole, could conceivably become president at some point during the ensuing four years.

⁹⁸ For more discussion about greater perception of power when speaking while standing rather than sitting, see Carol Kinsey Gorman, *The Silent Language of Leaders, How Body Language Can Help – or Hurt – How You Lead*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2011.

⁹⁹ Schroeder, 217.

right hand during most public appearances, including the debate. At times, he removed the pen from his right hand with his left hand, with which he sometimes took notes during Mondale's comments. Other than those who were aware of Dole's paralysis ahead of time, only the most astute observers might have noticed it. Dole was the first major party debate participant with a visible disability, and, as there were no close-ups of his immobile hand or the pen contained in it, the issue remained irrelevant. It is important to note, however, that the issue's irrelevance might have been because the disability was camouflaged – as Franklin Roosevelt's politically successful radio Fireside Chats did not reveal the image of the president in a wheelchair – rather than that physical disabilities did not matter to the nation.

A far more glaring phenomenon about Dole was his face. He had jet black hair that was combed back, dark, curved eyebrows, a relatively deep voice, and a very serious, dignified and distinguished demeanor. In short, Dole conjured images of the man from whom Ford needed to disassociate, Richard Nixon. In his campaign, Ford did not need any connection to Nixon by having a Nixon look-alike for a running mate, and the constant visual image stamped on television was not an advantage for him.

In contrast, Mondale seemed earnest, approachable, and compassionate. For a campaign based on openness, honesty, putting people first, and fresh-faced outsiders cleaning up the corruption and deception in Washington, Mondale certainly looked and sounded the part. In his opening remarks, Mondale talked about caring and about leadership, but he was also a strong opponent against Dole. Mondale mounted an offensive, citing unacceptable levels of inflation and unemployment under Ford's leadership. This was the first of many vice presidential debates to follow, and set the

tone as being more freewheeling and caustic than the debates between the ticket headliners.

Dole began on the attack, labeling Mondale as “probably the most liberal senator in the United States Senate,” and pointing out that Mondale voted for every spending proposal except for defense, for which he always voted for reductions.¹⁰⁰ Dole’s opening had a double effect: first, its acerbic elements established the henchman effect, and second, by portraying Mondale as far to the left, Dole attempted to neutralize any increased electability Carter may have attained by developing a political image as a centrist.¹⁰¹

Bruno asked Dole whether he planned to be a meaningful vice president, or, as former Vice President Nelson Rockefeller once said about the job, “standby equipment.”¹⁰² Dole responded with a joke that prompted some laughter from the audience: “[W]ell, it’s indoor work and no heavy lifting.” Turning confrontational, Dole said that he hoped Mondale would not pattern his reorganization efforts after Carter’s record as governor of Georgia, and then, apparently comfortable in the henchman role, proceeded to discredit Carter’s governorship. Mears placed Dole in a difficult position by reminding him that he disagreed with Ford having vetoed so many Congressional bills. In responding, Dole confirmed that he disagreed with Ford on occasion and even voted

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Larry Bartels, “Americans are More Conservative than They Have Been in Decades,” *Washington Post*, September 30, 2013, retrieved on January 3, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2013/09/30/americans-are-more-conservative-than-they-have-been-in-decades/>. Bartels described a rightward political shift in America in the 1970s.

¹⁰² Mondale-Dole. Upon becoming president, Ford appointed Nelson Rockefeller vice president. Rockefeller served until the end of Ford’s term (which was actually the remainder of Richard Nixon’s second term). Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

against him, but did not vote against Ford nearly as often as Mondale did.¹⁰³ Dole went on to praise Ford's vetoes as courageous. Essentially, Dole could not very well deny that he voted against Ford in the past, nor that he publicly disagreed with him on more than one occasion. By labeling Ford's vetoes, some of which he voted to override, as courageous, Dole may have come across as a double-talking politician. In hindsight, perhaps he would have chosen his words more carefully. Much like a live press conference, though one viewed by a much larger audience, a debate does not present the opportunity to prepare a response. Moreover, the onstage revelation that Dole had voted against Ford's policies on some occasions established another debate first: that running mates who have served as legislators might have publicly disagreed with policies instituted by the ticket headliners with whom they have aligned. Neither Kennedy nor Nixon had that problem in 1960, as there were no vice presidential debates that year.¹⁰⁴

Mondale described the Ford Administration's policy to give large tax breaks to corporations, specifically mentioning that the Ford Motor Corporation earned 800 million dollars without paying a dime to the federal government in tax. That Ford the company and Ford the president share the same name was purely coincidental. Nonetheless, Mondale's name-dropping of a corporation that made hundreds of millions without paying any taxes, and which also happened to have the same name as the president of the United States, might have sent a symbolic or even a subliminal message to the average taxpayer. Did some viewers actually believe that President Ford was somehow

¹⁰³ By responding that he had more in common with his running mate than his opponent did, Dole posited a rather weak counterargument.

¹⁰⁴ Mondale, although a senator, had no measurable record of public disagreement with Carter, as Carter had not been part of the federal government at that point.

connected to the Ford Motor Corporation? Whether Mondale's mentioning of the Ford company was purely random or well-calculated is immaterial; ultimately, it would only matter if the viewers made that association.

Dole's remarks sounded increasingly haphazard. He responded to Mondale's references to the Ford company by mentioning that the company's head, Henry Ford, was supporting Carter in the election, and then without a segue awkwardly shifted to discuss peace: "Governor Carter had a little meeting with [Henry Ford] at the Twenty-One club, had some small business men there, and said don't worry about taxes, I won't be doing anything for at least a year. We have peace in this country. That's important to me[.]" To the extent that incumbents have an advantage to the extent that they are perceived as being more experienced than challengers, when their arguments appear disorganized or disconnected in debates, they may lose that advantage.

Berger then asked Dole what was arguably the most loaded question of the evening, which was regarding Ford's intention to retain Henry Kissinger as secretary of state which, Berger added, contradicted the Republican platform. Sounding more like an aggressive beat reporter than a debate panelist, Berger then asked Dole: "Which way do you go, Senator Dole, with President Ford or with the Republican platform?" To his credit, Dole immediately replied: "I go with both and stay with Henry." Dole then defended Kissinger's record, and said that although he disagreed with Kissinger on occasion, he reflected on all the great things that the secretary of state did for America. He compared Kissinger to other powerful and independent-minded secretaries of state, such as Thomas Jefferson and Dean Acheson, who served Presidents Washington and Truman, respectively. Perhaps to some extent, Dole's answer inadvertently reinforced

Carter's remarks early in the second debate, that Kissinger was the *de facto* president of the United States when it came to foreign policy. Nonetheless, Dole augmented an argument that was very difficult to minimize and counter: the United States, under Ford's leadership, was at peace. Along with prosperity, peace traditionally ranks as one of the two most significant criteria in determining an incumbent president's likelihood of reelection.¹⁰⁵ The question underscored a disadvantage of incumbency in vice presidential debates: placing a sitting or aspiring vice president in the awkward position of having to disagree with the incumbent president – just as the panelists did to Nixon in 1960 regarding his policy differences with Eisenhower over Quemoy and Matsu.

Inevitably, it was only a matter of time until someone brought up Ford's Eastern Europe comment. Mondale remained calm and poised in answering a question that he undoubtedly must have anticipated and practiced answering during his debate preparations. He characterized Ford's mistake as one of the most outrageous statements made by a president in recent history. Mondale also wondered why it took Ford six days before he apologized for his mistake.¹⁰⁶ Mondale avoided addressing the tough part of the question, about what Carter would do if an Eastern European nation revolted against the Soviet Union. Dole continued his defensive stance, acknowledging that Ford had made a mistake, but encouraging the people to look at Ford's record rather than the rhetoric surrounding the gaffe.

¹⁰⁵ For more discussion about how the message of peace and prosperity has been used successfully to win reelection or to unseat incumbent presidents, see Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, 3rd Ed., New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996.

¹⁰⁶ Originally, Ford remained insistent that he had not misspoken. See Rudy Abramson, "President Defends His Dominance Comment," *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 1976, 1; David Nylan, "Ford Admits He Spoke Imprecisely," *Boston Globe*, October 9, 1976, 1. After much confusion, Ford said he regretted that his comments about Eastern Europe may have created a misunderstanding.

Dole sought to capitalize on Carter's decision to grant an interview to *Playboy* magazine. Essentially, the two controversies surrounding Carter's *Playboy* interview were the nature of the magazine itself, as it features numerous photographs of nude women, and that, though a married man, he expressly admitted to having lustful thoughts about other women. Dole then proceeded with sloppily-placed digs at Carter, suggesting that the governor's *Playboy* interview would get him the bunny vote.¹⁰⁷ Seemingly annoyed at Mondale's audacity, Dole quipped that Carter had no foreign policy to speak of, and that while Dole himself had meaningfully interacted with Soviet dissident Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, "maybe [Mondale] shook his hand somewhere."¹⁰⁸

Although Mondale was by no means a particularly gifted speaker, Dole was even less comfortable as a debater, which was another surface-level trait he shared with Nixon. To that end, Mondale reminded the voters not only that Ford pardoned Nixon, but also that Dole himself stood by Nixon up to the very end. In his response, Dole was eminently Nixonian. Amazingly, he referred to Nixon as having been "kicked around." Why he chose the words "kicked around," which reflected Nixon's famous 1962 comment to the media: "you won't have Dick Nixon to kick around anymore," is inexplicable, unless he purposely wanted to keep Nixon's political memory alive and well in himself. Dole portrayed Nixon as a tragic figure deserving of pity, not contempt. He mentioned Nixon's resignation and his wife's stroke, and suggested that Watergate was a dead issue that should be left alone.

Perhaps Dole's biggest mistake of the evening was his comparison of Watergate to the twentieth century wars, insofar as he and Ford were no more responsible for

¹⁰⁷ *Playboy* features photographs of nude models, often referred to as "bunnies."

¹⁰⁸ In waiting to respond to Ford's gaffe rather than mentioning it himself, Mondale avoided appearing to have been an opportunist; Dole, by contrast, seemed defensive and even embittered.

Watergate than Carter and Mondale were for the “Democratic” World War II and the Korean War. Mondale convincingly retorted that Ford had done his job as a “hatchet man” by actually suggesting that the fight against Nazi Germany was a partisan one. Mondale added that he and Carter certainly did not blame Dole for Watergate, but rightfully criticized him for defending Nixon to the very end.

The debate served to reinforce the Carter-Mondale populist appeal, and the Ford-Dole defensiveness about the Republican record. The most notable gaffe was Dole’s remark that the Korean War and World War II were partisan in nature. Mondale later said that at that moment, the election had been decided in his and Carter’s favor.¹⁰⁹ Dole’s disdain for the debates was evident when he sarcastically addressed the crowd as “those of you still tuned in,” implying that many ceased wasting their time paying attention to the debate and changed the channel.¹¹⁰

Dole’s remark turned out to be accurate, as approximately twenty million fewer viewers tuned in to watch his debate against Mondale than watched any of the six presidential debates to that point (four in 1960, two in 1976).¹¹¹ It is also significant, however, in illustrating the difficulty of maintaining a captive television audience. Arguably, voters who travel long distances to attend a live debate are less likely to stand up and leave in the middle of a debate than television viewers at home are likely to change the channel. A candidate’s best (or worst) moments of a debate, then, may be experienced by fewer viewers. That renders the post-debate analysis, which is

¹⁰⁹ Jim Lehrer, *Tension City*, New York, NY: Random House, 2011, 19. Dole speculated that he had caused the ticket irreversible damage, but Mondale was absolutely convinced of it.

¹¹⁰ Schroeder, 69.

¹¹¹ Minow, 153-156. Also see Martin F. Nolan, “Dole, Mondale, Swap Barbs in Debate,” *Boston Globe*, October 16, 1976, 1. Nolan astutely observed that Dole’s “those of you still tuned in remark” also referred to his protest of the debate having been scheduled on a Friday night, which was high school football night in much of the country.

perpetuated in the print and broadcast media, even more significant, and underscores the television debater's need to be an entertainer.

Jon Margolis and Bill Neikirk of the *Chicago Tribune* acknowledged the running mates' henchmen roles, and reported that in an exit poll, more audience members thought that Mondale had won the debate.¹¹² Robert Healy of the *Boston Globe* saw it as a victory for the Democrat as well, writing on that newspaper's front page the day after the debate that in almost every category, Mondale "destroyed" Dole.¹¹³ At that point, it was unclear how much of the decreased viewership was due to the debaters themselves, or whether it was because it was only a vice presidential debate. Subsequent debate seasons, most of which showed a similar trend, confirmed that it had more to do with the latter.¹¹⁴ Dole's resemblance and reference to Nixon, as provided to millions of viewers by television, placed the former president, ironically, in a position to again do damage to the Republican ticket, even though he was nowhere near the debate stage.

In the aftermath of Ford's major blunder about Eastern Europe, and Dole's lesser but nonetheless important error in describing World War II and the Korean War as Democratic conflicts, Ford needed a convincing victory in the final debate to make up ground. A Gallup Poll taken before the final debate showed that Carter had neutralized Ford's momentum and built a comfortable six-point lead over the president.¹¹⁵ The

¹¹² Jon Margolis and Bill Neikirk, "Mondale and Dole – They're No. 2, So They Hit Harder," *Chicago Tribune*, October 16, 1976, 1.

¹¹³ Healy, "No Doubt about it, Mondale Was the Winner," *Boston Globe*, October 16, 1976, 1. Healy opined that Dole did not even appear to be a serious candidate, and that the Ford-Dole ticket was in "grave trouble."

¹¹⁴ 2008 was a notable exception, in which the debate between Joe Biden and Sarah Palin drew a greater television audience than any vice presidential debate in history, and more than that year's presidential debates.

¹¹⁵ David S. Broder, "The Final, Crucial Debate," *Washington Post*, October 22, 1976, 1.

candidates' top advisers warned them that a mishap could cost them the election, which hinted that the final contest might be lower in risk and volatility.¹¹⁶

The final debate took place on October 22 in Williamsburg, Virginia, just eleven days before the election.¹¹⁷ With both candidates a bit too gaffe-conscious, it was mostly a defensive contest. Further evidencing the expanding role of women in American media, Barbara Walters of *ABC News* moderated. Famous for her exclusive interviews and bridging hard news and celebrity features, Walters, who was the fourth woman and second moderator of the 1976 debate season, strove to remain politically detached, as had the previous debate moderators.¹¹⁸ The panelists consisted of syndicated columnist Joseph Kraft, Robert Maynard of the *Washington Post*, and Jack Nelson of the *Los Angeles Times*.¹¹⁹

Particularly blunt, Kraft began the evening's discussion with a question to Ford about what price he expected the American people to have to pay to rebound from the difficult times facing the nation, and followed up by specifically pointing to the simultaneous concerns of rising inflation and unemployment.¹²⁰ Ford's response was rather general, citing the need for "the right vision and the right restraint and the right leadership." In response, Carter, too, was quite general, though he discussed the inequities of the tax system which he argued favored the rich, thereby reinforcing his populist image.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*; Squires, "3d Debate: Last Chance to Err," *Chicago Tribune*, October 22, 1976, 6. Each side's advisers were confident that their candidate could win if they steered clear of any blunder.

¹¹⁷ Carter-Ford Debate 3, October 22, 1976, C-SPAN, retrieved on April 30, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33391-1>.

¹¹⁸ Susan McLeland, *Barbara Walters*, The Museum of Broadcast Communications, retrieved on March 31, 2012, <http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=waltersbarb>. Walters was not only the second woman ever to moderate a debate, but the second of the 1976 campaign. Two of the three presidential debates that year, then, were moderated by women. As had been the case with Pauline Frederick in the second Carter-Ford debate, Walters' gender was not specifically discussed, and did not have any noticeable effect on the debate.

¹¹⁹ Carter-Ford 3.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*.

Maynard then asked Carter why he believed that the voters were so unenthused about the presidential campaign, pointing out that only about half of eligible voters planned to exercise that right.¹²¹ Maynard specifically referred to the debates' low points, which included a focus on Ford's second debate blunder and Carter's infamous interview with *Playboy* magazine.¹²² Carter quickly reminded the viewers about the aftermath of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Watergate, but did not hide from the *Playboy* incident, in which he disclosed to the magazine that he lusted after other women in his heart.¹²³ In fact, true to his testament of openness and honesty, Carter made what seemed like one of the most candid statements of the entire debate season: "[T]he *Playboy* thing has been of very great concern to me. I don't know how to deal with it exactly....[I]n retrospect, from hindsight, I would not have given that interview had I to do it over again."¹²⁴ That blunt, even awkward, honesty, was an antithesis to the Nixon years, and his resignation amid the Watergate scandal. Under different circumstances, a presidential candidate admitting uncertainty might not have been received well by the public, but with the stain of Watergate still fresh on people's minds, it may have been precisely what made Carter electable.

In his defense, Carter mentioned four high-profile individuals who were fellow *Playboy* interviewees: prominent journalists Walter Cronkite and William Buckley, California Governor Jerry Brown, and Ford's own treasury secretary, Albert Schweitzer. Carter distinguished himself from Ford's campaign, vowing to remain above board and

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Anonymous, "Playboy Interview – Jimmy Carter," *Playboy*, Volume 23 No. 11 (November 1976), 85; Squires, "The Great Debate, How Many Viewers Stayed Awake," *Chicago Tribune*, September 26, 1976, 18. One observer quipped after the first debate, that "I lust in my heart for a better candidate than these two."

¹²⁴ Carter –Ford 3. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

not to personally attack Ford's character as, he asserted, Ford's people were doing to him.

In response, Ford acknowledged that Americans were disenchanted by politics because of Vietnam and Watergate, neither of which should be attributed to him. Ford then adopted a much sunnier disposition, relaying his experiences as the nation's leader who presided over the bicentennial celebration on July 4, where he sensed that a new spirit had been born in America. It seemed inevitable that Ford could not escape the final debate without one more probe into his role in Watergate. Jack Nelson asked the question, specifically reminding Ford that were it not for Watergate, he would not be president, and thereby implying that Ford owed the American people a more detailed explanation regarding his role in the incident. Without hesitation, Ford emphatically insisted that he answered every question dealing with Watergate, was given a clean bill of health by the most objective inquisitors, and that, accordingly, he considered the matter closed.

Kraft peppered Ford with questions about a pause in the economic recovery, calling Ford's record regarding unemployment "rotten." In fact, Kraft was possibly the most overtly partisan panelist in any debate to that point. A former speechwriter for Democrat John F. Kennedy, Kraft later served as an advisor to President Carter, who was also a Democrat.¹²⁵ Although Ford remained composed in his response, not showing visible signs of anger or frustration, he said that he "violently disagree[d]" with Kraft's conclusions, and added that the record did not support them.¹²⁶ Ford continued to

¹²⁵ Gaylord Shaw, "Political Analyst Joseph Kraft dies at 61," *Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 1986, retrieved on March 31, 2012, http://articles.latimes.com/1986-01-11/news/mn-26762_1_joseph-kraft. A highly-opinionated word like "rotten" stood out in the debates as questioners before and since refrained from such blatant subjectivity.

¹²⁶ Carter-Ford 3. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

defend the economic recovery under his leadership, pointing out that the United States led the world, including Japan and Western Europe, out of recession and into recovery. Kraft's comparatively abrasive delivery served as the first test for any debater in fielding harsh and arguably bias-motivated questions.

Ford's closing remark accurately captured his position throughout the debates. He pointed to economic recovery, holding the line on inflation, presiding over the end of the Vietnam War, and steering the country back to a steady course following the turmoil of Watergate. He referred to the nation's Bicentennial celebration that occurred three months earlier, and how the country's morale was lifted, and the people seemed happy, hopeful, and united once again. Ford did not make any grand promises: he did not vow to lead the country to unprecedented greatness, and he did not dream big dreams. His hope that Americans would say: "Jerry Ford, you've done a good job, keep on doing it," was very telling, in that he seemed satisfied with having done a job that was good, but not perfect, not spectacular, and not extraordinary. It appeared that Ford was telling the American people that he would not pretend to achieve greatness, but the good would outweigh the bad.

For his part, Carter thoroughly described all that was wrong with America under Ford's watch, noting that Ford's presidency by that point was almost as lengthy as John F. Kennedy's, and asking rhetorically what had Ford accomplished. Just under thirteen years after his assassination, Kennedy was remembered fondly by the electorate, and by Democrats in particular, and so it served Carter well to compare Ford's record to Kennedy's, which had the advantage of nostalgic enhancement. Moreover, as challengers, both Kennedy and Carter maintained that the *status quo* was not good

enough, putting the incumbents, Nixon and Ford, respectively, in the awkward position of having to defend their administrations' records while promising to do better.

The *Washington Post* concluded that Carter fared better in the third debate, because, unlike Ford, who demonstrated mere competence in the day-to-day management of the nation, Carter thought more carefully about the nation's untapped capacities.¹²⁷ Jim Squires, who had been critical of both candidates' performances in the first debate, but who lauded the intensity of both the second debate and the running mates' contest, concluded that Ford needed a big win in the final debate, but at best earned a draw.¹²⁸ A national poll taken after the debate had Carter beating Ford 40 percent to 29 percent.¹²⁹

The poll numbers reflected the public's perception of who won the debates, and how that affected the candidates' approval ratings. Although a debate victory does not automatically translate to higher approval ratings, in the absence of any other identifiable factor, polls taken immediately following a debate that show the perceived debate winner's approval ratings rise and the perceived debate loser's approval ratings fall, it is plausible to attribute debate performance to the change in approval ratings. Carter entered the debate season with a double-digit lead over Ford, and maintained that after the first debate.¹³⁰ Though Ford chipped away at Carter's lead on the campaign stump in the two weeks that followed, his image suffered after the second

¹²⁷ Editorial, "The Final Debate," *Washington Post*, October 24, 1976, B6.

¹²⁸ Squires, "Last of Great Debates Leaves Story Unchanged," *Chicago Tribune*, October 24, 1976, 10.

¹²⁹ UPI, "Carter Called Winner in Poll by 40 percent to 29 percent," *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 1976, 22.

¹³⁰ Gallup Poll, October-November 1976, retrieved on March 31, 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/23995/gerald-ford-retrospective.aspx>.

debate slipup, and then made up some (but not all) of the lost ground following a stronger showing in the final debate.¹³¹

The *Boston Globe's* Robert Healy declared that the debates not only ended the campaign, but were also the campaign.¹³² William Greider of the *Washington Post* gave the final debate to Carter, and praised it as providing a sharp portrait of the campaign.¹³³ While Healy's and Greider's contentions do not necessarily settle the issue of whether debates are election determinants, they provide a glimpse into how with each debate season, analysts with greater frequency begin to recognize the debates' impactful role.

The 1976 debates were less about an individual winner than a successful comeback of the institution that began in 1960 and had been on a sixteen-year hiatus.¹³⁴ George Farah commented on the importance of the nonpartisan LWV having sponsored the 1976 debates, as they could freely admonish candidates for not participating, given that there were no federal restrictions preventing them from doing so.¹³⁵ Even before the third debate, the *Wall Street Journal* defended the debates, and charged that without them, the 1976 campaign would have been even drearier.¹³⁶ Despite formal debates having occurred only once before, in 1960, Newton Minow personally told Ford that by participating in the debates, he reestablished an important American tradition.¹³⁷ Minow's words were prophetic, because that was the year when major party debates

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Healy, "Final Debate and the End of Campaign," *Boston Globe*, October 25, 1976, 1.

¹³³ William Greider, "Last Debate: Substance over Bumble," *Washington Post*, October 23, 1976, 1.

¹³⁴ Minow, 54.

¹³⁵ George Farah, *No Debate*, New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2004, 6.

¹³⁶ Editorial, "In Defense of Debates," *Wall Street Journal*, October 22, 1976, 14.

¹³⁷ Minow, 54.

became an American tradition. That there has not been a presidential election since without them underscores how much they matter.

Carter won the election: the American people exorcised the ghosts of Watergate and voted in “friendlier spirits.” The debates themselves generally received positive press, which was an indicator that they might become a permanent fixture in presidential politics. Moreover, the debates matter because, just as in 1960, the ticket that did better in the debate season overall (according to the polls and the pundits) also won the election; and both times, it was the incumbent who lost.

Despite the rise and fall of the candidates’ poll numbers, which were consistent with the generally held opinions about how well they debated, the debates had a far broader impact on the elections than a possible effect on the outcome. Once again, the role of television played an important part in cultivating image: from the candidates’ awkward twenty-seven standstill minutes in the first debate, to Dole’s brooding Nixonian features, to footage of Ford’s Eastern Europe gaffe that were all rebroadcast throughout the remainder of the campaign. The media’s post-debate analysis had a dynamic effect on the image of both candidates, particularly in terms of how they fared, which to some extent, created a perception more powerful than the one formed during the actual debates.

Beyond the political landscape, the debates provided a glimpse into changes to American culture since the previous debate season in 1960, particularly in terms of feminism and sexuality. Regarding the former, most notably, the National Organization of Women (NOW) was founded in 1966.¹³⁸ The two female moderators and two female

¹³⁸ National Organization for Women website, retrieved on November 19, 2013, <http://www.now.org/organization/info.html>. NOW’s mission is to “eliminate discrimination and harassment in the

panelists, and the sponsoring of the debates by the League of Women Voters, evidenced the growing impact of women on American politics. The *Playboy* interviewees to whom Carter had referred in an attempt to legitimize his own interview with the magazine all appeared in the magazine from 1963 to 1976, which was long after *Playboy's* founding in 1953, and some years after the Kennedy-Nixon election. Clearly, attitudes about gender equality as well as more liberal sexual mores emerged in between the first and second debate seasons. Television played a pivotal role in projecting these changes, not only as evidenced by the two female debate moderators in the 1976 season, but also in a simple yet sweeping change in how the bedrooms of married couples were portrayed on television shows, having moved from twin beds in the 1960s to a double bed on most programs by the time of the Carter-Ford debates.¹³⁹

Neither Carter, who won the election, nor Ford, who trailed by thirty-two points before the debates, expressed regret about debating. Nonetheless, any conclusions about whether the candidates in 1980 or beyond were likely to debate, or whether a new, if not permanent era of no debates ensued, were tenuous. The *Chicago Tribune* expressed the view that they “may well have marked a turning point in American political strategy.”¹⁴⁰ The debates did indeed persevere in subsequent seasons, which indicated how much they mattered, as they progressively impacted the campaigns and the elections overall.

workplace, schools, the justice system, and all other sectors of society; secure abortion, birth control and reproductive rights for all women; end all forms of violence against women; eradicate racism, sexism and homophobia; and promote equality and justice in our society.”

¹³⁹ Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007, 19-20. Levine described how television in the 1970s reflected the American sexual revolution that had begun in the mid-1960s.

¹⁴⁰ Editorial, “Potshots and Platitudes,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 17, 1976, 4.

**DO THE DEBATES MATTER? AN EXAMINATION OF THE PROGRESSIVELY
INFLUENTIAL ROLE OF MAJOR PARTY DEBATES ON
AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: 1960-2008**

**CHAPTER 4: 1980 – RONALD REAGAN, THE “GREAT COMMUNICATOR” USES
THE DEBATES TO CONVEY OPTIMISM, NATIONALISM, AND REASSURANCE**

Republican Ronald Reagan (Former Governor, CA) and George H.W. Bush (Former CIA Director) v. Democrat Jimmy Carter (Incumbent Democratic President) and Walter Mondale (Incumbent Democratic Vice President) v. Independent John Anderson (Former U.S. Representative, IL) and Patrick Lucey (Former Governor, WI). The vice presidential candidates did not debate. Reagan-Anderson (50 million), Reagan-Carter (80.6 million).

The third presidential debate season, in 1980, added a new dimension as Republican challenger Ronald Reagan, a seasoned actor who had honed his political message for years, plied his affinity for communication by using the television format to an extent no other candidate had done before. In the Republican primary, he distinguished himself from the competition, establishing an image as a strong leader, then again in the first debate against Republican-turned-Independent, former Illinois Congressman, John Anderson, and, finally, in a one-on-one showdown against Democrat incumbent Jimmy Carter. Carter, who ran for reelection despite approval ratings in the low to mid-thirties in his fourth year, was not inclined to participate in debates until public pressure forced his hand.¹

Carter knew that the previous incumbents who chose to debate lost the ensuing election, and his concern was heightened by the prospect of having to debate two opponents at once: not just the traditional major party opponent, but also Anderson. The 1980 debates were significant not only because of Anderson’s inclusion, but also

¹ Gallup, Presidential Approval Ratings, retrieved on January 4, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx#2>.

because they were the first example of debates in consecutive presidential elections, suggesting that they might become a regular component of American political culture.

Reagan, who told stories of American greatness and reassured Americans that nothing was beyond their grasp, was widely known as the Great Communicator.² Debating scholar Robert C. Rowland of the University of Kansas attributed Reagan's success in the debates to what he termed "rhetorical authenticity."³ "Reagan always sounded like Reagan," Rowland explained, and therefore Reagan was able to use grand moments with very large captive audiences – a prime example of which were the debates – not only to reinforce support from those who shared his conservative ideology, but to attract those who found his communicative sincerity appealing.⁴ Though Rowland did not expressly say as much, his contentions leave the impression that Reagan's "verbal magic," as he termed it, was more powerful than his substantive convictions. It is possible, then, that though some voters turned to Reagan because he was conservative, other voters turned to conservatism because that was what Reagan conveyed.

Reagan's biographer, Lou Cannon, wrote shortly after Reagan's death in 2004 about how Reagan's nationalism contributed to his mastery of communication.⁵ "He exuded a sense of country", Cannon wrote. "I have often paraphrased fellow journalist Walter Lippmann," Cannon continued, "who said that 'the greatness of Charles de Gaulle was not that he was in France, but that France was in de Gaulle.' I said the same thing about

² Dinesh D'Souza, *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader*, New York, NY: The Free Press, 1997, 34.

³ Robert C. Rowland, "Principle, Pragmatism, and Authenticity in Reagan's Rhetoric," 1-56, 4, presented at the University of Southern California's School of Planning, Policy and Development's Reagan Centennial, February 2, 2011, retrieved on July 16, 2014, <http://priceschool.usc.edu/events/reagan/news/communication-panel>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Lou Cannon, "Why Reagan was the 'Great Communicator,'" *USA Today*, June 6, 2004, retrieved on May 28, 2014, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2004-06-06-cannon_x.htm.

Reagan”⁶ In *Ronald Reagan: the Role of a Lifetime*, Cannon wrote that Reagan had “an innocent and unshakable belief in the myth of American exceptionalism.”⁷ Anatoly Lieven wrote that “in Reagan’s rhetoric...the ‘Great Communicator’ was a superb restorer of the myths of American nationalism...because he believed them to the full himself, particularly...American innocence, American beneficence, and America as the heartland of human freedom and progress.”⁸ Cannon’s and Lieven’s observations combine two essential elements of Reagan’s image and uncanny ability to attract the American public to his message and, in turn, to him: his passion for nationalism, and the strong, sincere, and optimistic conviction behind his words.⁹

Reagan used the debates to connect with the American people to a more significant extent than any previous debater, and conveyed an image of reassurance for which a nation experiencing domestic and foreign crises yearned. This chapter examines how he showcased his communicative prowess by taking charge in both the Republican primary debates, and then in the general election debates. By most accounts, Reagan prevailed over all of his opponents and a week after debating Carter he won the election.

There is a considerable amount written about the 1980 election itself and, to a lesser extent, the debates’ impact upon it. *What the Heck are You Up to, Mr. President?: Jimmy Carter, America’s Malaise, and The Speech That Should Have Changed the*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Cannon, *The Role of a Lifetime*, New York, NY: Public Affairs, 1991, 2000, 711.

⁸ Anatoly Lieven, *Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004, 58.

⁹ “Three Myths about Reagan Debunked,” History News Network, George Mason University, February 6, 2014, retrieved on May 28, 2014, <http://hnn.us/article/154642>. Gray wrote about Reagan’s deep thinking on numerous issues. For more discussion about Reagan’s notes and journals about issues and policy, see Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson (eds.), *Reagan in His Own Hand*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

Country by Kevin Matson provides an excellent understanding of image and perception, by extensively analyzing Carter's July 15, 1979 address about the economy, which became infamously known as the "malaise speech" and emblematic of Carter's downheartedness.¹⁰ That Carter never actually uttered the word "malaise" at any point during that speech – perhaps people thought they heard it because the stark economic data Carter presented made them feel that way – underscores how perception is often a more impactful image-maker than reality. In stark contrast, Dinesh D'Souza's *How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader* describes how Reagan was able to convey optimism and reassurance to the American people.¹¹ Moreover, in *Reagan's Victory: the Presidential Election of 1980 and the Rise of the Right*, author Andrew Busch described the Carter-Reagan debate as the critical turning point of the election.¹² Busch's emphasis on the debates' impact underscores their progressive impact on election after election that were observed by those examining presidential campaigns. This chapter adds to the scholarship by noting Reagan's use of the debates as a tool to cultivate his image of optimism, confidence, and reassurance, not only in the oft-referenced debate with Carter, but also in the debate with Anderson and the primary debates against his fellow Republicans.

When the nation elected Carter president in 1976, it seemed as if the negative weight of Beltway politics from the Republican Nixon Ford Administrations, of which Watergate was the most painful reminder, was lifted from the public psyche.¹³ Carter, who was

¹⁰ Kevin Mattson, *What the Heck are You Up to, Mr. President?: Jimmy Carter, America's 'Malaise,' and The Speech That Should Have Changed the Country*, New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2009.

¹¹ D'Souza.

¹² Andrew Busch, *Reagan's Victory: the Presidential Election of 1980 and the Rise of the Right*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005, 118.

¹³ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith, Memoirs of a President*, New York, NY: Bantam, 1982, 27. Carter recalled how he realized that, in great part, he was the anti-Watergate candidate. "Beltway" politics, a reference to the main highway

then a fresh-faced outsider from the opposite party, with a floppy head of hair like John F. Kennedy and a smile that promised a new beginning at the dawn of the nation's third century, seemed to have the potential to restore integrity to the American presidency.¹⁴ Instead, Carter's administration self-destructed. He lost badly in his reelection bid, and to this day is consistently ranked as one of America's worst presidents.¹⁵

The implosion was due to several factors, not the least of which were rampant inflation, high unemployment, and American civilians held hostage in Iran. On November 4, 1979, a group of Iranian extremists seized the American Embassy in Teheran and took fifty-two Americans hostage.¹⁶ For over a year, Carter tried to resolve the crisis but was unsuccessful.¹⁷ His own secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, resigned after a failed rescue mission that he opposed, which resulted in American soldiers being killed; in the aftermath their remains were displayed at a feast amid a backdrop of burning American flags.¹⁸ Domestically, America experienced a devastating "misery index" of combined inflation and unemployment that exceeded twenty percent.¹⁹

leading into Washington, DC, describes the politics of Washington insiders; Jules Witcover, *Marathon: The Pursuit of the Presidency 1972-1976*, New York, NY: Viking Press, 1977, 42.

¹⁴ Political cartoonists exaggerated Carter's floppy hair and large teeth extensively before and during his presidency. For more discussion about political cartoons in presidential campaigns, see Wendy Wick Reaves, *Oliphant's Presidents*, Kansas City, MO: Universal Press Syndicate, 1990. Pat Oliphant is an editorial cartoonist. Specific cartoons depicting the Carter years appear on pages 45-52.

¹⁵ Alvin Stephen Feltzenberg, *The Leaders We Deserved*, New York, NY: Perseus, 2008, 178. Generally, the criteria used to evaluate the presidents were character, competence, vision, domestic policy, and foreign policy. Carter received poor scores in every category except character.

¹⁶ D'Souza, 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ David F. Trask, *Resignation of Secretary of State Cyrus Vance*, Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, December 1979, retrieved on May 4, 2012, <http://www.shafr.org/passport/2002/dec/vance.htm>

¹⁹ D'Souza, 26. "Misery index" was a term coined by economist Arthur M. Okun, an advisor to President Lyndon Johnson. For more discussion about the misery index' role in presidential administrations, see Joseph A. Pechman, (ed.), *Economics for Policymaking: Selected Essays of Arthur M. Okun*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.

To the extent that peace and prosperity are helpful to an incumbent's chances for reelection, the Carter presidency enjoyed neither.²⁰ The voters sought an alternative to Carter, who would lift them from malaise and reassure them that everything was going to be alright. Their two most viable options appeared to be Republican nominee Reagan, and Anderson, who continued his campaign as an independent after failing to emerge as the Republican nominee.

More so than in either of the first two debate seasons, prominent publications and journalists intimated that debates could very well decide the election's outcome.²¹ Moreover, that an incumbent debater had yet to win the ensuing election did not go unnoticed. In *Portrait of an Election: The 1980 Presidential Campaign*, Elizabeth Drew described how a challenger, standing on the same stage as the incumbent, automatically crossed the "acceptability threshold."²² In fact, speculation about how Carter might fare, and whether he risked his entire presidency by agreeing to debate, as America's most-watched news anchor Walter Cronkite suggested, further underscored the dual impact of the presidential debates being broadcast on television and the increased acceptance that the debates mattered.

For these reasons, Carter wanted no part of the debates, particularly if Anderson was to be included. Anderson polled between fifteen and twenty percent nationwide, attracting liberal and moderate voters from both major parties, and so the debate

²⁰ For more discussion about how the message of peace and prosperity has been used successful to win reelection or to unseat incumbent presidents, see Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, 3rd Ed., New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996.

²¹ Alan Schroeder, *Presidential Debates, Fifty Years of High-Risk Presidential TV*, 2nd Ed., New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008, 112. The *Christian Science Monitor* described it as a "one on one shootout" that would decide the outcome, and the *Washington Post*, describing it as a "single roll of the dice," said the election hinged on the outcome, as did veteran newsman Walter Cronkite.

²² Elizabeth Drew, *Portrait of an Election: The 1980 Presidential Campaign* New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1981, 411-412. The same point was made in a subsequent book by Austin Ramney, *The American Elections of 1984*, New York, NY: American Enterprise Institute, 1985.

sponsor, the League of Women Voters, rendered him a formidable candidate.²³ Carter refused to share the same stage as Anderson.²⁴ As Carter explained to Jim Lehrer, “every time the Independent candidate got a vote, it was a vote taken away from me.”²⁵ Carter worried about losing liberal and moderate voters to Anderson, while Reagan retained the conservative votes, leaving the incumbent little chance of reelection.²⁶

Once the press learned about Carter’s resistance to a three-way event, speculation mounted that the televised debate would feature Reagan and Anderson along with an empty chair with Carter’s name on it.²⁷ The League of Women Voters was so incensed by Carter’s refusal to take part that it actually vowed to place a chair on stage.²⁸ Much was made of the League’s threat, including a political cartoon portraying the chair as a baby’s (Carter’s) high chair, and late night television comedian Johnny Carson’s famous quip: “what if the chair wins?”²⁹

Eventually, the League refrained from placing a chair on the stage, but the initial inclination to do so and the ensuing publicity exemplifies the debates’ far-reaching influence on broader American culture, magnified by the press and the late night comedians.³⁰ A Gallup Poll for *Newsweek* magazine revealed that three out of four

²³ Susan A. Hellweg, Michael Pfau, *et al.*, *Televised Presidential Debates*, New York, NY: Praeger, 1992, 57; Jim Mason, *No Holding Back: The 1980 John B. Anderson Presidential Campaign*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2011, 2.

²⁴ Newton N. Minow and Craig L. Lamay, *Inside the Presidential Debates*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 56.

²⁵ Jim Lehrer, *Tension City*, New York, NY: Random House, 2011, 20.

²⁶ David J. Lanoue, “The One That Made a Difference: Cognitive Consistency, Political Knowledge, and the 1980 Presidential Debate,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 56 No. 2 (Summer 1992), 168-184, 170.

²⁷ Minow, 56. Minow described that the rumor spread rapidly after “a Washington Post reporter” wrote an article about it. That article was by T.R. Reid titled “Reagan, Anderson, Empty Chair,” *Washington Post*, September 11, 1980, 1.

²⁸ Schroeder, 18.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ The weekly comedy, *Saturday Night Live* has featured parodies of presidential debates for many years now as a regular opening feature during the election season. For more discussion about the role of comedy in presidential

voters disagreed with Carter's decision not to take part.³¹ The Carter camp remained optimistic, nonetheless, that most Americans understood that it was not to Carter's benefit to debate against two Republicans (albeit, one of them a recent defector).³² As one Carter official acknowledged, it would damage Carter if either of those candidates – much less both of them – looked presidential.³³ Essentially, Carter's image suffered over the "empty chair," even though neither he nor any of his rivals had yet stepped onto the debate stage. That the debates could affect the image of participants and non-participants alike is emblematic of their far-reaching impact.

Unlike Carter, Reagan welcomed the opportunity to debate Anderson, though he preferred that the president join them as well. Because he intended to fill Carter's shoes, Reagan said, he emphasized the importance of debating the incumbent face-to-face.³⁴ A professional actor and longtime politician, Reagan was extremely comfortable at the podium. Famously, he debated Robert F. Kennedy, a celebrated speaker in his own right, in 1967, and the latter reportedly felt Reagan got the better of him to the point where he told his aides privately never to put him on the same stage with Reagan again.³⁵ Reagan also used the primary debates to effectively distance himself from his fellow Republican hopefuls.

campaigns, see Jody C. Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris, *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2008.

³¹ Anonymous, "Gallup Poll: Carter Absence Disapproved," *Boston Globe*, September 21, 1980, 1; Allan Mayer, "A Debate over the Debates," *Newsweek*, September 8, 1980, 19.

³² Bill Peterson and Lou Cannon, "All 3 Candidates Have a Stake in Tonight's Debate," *Washington Post*, September 21, 1980, 1.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Schroeder, 19; Paul Kengor, "The Great Forgotten Debate," *National Review*, May 22, 2007, retrieved on December 1, 2012, <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/220949/great-forgotten-debate/paul-kengor?pg=1>. Kengor reported that immediately after the debate, an exasperated Kennedy asked "who the f**k got me into this?"

³⁵ Ronald Reagan and Robert F. Kennedy Town Meeting of the World, May 15, 1967, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library VHS, retrieved on June 4, 2010; Schroeder, 146.

After George H.W. Bush won the Iowa Caucus in January, the *Nashua Telegraph*, a prominent New Hampshire paper, agreed to sponsor a debate between Reagan and Bush, the two Republican frontrunners.³⁶ Kansas Senator and former Republican vice presidential nominee Bob Dole, who was also a presidential candidate in 1980, protested against the *Telegraph's* exclusion of all candidates except for Reagan and Bush, arguing that the newspaper was contributing to those two campaigns, in violation of the rules of the Federal Elections Commission (FEC).³⁷ The FEC agreed with Dole's objection and, as there was a risk that the debate would be canceled, Reagan's campaign agreed to pay for it entirely.³⁸ Reagan then invited the other Republican candidates to participate: Dole, Anderson, Howard Baker, Phil Crane, and John Connally. All but Connally, who was campaigning elsewhere, accepted.³⁹ On the night of the debate there was mass chaos and uncertainty, as there were chairs and microphones only for Reagan and Bush, while the other candidates stood around awkwardly. Reagan tried to make an announcement, but the moderator ordered Reagan's microphone to be shut off, at which point Reagan fired back: "I am paying for this microphone, Mr. Green!"⁴⁰ The auditorium erupted in applause, and the four displaced candidates clapped their hands in unison for Reagan, who arguably sealed the party's nomination at that moment.⁴¹ Perhaps one of the reasons Reagan's forceful reaction resonated so much with the crowd was that conditions in America were not improving, both at home with a rising misery index and abroad with the Iran hostage

³⁶ University of Virginia – Miller Center website, retrieved on November 19, 2012, <http://millercenter.org/president/reagan/essays/biography/3>.

³⁷ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1990, 212.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Miller Center. Actually, the man's name was Breen, not Green, which either went unnoticed or was a technicality that paled in comparison to the drama of the moment.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

crisis. In sharp contrast, Reagan conveyed strength, confidence, determination, and leadership.

The first, and, initially, the only general election debate scheduled was between Reagan and Anderson. For Anderson, who was a distant third in all polls, any exposure he gained as a result of the debate was welcome and an opportunity he could not afford to squander.⁴² The *New York Times*' Warren Weaver noted that the hour-long debate ensured Anderson equal status with Reagan throughout.⁴³ Considering a successful debate performance vital to his candidacy's success, Anderson spent the day closely huddled with advisors in preparation.⁴⁴

Moderated by Bill Moyers of the *Bill Moyers Journal*, the debate took place in Baltimore, Maryland, so close to the White House that it might have underscored the significant absence of its principal resident, Jimmy Carter.⁴⁵ Clearly a Democrat, Moyers, formerly President Lyndon Johnson's press secretary, was very critical of the Nixon presidency both before and especially after Watergate.⁴⁶ He was later forceful in criticizing the Iran-Contra affair during Reagan's presidency.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, Moyers' partisanship did not play any noticeable role in his capacity to serve as an impartial moderator. The panelists were Carol Loomis of *Fortune* magazine, syndicated columnist

⁴² Editorial, "Threesies, Twosies and the Debates," *New York Times*, September 28, 1980, 20. During the final three months of the campaign, Reagan and Carter's support in the polls, by percentage of voters, ranged somewhere within the high 30s and mid-40s, whereas Anderson's number was around 14.

⁴³ Warren Weaver, "For Anderson, The Future is a Single Hour," *New York Times*, September 21, 1980, 1. Even though Reagan was not the incumbent, as a major party nominee he was the establishment candidate, whereas Anderson, the Independent, was the underdog.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Reagan-Anderson Debate, September 21, 1980, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library VHS, retrieved on June 4, 2010. That Carter was so close to the event and did not attend might have accentuated the magnitude of that decision.

⁴⁶ Bernard Timberg, *Bill Moyers*, The Museum of Broadcast Communications, retrieved on April 26, 2012.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Daniel Greenberg, Charles Corddry of the *Baltimore Sun*, Lee May of the *Los Angeles Times*, Jane Bryant Quinn of *Newsweek*, and Soma Golden of the *New York Times*.⁴⁸

The first question, from Loomis to Anderson, was about what politically unpopular measures he might endorse in order to reduce inflation.⁴⁹ Anderson pounced on the question immediately, and though his content was not belligerent, his tone was loud and the volume and intensity of his voice made him appear abrasive, which was an approach often reserved for candidates' running mates.⁵⁰ Anderson emphasized that inflation was a very serious problem, and that neither he nor Reagan were responsible for it, but the man who was (Carter) had chosen to be absent.⁵¹ Just as Bob Dole's dark, intense features and deep, commanding voice may have reminded 1976 debate viewers of the then-recently disgraced former president, Richard Nixon, Anderson may well have been the "Nixon" of the 1980 debates, not the soft-spoken Nixon of the 1960 debates, but rather the gruff and often volatile president.

Anderson's hair was not jet black, like Nixon's. With a head full of white hair, smartly parted to the side, and a pair of brown-framed glasses on his thin face, Anderson looked every bit the law professor that he had been for many years.⁵² In fact, he looked

⁴⁸ Reagan-Anderson.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ For more discussion about the role of running mates in debates, see Leslie H. Southwick, *Presidential Also-Rans and Running Mates, 1788 through 1996*, 2nd Ed., Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008. "Attack dog" is a long-used term to describe a prominent if not the primary role of a running mate in a presidential campaign. For more discussion, see Chuck Raasch, "Kemp, the Consummate Quarterback Politician," *USA Today*, May 5, 2009, retrieved on December 2, 2009, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/columnist/raasch/2009-05-05-raasch-column-05052009_N.htm. Raasch wrote that 1996 Republican running mate Jack Kemp was not as aggressive as would be expected in the traditional "attack dog" role of a running mate; David Barstow described 2000 Democratic running mate Joe Lieberman, as not having been the traditional "attack dog" that a VP nominee typically is: David Barstow, "The Democrats – The Running Mate: Lieberman Preparing for the Spotlight," *New York Times*, August 16, 2000, retrieved on December 2, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/08/16/us/the-democrats-the-running-mate-lieberman-preparing-for-moment-in-spotlight.html>.

⁵¹ Reagan-Anderson.

⁵² James R. Kotche, *John B. Anderson*, Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, retrieved on April 28, 2012, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=A000195>

older than the dark-haired Reagan, who was eleven years Anderson's senior. Anderson may have realized that, because he quipped about Reagan's age during the campaign. In a Republican primary debate that was held on January 5 in Iowa, Anderson emphasized that: "I *am* younger [than Reagan]." ⁵³ That interjection and emphasis on the word *am* was emblematic of visual media's powerful influence on image. Realizing that looking older than the sixty-nine-year-old Reagan was detrimental to Anderson's image, he was quick to point out that he was indeed the younger man. In fact, it illustrates how image might be more powerful than content. Had viewers stepped away from their television sets at that moment, for instance, they would have missed Anderson's explanation, since Anderson's white hair juxtaposed against Reagan's dark hair remained a constant visual all evening long.

In his opening response, Reagan insisted that the inflation-cutting measures he proposed were unpopular only with the government and with its special-interest groups. ⁵⁴ From those opening lines, it became clear that Reagan was in command. Unlike Anderson, who acquiesced to the panelists, Reagan set his own terms. But he did not stop there. Reagan presented an extensive explanation of inflation, and, like Anderson, spoke disparagingly of Carter, referring to him as "the man who isn't here tonight." ⁵⁵ Just as Reagan conveyed his decisiveness in the primary debates, he exuded that same message in his opening moments of the Anderson debate.

⁵³ Mike Shanahan, "Anderson links Reagan's age, 'vintage thinking.'" *St. Petersburg Times*, September 16, 1980, 4A; Eleanor Randolph, "Anderson Calls Reagan Tax Plan Old-Fashioned," *Los Angeles Times*, June 24, 1980, 10. Republican Primary Debate, January 5, 1980, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library VHS, retrieved on May 7, 2012.

⁵⁴ Reagan-Anderson. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

⁵⁵ Audiences have focused on the absence of central figures for centuries. For more discussion on how absence has been treated in literature, see Mahfouz Safi Muhammad, "The Absence of Presence," *The Midwest Quarterly*, Volume 53. No. 4 (Summer 2012), pp. 392-409.

Anderson went on to explain his plan for fiscal austerity, stating that the nation needed to learn to conserve. He proposed a tax hike on gasoline, the revenues of which would be used to reduce social security taxes. Jumping at the opportunity to score again, Reagan wondered why American consumers should have to pay a tax and then get the money back: “why take it in the first place if you’re going to give it back? Why not leave it with them?” In doing so, Reagan alternated indignant conviction with common sense, and thereby exuded a reassurance that appeared to be an antidote to Jimmy Carter’s weak and indecisive leadership.⁵⁶

Reagan was firm, but not angry; friendly, but confident. Compared with Anderson, who appeared irascible, Reagan evoked both candor and promise, all with a good-natured and sunny demeanor. Whereas Carter believed that a debate would hamper his standing, Reagan capitalized on the opportunity. Instead of approaching the debate as if he stood to lose a great deal if he were to perform poorly, Reagan viewed it not so much as a chance to increase his lead over Anderson as to score points against Carter.⁵⁷ Reagan’s and Carter’s contrasting approaches toward the debates provided a glimpse into their broader personalities, which were seen as optimistic and pessimistic, respectively.

To that point in the debate, all the audience heard about the sitting president’s record, was Reagan’s and Anderson’s unflattering accounts of it. Greenberg, in fact, warned both candidates to answer the questions rather than to elaborate on their campaign

⁵⁶ For more discussion about Jimmy Carter having been perceived as a weak and indecisive president, see Kenneth E. Morris, *Jimmy Carter, American Moralist*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996, 81; Andrew Rosenthal, “Republican Turf,” *New York Times*, September 11, 2012, retrieved on November 21, 2012, <http://takingnote.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/11/republican-turf/>; and David Osborne, “Mitt Romney Misfires in his Attempt to Discredit Barack Obama’s ‘Weak’ Foreign Policy,” *The Independent*, September 16, 2012, retrieved on November 21, 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/mitt-romney-misfires-in-his-attempt-to-discredit-barack-obamas-weak-foreign-policy-8142466.html>.

⁵⁷ Reagan, 220-221.

platforms.⁵⁸ That admonition, which was the first by any panelist to any candidate in the relatively short history of presidential debates, was significant. In subsequent debates, candidates became increasingly bold, even brash, in terms of sidestepping or overtly ignoring direct questions and simply proceeding with their own agenda. The most obvious example of that development was 2008 vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin's response to moderator Gwen Ifill: "I may not answer the question the way...you want to hear...I'm going to talk straight to the American people."⁵⁹

As the debate progressed, Anderson relayed stark facts, whereas Reagan's rhetoric was overflowing with promise about great days ahead. The theory of rhetoric, persuasive communication, dates back to Ancient Greece, but a more modern version of it, fantasy theme analysis, was developed by Ernest Bormann.⁶⁰ Reagan effectively sought to attract the audience to a message based on desire as much as reason, throughout the 1980 campaign. The Anderson debate was a window into Reagan's boundless optimism, which, as Michael Shermer wrote, is stronger than realism in modern American culture.⁶¹

The difference in the candidates' personalities and projected methods of leading the country became even more apparent when they were asked to comment on the country's dwindling volunteer armed forces, and whether they would consider reinstating the draft if the problem persisted. Anderson, in typical fashion, responded

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Biden-Palin Debate, October 2, 2008, C-SPAN, retrieved on March 3, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/VicePresidentialCandidate>.

⁶⁰ Ernest Bormann, *Communication Theory*, New York, NY: Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1980, 184.

⁶¹ Michael Shermer, "Kool-Aid Psychology," *Scientific American*, December 18, 2009, retrieved on January 6, 2014, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=kool-aid-psychology>. Shermer described optimism as superseding realism as a thinking tool. For more discussion about Reagan's role in positive thinking in late 20th century America, see Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: from Mary Baker Eddy to Normal Vincent Peale and Ronald Reagan*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.

literally about the need to increase wages for military personnel, and that if left with no other choice, he would reinstate the draft. In contrast, Reagan pointed out that he and Anderson agreed on that issue more than they disagreed, and that “the only one disagreeing with us is the president.” French philosopher Jacques Derrida wrote about the superiority of activity over passivity, which was applicable in this case regarding those present (Reagan and Anderson) and absent (Carter) in the debate.⁶² Though Reagan had probably never heard of Derrida or his theory, he understood the significance of the concept: he capitalized on Carter’s absence. Reagan went on to declare his unequivocal support for the military, and explained the problem with military pay not only with more passion, but with a simple clarity that Anderson lacked. Anderson relayed facts quite efficiently, but Reagan was adept at a far more important skill: knowing how to weave them into a compelling story. For example, Reagan was speaking about a high school he had recently visited in Texas, when his response time ran out. Rather than become irked, Reagan laughed it off and said “I’ll catch up with it later.”⁶³ At his next opportunity at the microphone, Reagan finished his story, announcing with patriotic pride that forty out of eighty high school students who took a class in military training entered one of the United States Military Academies. At every turn, Reagan connected with the American people, displaying a different personality to both the grouchy Anderson and absent Carter. He projected an optimistic, national pride.

Reagan saved his best for last. His closing remarks, essentially an ode to the United States, were without question, the rosiest homage to the nation by a presidential

⁶² Jacques Derrida. *Positions*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1972, 1981, 41.

⁶³ Reagan-Anderson. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

debater to that point. “I’ve always believed that this land was placed here between the two great oceans by some divine plan,” Reagan began:

We came from 100 different corners of the earth...[and] spoke a multitude of tongues. We landed on the Eastern shores and then went over the mountains and the prairies and the deserts...[a]nd in so doing, we built a new breed of human called an American.

If a beleaguered nation was thirsty for a new leader to provide hope and inspiration, it seemed that Reagan was made to order.

[S]ome people in high positions of leadership tell us that...the best is over. That we must cut back. That we must share in an ever-increasing scarcity. That we must, in the failure to be able to protect our national security as it is today...not be provocative to any possible adversary.

In an instant, Reagan removed the malaise-era ushered in by Carter, as well as Anderson’s warnings of austerity or doom. Reagan’s message was clearly different: “[W]e...have gone through four wars. We’ve gone through a Great Depression...[b]ut we came through all of those things and we achieved even new heights and new greatness.” In what became the trademark of his presidency, Reagan refused to campaign on the promise that he would be the one to solve the nation’s problems. He emphasized that the people of the United States, together, could begin the world over again. Punctuating his coda, Reagan added: “[w]e can meet our destiny – and that destiny to build a land here that will be, for all mankind, a shining city on a hill.”⁶⁴

Anderson’s final statement lacked the forcefulness shown by Reagan. Consistent with his focus during the evening, Anderson’s final remarks were a litany of American

⁶⁴ In the Bible, Matthew 5:14, Jesus Christ refers to a “city upon a hill.” Reagan, a devout theist, often made Biblical references in his speeches. For more about Reagan’s faith and his use of Biblical references in his rhetoric, see Mary Beth Brown, *The Faith of Ronald Reagan*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004; Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America’s Forgotten Founding Father*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003. The addition of the word “shining” is attributable to John Winthrop, a Puritan who in the early 17th century set sail from England to the New England region of what is now the United States. His statement symbolized the Puritan notion that their destination would become a guiding light for the entire world.

problems. “I dare hope that the American people will be listening and that they will see that an independent government of John Anderson and Patrick Lucey can give us the kind of coalition government that we need in 1980 to begin to solve our problems,” Anderson concluded. By mentioning his running mate, Wisconsin Governor Patrick Lucey, who was unknown at a national level, Anderson inadvertently accentuated his image as the obscure candidate in the race. His final sentence epitomized the two men’s contrasting styles and demeanors. Anderson ended his debate with the word “problems,” speaking to a nation arguably overloaded with bad news as a result of its president’s malaise speech. Reagan, on the other hand, evoked reassurance and hopefulness, describing America as a “shining city on a hill.”

Beyond reassurance, the “shining city on a hill” to which Reagan referred was borrowed, as he later elaborated, from *A Modell of Christian Charity*, a sermon delivered in 1630 by John Winthrop, who became Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in which he described colonial settlement in the land that eventually became the United States of America as follows: “wee must consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us.”⁶⁵ In *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, American Studies scholar Sacvan Bercovitch described Winthrop’s vision of “an extraordinary society,” to be a church-state that served as a refuge.⁶⁶ In extending Winthrop’s sentiment into twentieth century America, Reagan effectively communicated two points: nationalism and exceptionalism.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” 1630, Historical Manuscripts, New York Historical Society, retrieved on June 7, 2014, <http://cdm16694.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p16124coll1/id/1952>.

⁶⁶ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970, 46.

⁶⁷ George Nash, “Ronald Reagan’s Vision of America,” *American Exceptionalism*, Charles W. Dunn (ed.), Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013, pp. 103-126, 107. Nash wrote that Reagan sought to inspire Americans to believe that God was watching over the United States.

Moreover, by conjuring images of America as a “shining city” rather than sounding gloomy and alarmist, Reagan was able to convey divergence without explicitly enumerating particular differences with Anderson. Howard Giles, Justine Coupland, and Nikolas Coupland formulated the communication theory of accommodation, a component of which is divergence: the accentuation of differences. Reagan practiced the divergence communication theory effectively without actually verbalizing his differences with Anderson; the contrasting demeanors of the combatants provided ample evidence of those differences without the need for express verbal confirmation. As with Bormann’s and Derrida’s theories, it is not that Reagan consciously decided to apply divergence communication, but rather that his natural communication style exemplified it. Reagan referred to Winthrop in his 1974 speech to the Conservative Political Action Committee and in his speech at the 1976 Republican Convention.⁶⁸ The debates, however, provided the seasoned actor and orator with an even larger stage. Unlike the 1974 and 1976 venues, which specifically focused on conservatives and Republicans, respectively, the debates mattered more, because they pertained to a general election and thereby attracted a wider audience.

The Reagan-Anderson debate allowed Reagan to bond with the American people. The viewers saw that Reagan was not the type of Republican they wanted to avoid. He was not like the brooding Nixon nor the plainly ordinary Ford – who described himself “a Ford, not a Lincoln” thereby describing himself as less than great.⁶⁹ Reagan was a

⁶⁸ Ronald Reagan, “Speech to the Conservative Political Action Committee,” January 25, 1975, *The Patriot Post*, retrieved on June 8, 2014, http://reagan2020.us/speeches/City_Upon_A_Hill.asp; Ronald Reagan, Speech at the 1976 Republican National Convention, August 19, 1976, *the Patriot Post*, retrieved on June 8, 2014, http://reagan2020.us/speeches/rnc_1976.asp.

⁶⁹ Ford’s aversion to self-aggrandizing is exemplified in his remarks upon being sworn in as vice president, on December 6, 1973: “I’m a Ford, not a Lincoln.” Gerald R. Ford, Presidential Library and Museum, retrieved on December 2, 2012, <http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/grf/quotes.asp>. The reference was a self-deprecating

different kind of Republican, and that was why the voters were so drawn to him. He had an easy smile and a twinkle in his eye, and when he spoke about America, he projected two important aspects of reassuring nationalism: not only a strong love of country, but also the confident optimism that there was no difficulty Americans could not overcome.⁷⁰

The last time that Americans were so enamored with a Republican presidential candidate was when Dwight Eisenhower ran for president in 1952 and 1956, and he won both of those elections convincingly.⁷¹

The *New York Times* reported that Reagan was the clear winner in the post-debate polls, because both moderates and conservatives thought that he won the debate.⁷² Accordingly, Anderson did not achieve the momentum boost he sought, and Carter, by sitting out, lost credibility among the voters in general.⁷³ Even if the opposite were true, that is, if Anderson had done better than Reagan, both candidates did well enough to gain on Carter.⁷⁴ Because Reagan was already much closer than Anderson to pulling even with Carter, he was the one who benefitted the most.⁷⁵ The *New York Times*

comparison to “Lincoln,” Ford’s inference being that President Abraham Lincoln was a superior politician, as the automobile brand Lincoln is superior to the Ford brand.

⁷⁰ Ronald Reagan, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, retrieved on June 8, 2014,

http://www.reaganfoundation.org/tgcdetail.aspx?p=TG0923RRS&h1=0&h2=0&sw=&lm=reagan&args_a=cms&args_b=1&argsb=N&tx=1750. Reagan challenged the American people to “believe in ourselves and to believe in our capacity to perform great deeds, to believe that together with God’s help we can and will resolve the problems which now confront us. And after all, why shouldn’t we believe that? We are Americans.”

⁷¹ Tom Wicker, *Dwight D. Eisenhower*, New York, NY: Times Books, 2002, 16, 93. Eisenhower both won contests in an electoral landslide.

⁷² Hedrick Smith, “Poll Finds Reagan Leads after Debate,” *New York Times*, September 28, 1980, 1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Hedrick Smith, “Reagan, Anderson, Buoyed by Debate,” *New York Times*, September 29, 1980, 1. Reagan and Anderson both agreed that the debate went well, and each reserved any criticism for Carter, rather than for one another.

⁷⁵ Martin Schram, “Reagan Was the Major Beneficiary of Anderson’s Success,” *Washington Post*, September 23, 1980, 2.

admonished Carter for not debating, and begrudgingly gave Reagan praise for ensuring that Anderson did.⁷⁶

By yielding the stage to Reagan, Carter gave his principal opponent the opportunity to play frontrunner to Anderson's underdog, and faced an uphill battle in trying to thwart his momentum. More and more Americans were drawn to Reagan, and Anderson's poll numbers began to plummet in the first debate's aftermath. The League of Women Voters no longer considered him a viable candidate, and agreed to stage a debate featuring Reagan and Carter only.⁷⁷

If Carter refused to debate under any circumstances, whether against Reagan only or against both Reagan and Anderson, then the League's decision to exclude Anderson would have made no difference. The president could have cited the Iran hostage situation as an imminent crisis that required his full attention. After all, in all presidential elections since the ratification of the Constitution in 1788, there were only two presidential election years in which the candidates debated: 1960 and 1976. Carter's refusal to debate in 1980 would not have been anything out of the ordinary.

That Carter refused to take part in a three-way debate specifically, however, essentially forced him into accepting a one-on-one showdown with Reagan. Once Anderson was rendered irrelevant by the League of Women Voters, Carter was backed into a corner and had no practical choice but to debate.

⁷⁶ Editorial, "The Next Debate," *New York Times*, September 23, 1980, 22. The *Times* questioned Reagan's motives for championing Anderson's right to debate, but gave him credit nonetheless.

⁷⁷ Minow, 57; Corrado, 63; Anonymous, "Carter and Reagan To Debate Tuesday at Cleveland Facility," *Wall Street Journal*, October 22, 1980 reported that the League of Women voters dropped Anderson from consideration due to his waning poll numbers.

The Reagan-Carter finale instantly became the focal point of the campaign.⁷⁸ It was by far the more dramatic of the two 1980 debates for various reasons. First, it was the only debate between the two major-party nominees that season. Second, it took place only seven days before the election, thereby increasing the chances that the candidates' performances remained fresh on the voters' minds, rendering it that much more difficult to recover from a major debate blunder.⁷⁹ Third, as evidenced by the record-high viewership of eighty million, the voters were undoubtedly intrigued by a one-on-one showdown between a challenger who relished the television camera and an incumbent who shied away from it.⁸⁰ Former President Ford, the only person who could have counseled Reagan on debating Carter based on personal experience, predicted that if Reagan was perceived to be the debate's winner, "that will ensure his election."⁸¹ Ford's remark should not go unnoticed, as it made the case for recognition of the importance of the debates to the elections by a debate veteran, who understood that impact firsthand. That the debates were described as the premier factor in deciding the election unquestionably reaffirmed how much they mattered.

A key remark that served to elevate Reagan to Carter's level of prominence (as president), if not beyond it, was Reagan's response to whether he was nervous to share the stage with the president: "Not at all. I've been on the same stage with John Wayne."⁸² That statement relayed three messages. First, that the stage was as natural a setting to Reagan, who was a seasoned actor, as it was to the president. Second, that

⁷⁸ Minow, 57; Adam Clymer, "Carter and Reagan to Meet Tonight in Debate That Could Decide Race," *New York Times*, October 28, 1980. Clymer reported that both campaigns agreed that the debate could be the deciding factor.

⁷⁹ Lanoue, 170.

⁸⁰ Minow, 157.

⁸¹ F. Richard Ciccone, "Carter Labeled as Debate Underdog," *Chicago Tribune*, October 28, 1980, 6.

⁸² Schroeder, 20. Quoting an *NBC News* postscript of October 28, 1980.

compared to an iconic actor like John Wayne, Jimmy Carter was no one to get nervous about, regardless of the fact that he was the president of the United States. Finally, that Reagan had a quick wit and an affable personality, and that by electing him, Americans might expect a hearty dose of jokes mixed in with the hard news.

The debate's setting was Cleveland, Ohio, and moderated by Howard K. Smith of *ABC News*.⁸³ Twenty years earlier, Smith moderated the very first debate, between Kennedy and Nixon. The panelists were Marvin Stone, the editor of *U.S. News & World Report*, Harry Ellis of the *Christian Science Monitor*, William Hilliard of the *Portland Oregonian*, and Barbara Walters of *ABC News*.

Stone directed the first question to Reagan, asking him to explain the differences between Carter and himself regarding the use of American military power. Reagan's answer was crisp and bold, and made three substantial points: that he really did not know what the differences were between his and Carter's policies, because he did not know what Carter's policies were; that to alleviate any concerns that he was a warmonger, he said "I believe with all of my heart that our first priority must be world peace, and that the use of force is always and only a last resort, when everything else has failed, and then only with regard to our national security" and that America, because of its unique position in the world as a superpower that advocated freedom, was responsible for maintaining peace around the world.

Reagan thereby introduced American exceptionalism into the debate, which is a notion that existed well before the establishment of the United States, dating back to

⁸³ Reagan-Carter Debate, October 28, 1980, C-SPAN, retrieved on June 5, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33229-1>. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

Puritan settlements, and one that furthered the “city on a hill” image.⁸⁴ Reagan also blamed Carter’s weak foreign policy for the crises facing the United States. Though he did not mention it by name, he was referring to the Iran Hostage Crisis. The debate took place on day 360 of a crisis to which no end appeared to be in sight. In the opening minutes, Reagan effectively conveyed his nationalistic message, and the divergence of his and Carter’s respective approaches to America’s role on the world stage.

In a follow-up question, Stone asked Reagan how he intended to raise defense spending, cut taxes, and balance the budget. The challenger’s response was very clear. In fact, he spent the entire debate articulating his platform points, ensuring that any generalizations or mischaracterizations of his position were corrected. Reagan said that his economic program, supported by numerous top economists, would provide for a balanced budget, and that he was not proposing to cut spending, but to increase spending. Politicians have long derided their opponents for proposing “spending cuts,” that sound like net reductions, but which are actually reductions to the rates of increase, and Reagan prudently crystallized the difference.⁸⁵ More important than the substance of Reagan’s comments was his tone; he was calm and affable, yet firm and critical of misrepresentations of his positions, whether implicit or explicit, by the Carter campaign.

After struggling to justify why he deserved reelection given the high inflation and unemployment rates, Carter spoke about his most damaging crisis of all: the American hostages in Iran. Understanding that the issue might be too sensitive to explore directly, given that negotiations to release the hostages were ongoing, and anything Carter said could upset a very delicate situation, Walters asked Carter to elaborate on his long-term

⁸⁴ Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987, 20.

⁸⁵ For more discussion about use of rhetoric in presidential campaigns and administrations, see Alan Partington, *The Linguistics of Political Argument*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2003.

thoughts about how to deal with terrorists. Carter said that he would continue to control the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and blamed Reagan for not considering that an important issue. Reagan retorted that as Walters asked the question twice (first, of Carter), she ought to receive at least one answer, but then refrained from replying in any detail for fear that his answer might tamper with ongoing negotiations. If Carter had any promising information about a pending release, he was certainly also obliged to withhold it from the public, even though divulging it could have bolstered his status with the voters, which provides another example of how an incumbent might be at a particular disadvantage in the debates. Carter asserted that Reagan did not think nuclear proliferation to be an important issue, and Reagan responded that this assertion was false. This was one of the many times during the evening when Reagan accused Carter of misspeaking.

To portray Reagan as an extremist, Carter aligned himself even with Nixon and, more surprisingly, with his own 1976 rival, Ford. The president stated that for the past several years, both he and his predecessors' administrations worked with the Soviets to limit nuclear weapons, whereas Reagan stood on dangerous ground by opposing arms limitation. Reagan seized the opportunity to explain that he was not against arms limitation, simply against a treaty that clearly favored the Soviets. Reagan proposed an agreement that would reduce arms on both sides so that neither country could pose a nuclear threat to the other. Amid the discussion, Carter made mention of something that his staff strongly advised against, and might have contributed considerably to his undoing: he shared with the audience that he asked his daughter, Amy, who turned nine years old a week earlier, what the most important issue was, and she said it was

nuclear weaponry.⁸⁶ Perhaps Carter wanted to emphasize that even a child can understand the most pressing issue facing the world, or he may have been seeking to connect with the audience about a bonding moment with his daughter.

Unfortunately, neither message was conveyed as such. Instead, it appeared that Carter, who already seemed to be struggling to cope as president, given the numerous crises he was juggling simultaneously and unsuccessfully, was not beyond taking foreign policy advice from a child.⁸⁷ Carter's miscalculation is emblematic of Charles Osgood's extensive study of internal meaning.⁸⁸ Osgood maintained that audiences perceive messages based on their own personal understanding of them, which may not necessarily correlate with the communication the messenger intended to convey.⁸⁹

In retrospect, Carter's advisors claimed to have warned him against including that anecdote, and there was speculation that the president, realizing he made a mistake the moment he spoke, appeared tentative.⁹⁰ Debate footage does not reveal any change in Carter's demeanor, however.⁹¹ Reagan, using the opportunity to display his humor, made a post-debate quip about Carter's reference to his daughter, joking that when his children Ron and Patti were small, he often talked about nuclear power with them.⁹²

As in the debate against Anderson, Reagan came across as the more idealistic debater. Like Anderson, Carter warned about the need to conserve energy, whereas

⁸⁶ Schroeder, 142. Schroeder describes that Carter's Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan lamented not having been blunter at pre-debate strategy sessions about discouraging Carter from using the line, and that rhetoric expert Sam Popkin observed that Carter tensed as soon as he made the comment, realizing his mistake.

⁸⁷ Paul F. Boller, *Presidential Campaigns from George Washington to George W. Bush*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004, 361.

⁸⁸ James G. Snider and Charles Osgood, (eds.). *Semantic Differential Technique*, Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1969, 9-10.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Schroeder, 83.

⁹¹ Reagan-Carter.

⁹² Schroeder, 142.

Reagan described the United States not as energy poor, but as energy rich.⁹³ It was yet another example of Reagan's sunny outlook, and that what Reagan was saying was what the majority of Americans wanted to hear. Reagan biographer Dinesh D'Souza wrote that, having survived Watergate, stagflation, and the current Iran hostage crisis: "[t]he nation's woes called for nothing less than a man who could turn the tide of history and renew the American spirit."⁹⁴ Reagan used the debates as a positive tool to reassure Americans about such a national renewal. In contrast, Carter, who was at the time negotiating the hostages' release, worried that if the hostages were freed, the voters might accuse Carter of having manipulated the timing for political gain.⁹⁵ Rather than seizing the offensive by being the bearer of great news (of the hostages' release) to the nation, Carter fixated on the gloomier possibility.

It seemed a daunting task for Carter to convince the viewers that things would improve in America under his continued rule. Instead, he chose the seemingly safer path of continuing to attack Reagan's record and positions. At every turn, however, Reagan maintained that Carter's remarks were misleading distortions.⁹⁶ In attempting to distance himself from Reagan's proposal to change the Social Security system so that it would not become bankrupt, Carter stated that Reagan began his political career campaigning around the United States against Medicare.

Reagan's response was not only the highlight of the debate, but is also regarded as one of the most effective comments in debate history.⁹⁷ Having spent his last few turns

⁹³ Reagan-Carter debate.

⁹⁴ D'Souza, 35.

⁹⁵ Ciccone.

⁹⁶ Reagan-Carter. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

⁹⁷ Charles Whitfield, "US Election: Top 10 Debate Moments," *The Telegraph*, October 16, 2012, retrieved on May 18, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/us-election/9583195/US-election-top-10-debate-moments.html>. Whitfield ranked the "there you go again" line as one of the top ten moments in presidential debate

at the microphone stating that many of Carter's statements about him were simply not true, Reagan turned and looked at Carter, chuckled, and uttered the unforgettable words: "there you go again." Reagan then flashed his trademark smile and went on to explain that he only opposed that specific Medicare bill because he believed that a competing piece of legislation that was being considered at the time was better. Reagan insisted that he did not oppose the principle in providing health care for senior citizens.

"There you go again" very well might have sealed Carter's fate or, more appropriately, elevated Reagan into full acceptance by most Americans.⁹⁸ Carter later confided to Jim Lehrer that the line "showed that [Reagan] was relaxed and had a sense of humor, and it was a kind of denigrating thing for me."⁹⁹ Carter had looked grim all evening; his once trademark beaming smile was now a faint memory, replaced by a look of gloom and discomfort on his face, which inadvertently symbolized his painful tenure in office. In contrast, Reagan chuckled at what he labeled yet another Carter misstatement, and proceeded to correct him. Carter set the tone by indicating that he accepted nuclear weaponry advice from a child, and now Reagan completed the equation by effectively treating Carter himself as a child.¹⁰⁰

Reagan's "there you go again" was also historically significant in that, no matter how benign the delivery, it was probably the first debate "scolding," in the sense of one

history.; Kenneth T. Walsh, "6 Best Zingers from Past Presidential Debates, *U.S. News & World Report*, October 1, 2012, retrieved on May 18, 2014, <http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/ken-walshs-washington/2012/10/01/6-best-zingers-from-past-presidential-debates>. Walsh included the line among the six most memorable debate quotes; Schroeder, 147. Reagan biographer Lou Cannon described the line as "the high point of the campaign itself."

⁹⁸ Schroeder, 147. Schroeder characterized that line as the most pronounced example of the difference between Reagan's "cheerful disposition" and Carter's "pinched demeanor.;" Lehrer, 23-24. Jim Lehrer, who has moderated more debates than anyone else, described "there you go again" as the debate's "most famous" line, and referred to his own interview with Carter, during which the former president conceded that it was a memorable line that benefitted Reagan; William Safire, "There You Go Again," *New York Times*, October 30, 1980, 27. Safire echoed those sentiments, even using "there you go again" as the title for his column in order to underscore that point.

⁹⁹ Lehrer, 24.

¹⁰⁰ Reagan-Carter.

candidate seemingly having seized authority, and admonishing the other to the point of the latter being at a loss for words. Carter seemed tentative and insecure, while Reagan was confident and reassuring. It was a particularly poignant moment because the admonisher was the challenger, and the admonished the incumbent, thereby symbolizing a passing of the torch of leadership in America. Future debate seasons provided further examples of that type of scolding, which defined one candidate as the leader and the other as the follower, but “there you go again” in 1980 was the first.

With the ease of a seasoned storyteller, Reagan took pleasure in explaining a rather simple point in simple language to the millions of viewers. He reminded the world that four years earlier, while running against Ford, Carter pointed to what he called a misery index, which was the rate of employment added to the rate of inflation.¹⁰¹ At the time, Reagan continued, the misery index was 12.5 percent, and Carter said that no man with that size misery index during his presidency has a right to seek reelection. And the misery index under Carter, Reagan crowed, was over 20 percent.¹⁰²

Carter’s closing statement was a haphazard soliloquy about how he did his best, how lonely it is making a decision, and how every vote counts. He appeared to be a man who sensed his presidency was slipping away. He was able to prevail against his unspectacular opponent in 1976, but was unable to overcome a rival basking with charisma.

Reagan, in turn, asked the American people: “are you better off than you were four years ago?” If the answer was yes, Reagan continued, “why then, I think your choice is very obvious as to whom you will vote for. If you don’t agree, if you don’t think that this

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

course that we've been on for the last four years is what you would like to see us follow for the next four, then I could suggest another choice that you have."¹⁰³ True to character, Reagan was too humble to be so blunt as to explicitly say to vote for him instead of Carter.¹⁰⁴

Carter had good reason to look weary and beaten during the debate. Like Nixon, he mistakenly concluded that substance was a more important debate criterion than image.¹⁰⁵ Reagan, on the other hand, understood the primacy of image, verbal and nonverbal alike, and the power of television to project it. To punctuate a master performance, Reagan strode over to Carter, in full view of the camera, and shook the surprised president's hand.¹⁰⁶ The gesture worked to Reagan's advantage, as it made him look friendly and Carter seem flummoxed.¹⁰⁷

A poll taken by *ABC News* immediately following the debate indicated that Reagan won by a 2-to-1 margin.¹⁰⁸ Some criticized the poll for favoring Reagan. The telephone calls for the poll were made late in the evening, and were presumably too late in the day for most people, except for those on the West Coast, where Reagan's support was the strongest.¹⁰⁹ This strategy illustrates how polls and voter behavior can be manipulated by calculated use of time zones.¹¹⁰ Nonetheless, a poll taken by the Associated Press declared Reagan the victor, 46 to 34 percent, and, even more convincingly, a different

¹⁰³ Reagan-Carter.

¹⁰⁴ Kengor, "Ronald Reagan Was, at Heart, Humble," *The New Era*, January 26, 2011, retrieved on December 1, 2012, <http://sweethomenews.com/ronald-reagan-was-at-heart-humble-p354-97.htm>

¹⁰⁵ Schroeder, 19.

¹⁰⁶ Schroeder, 48.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Anonymous, "It's Reagan 2 to 1 in Poll by ABC after the Debate," *Chicago Tribune*, October 29, 1980, 10.

¹⁰⁹ David Nyhan, "Chalk up a Big One for Challenger," *Boston Globe*, October 30, 1980, 1.

¹¹⁰ For more discussion on how time zones affect American voter behavior, see William H. Flanagan and Nancy H. Zingale, *Political Behavior of the American People*, 12th Ed., Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2010.

survey that involved viewers pushing a button on a device from their homes while watching the debate live, preferred Reagan by an overwhelming 71 to 29 percent.¹¹¹

New York Times reporter John J. O'Connor contrasted Reagan's "easy smiles" with Carter's "puffy rigidity."¹¹² Robert L. Turner of the *Boston Globe*, in his article cleverly titled "Carter Strikes Aught," suggested that based on rumors that if elected, Reagan would cut entitlement programs – "if you weren't afraid of Ronald Reagan at 11PM last night, then he won the debate."¹¹³ Whereas other observers focused on Reagan's personality, Turner pointed out that the challenger also conveyed a positive impression regarding his proposed policies. The *Times*, which is clearly the most partisan of America's large, establishment newspapers, having endorsed only Democrats in all fourteen presidential races since 1960, ultimately endorsed Carter and convened its own debate focus group.¹¹⁴ The group overwhelmingly concluded that Reagan won the debate: most were very positive about Reagan, and even Carter supporters were providing unenthusiastic support for the incumbent.¹¹⁵

Some reporters reasoned that Reagan ultimately welcomed the one-on-one debate because his slim lead over Carter was slipping, and he thought a direct showdown would work to his advantage.¹¹⁶ Whatever the motive, a week later, the American voters

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² John J. O'Connor, "Instant Poll Steals Post-Debate Scene," *New York Times*, October 30, 1980, C26.

¹¹³ Robert L. Turner, "Carter Strikes Aught," *Boston Globe*, October 29, 1980, 1.

¹¹⁴ Bernard Weinraub, "Area Panel's Scorecard on the Debate: Reagan Won it By a Wide Margin," *New York Times*, October 30, 1980, B20. The *Chicago Tribune* by contrast, endorsed Republicans during those years, except in 2012, when it endorsed Democrat Barack Obama. The *Washington Post* has also endorsed all Democratic presidential candidates, but only began endorsing in 1976, and decided not to endorse anyone in 1988. The *Wall Street Journal* generally avoids presidential endorsements. For more information about the *New York Times*' gradual partisan shift, see Bob Kohn, *Journalistic Fraud*, Nashville, TN, WND Books, 2003.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Hedrick Smith, "Lead Slipping: A New Reagan Suits up for the Debate," *New York Times*, October 19, 1980, 1.

dispatched Carter from office in a landslide.¹¹⁷ Studies confirmed that the debates, particularly the Reagan-Carter debate, worked in the challenger's favor. There was a direct correlation between debate performance and voter behavior, insofar as those who thought Reagan won the debate voted for him and those who thought Carter lost the debate did not vote for him.¹¹⁸ Perhaps most important of all were the swing voters, who were uncommitted to either candidate before the debate: they were clearly more impressed by Reagan than by Carter after the debate, by 53 to 26 percent.¹¹⁹

William Safire, a longtime *New York Times* columnist and former speechwriter for President Nixon, made a particularly keen observation: that even if Carter outpointed Reagan from a technical perspective, as he said Nixon did to Kennedy in 1960, Carter, like Nixon, "lost the television war."¹²⁰ Safire viewed Reagan as too decent to be the puncher, but because of his strong sense of justice and fairness, he was a ferocious counterpuncher who defended himself effectively against unfair smears.¹²¹ Safire concluded that Reagan emerged from the debate showing the American people that he was "neither a warmonger nor a dope," and "warm" to Carter's "cold."¹²² Daniel Henninger of the *Wall Street Journal* also pointed out the role that television played in the debate and, by extension, in the campaign.¹²³ Henninger focused on the fact that the presidency of the United States essentially could be decided by "a 90-minute

¹¹⁷ Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People*, New York, NY, Harper-Collins, 1997, 918.

¹¹⁸ Lanoue, 181. One important example Lanoue cited was that of those who planned to vote for Carter, 42 percent did not think that he won the debate, as compared to only 22 percent of Reagan supporters vis-à-vis their candidate; Lanoue, 171-172, another example was the Survey Research Center's (SRC) National Election study, which revealed that among debate viewers, 79 percent of Republicans thought Reagan was more qualified than Carter to be president, whereas only 49 percent of Democrats thought Carter was more qualified.

¹¹⁹ Lanoue, 172. The remaining 21 percent remained undecided or did not draw a definitive conclusion.

¹²⁰ Safire, "There You Go Again."

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Daniel Henninger, "The Great Debate and Electronic Democracy," *Wall Street Journal*, October 30, 1980, 30.

show.”¹²⁴ Henninger’s interesting choice of the word “show” underscores the difference between a “show” and a “broadcast,” with the former necessitating a performance.

Reagan’s own pollster was extremely thankful that the debate was on television, and thereby viewed by tens of millions of voters.¹²⁵ In that sense, Reagan’s success can be attributed not only to using television to communicate an ideology he had honed for decades to an audience of tens of millions, but also by simple but telling gestures such as appearing affable by shaking Carter’s hand, in contrast with the president’s awkward response. Only the face-to-face nature of the debates, and only the medium of television, could have combined to cement that image in living rooms across America from then until Election Day, when Reagan won decisively.¹²⁶

The first and third debate seasons involved perhaps the two individuals who mastered the art of televised debates better than any of the other participants to date, John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan. In terms of unseating an incumbent’s administration, Kennedy’s task was considerably more difficult than Reagan’s. The former had to compete against the popularity of the prosperous Eisenhower years, whereas the latter ran amid a national mood of dejection.¹²⁷ By that same measure, it also made Reagan’s charismatic and reassuring demeanor that much more significant than Kennedy’s because the nation thirsted more for it in 1980 than in 1960. Television remained a tremendous influence in shaping the debates. The Reagan-Carter debate was not an aesthetic mismatch, as was that between the telegenic Kennedy and the

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Martin Schram, “After the debate, the pollsters scramble,” *Washington Post*, October 30, 1980, A1.

¹²⁶ Because of repeated telecasts and post-debate analyses, footage from the debate, including the closing handshake, were often replayed on television news shows.

¹²⁷ Gallup Poll, 1976 and 1980, retrieved on December 1, 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/158387/americans-feel-better-off-worse-off-financially.aspx>. In 1976, almost 50 percent of Americans were optimistic about their financial situation, as compared to only 36 percent in 1980.

perspiring, badly shaven Nixon in 1960. Nor was there a humiliating slip, such as Ford's insistence in 1976 that there was no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. Instead, it was about personality. Reagan seemed confident, affable, and reassuring, while Carter appeared grim, ill at ease, and defeated. Reagan's natural ease in front of the camera evoked the reassurance the anxiety-laden nation sought, and introduced an element of first impression to the debates: it is not enough to avoid a poor aesthetic appearance or a gaffe, as a debater can look bad simply by standing next to a debater who turns in a masterful performance.

The Great Communicator used the dominant television medium to convey his message of reassurance and optimistic nationalism. He was not the first president to refer to Winthrop's "city upon a hill." President-elect Kennedy who, not unlike Reagan, understood the far-reaching impact of televised debates and capitalized on that during the 1960 election, also warned that "today the eyes of all people are truly upon us."¹²⁸ Reagan had gone further, however, not only by identifying America's pivotal challenges on the world stage, but also in reassuring the voters that America would triumph over them. On the debate stage, Reagan spoke directly to the American people, conveying a reassuring message of optimistic nationalism, replete with the communication theories of fantasy image, rhetoric, and divergence. He understood full well the importance of aural and visual communication, and, despite the heartfelt authenticity of his message to which Cannon and Lieven referred, he understood that succeeding in the debates required a masterful performance.

¹²⁸ John F. Kennedy, Address to the Massachusetts General Court, January 9, 1961, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, retrieved on June 9, 2014, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/OYhUZE2Qo0-ogdV7ok900A.aspx>.

John Anderson proved to be a critical factor, because his presence resulted in avoiding the three-way debate, and Reagan's outperformance of him in the first debate resulted in his fading into relative obscurity. That, in turn, forced Carter to face Reagan one-on-one. A dozen years later, in 1992, then-incumbent President George H.W. Bush faced the same hurdle of two debate opponents and, perhaps recognizing the impact on an election of a three-way debate, after all, he and Reagan won that election, was also averse to a three-way debate.¹²⁹

Interestingly and inexplicably, the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), which provides the debate transcripts on its website, provided a transcribed version of the Reagan-Carter debate, with one key phrase completely missing: "there you go again."¹³⁰ There is no indication to think the omission is based on anything more than human error in transcription, though there is a striking irony that the line left out is the one numerous post-debate analysts found so compelling.

Of the three debate season election winners to that point, Kennedy died before having the chance to agree to reelection debates, though his likely principal opponent, and 1964 Republican nominee, Barry Goldwater, said that he and Kennedy agreed in advance to a series of debates.¹³¹ Carter was reluctant to debate in 1980 at first, but then relented when his reticence damaged his image. Why would Reagan, or any other incumbent, especially one with a substantial lead in the polls dare tempt fate and debate?

¹²⁹ Minow, 107-108. Bush wanted to avoid the debates until intense public pressure eventually caused him to relent and participate.

¹³⁰ <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-28-1980-debate-transcript> June 12, 2010. The CPD has not responded to repeated requests, via electronic mail, to correct the record.

¹³¹ Schroeder, 16.

Beyond making and breaking the images of candidates, by 1980 the debates had forged their own image, as fora in which challengers could capitalize and defeat the respective incumbents. The debates mattered, both to the extent that pundits attributed candidates' victories and defeats to them, and to the extent that there was speculation about future candidates being leery of participating in them.

**DO THE DEBATES MATTER? AN EXAMINATION OF THE PROGRESSIVELY
INFLUENTIAL ROLE OF MAJOR PARTY DEBATES ON
AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: 1960-2008
CHAPTER 5: 1984 – FIRST INCUMBENT VICTORY ALMOST THWARTED BY
NEGATIVE IMAGE OF ADVANCED AGE**

Republican Ronald Reagan (Incumbent President) and George H.W. Bush (Incumbent Vice President) v. Democrat Walter Mondale (Former Vice President) and Geraldine Ferraro (Representative – NY). Reagan-Mondale 1 (65.1 million), Reagan-Mondale 2 (67.3 million), Bush-Ferraro (56.7 million).

The first three debate seasons impacted the ensuing elections to varying degrees by enhancing the images of the challengers while impairing those of the incumbents, resulting in the incumbents losing all three of those elections. This fact supported President Eisenhower’s observation that incumbent debaters are inherently at a disadvantage.¹ This chapter examines the debates’ impact on the 1984 election, particularly as it related to Reagan’s advanced age.

If Reagan, who was the incumbent in 1984, had refused to debate, it would have been the first time since 1975. Reagan enjoyed high approval ratings and a comfortable lead over the Democratic challenger, Walter Mondale, who was vice president during Carter’s term.² It did not appear likely that his reelection would be in peril if he declined to debate, and so he became the first incumbent in American history to take the unnecessary risk of debating, even though, in all likelihood he would have won

¹ Boston Globe Staff, “Bay Stater Quotes Ike: Debates Don’t Help Nixon, Boston Globe, October 13, 1960, 1. Eisenhower said the man in office is in a position to be second-guessed by a man on the sidelines, one who is not holding office.

² Gallup, Presidential Approval Ratings, retrieved on January 19, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx#2>. Reagan’s approval ratings at the time of reelection were 55 percent; Gallup, 1984 Election Heat Trends, retrieved on January 19, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/110548/gallup-presidential-election-trialheat-trends-19362004.aspx#2>. Reagan led Mondale by approximately 20 points in the weeks leading up to the first debate.

reelection anyway. The gamble almost backfired, as Reagan's poor showing in the first debate raised questions about his age (at 73, he was already the oldest president in history). In a wider context, the perception that Reagan had become too old for the job served as a lens through which to view the emphasis of youth in American culture. Nonetheless, Reagan performed effectively in the subsequent debate, regained his momentum, and coasted to a landslide victory. By taking that unnecessary risk, Reagan set a standard, albeit implicitly, that no incumbent president should avoid debating. Essentially, the debates became *de facto* fixtures in presidential campaigns. In the process, Reagan also became the first incumbent to debate and win the election, breaking the incumbents' losing streak of the first three debate seasons.

Reagan biographer Lou Cannon, in *The Role of a Lifetime*, covers the 1984 debates thoroughly and attributes the president's subpar performance in the first debate to lack of adequate preparation, which was perhaps due to complacency.³ Historian Richard Reeves' *Ronald Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination*, an account that covers Reagan during the eight years of his presidency, includes even-handed analysis of the 1984 debates. The 1980 debates were excluded, as they preceded Reagan's term of office.⁴ An inside look at the 1984 race from the campaign managers, in *Campaign for President: the Managers Look at 1984*, though disproportionately focused on the Democratic primaries (Reagan faced no viable challenger in the Republican primaries), discusses the campaign's momentum swings after the first and second Reagan-Mondale debates.⁵

³ Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, New York, NY: Public Affairs, 1991, 471-473.

⁴ Richard Reeves, *Ronald Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2005.

⁵ Jonathan Moore (ed.), *Campaign for President: the Managers Look at 1984*, Cambridge, MA: Auburn House, 1986.

Reagan's advanced age was compounded by symptoms later diagnosed as Alzheimer's disease. Lesley Stahl, a White House correspondent during the Reagan years, described horrifying moments when the president seemed to lack awareness of his surroundings and the ability to respond to simple questions: "Reagan was as shriveled as a kumquat," Stahl wrote in 1999, in a retrospective about her departure from the White House in 1986.⁶ "He was so frail, his skin so paper-thin...His bony hands were dotted with age spots, one bleeding into another...Reagan didn't seem to know who I was. He gave me a distant look with those milky eyes and shook my hand weakly. How had he deteriorated so quickly? I had just seen him the week before."⁷ But, within moments, Stahl wrote, "the glaze in his eyes cleared, the freckles on his hands faded, the skin on the back of his neck tightened, and color came back to his cheeks, [and he became] jaunty and alive."⁸

Reagan's son Ron wrote *My Father at 100* in 2011, memorializing Reagan's life in exactly a century after his birth.⁹ He described concern about his father's "mellowing behavior" around the time of the first debate against Mondale: "Some voters were beginning to imagine grandpa – who can never find his reading glasses – in charge of a bristling nuclear arsenal, and it was making them nervous."¹⁰ Specifically referring to the debate, he wrote "my heart sank as he floundered his way through his responses, fumbling with his notes, uncharacteristically lost for words. He looked tired and bewildered...Dad knew he'd performed badly but convinced himself he'd been

⁶ Lesley Stahl, *Reporting Live*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1999, 256.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Stahl, 257.

⁹ Ron Reagan, *My Father at 100*, New York, NY: Penguin, 2011.

¹⁰ Ron Reagan, 205.

'overtrained.' There might have been some truth to that."¹¹ In Kansas City two weeks later, the younger Reagan was there to support his father for the second debate, and was relieved that "[w]hatever had been bothering my father, he seemed to have vanquished it."¹²

After the debate, Mondale told aides "This guy is gone. It's scary. He's really not up to it."¹³ Tellingly, however, as soon as the cameras were turned off, Reagan said: "God, I was awful."¹⁴

According to the National Institute on Aging, Alzheimer's disease typically affects people over age sixty, and afflicts one in eighty-five Americans, approximately 1.5 percent.¹⁵ Statistically, Reagan was not a likely candidate, though his seemingly uncharacteristic behavior could have been a reaction, even if not a conscious one, to the broader issue of gerontophobia. Psychologist Dale Archer wrote about America's obsession with youth, describing an ever-growing demand for hair dyes, cosmetic surgery, and medication that enhances sexual performance.¹⁶ David Hackett Fischer specifically wrote about being taken by surprise and experiencing a period of denial upon realizing one's own aging process.¹⁷ Fischer described how, by the 1960s, the United States transitioned from exalting old age, where, for example, some of the Founding Fathers had worn white powdered wigs to seem far older than their years, to a

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Herbert S. Parmet, *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee*, New York, NY: Scribner 1997, 295.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ "Alzheimer's Disease Fact Sheet," National Institute of Aging, retrieved on June 14, 2014, <http://www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/publication/alzheimers-disease-fact-sheet>.

¹⁶ Dale Archer, MD, "Forever Young: America's Obsession with Never Growing Old," *Psychology Today*, October 2, 2013, retrieved on January 21, 2014, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/reading-between-the-headlines/201310/forever-young-americas-obsession-never-growing-old>.

¹⁷ David Hackett Fischer, *Growing Old in America*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977, 3.

rejection of old age.¹⁸ That transition extended to presidential politics, as John Kennedy projected the image of youth by shunning the fedora, which had been a staple of American men's wardrobe.¹⁹ Perhaps Reagan, who spent several decades in film and television, was all too aware of the negative image of aging when prompting his team to request softer stage lighting for the final debate, which was presumably aimed to make the president's wrinkles less noticeable.²⁰

In their 1998 monograph, *Successful Aging*, geriatrician John Wallis Rowe and gerontology scholar Robert L. Kahn wrote that as people grow older, they become more accustomed to the concept of aging.²¹ The particular age they consider "old" also shifts higher, which is significant with regards to older political candidates insofar as the percentage of senior voters also increased over the previous three decades.²² A year after Reagan's reelection, Dr. Andrew Weil addressed America's "obsession with youth" and unhealthy anxiety about the reality of aging: "[W]hether...Botox or cosmetic surgery for the purpose of making it easier to pretend that aging is not happening[,] I don't think that's mentally healthy. I think it is healthy to observe the fact that we're aging, that we're moving along this continuum of life. I don't think it's good to deny that."²³ John Brain wrote that not all cultures are fixated on youth but particularly in America, youth is

¹⁸ Fischer, 4.

¹⁹ Neil Steinberg, *Hatless Jack: The President, The Fedora and the Death of the Hat*, New York, NY: Penguin, 2004, 185.

²⁰ Anonymous, "A Debate Wrinkle, Reagan Wants Softer Light," *United Press International*, reprinted in the *Chicago Tribune*, October 21, 1984, 20.

²¹ John Wallis Rowe and Robert L. Kahn, *Successful Aging*, New York, NY: Random House, 1998, 17-18.

²² Robert H. Binstock, "Older Voters and the 2010 U.S. Election: Implications for 2012 and Beyond?" *The Gerontologist*, Volume 52 No. 3, 2012, 408-417, 409. By 2008, over 70 percent of eligible voters 65 and older voted in the presidential election.

²³ "Dr. Andrew Weil Says Americans are Obsessed with Youth," *ABC News*, December 11, 2005, retrieved on June 14, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/ThisWeek/Health/story?id=1395124>.

“so valued and age so fearfully resisted, [and] the American ideal is young, physical, full of potential, and older people as a group are treated as over-the-hill.”²⁴

Age aside, Ronald Reagan had very little to worry about politically in terms of being reelected. He took office with inflation at an alarming 13 percent and unemployment at 7.5 percent, and four years later, during his administration, inflation fell to less than 4 percent, with 7.3 million new jobs in two years.²⁵ Reagan’s high marks were the result of more than just the good economic news. The nation’s status in the world improved literally from the day Reagan took office on January 20, 1981, when he announced the good news that “the planes bearing our prisoners left Iranian air space, and they’re now free of Iran.”²⁶ By relaying the news Americans longed to hear for over a year on his inauguration day, Reagan indeed began his tenure on a high note.

Reagan advocated a significant military buildup in order to enjoy stronger bargaining power when negotiating nuclear disarmament with the Soviet Union, which was a policy encapsulated in his oft-repeated slogan: “peace through strength,” a modern version of President Theodore Roosevelt’s “speak softly but carry a big stick.”²⁷ On October 23, 1983, over 300 American peacekeeping troops in Beirut, Lebanon were killed by a barracks bomb and a suicide bomber in what in Reagan described as “the saddest day

²⁴ John Brain, “America’s Fear of Aging,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 2, 1991, retrieved on June 15, 2014, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1991-04-02/news/1991092131_1_older-people-hierarchies-fear-of-aging.

²⁵ Robert W. Merry, *Where They Stand: The American Presidents in the Eyes of Voters and Historians*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2012, 195-196.

²⁶ Steven R. Weisman, “Reagan Takes Oath As 40th President; Promises An ‘Era Of National Renewal,’” *New York Times*, Jan 20, 1981, retrieved on December 23, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/big/0120.html#article>.

²⁷ Dinesh D’Souza, *Ronald Reagan: An Ordinary Man, An Extraordinary Leader*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997, 136; for more discussion on Theodore Roosevelt’s strategy to maintain national security through military might, see James M. Strock, *Theodore Roosevelt on Leadership: Executive Lessons from the Bully Pulpit*, New York, NY: Random House, 2003.

of my presidency, perhaps the saddest day of my life.”²⁸ Just two days later, however, America launched a successful invasion of Grenada, at the request of the Organization of American States, to stabilize that country’s government and to ensure the safety of American medical students there.²⁹ The maneuver was the first victorious military conflict in the post-Vietnam era, and boosted the image of a strong America, and the morale of military and civilian Americans alike.³⁰ That the invasion lasted days rather than decades resulted in broad national support, causing House Speaker Thomas “Tip” O’Neill to reverse his original opposition to it.³¹ On the domestic front, *Time* magazine credited Reagan for engineering “one of the most stunning economic turnarounds in US history.”³²

The *New York Times*’ James Reston praised Reagan for agreeing to debate Mondale even though he was all but guaranteed reelection.³³ Reston described Reagan as generous for agreeing to debate, because he had such a large lead that he could withstand any negative impact from refusing to do so. All incumbent presidents since 1936 with an approval rating of 50 percent or higher won reelection by landslides or near-landslides.³⁴ At the time Reagan agreed to debate Mondale, his approval rating was 55 percent. Moreover, the two debate-era incumbents who chose to forgo the

²⁸ Cannon, 386-387.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ For more discussion about how the Grenada invasion restored America’s morale vis-à-vis military actions, particularly since the negative impact left on it by Vietnam, see Mark Adkin, *Urgent Fury: The Battle for Grenada*, Philadelphia, PA: Trans-Atlantic Publications, 1989.

³¹ Hendrick Smith, “O’Neill Now Calls Grenada Invasion ‘Justified’ Action,” *New York Times*, November 9, 1983, retrieved on July 28, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/11/09/world/o-neill-now-calls-grenada-invasion-justified-action.html>.

³² Charles P. Alexander, “That Monster Deficit,” *Time*, March 5, 1984, retrieved on December 23, 2012, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,952362,00.html>

³³ James Reston, “Debating the Debates,” *New York Times*, Oct 7, 1984, 21.

³⁴ Frank Newport and Joseph Carroll, “Reflections on Presidential Job Approval and Reelection Odds,” Gallup, June 10, 2003, retrieved on December 23, 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/8608/reflections-presidential-job-approval-reelection-odds.aspx>. Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon, and, following Reagan, Bill Clinton.

option of debating their challengers and instead relied on their leads, Lyndon Johnson in 1964 and Richard Nixon in 1972, won by two of the biggest landslides in American history.³⁵ Accordingly, forgoing the debates in post-1960 America was not necessarily a political liability.

By 1984, there was enough historical evidence to suggest what could go wrong in a debate: Nixon's appearance in 1960 and Ford's gaffe in 1976 being two memorable examples. Worse yet, what if Reagan slipped on his way to the podium? What if, like Nixon, he had a high fever the night of the debate and thus either had to cancel or risk looking pallid? Reagan was in excellent health but, then again, so was President George H.W. Bush when in January 1992, as a result of the stomach flu, he vomited during his meal at a dinner in his honor at the home of Japanese Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa, and then collapsed.³⁶ Such an incident could be damaging under any circumstances, but more destructive in front of a captive audience of tens of millions of viewers all over the United States and throughout the world watching a debate.

With Reagan's aim to establish a stronger America economically and militarily well underway, he enjoyed a 20-point lead over Mondale in the polls.³⁷ Phil Gailey of the *New York Times* described Reagan's popularity as so tremendous that Mondale would inevitably find it intimidating and almost insurmountable.³⁸ Gailey noted that Mondale

³⁵ 1964 General Election Results, David Leip's Atlas of Presidential Elections, retrieved on December 23, 2012, <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?year=1964>; 1972 General Election Results, <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/index.html>. Johnson won 486 electoral votes to 52, and 44 of 50 states; Nixon won 520 to 17, and 49 of 50.

³⁶ Michael Wines, "Bush Collapses at State Dinner with the Japanese," *New York Times*, January 9, 1992, retrieved on December 23, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/01/09/world/bush-in-japan-bush-collapses-at-state-dinner-with-the-japanese.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

³⁷ Gallup.

³⁸ Phil Gailey, "In Debate Tonight, Will the Issues Matter?" *New York Times*, October 7, 1984, 1.

needed to be aggressive, without seeming to be attacking Reagan personally.³⁹ Jack Nelson of the *Los Angeles Times* also thought Mondale should be on the attack, as his best chance of “rescuing his beleaguered presidential campaign.”⁴⁰ Also, Pat Brown, whom Reagan debated and unseated in the 1966 California gubernatorial race, essentially told Mondale that there was not really very much he could do against Reagan.⁴¹ The 1984 race appeared to be a formality rather than a battle, until the first debate was held.

Barbara Walters of *ABC News* moderated the first debate from Louisville, Kentucky on October 7. The panelists were James Wieghart of the Scripps-Howard News Service, Diane Sawyer, of CBS’ show, *60 Minutes*, and Fred Barnes of the *Baltimore Sun*.⁴² Walters, who moderated the final Carter-Ford debate in 1976, criticized both the Reagan and Mondale campaigns for being so disagreeable in selecting moderators; they had hundreds from whom to choose and agreed on only three.⁴³ Although there was no discernible advantage or disadvantage to any particular debater in any debate season regarding favorable panelists, that the Reagan and Mondale camps were so meticulous in selecting the questioners underscored how significant the debates became in presidential campaign culture, and how much they mattered to the candidates themselves. The Mondale camp, in fact, negotiated for placement of the respective podia at an angle that allowed Mondale to pivot his body toward Reagan and ask him a question directly, in a more confrontational style, just as Kennedy did to his

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Jack Nelson, “Mondale to Come out Swinging,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 7, 1984, 1.

⁴¹ Schroeder, 68.

⁴² Reagan-Mondale Debate 1, October 7, 1984, C-SPAN, retrieved on August 6, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33459-1>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

advantage in the final debate with Nixon.⁴⁴ Reagan, in turn, wanted more lights on the audience so that he could see the faces in the crowd, rather than feel as if he was talking into a dark and unpopulated room.⁴⁵

Reagan strode out to greet his opponent center stage, looking every bit the strong, confident, and seemingly ageless chief executive.⁴⁶ The camera then panned to each candidate as Ridings introduced him to the crowd. Apparently unaware that the camera was on him at that moment, Reagan was looking away and had an anxious and even worried expression on his face. Mondale, by contrast, looked squarely into the living rooms of millions of Americans and gave a slight nod of introduction as Ridings spoke his name. Although Reagan's rare miscue was a momentary lapse of timing, the voters' first glimpse of him that evening conceivably left a subtle if not indelible impression that Reagan was getting too old to focus, particularly in light of what occurred later in the debate.

Wieghart asked Reagan about arguably the most troublesome domestic issue, the budget deficit, and whether he had a "secret plan" to address it.⁴⁷ The "secret plan" reference evoked memories of another Republican president, Richard Nixon, who, in 1968, prior to winning the election maintained that he had a secret plan to end the

⁴⁴ Schroeder, 218. Mondale attempted the "pivot" in 1984 as did Al Gore in 2000 against George W. Bush. For more discussion about the perceptions candidates create in televised debates, see Kathleen Hall Jamieson and David S. Birdsell, *Presidential Debates*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988; Myles Martel, *Political Campaign Debates: Images, Strategies, and Tactics*, New York, NY: Longman, 1983.

⁴⁵ Reagan-Mondale 1; For more discussion about how the candidates increased debate preparation, including requests about stage lighting, podium, and other aesthetics, see Newton N. Minow and Craig L. Lamay, *Inside the Presidential Debates*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

⁴⁶ Reagan-Carter. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

⁴⁷ Although the American economy was booming, the nation was in the midst of record-high deficits.

Vietnam War.⁴⁸ Reagan responded: “I have a plan – not a secret plan. As a matter of fact, it is the economic recovery program that we presented when I took office in 1981.”⁴⁹ With that opening sentence, Reagan neutralized any negative images of Nixon redux that Wieghart conceivably insinuated.⁵⁰

Mondale began by criticizing Reagan for ignoring the deficit, but asserted that he respected both the man and the office, thereby appearing collegial, even deferential. But he criticized Reagan for not leveling with the American people about how to fix the mounting deficit problem.⁵¹ When Diane Sawyer reminded Mondale that he received lower ratings in the polls in terms of leadership compared to Reagan, Mondale’s response, “[w]ell, I think we’re getting better all the time[,]” sounded rather weak.⁵²

In responding to Mondale, Reagan at one point said: “You know, I wasn’t going to say this at all, but I can’t help it. There you go again.”⁵³ The crowd laughed, but the line was not as heartily embraced as it was four years earlier, maybe because Walters admonished the crowd not to cheer, but perhaps because by 1984 it no longer seemed spontaneous, and it was much like watching the same standup comedy routine live for a second time. Moreover, that the line seemed anachronistic to some extent symbolized that Reagan’s time, too, had passed. Alan Schroeder described the tactic as backfiring, concluding that Reagan walked into Mondale’s trap.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ For more discussion about Nixon’s reference to a secret plan to end Vietnam and its impact on the 1968 presidential election and his ensuing administration, see Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, New York, NY: Harper-Collins, 2007, and Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, Lawrence, KS, University Press of Kansas, 2002.

⁴⁹ Reagan-Mondale 1.

⁵⁰ The “secret plan” reference did not experience media coverage, as the press was focused on Mondale’s potential post-debate momentum.

⁵¹ Reagan-Mondale 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Reagan-Mondale 1.

⁵⁴ Schroeder, 52.

If Mondale's timing and delivery were better, he might have turned Reagan's words against him, but the opportune moment to counterattack passed when Reagan went on to make critical points that put Mondale on the defensive.⁵⁵ Mondale pointed out that in 1980 "there you go again" was Reagan's response to Carter's charge that Reagan would cut Medicare, "and what did you do right after the election? You went out and tried to cut twenty billion dollars out of Medicare." The trap to which Schroeder referred would have been much more effective if Mondale had begun with that counterattack, rather than clarifying other points he was making. Nonetheless, Reagan, appeared either annoyed or caught off guard, or perhaps both. He irritably bit on his tongue, folded outside of his mouth, and softly uttered "mm-hmm."⁵⁶ Rather weakly, Mondale ended with: "and so, when you say 'there you go again,' people remember this, you know." Mondale then moved away from the topic and continued speaking, until Walters cut him off in mid-sentence, telling him that his time was up. "Sorry," he replied.⁵⁷

Unlike Mondale, Reagan kept his response short and to the point. Reagan even said "I gave you back some of that time," referring to Walter's penchant for sticking to the time limitations, which drew some laughter from the audience.⁵⁸ Yet again, the "Teflon President" appeared to emerge from Mondale's strongest onslaught unscathed.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, whereas a transcript published in a newspaper would not have depicted Reagan's tongue-folded "mm-hmm," the televised image did both in its live transmission and in subsequent rebroadcasts.

⁵⁵ Anonymous, "Bush Attempts to Shift Attention from Finances," Associated Press, October 5, 1984. Mondale accused Vice President Bush of not having paid his full share of income taxes.

⁵⁶ Reagan-Mondale 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Patricia Schroeder, "Nothing Stuck to 'Teflon' President," *USA Today*, June 6, 2004, retrieved on June 25, 2012, http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2004-06-06-schroeder_x.htm. The term "Teflon President" was coined by Schroeder, to describe how any of his presidency's shortcomings did not appear to affect his popularity.

Whether or not Reagan was psychologically affected by Mondale's trap was another matter. Perhaps because of the Mondale quip, because he was not at his best on that particular evening, or simply because he had become too old for such long encounters, Reagan seemed to lose energy quickly. For much of the remaining half hour, he appeared tired, distracted, and even clumsy. The hour mark in a ninety-minute debate was dubbed "the witching hour" by debate analysts, as it was the time in the debate when candidates might be lulled into letting down their guard and losing steam.⁶⁰

Describing Reagan's performance in the first debate as "his greatest humiliation as a public figure," as Schroeder did, does not account for the fact that because Reagan was a better orator than Mondale to begin with; the fall from grace only brought him down to Mondale's level, and that the audience for some portion of the evening was subjected to two subpar debaters, not an effective one and an ineffective one.⁶¹

Reagan made his closing statement first. It seemed that the old campaigner regained enough of the momentum he lost after the "there you go again exchange" to conclude effectively. Walters then confused him, and everyone else, by telling Reagan that he did not give his rebuttal; Reagan pointed out that he did, but laughed and said "I'm all confused now."⁶² As it happens, Reagan was correct; the gaffe was Walters', not his. That Reagan chose to laugh at his own confusion, albeit one caused by Walters' mistake, might have perpetuated the image that he was getting old. Turning again to his record, Reagan began awkwardly, piecing together incomplete messages, but

⁶⁰ Alan Schroeder, 78-79. Many of the debates' most notable mistakes were made during that time, including Ford's comment about no domination of Eastern Europe, and Dan Quayle's leaving himself wide open for Lloyd Bentsen's "you're no Jack Kennedy" remark in 1988. For more discussion about the "witching hour" in debates, see Roger Simon, *Show Time: The American Political Circus and the Race for the White House*, New York, NY: Random House, 1998.

⁶¹ Schroeder, 148.

⁶² *Ibid.*

straightened himself out and asked: “Is America better off than it was 4 years ago?”

Throughout the campaign, Reagan repeated his line from 1980: “are you better off than you were four years ago?”⁶³ It was more important, Reagan continued, to ask if America was better off as a whole. He added that the answer is “yes,” but that it was only the beginning, and if the job were done he might not have sought a second term.⁶⁴ Evoking the sunny optimism on which he based his entire “Morning in America” campaign theme, Reagan declared: “I think we’ve given the American people back their spirit. I think there’s an optimism in the land and a patriotism, and I think that we’re in a position once again to heed the words of Thomas Paine, who said: ‘We have it in our power to begin the world all over again.’”⁶⁵ With that, Reagan rested his case.

Mondale addressed Reagan’s “are you better off” question, concluding that the wealthy were better off, the middle class were about where they were before, but those with “modest income” were worse off.⁶⁶ His analysis grew more powerful when he asked, skeptically, “will we be better off” under four more years of Reagan? Mondale’s strategy was to be grateful and deferential to the president for a job fairly well done, and to implement a “gold watch” strategy, whereby Mondale would symbolically nudge Reagan aside, as if the president faced age-related mandatory retirement.⁶⁷

⁶³ Reagan asked that question again, in 1984, as he did in 1980, throughout the campaign, not least of which in his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in Dallas Texas on August 23, 1984.

⁶⁴ Reagan-Mondale, 1.

⁶⁵ Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History, retrieved on January 6, 2013, <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/age-reagan/timeline-terms/reagan%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cmorning-america%E2%80%9D>. “Morning in America” was the theme of Reagan’s reelection campaign.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Schroeder, 61. The term was coined by Democratic strategist Pat Caddell, based on the notion that Mondale should praise Reagan for his service to the country, but figuratively give him a “gold watch,” suggesting that it is time for Reagan to retire.

Mondale thanked Reagan for agreeing to debate. “He didn’t have to, and he did, and we all appreciate it.”⁶⁸ That sentence revealed quite a lot about the campaign. Mondale surely appreciated it the most, as Reagan essentially handed him a chance, however small, to climb back into contention. Reagan’s lead was significant, but if he had opted for a Rose Garden strategy (a refrain from active campaigning), rumors that he was getting too old for the rigors of a debate could have arisen and caused some to wonder whether at age seventy-three he was simply too old to continue in the job.⁶⁹

There was near-uniform consensus in the post-debate analysis that Reagan was uncharacteristically listless, and there was growing speculation that age finally caught up with him. One reporter noted that Mondale “clearly won” the first debate.⁷⁰ Another wrote that “Mondale jolted Reagan by thoroughly outclassing him.”⁷¹ An overnight poll declared Mondale to be the winner, 52 percent to 32 percent.⁷² A *New York Times*/CBS poll conducted after the debate showed that 47 percent of the voters thought more highly of Mondale after the debate, compared to only 6 percent who thought more highly of Reagan.⁷³ In fact, 27 percent responded that as a result of the debate, they no longer thought that Reagan was as sharp as he once was.⁷⁴ Gerontologist Lawrence Klein differentiated between “young-old” and “old-old” brackets. The former category spans ages sixty-five to seventy-five, which meant that halfway into his second term, Reagan

⁶⁸ Reagan-Mondale, 1.

⁶⁹ Lawrence L. Knutson, “Rose Garden Strategy Can Prove Thorny for Incumbents,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 14, 1996. The “Rose Garden” strategy refers to incumbent presidents who refrain from active campaigning, remaining (figuratively) in the White House Rose Garden.

⁷⁰ Jon Margolis, “Pressure’s on before Next Debate,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 14, 1984, D6.

⁷¹ Steve Neal, “Mondale Jabs at Reagan as Unready for Rematch,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 15, 1984, 4.

⁷² Richard E. Meyer, “Candidate Camps Assess the Debate,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 1984, B1.

⁷³ Adam Clymer, “Poll Finds Debate Gave Mondale a Small Gain,” *New York Times*, Oct 11, 1984, 11.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

would enter the latter and that 10 percent of people at age seventy-five suffer from dementia or senility.⁷⁵

Polls taken by *ABC News* and *Newsweek* also reflected viewers' perceptions that Mondale won the debate, by 39 to 35 percent and 54 to 35 percent, respectively.⁷⁶ Mondale's senior campaign adviser, Richard Leone, was exuberant after the debate, boasting that "[w]e're all several inches taller," and that Mondale's performance was "the beginning of the turnaround."⁷⁷ The *Wall Street Journal* summarized the phenomenon, describing how pundits and pollsters alike agreed that Mondale won.⁷⁸ Some wondered whether Mondale exposed Reagan's age, and whether that was enough of a factor to change the inevitability of Reagan's reelection.⁷⁹ Pollsters on both sides believed that Mondale created a chance to revive his campaign.⁸⁰ Others observed that Reagan was out of rhythm, irritated, and uncharacteristically rattled.⁸¹

Ironically, Reagan's reputation as "The Great Communicator," in the context of the first debate was a liability.⁸² Had Reagan been considered a subpar speaker, his performance might have been evaluated as expected. Because he was expected to win the debate rather easily, the result made it easy to blame his disappointing effort on

⁷⁵ Paul Bedard, "Reagan's Son Claims Dad Had Alzheimer's as President," *U.S. News & World Report*, January 14, 2011. Reagan, in fact, publicly announced in 1994 that he was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, more than five years after leaving the presidency, though his son, Ron Jr., speculated that his father showed signs of the disease much earlier than that, during the mid-1980s, while he was in office.

⁷⁶ Howell Raines, "Chance of Revival Seen for Mondale after TV Debate," *New York Times*, October 9, 1984, 1.

⁷⁷ Robert W. Merry and James M. Perry, "Back in the Race? Debate Narrows Gap for Mondale," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct 9, 1984, 1.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Rich Jaroslovsky and James M. Perry, "Fitness Issue – New Question in Race: Is Oldest U.S. President Now Showing His Age?" *Wall Street Journal*, October 9, 1984, 1.

⁸⁰ Raines.

⁸¹ Hedrick Smith, "A Bolder Mondale and an Incumbent on the Defensive," *New York Times*, October 9, 1984, 28.

⁸² Reagan's most prevalent nickname was "The Great Communicator." For more discussion about why he received that nickname, see Lou Cannon, "Why Reagan was the 'Great Communicator,'" *USA Today*, June 6, 2004, retrieved on January 6, 2013, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2004-06-06-cannon_x.htm.

something else.⁸³ The high expectations placed on Reagan hampered him, just as the low expectations Carter placed on himself in 1976, when he said that he fully expected Ford to be stronger than him in both domestic and foreign policy, benefited him.⁸⁴

Days later, the media continued to attribute Reagan's debate performance to his advanced age.⁸⁵ To underscore how old the president was, journalists wrote that when Reagan was born, there were only forty-six states, William Taft was president, and windshields had just been made standard equipment in automobiles.⁸⁶

The numbers continued to increase for Mondale, demonstrating that, as in previous debate seasons, post-debate perceptions are not limited to the immediate reaction following a specific debate.⁸⁷ Rather, they remain dynamic throughout the ensuing days and weeks leading up to the election. Immediately following the debate, perhaps Reagan's age, and more specifically, its perceived negative impact on his energy and sharpness, became the overriding post-debate issue because, although the viewers and pundits alike opined that Mondale's performance was not particularly impressive. Had Mondale delivered a spectacular performance, there probably would have been more focus on him as a rising star, and a formidable challenger who could conceivably unseat a sitting president. Instead, discussion focused on whether age had finally caught up with Reagan. A *Los Angeles Times* poll revealed that Reagan lost his once-commanding lead in his home state of California, and Mondale was still behind but

⁸³ Samuel L. Popkin, *The Candidate: What it Takes to Win – and Hold – the White House*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012, 232. Bush's staffers considered the debates to be Bush's weakness, because he was inarticulate and therefore perceived as lacking knowledge.

⁸⁴ Schroeder, 106.

⁸⁵ Jane Mayer and Ellen Hume, "President's Age and Debate Performance Dominate Campaign to Reagan's Dismay," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct 11, 1984, 1.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Clymer, October 11.

within striking distance.⁸⁸ Worse yet for the president, the Harris Poll a week after the first debate found that Reagan's lead was narrowed to nine points, and leading *Boston Globe* writer Robert Healy to proclaim that the second and final Reagan-Mondale debate would be "crucial."⁸⁹

Reagan's lethargic performance, then, can be compared to Richard Nixon's sickly appearance in 1960, and Gerald Ford's gaffe that there was no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe in 1976, a negative talking-point that dominated public discussion. In contrast, in 1980, the main focus was positive: Reagan's ability to use television to convey a positive, optimistic, and reassuring message.

Reagan's own campaign staff acknowledged that the first debate was not their candidate's finest hour, but took comfort in Mondale being so far behind in the polls to begin with.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, for the first time in his presidency, it appeared that Reagan became self-conscious about his age, given his quip that "if I had had as much makeup [as Mondale wore], I'd look younger, too."⁹¹ Reagan added that not only did he not wear makeup for the debate, but never wore it at all – not even when he appeared in motion pictures.⁹² Reagan went even further in an attempt to demonstrate his youth and vigor, jokingly challenging Mondale to arm wrestle.⁹³

An interesting post-debate analysis, and one of the few that did not focus on Reagan's age, was by *Los Angeles Times* columnist Dennis McDougal, who wrote that

⁸⁸ William Endicott, "Reagan Lead in State Drops after Debates," *Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 1984, 10.

⁸⁹ Robert Healy, "Next Debate's Importance," *Boston Globe*, October 17, 1984, 23.

⁹⁰ George Skelton, "Reagan Advisers Disappointed but See No Knockout," *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, B1.

⁹¹ Anonymous, "Reagan Pans Mondale's Pancake during Debate," *United Press International*, reprinted in the *Los Angeles Times*, October 10, 1984, 1.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.* A few months earlier, the 73 year-old Reagan defeated famed bodybuilder Dan Lurie, then-60, in two arm-wrestling contests at the White House. Anonymous, "Reagan Uses His Muscle," Associated Press, February 18, 1984.

although Reagan lost the debate on television, he won it on the radio, as Nixon did in 1960, because no matter how he looked on camera, he still had “the most trusted voice in America.”⁹⁴ McDougal was quick to add, however, that those results were more anecdotal than scientific, and that the radio audience was far smaller than those who watched on television. McDougal’s article illustrates the growing dominance of television since the debates began in 1960.⁹⁵ It is important to keep in mind that although television adds a visual dimension that radio lacks, it retains the aural component of radio. Accordingly, while radio can conceal visual shortcomings, television cannot hide vocal ones.

Rich Jaroslovsky and James M. Perry of the *Wall Street Journal* summarized the first debate’s primary phenomenon: “Reagan’s rambling responses and occasional apparent confusion injected [age as] an unpredictable new element into the race.”⁹⁶ Therefore, all eyes were on Reagan to see how he would perform in the second debate, on October 21. Meanwhile, the more immediate story was about Mondale’s running mate, New York Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro, the first woman on a major party presidential ticket. If elected, in the event of Mondale’s death, incapacitation, resignation, or removal from office, she could become the first female president. Although Reagan’s age remained the featured issue of the campaign, tens of millions of viewers tuned in to see how Ferraro fared, head-to-head, against the sitting vice president of the United States, George H.W. Bush.

⁹⁴ Dennis McDougal, “Who Had the Vocal Edge?” *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 1984, G1.

⁹⁵ “The History of Television,” TV History, retrieved on June 20, 2014, <http://www.tvhistory.tv/facts-stats.htm>. More than 98 percent of American households owned televisions by 1980.

⁹⁶ Jaroslovsky.

ABC News political correspondent Sander Vanocur, who was the panelist in the first Kennedy-Nixon debate, moderated the Bush-Ferraro contest, which took place in Philadelphia. The panelists were John Mashek of *U.S. News & World Report*, Jack White of *Time* magazine, Norma Quarles of *NBC News*, and Robert Boyd of the *Knight-Ridder* newspapers.⁹⁷

Mashek began by reminding Bush that he disagreed with Reagan on a number of issues four years earlier, when he competed against him in the Republican primaries, even having referred to Reagan's financial policy as "voodoo economics." Should Bush unexpectedly become president, Mashek asked, to what extent would he follow Reagan's policies? Bush started sprightly and in high spirits, and unabashedly declared his allegiance to Reagan, first and foremost because Bush believed that Reagan's policies were great for the country, but also because he insisted that "[y]ou can't have the president of the United States out there looking over his shoulder wondering whether his vice president is going to be supporting him." While incumbent Vice Presidents Bob Dole in 1976 and Mondale in 1980 also defended their presidents, as did Nixon in 1960 (although Eisenhower was no longer running for office), none came close to Bush's level of energy. Bush lauded the Reagan record, while reminding viewers that Ferraro did not see eye to eye with Mondale on a number of issues. Bush's opening remarks exuded forceful confidence and passionate delivery.

Mashek put Ferraro on the defensive right away, asking her how she could compare her three terms in Congress to Bush's formidable résumé. The New York Congresswoman was not fazed: she calmly answered that she was not born into

⁹⁷ Bush-Ferraro Debate, October 11, 1984, C-SPAN, retrieved on August 20, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33136-1>. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

Congress six years earlier at age forth-three, but she had a life before that. She believed that her analytical abilities made her suitable for the job. In an interesting contrast to future high-profile women campaigning for national office, such as Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin, who were presidential and vice president contenders in 2008, respectively, and who appeared in meticulously tailored power business suits, Ferraro, as the first woman in that role, had a softer look: her jacket was a whitish earth-tone color, and her eyeglasses had a rosy tint, with large, pinkish frames.⁹⁸

Perhaps her conspicuously subdued wardrobe meant that even though she was a pioneer as the first woman on a major party presidential ticket, she did not want to make gender an issue. She fielded the question at face value – how her mere six years’ experience would fare against Bush’s considerably more extensive professional record – rather than interpreting it as a veiled implication that she was at a disadvantage because of her gender. Even when Mashek injected gender into the conversation with his follow-up question, citing polls that showed more women supporting the Reagan-Bush ticket than her own, Ferraro’s gender-neutral reply was that she was not much of a believer in polls.⁹⁹ The candidates’ respective opening remarks provided the contrast of a somewhat reserved Ferraro and an ultra-energetic Bush.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ For more discussion about fashion and powerful political women, see Pamela Golbin, *Power Dressing: First Ladies, Women Politicians, & Fashion*, New York, NY: Merrell, 2011; Patrick Healy and Michael Luo, “150,000 Wardrobe for Palin May Alter Tailor-Made Image,” *New York Times*, October 23, 2008, 1. Sarah Palin insisted in 2008 that she had no idea how much the Republican National Committee spent on clothes for her to change her fashion image from “average hockey mom.”

⁹⁹ Bush-Ferraro.

¹⁰⁰ Dan Fastenberg, “Bush the Elder Invites Dana Carvey to the White House,” *Time*, July 29, 2010, retrieved on June 28, 2012, http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2007228_2007230_2007252,00.html. A few years later, when Bush became president, comedian Dana Carvey honed an uncanny impersonation of him on *Saturday Night Live*. After Carvey lampooned Bush on NBC’s “Saturday Night Live” show so successfully that it became an important part of political culture – even capturing the attention of Bush himself, the outgoing president, in a good-natured gesture invited Carvey to the White House Christmas Party in December, 1992. For more discussion about the role of comedic parody in presidential campaigns, see Laurence Maslon and Michael Kantor, *Make ‘Em Laugh: The Funny Business of America*, New York, NY: Hachette, 2008.

While commenting on the role of religion in politics, Ferraro made an interesting remark: that evangelical minister Jerry Falwell “has been told that he would pick two of our Supreme Court Justices.”¹⁰¹ Essentially, then, the Democratic vice presidential nominee accused the president of the United States, if not the entire Republican Party, of permitting a minister, a private citizen, to choose two justices for the nation’s highest court. Rather than pounce on Ferraro’s comments and dismissing them as preposterous and absurd, Bush showed restraint. His response was critical, but measured. He referred to the story as a “canard,” and reminded the audience that to that point, Reagan made only one Supreme Court appointment, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, whom Bush described as a “superb, outstanding” choice, and one that Falwell had opposed.¹⁰² How, then, the vice president wondered, was it that Falwell selects Supreme Court Justices? Bush’s response was less significant in its substance than in the broader context of his having resisted any temptation to pursue an aggressive counterattack. Ferraro recalled years later that Bush’s problem was twofold: he could not be so combative that he appeared to be a bully, but he could also be not so soft as to seem “wimpy.”¹⁰³ Displaying a level of comfort and a sense of humor about her unique (at the time) status, Ferraro described how in debate strategy meetings, she thought about ways to throw Bush off guard, psychologically. She joked that during the handshake before the debate, she would “slip my left hand around his waist and kiss him on the lips.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Bush-Ferraro.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Richard L. Vernaci, “Debate Advice: Keep it Simple,” Associated Press, Sep. 24, 1988.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

As the debate then turned to foreign policy, which was presumably Bush's forte, Ferraro referenced arguably the Reagan Administration's most vulnerable foreign policy issue, at least in the first term: the terrorist bombing and killing of United States Marines at the American Embassy in Lebanon.¹⁰⁵ Ferraro built a strong case against Reagan, beginning with a reminder of his welcoming home the fifty-two American hostages that were held captive in Iran, during which he vowed that it would be the last time the United States would be embarrassed, and that if something like that ever happened again, there would be swift and immediate steps taken. Ferraro then proceeded to point out that there had been three different bombings at the Embassy, and that Reagan, on three different occasions said that he would take full responsibility. "I'd like to know what that means," Ferraro said, in what might have been her strongest moment of the night.¹⁰⁶

Bush, in turn, finally fell into the "bully" trap: as the incumbent vice president and former head of the CIA, it was conceivable that he would take on an alpha male stance. He said: "[L]et me help you with the difference, Mrs. Ferraro, between Iran and the embassy in Lebanon."¹⁰⁷ Bush went on to distinguish between government-sponsored terrorism in Iran, and the rogue terrorists in Lebanon, whom the Lebanese government wanted to eradicate, and further stated that the government cooperated with the United

¹⁰⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, "Truck Loaded with TNT Wrecks Headquarters of a Marine Unit," *New York Times*, October 24, 1983. Two truck bombs planted by terrorists killed 241 US Marines in Beirut, Lebanon on October 24, 1983. As the attacks occurred on Marine barracks (the Marines were part of a multinational peacekeeping force, the military – and, by extension, the Reagan Administration – was criticized for lapses in security.

¹⁰⁶ Bush-Ferraro.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

States in order to do just that.¹⁰⁸ Sounding like John Lennon, Bush said “[w]e went to Lebanon to give peace a chance.”¹⁰⁹

Ferraro responded with force: “Let me just say, first of all, I almost resent, Vice President Bush, your patronizing attitude that you have to teach me about foreign policy.”¹¹⁰ Ferraro went on to indicate her foreign policy experience, including her visit to Iran, but the first sentence was powerful enough, as it was repeated for days by media that was perhaps overeager to make gender an issue, even if Ferraro, the woman in question, was not.¹¹¹ Years later, however, Ferraro insisted that although the “patronizing” reference, her shining moment in the debate, was unplanned, she said Bush’s tone was irritatingly condescending, especially when he addressed her as “Mrs. Ferraro,” even though it was pre-agreed upon that she would be addressed as “Congresswoman Ferraro.”¹¹²

Demonstrating what was only the beginning of his disdain for political debates, Bush declined the chance to ask his opponent a direct question, instead commenting “I’d sure like to use the time to talk about the World Series or something of that nature.”¹¹³ Though it was purely coincidental, the debate took place on the 100th anniversary of the birth of arguably the most powerful and influential First Lady in American history, Eleanor Roosevelt.¹¹⁴ Ferraro quoted Roosevelt on one occasion, and commented that

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ John Lennon was a member of the rock band, the Beatles, and “Give Peace a Chance” was his first solo single.

¹¹⁰ Bush-Ferraro.

¹¹¹ Raines, “Bush and Ferraro Debate; Disagree about Leadership, Foreign Policy and Religion,” *New York Times*, October 12, 1984; Schroeder, 152.

¹¹² Schroeder, 152.

¹¹³ Bush-Ferraro. During a 1992 debate, Bush was seen on-camera looking at his wristwatch, as if annoyed that he had to be there. In 1992, Bush was caught looking at his watch on camera during a debate, which was widely perceived as his having been bored.

¹¹⁴ For more discussion about Eleanor Roosevelt’s influential role in civil rights and foreign affairs, see Maurine H. Beasley, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010.

it was her 100th birthday. Just as John F. Kennedy in 1960 referred to fellow Democrats Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Harry Truman as exemplary presidents, Ferraro incorporated Eleanor Roosevelt into the discussion to create the impression that being a woman is not an impediment to being a strong leader.

When it was over, it seemed that Bush did exactly what he needed to do – remain firm, but not antagonistic. Ferraro was impressive and even steely while soft, all the while in a dignified and understated manner. Because Reagan maintained a sizeable lead over Mondale, despite the latter narrowing the gap, Ferraro really needed a decisive victory over Bush. By most accounts, however, it was not lopsided at all, and if there was an edge to be given, it was to Bush. Tom Brokaw of *NBC News* thought that Ferraro was probably not as successful as she hoped to be in the debate, and his colleague, Roger Mudd, thought her soft and subdued appearance cast an unfavorable image.¹¹⁵ *CBS News* analysts agreed that Bush won the debate, as did viewers who responded to an *ABC News* poll taken afterwards.¹¹⁶ The *Wall Street Journal* saw a strong second half for Bush on foreign policy, though credited Ferraro’s “patronizing” comment as the debate’s single strongest moment.¹¹⁷ Bush was exhilarated after his debate, claiming that he felt “very, very good.”¹¹⁸ In the same vein, however, Bush underscored his disregard for the debates by confessing: “Boy, I’m glad that thing’s over. I don’t need any more of that.”¹¹⁹ Nonetheless, a buoyant Bush emerged from a

¹¹⁵ “Who Won the Bush/Ferraro Vice Presidential Debate?” *NBC Today Show*, New York, NY: NBC Universal, 10/12/1984, retrieved on June 30, 2012, <http://archives.nbclearn.com/portal/site/k-12/browse/?cuecard=37897>

¹¹⁶ Raines, “Bush and Ferraro Debate..” Bush won the ABC poll by a margin of 43 to 32 percent, with 24 percent undecided.

¹¹⁷ James M. Perry and Robert W. Merry, “Bush, Ferraro Square off in Vice Presidential Debate,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 12, 1984, 1.

¹¹⁸ Fay S. Joyce, “Bush is Delighted after His Debate,” *New York Times*, October 13, 1984.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

press conference displaying the *New York Post* newspaper's front page headline, which read: "George Wins One for the Gipper."¹²⁰

With the Bush-Ferraro debate out of the way, Reagan's performance in the first debate reclaimed the center of attention in media coverage. Tom Winberry perhaps summed it up best with an article headlined: "After Round 1½, Reagan is Only-Bruised."¹²¹ Winberry labeled the status of the debate season "1½" awarding a full point for the presidential contest and one-half point for the running mates' debate, that half-point for the running mates consistent with Hal Bruno's reference in the 1976 Mondale-Dole debate then-Vice President Nelson Rockefeller's description of that job as "standby equipment."¹²² He concluded that Reagan had an enormous lead to begin with, which Mondale sliced after the first debate, but that Bush regained the momentum for the Republican ticket.¹²³

Mondale still sought to exploit his perceived victory, contending that Reagan would crumble in the heat of a debate, outside the "question-free zone" that his entourage put around him.¹²⁴ There was even speculation that if Reagan did not bounce back in the campaign's final debate, Mondale could emerge victorious via a dramatic comeback.¹²⁵

The second Reagan-Mondale debate took place in Kansas City, Missouri on October 21. Edwin Newman, who facilitated the first Carter-Ford debate, was the moderator. The

¹²⁰ Photograph, Associated Press, printed in the *Gadsden Times*, October 13, 1984, A8; *New York Post*, October 12, 1984. Reagan as an actor played the role of football player George Gipp in the 1940 *Knute Rockne: All American*, in which he inspired the team to "win one for the Gipper." Reagan was referred to as "the Gipper" throughout his political career.

¹²¹ *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1984, E5. The vice presidential debates to that point did not play any sort of significant role in their respective debate seasons overall, although in subsequent seasons – notably 1988, 1992, and 2008 – they mattered more.

¹²² Mondale-Dole Debate, October 15, 1976, C-SPAN, retrieved on May 4, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/75693-1>.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Raines, "Debates Shift Focus and Perhaps the Odds," *New York Times*, October 14, 1984.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

panelists were Georgie Anne Geyer, also a syndicated columnist, Marvin Kalb of *NBC News*, Morton Kondracke, executive editor of *The New Republic* magazine, and Henry Trehwitt of the *Baltimore Sun*.¹²⁶ As the two combatants entered the debating hall, each from opposite sides of the stage, Reagan once again looked more fit and presidential. Despite being seventeen years older than Mondale, Reagan's build was more impressive, with his V-shaped upper body reminiscent of his days as a Hollywood actor.¹²⁷ Moreover, Reagan was taller and, despite their age difference, had darker hair than Mondale.¹²⁸

Mondale's response to the first question, which dealt with turmoil in Central America, was quite ordinary.¹²⁹ But then, seemingly overanxious to dispel any of the rumors that he was too old for the job, Reagan began his own response with great zeal, speaking in rapid-fire speech, which was reminiscent of his earlier days.¹³⁰ It was as if the septuagenarian chief executive said to the American people, "look, I've still got it." Also uncharacteristic was Reagan's next line: "I have ordered an investigation," which made him sound more defensive than authoritative.

¹²⁶ Reagan Mondale Debate 2, C-SPAN, October 21, 1984, retrieved on August 9, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33260-1>.

¹²⁷ Reagan was 73, Mondale was 56.

¹²⁸ Just as in 1980, Reagan's jet-black hair prompted his white-haired Republican primary opponent, John Anderson, to point out that he was younger than Reagan; Stephen F. Knott and Jeffrey L. Chidester, *At Reagan's Side*, Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009, 189. In 1985, Reagan met with then-Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, who was 20 years Reagan's junior. Nonetheless, when Gorbachev emerged from the car, a coatless Reagan rushed to grab Gorbachev's arm, the latter heavily bundled in a coat and hat, as if to help him up the stairs; Paul Bedard, "Ronald Reagan's Hollywood Tips for Staying Useful," *U.S. News & World Report*, September 20, 2010, retrieved on February 14, 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/washington-whispers/2010/09/20/ronald-reagans-hollywood-tips-for-staying-youthful>. Bedard wrote that Reagan's Deputy White House Chief of Staff Michael Deaver said that Reagan did not dye his hair, but used Brylcreem pomade, and that gave his hair a wet, extra-youthful look.

¹²⁹ The Reagan Administration supported the Contras, rebels against the ruling Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

¹³⁰ Reagan-Mondale 2. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

Geyer pressed Reagan on whether the CIA was running things in Nicaragua, and Reagan appeared to be either confused, or too far removed from the decision-making to have all the details in his mind and ready to relay them at a moment's notice. Mondale, however, could not capitalize on the situation. He was too bland to take advantage of Reagan's noticeable, if only slight, unraveling. Suddenly, as if Reagan had an epiphany, he turned the tide. He accused Mondale of repeating the media's falsehood that Reagan had said that nuclear missiles, once fired, could be called back. Reagan clarified that what he said was the submarine and airplane missile carriers could be called back before the missiles themselves were launched. He dismissed the version that Mondale was relaying as "ridiculous," and, looking at his opponent, advised "I hope from here on you will no longer be saying that particular thing." Reagan concluded by thanking Mondale for having given him a chance to straighten the record, which drew some laughs from the audience. His voice resonated with passion that was tempered by a subtle smile and a twinkle in his eye. That was Reagan's first punch of the evening; not a powerful blow, but enough to signal that he began to regain his rhythm. It was just as Stahl and Ron Reagan described: Reagan apparently experiencing random fleeting moments of confusion and then reverting back to his normal self.

Marvin Kalb then asked Reagan a question designed to force him into an either/or choice. Kalb reminded Reagan that he called the Soviet Union an "evil empire," and asked the president whether he wanted to contain that empire, or roll it back. Building momentum, Reagan replied that he said exactly what he meant about the Soviet Union on numerous occasions and retracted none of it. Reagan was in his element.

Mondale then intensified his comments: he started talking tough about the Soviets, calling them a “tough and ruthless adversary.” He promised to work with each nation in Eastern Europe under Soviet influence to strengthen them so that they could break free. And he continued to blast Reagan for not understanding the nature and capabilities of nuclear missiles. Mondale seemed to realize that the tide was turning against him and that time was running out for him to close the gap in the polls.

Reagan was becoming visibly irritated that Mondale was attempting to match him in terms of being tough on the Soviets, so he railed about Mondale having appeared in a commercial where he was standing on the deck of the *Nimitz* aircraft carrier watching F-14 fighter planes take off, and quipped that if Mondale had his way, he would be deep in the water, because there wouldn't have been a *Nimitz* for Mondale to stand on, due to his opposition to the *Nimitz* being built. That line drew laughter from the audience and even from Mondale himself. Reagan relayed further information that depicted Mondale's weakness on national defense, reminding the viewers that Mondale had even disagreed with Carter, when the former president decided late in his term to increase the defense budget.

Approximately a third of the way through the debate, Henry Trewhitt set in motion what was arguably the defining moment of the 1984 debate season. He asked the president whether his age might be a factor in preventing him from working virtually around the clock in times of trouble, as President Kennedy did during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Reagan's response became his “there you go again” moment of 1984. He responded: “[n]ot at all, Mr. Trewhitt, and I want you to know that also I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my

opponent's youth and inexperience." Reagan's impeccably well-timed one-liner drew gales of laughter from the crowd, and perhaps even more tellingly, from Mondale himself. Juxtaposed with the *Nimitz* comment, Mondale seemed to be enjoying Reagan's humor just as much as the millions of people watching around the world. It went beyond a polite response to a joke, and it seemed that Mondale was enthralled by Reagan's charm. The line became an overnight classic in the annals of debate history.¹³¹ Reagan took a moment to bask in the glory of his well-delivered joke, and aptly added that either Seneca or Cicero said: "If it was not for the elders correcting the mistakes of the young, there would be no state."¹³² Trehitt later remarked that Reagan's response was so effective that it would make any follow-up question seem inappropriate.¹³³

With a single line, Reagan effectively delivered the campaign's knockout punch. There was no question that the American economy improved, that unemployment, inflation, and interest rates had all sharply fallen, that Reagan stood up to the Soviet Union, and that the majority of Americans felt better about themselves, and their country, than they did during the Carter-Mondale years. Mondale's best weapon was Reagan's age, and Reagan threw that right back at his critics. As Trehitt himself acknowledged, "I'd like to head for the fence and try to catch that one before it goes over, but I'll go to another question." Trehitt tried one last time to resurrect the matter of age, asking Mondale whether it should be a factor in the campaign but Mondale

¹³¹ David Broder, "Encounter Leaves Reagan on Course," *Washington Post*, October 22, 1984, A1. That one quip, Broder wrote, virtually swept away any barrier to Reagan's reelection; Edmund Morris, *Dutch*, New York, NY: Random House, 1999. Morris described Reagan's line as having erased the age issue in a few deft seconds, and that Reagan rolled over "poor, decent, dull, Walter Mondale."

¹³² Reagan-Mondale 2. Most likely, the quote is in reference to Cicero: "Quod si legere aut audire voletis externa, maximas res publicas ab adolescentibus labefactatas, a senibus sustentatas et restitutas reperietis," which essentially means that the greatest states are destabilized by the young, and then restored by the old.

¹³³ Schroeder, 181.

replied: “No. And I have not made it an issue, nor should it be.”¹³⁴ And with that, the age issue vanished, as did any chance of Mondale winning the election. Reagan seemed to do enough to clinch a second term. Now, if only he could survive the remaining hour of the debate without any implosions, he could coast to victory on Election Day, two weeks later.

From that point, Reagan built on his lead. Mondale alleged that America’s massive national debt and high interest rates affected Mexico, thus causing high unemployment there and a mass exodus of people illegally crossing into the United States. Reagan, who by that point seemed to be toying with his opponent, responded: “I’ve heard the national debt blamed for a lot of things, but not for illegal immigration across our border – and it has nothing to do with it.” Like many of his other lines, that one also drew laughter from the audience. As for the interest rates, Reagan reminded Mondale that they rose to 21½ percent under Carter, and fell to 12¼ percent under Reagan, and that he expected them to fall even further. One might wonder why Mondale would mention interest rates as a topic, given those statistics. Despite a longwinded closing statement that Reagan could not complete within the allotted time, he was in full command of the debate overall, and, it seemed, the campaign.

If the live audience’s laughter at Reagan’s age joke was not enough to conclude that he won the debate, debate season, and election at that moment, the press echoed those sentiments. His joke was a shining moment, much like his “I paid for this microphone” line during a Republican primary debate in 1980.¹³⁵ William Safire of the

¹³⁴ Reagan-Mondale 2. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

¹³⁵ Healy, “Reagan: Opponent Weak on Defense; Mondale: Incumbent is Out of Touch; No Stumbles, No Knockout,” *Boston Globe*, Oct, 22, 1984, 1; William Safire, “Reagan Comes Back,” *New York Times*, October 22, 1984, 1. Safire noted that, technically, Reagan made a blunder when he referred to the weak policies of “the last four

New York Times observed that for Mondale to close the gap, he needed to be “terrific” and Reagan “terrible,” but as it turned out, Mondale was “flat” and Reagan was “fine.”¹³⁶

A *Wall Street Journal* editorial summed up the two Reagan debates as “the age issue was born in the first debate and buried in the second, [and] we are back where we began,” *i.e.*, with Reagan in command.¹³⁷

In his autobiography years later, Reagan explained why he agreed to debate Mondale. It was not out of a sense of duty, but rather because he did not want to take his large lead for granted: “In a campaign, I always like to act as if I’m one vote behind; overconfidence is a candidate’s worst mistake.”¹³⁸ Moreover, in light of Schroeder referring to Reagan as arguably the best-prepared debater of them all because of fifty years in public announcing, showbusiness, and politics, perhaps shying away from an opportunity to appear on camera simply was not in Reagan’s nature.¹³⁹

Shortly after the first debate, Reagan wrote in his diary: “I have to say I lost. I guess I crammed so hard on facts and figures...I flattened out...I didn’t feel good about myself...the press has been calling him the winner.”¹⁴⁰ Reagan described how nervous he was after that debate, especially as the pundits and some of his supporters began to speculate that he had become too old for the job of president. The one-liner about his age in the second debate turned things around: “I think it’s possible I sewed up reelection with those fourteen words; I’m not sure. But the incident reminded me again

years,” because those were Reagan’s years. Safire wondered whether Reagan had another mental lapse, momentarily not realizing that he was campaigning in 1984, not 1980, or if he simply meant “the last four years” before he took office.

¹³⁶ Safire.

¹³⁷ Editorial, “The Second Debate,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 23, 1984, 1.

¹³⁸ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1990, 326.

¹³⁹ Schroeder, 146.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

of how unpredictable, even fleeting things can often make a big difference in life.”¹⁴¹

Mondale, too, commented on that fleeting moment: “[Y]ou’ll see that I was smiling. But I think if you come in close you’ll see some tears coming down because I knew he had gotten me there... That was really the end of my campaign that night.”¹⁴²

That Mondale attributed a single debate line to the destruction of his chances to win the election is a glaring example of what powerful catalysts the debates, as election-makers (or breakers), became perceived. Were it not for the first debate, virtually no one would have given Mondale any chance to beat Reagan; were it not for the second one, Mondale’s glimmer of hope for a comeback would not have vanished. The debates certainly do matter then, because to an important extent, the success of presidential campaigns, which typically span at least two years, greatly depend on candidates’ performances during a few hours of the debate season.

The theory that Reagan could have avoided the debates and won reelection nonetheless was prevalent during the campaign, and only became stronger after the election, because Reagan won in an overwhelming landslide, capturing forty-nine of the fifty states. Although the precise extent to which the debates impacted the election outcome may be difficult to calculate, there is little doubt that journalists, campaign staffers, and other political analysts believed that Reagan’s seemingly invincible lead was jeopardized by his performance in the first debate with Mondale, and recaptured as a result of his comeback in the second. Moreover, it is at least plausible to consider that, if Bush came across as a bully in the debate against Ferraro, and if Reagan seemed just as much out of sorts in the final debate as he was in the first, Mondale might have

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² Lehrer, 27-28. Mondale’s reaction to Reagan’s age quip in the second debate, as he described it to Lehrer. Mondale said that he told his wife that night that he thought the campaign was over.

achieved a monumental political upset, or at least come close to one. After all, at seventy-three, Reagan was already the oldest president in history. If he seemed flustered and confused in the final debate, the American people, though they supported him tremendously, might have thought it fitting to retire their beloved leader. This chapter, and to a greater extent this entire thesis, underscores the debates' importance insofar as they can make or break a candidate's image. In Reagan's case, they did a bit of both.

Whether or not concerns about advanced age remains an issue, and whether the exception the electorate made in 1984 was specific to Reagan, remains to be seen. Could it be that Americans did not want to admit that their president was getting old right before their eyes, and so, as a method of coping with their gerontophobia, they were quick to accept his improvement in the second debate as evidence that all was well?

More broadly, the 1984 debates were the first in which an incumbent took an unnecessary risk that almost backfired when his image suffered temporarily, and recovered to become the first incumbent debater to win the election. Both of those issues overshadowed another milestone: the first female debate participant and major party vice presidential nominee. It remained undeterminable whether future incumbent presidents would be heartened by Reagan's victory and take similar unnecessary risks, or whether the stumble Reagan suffered after the first debate would cause them to circumvent the debates if they were comfortably ahead in the polls at the time.

**DO THE DEBATES MATTER? AN EXAMINATION OF THE PROGRESSIVELY
INFLUENTIAL ROLE OF MAJOR PARTY DEBATES ON
AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: 1960-2008**

**CHAPTER 6: 1988 – DEBATES SHAPE THE IMAGE OF PERSONALITY, WHICH
BECOMES THE ISSUE IN AN “ISSUELESS CAMPAIGN”**

Republicans George H.W. Bush (Incumbent Vice President) and Dan Quayle (US Senator - IN) v. Democrats Michael Dukakis (Governor - MA) and Lloyd Bentsen (US Senator – TX). Bush-Dukakis 1 (65.1 million), Bush-Dukakis 2 (67.3 million), Quayle-Bentsen (46.9 million).

In the first presidential election since 1960, the debates occurred near the end of a popular incumbent president’s second term. Winning forty-nine out of fifty states in his 1984 reelection bid, Reagan remained extremely popular as the 1988 elections approached. Not surprisingly, a satisfied electorate voted Reagan’s vice president of eight years, George H.W. Bush, into his own presidential term that year. Bush’s 1960 counterpart, Richard Nixon, who was vice president to another popular Republican president, Dwight Eisenhower, was, however, unable to capitalize on that association. This chapter examines via debates that impacted the public’s perception of the candidates’ personalities – a criterion magnified in an election year that lacked a predominant substantive issue – how Bush was able to accomplish what Nixon could not.

Bush, the Republican nominee, was challenged by Democrat Michael Dukakis, the governor of Massachusetts. Further extending the similarities between the 1960 and 1992 campaigns, Dukakis selected US Senator (from Texas) Lloyd Bentsen, just as his fellow New Englander John F. Kennedy chose a Texan running mate (Lyndon Johnson). Though Kennedy’s reasons for selecting Johnson were arguably more political than geographical – Johnson had considered a presidential run that year and it

was easier for Kennedy to have Johnson on his side – the Dukakis-Bentsen campaign used the “Boston-Austin” connection to conjure images of 1960, an election year in which the Democratic challengers won. Why was Bush able to benefit from his role in a popular administration whereas Nixon was not? Part of the reason, in both instances, was image: the perception created by televised debates. In the 1988 debates personality mattered even more than it did twenty-eight years earlier.

As in previous seasons, the debates in 1988 included a momentum-changing debate gaffe and media focus on a one-liner: the former by Dukakis, the latter by Bentsen at the expense of his Republican counterpart, Indiana Senator Dan Quayle.¹ The predominant issue in the campaign became the image of candidates’ personality.² Why was there such an opportunity for personality to become the focal point? Mainly, because there was no prevalent substantive issue on the domestic or foreign front. There continued to be wide popular support for the Reagan Administration, and Bush made the Reagan record and Dukakis’ image the positive and negative themes of his campaign respectively, and used the debates to successfully perpetuate those themes.

In the weeks leading up to the 1988 election, Reagan’s presence loomed large with an approval rating close to 60 percent.³ As James T. Patterson described, during the Reagan years, the United States enjoyed a strong economy at home and the impending

¹ In 1976, President Gerald Ford made a much-discussed gaffe in stating there was no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. In 1980, the one-liner that garnered the most media attention was Ronald Reagan to Jimmy Carter in their only debate: “There you go again.”

² For more discussion about the role of personality in presidential politics, see John Dickerson, “How to Measure for a President,” *Slate*, September 26, 2012, retrieved on July 2, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/features/2012/how_to_measure_a_president_/what_qualities_should_we_look_for_in_our_presidents_.html; NPR Staff, “Presidential Politics, Does Likability Matter?” October 7, 2012, retrieved on July 2, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/07/162480455/presidential-politics-does-likeability-matter>.

³ Anonymous, “How the Presidents Stack Up,” *Wall Street Journal*, retrieved on January 12, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/info-presapp0605-31.html>.

end of the Cold War.⁴ British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher wrote that “from the strong fortress of his convictions, [Reagan] set out to enlarge freedom the world over at a time when freedom was in retreat—and he succeeded.”⁵ In 2005, an ideologically balanced group of presidential scholars ranked Reagan the sixth-greatest president of all time.⁶ That the majority of voters were apparently pleased with the direction in which the country was heading might explain why the 1988 presidential race was widely referred to as “the issueless campaign.” Mona Charen of the *Southeast Missourian* assessed the situation optimistically: “We Americans are lucky to be at peace, to be united, and to be able to run an ‘issueless campaign.’”⁷ In a compendium of presidential campaigns, Kerwin C. Swint also described 1988 as the issueless campaign as well, and pointed out that Bush made Dukakis the issue.⁸ Unlike previous debate seasons, which often focused on one debate as more integral to the campaign than the others, all three 1988 debates were significant in shaping the images of the candidates’ personalities.

Literature pertaining to the 1988 campaign outlines its particular characteristics, namely, that neither presidential candidate was an incumbent, and that there was an absence of an overriding issue. *The New Season: a Spectator’s Guide to the 1988*

⁴ James T. Patterson, “Ronald Reagan,” *To the Best of My Ability*, James M. McPherson, ed., New York, NY: Dorling Kindersley, 2001, 288-295, 288. For more discussion about the success of Reagan’s president and his popularity as a result, see Dinesh D’Souza, *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader*, New York, NY: The Free Press, 1997.

⁵ Margaret Thatcher, “Reagan’s Leadership, America’s Recovery,” *National Review*, December 30, 1988, retrieved from the Margaret Thatcher Foundation on February 27, 2013, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107425>.

⁶ James Taranto, ed., *Presidential Leadership*, New York, NY: Free Press, 2005, 11.

⁷ Mona Charen, “Be Grateful for Issueless Campaign,” *The Southeast Missourian*, November 6, 1988. Charen compared the American presidential election to the far more contentious election in Israel that year.

⁸ Kerwin C. Swint, *Mudslingers*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005, 156. Swint wrote that absent substantive issues of broad concern, Bush focused on Dukakis’ veto of a Massachusetts bill that would require teachers to lead their classes in reciting the pledge of allegiance. For more discussion of the lack of issues in the 1988 campaign, see Jack Germond and Jules Witcover, *Whose Broad Stripes and Bright Stars: The Trivial Pursuit of the Presidency, 1988*, New York, NY: Warner Books, 1989.

Election by George Will is a useful source for examining the 1988 presidential race.⁹ Though written a year before the election and therefore without knowledge of who the major nominees and their running mates were, the book emphasized the unpredictability and contentiousness of a campaign season that lacks an incumbent president seeking reelection.¹⁰ Psychologist and political scientist Stanley Renshon's 1998 monograph, *The Psychological Assessment of Presidential Candidates*, emphasizes candidates' images vis-à-vis the voters' perceptions, and pays particular attention to the 1988 debates in that respect.¹¹

Another prevalent phenomenon of 1988, negative campaigning, is extensively described in *Winning Elections*, particularly Rich Galen's essay, "Last Minute Attacks," which is about abrasive and confrontational demeanor within and outside of the debates.¹² As these studies show, the image of personality in the 1988 campaign and debates was more significant than in any debate before, or arguably, since. The lack of important external issues, made the candidate personalities, which could more easily be affected by debate performance, more significant. This chapter extends beyond the literature in examining image and personality through the lens of the debates individually and analyzes their dynamic relationship collectively.

Although Bush's strategy, as exemplified in the debates, was to portray Dukakis as a liberal, far to the left of the American mainstream and to unfavorably compare him to the Reagan record, it seemed that the voters were more concerned about another aspect in

⁹ George Will, *The New Season: a Spectator's Guide to the 1988 Election*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1987.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Stanley A. Renshon, *The Psychological Assessment of Presidential Candidates*, New York, NY: Routledge, 1998.

¹² Rich Galen, "Last Minute Attacks," *Winning Elections*, Ronald A. Faucheux (ed.), Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp. 115-121.

which Dukakis differed from Reagan: charisma.¹³ William Safire concluded that Dukakis' problem was "five parts personality," or lack thereof.¹⁴ Like the previous three Democratic presidential candidates in reverse chronological order, Walter Mondale, Jimmy Carter, and George McGovern, wrote Safire, Dukakis was "bo-ring." The only one of the three who won, Safire continued, was Carter, and he only eked out a narrow victory after squandering a very large lead, once the voters got to know and dislike him.¹⁵ Horace Busby, a former aide to President Lyndon Johnson, noted that Dukakis tried but failed to connect with the American people.¹⁶ Even eighteen years later, Dukakis' uncharismatic image endured, as *MSNBC News* anchor Chris Matthews began to call Hilary Clinton "Dukakis in a dress" to point out that she would not become president because people did not like her enough.¹⁷

With the election less than two months away, Dukakis continued to struggle with how his personality was perceived. At the same time, Bush tried to overcome an image problem of his own, commonly referred to as "the wimp factor." Margaret Warner, in a *Newsweek* magazine article, described a belief that Bush was not formidable enough to be president.¹⁸ Even Bush himself, who at six-feet-two-inches was one of the tallest presidents ever, described how often he was thought of as a "little short guy," by

¹³ Ronald E. Riggio, "Charisma and Presidential Success," *Psychology Today*, November 20, 2010, retrieved on March 15, 2013, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/cutting-edge-leadership/201011/charisma-and-presidential-success-lessons-reagan-clinton-and-oba>. The author, a psychologist, described Reagan as an exceptionally charismatic leader in the vein of Britain's Winston Churchill, India's Mahatma Gandhi, and John F. Kennedy.

¹⁴ William Safire, "Salome Tactics," *New York Times*, November 3, 1988, retrieved on February 2, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/11/03/opinion/essay-salome-tactics.html>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ John Dillin, "Why Dukakis Has a Long Uphill Fight," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 17, 1988, retrieved on February 2, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/1988/1017/aprof.html>. Busby attributed Dukakis' steady decline in the summer and fall to a deficit of likability.

¹⁷ Chris Matthews, "Hardball," March 6, 2006, *MSNBC*, retrieved on February 3, 2013, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/11711647/ns/msnbc-hardball_with_chris_matthews/t/hardball-chris-matthews-march/#.UQ3w_x1EEto.

¹⁸ Margaret Gannard Warner, "Bush Battles the Wimp Factor," *Newsweek*, October 19, 1987, pp. 28-35.

numerous people who met him in person and were astonished by his actual height.¹⁹ In fact, Bush's son Jeb said he made money betting people that his father was taller than Reagan.²⁰ Tony Coelho, the Democratic House whip and a speaker at the Party's National Convention, once joked that Bush, who was on a fishing trip at the time, took James Baker along "in case George is too squeamish to bait his own hook."²¹

The wimp factor became more significant due to Bush's role in what became the most conspicuous blemish of the Reagan Administration's record, the Iran-Contra affair. In 1985, various Reagan Administration officials sold arms to Iran in order to establish better relations with moderates in that country's government, and to gain Iran's influence in helping to release Americans who were being held hostage by extremists in Lebanon.²² The proceeds of the sales would go to fund Contra rebels in Nicaragua, a cause that Reagan supported, but for which Congress prohibited any further funding.²³ Reagan never stated that he knew about an arms-for-hostages trade or about any illegal funding of the Contras, but accepted full responsibility as the commander-in-chief.²⁴ The nation, at least as evidenced by his high approval ratings upon exiting from

¹⁹ Warner, 29. Only Abraham Lincoln, Lyndon Johnson, and Thomas Jefferson were taller than Bush. For more information about presidential statistics such as listing by height, see Joseph Nathan Kane and Janet Podell, *Facts about the Presidents*, 8th Ed., New York, NY: H.W. Wilson, 1964, 2009.

²⁰ *Ibid.* Jeb Bush later became governor of Florida, and ran for president in 2016; for more discussion about the perception and importance of height in presidential campaigns, see Gordon Patzer, "Marketing U.S. Presidential Candidates: Height Matters," Proceedings of ASBBS, February 2012, Volume 19, No 1, pp. 693-703.

²¹ Adam Clymer, "Democrats Use Humor and Scorn in Mounting Attack against Bush," *New York Times*, July 20, 1988, retrieved on January 12, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/07/20/us/democrats-atlanta-democrats-use-humor-scorn-mounting-attack-against-bush.html>.

²² Robert W. Merry, *Where They Stand*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2012, 204-205. For more discussion about George H.W. Bush's legacy more than two decades after leaving office, see Jon Meacham, *Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush*, New York, NY: Random House, 2015.

²³ Lou Cannon, *President Reagan*, New York, NY: Public Affairs, 1991, 337-338.

²⁴ Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Iran Arms and Contra Aid Controversy," Press Conference, March 4, 1987, from University of Texas, retrieved on January 12, 2013, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1987/030487h.htm>; for more discussion about the Iran-Contra scandal, see Peter Kornbluh (ed.), *The Iran-Contra Scandal*, New York, NY: New Press, 1993.

office a year later, chose to believe him.²⁵ Because Bush's role in foreign policy was much more detail-intensive than Reagan's, however, the nation was less inclined to believe that Bush knew nothing.²⁶ Many perceived Bush's attempts to remain loyal to Reagan but distance himself from Iran-Contra, as a sign of ambivalence and weakness.²⁷ Juxtaposed with Reagan's "no pale pastels, but bold colors" approach to leadership, Bush seemed to be a man of compromised ideological conviction.²⁸

As Bruce Curtis aptly observed in an *American Heritage* piece also titled "The Wimp Factor," Bush was able to improve his image mainly by favorably comparing himself to Quayle and Dukakis.²⁹ That Quayle was able to secure a low-risk National Guard assignment during the Vietnam War, and that Dukakis looked almost comical in an oversized military helmet for a campaign commercial, made Bush, a World War II combat pilot and former CIA Director, seem far more formidable by comparison.³⁰

Beyond the National Guard matter, Quayle became the political joke of the season. Earlier that summer there was a great deal of speculation as to whom Bush would select as his running mate, not least of whom were Kansas Senator and former vice presidential candidate Bob Dole, and New York Congressman Jack Kemp.³¹ A *New York Times* poll among Republican Convention delegates found Dole and Kemp to be

²⁵ Kornbluh.

²⁶ Timothy Naftali, *George H.W. Bush*, New York, NY: Times Books, 2007, 50.

²⁷ Naftali, 50.

²⁸ Reagan, "Let Them Go Their Way," Speech to the Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC), March 1, 1975, retrieved on February 8, 2013, http://reagan2020.us/speeches/Let_Them_Go_Their_Way.asp. Reagan used the "no pale pastels, but bold colors" reference throughout his career, including during his acceptance speech at the 1984 Republican National Convention, to underscore the need for clear, uncompromising conviction.

²⁹ Bruce Curtis, "The Wimp Factor," *American Heritage*, Volume 40 No. 7, November 1989, retrieved on January 18, 2013, <http://www.americanheritage.com/content/wimp-factor>.

³⁰ *Ibid.* Quayle's National Guard assignment and Dukakis' military tank commercial cast a negative light on each of their campaigns through the summer and fall of 1988. For more discussion on those phenomena, see Christine M. Black and Thomas Oliphant, *All By Myself*, Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot Press, 1989.

³¹ Richard L. Berke, "Poll Finds Dole and Kemp Favored for No. 2 Post," *New York Times*, August 3, 1988, retrieved on February 2, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/03/us/poll-finds-dole-and-kemp-favored-for-no-2-post.html>.

the heavy favorites, with a dozen other possible candidates mentioned, and not one vote for Quayle.³²

Bush defied conventional wisdom and shocked the pundits when he selected Quayle, leaving many observers wondering why he would pick an obscure senator when there were so many better-qualified potential choices. The *Washington Post* observed that the vice presidential debate would not be about whether Quayle was more qualified than Bentsen, but whether Quayle was qualified at all.³³ Gerald M. Boyd wrote a column focusing on Quayle's gaffes, in which he quoted a top Bush official (whom he did not identify by name) as having conceded that Quayle was "well, no rocket scientist."³⁴ Boyd noted one of Quayle's most quotable verbal blunders: that he "did not live in this century."³⁵ Another of Quayle's oft-mentioned gaffes was his description of the Holocaust, *i.e.* the killing of millions of Jews by Nazi Germany, as "an obscene period in **our nation's** history [emphasis added]."³⁶ That remark prompted jokes about Quayle, such as: "what were his three toughest years? Second grade."³⁷

Lloyd Bentsen, in fact, was the only one of the four candidates who did not suffer from an image problem. Far from being a laughing stock, Bentsen was a bit too formidable, to the extent that he overshadowed Dukakis. There was discussion that Bentsen, not Dukakis, should have headlined the Democratic ticket, particularly in order

³² *Ibid.* Dole and Kemp, in fact, became the 1996 Republican presidential and vice presidential nominees.

³³ Robert Barnes and R.H. Melton, "In Vice Presidential Debate, the Main Question May Be Quayle," *Washington Post*, October 5, 1988, 17.

³⁴ Gerald M. Boyd, "Quayle Getting His Big Chance to Clear Doubts," *New York Times*, October 5, 1988, 30.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Editorial, "The Bentsen-Quayle Question," *New York Times*, October 5, 1988, 32.

³⁷ *Ibid.*; Robert Dvorchak, "The Quayle Question Revived by Bush's Irregular Heartbeat," Associated Press, May 7, 1991, retrieved on February 2, 2013, <http://www.apnewsarchive.com/1991/The-Quayle-Question-Revived-by-Bush-s-Irregular-Heartbeat-With-AM-Bush-Bjt/id-1de4f39a831e29f6d98d470b8b6db6f6>. The Quayle jokes continued well after he became vice president, with top-selling merchandise including bumper stickers with a photo of Quayle and the message "Keep George Healthy," and the Quayle Newsletter, a quarterly update on Quayle's gaffes.

to attract voters who were not sold on Bush but who thought Dukakis was too liberal.³⁸ Moreover, Bentsen already had a victory over Bush. The two competed in the 1970 US Senate race in Texas, which was won by Bentsen, who was perceived to be even more conservative than the Republican Bush, and many Texas conservatives said they would have voted for the Democrats if the ticket were Bentsen-Dukakis.³⁹

No matter how impressive Bentsen seemed, he still was, after all, only the running mate. As Dole had joked in the 1976 debates, that job entailed “indoor work and no heavy lifting.”⁴⁰ The focus was always on the frontrunners, and as they prepared to meet in the first debate, Bush had the advantage over Dukakis, having undergone something of an image makeover.

Various members of the press and political analysts described the debates as pivotal to the election results. Steve Daley of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote that one little slip by either candidate in the first debate could shift the momentum enough to change the election outcome.⁴¹ William Schneider of the American Enterprise Institute believed that it was precisely because there were no big issues at stake in the 1988 election, with the country relatively pleased with the *status quo*, that any one-liners and gaffes in the debates could make a big difference.⁴² The *Philadelphia Inquirer's* Larry Eichel also described the issues as “uncompelling” and noted that voter commitment was so weak

³⁸ Warren Weaver, “Texas Law Seems Mixed Blessing to Bentsen,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1988, retrieved on Jan, 19, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/10/04/us/texas-law-seems-mixed-blessing-to-bentsen.html>.

³⁹ *Ibid*; Gerald M. Boyd, “Bush Aims at Broad Issues in Debate Tonight with Foe,” *New York Times*, September 25, 1988, 26. Bush, in fact, joked about his propensity to make blunders, in light of his remark that the date of Pearl Harbor was September 7 instead of December 7: “Who thought that we would be debating on Christmas night, September 25th?”

⁴⁰ Mondale-Dole, October 15, 1976, C-SPAN, retrieved on May 4, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/75693-1>.

⁴¹ Steve Daley, “The First Debate: Candidates Are Aware That One Slip in TV Joust Could Alter the Election,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 25, 1988, 1.

⁴² *Ibid*.

that it could easily be swayed by the debates.⁴³ Although none of those comments conclusively established that the debates do, in fact, impact election outcomes, they do demonstrate that the debates do, in fact, matter, as all of them illustrated that an increasing number of observers at least believed that was the case.

The first debate took place at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, on September 25.⁴⁴ It was the first debate that Jim Lehrer moderated; he has since moderated at least one in every subsequent season.⁴⁵ The panelists were John Mashek of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Anne Groer of the *Orlando Sentinel*, and Peter Jennings of *ABC News*.⁴⁶

As the two candidates emerged from opposite sides of the stage, the crowd became quite animated, cheering wildly. A full six inches taller than Dukakis, Bush towered over his opponent as the two shook hands center stage, but then they proceeded to their respective podia, which were strategically designed by the Dukakis campaign to camouflage the significant height disparity.⁴⁷ Although a correlation between height and electability in presidential elections is not indisputable, in only one of the debate seasons did a candidate lose to an opponent who was more than three inches shorter: John Kerry to George W. Bush in 2004.⁴⁸ In every other instance, either the taller candidate won the election, or the candidates, when shaking hands onstage, were so close in height that the difference was negligible. Only the combination of the debates

⁴³ Larry Eichel, "Big Event Bush, Dukakis Forces See Tonight's Debate as Crucial," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 25, 1988, 1.

⁴⁴ Bush-Dukakis Debate 1, September 25, 1988, C-SPAN, retrieved on September 10, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/4309-1>.

⁴⁵ For more discussion about Lehrer's experiences as debate moderator, see Jim Lehrer, *Tension City*, New York, NY: Random House, 2011.

⁴⁶ Bush-Dukakis 1.

⁴⁷ Bush is six feet two inches tall, and Dukakis is five feet eight inches tall; Alan Schroeder, *Presidential Debates, 50 Years of High-Risk Presidential TV*, 2nd Ed., New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008, 28.

⁴⁸ See Kane and Podell.

and the medium of television could illustrate the image of that striking height differential so vividly, because there is rarely another instance during the campaign when general election candidates appear side-by-side. Those who wagered, as Jeb Bush described, that his father was shorter than Reagan were speculating, based on their perception of the latter being more powerful than the former and, thereby, presupposing that he was the taller of the two men. The 1988 debates, however reversed any notions of Bush as the “little short guy,” considering how he stood, literally, head and shoulders above his opponent.

Lehrer opened the debate by indirectly corroborating that 1988, indeed, was “the issueless campaign.” Citing drug use as the number one domestic issue on voters’ minds, Lehrer asked Bush why he thought so many Americans were tempted to use drugs.⁴⁹ That Lehrer identified drug use rather than, say, inflation, unemployment, taxes, or the deficit, as the top domestic concern underscored the aforementioned notions that the choices between the two candidates were more personal than policy-driven. Bush attributed drug use to a breakdown in values, which he vowed to restore by teaching values in school. Bush appeared every bit the energetic combatant he was four years earlier as a running mate against Geraldine Ferraro. His delivery was just a measure slower and his voice just a notch deeper, which made it sound more ‘Reaganesque’ than during his rather high-strung, higher-pitched, somewhat nasal delivery against Ferraro. The deeper voice could have been a conscious change during debate

⁴⁹ Bush-Dukakis 1.

preparations or just a natural consequence of aging, but it also made him sound less “wimpy.”⁵⁰

In response, Dukakis criticized the Reagan-Bush administration for not having done enough to curtail drug trafficking, but failed to answer in a way that might negate his reputation as a listless personality. The son of Greek immigrants, Dukakis had a thick head of coarse, black hair, particularly bushy eyebrows, and eyes that looked half-closed and made him look sleepy. All of those aesthetic factors, combined with his calm monotonic delivery created the perception that he lacked passion.⁵¹ Visual and aural information, then, as delivered by television, could potentially make or break an image. Continuing Reagan’s tradition of humor-infused one-liners, Dukakis referred to Bush’s promise to reduce the deficit while increasing spending and lowering taxes, calling him the “Joe Isuzu of American politics,” a reference to a fictional character used in Isuzu automobile commercials at the time; a pathological liar who said anything to sell a car. Sensing that the reference was rehearsed, Bush retorted: “Is this the time to unleash our one-liners? That answer was about as clear as Boston Harbor.”⁵² The vice president’s perfectly timed and flawlessly-delivered response drew laughter from the audience, but also subtly evoked his intense dislike of the choreographed aspects of

⁵⁰ Megan Garber, “Why We Prefer Masculine Voices,” *The Atlantic*, December 18, 2012, retrieved on March 16, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2012/12/why-we-prefer-masculine-voices-even-in-women/266350/>. Garber wrote that deep voices are an asset to those who seek positions of leadership.

⁵¹ Tom Shales, “After the Debate; Winners and Spinners,” *Washington Post*, September 26, 1988; Bob Drogin, “Jokes about Being a Northern Liberal with a Greek Name,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 1988, retrieved on January 21, 2013, http://articles.latimes.com/1988-03-01/news/mn-342_1_south-texas. Dukakis even started joking about it on the campaign trail: “If you can’t remember my name, and can’t pronounce it, just remember, go for the guy with the bushy eyebrows.”

⁵² Casey Bukro, “Harbor Taints Dukakis’ Record on Pollution,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 2, 1988, retrieved on February 8, 2013, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1988-09-02/news/8801270386_1_boston-harbor-dukakis-administration-massachusetts-gov. Boston Harbor was widely considered in 1988 the dirtiest in the United States.

debates.⁵³ It was an impromptu response later in the debate, however, that better captured Dukakis' elusive sense of humor: when Bush, who earlier called September 25th Christmas in order to poke fun at his own confusion of dates, said "where was I?" Dukakis delivered a perfectly timed deadpan response: "25th of December, Mr. Vice President," which yielded the evening's loudest laughter.⁵⁴

As the analysts predicted, much of the debate centered on Dukakis' personality. Jennings explained to him that voters perceived him as passionless, to which Dukakis awkwardly repeated, "passionless?" with emphasis on the last syllable.⁵⁵ Dukakis seemed not to understand Jennings' meaning. The governor's critics considered him technocratic, and "the smartest clerk in the world," Jennings continued, and when he reminded Dukakis that his public passion in the 1960s was not Vietnam or civil rights, but no-fault auto insurance, even Dukakis chuckled. Jennings' question gave Dukakis an opportunity to show some emotion, but his response was devoid of it. By not taking advantage of the opening that Jennings gave him to redeem himself, Dukakis further perpetuated his listless stereotype, which sharply contrasted with how Bush used the debates to reverse the "wimp" perception.

Beyond the image of his personality, Dukakis had to overcome the damage caused by a series of attack ads aired by the Bush campaign throughout the fall that depicted Dukakis as weak on crime, because as Massachusetts Governor, he furloughed a

⁵³ Lee Banville, *Debating Our Destiny: Presidential Debate Moments That Shaped History*, Arlington, VA: MacNeil-Lehrer Productions, 2012. Bush complained that debates were too pre-programmed and too artificial.

⁵⁴ Bush-Dukakis 1. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source. Earlier in the campaign, Bush mistakenly referred to the invasion of Pearl Harbor as having taken place on September 7 (it took place on December 7, 1941).

⁵⁵ Bush-Dukakis 1. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

convicted murderer who did not return to prison and subsequently committed rape.⁵⁶

When Dukakis commented in the debate that although he opposed the death penalty, he was very tough on violent crime, the latter line drew mocking laughter from the audience, which caused the perpetually expressionless Dukakis to be visibly embarrassed. To make matters worse, Bush then mentioned that the Boston Police Department endorsed him for president, and not Dukakis, Massachusetts' own governor.⁵⁷

Bush had his own obstacles to overcome. Given all the negative publicity about Quayle, it was inevitable that Bush would be questioned about his vice presidential choice. When Mashek asked, “[w]hat do you see in him that others do not?” the crowd laughed, underscoring that Quayle’s candidacy had become a farce. Displaying his brashness in defiance of the “wimp factor” stigma attached to him earlier in the campaign, Bush defended Quayle as a capable young man, predicted that Quayle would be an outstanding vice president, and blasted those who disparaged him. Bush also praised Quayle for having stood up to the “tremendous [and] very unfair pounding” that he took. Bush’s defense of his running mate, if not convincing enough to squelch the backlash, underscored Bush’s strong backbone. Ironically, then, Quayle’s negative image may have helped Bush, insofar as his stirring defense of his running mate enhanced his own image. If the first debate did nothing to help Quayle, it had helped Bush’s and hurt Dukakis’, thereby giving the Bush team an advantage.

⁵⁶ David Oshinsky, “What Became of the Democrats?” *New York Times*, October 20, 1991, retrieved on January 25, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/10/20/books/what-became-of-the-democrats.html?pagewanted=4&src=pm>. Al Gore, who ran against Dukakis in the 1988 Democratic primaries, was the first to criticize Dukakis for Massachusetts weekend furlough programs, but it was the Bush campaign that exploited the Willie Horton issue. For more discussion about how Willie Horton’s situation affected the 1988 campaign, see Emmett H. Buell, Jr. and Lee Sigelman, *Attack Politics: Negativity in Presidential Campaigns Since 1960*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008.

⁵⁷ Bush-Dukakis 1. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

Long-term personality perceptions notwithstanding, the consensus was that Dukakis edged Bush narrowly in the debate, and he closed the gap in the polls.⁵⁸ A post-debate Gallup Poll had Dukakis winning, 42 to 41 percent.⁵⁹ An *ABC News* poll taken immediately after the debate resulted in the participants having declared Dukakis the debate winner, 44 to 36 percent, with 20 percent replying that it was a tie.⁶⁰ Those poll results are noteworthy when compared to polls about the candidates' overall standing in the race. Although a CBS/*New York Times* pre-debate poll showed Bush with an eight-point lead over Dukakis, two post-debate polls indicated that the challenger gained ground. A Gallup Poll revealed that Bush's overall lead over Dukakis was only 47 to 42 percent, and when asked who did a better job in the debate, 38 percent stated Dukakis to only 22 percent for Bush.⁶¹ An ABC Poll had Bush with an even smaller lead for Bush over Dukakis than the Gallup Poll, with 46 to 42 percent, which is a statistical tie.⁶² Although there is no conclusive correlation to suggest that the debate directly affected the poll numbers, it is clear that major polls declared Dukakis the debate winner, as did the majority of analysts. At worst, they declared the debate a draw, and during that time, Bush's overall lead in the polls also narrowed.

⁵⁸ James M. Perry and Gerald F. Seib, "Campaign '88: Bush, Dukakis, Trade Charges on National Security, Deficit, Patriotism, and Drug Policy in First Debate," *Wall Street Journal*, September 26, 1988, 1. The authors wrote that Dukakis won on technical efficiency; E.J. Dionne, "After the Debate; Round One Undecisive," *New York Times*, September 27, 1988. Bush's own communications adviser, Jim Lake acknowledged that Dukakis won on debating points, but quickly added "you can't score a presidential debate on debating points."; Paul Taylor, "President Debate Appears to Have Shifted Few Opinions," *Washington Post*, September 27, 1988, 1. Democratic consultant David Garth conceded, Dukakis came across as the better presenter, but "you wouldn't want to have a beer with him. There is a tightness about him, an underlying smugness that...came across in the debate."

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Paul Taylor and Gwen Ifill, "Group of Previously Undecided Voters Leans Closer to Bush; Some Previously Undecided Viewers Turn Away from Dukakis," *Washington Post*, September 26, 1988, 17.

⁶¹ Anonymous, "Bush Keeps Narrow Edge over Dukakis in Latest Gallup Poll," *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 1988.

⁶² Anonymous, "New ABC Poll Finds Dukakis, Bush in Tie," *Boston Globe*, September 29, 1988, 23.

None of the major polls, or newspapers, thought that Bush prevailed. Even those who viewed the debate to be a draw, such as the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* Larry Eichel, saw it as a rather even contest, and concluded that, particularly in the opening debate, "a draw is as good as a win for the outsider (Dukakis)."⁶³ Most, however, thought that Dukakis did a better job.

Bush was asked during the debate whether he questioned Dukakis' patriotism, to which he replied no, but a defiant Dukakis said that Bush questioned it indeed, and "I resent it." Notably, David Broder of the *Washington Post* observed that Dukakis' "I resent" remark in defense of his patriotism was so effective that Bush never broached the subject again.⁶⁴ To the extent that voters in 1960 might have wished "if only Nixon seemed more at ease" or in 1980 "if only Carter sounded more optimistic," Broder's comment underscores the extent to which a lively, passionate personality was the voters' "if only" with regards to Dukakis in 1988. That one moment of passion sparked post-debate analysis, and speculation as to whether Dukakis would deliver more of it in the second debate with Bush.

As Thomas B. Rosenstiel of the *Los Angeles Times* observed, post-debate reporting increasingly concluded that Dukakis prevailed in the debate, as subsequent newspaper articles reported the findings of previous ones, and reflected the tightening polls.⁶⁵ As Michael Pfau wrote, years later, whereas journalists merely reported during the earlier debate seasons, providing transcripts or summaries of the events, they became

⁶³ Eichel, "Bush, Dukakis Differ Sharply Clarifying the Lines of Battle," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 26, 1988, 1. For more discussion about how the debate was largely viewed as even, see Mary McGrory, "No Knockouts," *Washington Post*, September 27, 1988.

⁶⁴ David S. Broder, "Dukakis Keeps His Hopes Alive; Democrat Fends off Bush Effort to Place Him Far to Left," *Washington Post*, September 26, 1988, 1.

⁶⁵ Thomas B. Rosenstiel, "Consensus Builds for Dukakis in Debate," *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 1988, 16.

progressively analytical over time, which in turn influenced voters who did not watch the debates in the first place.⁶⁶ Accordingly, this made the debates matter even more. Broder's comment, for example, appeared to be a cue to prompt Dukakis to be more passionate. That same year, in an October 25 interview on *ABC News*' show *Nightline*, host Ted Koppel tried to coach Dukakis into doing a better job to connect with the American people during the ninety-minute interview on the highly rated program.⁶⁷ The impact of the media on the debates not only grew in terms of increased focus, post-debate analysis, and repeated clips of specific moments as the campaign continued, but also, as in Broder's and Koppel's cases, moved beyond reporting and analysis to helping to shape the direction of the race.

Whether or not the "pounding" Dan Quayle took from the media was "unfair," as Bush emphatically insisted in the first debate, was a matter of opinion. What is evident, however, is that no other vice presidential candidate in debate history, at least to that point, was the subject of such intense scrutiny and negative criticism by the press as Quayle.⁶⁸ That the Dukakis campaign saw the Quayle-Bentsen event as "the second presidential debate" but the Bush team considered it largely irrelevant revealed each side's confidence, or lack thereof, in its respective candidate, wrote Robert Shogan.⁶⁹ However, the low expectations attributed to Quayle might have benefitted him to some

⁶⁶ Michael Pfau, "The Subtle Nature of Presidential Debate Influence," *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Volume 38 No. 4 (Spring 2002), 251-261, 256.

⁶⁷ Anonymous, "Ted Koppel Recalls 'Nightline' Highlights," *ABC News*, November 20, 2005, retrieved on August 19, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/ThisWeek/Politics/story?id=1330876>. Koppel said to Dukakis: "With all due respect, let me suggest to you I still don't think you get it."

⁶⁸ To that point, the vice presidential debaters were Walter Mondale and Bob Dole in 1976, and Bush and Geraldine Ferraro in 1984; none was assailed nearly as much as Quayle.

⁶⁹ Robert Shogan, "Debate Tonight Could Be a Key Event of Race," *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 1988, retrieved on January 20, 2013, http://articles.latimes.com/1988-10-05/news/mn-2843_1_debate-tonight. Both sides expected Bentsen to do better than Quayle, which is why the Dukakis campaign advertised the debate as more significant than the Bush team did.

extent. As journalist Dick Polman saw it, all Quayle had to do to perform well was to show that he could “walk and chew gum at the same time.”⁷⁰ It was the low expectations phenomenon, which Jimmy Carter first used to his benefit in 1976, redux.⁷¹

Nonetheless, the *Washington Post* reported numerous scheduled “Quayle-hunting” parties, where invitees gathered to watch the debate, dressed in feathers, to express the view that Quayle was a “dead duck.”⁷² A substantial number of viewers, if not an outright majority, planned to watch the debate primarily to see whether or not Quayle made a fool of himself. The sideshow carnival mindset seemed to supersede any intellectual curiosity about the candidates’ stance on the issues. Never before was a debater expected to fail so miserably. Low expectations aside, such intense pre-debate scorn is hard for anyone to overcome.

The debate took place on October 5 in Omaha, Nebraska.⁷³ Judy Woodruff, of the *MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour* and *Frontline*, both on the PBS network, was the moderator.⁷⁴ The panelists were John Margolis of the *Chicago Tribune*, Tom Brokaw of *NBC News*, and Brit Hume of *ABC News*.⁷⁵ The first question went to Quayle. The Republican vice presidential nominee’s youthful movie star looks were somewhat reminiscent of Robert Redford, specifically in *The Candidate*, a 1972 film in which Redford played a young, handsome, but politically inexperienced man running for the

⁷⁰ Dick Polman, “Tonight: a High Point in the Tale of Quayle,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 5, 1988, 1.

⁷¹ Schroeder, 106. Carter said that to the extent that he could hold his own against the experienced incumbent president, Gerald Ford in the debates, he would consider that a victory.

⁷² Evelyn Hau, “A-Debating We Will Go,” *Washington Post*, October 6, 1988, 3.

⁷³ Quayle-Bentsen Debate, October 5, 1988, C-SPAN, retrieved on September 24, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/4127-1>.

⁷⁴ Woodruff is outspoken for adhering to journalistic integrity, and because her questions are often so even-handed, she is accused by the far right of being too liberal, and by the far left of being too conservative. For more discussion about her career and comments, see Marlene Sanders, *Waiting for Prime Time: The Women of Television News*, Chicago, IL, University of Illinois Press, 1988.

⁷⁵ Quayle-Bentsen.

United States Senate.⁷⁶ But Quayle's bushy eyebrows, gentle, almost glazed look, and mellow voice gave him the appearance of being a 'lightweight' or, worse yet, fueled the media's preconception that he was unintelligent.⁷⁷ In fact, when Woodruff began the question by referring to former Secretary of State Alexander Haig's remark, that Bush's selection of Quayle "was the dumbest call George Bush could have made," the crowd laughed and applauded in support, and Quayle could do little but look on and smile awkwardly.⁷⁸ Woodruff then softened the question, asking Quayle why he thought his image was so poor. Quayle responded by discussing military weapons in highly technical terms – megatonnage, telemetry, and encryption – evidently an attempt to convey an image of knowledge and experience in order to challenge the perception that he was ignorant. Conceivably unconvinced that Quayle justified his credentials, Hume later asked him to identify some work of literature, art, or film that he experienced over the past two years that had a strong effect on him. Quayle answered the question thoroughly and confidently, but the substance of the response was less significant than the predisposed doubts about his overall preparedness.

As Bentsen began speaking, he looked and sounded distinctively different from the youthful and defensive Quayle. A mature, bespectacled, distinguished Southern gentleman, Bentsen fit the image of the prototypical senator well.⁷⁹ He emphasized that the debate was not about who would make a better vice president, but who was best qualified to be a heartbeat away from the presidency.

⁷⁶ Garry Abrams, "The Redford Factor: Do Looks Really Sway Voters?" *Los Angeles Times*, September 7, 1988, retrieved on January 28, 2013, http://articles.latimes.com/1988-09-07/news/vw-1508_1_robert-redford..

⁷⁷ For more discussion about how Quayle was portrayed as unintelligent in both words and caricatures in the media, see Janis L. Edwards, *Political Cartoons in the 1988 Presidential Campaign*, New York, NY: Garland, 1997.

⁷⁸ Alexander Haig was a general and was President Reagan's first Secretary of State.

⁷⁹ senate.gov. The average age of a US senator over the past 30 years has been in the low sixties, far closer to Bentsen's age at the time than to Quayle's.

The panelists persisted in pressing Quayle about his ability to step in and become president at a moment's notice, to which Quayle responded that he would say a prayer for himself and for the country that he was about to lead. Quayle sounded extremely calm, perhaps a bit too calm: almost as if he was in a trance, confused, or on medication. Turning his attention to Dukakis, Quayle stated that he had more experience and accomplishments than the Massachusetts governor. The more Quayle insisted that he was capable and qualified, the more audible eruptions of laughter were heard from the live audience. Quayle then inadvertently set up Bentsen for what was considered not only his best line of the night, but also one of the most memorable in debate history. In relaying his experience, Quayle explained that he had as much Congressional experience at that point as Jack Kennedy did when he ran for president. Bentsen looked on with glee, as if he could not wait to deliver the lethal response. He quipped: "Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy, I knew Jack Kennedy, Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy." The crowd responded with cheers and squeals as Quayle, struggling to be heard above the audience's noise level, leered at Bentsen and snapped back: "That was really uncalled for, Senator." But Bentsen did not relent, replying: "You are the one that was making the comparison, Senator – and I'm the one who knew him well. And frankly I think you are so far apart in your objectives you choose for your country that I did not think the comparison was well-taken." Bentsen enunciated the word "senator" with a strained tone, perhaps to suggest that even though Quayle held the same title as he did, Quayle was hardly his political equal. Quayle, meanwhile, continued to look on with contempt.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Schroeder, 88. In retrospect, Quayle acknowledged that his advisors counseled him not to draw any comparisons to Kennedy, and realized that he probably should have listened to them.

An ABC News Poll indicated that Bentsen won the debate by a large margin: 51 to 27 percent for Bentsen, with 22 percent undecided.⁸¹ The media ranked Bentsen's "you're no Jack Kennedy" line as the evening's top sound bite.⁸² Indeed, Quayle was, "no Jack Kennedy" in more ways than one. At the time of their debate debut, both were young senators without particularly impressive legislative records, and whose experience was questioned. However, where Quayle's debate appearance was defensive, Kennedy, used his youthful energy and telegenic looks to cultivate his image.⁸³ In fact, the only instance when Quayle used his youth to any advantage was when Bentsen told Margolis "I can't hear you," and Quayle quipped, "I can hear you," implying that unlike Bentsen, advanced age did not impair his hearing. Nonetheless, even that remark, viewed in the greater context of whether Quayle was qualified for the job of vice president, made him seem less the attractive young leader than a disrespectful freshman making fun of his aging teacher.

Perhaps more significantly, however, was not how much better Bentsen did than Quayle, but that Quayle performed well enough. E.J. Dionne pointed out, for instance, that more viewers thought that Quayle was qualified to step in as president if need be than did prior to the debate.⁸⁴ Journalist Patrick Thomas observed that Quayle did well

⁸¹ Broder, "JFK's Ghost and the 'Quayle Factor,'" *Washington Post*, October 6, 1988, 1.

⁸² Shales, "Bentsen and Quayle: A Single Point of Light," *Washington Post*, October 6, 1988, 1. CBS News' Bob Schieffer said that Bentsen "zinged" Quayle with that line; Gerald F. Seib and David Rogers, "Bentsen Outperforms Quayle in Debate," *Wall Street Journal*, October 8, 1988, 1; A.M. Rosenthal, "The Bentsen-Quayle Whatever," *New York Times*, October 7, 1988, 35. Rosenthal was critical of the debaters having been coached to deliver one-liners, but nonetheless acknowledged that the best of those was "you're no Jack Kennedy." Four years later, at the 1992 Republican Convention, Ronald Reagan spoke on behalf of Bush, and criticized Bill Clinton, who compared himself to Thomas Jefferson, by saying: "I knew Thomas Jefferson. Thomas Jefferson was a friend of mine [self-deprecating humor at his own advanced age]. Governor [Clinton], you're no Thomas Jefferson."

⁸³ Schroeder, 137. Kennedy understood the power of television in American politics as well as anyone did, and in gratitude for its role in the debates, acknowledged: "we wouldn't have had a prayer without that gadget."

⁸⁴ Dionne, "The Debates: Revival for Democrats," *New York Times*, October 7, 1988, 6.

enough to cease being the focal point of the campaign.⁸⁵ Even Democratic strategist Robert Beckel conceded that Quayle's performance was not bad enough to change the outcome of the election, and that it all hinged on the final Bush-Dukakis debate.⁸⁶ After all, Quayle made no actual gaffe in the debate; the only apparent damage was that he was the victim of the "you're no Jack Kennedy" punchline. Quayle's presence at the debate helped him precisely in the same way that Jimmy Carter's absence in the Reagan-Anderson debate in 1980 hurt him.⁸⁷

As the attention turned to the final debate, polling also determined that Bush was the more likable candidate, which prompted Dukakis' aides to urge him to be more personable and convivial in the final contest.⁸⁸

On October 13, the day of the third and final debate and a full week after Quayle-Bentsen, a *New York Times* poll showed that Bush continued to hold a narrow lead, 47 to 42 percent, over Dukakis.⁸⁹ Did that mean that the running mates' debate was of no consequence, or that Quayle, who, according to a wide consensus, was outdebated by Bentsen, did well enough to mollify the voters' concerns? The fact that Bush was sixty-four and in excellent health, rendered the chances that Quayle would become president as a result of Bush dying in office quite small.⁹⁰ The real focus, then, was on Bush versus Dukakis.⁹¹

⁸⁵ Patrick Thomas, "In Debate, Quayle at Least Passes the 'Sidekick Test,'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 1988, 3.

⁸⁶ Eichel, "No Disaster, But No Dazzle for Quayle," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 6, 1988, 1.

⁸⁷ Reagan-Anderson Debate, September 21, 1980, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library VHS, retrieved on June 4, 2010. Reagan referred to Carter as "the man who isn't here tonight"; For more discussion on how absence has been treated in literature, see Mahfouz Safi Muhammad, "The Absence of Presence," *The Midwest Quarterly*, Volume 53, No. 4 (Summer 2012), pp. 392-409.

⁸⁸ Andrew Blake, "Dukakis Urged to be 'Warm' in Debate," *Boston Globe*, October 13, 1988, 27.

⁸⁹ Dionne, "Poll Shows U.S. Voter Optimism is Helping Bush in the Campaign," *New York Times*, October 13, 1988, 1.

⁹⁰ Philip H. Melanson, *The Secret Service: The Hidden History of an Enigmatic Agency*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002, 316. Only four presidents ever died in office of natural causes. The other four were assassinated,

The media, in turn, continued to express their opinion that even a single debate – the final one – could be catalytic. Edward Walsh of the *Washington Post* wrote that Dukakis was in “dire need of a breakthrough” in the final debate, and that he continued to be perceived as “insufficiently ‘likable.’”⁹² The *Wall Street Journal* determined that Dukakis had the unenviable task of being both aggressive and likable at the same time.⁹³ The Bush team, on the other hand, counted on the final debate to erase any bad memories of Quayle’s performance.⁹⁴ But Bush did not exude a sense of urgency: he spent the day before the debate relaxing and attending a baseball playoff game as his staff poked fun at Dukakis, and even Bush’s wife, Barbara, wore a Dukakis mask that exaggerated the Democrat’s thick eyebrows.⁹⁵

The debate took place at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA).⁹⁶ *CNN*’s Bernard Shaw, a well-respected journalist known for his detached professionalism, was the moderator.⁹⁷ The panelists were Ann Compton of *ABC News*, Andrea Mitchell of *NBC News*, and Margaret Warner of *Newsweek* magazine, who wrote the “wimp factor” article in the magazine’s October 19, 1987 edition.⁹⁸

although substantially fortified security measures since Kennedy’s assassination in 1963 decreased that likelihood even more significantly.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* Reagan enjoyed a 60 percent approval rating, and poll respondents after the first Bush-Dukakis debate viewed Bush as more conservative, like Reagan, than they thought prior to it. On the whole, they continued to give Bentsen high marks, though they did not think the vice presidential debate mattered as much as the presidential ones.

⁹² Edward Walsh, “Dukakis Needs a Debate Breakthrough,” *Washington Post*, October 13, 1988, 21.

⁹³ Gerald F. Seib and Michel McQueen, “Dukakis Enters Final Debate with More at Stake,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 13, 1988, 1.

⁹⁴ Robert S. Boyd, “Stakes Higher for Dukakis in Final Face-off with Bush,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 13, 1988, 1. “People vote for presidents, not vice presidents,” added Bush Campaign Manager Lee Atwater.

⁹⁵ Bernard Weinraub, “Relaxed Bush Camp is Set for the Debate,” *New York Times*, October 13, 1988, B10.

⁹⁶ Bush-Dukakis Debate 2, C-SPAN, October 13, 1988, retrieved on September 23, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/4256-1>.

⁹⁷ John Tedesco, *Biography of Bernard Shaw*, Museum of Broadcast Communications, retrieved on February 1, 2013, <http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=shawbernard>.

⁹⁸ Bush-Dukakis 2. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

The debate's very first question, which Shaw asked Dukakis, was the one journalists in the ensuing days, and debate experts ever since, described as the question that sealed Dukakis' defeat: "If Kitty Dukakis [the candidates' wife, who was seated in the audience] were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?" Shaw divided the sentence into two parts, taking a long pause after "raped and murdered." If Shaw expected an impassioned reaction from Dukakis, he did not get one. The Massachusetts governor, who was described as passionless even in the first debate, lived up to that image. He simply stood there facing Shaw with a lethargic and ultra-calm demeanor. In fact, Dukakis' response ignored the hypothetical involving his wife. He answered: "No I don't, Bernard. And I think you know that I've opposed the death penalty during all of my life." He did not discuss how, perhaps if it were his own wife who was raped and then murdered, his emotions might stir to the point where his response would not be calm. Or that the American justice system was based on impartial juries to prevent emotional verdicts, which surely would not be the case if he were judge and jury over his wife's murderer. Instead, Dukakis' answer, just like his expression, was robotic.

The remainder of Dukakis' response, in which he explained that his policies helped reduce crime significantly despite his opposition to the death penalty, became irrelevant. The voters wanted emotion, and Dukakis delivered none. Behind the scenes, Dukakis' advisors urged him to be emotional about law and order issues, and to highlight that his father and brother were victims of violent crime.⁹⁹ Viscerally opposed to injecting personal experiences into policy matters, Dukakis fought against engaging in such theatrics, but he overcompensated by appearing too mechanical in his response to

⁹⁹ Schroeder, 88. His father was robbed and his brother suffered lethal injuries by a hit-and-run driver.

Shaw's hypothetical, when human emotion might have been more effective.¹⁰⁰ Although the *Chicago Tribune*, in a post-debate editorial, called Shaw's question "egregiously offensive," many later deemed that Dukakis dug himself into a hole out of which he was unable to climb.¹⁰¹ Adding a new dimension to the notion that a single debate can potentially affect the momentum of a campaign and the psyche of a candidate, if not the outcome of the election, Shaw's seminal question about the hypothetical rape and murder underscored how a single journalist – whether inadvertently or not – can be just as catalytic. Insofar as the debates matter, they affect not just the audience, but also the candidates themselves.

If Dukakis' response did irreparable damage to his lackluster image, then Bush's opening remarks highlighted his ability to be both lighthearted and forcefully serious. Shaw's opening question to Bush was: "[I]f you are elected and die before inauguration day," to which Bush good-naturedly chuckled and said "Bernie," seemingly hinting that the journalist should not be thinking such an awful thought out loud.¹⁰² Bush's sense of humor was a sharp contrast to Dukakis' emotionless response moments earlier.¹⁰³ Shaw remained stone-faced and distinguished, not laughing along, and continued: "automatically, automatically, Dan Quayle would become the forty-first president of the United States. What have you to say about that possibility?"¹⁰⁴ As he did in the first debate, Bush mastered the art of shifting gears instantly, from good humor to a serious and often admonishing tone. "I'd have confidence in him," Bush replied. "And I made a good selection. And I have never seen such a pounding, an unfair pounding, on a young

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Schroeder, 154; Editorial, "A Helpful Debate In Spite of Itself," *Chicago Tribune*, October 15, 1988, 10.

¹⁰² Bush-Dukakis 2.

¹⁰³ Schroeder, 188.

¹⁰⁴ Bush-Dukakis 2. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

senator in my entire life.” Bush added, that he also had never seen a presidential campaign before in which one nominee [Dukakis] ran against the opposing vice presidential nominee [Quayle]. Bush drew applause for that comment, which might have been an implication that Dukakis was either afraid or otherwise unwilling to challenge Bush directly, and so decided instead to attack Quayle. The candidates’ opening moments were probably more crucial to their overall performances than in any of the previous fifteen debates.

Asked by Warner about his personality, Dukakis responded, to some scattered appreciative laughter, that he was “a reasonably likable guy.” That might have been one of his warmer moments during the debates, though he added that he was a “serious guy” as well, and that the presidency is a very serious office. He concluded that although he would enjoy being liked, Dukakis was more interested in doing the job. After eight years of Reagan charisma, it seemed highly unlikely that the American people would elect a candidate who seemed to struggle so much in trying to make the case for his own likability.

In expressing his disdain for debates, when Mitchell asked him if he would agree to another one, Bush responded forcefully, again shedding any remnants of the wimp factor. Bush emphatically refused to have another debate, insisting that the people had had enough of them. Bush looked squarely at the panelists and chided them, in their capacity as prominent members of the media, for being so interested in polls that they did not report the candidates’ issues with enough frequency and detail. He also blasted the Democrats at their convention for starting the negativity, prefacing it with “I don’t want to sound like a kid in the schoolyard: he started it.” Bush continued displaying his

outrage, taking on the role of a scolding grown-up, particularly when he blasted Dukakis for having compared the president to the head of a rotting fish, while Dukakis looked on sheepishly.¹⁰⁵ That juxtaposition of the admonisher and the admonished reinforced the perception that Bush was in charge.

The debate moment that best captured why Bush was able to capitalize on his link to Reagan, where Nixon in 1960 was unsuccessful in doing the same vis-à-vis Eisenhower, was Bush's response to Compton's question about whom he considered to be an American hero. Bush talked about Reagan, praising the president for a job well done despite "cynics abound[ing]," and contended that Reagan was about to leave office with approval ratings at an all-time high, because the American people considered him a hero as well. Compared to Nixon in 1960, who endured much questioning in the debates about his disagreements with Eisenhower, and was reminded that Eisenhower asked reporters to give him "about a week" to think of a foreign policy initiative of Nixon's that he adopted, Bush called Reagan his hero.

It is important to note that the same list that ranked Reagan as the sixth greatest president placed Eisenhower at number eight.¹⁰⁶ He, too, left office with approval numbers equal to Reagan's, and his peak rating of 79 percent eclipsed Reagan's high of 68 percent.¹⁰⁷ In attempting to reconcile why Bush was able to leverage his president's popularity to victory whereas Nixon was not, that answer is found within the

¹⁰⁵ Robin Toner, "Dukakis Focuses on Reagan Ethics," *New York Times*, Jul, 31, 1988, retrieved on February 2, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/07/31/us/dukakis-focuses-on-reagan-ethics.html>. In describing a scandal alleging that Pentagon officials took bribes in exchange for offering defense contracts, Dukakis held Reagan responsible by quoting an old Greek saying "a fish rots from the head first."; John Simpson and Jennifer Speake (eds.). *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, Oxford: England, Oxford University Press, 2003. The Dictionary confirms that the phrase did originate in Greece, and first appeared in English in 1851.

¹⁰⁶ Taranto, 11.

¹⁰⁷ Gallup Presidential Approval Ratings, retrieved on February 28, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx>.

debates themselves, where Bush consistently projected unity with Reagan, thereby creating the impression that his presidency effectively would be Reagan's third term, in contrast with Nixon, who often found himself at odds with Eisenhower's foreign policy.¹⁰⁸ For those who considered voting for Bush in the hope that his presidency would be a seamless continuation of the Reagan years, Bush's affirmation helped to perpetuate that notion.¹⁰⁹

Further evidence of a link between debate performance and standing in the polls was that within thirty minutes of the debate, an *ABC News* poll concluded that Bush won, 49 percent to 33 percent.¹¹⁰ Two days later, the *New York Times* reported Bush winning by a two-to-one margin.¹¹¹ The *Los Angeles Times* had Bush winning 47 to 26 percent.¹¹² All the major television networks at the time – ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC – declared the debate winner was Bush, and he extended to a nine-point Gallup Poll lead, 50 to 41 percent, over Dukakis.¹¹³

Austin Ranney said that Dukakis “needed to hit a home run, and all he hit was a single.”¹¹⁴ Kathleen Jamieson concluded that Bush “dominated” the agenda.¹¹⁵ Ellen Warren, a communications professor at the University of Rhode Island, who was writing for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, observed that Dukakis “wasn't very likable in answering his

¹⁰⁸ Nixon repeatedly differed with Eisenhower in that the former supported the United States' protection of the Chinese islands Quemoy (now Kinmen) and Matsu.

¹⁰⁹ Tom Wicker, *Dwight D. Eisenhower*, New York, NY: Times Books, 2002, 118; Kennedy-Nixon 1, September 26, 1960, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library DVD, retrieved on May 4, 2010.

¹¹⁰ Charles Green and Robert S. Boyd, “Candidates Tangle in 2d Debate Clash on Crime and Quayle,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 14, 1988, A1.

¹¹¹ Editorial, “Sure Loser in the Debate: The Format,” *New York Times*, October 15, 1988, 30.

¹¹² George Skelton, “The Times' Poll: Voters Say Bush Won, 47%-26%,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1988, 1.

¹¹³ Rosenthal, “Third TV Debate Brings Change in Commentary,” *New York Times*, October 15, 1988, 1.

¹¹⁴ Shogan, “Bush Called Dominant in Debate, Dukakis Seen as Unable to Make Necessary Gains,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1988, 1.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

own likability question.”¹¹⁶ The most severe criticism of Dukakis, however, centered on his response to Shaw’s provocative “rape and murder” question. It was an “iceman” answer, wrote the *Washington Post*’s Edward Walsh, who wondered why Dukakis did not relay the instances of his father’s robbery and his brother’s death from injuries inflicted by a hit-and-run-driver.¹¹⁷ Kitty Dukakis thought the question was outrageous, but thought her husband should have responded more forcefully.¹¹⁸ Shaw, who devised the question in the early hours of the morning of the debate, was worried that Dukakis would do so well in answering it that it would appear as if Shaw was trying to help Dukakis by asking such an easy question.¹¹⁹ It turned out to be anything but easy, however. Jack Germond and Jules Witcover called it “the killer question.”¹²⁰ David Broder, upon hearing Dukakis’ answer, concluded that the election was over.¹²¹ It was another example of the reverence analysts had for the power of debates: that a response to a simple question, which was largely criticized on style, could be the determining factor in an election’s outcome.

The way the candidates themselves analyzed the question was very telling in their ability to connect with the voters. Bush agreed with most viewers that Dukakis did not respond to the question well and “seemed flustered by it. Instead of saying ‘I’d kill him if I could get my hands on him,’ there was some kind of politically correct answer. And I

¹¹⁶ Ellen Warren, “At the Heart of the Debate, the Likability Factor,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 14, 1988, 17.

¹¹⁷ Edward Walsh, “While Bush Glows, Dukakis Eyes Clock,” *Washington Post*, October 15, 1988, 1.

¹¹⁸ Kitty Dukakis, *Now You Know*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1990, 220.

¹¹⁹ Schroeder, 187.

¹²⁰ Germond and Witcover, *Whose Broad Stripes and Bright Stars?* The book’s first chapter, based on that question, is titled “A Killer Question” because, as the authors explained, it destroyed Dukakis because of how he handled it. If he answered it with more emotion, they wrote, he might have helped his image quite significantly.

¹²¹ Lehrer, 45.

think that hurt him.”¹²² Yet Dukakis, on the other hand, said to Alan Schroeder, that “I’ve listened to the response – and it doesn’t sound too bad.”¹²³

Bush won the election by a large margin, capturing nearly 80 percent of the electoral college and forty states, thereby becoming the first sitting vice president to debate and go on to win the presidential election, and the second incumbent to do so overall.¹²⁴ In fact, Bush’s victory marked the second in a row for incumbent debaters, which at least alleviated somewhat the concern that incumbents could not debate and proceed to win the election.

In the “issueless campaign” that Swift described, the issue was the image of personality, particularly for Dukakis’. Whether portrayed by Bush as considerably to the left of the American mainstream, defined in the polls as lacking warmth, or described by the debate questioners as passionless, Dukakis was unable to gain any momentum and overcome Bush’s lead. The vice president, in turn, effectively shed any remnants of the “wimp factor” by using the debates to admonish Dukakis, the debate panelists, the media as a whole, and even the Texas state treasurer.

The 1988 debates were also about incumbency, in this case Bush’s, and that he was able to succeed where Nixon failed in 1960. He was able to refer proudly to his president’s record at every turn, and convince the American people that his opponent would seriously deviate from that direction. Moreover, for the first time in any debate season, a moderator’s question was considered in post-debate analysis to have dealt a severe blow to a particular candidate’s chances of winning the election. That, too,

¹²² Lehrer, 36.

¹²³ Schroeder, 154.

¹²⁴ Dave Leip’s Atlas of United States Presidential Elections, 1988, retrieved on February 1, 2013, <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS>. Reagan was the first, in 1984.

served to underscore the perils and pressures of debating on live television before a nationwide audience of tens of millions of potential voters. All of those factors worked in Bush's favor, so much so that his running mate's own debate performance, reflected by poll results and media observation as the most lopsided loss in debate history, was rendered inconsequential.

Arguably more so than any other debate season before or since, 1988 was a microcosm of the debate phenomenon overall. Taken together with 1960, it illustrated a correlation between an incumbent vice president's ability to link himself to a popular president he served, and how likability and an ability to connect with the voters (as was also the case in 1980) were more influential than technical debating proficiency. Like 1984, it was a positive use of the incumbent administration's record, unlike in 1976 and 1980, when the incumbents did not have as much popular backing to posit that argument effectively, or 1960, when the incumbent did not do a sufficient job in projecting that message. Moreover, it added a new dimension to the importance of running mates, insofar as they might be perceived as too weak (such as Quayle) or too strong (such as Bentsen) and thereby call into question the ticket headliner's judgment in selecting them. Lastly, the 1988 season underscored that the debates continued to matter more and more. That year marked four consecutive presidential elections that featured debates that were consistently watched by a television audience of tens of millions, thus rendering it that much harder for future candidates to evade them.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Newton N. Minow and Craig J. Lamay, *Inside the Presidential Debates*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 158.

**DO THE DEBATES MATTER? AN EXAMINATION OF THE PROGRESSIVELY
INFLUENTIAL ROLE OF MAJOR PARTY DEBATES IN
AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: 1960-2008**

**CHAPTER 7: 1992 – TELEVISION AND THE TOWN HALL FORMAT
MANIFEST POPULISM**

Democrats Bill Clinton (Governor – AR) and Al Gore (US Senator - TN) v. Republicans George H.W. Bush (Incumbent President) and Dan Quayle (Incumbent Vice President) v. Ross Perot (Businessman) and James Stockdale (Retired US Admiral). Clinton-Bush-Perot 1 (62.4 million), Clinton-Bush-Perot 2 (69.9 million), Clinton-Bush-Perot 3 (66.9 million), Gore-Quayle-Stockdale (51.2 million).

In 1992, more so than in any season since the debates' inception in 1960, populism was an influential, if not overriding factor. Most readily associated with the People's Party, which was formed in 1892 by farmers who railed against bankers, railroad moguls, and the elitist establishment in general, populism waned as a movement in the early twentieth century, particularly on the national level, following the strong but unsuccessful presidential run by Theodore Roosevelt in 1912.¹ Eighty years later, however, capitalizing on an election year recession, both Democratic challenger Bill Clinton, then Governor of Arkansas, and Independent Ross Perot portrayed incumbent President George H.W. Bush as an out-of-touch elitist.² Perot conveyed a populist theme through Election Day, capturing approximately 19 percent of the popular vote, greater than any non-major party candidate since Roosevelt ran on the Progressive/Bull

¹ Lawrence Goodwin, *The Populist Movement*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1976, xxi; Theodore Roosevelt, after not seeking reelection in 1908, decided to run again in 1912, but the Republicans re-nominated the incumbent, President William Taft. Roosevelt then ran on the Progressive/Bull Moose ticket and gained 27 percent of the popular vote. For more discussion on the 1912 election, see James Chace, *1912: Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft and Debs—the Election that Changed the Country*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004.

² Timothy Naftali, *George W. Bush*, New York, NY: Times Books, 2007, 140. Naftali wrote that although the recession, in hindsight, was short-lived, unemployment reached 6.9 percent, its highest level in nine years.

Moose ticket in 1912.³ Clinton also evoked populism with the “I feel your pain” overture to the electorate, contending that he, unlike Bush, understood the plight of Americans of modest means trying to survive in an uncertain economic climate.

Essentially, populism is advocating “for the [common] people,” as opposed to the well-established, is described in *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s*, by historian Ronald P. Formisano, as it focuses more on populism’s theme than a connection to the late nineteenth century agrarian uprising and contended that the roots of populism in America are as old as the formation of the nation itself, with anti-federalist resentment toward the establishmentarian Federalists sowing the seeds of discontent that festered for decades.⁴ In *American Populism: A Social History 1877-1898*, Robert C. McMath, Jr. depicted a related but distinct populist theme: opposition to a growing wealth gap in America that was attributed to the late nineteenth century’s industrial revolution.⁵ In *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, Michael Kazin described the movement from colonial times into the late twentieth century, elaborating particularly on the Clinton and Perot populist themes of the 1992 presidential campaign.⁶ Moreover, from a predominantly political perspective, *Third Parties in America*, by Stephen Rosenstone, specifically examines the populist ideology as reflected in non-major political parties, depicting that it is not limited to economic disparity but extends to the disenfranchisement of those not politically well-

³ 1992 General Election Results, David Leip’s Atlas of Presidential Elections, retrieved on August 29, 2014, <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?year=1992>; 1912 General Election Results, Leip, retrieved on August 29, 2014, <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?year=1912>.

⁴ Ronald P. Formisano, *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

⁵ Robert C. McMath, Jr., *American Populism: A Social History 1877-1898*, New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1992.

⁶ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1995, 270-271.

connected.⁷ This chapter examines the dynamic relationship among the six debaters, and how each played a role, whether consciously or by omission, of advancing or retreating from the issue of populism in the debates.

Insofar as populism is rooted in “leveling the playing field,” the outcry regarding the recession came loudest from the middle class, which was worried about a lower standard of living and how to afford to pay for their children’s education.⁸ The debates provide such equalization, at least on the political playing field, insofar as they create an environment for a fixed time, usually ninety minutes, in which candidates are left to their own devices, without advisors or public relations specialists to help deliver their messages.⁹

If populism was the message of the 1992 campaign, television was its messenger. The debates were not only equalizers in terms of providing opportunities for challengers to stand on the same stage as their incumbent opponents, but also because they were televised and thus provided equal access to almost every American, given that by 1992, 98.6 percent of households contained at least one television set.¹⁰ The debates, which were broadcast over the major networks at no charge to the viewer, thereby provided nearly every American (potentially, at least) the opportunity to watch and listen to every word, as opposed to limiting such access to a live audience, which would exclude well over 99.9 percent of the electorate. Perot, in fact, not only purchased television time to

⁷ Stephen J. Rosenstone, Roy L. Behr, *et al.*, *Third Parties in America*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.

⁸ Naftali, 131.

⁹ Kim R. Holmes and Michael Novak, *Rebound: Getting America Back to Great*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013, 27. Holmes and Novak described the essence of populism as “leveling the playing field” among those with disparity in financial status.

¹⁰ Nielsen Estimate Universe 2012 Report, retrieved on August 29, 2014, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2011/nielsen-estimates-number-of-u-s-television-homes-to-be-114-7-million.html>.

air multiple thirty-minute infomercials, but also used his airtime during the debates themselves to remind viewers on what day and time the segments would be televised.

Moreover, a striking difference between the 1992 debates and any before or since was the number of debaters on stage at once. The three presidential debates and the sole vice presidential debate featured the incumbent debating two challengers simultaneously. The 1992 debates also introduced the town hall format, another extension of populism, and one that has remained a constant component of every subsequent season.

Never a supporter of the debates to begin with, Bush was particularly hesitant to participate in them in 1992.¹¹ Faced with a sluggish economy, Bush had to withstand a challenge from his own party and then an even stronger challenge from two formidable opponents in the general election, with all of the opposition invoking the populist theme that, born of privilege, Bush was out of touch with the financial hardships of working-class citizens. The son of a multimillionaire United States Senator and a descendant of the eminently wealthy Bush and Walker families, Bush never personally experienced the anxiety of not having enough money to pay the bills.¹² At the 1988 Democratic Convention, Texas Treasurer Ann Richards quipped that Bush was “born with a silver foot in his mouth.”¹³ As Bush wavered about whether or not to debate, however, the

¹¹ Alan Schroeder, *Presidential Debates, 50 Years of High-Risk Presidential TV*, 2nd Ed., New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002, 150. Bush criticized the debates for being “too much showbusiness.”

¹² For more discussion about the financial worth of George H.W. Bush and the Bush Family, see Matthew T. Corrigan, *American Royalty*, New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2008, and Anonymous, “The Net Worth of Every American President,” *The Huffington Post*, February 21, 2011, retrieved on August 31, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/21/the-net-worth-of-the-amer_n_825939.html.

¹³ Anonymous, Transcript of Speech by Ann Richards, the Texas Treasurer,” *New York Times*, July 19, 1988, retrieved on August 31, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/07/19/us/transcript-of-the-keynote-address-by-ann-richards-the-texas-treasurer.html>.

voters unequivocally expressed their expectation of him to do so, which further confirmed that the debates matter.

It was clear in September 1992, two months before the election, that Bush wanted no part of the debates. It was also clear how important they had become in American political culture. In his 2008 book, *Inside the Presidential Debates*, preeminent debate scholar Newton Minow described the debates as “*de facto* mandatory” even as far back as 1992, when the American people refused to allow Bush the privilege of forgoing them.¹⁴ Some of the president’s detractors attended rallies dressed in chicken costumes in order to symbolize that Bush was too “chicken” to debate.¹⁵ An irritated Bush began to squabble with some of the “chickens” publicly, and television stations delighted in broadcasting such an amusing visual: the president of the United States arguing with a chicken.¹⁶ Looking foolish in the process and continuing to trail in the polls, Bush quickly challenged the Clinton-Gore ticket to four debates, to which both sides agreed on September 30.¹⁷

That Bush looked to the debates as the way to preserve his presidency underscores that the debates mattered or were perceived to matter, even if they did not affect the outcome of the election. An important question to consider, however, is why was Bush in such a predicament in the first place? Why was he so far behind in the polls?

The focal point of Bush’s 1988 presidential campaign was the record of President Ronald Reagan, under whom Bush served as vice president since January, 1981. Bush capitalized on Reagan’s high approval ratings, and even exceeded them, particularly

¹⁴ Newton Minow, *Inside the Presidential Debates*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 107-108.

¹⁵ *Ibid*; Schroeder, 21-22.

¹⁶ Schroeder, 22. Bush’s campaign team, Schroeder wrote, realized hesitation hurt the president and advised the president to reverse his negative image by agreeing to debates.

¹⁷ George Farah, *No Debate*, New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2004, 50.

because of his handling of the first Persian Gulf War.¹⁸ Even though Bush maintained international respect for not exceeding the war's mission, which was to liberate Kuwait, American critics blamed him for not proceeding into Iraq to remove its leader-dictator, Saddam Hussein, from power altogether.¹⁹

The main reasons for Bush's decline, however, were domestic. His popularity plummeted because of an economic recession followed by a sluggish recovery and persistently high unemployment, all of which conservatives blamed on Bush having abandoned the "read my lips, no new taxes" pledge he made when he campaigned for president in 1988.²⁰ Through extensive television commercials, Clinton capitalized on Bush's broken promise.²¹ Apparently unconvinced that presidential action was needed to boost the economy, Bush ignored pleas to "do something" and insisted that the economy was recovering.²² Clinton campaign strategist James Carville, when asked what the top campaign issue would be, replied "the economy, stupid." Though not directly referencing Bush as the "stupid" in question, Carville's use of the word "stupid" pointed to politicians as out of touch with the issue of prevalent concern among the vast

¹⁸ Anonymous, "How the Presidents Stack Up," *Wall Street Journal*, retrieved on January 12, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/info-presapp0605-31.html>. Reagan's exiting approval ratings approached 60 percent; Gallup Organization, retrieved on February 25, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/124922/presidential-approval-center.aspx>. Bush's highest number, in February-March 1991, was 89 percent. That was the highest approval rating on record, since Gallup began tracking approval ratings in 1945. The record was broken by Bush's son, George W., in September 2001, after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11; Richard S. Lowry, *The Gulf War Chronicles*, New York, NY: iUniverse, 2003, 206. After Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990, Bush mobilized a 34-nation international military coalition that from January to February 1991 drove Hussein's forces out of Kuwait.

¹⁹ Colin Powell, *My American Journey*, New York, NY: Random House, 1995. Powell who was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Persian Gulf War, explained that criticism aside, Bush was correct in leaving Hussein in power in order to prevent an imbalance of power in the Middle East in Iran's favor.

²⁰ Gallup, retrieved on February 25, 2013; Frank Luntz, *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear*, New York, NY: Hyperion, 2008, 11. Luntz wrote that many of Bush's supporters never forgave him for betraying his 1988 "read my lips, no new taxes" pledge, which he made at the Republican Convention.

²¹ Peter Goldman, Thomas DeFrank, *et al.*, *Quest for the Presidency 1992*, College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1994, 644.

²² Robin Toner, "Critical Moments; How Bush Lost Five Chances to Seize the Day," *New York Times*, October 11, 1992, 1.

majority of the American people. That line became the catchphrase of the 1992 campaign and highlighted Clinton's populist understanding of the economic plight many Americans were experiencing.²³

Bush's seemingly-cavalier attitude to the recession created the impression that he was out of touch with the concerns of everyday Americans, which was a charge made, not only by Democrats, but also from some within his own party. Although it was not unusual for a president's approval ratings to wane with unfavorable economic conditions and weaken his chances for reelection, it was less typical that a significant challenge would arise from his own party, and unprecedented that the challenge would come from an opponent who never held elected office. Nonetheless, that is exactly what happened in 1992, when Pat Buchanan, a conservative populist television commentator who worked for Presidents Nixon and Reagan, challenged Bush in the Republican Primary.²⁴

The power of television yet again played a pivotal role in presidential politics. Buchanan's legions of supporters, known as the "Buchanan Brigades," knew of him and his message not from his years in the Nixon and Reagan White House, but from his nightly pulpit as cohost of *Crossfire*, a prime-time point-counterpoint talk show on CNN, which in the early 1990s was America's top-rated cable television network.²⁵

Brandishing a pitchfork prop, which richly symbolized the agrarian populism of a century earlier, "Pitchfork Pat" Buchanan's message, championed hardworking, unprivileged

²³ Goldman, 585.

²⁴ *Ibid*; It has been rare for incumbent presidents seeking reelection to be challenged within their own party. Before 1992, such challenges last took place in 1980, when Edward Kennedy challenged President Jimmy Carter, 1976, when Ronald Reagan challenged President Gerald Ford, and Eugene McCarthy, who challenged President Lyndon Johnson. Ford, Carter, and Bush all won their party's nomination, but lost the election. Johnson decided not to seek reelection altogether. For more discussion about intra-party challenges to incumbent presidents, see Marc J. Shulman, *A History of American Presidential Elections: From George Washington to Barack Obama*, New Rochelle, NY: MultiEducator, 2013.

²⁵ Timothy Stanley, *The Life and Tumultuous Times of Pat Buchanan*, New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2012, 89-90. Stanley described Buchanan supporters that never missed an episode of *Crossfire*.

Americans, but did not result in any primary wins, though early on, he had a very strong showing in the first primary, held in New Hampshire, capturing almost 40 percent of the vote.²⁶ Though Buchanan's candidacy fizzled, his populist theme, railing against the image of an elitist George Bush, did not.²⁷ Moreover, what rendered the 1992 campaign particularly unusual was that Bush faced a significant general election challenge from not one opponent, but two and television proved catalytic in Bush's difficulties in overcoming that challenge as well.

The Democrats nominated Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, who endured attacks on his character, that stemmed from allegations that he had an extramarital affair with Arkansas State employee Gennifer Flowers, that he dodged the draft in order to avoid serving in the Vietnam War, and that he was disloyal to the United States by participating in an antiwar demonstration in 1969 in England, where he was a student.²⁸ Clinton selected Tennessee Senator Al Gore, who ran for president four years earlier, as his running mate. Unlike Dukakis, who by referring to himself as a "card-carrying member of the ACLU" (American Civil Liberties Union) gave the Republicans plenty of fodder to portray him as a liberal, far to the left of the American mainstream, Clinton and Gore were both political centrists.²⁹ Moreover, a heated exchange with an AIDS activist in March 1992 while campaigning resulted in a line uttered by Clinton that personified

²⁶ Lunz, 10; Paul West, "Buchanan Mounts up Again," *Baltimore Sun*, March 3, 1999. West wrote that Buchanan, who ran for president in 1992, 1996 and 2000, practiced "pitchfork populism" and brought a pitchfork along as a prop at numerous campaign stops.

²⁷ *Ibid.* Lunz described how the media perpetuated the anti-Bush populist theme even after Buchanan left the race.

²⁸ Larry J. Sabato, "Clinton Accused," *Washington Post*, retrieved on February 25, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/frenzy/clinton2.htm>.

²⁹ Joe Klein, "Ready for the Duke?" *New York*, August 17, 1987, 30. Dukakis made that statement to an audience in Iowa while on the campaign trail; James MacGregor Burns and Georgia J. Sorenson, *Dead Center: Clinton-Gore Leadership and the Perils of Moderation*, New York, NY: Scribner, 1999, 330. The authors described Clinton's and Gore's centrist campaigns in both 1992 and 1996; Mitchell Locin, "Clinton Says He's a 'New Democrat,'" *Chicago Tribune*, October 22, 1992, retrieved on August 1, 2014, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1992-10-22/news/9204050594_1_democratic-nominee-bill-clinton-democratic-party-democratic-governors. Clinton said his policies would not be trickle-down economics, but not tax and spend, either – they would be grow-and-invest.

his populism and specifically his compassion: “I feel your pain.”³⁰ Bush, therefore, headed into the general election with a tougher battle on his hands than he experienced in 1988: he neither had a good economy, nor an opponent whose ideology made for an easy target.

As if Bush did not have enough difficulty battling Clinton, he also had to endure a challenge from Texan self-made billionaire Ross Perot. A political independent who used his own money to fund his grass-roots campaign, Perot emerged as the frontrunner by June.³¹ That Perot led in two prominent national polls was particularly surprising, considering that no independent candidate has ever won the presidency, and was emblematic of a nation willing to look beyond traditional politicians for answers.³²

Despite warnings from Nixon, who faced a strong populist challenge from George Wallace in the 1968 election, to take Perot’s candidacy seriously, Bush predicted that the independent’s campaign would self-destruct. By July, it appeared that he was right: Perot suddenly quit the race because, as Bush biographer Timothy Naftali claimed, the Bush-led Republicans were trying to undermine him, attack his family, and even sabotage his daughter’s wedding.³³ Actually, Perot initially said that a resurgent Democratic Party was the reason why he dropped out, because he surmised that he

³⁰ Anonymous, “Heckler Stirs Clinton Anger,” *New York Times*, March 28, 1992, retrieved on April 20, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/28/us/1992-campaign-verbatim-heckler-stirs-clinton-anger-excerpts-exchange.html>; Clinton wrote a book published in 1992 describing his populist message: *Putting People First: How We Can All Change America*, New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1992.

³¹ Anonymous, “Poll Gives Perot a Clear Lead,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1992, retrieved on February 16, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/06/11/us/the-1992-campaign-on-the-trail-poll-gives-perot-a-clear-lead.html>. A *New York Times* Poll showed Perot with 39 percent support, compared to 31 percent for Bush and 25 percent for Clinton; Anonymous, “Perot the Front Runner,” *Time*, June 15, 1992, retrieved on February 16, 2013, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,975771,00.html>. Perot had 37 percent of the vote in a Time/CNN Poll, whereas Clinton and Bush tied with 24 percent each.

³² Shulman. The only time a non-major party candidate even finished second was in 1912, when Theodore Roosevelt (who was a Republican), a Progressive/Bull Moose Party candidate finished ahead of Republican William Howard Taft and behind Democrat Woodrow Wilson.

³³ Leip; Naftali, 145. Naftali wrote that Nixon was concerned that [Bush] may not realize how serious the Perot challenge is.”

had no chance of winning.³⁴ Naftali, writing fifteen years later, presumably overlooked the fact that it was not until late October, after the debates were over, when Perot relayed the story about the alleged sabotage. Once Perot left the race, it appeared that his supporters turned to Clinton, because the Democrat's poll numbers rose rapidly.³⁵ In early July, before Perot withdrew, he and Bush were tied in a Gallup Poll at 33 percent, with 27 percent for Clinton. Once Perot exited, Bush only gained a single point, to 34 percent, while Clinton soared to 56 percent.³⁶ Because Perot emphasized fiscal conservatism in his campaign, it would have been plausible for his supporters to turn to Bush who, as a Republican, represented the major party most associated with reining in spending.³⁷ That they gravitated to the Democrat Clinton instead underscored the significance of the other broad theme of Perot's candidacy, which was populism. It was Clinton who said he felt the voters' pain, in contrast with Bush, the seemingly out-of-touch candidate of privilege.

The day after Bush finally agreed to debate Clinton, Perot reentered the race, eleven weeks after he withdrew.³⁸ Perot explained that upon his exit he assumed that the Democrats and Republicans would shoulder the load of solving the nation's problems, but when he saw that they did not, he decided to reenter.³⁹ That explanation seems inconsistent with the theme of his campaign, that he did not have faith in the two major

³⁴ Edwin Chen, "Perot Quits Presidential Race," *Los Angeles Times*, July 17, 1992, retrieved on February 16, 2013, http://articles.latimes.com/1992-07-17/news/mn-3649_1_democratic-party.

³⁵ Gallup Poll, retrieved on February 16, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/110548/gallup-presidential-election-trialheat-trends-19362004.aspx#2>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Lewis Gould, *Grand Old Party: A History of the Republicans*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012, xi. Gould wrote that the Republicans, particularly in the 20th Century, emphasized fiscal discipline, even though they did not always practice it.

³⁸ Anonymous, *Chicago Tribune*, October 6, 1992, retrieved on February 16, 2013, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1992-10-06/features/9203310633_1_independent-candidate-ross-perot-texas-billionaire-jim-stockdale. Perot changed his story after the debates concluded, alleging that he left the race because Republicans threatened to sabotage his daughter's wedding.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

parties to govern effectively. Why, then, did he assume that suddenly they would rise to the occasion upon his withdrawal? Nonetheless, the drama surrounding Perot's return was magnified because he announced it via a televised press conference.⁴⁰

Perot's emergence, retreat, and reemergence as a candidate was not the only unorthodox aspect of his campaign – another was his choice of running mate, retired Admiral James Stockdale. This highly-decorated naval officer who was held as a prisoner-of-war in Vietnam, Stockdale had an extremely distinguished military career and was a respected academic, political scholar, and prolific author, though he was less remembered for his valor and intellect than for his poor showing in his one and only debate performance.⁴¹ Stockdale's lacked experience in campaigning, and so Perot only chose him temporarily, in order to satisfy ballot access laws, and intended to replace the admiral with a permanent running mate later in the campaign.⁴² By the time Perot dropped out and dropped in again, a month before the election and only days before the first debate, it no longer seemed practical or wise to search for a new running mate.⁴³

Bush was delighted by the news of Perot's return, as he believed that Clinton's mid-July surge was attributable to Perot's withdrawal, and hoped with Perot's reentry that the poll numbers would readjust in his favor as well.⁴⁴ The Clinton campaign apparently viewed the circumstances similarly, and thus did not want Perot included in the debates,

⁴⁰ Anonymous, "The Political Fray," *CNN*, retrieved on April 12, 2013, <http://cgi.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1996/conventions/long.beach/perot/political.fray.shtml>.

⁴¹ Steven A. Holmes, "Perot's Running Mate in '92, Dies at 81," *New York Times*, July 6, 2005, retrieved on February 16, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/06/politics/06stockdale.html?_r=0.

⁴² Jimmie D. Trent and Judith S. Trent, "The Incumbent and his Challengers: The Problem of Adapting to Prevailing Conditions. In K. E. Kendall (Ed.), *Presidential Campaign Discourse: Strategic Communication Problems*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995, 69-92, 85.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

but acquiesced so as not to appear scared.⁴⁵ For the first time since Jimmy Carter in 1976, the debates familiarized the American public with a little-known participant – two of them, in fact.⁴⁶ But even Carter, as well as vice presidential nominees Geraldine Ferraro and Dan Quayle, in 1984 and 1988, respectively, gained some public exposure through their parties' conventions. In contrast, the Perot-Stockdale ticket was independent and therefore did not enjoy the benefit of an extensive and nationally-televised nominating convention. Though the pre-debate exposure helped Carter and Ferraro, Quayle entered his 1988 debate already being ridiculed in the media, and expectations were low. Stockdale, on the other hand, remained obscure until he stepped onto the stage to face Gore and Quayle. Any lampooning he experienced resulted from the debate itself.

The particular debaters aside, a direct comparison of Roper polls taken in the fall of 1988 and 1992 is very revealing about the issues. In both years, domestic affairs, specifically the economy, far outweighed foreign matters as the voters' top concern.⁴⁷ In 1988, however, 64 percent of the respondents thought the economy was either in good or very good condition, whereas in 1992, 87 percent thought the economy was either "not so good" or "poor." In the "issueless" 1988 campaign, even though the voters identified the economy as the top problem, only 12 percent of them did so, narrowly exceeding several other domestic concerns – most notably drugs and unemployment.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Farah, 51.

⁴⁶ Minow, 48. Jimmy Carter was not well-known nationally when he ran for president in 1976, and believed the debates were the best format through which to gain exposure.

⁴⁷ Roper Poll, October 1988 and October 1992, http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/elections/presidential/presidential_election, retrieved on March 23, 2013. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

⁴⁸ Mona Charen, "Be Grateful for Issueless Campaign," *The Southeast Missourian*, November 6, 1988. The 1988 campaign was called the "issueless" campaign by various journalists.

In 1992, however, the economy ranked as the top issue with 61 percent of the voters, which was far ahead of the next-highest issue, which was “social [sic],” at 19 percent.⁴⁹

Perot’s infomercials, the debut of the town hall debate format within the debate structure, and the striking visual of three general election candidates sharing the same stage exemplified the power of television in the campaign. That Perot, a political unknown only months earlier, stood on the same stage as the establishment party candidates symbolized the campaign’s populist theme; that he geared his message directly to ordinary Americans confirmed it.

On October 11, the morning of the first debate among the presidential candidates, there was wide consensus in the press that it could be significant to the election’s outcome.⁵⁰ Curtis Wilkie of the *Boston Globe*, in particular, described the debate as “one of [Bush’s] last chances to save his presidency.”⁵¹ Mary McGrory of the *Washington Post* focused on Clinton’s desire to project the image of a modern-day John F. Kennedy.⁵² Surprisingly, she made no reference to how that comparison backfired when Dan Quayle made it four years earlier. A *New York Times* article noted that viewers most often remember *faux pas* and clever one-liners rather than anything of substance the candidates had to say.⁵³ The *Chicago Tribune* went further, suggesting

⁴⁹ Roper Center Poll, October 12-14, 1992, retrieved on August 31, 2014, http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/elections/presidential/presidential_election_1992.html. “Social” combines the subcategories “Moral Values,” “Abortion,” and “Crime/Drugs.”

⁵⁰ Larry Eichel, “The First Debate is Seen as Do-Or-Die Time for the President,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 11, 1992, 11. Eichel characterized Bush’s challenge as “daunting in the extreme”; Dan Balz, “Debate Marathon Opens Tonight; Bush Is Seen with the Most at Stake,” *Washington Post*, October 11, 1992, 1. Balz described how Bush would be attacked from both sides, and pointed out that a number of strategists thought he needed to dominate in the debates in order to catch Clinton.

⁵¹ Curtis Wilkie, “Candidates Enter Crucible of Debates,” *Boston Globe*, October 11, 1992, 1.

⁵² Mary McGrory, “Stepping into the Ring,” *Washington Post*, October 11, 1992, C1. Clinton often mentioned during the campaign that Kennedy was his boyhood hero and inspiration for his entering public service.

⁵³ Richard L. Berke, “Candidates Cram for the First Debate,” *New York Times*, October 11, 1992, 1. Berke noted Nixon’s five o’clock shadow in 1960, Ford’s 1976 gaffe about no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, and Dukakis’ impersonal response to the hypothetical scenario in which his wife is raped and murdered.

that even more than the debates themselves, the post-debate analysis decided the winner.⁵⁴ Though neither the *Times* nor the *Tribune* article established an unequivocal correlation between debate performance and election result, both repeatedly juxtaposed candidates' debate missteps with their respective losses. Far from the first season in 1960, when numerous reporters did not know quite what to make of the debates and called them "discussions," the debates certainly rose in stature in the media's eyes in terms of their roles in presidential elections.⁵⁵ They mattered in 1960, and by 1988, they mattered a great deal more.

The debate took place in St. Louis, Missouri, at Washington University.⁵⁶ Jim Lehrer was the moderator, as in the first Bush-Dukakis debate in 1988. The panelists were John Mashek of the *Boston Globe*, Ann Compton of *ABC News*, and Sander Vanocur, who was a panelist in the first Kennedy-Nixon debate and moderated the Bush-Ferraro debate.

The impact of television in shaping the candidates' images was evident from the start. Although Perot was diminutive in stature, had a high-pitched voice and a notable Texas twang, his delivery was a crisp, clear, staccato, which is ideal for the fast-paced formats of comments and rebuttals. His responses were the sharpest of the three debaters and drew the most applause. Clinton had a striking telegenic presence: six-feet two inches tall, a luxuriously thick head of hair, and markedly youthful looks. He was the first major-

⁵⁴ Charles Leroux, "Open to Debate: Analysts, Not Candidates, often Decide Winner," *Chicago Tribune*, October 11, 1992, 1.

⁵⁵ The *Chicago Tribune*, in fact, was one of those that referred to the first Kennedy-Nixon debate as a "discussion": *Chicago Tribune* Staff, "How Viewers Sized up First TV Discussion," *Chicago Tribune*, September 27, 1960

⁵⁶ Clinton-Bush-Perot Debate 1, October 11, 1992, C-SPAN, retrieved on September 29, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33071-1>. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

party presidential nominee who was only in his forties since Kennedy.⁵⁷ Clinton's youthful appeal, wrote Godfrey Sperling, Jr., like Kennedy's, had the potential to make his considerably older opponents look drab by comparison, particularly on television.⁵⁸ Bush, in contrast, looked tired and droopy, and as if he was irritated that he had to be there. Unlike his ultra-energetic 1984 debate against Ferraro and his authoritative offensive against Dukakis in 1988, Bush's delivery was slow and his voice slightly hoarse.

If the aesthetics of television favored the two challengers, so did the substantive theme of populism. Lehrer's first question to Perot, about what separated him from the other two candidates, was tailor-made to address the heart of Perot's message: that he was nominated directly by the people, rather than by special interest groups, political action committees, or foreign lobbyists. Perot distinguished his campaign by claiming that it was consistent with the Constitution's framers' intent, rather than the two-party ritual of a top-down government that, he alleged, exploited and manipulated voters during campaigns, by using fear-mongering and personal attack advertisements. Perot vowed that lobbyists "with thousand-dollar suits and alligator shoes" would become extinct and relegated to the Smithsonian Institution.⁵⁹ He quipped that if he were elected, everyone in Washington would faint, because it would be the first time that they would ever see something actually get done. It was the epitome of a populist message, and was a direct appeal to the people, circumventing and rejecting a plutocracy of big campaign donors influencing politicians.

⁵⁷ Godfrey Sperling, Jr., "Clinton's Kennedyesque Image," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 24, 1992, retrieved on March 23, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/1992/0324/24182.html>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* Clinton was 46 years old at the time; Bush was 68, and Perot was 62.

⁵⁹ The Smithsonian Institution is the world's largest museum complex. Smithsonian Institution Website, retrieved on April 24, 2013, <http://www.si.edu/About>.

Clinton to a lesser extent than Perot conveyed the message that he would represent and defend the powerless, specifically by criticizing the “trickle-down” economics of the Reagan-Bush era.⁶⁰ Clinton also presented himself as the candidate for change, not just from Republican economics, but also from the old Democratic tax-and-spend theories. He spoke directly to Bush, told him that Bush had had his way for twelve years, that those policies did not work, and that it was time to change.⁶¹ That Clinton clearly identified himself as a different kind of Democrat rendered Bush’s “tax-and-spend liberal” charges against him less effective than they were against Bush’s past Democratic rivals. Clinton leveraged his centrist platform to depict the weakness in Bush’s campaign strategy: “Mr. Bush is trying to run against Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter and everybody in the world but me in this race.” If Bush’s tax-and-spend-liberal-Democrat attacks worked on Walter Mondale, Geraldine Ferraro, and Michael Dukakis, they seemed awkwardly inappropriate when directed at a Democrat who talked about tax breaks, robust economic growth, and military supremacy.⁶²

Capitalizing on the opportunity not only to appear more populist than Bush but also more politically experienced than Perot, Clinton dismissed the latter’s one-line quips: “Ross, that’s a great speech, but it’s not quite that simple.” Far from being flummoxed by debating two challengers at once, Clinton described himself as not only an alternative to the status quo, but the better alternative (as compared to Perot).

⁶⁰ “Trickle down” economics was a philosophy espoused by the Reagan Administration based on a belief that in a business environment of low taxes and few regulations, entrepreneurs would have greater incentive to create jobs, thereby causing the wealth to trickle down to the lower economic classes.

⁶¹ By twelve years, Clinton was referring to the eight years he served as Ronald Reagan’s vice president that immediately preceded his four years as president.

⁶² Bush referred to Mondale as a tax-and-spend liberal in the 1984 presidential debate, when Mondale was the Democratic nominee and Bush was vice president.

Bush, however, was unable to make a good appearance on television and evoke a populist compassion for ordinary people. Barely able to mask how irritated he was about partaking in the debate ritual, Bush explained to the audience what it was really like to be president, as opposed to his two challengers, who did not know firsthand. He acknowledged that “we need to do better,” a line reminiscent of Gerald Ford’s 1976 implication that he would not promise to do anything remarkable. Finally, Bush brought up “tax and spend,” seemingly oblivious to Clinton’s earlier statement about how inapplicable a line it was to describe the 1992 Democratic ticket, no less Perot, an avowed proponent of balanced budgets.

A *CBS News* poll declared Clinton the winner, Perot second, and Bush last, by 33 percent to 30 to 16.⁶³ As for the standings in the race overall, an *ABC News* poll showed Clinton ahead in overall support at 45 percent, Bush at 31 percent, and Perot climbing back up to 15 percent, more than double the support since rejoining the race.⁶⁴

Perot’s resurgence can be explained to a substantial extent by another formidable statistic: 61 percent of the responders indicated that they had a more positive view of Perot as a result of the debate.⁶⁵ Much attention, in fact, was paid by the press to Perot’s performance. Ruth Marcus wrote that Perot’s direct message to the people “won the hearts and minds” of undecided debate viewers.⁶⁶ Elizabeth Kolbert wrote that the debate analysts believed by consensus that Perot upset the two favorites and that the debate’s lesson was “be careful whom you invite.”⁶⁷ The *Boston Globe*’s Chris Black

⁶³ Elizabeth Kolbert, “Perot Shows He’s the Master of Live TV,” *New York Times*, October 13, 1992, 17.

⁶⁴ Anonymous, “Poll Show Lead by Clinton Holds,” *New York Times*, October 12, 1992, 12.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Ruth Marcus, “Perot Makes Good Showing among Uncommitted Voters,” *Washington Post*, October 12, 1992, 15.

⁶⁷ Kolbert.

wrote that Perot's "folksy, feisty performance" breathed new life into his candidacy.⁶⁸

Following the debate, the Perot campaign enjoyed a wave of positive momentum among supporters, the extent of which, he had not experienced since before his withdrawal from the race.⁶⁹ Based on those poll statistics and the pundits' observations, the debate did in fact have an impact on the voters' support of the candidates.

Although Perot's comeback dominated media coverage, the more important question, at least in terms of the election's potential outcome, was whether frontrunner Bill Clinton did well enough not to endanger his comfortable lead. William Safire pointed out that given Clinton's large lead over Bush heading into the debate, he won by not losing. Incorporating a boxing analogy by drawing a contrast between pugilism and politics, Safire wrote that a draw favors the champion in the former type of contest, but the challenger in the latter.⁷⁰ Whether the novelty of Perot or the smooth consistency of Clinton made the stronger impact was not immediately clear, but most telling was that virtually no analyst or reporter had anything positive to say about Bush, much less to declare him the winner. Rosenberg said of Bush that he was "[n]ot good...Shoulda [sic] stayed home."⁷¹ Dan Balz wrote that Bush did not achieve the big win that he sorely needed.⁷² Larry Eichel commented that Bush "offered no compelling, new argument for his reelection."⁷³

⁶⁸ Chris Black, "Perot's Performance Energizes His Campaign," *Boston Globe*, October 13, 1992, 17.

⁶⁹ John Mintz and Michael Isikoff, "Perot's Debate Electricity Lights up Phone Lines to Volunteers," *Washington Post*, October 13, 1992, 8.

⁷⁰ William Safire, "Clinton Doesn't Lose," *New York Times*, October 12, 1992, 19; Howard Kurtz, "Ringside Scorers and Spinners," *Washington Post*, October 13, 1992, 10. Kurtz pointed out that his fellow journalists and other analysts tend to use pugilistic metaphors such as "jab," "knockout," and "standing toe to toe," when describing debate performances; a prime example was Charles M. Madigan, "Some Fury, No Knockout, No One Lands Telling Blow in Race," *Chicago Tribune*, Oct, 12, 1992, 1

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Dan Balz, "A Big Win Eludes Bush in Debate," *Washington Post*, October 12, 1992, 1.

⁷³ Larry Eichel, "Ultimately, Impact May Be Small," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 12, 1992, 1.

Andrew Rosenthal, in particular, attributed Bush's missed opportunity to the presence of Perot, who cut into Bush's much-needed on-screen time.⁷⁴ Perhaps it would have been to Bush's advantage to partake in the three-way debate if he were the frontrunner. In that case, Clinton would need the additional television exposure. That Bush trailed Clinton at the time of the debate, however, meant that every moment Perot expended delivering his witty one-liners deducted precious minutes from Bush's overall time to battle Clinton directly. Based on Rosenthal's analysis, the amount of televised time was critical to success in the debate which, in turn, had an impact upon the campaign.

The dim view presented by the press of Bush's chances for reelection broadened to include the running mates' debate, which was scheduled for October 13, only two days after the first Clinton-Bush-Perot contest. Adam Pertman wrote that a last-place finish by Quayle would all but seal the end of the incumbents' ticket, but that even if the vice president won, and convincingly at that, it would not be enough to erase Bush's poll deficit.⁷⁵ Expected to perform poorly in the 1988 running mates' debate and, to considerable extent, living up to those expectations, Quayle recalled Lloyd Bentsen's widely-discussed "you're no Jack Kennedy" line, calling it a cheap shot but one that taught an important lesson: that facts matter very little – it is all "how you come across on television."⁷⁶ That lesson became evident in the first debate season in 1960, when John F. Kennedy proved to be far more telegenic than Richard Nixon, and in 1980 and 1984 when Ronald Reagan, a professional actor, used the medium deftly to his

⁷⁴ Andrew Rosenthal, "Bush Didn't Score the Needed Knockout," *New York Times*, October 12, 1992, 1.

⁷⁵ Adam Pertman, "Goals Match, Tasks Differ in the VP Debate," *Boston Globe*, October 13, 1992, 16.

⁷⁶ Janet Cawley, "Quayle: Viewers' Impression More Important Than Content," *Chicago Tribune*, October 13, 1992, 4.

advantage.⁷⁷ Quayle's comment underscored that with each subsequent debate season, the participants became increasingly aware of the power of television.

By 1992, however, Quayle, who was vice president for almost four years, was no longer an unknown entity. The bigger question was Stockdale. Pertman described the admiral as having a common touch, much like Perot did, that Quayle and Gore lacked.⁷⁸ Larry Sabato predicted – very incorrectly as it turned out – that in post-debate discussions, most people would say that Stockdale won.⁷⁹ John E. Yang also miscalculated, contending that Stockdale's compelling life story would create problems for his opponents.⁸⁰ Whereas Quayle was expected to fail in 1988, Stockdale surprised the pundits in 1992 by vastly underperforming, largely because his oft-awkward timing and delivery rendered him poorly suited for television. Unlike Quayle, who struggled to emerge from negative perceptions of him already established prior to the debate, Stockdale's biggest problems emerged as a result of the debate itself.

The debate took place at the Georgia Technical Institute in Atlanta, Georgia.⁸¹ There were no panelists, only a sole moderator: Hal Bruno of *ABC News*, who was a panelist in the Mondale-Dole running mate contest in 1976. The debate allowed for a five-minute discussion period for each question, which at times turned into a free-for-all between Quayle and Gore, which the mild-mannered Bruno was helpless to control, while Stockdale looked on, either too dignified or too overwhelmed, or perhaps a little of both, to interrupt.

⁷⁷ For more discussion about candidates' use of television in presidential debates, see Sidney Kraus, *Televised Presidential Debates and Public Policy*, 2nd Ed., Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000.

⁷⁸ Pertman.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ John E. Yang, "Stockdale's Words Offer Few Clues to Positions," *Washington Post*, October 13, 1992, 8.

⁸¹ Gore-Quayle-Stockdale Debate, October 13, 1992, C-SPAN, retrieved on October 2, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33086-1>.

The running mates reprised their henchmen roles: Quayle's and Gore's combativeness and nastiness toward one another became the most-discussed issue post-debate. With near-unanimity, analysts blasted the contest as being devoid of collegiality, which they blamed somewhat on Gore but mostly on Quayle. Although characterized as mechanical, Gore came across as less abrasive than Quayle. Stockdale, in turn, was utterly dignified, though he seemed completely out of place in the highly staged environment of television, where timing, delivery, and aesthetics are critical.

Gore's diction was slow and overly enunciated. He praised Stockdale, deliberately emphasizing that "those of us who served in Vietnam" looked up to him as a national hero.⁸² That line was both congenial and respectful to Stockdale, and a snub to Quayle, who accepted a deferment in lieu of combat during the Vietnam War. Gore then joked that if the vice president did not try to compare Bush to Harry Truman, Gore would not compare Quayle to Jack Kennedy.⁸³

Quayle displayed his curtness from the onset, sarcastically thanking Gore for reminding him of his performance in the 1988 debate, and snapping that it was 1992.⁸⁴ The vice president then summarized his message for the debate: to demonstrate that Clinton's economic plan was bad for the country and that Clinton did not have the

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Anonymous, "A Truman Says Bush Isn't One," *New York Times*, September 10, 1992, retrieved on February 18, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/09/10/us/the-1992-campaign-a-truman-says-bush-isn-t-one.html>. Bush compared himself to President Truman on numerous occasions, particularly vowing to come back from behind and win the race as Truman did in 1948. The *Times* article quotes Truman's daughter, Margaret, as saying that Bush was nothing like her father. Dan Quayle cited his similarities to President Kennedy in the 1988 debate, prompting his opponent, Lloyd Bentsen, to reply "you're no Jack Kennedy."

⁸⁴ Gore-Quayle-Stockdale.

strength of character to be president of the United States, and punctuated by the attack by asking rhetorically: “can you really trust Bill Clinton?”⁸⁵

Stockdale spoke last, and the crowd laughed loudly when he said: “Who am I? Why am I here?”⁸⁶ As millions of television viewers had their first glimpse of him at that precise moment, Stockdale’s opening line certainly amounted to a plausible rhetorical question. On the other hand, to hear a white-haired man of an advanced age (by debate standards – 69) whose delivery was choppy overall begin in this way could convey an image of a confused near-septuagenarian having problems maintaining lucidity rather than that of a crusty old veteran poking fun at himself and sharing a moment of levity with the audience. As the admiral spoke about his distinguished war record, it was clear that his mind was sound. Nonetheless, it was also clear that television was not his strong suit. In sharp contrast to his competitors, Stockdale practiced for the debate in the most understated of ways: he used a home video camera set up by his son.⁸⁷ Stockdale’s timing and delivery seemed wholly out of place with the comparatively smoother, albeit confrontational, approaches of his fellow debaters.

Quayle and Gore intensified the pace with their interruptions and attacks on one another, and the partisan audience’s routine interruptions to applaud their candidate of choice led Bruno to ask the crowd, ever so politely, not to hiss. Bruno’s demeanor was very different from that of Bernard Shaw, who, four years earlier, sounded quite ominous when he silenced the crowd in the second Bush-Dukakis debate. That Bruno lacked either the ability or the desire to contain Quayle and Gore caused the two combatants to continue their war of words, ignoring cordiality and decorum. Stockdale

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Gore-Quayle-Stockdale.

⁸⁷ Schroeder, 163.

continued to speak only when prompted, either because it was his turn to answer a question, or because Bruno was so flustered by the other two candidates' complete dominance of the discussion period that he specifically directed Stockdale to interject. When he did speak, any command over the issues was overshadowed by his tentativeness to enter the fray without a push from the moderator. On the question of health care, for instance, when Bruno prompted Stockdale to begin the five-minute discussion, Stockdale had nothing to say at all. "Well, I'm out of ammunition on this one," was his response. Without hesitation, Gore jumped in: "well, let me talk then because I've got a couple of things that I want to say." That brief exchange summarized the entire evening: Stockdale did not seem particularly eager to engage in lengthy discussion, whereas Quayle, and particularly Gore, appeared ready to talk all night.

Stockdale's most embarrassing moment was late in the debate when he could not hear a question and said: "You know, I didn't have my hearing aid turned on. Tell me again." Had Stockdale really been so out of sorts, or was the hearing aid line a clever quip to indicate that he intentionally tuned out his two opponents, who bellowed at one another all evening? Stockdale was evidently out of his element, but his quip about Gore's and Quayle's yelling as reminiscent of gridlock was a plausible reason why it might have been the latter. Stockdale's son and namesake wrote a tribute to his father's performance, emphasizing the admiral's goodness and integrity, juxtaposed with the "children of privilege," Gore and Quayle, whom the younger Stockdale said "epitomized modern anger, with its hair combed."⁸⁸

⁸⁸ James Bond Stockdale 2d, "Why Was He There?" *New York Times*, October 17, 1992, 25.

Quayle emerged, without a doubt, as a better debater; if less collegial than he was four years earlier, he was at least more formidable.⁸⁹ And as overbearing as Gore was, he clung steadfastly to the issues, while fending off Quayle's barrages, and remaining respectful to his other opponent, the substantially older and highly decorated admiral.

Moreover, Gore articulated the populist theme more often and more emphatically than either Quayle, or Stockdale. Gore spoke repeatedly about the Bush-Quayle policy of giving tax cuts to the wealthy and imposing tax increases on the middle class, and how America needed a president like Clinton, who would care about the problems of "real people." Much like Clinton, who in the first debate distinguished himself by criticizing his two opponents' proposals simultaneously, Gore assailed the Bush-Quayle ticket for sending jobs overseas and thereby causing higher unemployment among Americans, and the Perot-Stockdale ticket for focusing on balancing the budget to the detriment of economic growth. Gore, therefore, echoed Clinton's centrist, balanced theme, as well as his concern for the problems of ordinary citizens.

The media consistently assailed the debate, characterizing it as a free-for-all, blaming Gore and Quayle specifically, and treating Stockdale more with sympathy than ridicule for having seemed overwhelmed by it all.⁹⁰ The *Los Angeles Times* described Gore and Quayle as being "aggressive, interrupting, and taunting," and "overshadow[ing]" Stockdale, who was perceived as uncertain.⁹¹ *Times* writers Cathleen Decker and Sam Fullwood attributed the hearing aid comment to genuine bewilderment, not clever

⁸⁹ In 1988, the overwhelming consensus in the polls and by media analysts was that Quayle lost the vice presidential debate to Lloyd Bentsen, who deridingly said to Quayle that he was "no Jack Kennedy." For more discussion about Quayle as a debater, see Schroeder, 156-157.

⁹⁰ Schroeder, 39.

⁹¹ Cathleen Decker and Sam Fullwood, "Quayle and Gore Trade Angry Barbs on Character Issue Debate," *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1992, 1.

humor.⁹² Howard Rosenberg, also of the *Times*, found the debate highly entertaining and called for a second one, with popcorn.⁹³ He thought Gore was too mechanical, Quayle too aggressive, and, apparently not thinking Stockdale was kidding, wondered how in the world the admiral could forget to turn on his hearing aid.⁹⁴

The *Boston Globe* thought Gore was smooth in conveying Clinton's message while deflecting "savage" attacks from Quayle, while Stockdale was largely ineffective, either too disoriented or too disgusted to participate.⁹⁵ R.W. Apple of the *New York Times* found Quayle too flippant, though markedly improved from his 1988 performance.⁹⁶ "Dan Quayle may be no Jack Kennedy, but he was no stumblebum either," Apple wrote.⁹⁷ He thought Gore was more presidential, however, and that Stockdale lacked vigor.⁹⁸ Robin Toner, also of the *Times*, thought Gore was sharp but wooden, Quayle aggressive but flustered, and Stockdale simply stunned.⁹⁹ The *Washington Post's* Charles Krauthammer labeled the entire event a "schoolyard debate," pointing out that a single moderator was ill-prepared to control Gore and Quayle, for whom, like "seven-year olds...repetition passes for argument"; with air time based on who could interrupt the most and yell the loudest, Stockdale was the big loser.¹⁰⁰

A post-debate poll by *ABC News* found that 38 percent of respondents thought that Gore won the debate, compared to 32 percent for Quayle and just 2 percent for

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Howard Rosenberg, "Clashes Put 'Danger' Back into Debates," *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1992, 12.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Adam Pertman and John Alosious Farrell, "Quayle, Gore Stage a Slugfest," *Boston Globe*, October 14, 1992, 1.

⁹⁶ R.W. Apple, Jr., "Quayle on the Offensive," *New York Times*, October 14, 1992, 1.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Robin Toner, "Quayle and Gore Exchange Sharp Attacks in the Debate," *New York Times*, October 14, 1992, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Charles Krauthammer, "Schoolyard Debate," *Washington Post*, October 15, 1992, 31.

Stockdale.¹⁰¹ An *NBC News* poll had Gore winning by an even wider margin over Quayle, with 50 to 32 percent and 7 percent for Stockdale.¹⁰² That Stockdale did not garner more support, even as a protest to Quayle's and Gore's undignified behavior, underscored how ineffective he was. By a four-to-one margin, voters said Stockdale's performance rendered them less likely to vote for Perot.¹⁰³ Even more so than in 1960, when Nixon's pallid complexion cast an unfavorable television likeness, television in 1992 propagated another political undoing, this time of a highly decorated war hero and scholar.

With the vice presidential debate concluded, the attention returned to the next one among the ticket headliners, and writer Curtis Wilkie predicted a heated exchange.¹⁰⁴ That Bush aides acknowledged that the debate very well might have been their candidate's last realistic chance to narrow the lead Clinton held over him, reinforced that the debates do matter, as they progressively became perceived as significant if not essential to the election not only by the voters and the analysts, but also by the campaigns.¹⁰⁵

A transformational feature of the second Clinton-Bush-Perot debate was the format, which was a "town hall," featuring an audience comprising 209 undecided voters, all of whom submitted questions on any topic (though only a fraction of the questions were asked). There were no panelists, and there was only a sole moderator, who guided the

¹⁰¹ Pertman and Farrell.

¹⁰² David Shribman and Gerald F. Selb, "Quayle, Gore Exchange Sharp Debate Attacks," *Wall Street Journal*, October 14, 1992, 3.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* The issue was that by selecting Stockdale as his running mate, the authors wrote, it seemed that Perot lacked sound judgment; for more discussion about how running mates are perceived as a candidate's first presidential test, see Leslie H. Southwick, *Presidential Also-Rans and Running Mates, 1788-1996*, 2nd Ed., Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008.

¹⁰⁴ Curtis Wilkie, "More Sparks Likely Tonight in 2d Presidential Debate," *Boston Globe*, October 15, 1992, 1. Wilkie expected Bush to continue the aggression that Quayle employed in the running mates' debate.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

questioning, maintained balance of the candidates' debate time, and asked follow-up questions from time to time.

The town hall format superbly captured the essence of the 1992 campaign's prevalent factor, populism, as it allowed ordinary citizens to ask potentially history-making questions of the next president of the United States while being viewed by tens of millions of television viewers. Ford's 1976 Eastern Europe gaffe and Dukakis' passionless 1988 response to his wife's hypothetical rape and murder, had shown that a single question could impact an entire debate, if not the campaign as a whole. For the first time in debate history, the 1992 Town Hall gave that power to laypersons rather than to media professionals.

Moderated by Carole Simpson of *ABC News*, the debate took place at the University of Richmond in Richmond, Virginia.¹⁰⁶ Simpson was more critical of the debate process than any other moderator, having blasted the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) for favoring male moderators.¹⁰⁷ On the night of the debate, however, she gleefully proclaimed that “[w]e’re making history now and it’s pretty exciting,” because this would be the first debate with a town hall format.¹⁰⁸

That the audience was comprised of self-identified uncommitted voters also played an essential role in the town hall format, because unlike other live debate crowds, such as the Gore-Quayle-Stockdale audience, it was not a partisan one that overtly applauded for its favorite candidate. Debate scholar Alan Schroeder noted particularly

¹⁰⁶ Clinton-Bush-Perot Debate 2, October 15, 1992, C-SPAN, retrieved on October 14, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33137-1>.

¹⁰⁷ Carole Simpson, interview on MSNBC, October 15, 1992, retrieved on February 22, 2013, <http://video.msnbc.msn.com/jansing-and-co/49418030#49418030>. Simpson alleged that because the CPD is predominantly comprised of men, it relegates women to moderating only vice presidential debates or town hall fora, in which the moderator does not have the opportunity to ask questions.

¹⁰⁸ Clinton-Bush-Perot, 2. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

contentious, replete with loud, boisterous and partisan audience members in the 1988 Quayle-Bentsen debate, for instance.¹⁰⁹ Consequently, the absence of partisanship in the 1992 Town Hall resulted in a much better-behaved group, and Simpson did not have to admonish them even once for clapping, cheering, or hissing. Clinton negotiated for the town hall in order to showcase his ability to connect with the voters in a personal way.¹¹⁰ To establish an audience pool of uncommitted voters, the Commission on Presidential Debates, which sponsored the debates, employed the Gallup Organization to conduct screenings with prospective audience members to identify political leanings or candidate allegiances.¹¹¹ Any self-serving motives on Clinton's part aside, the town hall has become a fixture in debates, part of every season since 1992. Whether intentionally or not, Clinton transformed the debates more so than any other candidate before or since, by advocating for the town hall format.

Bush's irritability and impatience for the debates was reflected in a single gesture not only written about in print media, but also broadcast on television for the remainder of the campaign: seemingly disinterested, he was caught on camera looking at his wristwatch. Taken alone, that gesture might not be interpreted as anything other than a competitor seeking to inform himself about how much time was left in the event. However, within the greater context of Bush's rather dismissive comments in previous years about the debates in general, some in the press perceived it as boredom or disdain.¹¹² Worse yet for Bush, if his gesture was interpreted as disdain not only for the

¹⁰⁹ Schroeder, 214.

¹¹⁰ Lee Banville, *Debating Our Destiny: Presidential Debate Moments That Shaped History*, Arlington, VA: MacNeil-Lehrer Productions, 2012, 31. Clinton introduced the town hall concept, and his debate negotiators were willing to concede various issues to the Bush team, as long as there would be at least one town hall debate.

¹¹¹ Schroeder, 204.

¹¹² Jim Lehrer, *Tension City*, New York, NY: Random House, 2011, 52. The incident was magnified in subsequent years; Lehrer in his 2011 presidential debates compendium, described it as the town hall debate's "Major Moment,"

debate ritual itself, but also for the economic problems of everyday Americans, he would seem elitist, which was the very antithesis of the election's populist essence.

Were it not for television's role in broadcasting the debate live and serving as an essential tool for continued post-debate media analysis, Bush's fleeting glance at his watch probably would have gone unnoticed, save for any members of the live audience who focused their eyes on Bush (who was not speaking at the time) at that precise moment. It was another reminder of the power of television and its impact on presidential campaigns: in the debates, every moment counts insofar as any moment can be potentially damaging.

Bush's non-verbal gesture magnified the perception of his words in terms of his defensiveness and irritability: "Everybody's running against the incumbent. They can do better. Everyone knows that," he said. Even when conveying what became the centerpiece of his campaign, attacking Clinton's character, his forcefulness was neutralized by his prefacing qualification: "probably a lot [of people] here will disagree with me." Bush was right. The polls reflected that Clinton's character was an issue that was not of particular concern to voters; the economy was their top priority.

Although Perot and Clinton projected populist themes, each did so somewhat differently. Perot based his campaign on promising a government free from rich and powerful special interests, and Clinton focused his campaign on a compassionate understanding of people's problems. Perot poked fun at his major party rivals, suggesting that if neither the Democrats nor the Republicans were to blame for the national debt, then perhaps some extraterrestrial being was responsible for it. He

capitalizing both words; Newton Minow, *Inside the Presidential Debates*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 51. Referring to debate moments that are discussed and even embellished over time, Minow described the wristwatch incident as a moment that lived on in the memories even of those who did not see it happen.

continued his attack on the political establishment by explaining that he used his own money, not Political Action Committee (PAC) money, to buy television time, and proceeded to advertise the dates and times of his upcoming segments, as well as the networks that would air them. That element of self-promotion managed to cause some among the extremely well-behaved crowd to chuckle. Moreover, it further exemplified the massive and ever-increasing power of television in the campaign process: a candidate used a televised event (the debate) to promote an upcoming televised event (his own infomercial). Perot's segments exemplified the role of television in the campaign in a wider context, insofar as they afforded Perot even more exposure to the voters. Just as the debates were great equalizers, by neutralizing the status between Perot and the major party candidates, so were the television commercials.

In his closing remarks, Perot was sloppy and disorganized, and he needed to be reminded by Simpson that he ran out of time, at which point he said: "I'll see you tomorrow night – on NBC – 10:30 to 11:00 Eastern time," referring to the television air time. Seemingly amused by his own brashness, he shook Bush's hand and laughed loudly. That impromptu reaction exemplified how Perot, more so than any of the other debate combatants, seemed noticeably out of place in the highly structured, almost scripted, realm of televised presidential debates, which, increasingly since 1960, involved intense practice sessions, lighting coordinators, wardrobe consultants, and other advisors for all of the debaters.¹¹³ To that extent, the debate's depiction of the disadvantage of Stockdale's lack of formal preparation *vis-à-vis* his Democrat and Republican counterparts symbolized how middle class Americans in 1992 thought

¹¹³ For more discussion on candidates' debate preparation, see Schroeder, 81-97.

themselves disadvantaged compared to the upper class, which was a disparity that both Clinton and Perot attributed to Bush's incomprehension or indifference.

The question from the audience that best highlighted Clinton's affinity for establishing a personal connection with voters was whether the candidates were personally affected by national debt (Simpson expanded the question to refer to the recession overall) and if not, how could they possibly relate to the plight of Americans of modest means? Perot said that he felt so seriously about that issue that he disrupted his private life and his business in order to "get involved in this activity."¹¹⁴ He continued by saying that although he came from a very modest background, he lived the American dream, and he was very lucky. He wanted all of the children of the United States, however, including his own children and grandchildren, to experience strong economic opportunities. Rather than downplay his incredible wealth, Perot seemed quite proud of it, not in a showy way, but in acknowledging, rather humbly, a deep-felt gratitude to the United States of America for giving him the opportunity to amass a tremendous fortune.

The questioner continued talking about people she knew personally who could no longer afford their mortgages and car payments, and asked Bush, point blank, "how can you help us, if you don't know what we're feeling?" That sentence summarized perfectly the perception that Bush was out of touch with the plight of those who did not have the financial means to withstand a troubled economy. Bush talked about knowing of such problems via all the mail that he reads, what he saw and heard and how he talked to people "from time to time." He spoke about having visited a black church just outside Washington, D.C., and having read the church bulletin's description of teenage

¹¹⁴ Clinton-Bush-Perot 2. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

pregnancies in the community. He defended his compassion, stating that a person does not have to experience something personally in order to understand it and care about it. Then, rather hurriedly and uncomfortably, he talked about stimulating exports and creating better education systems, thanked the questioner for clarifying the question, and retreated to his seat.

Almost before Bush completed his response, Clinton emerged and walked toward the questioner, made eye contact and asked her to repeat how she, specifically, was affected. As the woman responded, Clinton walked as close to her as possible without trampling on the other audience members. Clearly, he conveyed the impression that he cared about her problem specifically. He spoke at length about how many people he met who had lost their jobs, and he, specifically, blamed the Reagan-Bush trickle down policy, which he referred to as a “failed economic theory.”

Perot answered with conviction, but he referred to running for president as “an activity” in which he was “getting involved.” Bush spoke with compassion, but arguably seemed condescending by referring to a black church, as if he was trying to impress his black questioner that he was in touch with black Americans. It did not help his case that he retreated quickly, as if to scurry away, which was antithetical to populism, and which gave the impression that he was no longer interested in being bothered by the questions of ordinary people. It was Clinton, then, who triumphed in that exchange. As writer Joe Klein described:

“[Clinton’s] words were not as important as the body language – which could only be seen by the millions of television viewers, not by the readers of print media. The three steps he took toward the woman spoke volumes about his empathy, his concern, his desire to respond to the needs of the public.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Joe Klein, *The Natural: The Misunderstood Presidency of Bill Clinton*, New York, NY: Random House, 2002, 43.

At that moment, Klein continued, “[t]he presidential campaign was, in effect, over.”¹¹⁶

Clinton used the debates to showcase his own proficiency as a communicator, perhaps just as effectively as Ronald Reagan had twelve years earlier in the debates against John Anderson and Jimmy Carter, though Clinton’s effectiveness was of a different kind. Whereas Reagan’s forte was espousing the broad concepts of optimism and nationalism to the country as a whole, Clinton’s skill was best placed in establishing personal connections with prospective voters. The televised town hall format gave tens of millions of viewers the chance to see that personal connection unfold in Clinton’s response to the questioner’s anxiety about her financial situation. The town hall was ideally suited to Clinton’s communicative strengths.

The post-debate commentary was rather consistent: Bush did nothing to salvage his faltering campaign, Perot did reasonably well, and Clinton fared best among the three. The biggest winner of all, however, was the town hall format. Audience participation was an advantage, wrote Green and Seelye, because the voters on hand had the opportunity to ask questions concerning the issue directly on their minds without media filtration.¹¹⁷ Chris Black and Curtis Wilkie of the *Boston Globe* indirectly credited the format with condemning the polemical nature of political campaigns and setting the tone for a civil debate because it allowed an unnamed audience member early on to ask: “Can we focus on the issues, and not the personalities and the mud?”¹¹⁸ Ed Siegel wrote that the “big winner...was democracy, and Charles Madigan and Howard Kurtz

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Green and Seelye, “Polite Debate Focuses on the Issues,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 16, 1992, 1.

¹¹⁸ Clinton-Bush-Perot 2; Chris Black and Curtis Wilkie, “They Keep the Gloves on: Voters’ Questioning Makes Candidates Stick to Issues,” *Boston Globe*, October 16, 1992, 1. The *Globe* described the question as “Can we focus on issues instead of mud.” The quote written in the text, however, is word-for-word, as retrieved from the debate itself.

both praised the issue-oriented substance.¹¹⁹ Dan Balz of the *Washington Post* wrote that the voters experienced their clearest view of the candidates' differences, and the *Chicago Tribune* titled its editorial the following morning "A Debate Worthy of a Great Democracy."¹²⁰

Although the town hall debate did not really change the dynamics of the race, it certainly was revolutionary in that it introduced a debate format that allowed populism, at least procedurally, to flourish via the tool of television, and that has become a staple of every subsequent debate season. The town hall also restored a certain cordial component that was missing. Generally, it would seem far more unnerving to direct personal attacks at one's opponent while standing side-by-side, often only a few inches from one another, as was the case in the town hall, instead of doing so from behind a podium. One wonders, then, whether the running mates that year might have been more respectful to one another if they stood inches apart from each other and from audience members.

A CBS poll taken after the debate found that Clinton won by a wide margin over Bush and Perot, 54 to 25 to 20 percent, respectively.¹²¹ The press did not seem too interested, however, in how much less impressed the voters were with Perot in the second debate than in the first, which took place just four days earlier. It was not as if Perot said or did anything even marginally different in one debate versus the other, and nothing of note happened in his campaign to cause him to fall out of favor so sharply in

¹¹⁹ Ed Siegel, "People's Questions Make for Good TV," *Boston Globe*, October 16, 1992, 18; Charles Madigan, "Issues Win over Innuendo," *Chicago Tribune*, October 16, 1992, 1; Howard Kurtz, "People's Debate Produced Relentlessly Substantive Exchange," October 17, 1992, 11.

¹²⁰ Balz, "Debate Delineated Differences among Candidates on Issues," *Washington Post*, October 17, 1992, 10; Editorial, "A Debate Worthy of a Great Democracy," *Chicago Tribune*, October 17, 1992, 20. The *Tribune* praised the debate as one that would be remembered for the people's demand that the candidates address the issues.

¹²¹ David S. Broder and Ruth Marcus, "Clinton, Bush, Perot Stick to Issues in Debate," *Washington Post*, October 16, 1992, 1.

ninety-six hours. The only “gaffe” of sorts was the unimpressive debate performance of Perot’s choice for vice president, James Stockdale, two days earlier. Perhaps that caused much of the public to lose some interest in Perot’s message once they soured on his judgment in choosing a running mate and, particularly for those who sought a change from Bush, to look at Clinton more promisingly.

Meanwhile, the consensus in the Republican Party seemed to be that Bush was doomed. Wilkie wrote of a “prominent Republican” who said that there probably was not a single Republican outside of the Bush campaign itself who did not think Bush’s situation was an “unmitigated disaster.”¹²² Ann Devroy and Ruth Marcus also quoted “a Republican” that said of Bush: “He knows it’s gone. He knows it really is too late.”¹²³ Larry Eichel called Bush “a candidate without a strategy.”¹²⁴

Though the wristwatch incident eventually became one of the more memorable debate moments, there was some mention about it, though not a great deal, in the press immediately following the debate. Timothy J. McNulty and Steve Daley observed that Bush checked his watch and complained in a very hushed voice, “it’s hot in here.”¹²⁵ Although no such comment is audible in debate video footage, it is entirely possible that Bush felt overall discomfort, considering that seconds earlier he unbuttoned his suit jacket and pulled up his belt.¹²⁶ In a satirical *Washington Post* column, Tom Shales wrote that when Bush looked at his watch, he wasn’t the only one

¹²² Wilkie, “GOP Mood Grim after Bush Debate Troubles,” *Boston Globe*, October 17, 1992, 1. Wilkie wrote that Republican in question wanted to remain anonymous, Wilkie honored the request.

¹²³ Ann Devroy and Ruth Marcus, “Bush’s Demeanor Raises GOP Concern; Some Sense Resignation in Debate,” *Washington Post*, October 17, 1992, 1. There is no evidence to indicate whether or not it was the same Republican that Curtis Wilkie interviewed for the *Boston Globe* article of the same day.

¹²⁴ Eichel, “Debate a Tame Affair – Bad News for Bush,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 16, 1992, 1.

¹²⁵ McNulty and Daley.

¹²⁶ Clinton-Bush-Perot 2.

who was bored.¹²⁷ After Bush lost the election, he told Lehrer that the entire incident was overblown to portray him as already having conceded the race at that point.¹²⁸ However, Bush conceded: “was I glad when that damn thing was over? Yeah. And maybe that’s why I was looking at it – only ten more minutes of this crap, I mean. Go ahead and use that...I’m a free spirit now.”¹²⁹ Though Bush did not verbalize that explanation for looking at his watch until after he retired from politics, the gesture itself, during the debate at the height of the campaign season, underscored his lack of comprehension of, and/or defiance toward, the debates as shapers of public opinion. Evidently, Bush did not think that a show of disdain for highly structured debate choreography would negatively impact his chance for reelection. By the time he realized how much the debates matter, it was too late; he had already lost the election.

Lehrer, to whom Bush referred to the debates as “crap,” moderated the final debate, which took place on October 19 at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan. The panelists were Susan Rook of CNN, Gene Gibbons of Reuters, and Helen Thomas of United Press International.¹³⁰ A *Newsweek* poll released two days earlier showed that Clinton maintained a strong lead over Bush, 46 to 31 percent, with Perot continuing to gain, but remaining a very distant third with 14 percent.¹³¹ An ABC Poll had the contest 49-31-12, and a CNN-*USA Today* poll 47-34-12, for Clinton, Bush, and Perot, respectively.¹³² Earlier in the campaign, Perot took away more support from Clinton than from Bush. Over the first three debates, however, Perot’s gain was Bush’s loss, as

¹²⁷ Tom Shales, “The Debate Goes on...and on and on,” *Washington Post*, October 16, 1992, 1.

¹²⁸ Lehrer, 52-53.

¹²⁹ Lehrer, 53.

¹³⁰ Clinton-Bush-Perot-Debate 3, October 19, 1992, C-SPAN, retrieved on October 26, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33253-1>.

¹³¹ Anonymous, “Clinton Retains Lead in New Poll,” *New York Times*, October 18, 1992, 26.

¹³² Anonymous, “Bush’s Back to Wall, Debate Offers a Chance,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 19, 1992.

Clinton stayed steady. Citing the poll numbers, the press all was preparing Bush's political epitaph.¹³³

Bush looked disheveled, and his reddish-pinkish-maroon tie looked comparatively *avant-garde* when juxtaposed with the more conservative attire presidential debaters typically wear. Moreover, he needed a haircut: his hair was conspicuously unruly and gray at the temples. Bush's somewhat unkempt appearance was probably the first aesthetic *faux pas* since Richard Nixon's five-o'clock shadow in 1960. Clinton, by comparison, looked cool and confident in his suit, with not a hair out of place, and when he spoke he was poised in delivery and evenhanded in theme, which made him appear even smoother. Maintaining his trademark homey quaintness, Perot began with one of his "folksy" analogies referring to his plan to reduce the federal deficit: "If you take a patient into the hospital that's bleeding arterially, step one is to stop the bleeding. And we are bleeding arterially." Perot received a thundering round of applause when he said "I'm spending my money on this campaign; the two parties are spending your money, taxpayer money. I put my wallet on the table for you and your children." Early on, Perot appeared to be regaining his populist stride.

As he did in the first two debates, Clinton was masterful in the final contest in distinguishing himself from both Bush and Perot at the same time. When the president acknowledged that he made a mistake in raising taxes, and Perot responded with arithmetic, Clinton gave the simplest answer: that Bush's mistake was not recanting his promise not to raise taxes, but having made the promise in the first place. Judging from the live audience's applause, it was also the answer that resonated with them the

¹³³ Eichel, "Bush Enters Tonight's Debate with Stakes Highest in Campaign," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 19, 1992, 1; Robert Shogan, "It's High Noon as Bush Loads up for Debate," *Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 1992, 1; Robert A. Jordan, "Bush Needs a Miraculous Last At-Bat," *Boston Globe*, October 18, 1992, 77.

most.¹³⁴ By comparison, Perot overwhelmed the viewers with details, and Bush's response sounded like backpedaling. Clinton's answer was clearly the strongest.

Bush's farewell, in a sense, came before his closing statement. There was a moment of unscripted humor that occurred when Clinton insisted that if elected, he would be personally responsible for economic policy in his own administration. Bush interjected with: "[t]hat's what worries me," which received appreciative laughter, for the cleverness if not the substance, and Bush then went on to warn Americans "watch your wallet" if Clinton were to be elected. He used that line twice during the evening, in fact, and each time it sounded as if he was conceding defeat. It was as if Bush realized that Clinton would become president, and so in his farewell to the nation, he warned the people to keep an eye on how Clinton would spend their money.

The candidates' closing statements encapsulated their overall debate performances and campaign momentum. Highlighting his centrist economic plan, which was not trickle-down, but not tax-and-spend, either, Clinton called his plan invest and grow, and said, once again, that it was time for a change. He spoke glowingly about a country in which people work hard, play by the rules, and break down racial, regional, and financial barriers – a country Clinton envisioned that he would lead into the twenty-first century. In referring to Election Day, Bush began: "Three weeks from now" and then corrected himself, "two weeks from tomorrow..." which was symbolic of the perception about how out of touch he was. Perot had the final and, based on the audience's reaction, most inspiring word. He specifically mentioned the days, times, and television stations pertaining to his upcoming thirty-minute telecasts and to a crescendo of applause

¹³⁴ Bush vowed in 1988 that if elected he would not raise taxes; Perot, in the final 1992 debate, explained that for every dollar raised in taxes, Congress spent \$1.83.

vowed that “we will be going full steam ahead to make sure that you get a voice and that you get your country back.” When he advised people to stop listening to those in the press who say that voting for an independent candidate is throwing a vote away, the crowd cheered even louder. Along the same lines as Ronald Reagan’s “are you better off now” line in 1980, Perot asked which one of the three candidates was the best qualified to create jobs and to manage money.

Clinton’s and Perot’s skillful use of television to perpetuate their populist themes worked in their favor and to Bush’s detriment. An ABC poll taken after the debate showed Clinton winning over Perot and Bush 36-26-21, thereby seemingly confirming what many analysts suspected, which was that Clinton was going to win the election.¹³⁵ Bush was more aggressive in the final debate, but it was too little, too late.¹³⁶ The pundits consistently reasoned that, though Bush somewhat narrowed the gap, his surge would not be meaningful enough to overcome Clinton’s large lead.¹³⁷

A fascinating story unfolded on October 25, when Perot, in a television interview revealed that the actual reason he dropped out of the race in July was because Bush campaign staffers threatened to sabotage his daughter’s wedding and circulate a computer-altered photograph of her.¹³⁸ Though the poll numbers were not noticeably affected, it seemed that two candidates could be hurt: either Perot if voters thought he

¹³⁵ Jill Abramson and Gerald F. Seib, “Bush Steps up His Attacks on Clinton in Final Debate,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 1992, 3.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Howard Kurtz, “Has Bush Been Written Off?; In Eyes of News Media, Last Night Was Presidents’ ‘Last Chance,’” *Washington Post*, October 20, 1992, 21. David Gergen of *U.S. News & World Report*, the *Chicago Tribune*’s Clarence Page, and John Chancellor and Tom Brokaw, both of *NBC News*, were among those who shared that opinion.

¹³⁸ Richard L. Berke, “Perot Said He Quit in July to Thwart G.O.P. ‘Dirty Tricks,’” *New York Times*, October 26, 1992, retrieved on February 25, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/26/us/1992-campaign-overview-perot-says-he-quit-july-thwart-gop-dirty-tricks.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>; Susan Baer, “Perot Accuses GOP of ‘Dirty Tricks’; Candidate Tells ‘Real’ Reason for Quitting in July,” *Baltimore Sun*, October 26, 1992, retrieved on February 25, 2013, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1992-10-26/news/1992300143_1_ross-perot-dirty-tricks-perot-supporters. Bush spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater called Perot’s accusations “crazy.”

was paranoid or delusional, or Bush if voters believed Perot's allegations. Either way, the only candidate not at risk was the frontrunner, Bill Clinton. Although Perot's strategy in timing his disclosing of the information did not result in his winning the election, it underscored his reliance on television to deliver his message, and his difficulties as an independent politician trying to survive amid an onslaught of attacks by the political establishment.

On Election Day, Perot's surge in the debates was at least enough to make history; he gained a higher portion of the popular vote, 18.9 percent, than any non-major party candidate since Theodore Roosevelt eighty years earlier, but as the polls reflected and the pundits predicted, Clinton won the election. Of the four incumbent presidents who debated, Bush became the third to lose, but the first to face two opponents at once.¹³⁹ If the debates generally disadvantaged the incumbent, as some suggested, then it seems reasonable that an incumbent facing two challengers simultaneously is in an even more precarious situation.

Since the debates resumed in 1976 after three debateless elections, the 1992 season reflected the most noticeable advance television made in influencing the campaign as a whole. Ross Perot used television effectively to air self-paid infomercials, which he promoted unabashedly during the debates, but that same medium thwarted his momentum because of Stockdale's dismal debate performance, which reflected poorly on Perot's judgment in his selection of a running mate. How Stockdale would have fared, one might wonder, if he were in a room with Gore and Quayle, without television cameras, and all three simply wrote the answers to the same question they were asked in the debate? Any notion the public's perception might have been different in that case

¹³⁹ Gerald Ford in 1976 and Jimmy Carter in 1980 also lost; Ronald Reagan won in 1984.

speaks to the tremendous impact of television in the debates and, to a larger extent, the campaigns overall.

The prominence of the Perot-Stockdale ticket was a symbolic victory for populism, and the first town hall debate revolutionized the debates significantly. The candidate who most effectively responded to people one-on-one was at a decided advantage, as Clinton demonstrated. Moreover, ordinary Americans, rather than politicians, journalists, or pundits, were in the spotlight in front of tens of millions of viewers, and had the chance to make history, as that unnamed questioner did when she asked the candidates how the economy affected them. Well-suited to Clinton's strengths, the town hall helped him to answer that question not only for the questioner directly, but for the millions of Americans who believed that he "felt their pain."

The 1992 debates certainly mattered. They were particularly compelling because there were three candidates instead of two, entertaining because the Perot-Stockdale ticket was comprised of two non-politicians with fascinating biographies, and significant because of the widely-praised town hall format and, more broadly, the impact of television on the campaign's populist theme. They mattered because, for the sixth time in as many debate seasons, the debate winner as proclaimed by the polls and pundits, also won the ensuing election. "It's the economy, stupid," the catchphrase that came to symbolize the miscommunication between elite politicians and the dissatisfied masses, was captured on television most poignantly in that moment when that ordinary citizen asked about it: the candidate who retreated lost the election, but the one who gravitated toward her won it. Accordingly, the debates mattered because it was in that forum when that transformational moment happened. Beyond the 1992 election itself, the

candidates' responses to the economy presented a glimpse into the political future through to 2008. Except for the 2004 election, which was the one following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the economy remained the primary issue of concern among American voters.

**DO THE DEBATES MATTER? AN EXAMINATION OF THE PROGRESSIVELY
INFLUENTIAL ROLE OF MAJOR PARTY DEBATES ON
AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: 1960-2008**

**CHAPTER 8: 1996 – THE DEBATES AS VEHICLES FOR RESTORING CIVILITY TO
PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNING**

Democrats Bill Clinton (Incumbent President) and Al Gore (Incumbent Vice President) v. Republicans Bob Dole (US Senator - KS) and Jack Kemp (Former Representative, NY, and Former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development). Clinton-Dole 1 (46.1 million), Clinton-Dole 2 (36.3 million), Gore-Kemp, 26.6 million).

The 1996 debates offered little in terms of suspense, although that certainly did not diminish their role in American presidential politics. Significantly, they reflected restored civility to presidential campaigning that year, which was something that had been missing since 1984. The Republicans, Kansas Senator Bob Dole and his running mate, former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Jack Kemp, challenged Democratic incumbents, Bill Clinton and Al Gore. Clinton held a comfortable lead over Dole during the entire campaign, including before, during, and after the debates and, as widely expected, won the election. There were no notable gaffes of any sort. Not aesthetic ones as in 1960, and not substantive ones as in 1976. The debates were also not image makers or breakers, as they had been in 1980, 1984, and 1988.¹ No candidate appeared out of his element on television, as Admiral James Stockdale had in 1992. Each of the four debaters was steady; there were no intra-debate season news stories about any damage from blunders. Comparative uneventfulness aside, the 1996

¹ Richard Nixon looked sickly on television in 1960, Gerald Ford misspoke about there being no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe in 1976, and Ronald Reagan was perceived as the warmer, more likable candidate in 1980 and 1984, as was George H.W. Bush in 1988. For more discussion about gaffes and personalities in the debates, see Alan Schroeder, *Presidential Debates 50 Years of High-Risk Presidential TV*, 2nd Ed., New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008.

debates mattered a great deal because they exemplified the decorum that had been lacking in the 1988 and 1992 campaigns.

Presidential elections are adversarial by nature, and so a certain amount of combativeness is evident in every campaign.² Although America's first president, George Washington, in his farewell address to the nation warned against establishing political parties, as they would supplant the national interest with petty jealousy and power struggles, even his immediate successors, John Adams (a Federalist) and Thomas Jefferson (a Democratic-Republican), ignored his advice and created a contentious political rivalry that lasted well beyond the scathing 1796 and 1800 presidential campaigns, in which they directly competed against one another.³ Adams' son, John Quincy Adams, however, exemplified the dignity that permeated the era following the decades-long feud between his father and Jefferson, and refused to campaign in his own reelection run in 1828 because it was unbecoming for a president to do so, even as he realized that not doing so would surely result in his defeat (as it did).⁴ In fact, the heralded Lincoln-Douglas debates between Illinois Senatorial candidates Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, in 1858, were not the first instances in which the two politicians debated. Almost twenty years earlier, Lincoln and Douglas served as surrogates to two 1840 presidential candidates, Whig William Henry Harrison and incumbent Democratic President Martin Van Buren, respectively, and debated on their behalves, because it was considered inappropriate for presidential

² Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996, 520. Jamieson described the history of contentious presidential campaigns throughout American history, particularly through the medium of advertising, generally by drawings in the 19th and early 20th centuries and ultimately supplanted by broadcast commercials in the age of television.

³ Kerwin C. Swint, *Mudslingers: the Top 25 Negative Political Campaigns of All Time*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006, 183.

⁴ Robert V. Remini, *John Quincy Adams*, New York, NY: Times Books, 2002, 122. Remini wrote that Adams, like most of his contemporaries in the early nineteenth century, shunned public campaigning.

candidates to debate personally, lest they be perceived as lowering themselves to attempting to solicit votes.⁵

The presidential debates provided a window into the tone of the respective campaign. The first four debate seasons were comparatively civil compared to the next two. Ever since Richard Nixon's ample deference to John Kennedy in 1960, there was a certain level of collegiality expressed by the debaters toward one another.

In 1976, the major party candidates agreed to debate in order to connect with the American people: incumbent President Gerald Ford sought trust, and the challenger, Jimmy Carter, sought recognition.⁶ Neither spent much time attacking his opponent personally. In 1980, though Ronald Reagan criticized Jimmy Carter frequently, he did so more in the form of one-liners, which he often delivered with a smile, tilted head, and a twinkle in his eye, and not with any apparent maliciousness.⁷ Reagan's affability endured into the 1984 campaign, in which he held a commanding lead over challenger Walter Mondale, throughout. Mondale, in turn, maintained that Reagan had served his country well, but that his time had passed, which was hardly a scathing attack.

By 1988, however, the presidential campaign had turned away from dignity and decorum, particularly due to the efforts of George H.W. Bush's campaign manager Lee Atwater. As marketing authority Tara Hunt summarized, Atwater was the campaign strategist who "invented the negative political game."⁸ Having circulated a never-

⁵ David Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990, 36.

⁶ Newton N. Minow and Craig L. Lamay, *Inside the Presidential Debates*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 47-48.

⁷ Schroeder, 147. In their debate, Reagan turned to Carter and said "there you go again" to point out the flaw in Carter's argument. Schroeder characterized that line as the most pronounced example of Reagan's cheerful disposition.

⁸ Tara Hunt, "The Lee Atwater Legacy and Attack Ads," January 4, 2013, retrieved on March 29, 2013, <http://tarahunt.com/2013/01/04/the-lee-atwater-legacy-and-attack-ads/>. For more discussion about Atwater's

substantiated rumor that Kitty Dukakis, the wife of Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis, had once burned an American flag, Atwater later conceded that it had always been his intention all along to discredit the Democratic nominee, whoever that would be.⁹ Atwater justified his barrage of negative campaign advertisements against Dukakis by declaring: "We had only one goal in the campaign: to help elect George Bush. That's the purpose of any political campaign. What other function should a campaign have?"¹⁰ Winning at any cost, then, was the philosophy that gave birth to the late twentieth century era of negative campaigning.

The 1988 debates provided a look into the abrasive tone that permeated the political discourse. In their first debate, Dukakis blasted Bush for attacking his character, and in the second, Bush returned the favor by scolding Dukakis for comparing the president (Reagan) to a rotting fish.¹¹ As for the vice presidential debate, much was made about Lloyd Bentsen's biting quip "Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy," which he addressed to a red-faced Dan Quayle.¹² The timing and delivery of Bentsen's comment and ensuing laughter and applause from the audience notwithstanding, it was an overt insult to Quayle that he was so inferior to Kennedy that it would be unthinkable to compare himself to the former president.

negative campaign strategies and their impact on the 1988 campaign, see John Brady, *Bad Boy: The Life and Politics of Lee Atwater*, Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996.

⁹ Hunt.

¹⁰ Michael Oreskes, "Lee Atwater, Master of Tactics for Bush and G.O.P., dies at 40," *New York Times*, March 30, 1991, retrieved on March 29, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/30/obituaries/lee-atwater-master-of-tactics-for-bush-and-gop-dies-at-40.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

¹¹ Bush-Dukakis Debate 1, September 25, 1988, C-SPAN, retrieved on September 10, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/4309-1>; Bush-Dukakis Debate 2, C-SPAN, October 13, 1988, retrieved on September 23, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/4256-1>.

¹² Quayle-Bentsen Debate, October 5, 1988, C-SPAN, retrieved on September 24, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/4127-1>; A.M. Rosenthal, "The Bentsen-Quayle Whatever," *New York Times*, October 7, 1988, 35. Rosenthal was critical of the debaters being coached to deliver one-liners, but nonetheless acknowledged that Bentsen's line had been the most effective of the campaign.

If the 1988 debates reflected the emerging era of negative campaigning, those in 1992 perpetuated that image. Although Atwater died the previous year, his legacy of attack advertisements persisted, as the Bush campaign, persisted in attacking Democratic rival, Bill Clinton's, character, primarily for dodging the draft in order to avoid serving in Vietnam and then, while attending college in England, protesting against that war, and thereby the policies of his own government, "on foreign soil."¹³ As Dukakis did in 1988, Clinton used the first debate to reprimand Bush for the attack on his character, implying that Bush employed McCarthy-like tactics.¹⁴ In castigating Bush, Clinton praised Bush's father, Prescott, who challenged McCarthy while serving alongside him in the Senate: "your father was right to stand up to Joe McCarthy, and you were wrong to attack my patriotism."¹⁵

The running mates' debate that year was even more vitriolic.¹⁶ In its post-debate coverage, the press consistently assailed the debate for its nastiness.¹⁷ Charles Krauthammer referred to it as a schoolyard debate, and a contest to determine who could interrupt the most and yell the loudest.¹⁸ In the third event, the first ever town hall debate, an exasperated uncommitted voter asked the candidates why they could not

¹³ Roper Poll, October 1992, http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/elections/presidential/presidential_election, retrieved on March 23, 2013. Eighty-seven percent of the responders thought that the economy was not in good shape; Larry J. Sabato, "Clinton Accused," *Washington Post*, March 27, 1998, retrieved on February 25, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/frenzy/clinton2.htm>.

¹⁴ Clinton-Bush-Perot Debate 1, C-SPAN, October 11, 1992, retrieved on September 29, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33071-1>. United States Senator Joe McCarthy had embarked on an investigation to uncover Communist spies in American government and other segments of American society, and was ultimately censured in 1954 by the Senate for contempt and abuse of power.

¹⁵ Clinton-Bush-Perot 1. Prescott Bush had been an outspoken critic of Joe McCarthy.

¹⁶ Gore-Quayle-Stockdale Debate, October 13, 1992, C-SPAN, retrieved on October 2, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33086-1>.

¹⁷ Cathleen Decker and Sam Fullwood, "Quayle and Gore Trade Angry Barbs on Character Issue Debate," *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1992, 1; Adam Pertman and John Alosious Farrell, "Quayle, Gore Stage a Slugfest," *Boston Globe*, October 14, 1992, 1; Charles Krauthammer, "Schoolyard Debate," *Washington Post*, October 15, 1992, 31.

¹⁸ Krauthammer.

discuss the issues with the goal of reaching consensus, rather than attacking one another, and added, “the amount of time the candidates spent in this campaign trashing their opponents' character and their programs is depressingly large.”¹⁹ The 1996 debates, however, ended the trend of negativity and reflected a comparatively civil campaign.

Beyond civility, voters based their support on substance: namely, the overall Clinton-Gore record. Much like 1988, the American people were by and large satisfied with the state of the union, and found no compelling reason to change course.²⁰

Overwhelmingly, the most important issue of 1992 was the economy, at 61 percent, but it was barely mentioned as a concern in 1996, with only 8 percent of poll respondents identifying it as the top priority.²¹ During Clinton's first term, the nation's top problem was effectively resolved, according to most voters. Therefore, it was no surprise that they had no intention of replacing him. The top issue identified that year, at a rather low 13 percent, was crime.²² A perpetual societal problem that was not necessarily linked to any specific president or political party, crime was not an issue that Dole could utilize against Clinton; even foreign policy did not render enough support to emerge from the 3 percent or less “other” category as a standalone issue.²³

Clinton became the second incumbent president (after Reagan) for whom all factors indicated that he could forego them and still win reelection who participated in them

¹⁹ Clinton-Bush-Perot Debate 2, October 15, 1992, C-SPAN, retrieved on October 14, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33137-1>.

²⁰ Gallup Poll, retrieved on September 3, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/110548/gallup-presidential-election-trialheat-trends-19362004.aspx#1>. Throughout 1996, well over 50 percent of Americans consistently supported Clinton's policies and indicated they would vote for him for reelection.

²¹ Roper Poll, 1992; CBS/*New York Times* Poll, August 16-18, 1996, retrieved on March 29, 2013, http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/elections/presidential/presidential_election_1996.html.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

nonetheless. Alan Schroeder described 1996 as the *first* time in debate history when the debates were not viewed as an inherent risk for the incumbent, and he attributed that to Clinton's renowned skills as a television performer; his debate performances mirrored his campaign.²⁴ Ronald Reagan in 1984, however, who held a commanding lead over Walter Mondale in pre-debate polls, was just perceived just as strong a debate favorite.²⁵ Any risk to Reagan's campaign as a result of his performance in the first debate with Mondale was hindsight. Nonetheless, Schroeder's point that Clinton held a commanding lead over Dole in the polls is without question.

Although Bill Clinton won the 1992 presidential election, a majority of the people voted against him, including the sizeable number that cast ballots for Independent candidate Ross Perot.²⁶ It is likely that Clinton took serious notice of the fact that a non-major party candidate (*i.e.*, not a Democrat or Republican) captured a larger percentage of the vote since Theodore Roosevelt did so in 1912, and that the centerpiece of Perot's campaign was balancing the budget and reducing the national debt.²⁷ Clinton focused intensely on reducing the annual deficit, and by the end of his first term he had cut it by more than half.²⁸ Campaigning as a "new kind of Democrat" to distinguish himself from that party's tax-and-spend liberal image, Clinton decreased the overall size of

²⁴ Schroeder, 23.

²⁵ Gallup Poll, October 5, 1984, retrieved on March 7, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/154559/US-Presidential-Election-Center.aspx?ref=interactive>. Reagan had led Mondale by 17 points entering the first debate.

²⁶ Dave Leip's Atlas of United States Presidential Elections, 1988, retrieved on February 24, 2013, <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS>. Only 43.09 percent voted for Clinton; 56.99 percent voted against him.

²⁷ *Ibid.* Roosevelt, who had been a Republican when he had been president from 1901-1909, ran for a third term as Progressive/Bull Moose Party candidate in 1912 and finished second (behind Democrat Woodrow Wilson and ahead of Republican William Taft) with 27.4 percent of the vote.

²⁸ Summary of Receipts, Outlays, and Surpluses or Deficits: 1789–2017, Office of Management and Budget, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/Historicals>, retrieved on March 4, 2013. Clinton had inherited an annual deficit of \$255 billion and in four years had reduced it to \$107 billion. For more discussion about his commitment to cutting the deficit, see Joe Klein, *The Natural: The Misunderstood Presidency of Bill Clinton*, New York, NY: Random House, 2002.

government in his first four years, as the private sector fueled a robust economy.²⁹ In his 1996 State of the Union address, Clinton declared that “the era of big government is over,” which prompted comparisons to Republican Ronald Reagan, who consistently railed against the size of government.³⁰ The title of James McCartney’s article aptly summarized the sentiment: “Terrific Speech by Reagan, I Mean Clinton.”³¹ Even the Republican Party Chairman, Haley Barbour, said: “I thought Ronald Reagan had taken over Bill Clinton’s body.”³²

The only Republican who seemed popular enough to unseat Clinton in 1996 was General Colin Powell, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who rose to national prominence during the Persian Gulf War of 1991 under President George H.W. Bush.³³ In October 1995, though Powell did not formally declare that he would run for president the following year, he was the frontrunner in the all-important New Hampshire primary.³⁴ The following month, however, Powell declared that he would not run, and Dole, who was in second place, ascended to frontrunner status by default.³⁵ With the exception of a narrow loss in New Hampshire to conservative populist commentator Pat Buchanan, who almost defeated Bush in that same primary four years earlier, Dole won every other

²⁹ Mitchell Locin, “Clinton Says He’s a ‘New Democrat,’” *Chicago Tribune*, October 22, 1992, retrieved on March 4, 2013, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1992-10-22/news/9204050594_1_democratic-nominee-bill-clinton-democratic-party-democratic-governors; Robert L. Haught, *Bubba Between the Bushes*, New York, NY: iUniverse, 2008, 35. Clinton, because of his Southern background, is often referred to as “Bubba.”

³⁰ Bill Clinton, “State of the Union, January 23, 1996,” National Archives and Records Administration, retrieved on March 4, 2013, <http://clinton4.nara.gov/WH/New/other/sotu.html>.

³¹ James McCartney, “Terrific Speech by Reagan, I Mean Clinton,” *Bergen Record*, January 26, 1996, 7.

³² David Dahl, “Clinton Borrows from Reagan’s Playbook,” *St. Petersburg Times*, January 25, 1996, 1.

³³ Richard L. Berke, “New Hampshire Poll Finds Powell with an Edge,” *New York Times*, October 19, 1995, retrieved on March 8, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/10/19/us/new-hampshire-poll-finds-powell-with-an-edge.html>.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Powell led a Bowdoin College poll 34 to 25 percent over Dole. New Hampshire is the first state to hold a primary in a presidential election year.

³⁵ Susan Baer, “Powell Takes Himself out of 1996 Race,” *Baltimore Sun*, November 9, 1995, retrieved on March 8, 2013, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-11-09/news/1995313115_1_powell-candidacy-political-arena. The October poll had indicated that with Powell not in the race, Dole’s support would rise from 24 to 35 percent.

state primary without much difficulty, and proceeded to the Republican National Convention virtually unopposed.³⁶

Dole's candidacy, however respectable, did not pose a formidable threat to Clinton. A United States Senator since 1969 and the Republican vice presidential nominee in 1976, Dole in 1996, at seventy-three was the oldest major party candidate ever to seek the presidency for the first time. Reagan, who was also seventy-three at the time of his 1984 reelection bid, caused concern about his age when he seemed tired and forgetful during the second debate with Walter Mondale.³⁷ That Reagan was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1994, amid concerns that the disease might have affected him while he was still president, underscored the age issue.³⁸ On a positive note, age seemed to agree with Dole. By 1996, he looked grayer and softer on television, which was a welcome contrast to the dark, brooding image, reminiscent of Richard Nixon, that he cast ten years earlier in the vice presidential debate against Mondale. That aesthetic accentuated the softer tone of civility that identified the 1996 campaign and debates.

As congenial as the 1996 version of Bob Dole appeared, the candidate's image suffered because of his connection to the more abrasive then-Speaker of the House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich. In 1994, for the first time in forty years, the Republicans gained control of Congress, winning a majority in both the House of

³⁶ Michael E. Myers and Laurie Kellman, "Buchanan Wins New Hampshire Vote," *Washington Times*, February 21, 1996, retrieved on March 8, 2013, <http://www.questia.com/library/1G1-56868696/buchanan-wins-new-hampshire-vote-stuns-dole-alexander>; Marc J. Shulman, *A History of American Presidential Elections: From George Washington to Barack Obama*, New Rochelle, NY: MultiEducator, 2013. Buchanan lost the New Hampshire primary to Bush in 1992, 53 to 37 percent, but won it in 1996 against Dole, 27-26 percent.

³⁷ Jane Mayer and Ellen Hume, "President's Age and Debate Performance Dominate Campaign to Reagan's Dismay," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct 11, 1984, 1.

³⁸ Paul Bedard, "Reagan's Son Claims Dad Had Alzheimer's as President," *U.S. News & World Report*, January 14, 2011.

Representatives and the Senate.³⁹ The “Republican Revolution,” as it was called, was orchestrated by Gingrich, the architect of the *Contract with America*, a document that focused on spending cuts and term limits, and which became the Party’s official 1994 campaign centerpiece.⁴⁰ Gingrich’s meteoric rise was short-lived, however, as he fell out of favor within a year, as it was perceived that he placed his own ego ahead of the country’s best interests.

Led by Gingrich in the House and Bob Dole in the Senate, Congress sent a budget to Clinton, who vetoed it, and the ensuing deadlock caused the shutdown of the federal government for a total of twenty-eight days between November 1995 and January 1996.⁴¹ Initially, Clinton’s veto made him appear uncooperative and that he was at least as culpable for the shutdown as Gingrich and Dole.⁴² Perceptions quickly changed, however, when Gingrich made reference to Clinton’s snubbing him during the flight back to the United States on Air Force One from Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s funeral, when Clinton directed that Gingrich and other Republicans sit at the rear of the plane, and did not speak to them.⁴³ The New York *Daily News* posted a cartoon that comprised its entire November 16, 1995 front page, titled “Crybaby,” depicting Gingrich

³⁹ Dan Balz, “A Historic Republican Triumph; GOP Captures Congress; Party Controls Both Houses for the First Time Since 50s,” *Washington Post*, November 9, 1994, 1.

⁴⁰ Jackie Calmes and Phil Kuntz, “Newt’s House: Republicans’ Wins Put Their Attack Tactician in a Position to Lead,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 9, 1994, 1; Republican National Committee, *Contract with America*, National Center for Public Policy Research, retrieved on March 4, 2013, <http://www.nationalcenter.org/ContractwithAmerica.html>.

⁴¹ Steven M. Gillon, *The Pact: Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, and the Rivalry that Defined a Generation*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008, 148-149. The dates were November 14-19, 1995, and December 16, 1995, to January 6, 1996.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Baer, “Gingrich Links Stalemate to Perceived Clinton Snub,” *Baltimore Sun*, November 16, 1995, retrieved on March 7, 2013, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-11-16/news/1995320017_1_speaker-newt-gingrich-bob-dole-gingrich-remarks. Air Force One is the airplane used by the president of the United States.

wearing a diaper and in the midst of a wailing tantrum.⁴⁴ Many Democrats brought copies of that cartoon into the House of Representatives chambers, prompting Republicans to pass a measure declaring that it was against House rules to refer to the Speaker as a “crybaby”; the measure passed by a vote of 231 to 173.⁴⁵ Clinton’s response sounded simultaneously sarcastic and mature: “if it would get the government open, I’d be glad to tell him ‘I’m sorry.’”⁴⁶ Although Reagan was nicknamed the “Teflon President” for his ability to evade political harm, Clinton, too, appeared to have good fortune on his side, as Gingrich’s remarks shifted the blame to the Republicans.⁴⁷

Clinton made repeated references to the “Dole-Gingrich” Congress during the debates. The phrase itself was innocuous enough: after all, “Dole-Gingrich Congress” was an appropriate way to identify the Republican leader of each legislative house. By repeating “Dole-Gingrich” often on the debate stage, Clinton was able to remind the audience about the two politicians’ connection, and yet managed to stay above the fray by not expressly proclaiming that Dole was as divisive as Gingrich.

Dole’s running mate was former professional football player and longtime Congressman Jack Kemp. He was not a polarizing figure like Gingrich, and was more Reagan-like in his optimism that pro-growth economic policies, even at the cost of higher deficits, were the panacea for all American problems. Moreover, Kemp was well-

⁴⁴ Anonymous, “Democrats Taunt GOP with Diapered Newt,” CNN, November 16, 1995, retrieved on March 7, 2013, http://www.cnn.com/US/9511/debt_limit/11-16/gingrich_pm/index.html.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ George Stephanopoulos, *All Too Human*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1999, 405.

⁴⁷ Presidential Approval Ratings, Gallup, 1992-1996, retrieved on March 8, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx#2>. Clinton’s approval ratings had been around 50 percent immediately preceding the shutdown, then plummeted to 42 percent and, shortly following Gingrich’s remark, rose to about 54 percent, the highest of his presidency to that point; for more discussion about Reagan being referred to as the “Teflon President,” see David J. Lanoue, “The ‘Teflon Factor’: Ronald Reagan & Comparative Presidential Popularity,” *Polity*, Volume 21 No. 3 (Spring 1989), pp. 481-501.

liked personally and respected politically by Democratic and Republican leaders alike.⁴⁸ His priority of economic growth over fiscal austerity was contrary to Dole's.⁴⁹ Clinton and his running mate, Al Gore, exploited the Dole-Kemp rift over that issue, much like Kennedy pestered Nixon in 1960 to the extent that the latter disagreed with Eisenhower about Quemoy and Matsu, and in 1976 when Marilyn Berger pressed Dole about whether he agreed with Ford or with the Republican platform regarding the role of Kissinger.⁵⁰ As for Gore, he emerged as an active vice president who focused on technology as a tool for economic growth, and on deficit-reducing measures.⁵¹ The press' particular interest in the running mates' debate as a preview of the potential presidential race in 2000 implied that a successful reelection bid by Clinton that year (1996) was a foregone conclusion.

Clinton consistently polled anywhere from ten to twenty points ahead of Dole, rendering it difficult for the challenger to close the gap with only a few weeks remaining before Election Day.⁵² Although the Dole campaign saw the debates as their candidate's best chance to make a comeback, an unidentified "key" campaign official conceded that trailing Clinton was a very disadvantageous position for Dole to be in at

⁴⁸ David E. Rosenbaum, "A Passion for Ideas: Jack French Kemp," *New York Times*, August 11, 1996, retrieved on March 29, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIWoxLjn1L4>. Rosenbaum wrote that Kemp often crossed the Republican Party platform by supporting largely Democratic initiatives, such as education for illegal aliens and welfare benefits. For more discussion about Jack Kemp's life and political legacy, see Morton Kondracke and Fred Barnes, *Jack Kemp: The Bleeding-Heart Conservative Who Changed America*, New York, NY: Random House, 2015.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Russell Baker, "Nixon and Kennedy Debate Cuba; also Clash over Quemoy Issue, Atom Testing, and U.S. Prestige," *New York Times*, October 22, 1960, 1. Quemoy is now called Kinmen; Mondale-Dole, October 15, 1976, C-SPAN, retrieved on May 4, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/75693-1>.

⁵¹ Anonymous, "Albert Gore, 45th Vice President," *United States Senate Archives*, retrieved on March 29, 2013, http://web.archive.org/web/20080630050852/http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/VP_Albert_Gore.htm.

⁵² Jim Wolf, "Clinton and Dole Prepare to Debate," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 6, 1988, 5.

the debates' onset.⁵³ Part of the problem was the general lack of interest among the voters. It was "the checkout election," as voter turnout analyst Bruce Buchanan labeled it as a way of describing that voters found it "flatly irrelevant to their lives."⁵⁴ A Pew Poll in October revealed that 79 percent thought Clinton would win the election.⁵⁵ Coupled with the general sentiment that the country was moving in the right direction, the prospect of an election where the outcome seemed all but certain would surely tend to reduce debate viewership. Decreased attention on the debates, then, favored Clinton. If Clinton looked terrible on television like Nixon did in 1960, made a verbal gaffe like Ford in 1976, or appeared to grow too old for the job overnight like Reagan against Mondale in their first debate in 1984, then even with rebroadcasts and post-debate analysis in the news, the fewer people who watched the debates live, the less likely it would harm him.

A *Washington Post* editorial on the morning of the first debate described the debates not only as "useful," but as "increasingly important" in campaigns, particularly because "something awful can happen."⁵⁶ Accordingly, the editorial continued, the candidates do not even pretend to treat the debates casually, and fully admit to the intense pre-debate preparations they undergo, more evidence that the debates matter.⁵⁷ In Dole's case, somewhat surprisingly, he sought advice from a man who not only disliked debating intensely, but also experienced his worst performances against Clinton: George H.W. Bush.⁵⁸ Then again, at least Bush won the election (as vice president or president) in two other debate seasons, and at that time, the only other Republican to debate and win

⁵³ Dick Polman, "Debate Could Be Do or Die for Dole Tonight," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 6, 1996, 1.

⁵⁴ Polman, "Debate Faces a Tuned out Electorate," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 16, 1996, 1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Editorial, "Tonight's Show," *Washington Post*, October 6, 1996, C6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Adam Nagourney, "Dole Concludes Debate Preparation by Asking Bush for Advice," October 6, 1996, 27; David Maraniss, "Dole Lunches on Advice from Former President as Face-off Nears," *Washington Post*, October 6, 1996, 25.

was Reagan, who, by 1996, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and was unavailable to help Dole.⁵⁹ Ross Perot, who, like Bush, had direct experience in debating Clinton, was also running for president in 1996. A candidate for the Reform Party, which was created in support of his candidacy, Perot polled only in single digits and was not considered a serious contender, to the point that he was not invited to take part in the debates.⁶⁰

Taken together, those factors made Dole's turning to Bush seem not so unusual. To a greater extent, however, they revealed the growing extent to which the debates, and preparation for them, became woven into American political culture. In fact, as Alan Schroeder wrote, "presidential campaigns grind to a halt" weeks before the debate, to allow the candidates to devote their entire attention to them.⁶¹ Frank J. Fahrenkopf, Jr., co-chair of the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), described them as the "Super Bowl of politics," which further underscored how much they matter.⁶²

Dole asked to be situated at a podium on the right side of the stage (audience view left side) because his right arm, due to injuries suffered in World War II, was immobile, and he was unable to gesture with that arm if he was to Clinton's left and had to turn his body rightward to address him.⁶³ Rather than leave it to a coin toss, Clinton declined to compete for an advantage that involved exploiting his rival's war injury. Clinton's acquiescence was emblematic of the dignity prevalent in the 1996 campaign.

⁵⁹ For more discussion about Reagan's retreat from the public eye for the remainder of his life, see *The Long Goodbye*, written by his daughter, Patti Davis, New York, NY: Random House, 2004.

⁶⁰ George Farah, *No Debate*, New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2004, 56. Farah wrote that the Commission on Presidential Debates was dominated by Democrats and Republicans and therefore resistant to allowing non-major party candidates into the MPPDs unless they had been polling consistently at 15 percent or higher.

⁶¹ Schroeder, 80,

⁶² Farah, 1. The Super Bowl, which is the championship game of the National Football League, the preeminent professional American football league in the United States, is often the most-watched telecast in the United States in a given year, and one of the most-watched sporting events throughout the world.

⁶³ Schroeder, 217.

The debate took place on October 6 in Hartford, Connecticut. Jim Lehrer was the moderator of this and the subsequent two 1996 debates.⁶⁴ New to the debate format in 1996 was the complete elimination of panelists, a practice that has endured since then, and underscores the candidates' increased influence in the debate negotiations, and, presumably, preferences for fewer questioners.⁶⁵ With each subsequent debate season, the candidates played a greater role in shaping the debate terms and conditions, further revealing how significant they considered the debates to be.⁶⁶

Clinton spoke first and took the high road, thanking Dole for his many years of service to the nation, and pledged to focus on ideas during the debate, rather than on attacks.⁶⁷ Clinton seemed poised and confident, but neither arrogant nor combative. His thick head of hair meticulously styled, and with a smile and a gleam in his eye and a measured degree of pride in his tone of voice, Clinton reminded Americans that: “[f]our years ago, you took me on faith,” and “now there’s a record.” The president described that record: ten and a half million additional jobs, higher incomes, fewer people on welfare, lower crime, and a strong nation at peace. With an affirmative statement version of the question Ronald Reagan asked in 1980, Clinton declared: “We are better off than we were four years ago.”⁶⁸ Like Reagan, Clinton’s strategy was to run on his record.

Clinton remained at ease throughout the evening and refused to be antagonistic. Even when Lehrer tempted Clinton by suggesting that Dole said that Clinton practiced a

⁶⁴ Clinton-Dole Debate 1, October 6, 1996, C-SPAN, retrieved on November 1, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/74271-1>.

⁶⁵ Farah, 81. Farah wrote that a single moderator reduces the candidates’ chances of receiving unpredictable questions for which they are not prepared.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Clinton-Dole 1. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

⁶⁸ In his 1980 debate against Carter, Reagan asked the audience: “Are you better off now than you were four years ago?”

“photo-op foreign policy,” Clinton responded with supreme cordiality: “If...that’s what he said, he’s not right about that.” By implying that Lehrer possibly misquoted Dole, and by substituting the nicer-sounding “not right” for the harsher “wrong,” Clinton remained above the fray. He did, however, refer to Dole’s plan as a “tax scheme,” which was a phrase he repeated throughout the evening, sometimes including the word “risky” to describe it. If Clinton exhibited any flaw during the debate, it was his uttering of the words “tax scheme” and “risky tax scheme,” which sounded awkward and it was possibly something that was orchestrated by his handlers. Certainly, Clinton was accustomed to repeating political slogans, as evidenced by his 1992 debate messages “time for a change” and “courage to change.” However, “risky tax scheme” seemed out of character for the typically affable Clinton.

Reflecting the campaign’s civility, both Clinton and Dole used the debate forum to communicate that they personally liked one another, and that became evident even as they made some unflattering quips about one another: Dole said Clinton reminded him of his own brother Kenny, known in the Dole Family as “the great exaggerator,” and Clinton, in turn, described Dole’s tactics of calling him a liberal as a “golden oldie” that Dole imagined people wanted to hear, but whose time has passed. The statements could be taken to mean that Clinton was a liar and Dole was an outdated relic. On the other hand, Dole’s comparing Clinton to Dole’s own brother, and Clinton’s use of the word “golden” made the blows appear much softer. Four years earlier, Al Gore and Dan Quayle participated in the nastiest verbal exchange in debate history.⁶⁹ By comparison, the first Clinton-Dole debate was substantially more collegial.

⁶⁹ Gore-Quayle-Stockdale Debate, October 13, 1992, C-SPAN, retrieved on October 2, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33086-1>.

Moreover, Dole habitually interjected dry wit into the dialogue, but often spoke too softly and his timing was clumsy. His ample use of humor, which Clinton reciprocated, nonetheless reinforced the cordial and even light-hearted atmosphere that both created, which was a striking deviation from the combative 1988 and 1992 debates.

Voters in three different polls, CNN, ABC, and CBS, all thought that Clinton won the debate by substantial percentages: 51 to 32, 50 to 28, and 50 to 29, respectively.⁷⁰ A Gallup Poll conducted immediately after the debate showed that Clinton stretched his lead over Dole to twenty-two points, with 55 to 33 percent, compared with nineteen points before the debate.⁷¹ The overwhelming disparity contradicted what some analysts observed: Clinton's counter to Dole's offensive probably amounted to no more than a draw, which was to his benefit in any case, as he entered the debate with a sizeable lead in the polls. Those trained to review television performances rather than politics, however, concluded that Clinton won by a wide margin.⁷² Clinton's eye contact with the camera clearly outshone Dole's, observed the television experts, as he looked at the lens "as if it were an old friend."⁷³ Perhaps the tens of millions that comprised the television audience, who were presumably more proficient in watching television than analyzing politics, thought Clinton won so decisively precisely because he was far more telegenic than Dole. As in 1960, the Democrat with the floppy head of hair and the bright, tenor voice did a better job on television than the Republican with the dark, brooding features and baritone pitch. Clinton-Dole seemed like Kennedy-Nixon redux.

⁷⁰ Balz, "Clinton, Dole Politely Clash," *Washington Post*, October 7, 1996, retrieved on March 30, 2013, <http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=19961007&slug=2353119>.

⁷¹ Gallup, October 7-8, 1996, retrieved on March 30, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/110548/gallup-presidential-election-trialheat-trends-19362004.aspx#1>.

⁷² Stephen Seplow, "Evaluating the Outcome Sparks a Debate of its Own," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 8, 1996, 8. The experts to whom Seplow referred included television critics Tom Shales and Howard Rosenberg, and television news writer Frazier Moore.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

Aesthetics aside, Clinton, like Kennedy, understood television's far-reaching influence. In 1996, he gave actor Michael Douglas a grand tour of the presidential private airplane, Air Force One, as the latter was filming a motion picture of the same name, in which he starred as the president of the United States; Clinton deemed Douglas' performance to be very flattering to the general image of the presidency.⁷⁴

The big story in the press, however, was not Clinton's win, but the debate's tone. The *Boston Globe's* David Warsh described the debate as "uplifting" because the candidates were so courteous to one another.⁷⁵ David Broder of the *Washington Post* wrote that the debate "of civics and civility...may not help Dole much in the pursuit of his presidency, but he and President Clinton deserve a vote of thanks for helping politics regain its good name." Aside from the potential of a nation grateful for a civil campaign, Broder's conclusion that it "may not help Dole much," considered alongside Atwater's 1988 comment "what other function should a campaign have?" but to elect the candidate, did not bode well for the future of congenial campaigns if the candidates could not leverage them to victory.

E.J. Dionne, also of the *Post*, thought that Dole perhaps tried too hard not to appear mean. Whether Clinton soundly outperformed Dole or the pair debated to a virtual draw, writer Dick Polman surmised that either way, Dole did not generate the sea change in the public mood that he so desperately needed.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Mark Sachleben and Kevin M. Yenerall, *Seeing the Bigger Picture: Understanding Politics through Film and Television*, New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2004, 95. For more discussion on the emergence of television in American political culture, see Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990.

⁷⁵ David Warsh, "Going Down with Dignity," *Boston Globe*, October 7, 1996, D1.

⁷⁶ Polman, "For Dole, Just as Good Isn't Good Enough," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 7, 1996, 1.

With Clinton's lead over Dole even greater after the first debate, the running mates' contest three evenings later was less about the 1996 election than a preview of 2000. Unlike any previous pair of running mates in the debate era, both Gore and Kemp were considered the presumptive favorites to become their respective parties' presidential nominees in 2000.⁷⁷ By the debate's end, however, Kemp failed to measure up to the grand performance that he was expected to deliver. However, Kemp and Gore also personified the 1996 campaign's eminently civil tone.

The candidates debated in St. Petersburg, Florida, with Lehrer again the sole moderator. Kemp immediately exuded the quality of dignity by declaring that he and Dole saw Clinton and Gore as their opponents, not their enemies.⁷⁸ Kemp spoke about the debate serving as an example to the viewers all over the world of how American democracy functions with civility, respect, decency, and integrity.⁷⁹ Kemp's graying hair was just as thick as Clinton's and maybe even thicker. Dressed in a dark suit with a sharp blue tie, and wearing his eyeglasses from the onset, the former quarterback looked energetic and distinguished. Even with a distinctively gravelly and high-pitched voice, which was in stark contrast to most debate-era presidential nominees' more tenor/baritone dulcet tones, Kemp spoke articulately and authoritatively on the issues and looked and sounded every bit as presidential as any of the debate participants.⁸⁰

Gore returned Kemp's kindness by thanking him for his civility, and promised a positive debate that would focus on an exchange of ideas, rather than on personal

⁷⁷ Editorial, "A Rehearsal for 2000," *New York Times*, October 10, 1996, 32.

⁷⁸ Gore-Kemp Debate, October 9, 1996, C-SPAN, retrieved on November 9, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/75772-1>.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Megan Garber, "Why We Prefer Masculine Voices," *The Atlantic*, December 18, 2012, retrieved on March 16, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2012/12/why-we-prefer-masculine-voices-even-in-women/266350/>. Garber wrote that deep voices are an asset to those who seek positions of leadership.

attacks.⁸¹ In stark contrast to the 1992 vice presidential debate, which was widely described as a free-for-all, the Gore-Kemp contest promised to be a welcome return to collegiality and dignity.

Both men attempted an early try at humor, which, like Dole in the first debate, enjoyed only limited success but exemplified the cordial atmosphere. Kemp joked that the ninety-second time limit would be a problem, because he could not even clear his throat in that short period of time, and Gore made a “deal” with Kemp, as he did with Quayle during that debate’s opening moments: this time, Gore promised that if his opponent would not relay any football stories, he, in turn, would not “tell any of my warm and humorous stories about chlorofluorocarbon abatement.”⁸² It was less important that Gore and Kemp were not very good joketellers – the former too mechanical and the latter too stiff – than the sense of geniality they projected.

Jokes aside, Kemp was in the difficult position of disagreeing about economic policy, not only with the Clinton Administration but also with his own running mate who, like Clinton and Gore, was a deficit hawk, whereas Kemp was a staunch supply-side advocate who thought it possible for the United States to grow its way out of debt, and that the domestic economy was operating well below its potential. Gore used that distinction to his advantage, pointing out that over the years, Kemp often said “Dole never met a tax he didn’t hike” as a way of criticizing the senator’s intense focus on fiscal discipline, even if it meant potentially thwarting economic growth by raising taxes.

As Kemp criticized the economy under Clinton’s watch as “overtaxed and overregulated,” Gore, in turn, proclaimed Dole’s plan of an across-the-board 15 percent

⁸¹ Gore-Kemp.

⁸² Kemp was known for his loquaciousness, Gore for his technical jargon. Kemp also had a propensity for clearing his throat often during a speech.

tax cut a “risky tax scheme.” Clinton used those same words in the first debate, but Gore repeated the three words as a mantra, mechanically, unemotionally, and relentlessly, throughout the evening. In fact, Gore recited that phrase so often that various analysts referred to the vice president as everything from “reading a teleprompter in his mind” to being a “digitalized telephone operator,” and Gore’s “transparently predigested rhetoric became the object of ridicule.”⁸³ If Kemp commented on Gore’s robotic repetition early on, he might have made Gore appear foolish and subvert the vice president’s strategy; however, Kemp did not counterattack, and Gore continued on the “risky tax scheme” offensive. Every time Kemp touted the idea, Gore dismissed it, and his delivery became even slower and more deliberate as he repeated “risky tax scheme” monotonously.⁸⁴ As manifested in the debates, the Clinton-Gore strategy seemed simple: first, run on the record, and second, label the Dole plan as a risky tax scheme that would “blow a hole” in the deficit, raise interest rates, and do damage to the economy.

In a Gallup Poll taken before the debate, slightly more respondents expected Gore to win than Kemp, with 46 to 41 percent.⁸⁵ However, Kemp did not fare as well as the pre-debate expectations suggested; a poll taken immediately after the debate had Gore prevailing by a commanding 57 to 28 percent margin.⁸⁶ As *Washington Post* political analyst Dan Balz saw it, Kemp, hard though he tried, simply could not distract Gore from staying on message.⁸⁷ Gore’s unwavering “risky tax scheme” line, punctuating the

⁸³ Schroeder, 70. Sam Donaldson of *ABC News* had made the “teleprompter” remark, and *NBC News*’ Lisa Myers the one about the telephone operator. The “object of ridicule” was Schroeder’s overall conclusion.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Lydia Saad, “Clinton and Gore Sail through the First Two Debates,” retrieved on March 31, 2013, <http://www.uiowa.edu/policult/politick/smithson/961012.htm>.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Balz, “Staying Low-Key, Gore Finds Wedges between Kemp, Dole,” *Washington Post*, October 10, 1996, 1.

criticism he hurled at the Dole-Kemp ticket, prompted an exasperated Kemp in one instance to reply: "Al, get real!"⁸⁸ In "A Memo to Jack Kemp," Balz' *Post* colleague E. J. Dionne declared rather regretfully that Kemp was "clobbered," because "it's hard to see a decent guy lose."⁸⁹ Dionne qualified his frustration by adding that he found nothing wrong with Gore, but he "wanted to scream" every time Gore said "risky tax scheme" and Kemp simply stood there and was unable to counter effectively.⁹⁰ In referring to Kemp as a "decent guy," Dionne perpetuated the media sentiment that through two debates, the season's prevalent quality was decency, not drama.

Kemp was criticized for being too soft on both Clinton and Gore in the debate, and he acknowledged that he was not an attack dog.⁹¹ Christopher Buckley described the debate as a "model of decorum," and Martin Nolan of the *Boston Globe* declared that the running mates' blend of knowledge, civility, and good humor rendered it "the best vice presidential debate ever."⁹² Gore, too, was praised for saying kind things about Kemp, such as praising the latter's lifelong fight against racial discrimination.⁹³ The accolades mostly went to Kemp, however, not because Gore was any less civil, but

⁸⁸ Charles Babington and Paul Duggan, "Vice Presidential Nominees Debate Effect of Tax Cut," *Washington Post*, October 10, 1006, 1.

⁸⁹ Dionne, "A Memo to Jack Kemp," *Washington Post*, October 11, 1996, 25.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Schroeder, 165.

⁹² Christopher Buckley, "No Bark, No Bites," *New York Times*, October 11, 1996, 39; Martin F. Nolan, "Civility Reigns," *Boston Globe*, October 10, 1006, 27.

⁹³ Charles Pope and James R. Carroll, "Gore-Kemp Debate Marked by Sharp Policy Differences," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 10, 1996, 1; Jim Wallis, "Jack Kemp: Bleeding Heart Conservative," *Huffington Post*, May 5, 2009, retrieved on April 28, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jim-wallis/jack-kemp-bleeding-heart_b_197095.html. Even before he entered politics, Kemp had been outspoken in defending the rights of his fellow professional football players who were nonwhite.

because Kemp, whose ticket trailed Gore's by more than twenty points, was the one expected to be more aggressive.⁹⁴

Even as Dole promised his supporters that he would have a few "surprises" in store for Clinton in the final debate, he added that personal attacks were not his style, and that was not the type of campaign he planned on running.⁹⁵ Although the debate was the town hall format, which the Clinton campaign introduced to the debate repertoire four years earlier and which was widely regarded as Clinton's forte, the Clinton team negotiated the date to coincide with a baseball playoff game so that as few people as possible would watch.⁹⁶ So formidable was Clinton's lead in the polls throughout the summer and fall that apparently a less-publicized performance appeared to be the most prudent goal for him to pursue, even in a format in which he excelled. That strategy revealed an understanding of the risks incumbents faced in debates, and a focus on minimizing exposure without refusing to debate altogether. The very practice of trying to conceal debates by limiting viewership underscores how much they do, in fact, matter.

Held in San Diego, California on October 19 with Lehrer moderating once again, the final debate began with levity and congeniality. Dole spoke first and began by giving an update of major league baseball's National League Championship Series between the Atlanta Braves and the St. Louis Cardinals: "Braves one, Cardinals nothing, early on."⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Polman, "Kemp v. Gore," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 10, 1996, 17. Polman described the debate as "relentlessly civil," and noted that Kemp resisted overtures from other Republicans to attack Clinton more forcefully.

⁹⁵ Katherine Seelye, "Dole Hints about a 'Surprise' for Clinton at the Next Debate," *New York Times*, October 10, 1996, 12.

⁹⁶ Schroeder, 34.

⁹⁷ Clinton-Dole Debate 2, October 16, 1996. C-SPAN, retrieved on November 11, 2010, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?74273-1/presidential-candidates-debate>.

Dole's comment earned him a few laughs and depicted his deadpan humor and deeper meaning: criticism at Clinton's strategy to schedule the debate during a playoff game.⁹⁸

The live audience, as in the first town hall debate four years earlier, comprised self-proclaimed undecided voters who were, as compared to their more partisan counterparts in the conventional debate fora, very well-behaved. Clinton, in turn, began by commending Dole on his opening remarks, saying "I was going to applaud, too."⁹⁹ Clinton restated the goal he announced in the first debate, that he intended the evening to be about ideas, not insults. Accordingly, the third debate extended the theme of civility that was prevalent in the first two. That Dole insisted he did not attack the president personally at least illustrated his concern to keep the campaign civil, a concern that, judging from the media analysis, resonated with the voters.

As Nixon learned far too late in the 1960 campaign, visual image mattered in the debates. Clinton's superior telegenic qualities made Dole's attempt to overcome the president's sizable lead in the polls all the more difficult. Clinton looked poised, polished, and eager to talk about his first four years in office, and what he intended to do upon being reelected. Dole, in contrast, looked a bit tattered, and his tie was a lackluster gray, which was an unintended yet symbolic reflection of his understated and unremarkable campaign.

Though comparatively more aggressive than he was in the first debate, Dole nonetheless remained polite, further extending the campaign's civil tone. When Clinton regenerated use of the term "risky tax scheme," Dole had one of his best opportunities to scold the president, as George H.W. Bush so effectively scolded Michael Dukakis in

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

1988 about the latter comparing Reagan to the head of a rotting fish.¹⁰⁰ “I must say I’m a little offended by this word ‘scheme’” was as critical as he became. “You talked about it last time, you talked about a risky scheme and Vice President Gore repeated it ten times in St. Petersburg.”¹⁰¹ But, then, Dole relented. He said nothing more. He had Clinton right where he could admonish him, but retreated midstream. Clinton, in turn, continued to address any criticism with supreme cordiality. Clinton’s grace under pressure made him appear quite presidential. Any fleeting moments of tension quickly reverted to dignity and decorum.

The town hall format, in its second debate season, continued to shape the debates by expanding the potential range of topics on which the candidates might be questioned. One such question from an audience member was what would the candidates do to restore the strong Christian belief and godly principles set forth by America’s Founding Fathers? Dole completely missed his chance to resonate with his party’s socially conservative base.¹⁰² Instead, he spoke vaguely about a smaller government, and mentioned the Tenth Amendment that he carried around in his pocket, which states that any powers not specifically granted to the federal government under the Constitution are reserved for the states and for the people.¹⁰³ Notably, it was Clinton, the Democrat, who spoke about the greatness of America’s religious history, and that he would support policies that respect religion and help parents to teach those values to their children.

¹⁰⁰ Robin Toner, “Dukakis Focuses on Reagan Ethics,” *New York Times*, Jul, 31, 1988, retrieved on February 2, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/07/31/us/dukakis-focuses-on-reagan-ethics.html>. In describing a scandal alleging that Pentagon officials took bribes in exchange for offering defense contracts, Dukakis held Reagan responsible by quoting an old Greek saying “a fish rots from the head first.”

¹⁰¹ Clinton-Dole 2. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

¹⁰² For the better part of two decades, a growing faction of the Republican Party was called “the religious right,” comprised of socially conservative Evangelical Christians. For more discussion about the rise of the religious right and its influence in the Republican Party, see Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012.

¹⁰³ Clinton-Dole 2. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

“One of my proudest moments,” Clinton continued, “was signing the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, that says the government has to bend over backward before we interfere with religious practice.” Unbelievably, Dole ceded the religious values question to Clinton, who in turn forced Dole into a situation where he had to respond quickly to stay even. That late exchange was emblematic of the debate and the entire 1996 debate season. It encapsulated why Clinton, an accomplished debater with centrist policies and a largely satisfied electorate, was so heavily favored to defeat an unremarkable opponent, one whom Polman described as “just as good, [but]not good enough.” Other questions from audience members concerned improving the pay scale for the military, and whether nicotine is an addictive substance. While both were noteworthy issues, neither question was critical to the campaign, nor was either candidate’s response essential. The questions’ significance, however, underscored the town hall’s increasing role in representing a diversity of questions. No longer were the questions asked by members of the media, reflecting what they – and not necessarily the voters – considered most important.

Clinton’s strategy to schedule the debate simultaneously with the baseball playoffs seemed to work, as it was watched by fewer than 37 million people, making it the least-viewed presidential debate of all time.¹⁰⁴ That hardly appeared to matter, though, as a CBS poll taken immediately after the debate showed Clinton winning by more than a two-to-one margin, with 54 to 26 percent. An analysis by the *Los Angeles Times* concluded that an important reason why Dole did not attack very much was because he and Clinton really did not differ on the issues a great deal.¹⁰⁵ Dole was no more an

¹⁰⁴ Anonymous, “Clinton-Dole Debate Falls Short in TV Ratings,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 1996, 15.

¹⁰⁵ Anonymous, “A Debate of Ideas But Not Much Fire,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 1996, 8.

unabashed conservative Republican than Clinton was a steadfast liberal Democrat. Nonetheless, Polman also seemed accurate in concluding that Dole refrained from embarking on a full attack to avoid appearing mean-spirited.¹⁰⁶ Those in the press who praised Clinton for his ability to deflect Dole's arguments exaggerated Dole's antagonism, which was limited to begin with.¹⁰⁷

Although Clinton clearly seemed unfazed by Dole's interruptions and snide remarks, it also was evident that the two combatants had a mutual respect for one another that superseded their campaign rivalry.

To no one's surprise, Clinton won the election by ten million votes, which was well over double Dole's electoral votes, and thirty-one states to Dole's nineteen.¹⁰⁸ Lehrer spoke with Dole in 1999 and Clinton in 2000 about the 1996 debates, focusing on how civilized they were.¹⁰⁹ Dole confirmed that he did not want to attack Clinton personally, though he was uncertain about whether it would make a difference, and Clinton told Lehrer that he was surprised that Dole was not more aggressive.¹¹⁰

Very quietly, Ross Perot managed to gain a little over eight million votes, which amounted to 8.4 percent of the total.¹¹¹ It was the last time a non-major party candidate fared so well in the general election. It is only a matter of speculation as to how the eight million votes Perot gained would be divided if he was not in the race. Part of the reason that Perot's candidacy received comparatively little media coverage was because he

¹⁰⁶ Polman, "After Vowing to Get Tough, Dole Held Back," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 17, 1996, 1.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Hardy and Mike Dorning, "Clinton Shrugs off Dole Attack," *Chicago Tribune*, October 17, 1986, 1; Peter Slevin, "Dole Chides Clinton about Ethics, President Stays Cool During Final Debate," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 17, 1996, 1; Dan Balz and Blaine Harden, "Dole Pursues President throughout Final Debate," *Washington Post*, October 17, 1996, 1.

¹⁰⁸ Leip, retrieved on April 1, 2013, <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS>.

¹⁰⁹ Jim Lehrer, *Tension City*, New York, NY: Random House, 2011, 89.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

was not part of the debates in 1996. If Perot was invited to debate, perhaps another three-way series might have yielded at least one notable gaffe or triumph, and establish Perot as a more influential factor in the outcome.

Looking ahead to 2000, a *New York Times* editorial argued that Kemp was not about to ruin his chances of gaining the Republican nomination “by becoming Mr. Dole’s Doberman.”¹¹² Though cynical in its theory about the motivation behind Kemp’s collegial demeanor, the *Times*, nonetheless, noted that the 1996 debates personified civility. Kemp joked that “Al Gore played a dirty trick on me [in the debate] – called me a nice guy and that totally unnerved me and ruined my political career.”¹¹³ There may be some truth to that, as Republicans did not court Kemp, who was previously the early 2000 favorite, perhaps because he would most likely compete against Gore, the man who, in E.J. Dionne’s words, “clobbered” him.

The 1996 debates, then, while successfully serving as a vehicle through which the campaign’s civil tone was effectively captured, arguably yielded mixed results for two of the participants: Gore emerged as the 2000 Democratic nominee, whereas Kemp’s future as a presidential candidate effectively ended. Should Kemp’s 1996 performance have been a sign that the Republican Party would not urge him to run for president in 2000 and beyond? Did Dole’s and Kemp’s civility demonstrate that in presidential politics, there can be such a thing as being too nice?

Trailing George H.W. Bush in the polls in 1988, Michael Dukakis also chose to remain civil amid scathing, attacking commercials, and later regretted not retaliating.¹¹⁴

¹¹² “A Rehearsal for 2000.”

¹¹³ Lehrer, 92.

¹¹⁴ Eric Benson, “Dukakis’ Regret,” *New York*, June 17, 2012, retrieved on September 4, 2014, <http://nymag.com/news/frank-rich/michael-dukakis-2012-6>.

“It turned out to be the biggest mistake of my political career,” he told *New York* magazine in 2012, attributing his defeat to his reluctance to counter aggressively, even if that meant appearing overly combative.¹¹⁵ Did Republicans learn from Dukakis’ mistakes and not want to field their own “Dukakis-like” candidate in the form of Kemp? Although there is no evidence to suggest that the Dole-Kemp ticket would have done any better, or any worse, in the 1996 election had the Republican candidates been more polemical, there was at least a plausible presumption that, particularly when trailing in the polls, more aggressiveness may be warranted. Accordingly, the civility reestablished in the 1996 election, was less a long-term transformation of the political climate than a one-time aberration, as the campaigns of 2000 and beyond confirmed.

Finally, no analysis of the 1996 debate season can be complete without mention of the important precedent set by Bill Clinton: he became the second incumbent president to debate and win the election (Reagan, in 1984, was the first), but he was the first who did not experience any significant scares along the way.¹¹⁶ Even though Reagan won, a good deal of that had to do with the tremendous lead he enjoyed over Walter Mondale even before the debates began.¹¹⁷ Reagan’s widely-acknowledged subpar performance in the first debate was a setback and caused concern about whether he was too old for the job, but it did not matter much because of his commanding lead in the polls, and also because he rebounded with a strong performance in the second debate. If the race were tighter heading into the debates, perhaps Mondale would have won, or lost a very

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Incumbent Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter lost in 1976 and 1980, respectively, and incumbent Vice President Richard Nixon lost in 1960.

¹¹⁷ Gallup, 1984 Election Heat Trends, retrieved on January 19, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/110548/gallup-presidential-election-trialheat-trends-19362004.aspx#2>. Reagan led Mondale by approximately 20 points in the weeks leading up to the first debate.

close election. In either case, Reagan's decision to debate when the polls reflected he had no reason to, in hindsight, seemed unwise, and even reckless, and served as a prime example of the risks incumbents encounter when choosing to debate.

Accordingly, Clinton demonstrated that despite President Dwight Eisenhower's warning in 1960, it is possible for an incumbent president to debate and proceed to win reelection, all the while not experiencing any notable setbacks in the debates.¹¹⁸

Clinton's constitutional preclusion from seeking a third term in 2000 guaranteed that it would not be until at least 2004 when an incumbent president might debate again.¹¹⁹ In 1960, with no precedent from which to learn, Richard Nixon, by his own admission, did not prepare adequately for the debates. The question remained whether future candidates, perhaps buoyed by Clinton's seemingly effortless and successful 1996 debate performances, would treat the debates too lightly, as Nixon did, or would consider Clinton the exception rather than the rule, and remain vigilant and focused.

It is important to note, however, that even with a seemingly insurmountable lead, Clinton took no chances in the 1996 debates. He strategized to schedule them when they would be watched by as few television viewers as possible. That demonstrates how seriously Clinton took the debates, and how aware he was about how much they truly matter.

¹¹⁸ Boston Globe Staff, "Bay Stater Quotes Ike: Debates Don't Help Nixon, Boston Globe, October 13, 1960, 1. Eisenhower said the man in office is in a position to be second-guessed by a man on the sidelines, one who is not holding office.

¹¹⁹ The twenty-second Amendment to the United States Constitution, ratified in 1951, precludes any president who has served two elected terms to seek a third term.

**DO THE DEBATES MATTER? AN EXAMINATION OF THE PROGRESSIVELY
INFLUENTIAL ROLE OF MAJOR PARTY DEBATES ON
AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: 1960-2008
CHAPTER 9: 2000 – THE DEBATES REVEAL HOW BODY LANGUAGE CAN
IMPEDE A PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN**

Republicans George W. Bush (Governor – TX) and Dick Cheney (Former Secretary of Defense) v. Democrats Al Gore (Incumbent Vice President) and Joseph Lieberman (US Senator – CT). Bush-Gore 1 (46.6 million), Bush-Gore 2 (37.5 million), Bush-Gore 3 (37.7 million), Cheney-Lieberman (28.5 million).

The 2000 presidential election was the first since 1888 in which the Electoral College (and thereby, election) winner, Texas Governor and son of the forty-first president, Republican George W. Bush, did not gain the most votes overall.¹ Moreover, the election was so close that Democratic nominee and popular vote winner, incumbent Vice President Al Gore, challenged the results, prompting a series of recounts that were finally ended by the United States Supreme Court five weeks after the election, on December 12.² This chapter examines how body language, as seen through the lens of the debates, was a significant factor in Gore's inability to win the election even though he served eight years as vice president to Bill Clinton, who was a highly popular president.³

Incumbent vice presidents are not guaranteed victory when seeking the presidency themselves, even if the presidents they served were popular. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton all served two terms, and though each endured a

¹ United States Presidential Results, David Leip's Presidential Atlas, retrieved on April 28, 2013, <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/>.

² *Bush v. Gore*, 531 U.S. 98 (2000).

³ Gallup, Presidential Approval Ratings, retrieved on May 13, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx#2>. Clinton left office with approval ratings exceeding 60 percent.

blemish on his record sometime during the latter stages of his tenure, all left office with very high popularity ratings.⁴ Each of their vice presidents, Richard Nixon, George H.W. Bush, and Al Gore, respectively, ran for the presidency immediately thereafter, but only one (Bush) leveraged that relationship to victory. Why did Nixon and Gore fail to capitalize on that considerable advantage? Much of it is attributable to image, that is, nonverbal communication, that is captured by the televised debates. In Nixon's case, it was physical appearance; in Gore's case it was overbearing body language.⁵ The 2000 debates showed that Gore was unable to connect with the public the way Clinton did, and revealed Gore's nonverbal gestures, which included offensive noises and bullying tactics.

The electoral contest was effectively a tie, with Florida, where Bush won by only 537 votes, the deciding state. The Supreme Court's decision was fraught with controversy. Some thought it was the only sensible way to end the incessant recounting and ensure that the country would have a president to inaugurate on January 20 (2001), whereas others thought that the decision was political, because the five-Justice majority that ordered an immediate halt to the recount were all appointed by Republican presidents.⁶ The court declared Bush the election winner. An important fact, inconsistent with the latter theory, is that two of the four dissenting Justices, were appointed by Republican

⁴ Gallup. All three left office with approval ratings higher than 60 percent. Since the poll began in 1948, no other president ended his term with a higher ranking, except John F. Kennedy, who did not serve a full term – he was assassinated on November 22, 1963, only his 1036th day in office.

⁵ Newton N. Minow and Craig J. Lamay, *Inside the Presidential Debates*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 1. Minow and Lamay described how without makeup, Nixon looked ill on camera.

⁶ Charles Fried, "An Unreasonable Reaction to a Reasonable Decision," pp. 3-20 and Jed Rubenfeld, "Not as Bad as Plessy, Worse," pp. 20-38, Bruce Ackerman (ed.), *Bush v. Gore: The Question of Legitimacy*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002. The five-Justice majority was comprised of Chief Justice William Rehnquist, who was appointed by Richard Nixon, Sandra Day O'Connor, Antonin Scalia, and Anthony Kennedy, all of who were appointed by Ronald Reagan, and Clarence Thomas, appointed by George H.W. Bush.

presidents: John Paul Stevens by President Ford, and David Souter by Bush's father, the first President Bush.⁷

Further complicating the controversy was the fact that Bush's brother Jeb was Governor of Florida at the time. He recused himself from the recount process "to avoid even the appearance of impropriety," for which he was commended by veteran Democrat politician Mario Cuomo, who had been Governor of New York.⁸ Speculation by the public that Jeb Bush somehow improperly used his authority as Florida's governor to sway the election in his brother's favor was unsubstantiated.⁹ The United States Civil Rights Commission issued a report finding no evidence that Jeb Bush affected the vote count, or that he or any other Florida official was involved in a conspiracy to disenfranchise black voters (who as a voting bloc tend to vote more Democratic than Republican).¹⁰ Nonetheless, the report criticized Jeb Bush for overlooking mounting problems of disenfranchisement, which intensified the electorate's level of suspicion.

The contentiousness of the election's aftermath aside, the more important questions for this thesis are why was the election so close in the first place, and in what way do the debates provide a window into the campaign itself? One important reason to explain the former was the rather complacent mood of the American people. Biographer Evan Thomas wrote that the Americans in the 1950s counted on President Eisenhower to be

⁷ Supreme Court of the United States website, retrieved on April 29, 2013, <http://www.supremecourt.gov/about/members.aspx>.

⁸ David Royce, "FL Recount, Where's Jeb?" *Florida Times-Union*, November 10, 2000, retrieved on September 15, 2014, <http://jacksonville.com/apnews/stories/111000/D78692R82.html>.

⁹ Julian Borger, "Jeb Bush Blamed for Unfair Florida Election," *The Guardian*, June 5, 2001, retrieved on October 14, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/jun/06/uselections2000.usa>. Borger wrote that numerous civil rights groups argued that Bush did not do enough to ensure that the voting process was fair.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

the “great peacekeeper in a dangerous era” of a looming Soviet threat.¹¹ Though they trusted the former Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in World War II to keep them safe, the people were anxious in 1960 about whether Eisenhower’s successor would be just as capable.¹² Election year 2000, however, was less like 1960 and more like 1988, the post-Reagan election, when conditions in United States both at home and abroad were generally good: Americans had so little to be concerned about that the 1988 campaign was proclaimed “issueless.”¹³ Without a substantive issue to dominate the race, a great deal of attention was paid to the notion that Michael Dukakis simply was not very likable.¹⁴ Democratic consultant David Garth conceded that Dukakis came across as the better presenter, but “you wouldn’t want to have a beer with him. There is a tightness about him, an underlying smugness that...came across in the debate.”¹⁵ Garth’s comment aptly captured the debates’ role as prisms through which the campaign’s prevalent concerns could be viewed.

That same issue, likability also became a factor in 2000. Robert Blendon, of Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, observed that in an election year devoid of issues, the outcome might very well be based on personality.¹⁶ Blendon’s

¹¹ Evan Thomas, *Ike’s Bluff*, New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2012, 416.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Mona Charen, “Be Grateful for Issueless Campaign,” *The Southeast Missourian*, November 6, 1988. Charen wrote that “we Americans are lucky to be at peace, to be united, and to be able to run an ‘issueless campaign.’”

¹⁴ John Dillin, “Why Dukakis Has a Long Uphill Fight,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 17, 1988, retrieved on February 2, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/1988/1017/aprof.html>. Dillin wrote that former Lyndon Johnson aide Horace Busby attributed Dukakis’ steady decline in the summer and fall to a deficit of likability; James M. Perry and Gerald F. Seib, “Campaign ’88: Bush, Dukakis, Trade Charges on National Security, Deficit, Patriotism, and Drug Policy in First Debate,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 26, 1988, 1. The authors wrote that Dukakis had won on technical efficiency; Dionne, “After the Debate; Round One Undecisive,” *New York Times*, September 27, 1988. Bush’s own communications adviser, Jim Lake acknowledged that Dukakis had won on debating points, but quickly added “you can’t score a presidential debate on debating points.”

¹⁵ Paul Taylor, “President Debate Appears to Have Shifted Few Opinions,” *Washington Post*, September 27, 1988, 1.

¹⁶ Alexandra Marks, “Election 2000: Defining the Issues,” Archives, John F. Kennedy School of Government website, retrieved on April 29, 2013, http://www.hks.harvard.edu/ksgpress/bulletin/autumn2000/election_00.html.

Kennedy School colleague Tom Patterson characterized 2000 as a year of “issue fragmentation,” in which no specific issue dominated the campaign.¹⁷ There were no pressing foreign policy concerns, and the economy was enjoying an even longer expansion than during the Reagan years.¹⁸ For the first time since 1960, government spending resulted in a surplus rather than a deficit.¹⁹ Whereas in 1992, the candidates focused on how to tackle the deficit problem, just eight years later, Bush and Gore spent their time debating what to do with the newfound extra money.²⁰

As for being a candidate “to have a beer with,” Bush won the first documented “beer test” poll among presidential contenders.²¹ Opposing the prototypical “beer buddy” candidate was Gore, who in both the 1992 and 1996 running mates’ debates was described as mechanical.²² An article about President Barack Obama’s likability levels written more than a decade after the 2000 election referenced Gore as the quintessential modern-day unlikable politician, and referred to him as “wooden.”²³ In his book *The Candidate: What it Takes to Win – and Hold – the White House*, Gore campaign advisor Samuel L. Popkin wrote how the strategy among Gore’s staffers

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Jonathan Weisman, “Clinton Begins Replacing Economic Policymakers,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 18, 1999, retrieved on May 13, 2013, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1999-06-18/business/9906180012_1_economic-growth-economic-expansion-white-house-aides. Weisman wrote that Clinton presided over the longest economic expansion since World War II.

¹⁹ Anonymous, “Summary of Receipts, Outlays, and Surpluses or Deficits: 1789-2018,” *Historical Outlays*, Office of Management and Budget, retrieved on May 13, 2013, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/Historicals>.

²⁰ Gore preferred to pay down the federal debt, Bush to give it to the people directly in the form of tax cuts.

²¹ Fernando Suarez, “Clinton: We Don’t Need to Have a Beer with the Next President,” *CBS News Net*, February 9, 2008, retrieved on April 29, 2013, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-502443_162-3843626-502443.html. Based on the Bush standard of being a president one would “want to have a beer with,” Suarez described that Hillary Clinton, a presidential candidate in 2008 might have felt disadvantaged because her chief Democratic rival, Barack Obama, was considered more likable, suggested that “beer test” was not a wise way to elect a president. Bush was described as a “want to have a beer with” candidate in 2000, but the first documented “beer test” poll, which he won against John Kerry, was in 2004.

²² Howard Rosenberg, “Clashes Put ‘Danger’ Back into Debates,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1992, 12; E.J. Dionne, Jr., “A Memo to Jack Kemp,” *Washington Post*, October 11, 1996, 25. Both Rosenberg and Dionne referred to Gore as mechanical.

²³ Alan Greenblatt, “The Likability Factor: What’s Obama Lacking?” *National Public Radio* website, September 24, 2010, retrieved on April 29, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129858071>.

quickly shifted to portraying Gore as more competent than Bush when it became apparent that Bush was clearly the more likable of the two.²⁴

Bush's victory, however, is not attributable to a single factor. One possible reason is connection with the former incumbent. George H.W. Bush declared his allegiance to Ronald Reagan more unabashedly than Nixon and Gore did to their respective popular presidents. When faced with the choice of closely aligning himself with Clinton or forging his own distinct path, Gore chose the latter.

Although Gore had little cause to avoid being linked with Clinton's record, he had plenty of reason to disassociate himself from the scandals involving Clinton's personal life, particularly a purported affair the president had with his twenty-one-year-old intern, Monica Lewinsky.²⁵ After Arkansas employee Paula Jones sued Clinton in 1998 for sexual harassment in 1991, while he was that state's governor, an investigation uncovered that Clinton, while president of the United States, had an affair with Lewinsky.²⁶ Clinton publicly declared, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman [Lewinsky]" but later recanted that statement, acknowledging that he "misled" his wife as well as the American people.²⁷ Clinton was impeached by the House of Representatives on two counts, perjury and obstruction of justice, but was acquitted by the Senate.²⁸

Gore clearly tried to distance himself from Clinton's philandering, which was accentuated by his body language on the Democratic National Convention floor, where,

²⁴ Samuel L. Popkin, *The Candidate: What it Takes to Win – and Hold – the White House*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012, 228.

²⁵ Peter Baker and John F. Harris, "Clinton Admits to Lewinsky Relationship, Challenges Starr to End Personal 'Prying,'" *Washington Post*, August 18, 1998, 1; for more discussion about the Clinton-Lewinsky relationship, see Kenneth W. Starr, "The Starr Report," September 11, 1998, *Washington Post*, retrieved on September 15, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/icreport/icreport.htm>, and Marvin Kalb, *One Scandalous Story*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Peter Baker and Helen Dewar, "The Senate Acquits President Clinton," *Washington Post*, February 13, 1999, 1.

on national television in front of millions of television viewers, he kissed his wife, Tipper, passionately on the mouth.²⁹ Gore determined that the impeachment would serve as an impediment to his campaign bid, and, accordingly, kept Clinton at a distance.³⁰ Bush, too, reacted to the impeachment, vowing to “restore dignity to the White House.”³¹ However, even at the height of Clinton’s sexual scandal and ensuing impeachment, the latter’s approval ratings remained above 60 percent.³² Moreover, because Bush, a devout Christian who unabashedly campaigned on “traditional values,” was perceived to be no less a faithful husband than Gore, the vice president had little to gain by downplaying his connection to a highly popular president, and much to lose.³³ Describing the kiss, the *New York Times*’ Caryn James wrote that Gore “closed his eyes and gave her a full-mouthed kiss that lasted an exceptionally long time.”³⁴ It was perceived as a highly communicative form of body language: namely, that Gore, unlike Clinton, was faithful to his wife.³⁵ Gore’s body language was increasingly analyzed throughout the campaign, though mostly to his detriment, particularly in the debates against Bush.

There are a number of theories concerning nonverbal communication and body language in general, pertaining to political campaigns and presidential debates in particular. Psychologist Albert Mehrabian pioneered the study of nonverbal

²⁹ Anonymous, “Gore Forcing President to Sidelines, *USA Today*, October 19, 2000, retrieved on May 2, 2013, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/e98/e2988.htm>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Gallup Poll, 1988-1999, retrieved on May 2, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116584/presidential-approval-ratings-bill-clinton.aspx>.

³³ Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, New York, NY: Penguin, 2003, 151. Bush campaigned on “strong family values” in both of his (2000 and 2004) presidential bids.

³⁴ Caryn James, “When a Kiss Isn’t Just a Kiss,” *New York Times*, August 20, 2000, retrieved on May 2, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/08/20/weekinreview/the-nation-when-a-kiss-isn-t-just-a-kiss.html>.

³⁵ *Ibid.* James wrote that *MSNBC*’s Chip Reid and *NBC*’s Claire Shipman also drew that conclusion.

communication in the 1960s, contending that 38 percent of a message is paralinguistic: it is not the words themselves but the way in which they are said.³⁶ Cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall introduced the theory of proxemics in 1963, which pertains to personal physical space *vis-à-vis* nonverbal communication.³⁷ Horst Arndt and Richard Wayne Janney, in *Intergrammar*, their monograph on verbal and kinesic (body language) speech, described sighing as a “vocal characterizer” of a disruptive nature.³⁸ In 2002, Stanford W. Gregory Jr. and Timothy J. Gallagher analyzed nonverbal vocal communication in presidential debates, and argued that the dominant candidate, whose vocal style and volume set the tone of the debate, to which the non-dominant adapts, tends to prevail in the ensuing election.³⁹ Bruce Eckman hypothesized that nonverbal baselines, such as smiling, are important in communicating in a manner that yields positive or negative consequences.⁴⁰ Writing in 1977, Eckman referenced the 1976 Carter-Ford debates, observing that Carter, to his benefit (he won the election), smiled more frequently than Ford did.⁴¹ Dietram A. Scheufele, Eunkyung Kim, and Dominique Brossard, in 2007, studied the effects of a split television screen that showed both debaters simultaneously in depicting the significance of body language.⁴² Though that became a prominently-featured part of network debate broadcasts in 2004, the

³⁶ Albert Mehrabian, *Silent Messages: Implicit Communication of Emotions and Attitudes*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1972, 75.

³⁷ Edward T. Hall, “A System for the Notation of Proxemic Behavior,” *American Anthropologist*, Volume 65, No. 5 (October 1963), 1003-1026, 1018.

³⁸ Horst Arndt and Richard Wayne Janney, *Intergrammar*, Berlin, Germany: Walter De Gruyeter & Company, 1987, 227.

³⁹ Stanford W. Gregory Jr. and Timothy J. Gallagher, “Spectral Analysis of Candidates' Nonverbal Vocal Communication: Predicting U.S. Presidential Election Outcomes,” *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Volume 65, No. 3 (September 2002), pp. 298-308.

⁴⁰ Bruce Eckman, “Making Valid Nonverbal Judgments,” *The English Journal*, Volume 66, No. 8 (November 1977), pp. 72-74.

⁴¹ Eckman, 72.

⁴² Dietram A. Scheufele, Eunkyung Kim, *et al.*, “My Friend’s Enemy: How Split-Screen Debate Coverage Influences Evaluation of Presidential Debates,” *Communication Research*, Volume 34 No. 1 (February 2007), 3-24.

town hall debates, which debuted in 1992, broadcast the audience at a wide enough angle to show the non-speaking candidate's reaction.

Segments of the phenomena described within those theories, to varying degrees, are found throughout the 2000 debates. A group of psychologists in 2011 described exasperated facial expressions and nonverbal sounds as reflexive actions of frustration or disgust.⁴³ These theories underscore the multidimensional influence of televised debates, specifically, that they are much more than a vehicle through which the candidates' words are expressed. Rather, televised debates allow the viewer to observe what the candidates convey through their postures, gestures, nonverbal sounds, and other forms of nonverbal communication.

The first debate took place at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, on October 3, 2000; Jim Lehrer again was the sole moderator.⁴⁴ Monica Davey and Rick Pearson of the *Chicago Tribune* noted that given the very tight race – it was a statistical tie at the time – the debates were particularly important.⁴⁵ The candidates seemed to agree, as they specifically reduced their campaigning schedules in order to prepare for the debates, which indicated that the importance of the debates was now thoroughly accepted. Michael Kranish of the *Boston Globe* expected Gore to highlight his and Clinton's record and Bush to talk about Social Security and education reforms.⁴⁶ Far more significant than the issues, however, was the debaters' nonverbal communication.

⁴³ Betsy App, Daniel N. McIntosh, *et al.*, "Nonverbal Channel Use in Communication of Emotion: How May Depend on Why." *Emotion*, 2011 Volume 3 (June 2011), pp. 603-617.

⁴⁴ Bush-Gore Debate 1, October 3, 2000, C-SPAN, retrieved on November 14, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/159295-1>

⁴⁵ Monica Davey and Rick Pearson, "Tight Race Accentuates Importance of TV Debates," *Chicago Tribune*, October 3, 2000, 1.

⁴⁶ Michael Kranish, "The Stage is Set, Bush, Gore Debate at UMass Tonight," *Boston Globe*, October 3, 2000, 1.

It began with an awkward stage entrance that exemplified Hall's theory of personal space violation. Bush entered stage left, Gore stage right, but Bush walked at a slightly faster pace. Rather than meet Gore at the midpoint of both the stage and the two podia, Bush had already passed the midpoint when he and Gore stopped to shake hands.⁴⁷ Bush's rapid advance evidenced his high level of energy and, as the media later pointed out, nervousness.⁴⁸ Once Bush cleared the stage's midpoint, it seemed as if Gore, who was somewhat taller and bulkier, was going to crowd Bush and force him back to center stage. Instead, Gore appeared to lean in and tell Bush to retreat somewhat, to give Gore more room. Bush complied, though the typical center-stage pre-debate photograph was still rather off-center.⁴⁹ The visual depiction of those proxemics could only be captured on television: radio or debate transcripts would not tell that story.

Tellingly, Bush later claimed that Gore "deployed the ultra-firm handshake" in an attempt to gain some sort of psychological edge.⁵⁰ That initial mostly nonverbal exchange portended the tone of the debates. Bush was feisty, but compliant; Gore took charge by giving orders. Though Gore got his way to some extent, Bush seized slightly more than half the stage in the initial handshake, and by most accounts also got the better of Gore in the debates.

⁴⁷ Bush-Gore 1.

⁴⁸ Richard L. Berke and Kevin Sack, "The 2000 Campaign: the Debates," *New York Times*, October 11, 2000, A28. The authors described that Bush and his handlers were concerned that Bush was perceived by the media as not as familiar with a broad range of issues as Gore was.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, New York, NY: Random House, 2010, 75; for more discussion about overly aggressive handshakes criticized by viewers, see Anonymous, "Errors of Judgement," *The Australian*, retrieved on October 29, 2014, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/photos-e6frg6n6-1226033960188?page=2>. Mark Latham, candidate for prime minister of Australia, when shaking hands with the incumbent, John Howard, the day before the election in 2004, pulled his considerably shorter opponent toward him and appeared to tower over him in a crowding, bullying manner.

Gore opened the debate by promising to balance the budget, cut taxes for the middle class, safeguard Medicare and Social Security, invest in education, health care, and the environment, and resist the temptation to squander the government surplus.⁵¹ Gore's words almost mirrored Clinton's, though his tone was markedly different. Whereas Clinton most often seemed relaxed and had a natural ease about him, even when he appeared serious and thoughtful, Gore's delivery was every bit as robotic as it was in the 1992 and 1996 debates. By speaking loudly and slowly, he still sounded as if he were speaking to people who were hard of hearing, to small children, or to an audience for whom English was not the primary language – people who needed to hear every word very slowly.⁵² It was a speaking style that, depending on whether the audience considered it helpful or condescending, might, as Gregory and Gallagher hypothesized, enhance or hamper Gore's effectiveness.⁵³

Bush's style and delivery were in sharp contrast to Gore's. He spoke with a Texas twang, unlike his father's more Connecticut-like pronunciation.⁵⁴ Bush's voice was easier to listen to, and his manner was more relaxed. Substantively, he promised to give a quarter of the surplus back to the American people in a tax cut. In one short response, Bush summed it up: Gore's plan would empower Washington, whereas Bush's vision was to empower Americans to make their own decisions.⁵⁵ Bush accomplished two important goals in his opening response. First, he promised Americans a large tax cut,

⁵¹ Bush-Gore 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ For more discussion about how overly slow speech may be perceived as condescending, see Diane M. Kimoto, "The Taken-for-Granted Labor of Communication: Seeing beyond Words," *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, Volume 16, No. 1 (Winter 2010), pp. 31-51.

⁵⁴ The Bushes did not move to Texas until the elder George Bush was 24; his son, George, was 2.

⁵⁵ Bush-Gore 1.

which, historically, is an attention-getting proposition.⁵⁶ Second, he mentioned that Gore's proposed budget would be far larger than Clinton's, thereby planting the seed that Gore would not be an extension of Clinton, but a more liberal version. Unlike Dukakis in 1988, who, in likening the elder Bush to Reagan actually did his opponent a favor by linking him to a highly popular presidency, the younger Bush did the opposite. If the American people thought that Clinton did a fairly good job, Bush suggested that Gore would be considerably to the left, and a reversion to the pre-Clinton "tax-and-spend" Democrats.⁵⁷ By doing so, Bush challenged Gore's contention that, like Clinton, he would be a "new kind of Democrat" president, who would be more centrist than his predecessors.⁵⁸

Whereas Gore was able to goad his opponents into exasperation in earlier campaigns, eliciting ire from Dan Quayle in 1992 and causing even the perennially gracious Jack Kemp in 1996 to retort "get real, Al!", in 2000 it was Bush who irritated Gore.⁵⁹ Bush delivered several seemingly predetermined one-liners that apparently caught Gore off guard. "Tonight we're going to hear some phony numbers," Bush said of Gore, and accused him of running on "Medi-scare," alluding to Gore's message that Bush would cut Medicare benefits for senior citizens. Arguably, Bush's most poignant repartee of the evening was that Gore "has great numbers. He talks about numbers. I'm

⁵⁶ Bruce Bartlett, "Tax Cuts and 'Starving the Beast,'" *Forbes*, May 7, 2010, retrieved on May 16, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/2010/05/06/tax-cuts-republicans-starve-the-beast-columnists-bruce-bartlett.html>. Bartlett discussed the consistent political popularity of tax cuts since the late 1970s.

⁵⁷ Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush had referred to the Democrats as a "tax and spend" party, in the 1980, 1984, and 1988 presidential campaigns.

⁵⁸ Clinton-Bush-Perot Debate 1, C-SPAN, October 11, 1992, retrieved on September 29, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33071-1>. Clinton campaigned for president as a centrist, told George H.W. Bush in their first debate to realize he is running against him, not Lyndon Johnson or Jimmy Carter.

⁵⁹ Gore-Quayle-Stockdale Debate, October 13, 1992, C-SPAN, retrieved on October 2, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33086-1>; Gore-Kemp Debate, October 9, 1996, C-SPAN, retrieved November 9, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/75772-1>.

beginning to think not only did he invent the Internet but he invented the calculator. It's fuzzy math." That retort both ridiculed the story that surfaced about Gore having said that he invented the Internet, and introduced the catchphrase "fuzzy math" which the media repeatedly referred to during inter- and post-debate analysis.⁶⁰ The media's attention to short catchphrases such as "fuzzy math" underscores the notion that the debates' presence in political discussion is not limited to the live event, but is the topic of conversation in the media for days and even weeks, thereby elevating their potential impact on elections.

Although Gore withstood the initial barrage, his frustration was building and was manifested through body language, the nature of which fit Arndt and Janney's model of disruptive vocal characterizers: as Bush continued to criticize him, Gore interjected with a petulant and clearly audible sigh, one evidently meant for the audience to hear. It was the first of several more sighs that would follow, after Bush asked about Clinton and Gore's alleged lack of bipartisanship on foreign policy and when Bush again called Gore's budget "fuzzy math". The sighs became more noticeable every time. These disruptive "vocal characterizers," comprised a substantial portion of the message conveyed by Gore, according to Mehrabian's theory. Conjoining the two theories, if a substantial portion of the message heard is paralinguistic, and if sighs are perceived as disruptive, then Gore's message, to great extent, was ineffective and quite likely counterproductive.

⁶⁰ "Transcript," VP Gore on *CNN's* 'Late Edition,'" March 9, 2009, CNN, retrieved on May 13, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/stories/1999/03/09/president.2000/transcript.gore/index.html>. Gore never actually said that he invented the Internet, but in a CNN interview he said that as a member of Congress, "I took the initiative in creating the Internet."

Whether Gore's sighs were premeditated or a spontaneous reaction to exasperation, Gore surely must have known that the audience, both live and the millions watching on television, would notice. Perhaps he thought that it was a good thing to convey how frustrated he was, and used the sighs as a way of criticizing the substance of Bush's arguments. In any event, his querulous demeanor prompted some analysts to refer to that season's first debate as "the sighing debate."⁶¹ Gore even seemed annoyed at Lehrer, who interjected as Gore was speaking. "Can I get a rebuttal, here?" Gore exclaimed, clearly bothered by Lehrer's interruption, and perhaps feeling the after-effects of Bush's "fuzzy math" references.⁶² When Bush next spoke, Gore's scoffing laugh could be heard in the background.⁶³

Bush benefited not only from Gore's off-putting body language, crowding and sighing, but also from his own ability to project confidence. As president, Bush identified himself as "the decider," but it was in the first debate against Gore that a national audience got its first glimpse of his resolute focus.⁶⁴ When Lehrer asked him whether he would use force to remove Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milosevic, who lost his reelection bid but refused to step down from power, Bush promptly and firmly said no: "it's not in our national interest to use force. I would use pressure and diplomacy."⁶⁵ Bush clearly

⁶¹ Alan Schroeder, *Presidential Debates, 50 Years of High-Risk Presidential TV*, 2nd Ed., New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008, 160; M.J. Stephey, "Top 10 Memorable Debate Moments," *Time*, retrieved on May 4, 2013, <http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/completelist/0,29569,1844704,00.html>. Stephey ranked "Gore's Loud Body Language" as the eight most memorable debate moment of all time, emphasizing Gore's "endless sighing."

⁶² Bush-Gore 1.

⁶³ *Ibid*; for more discussion on how laughter may be perceived as derisive, see John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983.

⁶⁴ Dick Meyer, "The Decider-in-Chief," *CBS News*, February 11, 2009, retrieved on May 13, 2013, http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-500159_162-1523934.html; Steve Coffman and Zack Coffman, *Founders v. Bush*, Los Angeles, CA: One World, 2007, 7. On April 18, 2006, Bush first called himself "the decider at a press conference: he said "I'm the decider and I decide what's best."

⁶⁵ Bush-Gore 1; Editorial, "Repudiating Mr. Milosevic," *New York Times*, September 26, 2000, retrieved on May 6, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/09/26/opinion/repudiating-mr-milosevic.html>.

demonstrated that he would not answer a question from all sides, trying to be all things to all people; he clearly outlined his vision and stances on the issues.

The difference between reading the transcript and watching the debate on television reveals the significance of the candidates' nonverbal communication. Although the transcript contains all of the words, it reveals neither the body language nor the tone; it makes no reference to Gore's numerous sighs and mocking laughter.

The press, concentrated on those sighs. The *Washington Post's* Al Kamen cleverly titled his column, "No Sighin' Before Its Time," parodying the Orson Welles wine commercial, and attributed Gore's barrage of sighs to his plummeting poll numbers.⁶⁶ The *Philadelphia Inquirer's* Dick Polman wrote that Gore "certainly sighed a lot...his body sagging in exasperation," thereby further addressing the issue of body language.⁶⁷ Political analyst Ross Baker described Gore as "your fourth grade math teacher, after you gave the answer wrong," and deemed his behavior "rude and irritating."⁶⁸ Polman concluded that the sighing might be detrimental to Gore's chances to win the election, simply because voters would not want to watch him do that for four or eight years.⁶⁹ Bill Schneider of CNN thought that even though Gore might be more proficient on technical issues, Bush received the bigger boost because of Gore sighing and shaking his

⁶⁶ Al Kamen, "No Sighin' Before Its Time," *Washington Post*, October 11, 2000, 9; Gallup Poll, October 2000, retrieved on May 7, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/110548/gallup-presidential-election-trialheat-trends-19362004.aspx>. Bush and Gore were tied in a poll prior to the first debate, and Bush gained an eight point lead thereafter, prior to the second debate; Mike Veseth, "No Wine Before Its Time," *Wine Economist*, February 10, 2009, retrieved on May 7, 2013, <http://wineeconomist.com/2009/02/10/no-wine-before-its-time>. Kamen's column's title parodied "No Wine Before Its Time," which was the longtime slogan of the Paul Mason Winery of California, uttered in numerous television commercials by actor/director Orson Welles.

⁶⁷ Dick Polman, "Weaknesses Showed, Some Images May Stick with Voters," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 5, 2000, 20.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

head.⁷⁰ That much of the post-debate analysis focused not on substance, or even on words of any kind, but on Gore's sighing underscores the disruptive quality of the sighs, as postulated by Arndt and Janney, and confirms Mehrabian's contention about the importance of nonverbal communication overall.

Marjorie Brody observed that Gore tilted his head often, and wore too much rouge on his face.⁷¹ Is it possible that in preparing for the debate, Gore was influenced by Reagan, a successful debater who often tilted his head when he spoke, and had rosy cheeks?⁷² Michael Deaver, who served as Reagan's Deputy Chief of Staff, was shocked to discover upon initially meeting the sixty-nine year-old Reagan in 1980 that his rosy cheeks were natural, rather than the result of makeup.⁷³ If, in fact, Gore tried to be more like Reagan by artificially making his cheeks extra red, that symbolizes the image Gore projected throughout the remainder of the debates of trying to reinvent himself at every turn.⁷⁴ Is it also possible, however, that Gore viewed Nixon's shortcomings in the first debate against Kennedy as largely being attributable to Nixon's refusal to wear makeup, and thereby overcompensated in wearing too much of it? On the October 6, 2000 episode of the political television show *The McLaughlin Group*, host John McLaughlin noted the Reagan-like rouge on Gore's face during the debate, and

⁷⁰ Caryn James, "Proceeding with Caution in a Debate with Not Many Bumps along the Way," *New York Times*, October 4, 2000, 29.

⁷¹ Marjorie Brody, "Debatable," CNN, October 12, 2000, retrieved on May 17, 2013, <http://archives.cnn.com/2000/CAREER/corporateclass/10/12/marjorie.brody.debate>.

⁷² Bob Colacello, *Ronnie and Nancy: Their Path to the White House – 1911 to 1980*, New York, NY: Warner Books, 2004, 370.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Pat Bankston, "The Three Faces of Al Appear in the Three Presidential Debates," *The Times of Northwest Indiana*, October 22, 2000, retrieved on October 14, 2014, http://www.nwitimes.com/uncategorized/the-three-faces-of-al-appear-in-the-three-presidential/article_d3f97915-f5b7-516f-bbb5-733459c27afa.html;

panelist Michael Baronet joked that “maybe he got Richard Nixon’s makeup artist...from forty years ago.”⁷⁵

In 1960 and 1988, when Richard Nixon and Michael Dukakis arguably outdebated their opponents, John Kennedy and George H.W. Bush, respectively, on technicalities, Kennedy and Bush established more of a connection with the American people and won those elections.⁷⁶ George W. Bush accomplished that same feat in 2000. Although 48 percent of respondents to a Gallup Poll said that Gore won the debate, as compared to 41 percent for Bush, a significant 40 percent were more confident in Bush’s ability to be president as a result of the debate.⁷⁷ Accordingly, Doyle McManus and Scott Martelle of the *Los Angeles Times* speculated that Bush gained the most from the debate.⁷⁸

Whether or not Gore’s “hectoring style,” as a *New York Times* editorial described it, ultimately cost Gore the election is inconclusive.⁷⁹ Nonetheless, that the media thought so confirmed that at least in the minds of the analysts and journalists, the debates did in fact matter, and in the first Bush-Gore debate, the body language in particular.

The vice presidential choices for Bush and Gore, respectively, were former Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and US Senator from Connecticut Joe Lieberman. The selection of running mates for both presidential candidates was surprising to some extent; as tight as the race was, neither Bush nor Gore chose a running mate potentially expected to bring excitement to the campaign. Bush asked Dick Cheney, a former

⁷⁵ Transcript, *The McLaughlin Group*, October 6, 2000, retrieved on October 14, 2014, <http://www.mclaughlin.com/transcript.htm?id=172>.

⁷⁶ Schroeder, 9; Ellen Warren, “At the Heart of the Debate, the Likability Factor,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 14, 1988, 17. Schroeder and Warren both wrote that Kennedy and Bush had come across as more likable than Nixon and Dukakis, respectively, even though the latter two might have scored more debates points from a technical perspective.

⁷⁷ Doyle McManus and Scott Martelle, “In Many Voters’ Minds, Debate Fails in the Drama Department,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 2000, 20.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Editorial, “The First Presidential Debate,” *New York Times*, October 4, 2000, 34.

senator from Wyoming and former secretary of defense under Bush's father to oversee the process of selecting possible candidates and ultimately decided to pick Cheney himself. The critics immediately scoffed not only at that unorthodox sequence of events, but also the fact that Cheney was far more experienced than the frontrunner.⁸⁰ It was the same type of criticism that was directed at the Dukakis-Bentsen ticket, only more intense.⁸¹ On a positive note, however, Bush's choice of such a formidable running mate showed the governor's self-confidence.⁸² Gore also surprised the pundits with his unconventional selection, Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman, a solid and capable senator but a lackluster politician.⁸³ Moreover, the Jewish Lieberman was the first non-Christian major party presidential nominee in history. That his Judaism was a nonissue compared to Kennedy's Catholicism in 1960 was a testament to how far Americans had come in being more accepting of candidates' religions.⁸⁴

If body language was the prevalent post-debate topic of discussion in the season's first debate, it was a critical negotiating point in anticipation of the running mates' debate. Just as Clinton's campaign graciously afforded Bob Dole the opportunity to stand at the podium of his choice in 1996 so as not to be disadvantaged by his

⁸⁰ Clarke Roundtree, *George W. Bush: A Biography*, Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011, 70. Roundtree wrote that Cheney overshadowed Bush; Editorial, "The Cheney-Bush Ticket," *Hartford Courant*, July 26, 2000, retrieved on May 13, 2013, http://articles.courant.com/2000-07-26/news/0007260804_1_mr-cheney-cheney-bush-ticket-dick-cheney. The editorial described Bush's choice of Cheney as a decision to put an adult on the ticket.

⁸¹ Warren Weaver, "Texas Law Seems Mixed Blessing to Bentsen," *New York Times*, October 4, 1988, retrieved on Jan, 19, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/10/04/us/texas-law-seems-mixed-blessing-to-bentsen.html>. Some Democratic strategists had hoped that Dukakis' running mate, Lloyd Bentsen, would be the ticket headliner.

⁸² S. Robert Lichter and Richard E. Noyes, *Good Intentions Make Bad News*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996, 43. The authors wrote that many within the Republican Party concluded that Bush had thought he was not strong enough to select Jack Kemp or Bob Dole as his running mate, and so he chose the less formidable Quayle.

⁸³ Jason Linkins, "Joe Lieberman Not Invited to Party Conventions Apparently Some Sort of Surprising 'Snub,'" *Huffington Post*, July 31, 2012, retrieved on May 13, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/31/joe-lieberman-party-conventions_n_1726271.html. In reference to widespread humor about Lieberman's dullness, Linkins joked that the reason Lieberman was no longer invited to Democratic conventions was because he bored everyone.

⁸⁴ Albert J. Menendez, *The Religious Factor in the 1960 Presidential Election*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011, 5. Menendez described Kennedy's victory despite anti-Catholic prejudice.

paralyzed right arm, the Gore-Lieberman staffers were equally cooperative in granting Cheney the wish of a seated debate due to his weak heart.⁸⁵ As Lieberman strategist Jonathan Sallet observed, that ultimately worked to Cheney's aesthetical advantage as well: when he entered the debate arena, Cheney looked overweight and hunched, but when he sat down, he had a formidable "bulldog" presence.⁸⁶ Age had been a factor in debates since 1984, for both presidential and vice presidential debaters: Ronald Reagan's apparent disconnect in the first debate against Walter Mondale in 1984, James Stockdale's reference to his hearing aid in the 1992 running mates' debate, and that Bob Dole at seventy-three years old in 1996 would be the oldest president ever elected. It is plausible, therefore, that if the Democrats were insistent on a standing debate, Cheney might have had to withdraw. On the one hand, that could make Gore and Lieberman appear ruthless in taking advantage of their opponent's medical condition. On the other hand, it might raise the question that if Cheney was too weak to stand on his feet for ninety minutes, was he really a suitable choice to be able to assume the duties of president at a moment's notice if need be?⁸⁷

The debate itself took place in Danville, Kentucky, on the campus of Centre College.⁸⁸ There was a single moderator: the veteran newsman who moderated the second Bush-Dukakis debate in 1988, Bernard Shaw. That Cheney looked imposing worked in his favor, particularly when he discussed foreign affairs, and specifically when

⁸⁵ Schroeder, 170, 217. Cheney had a history of heart problems, and Dole was injured in World War II, causing the paralysis of his right arm.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Article II of the US Constitution, as well as the Twenty-Fifth Amendment, state that upon the president's death, incapacity, resignation, or removal from office, the vice president shall become president; Dana R. Carney, Amy J.C. Cuddy, *et al.*, "Power Posing: Brief Nonverbal Displays Affect Neuroendocrine Levels and Risk Tolerance," *Psychological Science*, Volume 21, No. 10 (October 2010), pp. 1363-1368. The authors argued that standing conveys more power than sitting.

⁸⁸ Cheney-Lieberman Debate, October 5, 2000, C-SPAN, retrieved on December 8, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/VicePresidentialCandi>.

advocating the importance of a strong military. Ever since an interview a year earlier in 1999, with Andy Hiller of WHDH-TV in Boston, during which Hiller pressed Bush to name various foreign leaders around the world, Bush was criticized for his inexperience on global matters.⁸⁹ Cheney more than demonstrated his vast knowledge of global events in the debate, thereby reassuring doubters that Bush's choice for vice president had superior geopolitical acumen.

If Gore's sighing and eye-rolling contrasted with the dignity and decorum established during the 1996 debates, Cheney and Lieberman seemed to restore it by remaining cordial and complimentary to one another throughout their contest. In stark contrast to 1988, when Shaw warned the boisterous debate crowd to remain silent, he appeared to recognize that Cheney and Lieberman were being cordial to one another, and that there was not much of a debate going on. Attempting to generate some contention, Shaw asked if there was anything hypocritical or contradictory that either candidate said or did during the course of the campaign. "I do have a couple of concerns where I like the old Joe Lieberman better than I do the new Joe Lieberman," Cheney said, stating that before he became Gore's running mate, he paid more attention to preventing materials of an adult nature from being sold to children. That was perhaps as polite a direct criticism as could be expected. Lieberman, too, was quite complimentary, proclaiming his "great respect" for Cheney and that he had nothing negative to say about him. Not only did both candidates remain above the fray in terms of criticism of one another, but

⁸⁹ Anonymous, "America's Bush No Whizz on Foreign Quiz," *BBC News*, November 6, 1999, retrieved on May 9, 2013, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/506298.stm>. Bush was unable to name Aslan Maskhadov of Chechnya, Atal Bihari of India, and Pervaiz Musharraf of Pakistan.

neither assumed the “henchman” role.⁹⁰ Politeness, aside, the seated format accentuated the lack of dynamic exchanges and exciting delivery. Lieberman’s low volume, sluggish appearance, and long-windedness was somewhat more lethargic than Cheney’s persona, which seemed a bit more lively and charismatic by comparison.

The media’s reaction to the running mates’ debate was unanimous in that it was considered civil and restrained. The candidates “often muffled their differences beneath a blanket of civility,” wrote Mark Z. Barabak of the *Los Angeles Times*.⁹¹ Ronald Brownstein, also of the *Times*, observed that the vice presidential hopefuls had forsaken the usual “attack dog” duties of that position and instead engaged in an “unrelentingly low-key encounter.”⁹² Polman wrote that the candidates’ commitment to civility rendered the debate almost meaningless, and in an editorial titled “A Courtly Debate,” the *New York Times* praised both candidates for placing civility above political gain.⁹³

Part of the cordiality had to do with the candidates themselves, though part of it certainly was attributable to the seated format. It is more difficult to be combative, as Dana Carney and Amy Cuddy contended, while sitting in a chair than when pontificating from a standing position behind a podium.⁹⁴ Accordingly, the same factor that rendered the first debate acerbic, body language, caused the second to be refined.

An *ABC News/Washington Post* poll released on October 9 indicated that Bush overtook Gore to break a virtual tie and claim a narrow lead, 48 percent to 45.⁹⁵ No significant news event caused the shift, but Dan Balz and Claudia Deane of the

⁹⁰ Ronald Brownstein, “Cheney and Lieberman Avoid the No. 2 Man’s Usual Attack-Dog Role,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 2000, 22.

⁹¹ Mark Z. Barabak, “Cheney and Lieberman Politely Stick to Scripts,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 2000, 1.

⁹² Brownstein.

⁹³ Polman, “Campaigns’ Attack Dogs. Public Sentiment Changed That,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 6, 2000, 18; Editorial, “A Courtly Debate,” *New York Times*, October 6, 2000, 32.

⁹⁴ Carney, Cuddy, *et al.*

⁹⁵ Dan Balz and Claudia Deane, “Bush Overtakes Gore in Poll,” *Washington Post*, October 11, 2000, 1.

Washington Post attributed it to Bush becoming more comfortable in articulating his views.⁹⁶ To the extent that being onstage and seen by tens of millions of television viewers nationwide, and without being in the non-adversarial setting of a nominating convention, perhaps the debates might serve as a valuable experience to hone one's ability to articulate a campaign message more effectively from that point forward.

Chicago Tribune political editor Michael Hackett, however, attributed Bush's rise in the polls directly to the debate: he wrote that Gore lost ground with the voters because of his body language, namely, sighing and rolling his eyes.⁹⁷

Gore's strategists expressed frustration over the polls as well as the media's review of their candidate's performance in the first debate, insisting that he was clearly superior to Bush in his command of the issues.⁹⁸ Gore's team understood that a more evident grasp of the issues does not necessarily translate to a debate or election victory, as was seen with Nixon in 1960 and Dukakis in 1988, so they compelled him to watch a parody of his first debate that appeared on the late night television comedy show *Saturday Night Live* on October 7, four nights after the first debate.⁹⁹ In the comedy sketch that mimicked the debate, actor Darrell Hammond portrayed Gore as a know-it-all who rolled his eyes excessively and thought he was so smart that he wanted to give two closing statements.¹⁰⁰ Will Ferrell, playing Bush, in turn, accentuated the candidate's reputation for poor speaking by summarizing his campaign in one word: "strategery."¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Michael Tackett, "Personality Issue Vexing Gore Again," *Chicago Tribune*, October 11, 2000, 1.

⁹⁸ Richard L. Berke and Kevin Sack, "In Debate 2, Microscope Focuses on Gore," *The New York Times*, October 11, 2000, 1.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Nick Ragone, *The Everything American Government Book*, Avon, MA: Adams, 2004, 227.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* Years later, during Bush's second term, Bill Sammon wrote a book titled *Strategery* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2006), about how Bush outwitted Democrats and confounded the mainstream media.

Although *Saturday Night Live* since its creation in 1975 lampooned presidential politics, some Americans learned more in 2000 by watching that debate parody than through any other medium, wrote Nick Ragone.¹⁰² That reinforced that the debates do matter indeed, not only as direct conveyors of the candidates' messages, but also as later parodied on popular late night television.¹⁰³ An effective parody could very well accentuate a candidate's negatives in the voters' eyes, magnifying flaws that might have been less apparent before. Terry M. Neal and Ceci Connolly of the *Washington Post* referred to the *Saturday Night Live* skit in their October 11 column, and agreed that in the ensuing debates, Gore needed to tone down his bombastic personality and Bush needed to display more intellectual prowess.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, parodies helped the debates transcend political audiences and reach potential voters who did not watch the debates themselves, or the post-debate newscasts, but did watch the Bush and Gore characters based on the debates on *Saturday Night Live*.

The frontrunners' second debate took place on October 11 at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.¹⁰⁵ Jim Lehrer moderated, and, like the running mates' debate, the candidates were seated at a table, facing the audience, and directly across from Lehrer, who had his back to the crowd. From the onset, it appeared that Gore took the advice of his handlers, and perhaps that of the media journalists and pundits as well, and underwent a complete makeover. Gone was the monotonous drawl, the painstakingly slow enunciation, and the know-it-all attitude. Gore sounded

¹⁰² Ragone.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* Late night talk show hosts, such as Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, and David Letterman have also parodied presidential candidates throughout the years.

¹⁰⁴ Terry M. Neal and Ceci Connolly, "Debate Challenges are Same as Before," *Washington Post*, October 11, 2000, 14.

¹⁰⁵ Bush-Gore Debate 2, C-SPAN, October 11, 2000, retrieved on December 15, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebat>. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

polite, humble, and in a rather remarkable turnaround, did not come across as someone who needed to be the smartest person in the room. He was just as clear and articulate as in the first debate but did not sound overbearing. It was the type of confidence perception to which Gregory and Gallagher referred. Bush also improved, providing more complex answers to the questions Lehrer asked. Nonetheless, he committed a speaking gaffe when he advised about the importance of “**resolving** your determination [emphasis added]” in foreign affairs.

Clearly a more congenial debate, like the running mates’ debate and the wholly dignified 1996 debate season, the second Bush-Gore contest revealed the candidates’ humorous sides, as well. When Gore referred to the United States’ invasion of Somalia under the first president Bush as “ill-considered” and Lehrer asked Bush to respond, the latter quipped that he had “a conflict of interest...if you know what I mean,” jokingly alluding to his subjectivity in assessing the foreign policy of his own father.¹⁰⁶ When Gore wanted additional time to discuss the issue but Lehrer said it was time to move on, Gore quipped: “[f]ar be it from me to suggest otherwise.” The crowd, interpreting it as self-deprecating humor and acknowledging that it was Gore’s correction of his rude behavior from the first debate, laughed appreciatively. Later Lehrer appeared to appreciate the mutual civility and only mildly scolded the two candidates for asking each other questions, which in violation of the debate’s rules. “I’ve been trying so hard not to,” Gore said, in a self-deprecating way that again drew some appreciative laughter from the audience. When Bush interjected that Gore violated the rule not once but twice, and

¹⁰⁶ Mark Fineman, “The Oil Factor in Somalia,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 18, 1993, 1. In December 1992, after the elder Bush had already lost the 1992 election to Bill Clinton but remained president (Clinton took office on January 20, 1993), Bush led the United Nations’ military initiative in Somalia in order to protect humanitarian aid to the victims of civil unrest and military conflict in that nation. Critics of the invasion blamed Bush for having used military force too hastily, in order to protect American oil interests there.

Gore said: “that is an interruption, by the way,” the crowd, Lehrer, Bush, and Gore himself, all laughed.¹⁰⁷

Even as Bush described Gore’s exaggerations in the first debate, Bush poked fun at himself as well, conceding that he had “been known to mangle a syllable or two.” Gore, in turn, responded: “I got some of the details wrong last week in some of the examples I used...and I’m sorry about that. And I’m going to try to do better.” Gore added: “I promise you this with all the confidence in my heart and the world, that I will do my best if I’m elected president, I’ll work my heart out to get the big things right for the American people.” Gore’s remarks sounded genuine, heartfelt, and even warm.

Gore’s civility seemed to work. Although a post-debate Gallup poll showed Bush still leading by three points, several other polls reflected that Gore had sliced into that lead, trailing by only one or two points, which was well within any poll’s margin of error.¹⁰⁸ The *Wall Street Journal’s* Gerald Selb and Jeanne Cummings called it a decidedly low-key debate, while Richard Berke of the *New York Times* described it as a cordial conversation.¹⁰⁹ A *Times* editorial titled “The ‘Makeup’ Debate” lauded Gore for abandoning his bullying tactics and noted that his more civil tone would likely help him with voters “inclined toward him on the issues but troubled by his officious manner.”¹¹⁰

A day later, however, the *Times* reversed itself somewhat in another editorial, observing that by being too passive, Gore might have given Bush too much time to articulate his own views unfettered by strong counterpoints, which the latter used to

¹⁰⁷ For more discussion on how humor helps candidates to connect effectively with audiences, see Patrick A. Stewart, “Presidential Laugh Lines: Candidate Display Behavior and Audience Laughter in the 2008 Primary Debates,” *Politics and the Life Sciences*, Volume 29, No. 2 (September 2010), pp. 55-72.

¹⁰⁸ Steven Thomma and Jodi Enda, “Candidates Lower the Volume, a Calmer 2d Debate for Bush and Gore,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 12, 2000, 1. Bush continued to lead 47 to 44 percent in a Gallup Poll, 43 to 41 in a Battleground poll, and 43 to 42 percent in polls by Zogby and CBS.

¹⁰⁹ Richard L. Berke, “This Time, More Accord Than Discord,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2000, 1.

¹¹⁰ Editorial, “The ‘Makeup’ Debate,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2000, 28.

show the viewers that he was more sure-footed and capable than some might perceive him to be.¹¹¹ Dana Milbank of the *Washington Post* went further, describing Bush's skillful maneuvering in controlling the pre- and post-debate commentary, when he used those occasions to criticize Gore on various issues, all the while keeping expectations low about his abilities as a debater.¹¹² In describing Gore as a nearly-invincible debater, the Bush team rendered any positive moments Bush had in the debate all the more noteworthy.¹¹³ Lastly, Tom Shales, also of the *Post*, found the debate to be too boring because of the overbearing civility, much like the Cheney-Lieberman contest.¹¹⁴ Perhaps the candidates being seated at a table in both instances created the more subdued atmosphere, which was less conducive to more dynamic body language. Shales predicted, correctly to a great extent, "swinging, zinging, and sighing" in the final debate.¹¹⁵

As the race between Bush and Gore remained extremely tight, the final debate was potentially more significant than most, because the slightest triumph or blunder by a candidate arguably might make the difference in the election.¹¹⁶ Even for those who dismiss the significance of debates, it would be hard to argue that in such an extremely close race, debate performance would not matter.

¹¹¹ Editorial, "Real Differences in the Debate," *New York Times*, October 13, 2000, 32.

¹¹² Dana Milbank, "How to Handicap the Debates," *Washington Post*, October 12, 2000, C1.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Tom Shales, "Episode 2: A Well-Behaved Bush and Gore Show," *Washington Post*, October 12, 2000, C1.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* For more discussion about speeches and conversations that do not meet preconceived expectations, see Robert E. Remez, Philip E. Rubin, *et al.*, "Speech Perception without Traditional Speech Cues," *Science, New Series*, Volume 212, No. 4497 (May 1981), pp. 947-950.

¹¹⁶ Glen Johnson, "Debates Called a Tool for the Undecided," *Boston Globe*, October 17, 2000, 27. Johnson described the final debate as a useful informational tool to help uncommitted voters; Michael Tackett, "Last Presidential Debate Shapes up as One That Could Tip Race," *Chicago Tribune*, October 17, 2000, 10. Tackett considered the final debate as the last opportunity for either candidate to advance his campaign.

The question various analysts most wondered about was which Al Gore would show up?¹¹⁷ Dick Polman and Gwen Florio, both of the *Chicago Tribune*, each wrote a column explaining that Gore's markedly contrasting demeanor in the first and second debates was an experiment: he was testing which personality resonated better.¹¹⁸ The *Washington Post's* Dan Balz and Richard Morin also contemplated Gore's alternating personalities, concluding that it damaged his credibility.¹¹⁹ An *ABC News/Washington Post* poll, in fact, revealed that fewer than half of the respondents considered Gore honest and trustworthy.¹²⁰

Lehrer again moderated the debate, which took place on October 17, 2000 at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri.¹²¹ That the setting was a town hall, which was a format introduced by the Clinton team in 1992 and a mainstay in debate seasons ever since, was a significant factor in the candidates' performances and their ability or lack thereof to use body language effectively.

As he did in the first debate, Gore crowded Bush by stepping forward at the last second, almost in front of him, as both candidates stepped to the center of the stage, but the Texas governor stood his ground.¹²² Bush's steadfast defense of his personal space was a maneuver he would have to repeat only minutes later. In fact, he turned the ensuing situation to his advantage and made Gore look awkward.

¹¹⁷ Tackett; Editorial, "The Final Debate," *Washington Post*, October 17, 2000, 32. Both Tackett and the *Post* asked: "which Al Gore will show up?"

¹¹⁸ Polman, "In Final Debate, Candidates Have the Task of Connecting," *Chicago Tribune*, October 17, 2000, 1; Gwen Florio, "For Al Gore, Tonight's Debate is a Personality Test," *Chicago Tribune*, October 17, 2000, C1.

¹¹⁹ Dan Balz and Richard Morin, "Bush Has Slim Lead on Eve of 3d Debate, Gore's Credibility Rating Down in Poll," *Washington Post*, October 17, 2000, 1.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Bush-Gore Debate 3, C-SPAN, October 17, 2000, retrieved on December 22, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebate>.

¹²² *Ibid.*

As in the final 1988 debate, in which Michael Dukakis set the tone by his passionless response to the very first question, a hypothetical of his wife being raped and murdered, Gore set a similar tone regarding the first question simply by his body language.¹²³ The question was about health care, and Gore mentioned the “Dingell-Norwood bill,” which was designed to remedy insurance companies’ overruling of doctors’ medical recommendations, and indicated that whereas he strongly supported it, Bush did not.¹²⁴ Lehrer pressed Bush to explain the two candidates’ differences on the issue. “Well, the difference is that I can get it done,” Bush responded, drawing laughter from the crowd. Bush’s reply was something of a non-sequitur and, judging from the audience’s positive reaction, underscored the importance of style in presidential debates. Perhaps sensing that Bush was beginning to charm the audience, Gore took a considerable risk: as Bush spoke, Gore walked over to him, clearly invading Bush’s personal space.¹²⁵ That is when Bush enjoyed his finest moment of the debate season: he continued to speak about his ability to get things done, seemingly unfettered by Gore’s tactics, and then turned to Gore in a magnificently timed manner, looked him over, and nodded his head at him.¹²⁶ The gesture was simple enough, but spoke volumes, with television again capturing the proxemics live and being able to replay them in the ensuing rebroadcasts and televised analyses. Gore’s intent to crowd Bush, perhaps to intimidate him in some way and make him move away, completely backfired. Instead, Bush had made Gore

¹²³ Bush-Dukakis, 2.

¹²⁴ Robert Pear, “House Passes Bill to Expand Rights on Medical Care,” *New York Times*, October 8, 1999, 1. Technically, the bipartisan bill’s correct name was the Norwood-Dingell, named after its principal author, Georgia Representative Charles Norwood (R). The chief Democrat co-author was Michigan Representative John Dingell.

¹²⁵ Anonymous, “Space Invaders, Territories and Personal Space,” Toastmasters, retrieved on May 12, 2013, http://westsidetoastmasters.com/resources/book_of_body_language/chap9.html. The international public speaking organization Toastmasters defined an acceptable personal space zone of no less than four feet. Gore had clearly penetrated that zone.

¹²⁶ Bush-Gore 3.

look a bit ridiculous. When Bush nodded at Gore, as if to acknowledge him and politely indicate that Gore's hovering was bizarre, it drew more laughs from the crowd, and even brought a conspicuously pained smile to Gore's face.¹²⁷ "I gave him a look of amused disdain and moved on," Bush later recalled.¹²⁸

The vice president sensed that he was outmaneuvered, but he was far from through. "What about the Dingle-Norwood bill," Gore interrupted, rudely.¹²⁹ Lehrer indicated to Bush that he would move on to a different question, at which point Bush replied that he did not quite finish his point. Lehrer let him continue as Gore lingered in Bush's space, completely ignored by both the moderator and Bush himself, who masterfully turned his back to Gore and spoke to the audience. Gore had no choice but to turn around and walk away. Clearly, he must have realized that his plan failed, and he did not get that close to Bush again.¹³⁰ The extent to which that moment was the debate's most poignant underscores Mehrabian's theory about paralinguistic prevalence. The dichotomy of Bush's calm reaction to Gore's crowding not only reflected Hall's proxemics, but also Eckman's conclusion of positive and negative nonverbal baselines. Bush's nod and smile to Gore were just polite enough to appear petulant, yet deriding enough to make Gore seem foolish. Gore's awkward lingering in Bush's space after the latter ignored him, in turn, rendered his strategy unsuccessful, which he realized, and the body language conveyed a failed attempt. Moreover, the essence of the split-screen effect that Scheufele, Kim, and Brossard discussed was prevalent in the entire

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Bush, 75.

¹²⁹ Bush-Gore 3.

¹³⁰ Schroeder, 64.

sequence, as Bush's and Gore's reactions to the other's overtures were in full view at all times.

Ultimately, the substance of the topic (health care) was not particularly significant, as the two candidates' views were far more similar than different on the issue, which was forgotten shortly after the election. The lasting memory of the occasion, however, was that Gore had invaded Bush's comfort zone, and in referring to a Congressional bill by name, epitomized the image of a Washington insider. Bush, meanwhile, came across as good-humored and good-natured. As in the first Kennedy-Nixon debate in 1960, when Nixon had looked ill, the audience recalled the aesthetics rather than the substance.¹³¹ Moreover, in *The Definitive Book of Body Language*, Allan and Barbara Pease note both the positive and negative effects of body language: one does not necessarily override the other in terms of frequency.¹³² The town hall debate exemplified that conclusion, as that single exchange between Bush and Gore depicted positive (in Bush) and negative (in Gore) aspects of body language within seconds of one another.

As the debate progressed, Gore asked Bush more direct questions, at which point the governor thanked Gore (for the questions), which drew some laughs from the crowd, and pointed out that it is a "high school debating trick...to answer something and then attack your opponent at the end."¹³³ Bush's explanation is telling insofar as he verbalized an underlying phenomenon throughout the history of the debates: are they

¹³¹ Newton N. Minow and Craig J. Lamay, *Inside the Presidential Debates*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 1.

¹³² Allan Pease and Barbara Pease, *The Definitive Book of Body Language*, New York, NY: Random House, 2004, 28.

¹³³ Bush-Gore 3. Don Hewitt, a producer for CBS at the time of the Kennedy-Nixon debates said "the only thing anyone remembers [about the debates] is Nixon's makeup...who said what and who cares?"

more about providing opportunities for the candidates to communicate their platforms, or to win on debating technicalities?

Meanwhile, Gore was not through bullying: he pressed Bush again, as Bush was answering an audience member's question about affirmative action: "Are you for it without quotas?"¹³⁴ Just firm enough to avoid seeming irritated, Bush replied: "I may not be for your version, Mr. Vice President, but I'm for what I just described to the lady." Gore continued his efforts to browbeat Bush, challenging him about whether he supported "what the Supreme Court says is a Constitutional way of having affirmative action." Instead of complying with Gore's directive, Bush looked to Lehrer to continue moderating the debate, rather than continue to engage in dialog with Gore and be put in a position where he was answering Gore's questions. "I think that speaks for itself," Gore commented, sounding self-satisfied. Whether his answer implied that Bush disagreed with the United States Supreme Court, or that Bush did not know enough about the topic to respond to it, would be an effective blow against his opponent. Bush pounced back, however: "No, it doesn't speak for itself, Mr. Vice President, it speaks for the fact that there are certain rules in this that we all agree to, but evidently rules don't mean anything."

The press recognized that the town hall format had brought out the worst in Gore's confrontational style, and his invasion of Bush's space was repeatedly played on television news clips in the days that followed.¹³⁵ Charlie Chaplin, one of the most

¹³⁴ Bush-Gore 3. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

¹³⁵ Mark Z. Barabak and Edwin Chen, "Gore-Bush Debate: Feisty from the Start," *Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 2000, 1. The authors described how Gore repeatedly violated the rules by asking Bush, and the audience members, direct questions; Caryn James, "Debates Leave Instant Analysts Hedging Their Bets," *New York Times*, October 19, 2000, 29. James wrote that Gore seemed like a "bull ready to charge" at Bush when he walked abnormally close to him.

famous stars of the silent film era, lamented the arrival of “talkies,” (films that contained sound), because he contended that the greatest expression of ideas was captured by nonverbal communication, namely, body language.¹³⁶ Decades before Mehrabian’s theory about the significance of nonverbal communication, Chaplin maintained that body language was superior to the spoken word because it could reach a far wider audience.¹³⁷ Similarly, the news clips of Gore looming over Bush could be seen and interpreted by someone who did not speak English (or any other language in which the debate was broadcast), had impaired hearing, or was in an area where the background noise was louder than the television’s volume. If there is merit to the adage that “a picture is worth a thousand words,” then surely a moving picture, such as footage of a presidential debate, might be worth even more.

R.W. Apple of the *New York Times* wrote about uncommitted voters who were particularly disturbed by Gore’s behavior.¹³⁸ An unidentified viewer said when Gore walked over to Bush it looked as if he were “going to smack him.” Another one, who was decidedly against Bush for ideological reasons, could not bring himself to vote for Gore because “he is such a strange man.” Those who favored Bush spoke little if at all about Bush’s plans for running the country, but liked the fact that he seemed sincere, and sounded like he means what he says.

A CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup post-debate poll showed that the voters at large agreed with those assessments: Bush jumped ahead by 11 points, 51 to 40 percent.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Mary Durham, Josh Handler, *et al.*, “Charlie Chaplin and Silent Films,” *Transcriptions Topics*, December 20, 1999, University of Santa Barbara, retrieved on May 16, 2013, <http://transcriptions.english.ucsb.edu/archive/topics/infoart/chaplin/>.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ R.W. Apple, “Last Debate Clearly Left Some Voters Dissatisfied,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2000, 1.

¹³⁹ Keating Holland, “CNN Poll: Bush Gains Solid Post-Debate Lead over Gore,” *CNN*, October 21, 2000, retrieved on May 12, 2013, <http://archives.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/10/21/tracking.poll>.

Moreover, many respondents expressly indicated that the debates affected their decision, particularly the final one: Republicans generally said they were more likely to vote as a result of having seen the debate, and Democrats declared they were less likely to vote.¹⁴⁰

With Bush so far ahead after the final debate, how did Gore manage to close the gap by Election Day? That Bush resonated better with Republicans than Gore did with Democrats initially favored Bush. Those who decide three weeks before the election not to vote and later change their minds, statistically tend to revert to their party's nominee, as political scholar James. E. Campbell noted specifically about the 2000 election, and thus were more likely to be Democrats than Republicans.¹⁴¹ Campbell also pointed out that in keeping his distance from Clinton so as not to be associated with the latter's extramarital scandals, Gore foolishly squandered the opportunity to be inextricably linked to the thriving economy during Clinton's presidency.¹⁴² The 1988 debates reflected how George H.W. Bush used the Reagan record repeatedly to his own political advantage in the campaign.¹⁴³ Even in 1960, it was Kennedy who worked hard in the debates to suggest an inconsistency in Nixon's foreign policy compared to Eisenhower's. George W. Bush, in 2000, did not need to work nearly as hard, as Gore consciously downplayed his connection to Clinton who, despite the scandals, enjoyed high approval ratings.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ James E. Campbell, "The Curious and Close Presidential Campaign of 2000," *America's Choice*, William Crotty (ed.), Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001, 115-137, 132.

¹⁴² Campbell, 133.

¹⁴³ Bush-Dukakis Debate 1, September 25, 1988, C-SPAN, retrieved on September 10, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/4309-1>.

¹⁴⁴ "Presidential Approval Ratings," Gallup, retrieved on May 13, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx#2>. When

Quite relevant to the actual election outcome was the third party candidacy of Ralph Nader. Running on the Green Party ticket and longtime consumer advocate, Nader gained only 2.73 percent of the overall vote, which was a very small portion of the total, but nonetheless greater than the differential between Bush and Gore.¹⁴⁵ More significantly, in Florida, Bush ultimately defeated Gore by only 537 votes to capture that state's 25 electoral votes, enough to give him the majority necessary to win the election.¹⁴⁶ Although numerous other third party candidates gained more votes in Florida than the Bush-Gore differential of 537, Nader's total, 97,488, was particularly significant.¹⁴⁷ Nader filed a lawsuit a few weeks earlier after not only being excluded from participating in the Bush-Gore debates by the sponsoring Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), but also because the CPD instructed the police to prevent Nader from physically attending the debate live, even though he had a ticket.¹⁴⁸ Nader argued that the CPD is not nonpartisan, but rather bipartisan, favoring the candidates of the two major parties to the exclusion of third party candidates, and that debate inclusion would have given him and other candidates more exposure and would influence voter behavior accordingly.¹⁴⁹ Although Nader's contention that his chances would have improved if he was invited to debate is speculative, that he was so tenacious in trying to convince the CPD to include him establishes how far-reaching he determined the influence of the debates to be.

Clinton left office on January 20, 2001, his approval ratings were over 60 percent, as high as they were for any exiting two-term president.

¹⁴⁵ David Leip's Presidential Atlas.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Shelley Murphy, "Nader Sues over Debate Exclusion," *Boston Globe*, October 18, 2000, 18.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; Also see Ben White, "Left-Out Nader Sues Debate Commission," *Washington Post*, October 18, 2000, 27; and Elizabeth Mehren, "Third-Party Candidates are Left Out in the Cold," *Los Angeles Times*, October 4, 2000, 10.

A key difference in the 2000 debates compared to the 1960 and 1988 debates was that to the extent that likability was a factor, Nixon and Dukakis did not succeed in getting the voters to like them because of a pallid physical appearance in 1960 and an emotionless performance in 1988, respectively. Gore, on the other hand, managed to cause the voters to dislike him because of his rude behavior, which was magnified by his offensive body language. Likewise, it is important to consider that in the year (2000) that Gore's actions were deemed by many to be bullying, an international movement against bullying began to emerge and it was very active in the United States in particular. A year earlier, anti-bullying legislation was passed for the first time in the United States, first by Georgia, and then by the time of the 2000 election, New Hampshire.¹⁵⁰ By the end of 2012, another forty-seven states had passed anti-bullying laws, leaving Montana the only state yet to do so.¹⁵¹ Although much of the bullying legislation centers on schoolchildren, Valerie Cade, founder of the Bully Free at Work organization, wrote that body language sometimes reflects a bullying attitude even more forcefully than words.¹⁵² Like Mehrabian, Hall, and other earlier theorists, Cade understood the power and effects of nonverbal communication. The 2000 election occurred at a time when, for the first time in its history, the United States began a national discussion to combat bullying of children and adults alike.

The 2000 debates, therefore, provided not only a lens through which the broader issue of the emerging national aversion to bullying could be viewed, but also continued to matter. Although the election was so close that it would be speculative to conclude

¹⁵⁰ Anonymous, "State Anti-Bullying Legislation," Bully Police USA, retrieved on May 13, 2013, <http://www.bullypolice.org>.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Valerie Cade, "Bully in the Workplace: Learning to Read a Bully's Body Language," *Bully Free at Work*, retrieved on May 13, 2013, http://bullyfreeatwork.com/blog/?page_id=14.

that a single factor determined the outcome, if we accept James Campbell's definition that the person who "did a better job" in the debate is not necessarily the debate's "winner," particularly insofar as Bush's popularity increased and Gore's decreased accordingly, then Bush may have in fact "won" the debate season.¹⁵³ It is less important to note that Gore actually received more votes than Bush (he won the popular vote) than to ask why he fell so sharply in the polls during the debates to begin with. Like Richard Nixon, the only other incumbent vice president to debate while running for president and lose the election, Gore's debate performance plausibly erased any advantage he had from serving a popular president for eight years. Both Nixon's and Gore's downfalls had to do with nonverbal retrospects: for Nixon, it was appearance, but for Gore, it was body language.

Running on one's record (as president or vice president) was not the only theme of the 2000 debates that was also prevalent in previous debate seasons. The power of television remained quite evident, particularly in depicting Gore's body language. Likability remained an important factor, especially in such an "issue-fragmented" election year. Overachieving (Bush, like Dan Quayle in 1992) by exceeding low expectations in debate performance, and underachieving (Gore, like Jack Kemp in 1996) by not living up to high ones, began to emerge as a consistent theme. Finally, public scorn for nastiness and appreciation for dignity, as exhibited in the 1992 and 1996 campaigns, respectively, remained consistent in 2000. The voters and media alike responded favorably to the Cheney-Lieberman and second Bush-Gore debates, which were very civil contests, but reacted negatively to the first and third Bush-Gore debates, which were abrasive, particularly because of Gore's sighs and bullying tactics.

¹⁵³ Campbell, 130.

If Bush would run for reelection in 2004 and debate his major party opponent (he did, on both counts), he would be the ninth incumbent (including vice presidents) to debate. To that point, three incumbents that debated won the ensuing election and the other five lost.¹⁵⁴ The question for 2004 remained whether Bush would benefit from the lessons of the first eight debate seasons.

¹⁵⁴ Incumbent presidents Reagan and Clinton won, in 1984 and 1996, respectively, as did incumbent vice president George H.W. Bush in 1988; incumbent presidents Ford, Carter, and George H.W. Bush lost in 1976, 1980, and 1992, respectively, as did incumbent vice presidents Nixon in 1960 and Gore in 2000.

**DO THE DEBATES MATTER? AN EXAMINATION OF THE PROGRESSIVELY
INFLUENTIAL ROLE OF MAJOR PARTY DEBATES ON
AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: 1960-2008**

**CHAPTER 10: 2004 – THE DEBATES UNDERSCORE THE ROLE OF
DECISIVENESS IN A WARTIME PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN**

Republicans George W. Bush (Incumbent President) and Dick Cheney (Incumbent Vice President) v. Democrats John Kerry (US Senator – MA) and John Edwards (US Senator – NC). Bush-Kerry 1 (62.4 million), Bush-Kerry 2 (46.7 million), Bush-Kerry 3 (51.1 million), Cheney-Edwards (43.5 million).

The 2004 presidential election was the first of the debate era to take place during wartime. Foreign policy, and national security in particular, was the dominant issue on voters' minds. With the possible exception of 1960, which was a time of considerable tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, every subsequent election year in which a debate was held primarily focused on the economy or on the candidates' personalities.¹ In 2004, however, Americans' top concern was safety, and above all they wanted a president who was resolute and decisive. George W. Bush, the incumbent president, delivered a consistent message of safety, not least of all in three debates against his opponent, Democrat John Kerry, a United States Senator from Massachusetts. Bush reassured Americans that he was committed to national security and winning the war on terror. Though it was a close race throughout, Bush won reelection, becoming the sixth wartime president to do so; no president during a war who ran for reelection ever lost.

¹ Liette Gidlow, "The Great Debate: Kennedy, Nixon, and Television in the 1960 Race for the Presidency," *History Now*, Fall 2004 (online publication), Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, retrieved on September 4, 2012, <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/sixties/essays/great-debate-kennedy-nixon-and-television-1960-race-for-presidency>. Gidlow wrote that the Cold War was the election's prevalent issue; the 1976, 1980, 1984, and 1992 elections focused mostly on the economy, whereas 1988, 1996, and 2000 were more about likability and personality.

This chapter examines the importance of decisiveness during wartime, why Bush's popularity soared early in his term and then dropped dramatically, and why Kerry was unable to capitalize on the fall in Bush's approval ratings and defeat him. Aesthetically, a significant addition to the televised debates was the introduction of the split television screen, which allowed the viewers to observe not only the candidate speaking, but also the one not speaking. That feature added a new dimension to debate preparation, as it damaged Bush in the first debate.²

A great deal has been written, even from ancient times, about military strategy and war preparedness, with a consistent emphasis on decisiveness. Widely considered the foremost ancient author on military strategy based on his treatise, *The Art of War*, written in the fifth or sixth century BC, Chinese General Sun Tzu wrote that "[h]esitancy in a general is a great calamity."³ Also enduring for centuries is *The Prince*, by Italian political theorist Niccolo Machiavelli, first published in 1532, which is, essentially, an instruction manual on how leaders ("princes") ought to rule.⁴ In the book's twenty-first chapter, titled "How a Prince Must Act in Order to Gain Reputation," Machiavelli emphasizes bold, decisive action, particularly in time of war: "A prince is further esteemed when he is a true friend or a true enemy, when, that is, he declares himself without reserve in favor of some or against another."⁵

² Dietram A. Scheufele, Eunkyung Kim, and Dominique Brossard, "My Friend's Enemy: How Split-Screen Debate Coverage Influences Evaluation of Presidential Debates," *Communication Research*, Volume 34 No. 1 (February 2007), 3-24. The split screen format was introduced in 2004. The authors studied the effects of the split screen on the debaters and on voters' perceptions of them.

³ Samuel B. Griffith (ed.), *The Art of War*, London, England: Oxford University Press, 1963, 114; Dr., Andrew R. Wilson, "The Art of War," U.S. Naval War College, <http://www.thegreatcourses.com/courses/the-art-of-war.html>, retrieved on September 22, 2014. Dr. Wilson described the book's lasting influence: "Its maxims have been invoked by everyone from the nuclear strategists of the cold war to China's modern cyber warriors."

⁴ Luigi Ricci (ed.) *The Prince*, London, England: Grant Richards, 1903.

⁵ Ricci, 87.

The United States Army's official Manual on Leadership delineates the importance of being decisive.⁶ America's future leaders, too, equate leadership with decisiveness, as reflected in a 2008 report by Ted Anthony, on a study at Edinboro State College in Pennsylvania, which he summarized as "to be an American in 2008 is to be born into a heritage of individual decisiveness."⁷ The entire group of students, seeking to become, hypothetically, president of the United States, exhibited near unanimous certitude; Anthony wrote: "there was not a single 'I'm not sure' in the room."⁸

Additional studies about wartime presidents include the 2012 article in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* by political scholars William Howell, Saul Jackman, and Jon Rogowski about wartime presidents. The authors observed that presidents who serve during time of war are able to shape domestic policy as well with less resistance from Congress.⁹ Franz-Josef Meiers wrote that Bush viewed his situation as a wartime president not only as an opportunity, but also as an obligation to take strong and decisive action.¹⁰ In "Electoral Democracy during Wartime," Herbert Weisberg examined voters' attitudes during wartime, and concluded that even though the Iraq War taken in isolation was not helping Bush, the voters perceived it as part of the Bush Administration's overall war on terror, which the voters largely supported.¹¹ In "Elections: Reliability Trumps Competence: Personal Attributes in the 2004 Presidential Election," Martin Wattenberg contends that Kerry outdebated Bush in terms of

⁶ United States Army, *Army Leadership, Be, Know, Do*, Field Manual 22-100, Washington, DC: 1999, 278.

⁷ Ted Anthony, "The Cult of Decisiveness in US Politics," *USA Today*, March 31, 2008, retrieved on September 24, 2014, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-03-31-1793896056_x.htm.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ William G. Howell, Saul P. Jackman *et al.*, "The Wartime President: Insights, Lessons, and Opportunities for Continued Investigation," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Volume 42, No. 4 (December 2012), pp. 791-810.

¹⁰ Franz-Josef Meiers, "The Return of the Imperial Presidency? The President, Congress, and U.S. Foreign Policy after 11 September 2001," *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, Volume 55, No. 2 (2010), pp. 249-286, 255.

¹¹ Herbert F. Weisberg, "Electoral Democracy during Wartime: The 2004 U.S. Election," *Political Behavior*, Volume 29, No. 2, (June 2007), pp. 143-149, 145.

substance, but that Bush's and Kerry's decisive versus "wishy-washy" personalities, respectively, were evident in the debates, and that caused the voters to favor Bush in the election.¹² In his post-election analysis, political scientist Charles Prysby attributed Bush's strong leadership, contrasted with Kerry's indecisiveness, as the prevalent determinant of Bush's victory.¹³ Prysby summarized the typical voter's sentiment as: "Bush is a cowboy; he shoots quick. Sometimes you have to do that, you have to be decisive."¹⁴

Bush displayed resoluteness throughout this first term, particularly regarding counterterrorism measures in response to the September 11 attacks. Though he referred to himself as "the decider" in a press conference two years after his reelection, Bush had long established his reputation for decisiveness.¹⁵ In *The Changing Character of War*, military historians Hew Strachan and Sibylle Schaepers argued that the sovereign is "he who decides."¹⁶ To illustrate their point, they cite Bush's "decider" self-reference and his effectiveness in linking his presidency to decisiveness and national security.

At the 2012 Republican National Convention, four years after Bush left office with only a 34 percent approval rating, his brother Jeb, in a speech to the delegates, said of him: "well, I love my brother. He is a man of integrity, courage, and honor, and during

¹² Martin P. Wattenberg, "Elections: Reliability Trumps Competence: Personal Attributes in the 2004 Presidential Election," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Volume 36, No. 4 (December 2006), pp. 705-713, 710.

¹³ Charles Prysby, "Perceptions of Candidate Character Traits and the Presidential Vote in 2004," *Political Science and Politics*, Volume 41, No. 1 (January 2008), pp. 115-122, 115.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Dick Meyer, "The Decider-in-Chief," CBS News, February 11, 2009, retrieved on May 13, 2013, http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-500159_162-1523934.html; Steve Coffman and Zack Coffman, *Founders v. Bush*, Los Angeles, CA: One World, 2007, 7. On April 18, 2006, Bush first called himself "the decider" at a press conference: he said "I'm the decider and I decide what's best."

¹⁶ Hew Strachan and Sibylle Schaepers, *The Changing Character of War*, London, England: Oxford University Press, 2014, 489.

incredibly challenging times, he kept us safe.”¹⁷ His facial expression when he said “well, I love my brother,” was a bit of a grimace, and he shrugged when he said it. When placed in context with the comments he made about his father and grandfather moments earlier, that “they served their country honorably,” was the grimace an acknowledgment that his brother’s presidency was a troubled one? As Bruce Eckman pointed out in his study of body language, a grimace conveys negative communication.¹⁸ Whether or not that was the case, Jeb Bush punctuated his defense of his brother, pausing after every syllable to emphasize that “he kept us safe.” The loud applause that followed underscored the appreciation the conventioners had and highlighted how the Bush presidency was linked not only to decisive action, but to national security.

Bridging decisiveness and war is the element of consistency, as reflected in Americans’ reelection of every wartime president who ever ran for reelection.¹⁹ As Howell and Jackman wrote in their 2013 monograph, *The Wartime President*, “wars exalt presidential power.”²⁰ President Abraham Lincoln famously attributed his 1864 reelection victory amid the American Civil War to Americans not wanting to “change horses midstream.”²¹ Accordingly, *USA Today*’s DeWayne Wickham pointed out in an

¹⁷ Jeb Bush, 2012 Republican Convention, C-SPAN, August 30, 2012, retrieved on September 25, 2014, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?c3731652/jeb-bush-sean-duffy-frantz-placide-education-policy>.

¹⁸ Bruce Eckman, “Making Valid Nonverbal Judgments,” *The English Journal*, Volume 66, No. 8 (November 1977), pp. 72-74.

¹⁹ DeWayne Wickham, “Wartime Presidents: Bush Has History on His Side,” *USA Today*, October 11, 2004, retrieved on September 18, 2013, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/columnist/wickham/2004-10-11-wickham_x.htm. James Madison started the War of 1812 that year and won reelection that same year; Abraham Lincoln waged the American Civil War in 1861 and won reelection in 1864; William McKinley waged the Philippine-American War in 1899 and won reelection in 1900; and Franklin Roosevelt entered World War II in 1941 and was reelected in 1944. Richard Nixon, who did not start the Vietnam War but inherited it when he was first elected in 1968, won reelection in 1972 as the war continued.

²⁰ Howell and Jackman, *The Wartime President*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013, 4.

²¹ “American President: Abraham Lincoln,” The Miller Center for the Presidency, University of Virginia, retrieved on September 25, 2014, <http://millercenter.org/president/lincoln/essays/biography/print>.

article written weeks before the 2004 election: “Wartime Presidents: Bush Has History on His Side.”²²

Although Bush left office a wartime president, it did not appear that he ever intended to be one. In the second 2000 debate against Al Gore, Bush outlined the theme of the understated foreign policy he expected to implement as president: no nation building.²³ Less than a year later, however, Bush charted a foreign policy course substantially centered on nation building. It became not only the defining issue of his first term, but also of his 2004 campaign for reelection.

Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the effective end of the decades-long US/USSR Cold War, American voters became increasingly less concerned with foreign policy.²⁴

Those polls reflected that the concept of a terrorist attack on American soil was not something about which Americans worried. A terrorist act that might have been of greater concern than was the case, were it not more limited in its damage, was the attack on Tower 1 of the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers in New York City on February 26, 1993.²⁵ The chief architect of the plan, Ramzi Yousef, admitted that he planned to detonate a bomb that would cause Tower 1 to fall onto Tower 2, bringing

²² Wickham; Also see Herbert F. Weisberg and Dino P. Christenson, “Changing Horses in Wartime? The 2004 Presidential Election,” *Political Behavior*, Volume 29, No. 2, (June 2007), pp. 279-304. The authors concluded that voters hesitate to change presidents during wartime.

²³ Bush-Gore Debate 2, C-SPAN, October 11, 2000, retrieved on December 15, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebat>.

²⁴ James T. Patterson, “Ronald Reagan,” *To the Best of My Ability*, James M. McPherson (ed.), New York, NY: Dorling Kindersley, 2001, 288-295, 288. Patterson described the Cold War as effectively having ended by 1988, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 having been the inevitable and even anticlimactic final component; Roper Poll, October 1988, October 1992, October 1996, and October 2000, http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/elections/presidential/presidential_election, retrieved on May 19, 2013. Foreign policy was chosen as the most important issue progressively less during those four presidential election years, 9 percent (1988), 4 percent (1992), and too negligible even to be identified among issues, respectively (2000).

²⁵ Anonymous, “First Strike: Global Terror in America,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, retrieved on May 19, 2013, http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2008/february/tradebom_022608.

down both buildings and killing thousands of civilians; the explosion was far less devastating than anticipated, and far fewer people, six in total, were killed.²⁶ Kuwaiti-born Yousef was a member of al- Qaeda, a Pakistani-based international terrorist organization founded by Osama bin Laden, a native Saudi Arabian, that used violence to protest the military presence of foreign nations on lands deemed holy by practitioners of the religion of Islam.²⁷ Even in the aftermath of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the American public remained largely unfazed when it came to foreign threats.²⁸

That sense of security instantly and dramatically evaporated, however, on September 11, 2001 when, in a series of attacks orchestrated by bin Laden, al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four American commercial airplanes, crashed two of them into both Twin Towers, a third into the Pentagon Building in Washington, DC, and purportedly aimed the fourth toward another major Washington target, such as the US Capitol Building or the White House, before a counterattack by passengers forced it to crash in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.²⁹ Collectively, the events are referred to as “9/11,” an abbreviation of the month and date on which the attacks occurred. Both towers were destroyed, part of the Pentagon was damaged, and 2,996 people were killed: 265 in the four airplanes, including the 19 hijackers, 125 at the Pentagon, and 2,606 in the towers.³⁰

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower*, New York, NY: Random House, 2006, 202.

²⁸ Roper Polls, October 1996 and 2000.

²⁹ Philip Zelikow, ed., “We Have Some Planes,” *9/11 Commission Report*, Pp. 1-35, July 22, 2004, New York, NY, SoHo Books, 2004, 1-14; the Pentagon is the headquarters of the US Department of Defense, the US Capitol is where the US Congress meets, and the White House is the official dwelling and office of the president of the United States.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

The events affected the entire nation, including President Bush, who was enjoying a peaceful morning reading a book to second-graders while visiting a school in Sarasota, Florida.³¹ Three days later, on September 14, Bush visited “Ground Zero,” as the site where the Twin Towers stood came to be known, and climbed atop some of the rubble, his arm around firefighter Bob Beckwith.³² Though he spoke into a bullhorn, someone from the crowd yelled to the president “we can’t hear you.” “I can hear you!” Bush shouted back, to building applause. Then, he continued: “I can hear you, the rest of the world hears you, and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!” The crowd on hand erupted in cheers and began chanting “USA, USA!”³³ That moment encapsulated the transformation of George W. Bush into a wartime president; within a week, his approval ratings rose to 90 percent, the highest on record for any president since Gallup began compiling those statistics in 1945.³⁴

By the time Bush’s presidency ended in January 2009, however, his approval ratings were barely over 30 percent, and sunk as low as 25 percent three months earlier.³⁵ Although Bush left office with near-record low approval ratings – only Harry Truman in 1952 and Richard Nixon in 1974 had lower numbers at the end of their presidencies – and though his ratings dropped by almost forty points by November 2004, it is important

³¹ Tim Padgett, “The Interrupted Reading: The Kids with George W. on 9/11,” *Time*, May 3, 2011, retrieved on May 19, 2013, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2069582,00.html>.

³² Video, *ABC News*, September 14, 2000, retrieved on May 13, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/Archives/video/sept-14-2001-president-ground-12590331>.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Gallup Presidential Approval Ratings; Also see Richard C. Eichenberg, Richard J. Stoll, *et al.*, “War President: The Approval Ratings of George W. Bush,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Volume 50, No. 6 (December 2006), pp. 783-808. The authors wrote that presidents’ approval ratings rise significantly during “rally events,” based on the extent of media coverage of the event in question, and conclude that the September 11 attacks were a very significant rally event for Bush accordingly.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

to note that because the descent began from a staggeringly high 90 percent, even the dramatic plummet left Bush slightly above 50 percent on Election Day.³⁶

Why did Bush fall so far out of favor with the American public in a period of three years, and why was his Democratic opponent, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, unable to exploit Bush's plunge and unseat the incumbent president? The main reason was the Iraq War, which Bush began on March 19, 2003.³⁷ On February 5, Secretary of State Colin Powell delivered a speech to the United Nations Security Council, citing the necessity to invade Iraq because that country's leader, Saddam Hussein, had violated sixteen United Nations resolutions over the previous decade, and because the United States, through its own intelligence and that of other nations, had strong reason to believe that Hussein either already developed Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) or was in the process of doing so, and had an intricate system in place to throw United Nations inspectors off course.³⁸

Although the Security Council ultimately voted against Powell's proposal, the American people overwhelmingly sided with their president and with Powell, who was an immensely well-respected public figure.³⁹ Polls through July showed that well over 70 percent of the respondents believed that invading Iraq was the right course of action.⁴⁰ However, as the war lingered through October 2004, with insurgents continuing to fight against occupying American soldiers, and with no WMDs found, only 52 percent,

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Robert Draper, *Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2007, 190.

³⁸ Colin Powell Transcript of Speech to the United Nations Security Council, February 5, 2003, retrieved on May 19, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/transcripts/powelltext_020503.html.

³⁹ Richard Liefer, "Powell Would Beat Clinton, Dole," *Chicago Tribune*, September 16, 1995, retrieved on May 19, 2013, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1995-09-16/news/9509160155_1_beat-clinton-poll-dole. Liefer cited a *Time/CNN* poll that revealed Powell as the 1996 Republican presidential nominee would have defeated incumbent President Bill Clinton, and even would have beaten both Clinton and Bob Dole in a three-way race if Dole were the Republican nominee and Powell ran as an independent.

⁴⁰ "Iraq War Approval Ratings," Gallup, retrieved on May 19, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1633/iraq.aspx>.

according to a Gallup poll, continued to think that invading Iraq was a good decision.⁴¹ A CBS Poll taken a month earlier yielded similar numbers, with 55 percent in favor of the invasion.⁴² By that point, foreign policy emerged as the number one issue on voters' minds, rising from insignificance in 2000 to become the top issue of the 2004 election for 44 percent of respondents, with 23 percent specifically citing the Iraq War as their top concern.⁴³ Although the nation supported the invasion of Afghanistan immediately following the 9/11 attacks in order to decimate al-Qaeda there, and initially supported the invasion of Iraq as part of that same war on terror, it was evident from public opinion polls that many began to question the wisdom of the latter invasion.

Throughout the campaign, Kerry often referred to the Iraq War as “the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time.”⁴⁴ On the other hand, Kerry insisted that “I won’t cut and run” from Iraq.⁴⁵ That remark presented the challenger with a dual problem: first, by asserting that if elected president he would not order American troops to withdraw from Iraq, his policy did not essentially differ from Bush’s in its essence, thereby reducing his “wrong war” comment to criticism delivered in hindsight. Second, by sharply castigating Bush for starting the war and yet not promising to finish it himself, Kerry provided fodder for his detractors, many of whom labeled him an indecisive “flip-flopper.” As Wattenberg wrote specifically about the 2004 election, and Machiavelli wrote about five centuries ago, the people, particularly during wartime, do not respond favorably to indecisiveness.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Joel Roberts, “Fading Support for the Iraq War,” *CBS News*, February 11, 2009, retrieved on May 19, 2013, http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-500160_162-930772.html.

⁴³ Roper Poll, October 2004.

⁴⁴ David M. Halbfinger and David E. Sanger, “Bush and Kerry Clash over Iraq and a Timetable,” *New York Times*, September 7, 2004, retrieved on May 19, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/07/politics/campaign/07campaign.html?_r=0.

⁴⁵ Robert Sam Anson, “Sen. Kerry, Engage!” *New York Observer*, May 24, 2004, retrieved on May 19, 2013, <http://observer.com/2004/05/sen-kerry-engage-tour-iraq-by-humvee-drive-down-to-najaf>.

The “flip-flop” catchphrase that followed Kerry throughout the 2004 campaign stemmed from a statement he made during a speech on March 14 at Marshall University, regarding an \$87 billion appropriations bill that he voted against, which would have continued funding the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars.⁴⁶ Kerry’s exact comment was: “I actually did vote for the \$87 billion before I voted against it.” Utilizing the power of television, the Bush campaign immediately seized the opportunity to air the footage of Kerry’s comments repeatedly in campaign advertisements, labeling him a “flip-flopper.” In a CNN interview on September 30, Kerry said that he meant that he voted for an earlier version of the bill, but in trying to explain it, had “one of those inarticulate moments late in the evening when I was dead tired.” The Bush campaign quickly retaliated, stating that Kerry made the comments early in the afternoon, which was correct: Kerry made that statement at 1:20PM.

That Kerry qualified his original statement with the “late in the evening” remark, resulted in a different obstacle for him: establishing credibility. Logically, Kerry would either have seen the footage of the negative campaign advertisements or, at the very least, his staff would review the details with him: would he not realize that the speech was not made “late in the evening?” Another instance involving Kerry’s credibility had to do with his recollection of being at the sixth game of the 2004 World Series baseball game between the Boston Red Sox and the New York Mets, which took place in New York City on the evening of October 25.⁴⁷ A *Boston Globe* article, however, reported

⁴⁶ Mike Roselli, “Kerry Discusses \$87 Billion Comment,” *CNN*, September 30, 2004, retrieved on May 20, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/09/30/kerry.comment>. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

⁴⁷ Susan Page, “Kerry Tries to Rejuvenate His Campaign,” *USA Today*, November 24, 2003, retrieved on May 20, 2013, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/politicselections/nation/2003-11-23-kerry-cover_x.htm.

that Kerry was at a fundraiser in Boston that evening.⁴⁸ Kerry's senior campaign advisor, Michael Meehan, responded that Kerry attended the event in Massachusetts and then "hopped on a shuttle flight from Boston to NYC."⁴⁹ The game began at 8:30PM, and lasted four hours and two minutes because it extended into extra innings; typically, a nine-inning game lasts approximately three hours.⁵⁰ It is theoretically possible that Kerry could have attended the fundraiser, navigated through traffic to board an airplane in Boston, and arrived in New York City in time to attend a brief portion of the game before it ended. Kerry could not possibly know the game would require extra innings and thus continue late enough for him to fly to New York from Boston to attend the latter stages of it. Moreover, because Kerry made numerous other sports-related misstatements in what some thought was his attempt to appeal to sports fans, skepticism lingered about whether Kerry really was in both cities on that same evening.⁵¹

Most of the questions surrounding Kerry's credibility, however, arose from a group that included soldiers that served with Kerry in the Vietnam War, which called itself the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth.⁵² The group wrote a letter to John Kerry on May 4, 2004, accusing him of having distorted information about some of them personally, and of

⁴⁸ Michael Goldfarb, "Kerry's World Series History," *Weekly Standard*, October 22, 2004, quoting Peter Howe, "N.M. Governor Details His State's Success Story," *Boston Globe*, October 26, 1986, retrieved on May 20, 2013, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/004/812xgkev.asp>.

⁴⁹ Daren Rovell, "Kerry in Boston, Game 6, on Same Night," *ESPN*, October 26, 2004, retrieved on May 20, 2013, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/news/story?id=1909344>.

⁵⁰ 1986 World Series Game 6, <http://www.baseball-reference.com/boxes/NYN/NYN198610250.shtml>, October 26, 1986, retrieved on May 20, 2013. When the game is tied after nine full innings of play, extra innings are played until a winner is determined, when at the end of a full inning, one team has more total runs than the other.

⁵¹ Chevy Chase, "Kerry Should Stop Talking about Sports," *USA Today*, April 18, 2013, retrieved on May 20, 2013. During the 2004 presidential campaign season, when asked to name favorite Red Sox player of all time, Kerry said it was Eddie Yost, a player who never played for the Red Sox. Also, when asked who his current (at the time) favorite player on the team was, he replied "Manny Ortez." No such player existed – it is likely that he meant either Manny Ramirez or David Ortiz, both of whom played for the Red Sox at the time.

⁵² John E. O'Neill and Jerome Corsi, *Unfit for Command: Swift Boat Veterans Speak out against John Kerry*, Washington, DC: Regnery, 2004, 188.

having thrown away the war medals that he was awarded as a protest against the Vietnam War.⁵³ The group questioned, accordingly, whether Kerry was fit to serve as the nation's commander-in-chief.⁵⁴ Kerry supporters blasted the group's efforts as a smear campaign, and the term "swiftboating" was coined to describe purportedly unscrupulous political tactics.⁵⁵ Substantial studies have linked candidate credibility to voter support, and conversely, lack of credibility to lack of support.⁵⁶ Though Bush did not overtly refer to Kerry as disingenuous, at various instances during the debates he portrayed himself as the more credible candidate.

A more subtle strategy used against Kerry, but one that revealed the anti-French sentiment present in the United States, particularly after 9/11, attributed "French-like" qualities to Kerry. Republicans referred to Kerry as "French-looking," and alluded that instead of saying "hello," Kerry might as well say it in French, "bonjour."⁵⁷ In fact, the Bush campaign's sarcastic response to Kerry's comment in the September 30 CNN interview where he spoke about the \$87 billion late in the evening was: "perhaps his watch was on Paris time?"⁵⁸ The French quips were meant to rally the Republican base that took exception to France's public criticism of the Iraq War, and to link Kerry to the

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Tagean Gaddard's Political Dictionary*, retrieved on May 20, 2013, <http://politicaldictionary.com/words/swiftboating>; Editorial, "Swiftboating Obama," *Washington Times*, August 21, 2012, retrieved on May 20, 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/aug/21/swift-boating-obama>. The editorial defined swiftboating as a term used by liberals to describe a coordinated disinformation campaign.

⁵⁶ Judee K. Burgoon, "The Ideal Source: A Re-examination of Credibility Measurement," *Central States Speech Journal*, Volume 27 (1976) pp. 200-206; Linda Lee Kaid and John Boydston, "An Experimental Study of the Effectiveness of Negative Political Advertisements," *Communication Quarterly*, 35 (1987), pp. 193-201; James C. McKroskey, "Ethos, Credibility, and Communication in the Real World," *North Carolina Journal of Speech*, Volume 4 (1971), pp. 24-31; Virginia P. Richmond and James C. McKroskey, "Whose Opinion do You Trust?" *The Journal of Communication*, Volume 25 (1975), pp. 43-50.

⁵⁷ Roger Cohen: "The Republicans' Barb: John Kerry 'Looks French,'" *New York Times*, April 3, 2004, retrieved on May 20, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/03/news/03iht-globalist_ed3_.html.

⁵⁸ Roselli.

French position, thereby contrasting Bush as a confident and decisive American patriot.⁵⁹

Jimmy Carter, in 1976, was the first debater to use the strategy of setting expectations low in order to have an easy threshold to meet, when he said that he expected Gerald Ford, the incumbent president and a twenty-seven-year veteran of Washington, to fare better in the debates because he knew considerably more about both domestic and foreign policy than Carter did.⁶⁰ The value of low expectations was evident in future debates, such as in 1988, when Republican vice presidential nominee Dan Quayle was widely expected (by the pundits and media alike) to do so poorly in the debates that journalist Dick Polman remarked all that Quayle had to do to perform well was to show that he could “walk and chew gum at the same time.”⁶¹ Evidently realizing the value of keeping expectations low, both campaigns praised the opposing candidate’s debating prowess. Bush’s staff referred to Kerry as “the best debater since Cicero,” and Kerry’s team pointed out that Bush “won every debate he’s ever had.”⁶² Kerry pointed out how well Bush did against Al Gore in 2000, while Bush spokesperson Karen Hughes downplayed the president’s oratory prowess, reminding that “he occasionally mangles the English language.”⁶³

⁵⁹ Cohen; for more information about the growing anti-French sentiment that begun in 2003, see Marguerite J. Mortiz and Yohann Brultey, “French Stereotypes Meet American Politics: Bush, Kerry and the Campaign Rhetoric of 2004,” *Spaces of French Migration, Culture, and Politics in the 20th Century Americas*, Atlanta, GA: Georgia State University Conference, February 10-12, 2012, retrieved on May 20, 2013, http://www.cas.gsu.edu/sacida/Media/Docs/SACIDA/IdA_Conference_.pdf.

⁶⁰ Alan Schroeder, *Presidential Debates: Fifty Years of High-Risk TV*, 2nd Ed., New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008, 106.

⁶¹ Dick Polman, “Tonight: a High Point in the Tale of Quayle,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 5, 1988, 1.

⁶² Anonymous, “1st Debate Offers Americans a Chance to Fill in the Blanks on Bush, Kerry,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 30, 2004, 8. The Ancient Roman Marcus Tullius Cicero is widely considered one of the greatest orators of all time; Dana Milbank, “How to Handicap the Debates,” *Washington Post*, October 12, 2000, C1. Milbank wrote about the value of exceeding low expectations, as Bush did against Al Gore in 2000.

⁶³ Anne Kornblut and Patrick Healy, “2 Camps Gird for Tonight’s Debate,” *Boston Globe*, September 30, 2004, 1.

Both candidates expended tremendous resources to prepare for the debate, including numerous advisers, mock stand-ins, and even creators of hypothetical post-debate spin.⁶⁴ The elaborate preparations made by the Bush and Kerry campaigns exemplified that the debates mattered, as every debate season featured more extensive pre-debate strategy than the previous one, depicting the importance the candidates placed on the debates. Journalists pointed out that the debates would provide an opportunity for Kerry to shed his flip-flop image, and would be valuable in helping swing voters make up their minds.⁶⁵

A *Los Angeles Times* poll revealed that the voters thought Bush was more decisive than Kerry and likely to be the stronger commander-in-chief, by 52 to 41 percent.⁶⁶ The poll results reflected the doubts some voters had about Kerry as a result of the flip-flopping accusations. To the extent that a leader's decisiveness tends to comfort the public during tumultuous times, it boded well for Bush that in the age of terror, a time during which Americans sought reassurance, they thought of him as decisive.⁶⁷ The good news for Kerry, however, as well as evidence that the debates were important to the voters as well, was that 63 percent of the respondents who were committed to a particular candidate stated that it was possible that they would change their minds given

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Jeff Zeleny, "After Trading Barbs from Afar, Candidates Rivals Ready to Go Face to Face," *Chicago Tribune*, September 30, 2004, 1. Zeleny wrote that Kerry must state his policies clearly and decisively; Jacob M. Schlesinger, "Indecision Time," *Wall Street Journal*, September 30, 2004, 1; Chuck Jaffe, "Debates May Not Be Decisive, But for Undecided, They're a Start," *Boston Globe*, September 30, 2004, C3. Zeleny and Jaffe both wrote that the debates were likely to sway a great deal of uncommitted voters.

⁶⁶ Ronald Brownstein, "Bush Leads Kerry Going into Debate," *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 2004, 1.

⁶⁷ Brandon Alsup, "Confidence Makes a Leader," *U.S. News & World Report*, May 14, 2008, retrieved on May 29, 2013, <http://money.usnews.com/money/blogs/outside-voices-careers/2008/05/14/confidence-makes-a-leader>. Alsup wrote that confidence is most evidently exuded by decisiveness and passion; Lee Hamilton, "The Attributes of Leadership," The Center on Congress at Indiana University, March 27, 2006, retrieved on May 29, 2013, <http://www.centeroncongress.org/attributes-leadership>. Hamilton identified strong decisiveness as the primary attribute of leadership; Dick Meyer, "The Decider-in-Chief," *CBS News*, February 11, 2009, retrieved on May 13, 2013, http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-500159_162-1523934.html. During Bush's second term, the media started referring to him as "the decider."

the outcome of the debates.⁶⁸ That poll reveals that the debates have the potential to make a tremendous impact on an election's outcome, and if they do not, it may be because the candidates did not disappoint their respective supporters. Accordingly, it is evident not only that the debates indeed matter, but that their importance increased over time.

The first debate took place on September 30 at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida.⁶⁹ Jim Lehrer, who had moderated at least one debate in every season since 1988, was the sole moderator again, and he described a new system to monitor each candidate's allotted response time: a panel situated in front of each debater that contained three lights. A green light would activate when thirty seconds remained, a yellow one would activate at fifteen seconds, and a red one at five seconds. When time expired, the red light would flash, and there was even a backup buzzer system in place, Lehrer said.⁷⁰ The lights were visible to the audience for the first time in debate history, a negotiating point urged by the Bush campaign in hopes of exposing Kerry's long-windedness and inability to keep within the time constraints.⁷¹ Even though the lights actually helped Kerry to adjust his timing and stay within the limit, the significance that the Bush campaign placed on including the panel exemplified the progressively influential role that the debates played on overall campaign strategy.⁷²

Emblematic of the primacy of national security, Lehrer began by asking Kerry whether he could do a better job than Bush in preventing another 9/11-type of attack on

⁶⁸ Brownstein.

⁶⁹ C-SPAN, Bush-Kerry Debate 1, September 30, 2004, retrieved on December 27, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/DebateCan>.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Schroeder, 44.

⁷² *Ibid.*

the United States.⁷³ Kerry said “[y]es, I do,” and then referred ambiguously to a “better plan” for homeland security and to fight the war on terror. He promised to do a better job building and maintaining alliances, which he said “the president has left...in shatters across the globe.” Kerry’s opening was strong: his deep and resonant voice sounded ominous, and his diction was impeccable.

When it was his turn to speak, Bush immediately focused on 9/11. He described his foreign policy as “a multi-pronged strategy to keep our country safer.” The president declared that three quarters of al-Qaeda leaders were already brought to justice, that the world became a different place after September 11, and it became a safer place as a result of the invasion of Iraq and the ousting of Saddam Hussein from power.

In their opening remarks, the debaters encapsulated the very essence of the campaign: focusing on national security, each candidate explained why he would be better at keeping America safe in the age of terror. To that end, Kerry promised that he would “hunt down and kill the terrorists, wherever they are.” By using words like “hunt down and kill,” Kerry projected that he was tough and decisive, not wavering and nuanced, just as Jeff Zeleny and other analysts deemed important for him to do. He pointed out that in taking his eye off Osama bin Laden and focusing instead on Saddam Hussein, Bush made “a colossal error of judgment, and judgment is what we look for in the president of the United States of America.” Kerry sounded strong, experienced, and determined. Nonetheless, as Weisberg determined, voters were more concerned about the overall war on terror and at worst perceived the Iraq war as a tactical setback on one battle front, rather than, as Kerry characterized it, a “colossal error of judgment.”

⁷³ Bush-Kerry 1. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

As stately as Kerry sounded, his physical appearance was somewhat awkward for television. Exceeding Bush in height by almost five inches, Kerry at six-feet-four stood taller than any presidential candidate in history except Abraham Lincoln and Lyndon Johnson, who were the same height as Kerry. His thick and wavy coiffure made Kerry seem even taller than he was. Kerry was not only lanky, but had somewhat odd-looking facial features. His long face, thin nose, and “massive brow and hooded eyes” were not particularly telegenic.⁷⁴ Kerry did not seem wholly comfortable standing that tall, as suggested by his slouch.⁷⁵ Kerry’s debate debut was reminiscent of Richard Nixon’s insofar as, while both candidates’ rich baritone voices were ideal in terms of the audio component of television, both had drawbacks regarding the visual aspect.⁷⁶ Moreover, if radio was surpassed by television in 1960, it was obsolete by 2004 as the medium of choice through which to access the debates.⁷⁷

A revealing characteristic of the 2004 debates, and one not prevalent in any previous season, was a split television screen that showed both candidates at once: not only the one who spoke, but also the one who listened and waited. Glimpses of the non-speaking candidate were shown in all debate seasons, beginning with the first one in 1960, when the camera panned to Nixon a good deal of the time when Kennedy spoke, which was to Nixon’s detriment considering how pallid he looked.⁷⁸ The split screen was displayed intermittently by the debate broadcast networks from as early as 1992. In terms of constantly keeping the spotlight not only on the candidate speaking, but also

⁷⁴ Schroeder, 173.

⁷⁵ Shelly Hagen, *The Everything Body Language Book*, Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2008, 29. Shelly wrote that both men and women that slouch or hunch are perceived as being insecure.

⁷⁶ Nixon looked pale and sickly in the first debate against John F. Kennedy, in 1960.

⁷⁷ “The History of Television,” retrieved on June 20, 2014, <http://www.tvhistory.tv/facts-stats.htm>.

⁷⁸ Schroeder, 6.

on the one listening throughout the entire evening, the split screen became significantly more prevalent in 2004.

In 1960, Nixon looked sickly on television, prompting the Kennedy campaign to attempt to convince the network camera crews to keep the camera on Nixon longer.⁷⁹ Just as television contributed to Nixon's undoing, the split screen, at least in the first debate, was detrimental to Bush. During Kerry's opening response, Bush fidgeted, adjusted his tie, and had a smirk on his face that seemed to project irritation. Television in 2004 further extended its influence on the debates in its ability to portray candidates' particular shortcomings, given the visual colored light panel and split-screen effects.

Lehrer asked Kerry to give examples of what he meant by Bush's colossal misjudgments. The senator pointed out that Bush spent more money rebuilding Iraq than fortifying national security at home, that firehouses were closing, bridges, tunnels, and subway systems that were all susceptible to terrorist attacks were being ignored, and that the overwhelming majority of containers arriving in American ports were not inspected.⁸⁰ "Does that make you feel safer in America?" Kerry asked rhetorically.

In a stinging rebuke of Bush's judgment, Kerry said: "You know, the president's father did not go into Iraq, into Baghdad, beyond Basra. And the reason he didn't [was] because there was no viable exit strategy. And he said our troops would be occupiers in a bitterly hostile land." Kerry's argument was particularly forceful in that he pitted the policies of the elder Bush against those of the younger, perhaps evoking reminders of how Bush was criticized in 2000 for having been too inexperienced to be president.⁸¹

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Kerry specifically referred to ports in Florida, the state in which the debate took place.

⁸¹ Clarke Roundtree, *George W. Bush: A Biography*, Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011, 70. Roundtree wrote that Cheney overshadowed Bush; Editorial, "The Cheney-Bush Ticket," *Hartford Courant*, July 26, 2000, retrieved

Much like Walter Mondale in 1984, who probably anticipated Ronald Reagan repeating his 1980 “there you go again” line, or Lloyd Bentsen, who also probably expected Dan Quayle to compare himself to John F. (“Jack”) Kennedy in their 1988 debate, Kerry apparently had a predetermined answer to Bush’s reminder that Kerry said he voted for the \$87 billion to fund the troops before he voted against it, based on his almost-reflexive response to the question. Kerry’s response was: “When I talked about the \$87 billion, I made a mistake in how I talk about the war. But the president made a mistake in invading Iraq. Which is worse?”⁸² Kerry concentrated on defending his own decision-making, emphasizing that it is better to change one’s mind to move to a correct position than it is to be certain but wrong.

Body language seemed to be the prevalent theme of the post-debate analysis by the media, as it had been throughout the debates four years earlier. Just as the first Bush-Gore debate in 2000 was called “the sighing debate,” Jim Rutenberg of the *New York Times* referred to the first Bush-Kerry contest as the “scowl and growl debate.”⁸³ The *New York Times* thought that the president’s “body and facial language sometimes seemed downright petulant,” and that Kerry “delivered the goods” on looking presidential.⁸⁴ Horst Arndt and Richard Wayne Janney wrote about sighing and other “disruptive [nonverbal] vocal characterizers.”⁸⁵ Dana Milbank of the *Washington Post* compared Bush’s scowls to Al Gore’s sighs in the 2000 debates, and Nick Anderson

on May 13, 2013, http://articles.courant.com/2000-07-26/news/0007260804_1_mr-cheney-cheney-bush-ticket-dick-cheney. The editorial described Bush’s choice of Cheney as a decision to put an adult on the ticket.

⁸² Reagan-Mondale Debate 1, October 7, 1984, C-SPAN, retrieved on August 6, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33459-1>; Quayle-Bentsen Debate, October 5, 1988, C-SPAN, retrieved on September 24, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/4127-1>.

⁸³ Jim Rutenberg, “The Post-Debate Contest, Swaying Perceptions,” *New York Times*, October 4, 2004, 1.

⁸⁴ Editorial, “The First Debate,” *New York Times*, October 1, 2004, A26.

⁸⁵ Horst Arndt and Richard Wayne Janney, *Intergrammar*, Berlin, Germany: Walter De Gruyeter & Company, 1987, 227.

and Scott Collins of the *Los Angeles Times* observed that Bush was particularly hampered by the split screen, which captured his unflattering facial expressions throughout the evening.⁸⁶ Peter Canellos described Bush as “clenching his teeth and rolling his eyes,” the latter gesture also attributed to Gore in 2000. Patrick Tyler called Bush “testy,” and Seth Borenstein wrote that Bush looked as if a fly was pestering him all evening and he had trouble swatting it.⁸⁷ Ironically, the “disruptive vocal characterizer” that gave Bush an edge in the first debate in 2000, according to post-debate polls and analyses, was what hurt Bush in the first 2004 debate.

Kerry was widely regarded as the winner, wrote the *Los Angeles Times*’ Mark Barabak, citing unnamed “strategists” from both the Bush and Kerry camps that acknowledged a tighter race as a result.⁸⁸ Ronald Brownstein and Kathleen Hennessey, also of the *Times*, were more specific: they referred to a post-debate *Times* poll that indicated more viewers thought Kerry won the debate than Bush, by a substantial margin, 54 to 15 percent.⁸⁹ Notably, the poll revealed that while the respondents’ impressions of Kerry improved considerably, their attitudes to whether or not Bush made the right decision by invading Iraq hardly changed at all: 44 percent thought he did and 53 percent thought that he did not before the debate, while 43 percent thought he did, and 54 percent thought he did not after the debate.⁹⁰ Michael Tackett of the

⁸⁶ Dana Milbank, “Reaction May Tell Tale of Debate: Bush’s Scowls Compared to Gore’s Sighs,” *Washington Post*, October 2, 2004, 10. Gore sighed repeatedly during his first debate against Bush in 2000; Nick Anderson and Scott Collins, “Split Screen Wasn’t Kind to Bush,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 2004, 18.

⁸⁷ Peter Canellos, “Senator Scores with Confidence,” *Boston Globe*, October 1, 2004, 1; Patrick E. Tyler, “As the World Watched a Debate, Some Saw a New Race,” *New York Times*, October 3, 2004; Seth Borenstein, “‘Experts’ Weigh in on the Debate,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 3, 2004.

⁸⁸ Mark Z. Barabak, “Analysts, Snap Polls Point to Post-Debate Boost for Kerry,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 2004, 1.

⁸⁹ Ronald Brownstein and Kathleen Hennessey, “Viewers Give Round 1 to Kerry,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 2004, 1.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Chicago Tribune also pointed out that not enough Americans at the time blamed Bush for the Iraq War, and so the president was not hampered by the war's progress to that point.⁹¹

Moreover, a *Tribune* editorial opined that Kerry was not successful enough to reverse the twenty-three-point "enthusiasm gap" between the candidates: 65 percent of Bush supporters, compared to only 42 percent for Kerry were "very enthusiastic" about their candidate.⁹² Though Bush maintained a five-point lead after the debate, 50 to 45 percent according to a *Washington Post/ABC News* Poll, a Gallup poll was much closer, with Bush leading by only two points, 49 to 47 percent, within the poll's three-point margin of error.⁹³ Bush's small but persistent lead might be attributable to a number of factors, including sustained public support for the Iraq War, and the fact that Kerry, to some extent, as evidenced by the enthusiasm gap, was the "anybody but Bush" candidate.⁹⁴

In the aftermath of the first Bush-Kerry debate, one of the most bizarre allegations in debate history was made. A mysterious rectangular "bulge" was spotted protruding from Bush's back, in between his shoulder blades.⁹⁵ The Bush team quickly dismissed the bulge as a naturally forming pucker that resulted from a poorly tailored suit.⁹⁶ Whenever the president would move a certain way, they explained, his suit would bunch up in that

⁹¹ Michael Tackett, "Bush, Kerry Clash on Iraq," *Chicago Tribune*, October 1, 2004, 1.

⁹² Editorial, "Scoring the Debate," *Chicago Tribune*, Oct 1, 2004, 24.

⁹³ Richard Morin and Christopher Muste, "Bush Has 5-Point Lead in New Poll," *Washington Post*, Oct 5, 2004, 6.

⁹⁴ Derrick Z. Jackson, "Kerry's 'Anybody But Bush' Trap," *Boston Globe*, April 20, 2004, retrieved on May 23, 2013,

http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2004/04/20/kerrys_anybody_but_bush_trap; Jill Lawrence, "Senator Makes N.H. Pitch Buttressed by Red Sox Brass," *USA Today*, November 1, 2004, retrieved on May 23, 2013, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/politicselections/nation/president/2004-11-01-kerry-campaign_x.htm; Ellen Goodman, "The Left Doesn't Need a Limbaugh," *Washington Post*, July 3, 2004, 27. Kerry was described less as having stood on his own merits than as being the non-Bush alternative.

⁹⁵ Schroeder, 235.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

spot.⁹⁷ Rumors began to circulate that Bush's handlers planted a device on him whereby they would signal to him throughout the debate as needed.⁹⁸ The president himself addressed those comments, calling them "absurd," and the majority of people agreed.⁹⁹ Even if the device were not a signal designed to help Bush during the debate, some wondered whether it was a medical apparatus of some sort, and whether the president was hiding a health condition from the public.¹⁰⁰ Taking such a huge risk in planting a device on the president, with potentially very little to gain, seemed illogical.¹⁰¹

That there was speculation as to that possibility, however, suggests how important success in the debate had become: that a candidate could conceivably risk scandalous consequences by attempting such a maneuver. It is difficult to imagine, when the debates originated in 1960, that anyone would have thought either participant, John F. Kennedy or Richard Nixon, would wear a device in order to be fed information from handlers into an earpiece, and thereby have an advantage throughout the contest; if not because of the candidates' sense of honor, that they would not cheat, then because the debates hardly seemed important enough to matter at the time.¹⁰² The inexplicable bulge controversy underscored how much the debates mattered: how far they had come in terms of their perceived importance in presidential campaigns.

Despite rumors that Bush planned to replace Cheney as his running mate in the 2004 election, he retained his vice president, which was a decision backed by a solid majority

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Schroeder, 236.

¹⁰⁰ Schroeder, 237.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² In the third Kennedy-Nixon debate in 1960, Kennedy was seen reading from a piece of paper while on camera, but it was in the open, and Kennedy insisted it was merely a letter from then-President Dwight Eisenhower, which Kennedy had brought along to use as a prop. For more discussion on that incident, see Lou Fleming, "Nixon Charges Kennedy Used Notes in Debate," *Los Angeles Times*, 1; Willard Edwards, "Nixon Blasts Kennedy for Violating Rule," *Chicago Tribune*, October 14, 1960, 1.

of Americans, according to various Gallup polls taken throughout 2004.¹⁰³ Kerry selected North Carolina Senator John Edwards, although it was widely reported that Kerry first reached out to Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona, a Vietnam War hero who staunchly supported Bush's national security policies, including the invasion of Iraq.¹⁰⁴ McCain refused Kerry's proposal, and when the latter chose Edwards, the Bush campaign ran a commercial featuring McCain endorsing Bush's foreign policy, which was a thinly veiled message that Kerry's first choice rejected him in favor of Bush, and was a reinforcement of Kerry's ambivalence: he wanted McCain, whose viewpoints, to a great extent shared by Bush, he later criticized in the debates.¹⁰⁵

As in 2000, the vice presidential debate in 2004 was subject to prejudicial expectations. Although Cheney was expected to be too stiff and gruff against Joe Lieberman in the 2000 running mates' debate, he was surprisingly personable, and even more charismatic than his perennially lackluster opponent.¹⁰⁶ Edwards, however, was expected to be more difficult competition for Cheney. At fifty-one, he was twelve years younger than Cheney, and the age difference appeared greater than that. Moreover, Edwards was a trial lawyer and therefore presumed to excel in contests of oratory skills.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Frank Newport, "Most Americans Want Dick Cheney to Stay on GOP Ticket," *Gallup News Service*, July 16, 2004, retrieved on May 23, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/12370/most-americans-want-dick-cheney-stay-gop-ticket.aspx>. A poll taken between July 8 and 11 2004 indicated that 59 percent of respondents wanted Bush to retain Cheney. Amid the rumors of replacement, no particular individual's name emerged as a potential new running mate for Bush.

¹⁰⁴ Jim VandeHei and Dan Balz, "Kerry Picks Edwards as Running Mate," *Washington Post*, July 7, 2004, 1.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Jason Linkins, "Joe Lieberman Not Invited to Party Conventions Apparently Some Sort of Surprising 'Snub,'" *Huffington Post*, July 31, 2012, retrieved on May 13, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/31/joe-lieberman-party-conventions_n_1726271.html. Linkins wrote in reference to the numerous descriptions of Lieberman as dull.

¹⁰⁷ Schroeder, 175. Schroeder described Edwards' "impressive command of rhetoric."

The debate was held on October 5 at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio.¹⁰⁸ The sole moderator was Gwen Ifill, of the PBS television station. As was the case four years earlier, the Democratic team was gracious in agreeing to a debate where Cheney and his opponent would be seated at a table, respecting Cheney's health issues.¹⁰⁹

The first question, to Cheney, was about whether there was a link between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. Notably, Cheney thanked Ifill and the staff at Case Western Reserve, but he did not acknowledge his opponent, much less thank him for agreeing to debate. It was the first signal of a dismissive attitude that Cheney exhibited toward Edwards throughout the debate. Later, Cheney reminded the audience that as vice president, he was also president of the Senate, "and I'm up in the Senate most Tuesdays when they're in session...the first time I ever met you was when you walked on that stage tonight." Cheney's comment, though a snide implication that Edwards routinely missed Senate votes in order to campaign, had an even greater effect in that it reminded the audience that Cheney was effectively the *de jure* head of the Senate, whereas Edwards was one among the hundred Senators.¹¹⁰ After the debate, the Democratic ticket challenged Cheney's veracity, insofar as his claim that he had never before met Edwards.

The vice president proceeded to describe the developments in Iraq as integral to the broader war on terror. As Bush did in the first debate, Cheney refused to portray the war

¹⁰⁸ Cheney-Edwards Debate, October 5, 2004, C-SPAN, retrieved on February 4, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/FullSc>. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

¹⁰⁹ Schroeder, 170.

¹¹⁰ Voting Record of Senator John Edwards, govtrack, retrieved on May 30, 2013, http://www.govtrack.us/congress/members/john_edwards/300039. In his first five years in the Senate, from 1999 to 2004, Edwards missed over 15 percent of Senate votes, a far greater absentee rate than the median of 2 percent.

on Iraq as an isolated matter. He described Iraq as “the most likely nexus between the terrorists and weapons of mass destruction,” and unequivocally pronounced that if he had to do it all over again, he would do the same thing, and concluded by emphasizing that the world was now safer because Saddam Hussein and his government were no longer in power. Cheney’s opening remarks reinforced Bush’s message that invading Iraq was the right thing to do, and that it was essential to national security.

Edwards, in turn, immediately began a barrage against Cheney and the Bush Administration, pointing out that “[w]e have lost more troops in September than we lost in August, lost more in August than we lost in July, lost more in July than we lost in June.” The youthful-looking man with the friendly face displayed his trial attorney acumen: in the first two minutes of the debate, he unleashed more lethal attacks at Cheney than Lieberman did during the entire ninety minutes four years earlier. Seemingly unflustered by Edwards’ comments, Cheney continued to explain how the United States made significant progress in Iraq, how a new government took root, troops were being trained, and Iraqis were scheduled to have free elections for the first time in their nation’s history.

It was clear that both Cheney and Edwards faithfully delivered the messages of their respective campaigns, and revived a level of antagonism not seen in a running mates’ debate since the 1992 “free-for-all” among Al Gore, Dan Quayle, and James Stockdale.¹¹¹ It also reinforced the fact that national security, and the importance of decisive action, specifically regarding the war on terror, was the predominant if not the

¹¹¹ Cathleen Decker and Sam Fullwood, “Quayle and Gore Trade Angry Barbs on Character Issue Debate,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1992, 1. The authors described the Gore-Quayle-Stockdale debate as having been a free-for-all; Charles Krauthammer, “Schoolyard Debate,” *Washington Post*, October 15, 1992, 31. Krauthammer called it a “schoolyard debate.”

singular matter of urgency for both campaigns. Tactically, Cheney put his henchman role to better use than Edwards did. Whereas Edwards focused more on attacking Cheney directly, Cheney focused his criticism on Kerry. Going beyond Bush's general references to Kerry's flip-flopping, Cheney explained that Kerry began changing his positions when his Democratic Primary rival, Howard Dean, made big strides in the primaries largely on an anti-war stance.¹¹² To the extent that Edwards focused on his immediate opponent, Cheney, rather than on the ticket headliner – even as Cheney was perceived to have a strong role in shaping foreign policy – perhaps his courtroom experience worked against him. Richard Nixon, also a lawyer, focused more on debate technicalities than the bigger picture of winning the election. Cheney, by contrast, understood that the Democratic presidential candidate was Kerry, not Edwards, and focused on criticizing the former more so than the latter.

Though the 2004 debates primarily elaborated on the national security discussion that permeated the campaign, the Cheney-Edwards contest introduced a different issue, one that for the first time in front of a national audience was debated directly by two major party opponents: same sex marriage. Though it did not rise to the level of national security in terms of significance in the 2004 election, and did not become a major issue in the subsequent elections, over the ensuing decade, same-sex marriage became more and more accepted within American society.

The subject was personal to Cheney, whose daughter was gay. In fact, Ifill pointed to Cheney's comment that "[f]reedom means freedom for everybody," to contrast his and the Bush Administration's support for a Constitutional ban regarding same-sex unions.

¹¹² Paul Maslin, "The Front Runner's Fall," *Atlantic*, May 2004, retrieved on June 1, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/2004/05/maslin.htm>. Maslin wrote that Dean was the Democratic frontrunner early in 2004, largely because of his firm stance against the Iraq War.

Cheney said that he did believe in freedom for everybody, but thought it best for the states to determine its limits. Cheney cited the example of the Massachusetts Supreme Court directing that states should legislate to allow same-sex marriage. “[T]he president made it clear that’s the wrong way to go, as far as he’s concerned,” said Cheney, “[n]ow, he states the policy for this administration, and I support the president.” Like the elder Bush in 1988, who named Ronald Reagan as an American hero, and unlike Richard Nixon in 1960 and Al Gore in 2000, who distanced themselves from their respective presidents, Cheney firmly projected his loyalty to George W. Bush.¹¹³ Going beyond what the other presidential loyalists had said, Cheney, by confirming that he followed the president’s directive in spite of being personally opposed to it, implied that when faced with such a choice, he considered his personal point of view subordinate to the president’s.

Edwards, in turn, specifically mentioned the Cheney family, commending the vice president and his wife for the love and support they gave to their gay daughter. Cheney limited his response to thanking Edwards for his kind words. Danette Ifert Johnson wrote about the feminine rhetorical style of debate, which focuses on connecting with the audience by relaying personal experience.¹¹⁴ Cheney’s reaction to Edwards’ comments, and reluctance to discuss his daughter’s sexual orientation, was the antithesis of the behavior Johnson discussed. That may have been attributable to Cheney’s personality, his preference not to subject his family members to the public

¹¹³ During the 1960 debates, Nixon implied that his policy toward the islands Quemoy (now Kinmen) and Matsu differed from Eisenhower’s and Gore in 2000 was tentative about being linked to Clinton because of the latter’s scandal involving an extramarital affair with his intern.

¹¹⁴ Danette Ifert Johnson, “Feminine Style in Presidential Debate Discourse, 1960–2000,” *Communication Quarterly*, Volume 53 No. 1 (2005), pp. 3-20; for more discussion about the feminine rhetorical style, see Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “The Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation: An Oxymoron,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Volume 59 (1971), pp. 74-86.

arena, or both. Aside from being a rare turn from the discussion about national security, the same-sex marriage issue was revisited in the final debate, and Kerry's treatment of it, specifically a reference to Cheney's daughter, was assailed in post-debate discussion.¹¹⁵

After that brief deviation from national security, the debate focused on the war on terror for the remainder of the evening. Never before in the history of debates were two of them completed with hardly any focus on domestic affairs, further illustrating the nature of presidential politics in the age of terror.

Wall Street Journal reporters Shailagh Murray and Greg Hitt viewed the debate as a contrast between Cheney's gravitas and Edwards' charm.¹¹⁶ Other observers, however, noted that the contest was more of a quarrel.¹¹⁷ Shortly after the debate, the Kerry campaign released footage showing Cheney and Edwards next to one another on the dais of the National Prayer Breakfast in February 2001, approximately three and a half years prior to their debate, in an effort to disprove Cheney's claim, and, in turn, his credibility, that he never met Edwards until the night of the debate.¹¹⁸ Cheney's error did not amount to a significant gaffe, however: that both men were adjacent to one another on the same dais does not confirm that they actually met. That is quite plausible, given Cheney's reputation for reserved social interaction: Bush said, for instance, that as he gave warm hugs to senior staff members upon reelection, he merely shook Cheney's

¹¹⁵ Yvonne Abraham, "Kerry's Comment Draws Fire from Cheney's Wife," *Boston Globe*, October 15, 2004, 24

¹¹⁶ Shailagh Murray and Greg Hitt, "Opposites Attack," *Wall Street Journal*, October 5, 2004, B1.

¹¹⁷ Canellos, "Unleashed Bitterness Marks VP Face-off," *Boston Globe*, October 6, 2004, 1; Zeleny, "Understudies Carry on Bush-Kerry Fight," *Chicago Tribune*, October 6, 2004, 1; Anonymous, "Close Combat," *Chicago Tribune*, October 6, 2004, 3.

¹¹⁸ Thomas Fitzgerald, "Actually, Cheney Has Met Edwards," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 7, 2004, 22; Jane Eisner, "It's All About Credibility," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 7, 2004, 35. The National Prayer Breakfast is held each February in Washington, DC. For more discussion on that event, see Norman Percy Grubb, *Modern Viking: the Story of Abraham Vereide, Pioneer in Christian Leadership*, New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1962.

hand because “Dick isn’t really the hugging type.”¹¹⁹ It is also possible that if it was the only time Cheney and Edwards ever met face-to-face, the vice president may have forgotten the incident, given how many people he interacted with in that capacity. Finally, the essence of Cheney’s point did not have to be taken literally: he meant that Edwards did not show up often to vote in the Senate; whether or not Cheney ever actually met him is not vital to that point’s merit. Regarding the issue of credibility, Cheney’s comment did not represent a significant problem for the Republican ticket.

Scot Lehigh of the *Boston Globe* thought the debate was a tie, as did his *Globe* colleague, Yvonne Abraham.¹²⁰ The public agreed to a large extent: an *ABC News* post-debate poll indicated that 43 percent thought Cheney won the debate whereas 35 percent chose Edwards, and 19 percent thought it was a tie.¹²¹ A CBS Poll showed Edwards winning 41 to 28 percent, with 31 percent calling it a tie, although the CBS poll was narrower in scope, having focused only on voters that did not yet commit to a particular candidate.¹²² The *ABC News* and CBS polls were the only polls consistently discussed by the press following the debate, and when compared to one another and the overall margin of error, they averaged to a tie. In the broader context of the overall campaign, that meant the race, for all practical purposes, also remained a tie.

The 2004 town hall debate took place on October 8 at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, and was moderated by Charles Gibson of *ABC News*.¹²³ Indicative of

¹¹⁹ George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, New York, NY: Crown, 2010, 296.

¹²⁰ Scot Lehigh, “Neither Can Claim a Clear Win,” *Boston Globe*, October 6, 2004, 19; Yvonne Abraham, “Some Hard Punches, But No Knockout Blows,” *Boston Globe*, October 6, 2004, 24.

¹²¹ Gary Langer and Dalia Sussman, “More Viewers Say Cheney Won Debate,” *ABC News*, October 6, 2004, retrieved on May 24, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/PollVault/story?id=140951&page=1#.UZ-pnqK1Eto>.

¹²² Boothie Cosgrove-Mather, “Uncommitteds Tab Edwards Winner,” *CBS News*, February 11, 2009, retrieved on May 24, 2013, http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-500160_162-647648.html.

¹²³ Bush-Kerry Debate 2, October 8, 2004, C-SPAN, retrieved on February 8, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/FullScr>. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

how Kerry's indecisiveness became a subject of rapidly increased focus, as Wattenberg later described, the first question of the evening, posed to the Massachusetts senator, was what would he say to voters who did not want to vote for him because he was too "wishy-washy?" Kerry laughed and proceeded to describe how Bush could not find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and so he turned the campaign into "a weapon of mass deception." That seemingly-rehearsed line was a bit out of character for him; he did not utter any sort of sound bite like that in the first debate. Kerry went on to say that Bush's four years yielded negative job growth, and that Kerry would give the people a tax-cut; he agreed with Bush's No Child Left Behind Program, but criticized it as underfunded.¹²⁴ His response appeared a bit off-balance, as if he was trying to cover a lot of things without a smooth segue from one topic to the other. In response, Bush began in his usual folksy, matter-of-fact style: "I can see why people think he changes positions quite often, because he does." Bush talked about Kerry's "87 billion" position change and how he was for removing Saddam Hussein and then changed his mind. "[Y]ou've got to be consistent when you're the president," Bush concluded, "[t]here's a lot of pressures, and you've got to be firm and consistent." Bush seemed to get the best of the opening exchange. He came across as decisive and confident: very presidential.

Bush intensified his oration, his voice ringing with emotion. He blasted Kerry's plan to address the war on terror as: "[L]et's keep it at the United Nations and hope things go well," insisting that Hussein was indeed a threat because he could have provided terrorists with WMDs, and declaring that the United Nations was not effective in its

¹²⁴ Transcript, "President Signs Landmark No Child Left Behind Education Bill," *White House*, January 8, 2002, retrieved on May 30, 2013, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020108-1.html>. The No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law by Bush, required states to adopt basic skills standards for all schoolchildren.

attempt to remove Hussein. Bush continued to find his voice as the debate wore on, showcasing his resoluteness with pride. He invoked Ronald Reagan's name, likening himself to the former president in terms of standing on principle.¹²⁵ "Listen, there's thirty nations involved in Iraq," said the president, his passionate tone obfuscating his incorrect subject-verb tense, "some forty nations involved in Afghanistan," and concluded that "I don't think you want a president who tries to become popular and wants the wrong thing." Bush characterized himself as ultimately decisive, and stressed that in wartime, the world needed a decisive leader. Bush accentuated his presidential authority, calling Kerry "naïve and dangerous" in his approach toward terrorists throughout the world.

In the same breath, however, Bush injected self-deprecating humor into the discussion, by saying Kerry's approach almost made him "want to scowl," which was a reference to the critique of his impetuous facial expressions in the first debate, that were revealed by the constant split screen broadcast. Besides his effectiveness in the second debate in terms of style, Bush strongly conveyed his message that the 2004 election was about national security, and that he was the more decisive and overall better candidate to protect the American people.

The town hall debate, which was a manifestation of populism, as ordinary people (not those in the media or in politics) had the opportunity to question the candidates directly, also served to highlight notions of populism that existed in the campaign. In the 1992 election, Democrat Bill Clinton and Independent Ross Perot promoted George H.W.

¹²⁵ Richard A. Epstein, "The Secret of Ronald Reagan's Success," *Chicago Tribune*, February 6, 2011, retrieved on May 31, 2013, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-02-06/opinion/ct-perspec-0206-reagan-20110206_1_personal-security-political-leader-secret. Epstein attributed Reagan's success to his steadfast commitment to principles in which he believed.

Bush as an out-of-touch elitist, but in 2004, it was Bush's son assuming the role of populist, and Kerry appearing to be the snob.¹²⁶ To some extent, that impression was magnified because his wife, Teresa Heinz Kerry, is the heiress to the Heinz food company. On a campaign stop, she asked what the dish "chili" was, which was particularly unusual considering that one of the products Heinz makes is a chili sauce.¹²⁷ In criticizing Bush's tax cuts as having favored the wealthy, Kerry told the debate audience that by looking at them, he could tell they did not make over \$200,000 per year. Kerry's blanket judgment fueled the elitist image that he hoped to shed. His claim that he had gone to a World Series baseball game in 1986 was likely also an effort to shed his elitist image. Despite Kerry's efforts to project a "regular guy" image, Bush prevailed over Kerry by 50 to 39 percent when voters were asked with whom they would rather have a beer.¹²⁸

Just as it began, the debate also concluded on the issue of decisiveness. Directly challenged to second-guess himself, Bush confirmed his refusal to doubt any of his choices. He defended his positions in Afghanistan and in Iraq as correct. He concluded that he might have made some mistakes in appointing people to certain positions, "but I'm not going to name them. I don't want to hurt their feelings on national TV." Bush not only drew laughter, as he did on a few occasions throughout the evening, but projected confidence in his decisions.¹²⁹ He conveyed the sentiment that was the foundation of his

¹²⁶ Thomas Frank, "What's the Matter with Liberals," *New York Review of Books*, August 11, 2005, retrieved on May 31, 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2005/may/12/whats-the-matter-with-liberals/?pagination=false>.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Anonymous, "Bush Edges Kerry in 'Regular Guy' Poll," *NBC News*, May 26, 2004, retrieved on June 1, 2013, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/5067874/ns/politics/t/bush-edges-kerry-regular-guy-poll/#.UajKYEDVD_g.

¹²⁹ For more discussion about the use of humor in presidential debates, see David M. Rhea, "There They Go Again: the Use of humor in Presidential Debates 1960-2008," *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Volume 49 No. 2 (Fall 2012), pp. 115-131; Paul Skalski, Ron Tamborini, *et al.*, "Effects of Humor on Presence and Recall of Persuasive

presidency: that the nation “requires a president who is steadfast and strong and determined.”

Nick Anderson of the *Los Angeles Times* did not identify a clear winner, but thought that Bush greatly improved from the opening debate.¹³⁰ William Weld, a former Massachusetts governor writing for the *Wall Street Journal*, looked beyond style, however, and predicted that Bush would win the election on substance, primarily because of a resolute stand against foreign enemies.¹³¹ Weld maintained that even though Kerry displayed an oratory flair in the debates, Bush was able, through the debates, to communicate his unwavering commitment to the nation’s security.¹³²

An *ABC News/Washington Post* poll indicated that two days after the second debate, Bush’s lead over Kerry grew from 50 to 46 percent to 51 to 45 percent.¹³³ A CBS poll during that same time period, however, showed a smaller lead for Bush, with 48 to 45 percent, within the poll’s three-point margin of error.¹³⁴ A Zogby Poll found the candidates tied at 45 percent apiece.¹³⁵ On October 13, the morning of the final debate, an article by Scot Lehigh appeared in the *Boston Globe* with the self-explanatory title: “Third Debate Could Seal the Deal.”¹³⁶ Lehigh wrote that in a race that remained very close, the third debate very well might be the most important moment in the entire

Messages,” *Communication Quarterly*, Volume 57 No. 2 (2009), pp. 136-153; and Hans Speier, Wit and Politics: an Essay on Laughter and Power,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 103, No. 5 (1998), pp. 1352-1401.

¹³⁰ Nick Anderson, “Pundits See No Clear Winner, but Say Bush Improved,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 9, 2004, 19. Anderson wrote that pundits generally thought Bush did better, but that Kerry was effective enough nonetheless, to secure a draw.

¹³¹ William Weld, “The Last Debate, and Beyond,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 12, 2004, 22.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Daily Tracking Poll 2004, *Washington Post*, retrieved on June 1, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/elections/2004/charting.html>.

¹³⁴ Bootie Cosgrove-Mather, “Bush Leads by a Hair,” *CBS News*, February 11, 2009, retrieved on June 1, 2013, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/10/12/opinion/polls/main648712.shtml>.

¹³⁵ Zogby Poll, October 9-11, 2004, retrieved on June 1, 2013, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/bush_vs_kerry.html.

¹³⁶ Lehigh, “Third Debate Could Seal the Deal,” *Boston Globe*, October 13, 2004, 13.

presidential campaign.¹³⁷ Whether the debates did, in fact, determine the election's outcome is not indisputable, but Lehigh's determination perpetuated the belief that was conveyed by others in the media, as well as analysts and the respective campaigns themselves: that the debates matter.

Moderated by Bob Schieffer of *CBS News*, the debate was hosted by Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona.¹³⁸ With graceful deference, Kerry said to Bush: "Mr. President, I'm glad to be here with you again to share similarities and differences with the American people." By acknowledging that he and Bush shared similarities, Kerry exhibited a disposition of harmony rather than antagonism, which was an approach more reminiscent of the dignified campaign of 1996 than of the 2000 election, with Al Gore's excessive sighing and invasion of Bush's personal space.

Continuing his language from the previous debates about taking a decisive stance on terrorists, Kerry vowed that he would "hunt them down, kill them, we'll capture them." Bush also echoed the message he delivered in the first two debates, that under his watch the world became a safer place overall. Beyond national security, however, Bush also used a tactic that worked well for his father in 1988 against Michael Dukakis: he portrayed his opponent as a liberal too far left of the American political mainstream. Bush criticized Kerry for raising taxes ninety-eight times over twenty years in the Senate and, addressing his opponent directly, added: "You know, there's a mainstream in American politics and you sit on the far left bank. As a matter of fact, your record is such

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Bush-Kerry Debate 3, October 13, 2004, C-SPAN, retrieved on February 18, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/DebateFu>. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

that [liberal standard-bearer] Ted Kennedy, your colleague, is the conservative Senator from Massachusetts.”¹³⁹

Schieffer then turned to same-sex marriage, which Gwen Ifill introduced in the Cheney-Edwards contest. Schieffer framed the question to Bush in a broader context, asking whether he believed homosexuality to be a choice. Bush immediately responded that he did not know whether or not homosexuality is a choice, but he did believe in the importance of treating people with respect and dignity. Kerry was more explicit, referring again, as Edwards did, to Cheney’s daughter, and professing that if she were asked the question, she would say that “she’s being who she was born as,” and that homosexuality is not a choice. Kerry said he believed that “[w]e’re all God’s children” but that, like Bush, he believed that marriage is between a man and a woman.

Kerry’s reference to Cheney’s daughter remained an issue in the press for days. Some debate viewers described Kerry as “arrogant” for having raised the remark, which they deemed hurtful, the *New York Times*’ Jodi Wilgoren reported.¹⁴⁰ A *Washington Post* editorial the day after the debate pointed out that Kerry did not serve himself well by making the comment.¹⁴¹ The Cheneys, displaying a more personal reaction, and one more akin to the feminine rhetorical style Johnson described, also expressed their anger about the comment: the vice president accused Kerry of saying anything to try to get elected, and Cheney’s wife, Lynne, said that Kerry “is not a good man.”¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Bush referred to then-Massachusetts Senator Edward “Ted” Kennedy, brother of the President John F. Kennedy, and long-considered the Senate’s liberal standard bearer. For more discussion about Kennedy’s reputation as a political liberal and how his Republican opponents used that against him, see Rich Simon and Claudia Luther, “Ted Kennedy Dies at 77; ‘Liberal Lion of the Senate,’” *Los Angeles Times*, August 26, 2009; Peter S. Canellos, *Last Lion: The Rise and Fall of Ted Kennedy*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2009.

¹⁴⁰ Jodi Wilgoren, “After 3 Debates, Some Voters Remain on Fence,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2004, 1.

¹⁴¹ Editorial, “Debate Ducking,” *Washington Post*, October 14, 2004, 30.

¹⁴² Abraham; Associated Press, “Cheney: Kerry Comment on Gays was a Cheap Trick,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 15, 2004, 12.

The issue of same-sex marriage was a brief respite from a debate – in fact, an entire debate season, that was centered around national security. Even when the discussion shifted to domestic matters, it remained linked to national security, as was the case with securing the nation’s borders and restricting individual purchase of certain types of firearms. Bush turned the Iraq War issue against Kerry, noting that the 1991 war against the same country (Iraq) and leader (Saddam Hussein) was widely supported on a bipartisan level, but noted Kerry’s opposition to it even then. Bush conflated the two wars and portrayed Kerry’s opposition in 1991, as in 2004, as also being a view outside the mainstream.

The final debate’s closing moments featured similarities to those in previous seasons. As was the case from 1980 forward, there were moments of self-effacing humor. Bush said he learned to listen to his wife and daughters, who told him “to stand up straight and not to scowl,” and said his wife “speaks English a lot better than I can – people can understand what she says.” Kerry said he “married up” more so than others, referring to his heiress wife. Punctuating his civility toward his opponent, again drawing similarities to 1996 and a contrast to 2000, Kerry ended by referring to Bush as a great father.

In his closing remarks, Bush evoked memories of Reagan and Nixon: the former in substance and the latter in style. When Bush described a favorite painting of his of the sunrise side of the mountain, not the sunset side, because “it’s the side to see the day that is coming, not to see the day that is gone, it echoed Reagan’s “morning in America” theme.¹⁴³ However, Bush smiled awkwardly throughout the entire evening, and at times

¹⁴³ Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History, retrieved on January 6, 2013, <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/age-reagan/timeline-terms/reagan%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cmorning-america%E2%80%9D>. “Morning in America” was the theme of Reagan’s reelection campaign, in 1984.

during seemingly ill-suited moments, much like Nixon did in 1960, perhaps overcompensating for the scowls in the first debate.¹⁴⁴

In a detailed analysis of the final debate, journalist John F. Harris and Richard Morin explained how the final contest in the four-component 2004 debate season by and large reinforced each candidate's long-perceived strengths and weaknesses.¹⁴⁵ Kerry's command of the facts and ability to posit an argument were highlighted, but so was his awkward and rather "annoying" personality.¹⁴⁶ Bush, in turn, seemed uneasy with debating in general, but came across as a decisive leader.¹⁴⁷

David Gergen, a veteran of both Democratic and Republican administrations, described the debates as having a "transformative effect on [the presidential] race."¹⁴⁸ John Harwood and Jeanne Cummings of the *Wall Street Journal* cited Gergen's comment and expanded it, contending that it was Kerry's debating prowess that brought him to a tie with Bush, thus erasing the distinct lead the president held at the onset of the debate season. Though Gergen did not conclude that Kerry necessarily erased Bush's lead to the point where he could prevail in the election, he noted that the election seemed comfortably in Bush's hands prior to the debates, whereas it became deadlocked at the conclusion of the debate season.¹⁴⁹ Two post-debate polls, one by

¹⁴⁴ Particularly in the third and fourth debates in 1960, Nixon often smiled at random intervals that were not connected to the context of the discussion.

¹⁴⁵ John F. Harris and Richard Morin, "Debate Helps to Sway Undecided; Third Encounter Enforces Trends," *Washington Post*, October 15, 2004, 6.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ John Harwood and Jeanne Cummings, "Debates Take Center Stage," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct 15, 2004, 4.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

ABC News and the other by *USA Today/NBC News*, rendered the final debate a statistical draw.¹⁵⁰

On November 2, Americans reelected George W. Bush by a close but conclusive margin.¹⁵¹ Bush won the electoral vote 286 to 251, but barely captured a majority of the popular vote, with 50.73 to 48.27 percent.¹⁵² In terms of sheer numbers, over sixty-two million ballots were cast for Bush, which was the most for any presidential candidate in American history.¹⁵³ A Pew Research Poll taken during the week following the election reflected the election results insofar as 53 percent indicated they were happy that Bush was reelected, compared to 43 percent unhappy and 4 percent unsure.¹⁵⁴ The respondents chose the Iraq War as the issue most important to them in the election by 27 percent, which was almost a two-to-one margin over the second-most important issue (the economy and jobs).¹⁵⁵

The poll results, then, pointed to Bush winning reelection because he was more effective than Kerry in conveying to the American people that his policies and vision were superior to Kerry's *vis-à-vis* the Iraq War, which was then at the forefront of national security. That his and Kerry's poll ratings waxed and waned based on their debate performances (as analyzed by the voters and pundits) perpetuated the debates' role in presidential elections.

¹⁵⁰ Gary Langer, "Poll, Last Presidential Debate is a Draw," *ABC News*, October 13, 2004, retrieved on September 25, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/PollVault/story?id=163784>; Susan Page, "Bush, Kerry in a Draw, Poll Says," *USA Today*, October 3, 2004, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/politicselections/nation/president/2004-10-03-poll_x.htm.

¹⁵¹ 2004 Election, David Leip's Presidential Atlas, retrieved on June 1, 2013, <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS>.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Pew Research Poll November 5-8, 2004, retrieved on June 1, 2013, <http://www.pollingreport.com/2004.htm#Four>.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

As DeWayne Wickham wrote two days before the final debate, Bush had history on his side because all of the wartime presidents prior to Bush that ran for reelection before the war ended, all five won.¹⁵⁶ Bush's victory made it six of six. Even though Americans consistently retained their incumbent presidents during wartime, it is conceivable that Bush's shaky performance in the opening debate, which was magnified by the split-screen feature, caused him to win by a narrower margin than he might have otherwise. Each of the other five wartime presidents that won reelection, none of whom debated their major party opponent, won by larger electoral margins.¹⁵⁷ To the extent that Tzu, Machiavelli, and the modern theorists were correct to emphasize decisiveness as an indispensable quality a leader must possess, Bush used the debates to convey his steadfast commitment to his decisions. His resistance to identify any action he took as president as a mistake might have been his most Machiavellian moment of all.

Perhaps the most apt quotation to summarize the voters in 2004 is the quote by the twelfth century philosopher Maimonides: "the risk of a bad decision is preferable to the terror of indecision."¹⁵⁸ Though the voters did not necessarily conclude that Bush made the wrong decision to wage war in Iraq, as Wattenberg pointed out, they blamed him less for that than they credited him for his commitment to fighting the war on terror. Maimonides' quote is even more telling in that respect: what he identified as terror is the indecision attributed to Kerry throughout the campaign and as reflected in the debates.

Although no other issue in 2004 emerged from the large shadow cast by concerns about national security, the debates effectively placed same-sex marriage into the arena

¹⁵⁶ Wickham.

¹⁵⁷ Leip. For more discussion about the wartime presidents, see John Axelrod, *America's Wars*, New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2002.

¹⁵⁸ Philip M. Parker, *Indecisions*, San Diego, CA: Icon, 2009, 1.

of presidential politics. The 2008 major party presidential candidates, Barack Obama and John McCain, did not speak much about same-sex marriage on the campaign trail, but both declared they believed that marriage ought to be defined as a union between one man and one woman.¹⁵⁹ Four years later, in May, 2012, President Obama publicly changed his stance, overtly supporting same-sex marriage.¹⁶⁰ The debates, therefore, served to elevate issues into the national consciousness that the candidates themselves did not emphasize, thereby compelling future candidates to address them. Accordingly, the debates mattered: their impact on elections extended not only to the imminent election but also to subsequent elections as well. Moreover, Bush made the necessary adjustments in the second debate to compensate for his shortcomings in the first, just as Ronald Reagan, the first incumbent to debate and win reelection, did in 1980, underscoring how critical the debates were. The introduction of a new dimension, the split screen, which gave neither candidate an off-camera respite, caused the debates to matter even more.

Bush became the third of six incumbent debate-era presidents to win reelection, which meant that even if Dwight Eisenhower was correct in 1960 that an incumbent debater is at an inherent disadvantage, it does not categorically translate to an electoral loss.¹⁶¹ Bush's numbers continued to fall and by the time he left office, had plummeted

¹⁵⁹ Anonymous, "Election Center 2008, *CNN*, retrieved on June 1, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/issues/issues.samesexmarriage.html>.

¹⁶⁰ Phil Gast, "Obama Announces He Supports Same Sex Marriage," May 9, 2012, *CNN*, retrieved on June 1, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/05/09/politics/obama-same-sex-marriage>.

¹⁶¹ Boston Globe Staff, "Bay Stater Quotes Ike: Debates Don't Help Nixon, *Boston Globe*, October 13, 1960, 1. Eisenhower said the man in office is in a position to be second-guessed by a man on the sidelines, one who is not holding office. Incumbents Ronald Reagan (1984), Bill Clinton (1996), and Bush (2004) won, and Gerald Ford (1976), Jimmy Carter (1980), and George H.W. Bush (1992) lost.

to 34 percent and were even lower, 25 percent, a few months earlier.¹⁶² The steady decline in Bush's popularity throughout his presidency was not a rapid enough fall by 2004 to cost him reelection, however. A majority of Americans at the time, as confirmed by the polls and as reflected in the theme of the debates, were most concerned about national security, and preferred Bush's decisive hand to Kerry's perceived "flip-flopping."

Because Bush was constitutionally prohibited from seeking a third term and Vice President Dick Cheney retired from politics, 2008 became the first election in the debate era in which no major party candidate was either the incumbent president or vice president. That situation added a different dimension to the debates' tenth season, as for the first time it did not give either candidate an advantage, or disadvantage: the incumbent running on the record and a challenger running against it. Moreover, if the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq continued into 2008 (which they did), it was a foregone conclusion that none of the debaters started them.

¹⁶² Gallup, Presidential Approval Ratings, retrieved on June 1, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116500/presidential-approval-ratings-george-bush.aspx>.

**DO THE DEBATES MATTER? AN EXAMINATION OF THE PROGRESSIVELY
INFLUENTIAL ROLE OF MAJOR PARTY DEBATES ON
AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: 1960-2008
CHAPTER 11: 2008 – THE DEBATES REFLECT AN
ANTI-REPUBLICAN ELECTION OF CHANGE**

Democrat Barack Obama (Senator – IL) and Joe Biden (Senator – DE) v. Republican John McCain (Senator – AZ) and Sarah Palin (Governor - AK). Obama-McCain 1 (52.4 million), Obama-McCain 2 (63.2 million), Obama-McCain 3 (56.5 million), Biden-Palin (69.9 million).

The 2008 presidential election, more so than any other in the debate era, epitomized change. It was not only a rejection of a sitting president, George W. Bush, but in great part a repudiation of an entire major political party, the Republicans. Further emblematic of the election's transformational quality was that its most influential nominees were two little-known candidates, each born in a non-contiguous state, and who eclipsed the political establishment: the Democratic presidential and Republican vice presidential candidates, respectively, Hawaii's Barack Obama and Alaska's Sarah Palin. Perhaps even more notable than Obama's general election victory over United States Senator John McCain (a Republican from Arizona) was that in the Democratic primary, he defeated the heavily favored United States Senator from New York and former First Lady of the United States, Hillary Clinton.

This chapter examines why the climate was ripe for sweeping change, and how Obama utilized the debates to convey that he was indeed the candidate of change. Moreover, the 2008 debate season, the tenth overall, illustrates how the debates had progressed on so many levels since 1960, particularly their growing impact on the candidates and the voters, and the evident influence of the debates of previous years.

Observing long-term trends in voting behavior not only in the United States, but also in Great Britain, Norway, and Sweden, Gosta Carlsson observed that political change occurs gradually.¹ Carlsson concluded that in the absence of very dramatic events, which often render prolonged analysis or procrastination impracticable, change where the substance matches the symbolism takes time to materialize.² Part of the resistance to change, Carlsson argued, is aversion to disruption of what is familiar and consistent, even if not optimal.³ Yet in 2008, the American people changed course dramatically and elected a president who not only campaigned on the promise of change, but whose very candidacy manifested change. In the process, Americans also effectively rejected a political and economic ideology that defined the Republican Party for twenty-eight years. This chapter extends beyond these general observations, however, and focuses on the features of 2008 which resulted in such transformational change.

In *The Black History of the White House*, Clarence Lusane determined that Obama emerged at the precise moment in history when Americans, dissatisfied with both major (Democrat and Republican) parties, preferred a post-partisan candidate, as Obama portrayed himself.⁴ David Weiss described the administration of Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush, as the most party-focused in decades, and pointed to the caustic

¹ Gosta Carlsson, "Time and Continuity in Mass Attitude Change: The Case of Voting," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 29, No. 1 (Spring 1965), pp. 1-15, 2.

² Carlsson, 14.

³ Carlsson, 2.

⁴ Clarence Lusane, *The Black History of the White House*, San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 2011, 429; Jonathan Weisman, "GOP Doubts, Fears 'Post-Partisan' Obama," *Washington Post*, January 7, 2008, retrieved on September 30, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/06/AR2008010602402.html?sid=ST2008010602580>. Weisman wrote that Obama campaigned as a "post-partisan" president, pledging to unite Democrats, Republicans, and independents.

partisan atmosphere that was prevalent throughout the Bush years, with a brief respite in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks.⁵

Alan I. Abramowitz developed a “Time for Change” model, which stated that whether or not voters retain the political party of the incumbent president in the subsequent election is determined by the extent to which they are satisfied with the incumbent.⁶ Bush’s unpopular policies, largely perceived by the electorate to be indicative of the Republican Party as a whole, including the nominee, John McCain, rendered it opportune for a candidate from the opposite party to prevail. Although Abramowitz’ formula does not withstand the test of all presidential elections, including two in the debate era, it is eminently applicable to the 2008 election.⁷

Americans in 2008 indeed were dissatisfied with the incumbent president. Bush’s popularity dropped considerably in the time since his reelection four years earlier. It fell to 34 percent, and tied with Jimmy Carter as the lowest of any president since World War II except Harry Truman and Richard Nixon. This is attributable to a number of factors: not solely the Iraq War, but also his handling of Hurricane Katrina and his nomination of White House Counsel Harriet Miers to serve as a United States Supreme Court Justice.⁸

⁵ David C. Weiss, “In Defense of the Post-Partisan President: Toward the Boundary Between ‘Partisan’ Advantage and ‘Political’ Choice,” *Brigham Young University Journal of Public Law*, Volume 24, No. 259 (2010), 259-312.

⁶ Alan I. Abramowitz, “Forecasting the 2008 Presidential Election with the Time-for-Change Model,” *Political Science and Politics*, Volume 41, No. 4 (October 2008), pp. 691-695.

⁷ *Ibid*; Presidential Approval Ratings, Gallup, retrieved on June 2, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116500/presidential-approval-ratings-george-bush.aspx#1>. Although Presidents Eisenhower and Clinton had among the highest ever approval ratings on election day of the final year of their presidencies, in each instance the election winner was a member of the opposing major party.

⁸ *Ibid*. Anonymous, “Harry S. Truman,” Miller Center, University of Pennsylvania, retrieved on June 3, 2013, <http://millercenter.org/president/truman/essays/biography/print>. Truman’s popularity plummeted largely because of his firing of popular general Douglas MacArthur, corruption within his administration, and charges from US Senator Joseph McCarthy that he was soft on communism; Fred Emery, *Watergate*, New York, NY: Touchstone, 1994, 481. Nixon resigned the presidency when it became very likely that he would be impeached for his role in covering up the Watergate scandal; Burton I. Kaufman and Scott Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter*, 2nd Ed.,

On August 29, 2005 hurricane “Katrina” began to cause damage to the United States Gulf Coast.⁹ While on vacation in Texas, Bush announced that there was no way to know whether the levees in New Orleans, Louisiana would break.¹⁰ Bush was criticized, however, for not returning to Washington until a day and a half after Katrina hit the Gulf, and even more so when a video revealed that he was warned ahead of time of the possibility of the levees breaking.¹¹ Although Katrina affected an area much wider than New Orleans, including the Pascaguola, Mississippi, home of Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, a Republican and Bush ally, repeated footage of the homes of mostly lower-income, African-American New Orleans residents that were devastated by the hurricane created the impression of Bush as a privileged white man indifferent to their plight.¹²

Bush’s delayed response to Katrina rendered him as compassionless at worst and incompetent at best in the eyes of many, costing him support among Democrats and independents. It was a decision he made two months later, however, that caused many conservatives, his political base, to also lose faith in him.¹³ On October 3, barely a month after Katrina, Bush nominated Harriet Miers to replace Supreme Court Justice

Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006, 176, 196. Carter’s presidency was hampered by high inflation and unemployment, and the Iran hostage crisis. Truman’s approval rating upon leaving office was 32 percent, Nixon’s was 24.

⁹ Joby Warrick, “White House Got Early Warning on Katrina,” *Washington Post*, January 26, 2006, retrieved on June 3, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/23/AR2006012301711.html>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Anonymous, “Video Shows Bush Katrina Warning,” *BBC*, March 2, 2006, retrieved on June 3, 2013, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4765058.stm>.

¹² Michael Fletcher, “Katrina Pushes Issues of Race and Poverty at Bush,” *Washington Post*, September 12, 2005, retrieved on June 3, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/11/AR2005091101131.html>.

¹³ Gary Langer, “Poll, Bush Approval Drops,” *ABC News*, September 12, 2005, retrieved on November 12, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/PollVault/story?id=1117357&page=2>. Langer wrote that Hurricane Katrina caused Bush’s poll numbers to drop, particularly among Democrats and independents, among whom 63 percent of African-Americans, whom he described as the Democrats’ most loyal voting bloc, thought Bush’s handling of Katrina was emblematic of poor race relations in America.

Sandra Day O'Connor, who announced her intention to retire.¹⁴ Prior to serving as White House Counsel, Miers, who had no judicial experience, was Bush's personal attorney and longtime confidante.¹⁵ Although liberals were expected to oppose Miers on ideological grounds, as Bush assured the public that she would not "legislate from the bench," a signal that she opposed the type of judicial activism for which conservatives often criticize progressives for advocating, Bush supporters complained that Miers lacked the intellectual rigor necessary to advocate conservative causes on the bench.¹⁶ Rush Limbaugh, a conservative radio personality on the top-rated talk show in the United States, lamented Bush's choice of Miers, saying "I had such high hopes" for a more compelling nominee.¹⁷ Moreover, liberals and conservatives alike criticized Bush for selecting Miers after first appointing her to head a search committee to find a replacement for O'Connor, much like he did in 2008 when he asked Dick Cheney to head a vice presidential nominee search committee and then offered the position to Cheney himself.¹⁸ Bill Maher, comedian and host of the HBO talk show *Real Time*, joked about Miers that Bush nominated his "cleaning lady" to the Supreme Court.¹⁹ Maher repeated the reference week after week, to the point that he delivered it with such apparent sincerity that a viewer who was unfamiliar with the particulars might

¹⁴ Timothy Williams, "Bush Names Counsel as Choice for Supreme Court," *New York Times*, October 3, 2005, retrieved on June 3, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/03/politics/politicsspecial1/03cnd-scotus.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*; Tom Curry, "Some Conservatives are Not Thrilled by Miers," *MSNBC*, October 4, 2005, retrieved on June 3, 2013, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/9536142/ns/us_news-the_changing_court/t/some-conservatives-not-thrilled-miers/#.UaylBUDVD_g.

¹⁷ Rush Limbaugh, Interview with Greta Van Susteren, *Fox News*, October 4, 2005, retrieved on June 3, 2013, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,171312,00.html>.

¹⁸ Curry.

¹⁹ Transcript, "American Morning," *CNN*, October 28, 2005, retrieved on June 3, 2013, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0510/28/ltm.05.html>.

interpret it literally.²⁰ By October 27, the White House announced that Miers asked Bush to withdraw her name from consideration amid criticism that stemmed, as the *Washington Post* reported, more from Bush's supporters than his detractors.²¹

During the Katrina and Miers incidents, Bush's popularity fell to 39 percent, which was the lowest to that point since he took office on January 20, 2001.²² Neither of those incidents, however, was attributable to the Republican Party as a whole. The timing of Bush's reaction to Katrina, and his appointment of Miers to the Supreme Court, which many in his own party criticized, were decisions based on circumstances and personal choices; they were not Republican political or ideological manifestations. Even the increasingly unpopular decision to invade Iraq was not entirely a Republican decision. As Bush's 2000 opponent, Al Gore, stated during their second debate, prompted by moderator Jim Lehrer, there was general concern about Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein amassing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs).²³ Moreover, when Bush asked Congress in 2003 for authority to use force against Iraq, eighty-two Democrats (40 percent) in the House of Representatives and twenty-nine senators (58 percent) in the Senate voted in favor of it.²⁴ Among the Democratic senators that sided with Bush were his 2004 opponent, John Kerry, and Obama's chief 2008 primary rival, Hillary Clinton.²⁵ Notably, Obama was not yet a senator and thus did not vote on that resolution, but at an

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Michael A. Fletcher and Charles Babington, "Miers, under Fire from Right, Withdrawn as Court Nominee," *Washington Post*, October 28, 2005, retrieved on June 3, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/27/AR2005102700547.html>.

²² Gallup.

²³ Bush-Gore Debate 2, C-SPAN, October 11, 2000, retrieved on December 15, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebat>.

²⁴ House of Representatives Roll Call, October 10, 2002, retrieved on June 3, 2013, <http://clerk.house.gov/evs/2002/roll455.xml>; Senate Roll Call, October 11, 2002, retrieved on June 3, 2013, http://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=107&session=2&vote=00237.

²⁵ Senate.gov.

antiwar rally in Chicago on October 26, 2004, he stated his opposition not to all wars, but to “dumb, rash” wars not based on reason but on passion.²⁶ “You want a fight, President Bush? Let’s finish the fight with bin Laden and al-Qaeda,” Obama added.²⁷ Obama’s consistent stance against the invasion of Iraq served him well in establishing his credentials as a candidate of change, which was different from the incumbent Bush, the Republican nominee McCain, and the Democratic favorite, Clinton.

The issue that most damaged Bush personally and the Republican Party ideologically occurred much closer to Election Day 2008: the sudden late-summer turmoil that threatened the American economy. Rampant lending to prospective homeowners in the 1980s and 1990s eventually led to individual defaults and foreclosures that affected large financial institutions as well as the stock market, and caused a recession that by September 2008 was being described as the nation’s worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.²⁸

Although Bush bore the brunt of the blame, as the crisis occurred during his presidency, critics began to question the very essence of a free market, especially the significant deregulation under President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, and through the Federal Reserve Bank, which was stewarded by Reagan’s appointee to chair that bank, Alan Greenspan, who retired in 2006.²⁹ Reagan and Greenspan were widely credited with releasing the market from excessive regulation, resulting in a largely uninterrupted

²⁶ Barack Obama, “Wars of Reason, Wars of Passion, Setting the Record Straight,” *Network Journal*, September 2004, retrieved on June 3, 2013, http://www.tnj.com/archives/2004/september2004/final_word.php.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Anonymous, “Great Depression 2.0,” *Time*, retrieved on June 3, 2013, http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1846697_1846700_1846652,00.html; Thomas M. Holbrook, “Incumbency, National Conditions, and the 2008 Presidential Election,” *Political Science and Politics*, Volume 41, No. 4 (October 2008), pp. 709-712.

²⁹ Larry Elliot, “Who’s to Blame for the Great Recession?” *Guardian*, February 3, 2012, retrieved on June 3, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2012/feb/03/who-caused-financial-crisis-great-recession>.

economic boom that lasted over twenty years.³⁰ As both leaders, Reagan in particular, championed the supply-side economics revolution, the 2008 crisis was largely blamed on excessive and unregulated lending and hence shook the very foundations of modern Republican ideology. Through September and October 2008, prior to Election Day, Bush's popularity fell below 30 percent for the first time, and at one point it was as low as 25.³¹ If Katrina and the Iraq War intensified opposition to Bush, the Miers nomination and the 2008 economic collapse, which quickly became known as the "Great Recession," eroded his popularity even among his once-ardent backers.³² Accordingly, with the election only weeks away, it seemed that change, specifically, electing a non-Republican, was welcome.

Those phenomena help to explain why Democrat Barack Obama defeated Republican John McCain, and are consistent with Abramowitz' Time for Change model. Perhaps the election's biggest surprise, however, was that Obama was in a position to contend in the general election to begin with, because the overwhelming favorite for the Democratic nomination was Hillary Clinton, the wife of the former president. A CNN poll less than three months before the start of the primaries indicated Clinton was the overwhelming favorite to win the nomination.³³ Clinton led the next-highest Democratic contender by thirty points, with 51 percent to 21 percent.³⁴ Within eight months, however, Obama surged and captured the nomination.³⁵

³⁰ *Ibid.* There was a recession from late 1989 to early 1992.

³¹ Gallup.

³² Elliot.

³³ Bill Schneider, "As Thompson's Star Fades, Clinton's is on the Rise," *CNN*, October 16, 2007, retrieved on June 3, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/10/16/schneider.poll/index.html>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Jennifer Parker, "Obama Clinches the Democratic Nomination," *ABC News*, June 3, 2008, retrieved on June 3, 2013, http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/Vote2008/story?id=4987177&page=1#.UazP0UDVD_g.

How did conditions change so dramatically in such a short period of time? To answer that question, it is important to understand the potential electability, or lack thereof, of Hillary Clinton. On the one hand, by 2008 she had topped Gallup's Most Admired Woman in the World for seven consecutive years.³⁶ First elected to the United States Senate in 2000, she became the only First Lady of the United States to hold public office.³⁷ She had more national political experience than Obama not only because she was in the Senate longer, but also because she was the spouse of a two-term president.

On the other hand, Hillary Clinton was a polarizing figure who infuriated female homemakers during her husband's 1992 presidential campaign with her derisive remark that she chose to be a professional woman rather than "stay[ing] home and bak[ing] cookies."³⁸ Shortly after taking office in 1993, President Clinton proposed health care reform, and assigned the project to a task force headed by his wife.³⁹ The task force's recommendation included a provision for the dramatically transformational measure of universal health care, and conservatives and libertarians, as well as various health care groups, deridingly referred to it as "Hillarycare."⁴⁰ The Democrat-led Congress

³⁶ Kristen A. Lee, "Hillary Clinton Tops Gallup Poll as Most Admired Woman in the World for 11th Consecutive Year," *New York Daily News*, December 31, 2012, retrieved on June 3, 2013, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/hillary-clinton-president-obama-top-admired-poll-article-1.1230182>.

³⁷ *Ibid.* Bill Clinton was elected as Governor of Arkansas in 1978 (at the time, it was a two-year term of office), lost his reelection bid in 1980, and won again in 1982, and 1986. He was president of the United States from 1993 to 2001, winning the 1992 and 1996 elections.

³⁸ Kirsten Swinth, "Hillary Clinton, Cookies and the Rise of Working Families," CNN, March 16, 2012, retrieved on June 3, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/16/opinion/swinth-hillary-clinton>.

³⁹ Daniel Berger, "Health Care Postponed," *Baltimore Sun*, December 31, 1992, retrieved on June 3, 2013, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1994-12-31/news/1994365085_1_health-care-health-care-group-health.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

conceded that it did not have enough support to become law, and it was abandoned in September.⁴¹

Nonetheless, Hillary Clinton's negatives did not neutralize the wide support that she (and Bill Clinton) maintained among voters, and particularly among Democrats. Her strengths seemingly outweighed her shortcomings enough to justify her status as the overwhelming favorite. That Hillary Clinton did not win the 2008 Democratic nomination underscores that it was indeed an election year of change.

In terms of organizational structure and strategy, Obama's success in the Democratic primary and general election is largely credited to his campaign's effective use of the Internet, and social media such as Facebook, to build a grass roots campaign that raised a great deal of money from young and often first-time voters, and outpaced his opponents' in deflecting negative publicity.⁴² This approach was yet another factor that rendered 2008 a year of such profound change. Sumitra Dutta and Matthew Fraser of *U.S. News & World Report* wrote that Obama was the first White House occupant "to have won a presidential election on the web."⁴³ The authors described how the Obama campaign relied on the Internet to generate a youth-based grass-roots support movement.⁴⁴ Martin Walker noted the significance of the grass roots movement: it was an equalizer to Clinton's superior campaign financial assets, as it did not take nearly as

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² David Carr, "How Obama Tapped into Social Networks' Power," *New York Times*, November 9, 2008, retrieved on June 4, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/10/business/media/10carr.html?_r=0. Carr wrote that Obama's use of social media networks created enough momentum to surpass Hillary Clinton and John McCain; Jose Antonio Vargas, "Obama Raised Half a Billion Online," *Washington Post*, November 20, 2008, retrieved on June 4, 2013, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/11/20/obama_raised_half_a_billion_on.html. Vargas wrote that Obama had over 3 million individual online donors that usually made modest donations, on average under \$100.

⁴³ Sumitra Dutta and Matthew Fraser, "President Obama and the Facebook Election," *U.S. News & World Report*, November 19, 2008, retrieved on November 12, 2014, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2008/11/19/barack-obama-and-the-facebook-election>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

much money to attract prospective voters through social media.⁴⁵ Obama's extensive use of the most significant form of media since television, was not the only catalyst to help secure his party's nomination. Also crucial was his message of change.

Michelle Bart aptly concluded that although Hillary Clinton had more experience, the people wanted change and Obama was their best hope.⁴⁶ One definition of change is to replace something faulty with something else.⁴⁷ In the case of political change in 2008, the "something faulty" was incumbent president George W. Bush and, as the polls indicated, his faultiness was linked directly and primarily (even though not exclusively) to the unpopularity of the Iraq War.⁴⁸ As a United States senator, Clinton voted to give Bush the authority to invade Iraq, whereas Obama was consistently opposed to the war.

Insofar as there was a desire for change in the spring of 2008, when Obama and Clinton competed for the Democratic nomination prior to the recession, the Iraq War was the primary concern on voters' minds, and Obama, not only by his rhetoric but also by his voting record, was, the clearest political antidote to Bush. Notably, the collapse of the economy in late summer 2008 took place after Obama had already secured the Democratic nomination. Had the economy faltered during primary season, perhaps the voters might have turned to Clinton instead, particularly if they linked her potential

⁴⁵ Martin Walker, "The Year of the Insurgents: The 2008 US Presidential Campaign," *International Affairs*, Volume 84, No. 6 (November 2008), pp. 1095-1107, 1096.

⁴⁶ Michelle Bart, "Obama-Biden: a Hope for Change!" *Huffington Post*, August 29, 2008, retrieved on June 4, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michelle-bart/obama-biden-a-hope-for-em_b_122304.html.

⁴⁷ Oxford Dictionary Online, retrieved on June 4, 2013, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/change?q=change>.

⁴⁸ Gallup.

success in stewarding the economy to her husband's performance in that capacity when he was president.⁴⁹

Another factor that represented change was Obama's considerable superiority in oratory skills compared to Bush: whereas Bush, even by his own admission, often "mangled" the English language, Obama was considered by some to be the greatest orator of his generation.⁵⁰ Humanities Professor Richard Macksey analyzed Obama's rhetoric further, concluding that even more than the eloquent delivery, Americans appreciated that the logic behind his arguments was easy to follow.⁵¹ That quality is consistent with Carlsson's determination that clear direction is vital in order for change to materialize.⁵² In terms of substance, Obama was considered a different kind of politician insofar as he was being "post-partisan."⁵³ After two bitterly divided elections, 2000, which Bush won with fewer total votes than Al Gore, and 2004 where he defeated

⁴⁹ Gallup, retrieved on September 30, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116584/presidential-approval-ratings-bill-clinton.aspx#1>. Clinton left office with a 66 percent approval rating, and his handling of the economy was considered his greatest strength.

⁵⁰ Stephanie Holmes, "Oratory and Originality," *BBC News*, November 18, 2008, retrieved on June 4, 2013, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7735014.stm>. Holmes wrote that rhetoric expert Ekaterina Haskins described Obama as the rhetorical descendant of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr.; Walker, 1095. Walker wrote that Obama's oratory prowess drew larger crowds that typically gathered to hear presidential candidates speak; Bush-Gore Debate 2, C-SPAN, October 11, 2000, retrieved on December 15, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebat>. Bush joked that he was known to "mangle a syllable or two"; for more discussion about presidents' oratory skills, see Elvin Lim, *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency: The Decline of Presidential Rhetoric from George Washington to George W. Bush*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008.

⁵¹ Richard Omara, "Deconstructing Obama's Oratorical Skills," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 26, 2009, retrieved on June 4, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/2009/0426/p02s03-usgn.html>.

⁵² Carlsson.

⁵³ Jonathan Weisman, "GOP Doubts, Fears, 'Post-Partisan' Obama," *Washington Post*, January 7, 2008, retrieved on June 4, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/06/AR2008010602402.html>; Michael Muskal, "Obama Takes Post-Partisan Theme, Runs with It," *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 2011, retrieved on June 4, 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/apr/04/news/la-pn-obama-reelection-post-partisan-20110405>; for more discussion about Obama and post-partisanship, see David C. Weiss, "In Defense of the Post-Partisan President: toward the Boundary between 'Partisan' Advantage and 'Political' Choice," *Brigham Young University Journal of Public Law*, Volume 24, pp. 259-312 (2010).

John Kerry by a slim margin, a truly post-partisan president would have been a dramatic change from the divisiveness that permeated American political culture.⁵⁴

To the extent that Obama's candidacy represented change, two of the four other components of the two major party tickets, Democratic running mate, Joe Biden, and Republican nominee, John McCain, were quintessential establishment politicians, at a combined age of 138 and with thirty-five years of combined experience in the United States Senate.⁵⁵ The only unusual aspect of either man's candidacy was that McCain, if elected, would have been seventy-three years old on Inauguration Day 2009, and the oldest person ever to be sworn in as president for the first time.⁵⁶ Otherwise, Biden and McCain firmly embodied the Washington establishment. McCain's choice of running mate, however, underscored that change was the prevalent theme of the 2008 election.

McCain's announcement of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as the Republican vice presidential nominee immediately prompted a barrage of reactions. McCain's campaign thought it a high-risk but high-reward strategy for various reasons. Only the second woman ever to be nominated for vice president of the United States by a major party, Palin emphasized in her first public speech after accepting McCain's offer that "the women of America aren't finished yet and we can shatter that glass ceiling once and for all." The McCain campaign hoped that she would attract female voters who were disappointed that Hillary Clinton was not the Democratic nominee and were skeptical of Obama.⁵⁷ Moreover, only forty-four years old at the time, Palin more than bridged the

⁵⁴ David Leip's Presidential Atlas. Bush lost the popular vote in 2000 and won it by less than 3 percent in 2004.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Ronald Reagan left office at age 77 but was only 69 when he was inaugurated, on January 20, 1981.

⁵⁷ Rick Klein, "Sarah Who? Why John McCain picked VP Palin," *Washington Post*, August 29, 2008, retrieved on June 3, 2013, http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/Conventions/story?id=5686244&page=1#.Ua4SVEDVD_g. In her speech, Palin cited both Clinton and the first female major party vice presidential nominee (in 1988), Geraldine Ferraro.

age gap between the forty-seven-year-old Obama and the septuagenarian McCain.⁵⁸ Perhaps even more importantly, Palin, a self-described populist who lived a simple life of relatively modest means, compared favorably to McCain, who was considerably wealthier and whom the Obama campaign portrayed as being out of touch with the problems of ordinary people, much like the Clinton campaign did to the elder Bush in 1992, and much like the stigma that haunted the younger Bush following Katrina.⁵⁹ The Democrats, on the other hand, relished the notion that Palin, formerly mayor of her small hometown, Wasilla, Alaska, was far too inexperienced for national politics.⁶⁰ Obama staffers also expected that Palin's vice presidential debate against Joe Biden would present a tremendous advantage to the Democratic ticket.⁶¹ The fact that strategists immediately thought about the debates' implications as soon as Palin was chosen, demonstrated how far the debates had advanced in terms of their prominent role in presidential campaigns.

Prior to the Biden-Palin debate, however, the frontrunners competed against one another onstage on September 26. In a poll that reinforced the theory that the debates do, in fact, matter, four out of ten voters proclaimed that the debates were important in their decision for whom to vote, according to a *Wall Street Journal/NBC News* pre-debate poll.⁶² Anne Kornblut and Robert Barnes of the *Washington Post* determined that the economic crisis heightened the stakes of the debate, and their *Post* colleague

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*; Peter Goldman, Thomas DeFrank, *et al.*, *Quest for the Presidency 1992*, College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1994, 644. Goldman wrote that the Clinton campaign focused on portraying Bush as not being sensitive to the economic plight of average Americans.

⁶⁰ Klein.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*; John Heilemann and Mark Halperin, *Game Change*, New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010, 370. Heilemann and Halperin wrote that McCain's staff frantically rushed to give Palin an "extreme makeover" in time for the debate with Biden.

⁶² Meckler, Laura, Holmes, Elizabeth, *et al.*, "Obama, McCain Spar on War, Financial Crisis in First Debate," *Wall Street Journal*, September 27, 2008, 1.

Dan Balz, citing various gaffes made in previous debate seasons, from Nixon's five o'clock shadow in 1960 to Gore's incessant sighing in 2000, which he deemed as doing serious damage to the candidates' respective campaigns, identified the debates as "enormously important."⁶³

It is valuable to pay attention to theories pertaining to the campaign and to the candidates, particularly as they are revealed in the debates. Kevin Coe and Michael Reietzes wrote that Obama's message of hope and change transcended not only race but also, more widely, partisan politics.⁶⁴ James Campbell determined that Obama's victory was less ideological, as – more voters described themselves as right of center than left of center, thus more closely linked to McCain's point of view – than it was a decision to change from the *status quo*, and they perceived Obama as the best choice to generate such change.⁶⁵ Thomas Holbrook pointed out that because Bush himself was not on the ballot, the backlash against the status quo might not be as pronounced because McCain, at least to some extent, was also a change from Bush.⁶⁶ Through the debates, Obama clearly and repeatedly represented himself as the agent of change while portraying McCain as an extension of Bush.

As the first debate approached, it remained unclear whether it would take place at all, because McCain announced that he would forgo the debate in order to return to Washington to attend a White House meeting for an emergency \$700 billion economic

⁶³ Anne E. Kornblut and Robert Barnes, "Stakes of Presidential Nominees' First Debate May Now Be Higher," *Washington Post*, September 26, 2008, 6; Dan Balz, "8 Question about the Debates," *Washington Post*, September 26, 2008, 4.

⁶⁴ Kevin Coe and Michael Reietzes, "Obama on the Stump: Features and Determinants of a Rhetorical Approach," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Volume 40, No. 3 (September 2010), pp. 391-413, 392.

⁶⁵ James E. Campbell, "The Exceptional Election of 2008: Performance, Values, and Crisis," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Volume 40, pp. 225-246, 244.

⁶⁶ Holbrook, 709.

rescue plan.⁶⁷ Obama attended that same meeting, but said that he would return to Oxford, Mississippi, the site of the debate in order to participate, regardless of whether a resolution was reached.⁶⁸ Obama maintained a five-point lead in a Gallup poll over McCain, with 49 to 44 percent, and the lead jumped to 50 to 42 percent, the day before the debate, when it remained uncertain whether McCain would take part.⁶⁹ Ironically, if there was one quality associated with Bush from which McCain would benefit from being linked, it was decisiveness.⁷⁰ That he was ambivalent about whether or not to debate due to the economic crisis did not project the image of strong unwavering leadership under pressure.

The debate did occur, with both candidates present, at the University of Mississippi in Oxford. Jim Lehrer, who had moderated at least one debate in every season since 1992, resumed his customary role in facilitating the opening debate.⁷¹ The candidates emerged from opposite sides of the auditorium and met at center stage to shake hands. The interaction was brief, as neither man particularly evoked warmth. Even in 2000, when George W. Bush and Al Gore had two awkward stage entrances, their handshakes, by comparison, exuded friendlier undertones.⁷² Although the debate was

⁶⁷ Michael D. Shear and Jonathan Weisman, "Debate Still in Limbo as Democrats Blame McCain for Interrupting Process," *Washington Post*, September 26, 2008, 1.

⁶⁸ Larry Eichel, "The Debate? Obama Says Yes; McCain is a Maybe," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 26, 2008.

⁶⁹ Gallup Poll, 2008 Election, retrieved on June 4, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/107674/gallup-daily-election-2008.aspx>.

⁷⁰ Ronald Brownstein, "Bush Leads Kerry Going into Debate," *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 2004, 1. Brownstein wrote that voters valued decisiveness and in the 2004 election thought Bush was more decisive than John Kerry.

⁷¹ Obama-McCain Debate 1, September 26, 2008, C-SPAN, retrieved on February 23, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebate2>. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source. Lehrer moderated every opening debate since 1988.

⁷² Bush-Gore Debate 1, October 3, 2000, C-SPAN, retrieved on November 14, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/159295-1>; Bush-Gore Debate 3, C-SPAN, October 17, 2000, retrieved on December 22, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebate>. In their first and third debates, Bush's faster walking pace caused him to walk beyond the stage's midpoint, prompting Gore to lean in during their handshake and presumably ask Bush to step back.

originally planned to focus more on foreign policy, the looming financial crisis dominated the news, as well as the first debate. Lehrer asked Obama to explain his position, and the challenger described the situation as a “defining moment in our history,” because the nation was involved in two wars and the “worst financial crisis since the Great Depression.” Quite significantly, Obama added that the looming crisis “is a final verdict on eight years of failed economic policies promoted by George Bush and supported by Senator McCain.” By connecting McCain to the sitting president, George W. Bush, Obama argued that McCain’s promise that he was going to lead “is kind of hard to swallow,” Obama firmly set the tone in the debate by establishing himself as the candidate of change.⁷³ Although McCain was neither the sitting president nor vice president and therefore also represented change, his support of Bush’s foreign and domestic policies essentially rendered him the *de facto* incumbent candidate, and Obama used the debate’s opening moments to underscore that contention.⁷⁴

If Obama failed to assert himself in the first debate it was during instances when both men spoke at the same time. Amid the noise their combined voices generated, as McCain’s treble tenor overpowered Obama’s velvety baritone, Obama generally relented: he refrained from speaking until McCain was done. The simultaneous delivery did more harm than good to both men: McCain appeared to be a temperamental old grouch who got his way by shouting loudest, and Obama a meek and subservient underling who retreated from confrontation. Tom Shales of the *Washington Post* viewed McCain’s demeanor as “condescending and even rude,” and thought that Obama was too accommodating in letting McCain get away with it, describing the Democrat’s

⁷³ Meckler, September 27, 2008.

⁷⁴ Obama-McCain 1.

behavior as “sportsmanlike conduct run amok.”⁷⁵ Chris Jones of the *Chicago Tribune*, though, found the complexity and independence of McCain’s character further revealed by the debate, particularly when “he grits his teeth, gets control of himself, and then progressively ratchets up the emotional underpinning of his rhetoric.”⁷⁶

Obama continued questioning why the public ought to take McCain at his word that he would do things differently than he had been doing for the previous eight years.⁷⁷ McCain responded by describing himself “a maverick of the Senate,” and, insisting that he, too, represented change, mentioned his running mate, Sarah Palin: “I’m happy to say that I’ve got a partner that’s a good maverick along with me now.” Obama pressed the issue, however: “You said that we were going to be greeted as liberators [in Iraq]. You were wrong,” Obama continued, as he asked the voters to consider who the best person was to decide how to use the American military wisely.⁷⁸ Obama’s theme was threefold: argue that the *status quo* was flawed, that McCain perpetuated it, and that only he, Obama, would bring about change for the better. In the truncated ninety-minute campaign microcosm of a presidential debate, Obama was able to link all three components of that message.

There was virtual consensus among post-debate analysts, as Jim Rutenberg of the *New York Times* described, that there was no clear winner.⁷⁹ A *Los Angeles Times* editorial deemed it “gaffe-free” and too close to call.⁸⁰ E.J. Dionne of the *Washington Post* gave Obama a slight edge in the debate because he fared well in the first debate,

⁷⁵ Tom Shales, “McCain’s High Horse Meets Obama’s High-Mindedness,” *Washington Post*, September 27, 2008, 1.

⁷⁶ Jones, Chris, “More than Meets the Eye,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 27, 2008, 8.

⁷⁷ Obama-McCain, 1. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

⁷⁸ Obama-McCain 1.

⁷⁹ Jim Rutenberg, “A Day after McCain and Obama Face Off, a Debate over Who Won,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2008, 26.

⁸⁰ Editorial, “Too Close to Call,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 2008, 20.

and for doing well in foreign policy, which was McCain's forte.⁸¹ Michael Shear and Murray Shailagh, also of the *Post*, and Larry Eichel of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* credited Obama for linking McCain's proposed policies to Bush's existing ones.⁸²

The views conveyed by the general public that viewed the debate, however, were markedly different from those of the analysts: a CNN poll scored Obama the debate winner by a margin of 51 to 38 percent, but a CBS poll among undecided voters only indicated that Obama won 39-24 percent.⁸³ A *Los Angeles Times*/Bloomberg poll also indicated that Obama benefited from the debate: Obama won the category of honesty and integrity 43 to 34 percent, whereas his and McCain's standing was even a few days earlier.⁸⁴

Regarding the financial crisis, Obama led McCain by six points, 45 to 39 percent, as the candidate more likely to handle it capably, but his lead doubled, 48 to 36 percent, after the debate.⁸⁵ Obama also improved his poll numbers in the ability to handle an international crisis, edging McCain 34 to 32 percent.⁸⁶ As in 1996, when political analysts deemed the first Bill Clinton-Bob Dole debate a draw, but television experts scored it heavily in Clinton's favor, the majority of Americans might be less concerned about the technical details that Obama and McCain discussed and more impressed by Obama's more effective message: that he was the candidate of change, even if most

⁸¹ E.J. Dionne, Jr., "Obama Holds His Own on Foreign Policy," *Washington Post*, Sept. 29, 2008, 19.

⁸² Michael Shear and Murray Shailagh, "In First Debate, Candidates Quarrel on Iraq," *Washington Post*, September 27, 2008, 1; Eichel, "Friday Night Fight," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 27, 2008, 1.

⁸³ Eichel, "McCain Still Looking for his Breakthrough," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 28, 2008, 1.

⁸⁴ Noam N. Levey, "Obama Nudges His Lead Since Debate," *Los Angeles Times*, September 28, 2008, 8.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

effectively by default, and his argument that McCain would merely be an extension of the Bush presidency.⁸⁷

Notably, Fred Barnes, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, praised Obama for making no consequential mistakes in his maiden debate.⁸⁸ Barnes' observation exemplified the role of gaffes ever since the beginning of the debate era: discussed and often magnified by the media, days and even weeks after they were made. Barnes' point reinforced the notion that the press paid attention to gaffes, thereby underscoring the importance of avoiding them.

The Biden-Palin event also reflected change, as it was not only the most-watched debate of the 2008 season, but was also the most-watched vice presidential debate in any season and second only to Reagan-Carter in 1980 as the most-watched debate overall. A staggering sixty-nine million viewers watched the Biden-Palin debate, far exceeding the average forty-two million viewership of a running mates' debate.⁸⁹ That Reagan-Carter attracted more viewers than any other debate is not surprising, as it was the only season since the debates began in 1960 in which the major party contenders faced each other only once, in every other instance they met at least twice, often thrice, and in 1960, four times. The vice presidents, on the other hand, never debated more than once per season, yet none of the other contests came close to attracting the television audience of the Biden-Palin event. What attracted so many more millions to that one? Essentially, it was to see whether or not Sarah Palin would fail – whether she

⁸⁷ Stephen Seplow, "Evaluating the Outcome Sparks a Debate of its Own," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 8, 1996, 8. Seplow described that television critics Tom Shales and Howard Rosenberg, and television news writer Frazier Moore thought Clinton did a decidedly better job than Dole in the debate.

⁸⁸ Fred Barnes, "The Takeaway from the First Debate," *Wall Street Journal*, September 29, 2008, 25.

⁸⁹ Newton N. Minow and Craig J. Lamay, *Inside the Presidential Debates*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 152-164.

would continue to inject life into the McCain campaign, or stumble more evidently than James Stockdale did in 1992.⁹⁰

On September 3, Palin made a strong impression on Republican voters in accepting the vice presidential nomination at their party's convention.⁹¹ Watching on a television backstage, an elated McCain shouted "she's incredible," and in the ensuing days glowed about her presence on the ticket, perpetuating the election year's theme: "change is coming, my friends."⁹² Palin made such an impact on the national electorate that Obama staffers were stunned, truly appreciating for the first time how Hillary Clinton's campaign must have felt when Obama emerged so suddenly as the unexpected phenomenon a few months earlier.⁹³

Two subsequent interviews, however, one with Charles Gibson of *ABC News* and the other with Katie Couric of *CBS News*, damaged Palin's credibility as well as McCain's. In the Gibson interview, Palin appeared confused when Gibson asked her what she thought of the Bush Doctrine.⁹⁴ Palin appeared confused about the question, as if she did not know what the Bush Doctrine was, and responded: "in what respect, Charlie?"⁹⁵ Moreover, when Gibson asked Palin about Russia, she said that Russia and Alaska are next-door neighbors: when Gibson pressed how Alaska's proximity might give her

⁹⁰ Howard Rosenberg, "Clashes Put 'Danger' Back into Debates," *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1992, 12; Robin Toner, "Quayle and Gore Exchange Sharp Attacks in the Debate," *New York Times*, October 14, 1992, 1. Rosenberg and Toner both described how Stockdale seemed completely bewildered in the 1992 running mates debate and looked completely out of place.

⁹¹ Heilemann and Halperin, 372.

⁹² Heilemann and Halperin, 373.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Charles Gibson Interview with Sarah Palin, *ABC News*, September 12, 2008, retrieved on June 8, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/video/gibson-interviews-palin-part-5793131>; Steven Weisman, "President Bush and the Middle East Axis of Ambiguity," *New York Times*, April 13, 2002, 2. The Bush Doctrine was President George W. Bush's declaration that the United States would defend itself, possibly including launching preemptive strikes, against nations that harbored or otherwise assisted terrorists.

⁹⁵ Gibson Interview with Palin.

special insight into Russia, as Gibson said McCain suggested in an earlier interview, Palin responded “you can actually see Russia from land here in Alaska.”⁹⁶

Palin faced a great deal of criticism following the interview, including inaccurate allusions that Gibson asked Palin a general question about what made her qualified about foreign policy and she referenced Alaska’s proximity to Russia accordingly. Gibson stated that McCain told him in a September 3 interview, in response to Palin’s foreign policy experience: “Alaska is right next to Russia. She understands that. Look, Sen. Obama's never visited south of our border. I mean, please.”⁹⁷ United States Senator Chuck Hagel, a Republican from Nebraska, who became increasingly critical of Bush’s foreign policy, ridiculed Palin, stating that it was insulting to the American people for her to say that she had foreign policy experience because “I can look out my window and see Russia.”⁹⁸ The *Washington Post* also wrote that “Democrats have taken issue with Palin's claim to national security credentials because of her state's proximity to Russia,” although it was McCain, not Palin, who made that claim.⁹⁹ Moreover, Palin never claimed, as Hagel suggested, that she could see Russia from her window, although his comment was later made famous by comedienne Tina Fey on the television comedy show *Saturday Night Live*, when, in a skit portraying Palin, she said: “I can see Russia from my house!”¹⁰⁰ In her 2009 memoir, *Going Rogue*, Palin claimed

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Charles Gibson Interview with John McCain, September 3, 2008, retrieved on June 8, 2013, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/Conventions/story?id=5715542&page=3>.

⁹⁸ Mary Lu Carnevale, “Sen. Hagel: It’s a ‘Stretch’ to Say Palin is Qualified,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 8, 2008, retrieved on June 13, 2013, <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2008/09/18/sen-hagel-its-a-stretch-to-say-palin-is-qualified>.

⁹⁹ Zachary A. Goldfarb, “A Day of Debating Palin’s Qualifications,” *Washington Post*, September 14, 2008, retrieved on June 8, 2013, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/the-talk/2008/09/by_zachary_a_goldfarb_alaska.html.

¹⁰⁰ Corky Siemazko, “Sarah Palin and Impersonator Tina Fey Top List of 2008’s Best Quotations,” *New York Daily News*, December 15, 2008, retrieved on June 8, 2013,

that people often mistook Fey's spoof for Palin's actual words.¹⁰¹ Juxtaposed with Bill Maher's remark about Harriet Miers being Bush's "cleaning lady," Fey's skit exemplifies the effect comedy can have, particularly on voters who are not well enough informed to distinguish satire from reality.

Nonetheless, in her September 24-25 interview with Couric, Palin did not downplay her comment regarding Alaska's proximity to Russia. When Russia enters United States airspace, Palin said, "where do they go? It's Alaska. It's just right over the border. It is from Alaska that we send those out to make sure that an eye is being kept on this very powerful nation, Russia, because they are right there, they are right next to our state."¹⁰² When Couric asked Palin which newspapers she read, Palin was not specific: "all of them, any of them, the same ones you read."¹⁰³ Palin then defended Alaska, insisting that the state is not some obscure, uninformed part of the world, but rather a microcosm of America.¹⁰⁴

Though Palin's irritability in the Couric interview appeared more attributable to defensiveness about Alaska than anger about being peppered with questions, many observers assailed her candidacy: the *Washington Post's* E.J. Dionne wrote that she was "spectacularly unprepared for a national campaign and embarrassingly inarticulate and unreflective."¹⁰⁵ Even renowned conservative columnist George Will declared that Palin was "obviously unqualified" to hold an office (the vice presidency) that might

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/sarah-palin-impersonator-tina-fey-top-list-2008-best-quotations-article-1.356865#ixzz2Vek7UgyH>.

¹⁰¹ Sarah Palin, *Going Rogue*, New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009, 309.

¹⁰² Sarah Palin interview with Katie Couric, *CBS News*, September 24-25, 2008, retrieved on June 8, 2013, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-18563_162-4479062.html.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Dionne, "McCain's Lost Chance," *Washington Post*, September 29, 2008, retrieved on June 13, 2013, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2008-09-29/opinions/36802834_1_words-middle-class-john-mccain-dial-group.

require her to assume the duties of the president at any moment.¹⁰⁶ Catalina Camia of the *USA Today* wrote that as Palin's lack of information about world events, or at least the perception thereof, continued to grow, not only was her momentum thwarted, but McCain's judgment for picking her was seriously questioned.¹⁰⁷ A *Washington Post/ABC News* poll revealed that 60 percent of respondents were concerned that she was not ready to be president if required.¹⁰⁸ More tellingly, roughly half were concerned about McCain's age, and 85 percent of those did not think Palin was ready to replace him if he were to die or become incapacitated in office.¹⁰⁹ The concerns intensified amid reports that McCain, a skin cancer survivor, might have a high risk of recurrence during the ensuing eight years, which was conceivably the length of time he would be president if elected to a maximum of two terms.¹¹⁰ Kathleen Parker of the *Washington Post* observed that the economic crisis that had exacerbated between Palin's acceptance speech and the debates warranted a far more detailed look into Palin's readiness.¹¹¹ Michael Smerconish was heartened that the debate would finally uncover Palin from the intense shield the McCain campaign provided, especially after her Gibson and Couric interviews.¹¹²

¹⁰⁶ Nico Pitney and Sam Stein, "George Will: Palin Not Qualified," *Huffington Post*, October 1, 2008, retrieved on June 8, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/09/30/george-will-palin-is-not_n_130647.html.

¹⁰⁷ Catalina Camia, "McCain Adviser: Palin Was 'High Risk, High Reward,'" *USA Today*, May 16, 2012, retrieved on June 8, 2013, <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/onpolitics/post/2012/05/Sarah-Palin-vice-president-vetting-John-McCain--694923/1#.UbOVxee1Eto>.

¹⁰⁸ Jon Cohen and Jennifer Agiesta, "Skepticism of Palin Growing, Poll Finds," *Washington Post*, October 2, 2008, 1.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ David Brown, "Questions Linger about McCain's Prognosis after Skin Cancer," *Washington Post*, October 18, 2004, 4.

¹¹¹ Kathleen Parker, "The Palin Problem," *Washington Post*, September 28, 2008, B7.

¹¹² Michael Smerconish, "A Clever Strategy for Keeping Access to Palin So Controlled?" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 28, 2008, C3.

On the other hand, Palin proved a formidable debater in her Alaska Gubernatorial campaign, and Biden was prone to making gaffes.¹¹³ Moreover, although Biden could criticize her perceived lack of experience and preparation for national office, he had to be careful not to appear to be an overbearing chauvinist, as George H.W. Bush seemed to some observers in his debate in 1988 against the only other female major party vice presidential nominee, Geraldine Ferraro.¹¹⁴ It is not as if Ferraro was meek or docile to any extent, but Palin, was known as “Sarah Barracuda,” and was famous for her rugged outdoor lifestyle, which including hunting moose, and for battling Alaska’s predominantly male political establishment.¹¹⁵ In her acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, Palin described herself as a hockey mom and added: “You know [what] they say the difference [is] between a hockey mom and a pit bull? Lipstick.”¹¹⁶ A far less significant factor than Palin’s gender was the energy she inspired among her supporters and the ridicule she inspired among her detractors.

Cathleen Decker of the *Los Angeles Times* accounted for all of those factors in concluding that the Biden-Palin debate was bound to be critical to the campaign,

¹¹³ Joel Millman, “Palin Proved a Formidable Foe in Alaska Debates,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 1, 2008, 14; Tom Braun and Tom Hamburger, “In Debate, Palin Can Unnerve Foes, Aides,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 2008, 1; Lisa Wangsness, “Biden Gaffes Leave Democrats with Mixed Emotions,” *Boston Globe*, October 1, 2008, 8; Katharine Q. Seelye, “Though an Experienced Debater, Biden is Often Tripped up by Spontaneity,” *New York Times*, October 1, 2008, 20.

¹¹⁴ Amy Chozick, “Biden Hunkers Down to Prepare for Debate,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 2, 2008, 11. Chozick wrote that Biden would have to be formidable without appearing like a sexist bully; Richard L. Vernaci, “Debate Advice: Keep it Simple,” Associated Press, Sep. 24, 1988. Vernaci wrote that Ferraro herself recalled how difficult a challenge Bush endured in appearing strong but not overbearing. Ferraro retorted that Bush not “patronize” her when he pointed out a foreign policy technicality; Perry Bacon, Jr., “Biden, Aides Focus on Tone of Debate,” *Washington Post*, October 2, 2008, 4. Biden consulted with Ferraro and Hillary Clinton in his pre-debate preparations.

¹¹⁵ Dan Beucke, “McCain’s VP Choice, Sarah Barracuda,” *Business Week*, August 29, 2008, retrieved on June 13, 2013, http://www.businessweek.com/election/2008/blog/archives/2008/08/mccains_vp_choi.html. “Sarah Barracuda,” Beucke wrote, was a nickname she received because of her aggressive play and ferocious defense on her high school basketball team.

¹¹⁶ Sarah Palin’s Vice Presidential Acceptance Speech at the Republican National Convention, September 3, 2008, retrieved on June 8, 2013, http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/president/conventions/videos/20080903_PALIN_SPEECH.html.

particularly insofar as the running mates' performances would reflect the frontrunners' judgment in selecting them.¹¹⁷ With that notion, the unusually high interest in a running mates' debate went beyond any fascination of watching a candidate appear entirely out of sorts; it was also a concern for the country's well-being if that candidate were to be next in line to the presidency. As the October 2 running mates' debate neared, the dominant element was the public's intense curiosity about how "the worst vice presidential nominee in US history," as Robert Elisberg referred to Palin, would fare.¹¹⁸

The debate took place at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri; Gwen Ifill of PBS, who moderated the Cheney-Edwards debate in 2004, was the moderator.¹¹⁹ As the candidates emerged from opposite ends of the auditorium and met at center stage to shake hands, Palin's hearty, energetic voice could be heard above the applause, asking her opponent if it was alright with him if she called him "Joe." Palin quickly injected warmth and personal charisma into the debate, and a type of personal connection that Danielle Ifert Johnson described as a feminine rhetorical style.¹²⁰ Palin quickly and firmly established herself as a candidate of change in her own right, most dramatically in the way she chose to field Ifill's questions.. Plainly defying Ifill's directives, she said: "I may not answer the question the way that...you want to hear, but I'm going to talk straight to the American people." Essentially, Palin unabashedly

¹¹⁷ Cathleen Decker, "VP Debate Could Be Politically Pivotal," *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 2008, 14.

¹¹⁸ Robert J. Elisberg, "The Worst Vice-Presidential Nominee in U.S. History," *Huffington Post*, August 29, 2008, retrieved on June 8, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-j-elisberg/the-worst-vice-presidenti_b_122491.html.

¹¹⁹ Biden-Palin Debate, October 2, 2008, C-SPAN, retrieved on March 3, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/VicePresidentialCandidate>. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

¹²⁰ Danette Ifert Johnson, "Feminine Style in Presidential Debate Discourse, 1960–2000," *Communication Quarterly*, Volume 53 No. 1, pp. 3-20 (2005); for more discussion about the feminine rhetorical style, see Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Volume 59 (1971), pp. 74-86.

unleashed her own set of rules. She did not jump to the moderator's command; instead, she use the debate as an opportunity for straight talk, an intimate conversation, albeit one viewed by a television audience of tens of millions, between her and the American people. Seemingly flustered by Palin's unexpected audacity, at one point in response to self-directed soliloquies, Ifill coldly snapped "okay, our time is up here."

In addition to taking it upon herself to create her own debate rules, Palin also invoked change with her message of populism. She spoke of predatory lenders, greed and corruption on Wall Street, and the need for "Joe Six Pack and hockey moms across the nation...to band together and say 'never again.'"¹²¹ Palin continued to rail against Wall Street, proclaiming herself a "Main Streeter" rallying the working class to stick together and remain vigilant. Then, in another unprecedented act, Palin proceeded to say that there were "huge blunders in the [Iraq] war. There were huge blunders throughout this administration, as there are with every administration." Never before in debate history did a debater so brashly criticize an incumbent administration of the same political party. Accordingly, Palin, to some extent, eclipsed even Obama as the 2008 candidate of change, and reminiscent of Holbrook's contention, change from the incumbent president's own party.

Biden, in turn, referred to McCain as a good man, but one for whom the answer to any economic problem "is that tried and true Republican response, deregulate, deregulate." As Palin continue to assail the Democratic ticket, Biden said that he did not even know where to begin responding. Biden did so in an appropriate tone, however. He did not appear frustrated, nor was he mocking Palin – even though, paradoxically,

¹²¹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, retrieved on June 10, 2013, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/joe%20six-pack>. "Joe Six-Pack" is a term used to describe a blue-collar worker (presumably drinking a six-pack of beer).

he flashed a wide smile at seemingly inopportune times, much like Nixon and George W. Bush did in the 1960 and 2004 debates, respectively.

Though hardly a major issue in the campaign, same-sex marriage became a topic for discussion in the debates for the second consecutive debate season, since McCain introduced it in the Cheney-Edwards debate.¹²² Both Palin and Biden expressed disdain for hateful attitudes toward homosexuals, but neither thought the definition of marriage ought to apply to any union other than that between one man and one woman. Biden, in fact, praised Palin for her position and said “we really don’t have a difference.” The issue epitomized a rather civil tone in the debate, less caustic than the Dick Cheney-John Edwards contest four years earlier, and more reminiscent of the highly civil Al Gore-Jack Kemp and Cheney-Joe Lieberman running mates’ debates of 1996 and 2000, respectively. Moreover, its inclusion in the discussion demonstrated the progressively impactful role the debates play not only in the campaign, but also in a wider context, that is, their contributions to American political culture.

An issue of greater concern to more Americans, as the polls reflected, was the exit strategy in Iraq. Palin reminded the viewers that Obama was against the 2007 troop surge that turned the tide in America’s favor, and pointed to Biden’s criticism of Obama during the Democratic primaries for not voting to fund the troops. Biden was a candidate for the Democratic nomination before withdrawing from the race and supporting Obama, who later selected him as his running mate. Palin also emphasized that Biden supported McCain on a lot of foreign policy matters and that Biden said he was honored to be on the same ticket with him. Palin’s timing and delivery were impeccable; with

¹²² Cheney-Edwards Debate, C-SPAN, October 5, 2004, retrieved on February 4, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/FullSc>.

apparently no plausible counter, Biden simply laughed sheepishly. Palin continued her attack, chiding Obama for not admitting that the surge worked.

Biden's retort was that instead of focusing on the surge, the more important point was that Obama, unlike Bush and McCain, was correct that the United States should not have invaded Iraq in the first place. That exchange effectively summarized the campaigns' respective stances about the war in Iraq: The McCain-Palin team criticized their opponents for not having faith in the surge, and Obama and Biden responded by assailing the Republicans for starting the war in the first place, thereby reinforcing their image as candidates of change. To that end, Biden linked McCain's policies to Bush's, declaring that they were essentially one and the same. "I've haven't heard how [McCain's] policy is going to be different than George Bush's...so far, it is the same as George Bush's" Biden said, putting Palin on the defensive.¹²³ By underscoring that nexus in the running mates' contest, Biden characterized the Democratic ticket as the one that represented change, as Obama did in his first debate against McCain.

As the debate progressed, Palin increased her plain speaking, at one point awkwardly combining two well-known lines: "say it ain't so, Joe, there you go again": the former a folklore phrase and the latter Reagan's line to Carter in their 1980 debate. Palin even said "[n]ow doggone it," as she continued smiling, even seemingly suppressing an outright stream of giggles, and gave a "shout-out to all those third graders at Gladys Wood Elementary School, you get extra credit for watching the debate."¹²⁴ Somewhat peculiarly, on at least four occasions, she tilted her head slightly sideways and downward, flashed a smile, and winked as she made her point. Though

¹²³ Biden-Palin.

¹²⁴ Reagan-Carter Debate, October 28, 1980, C-SPAN, retrieved on June 5, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33229-1>. Gladys Wood Elementary School is in Anchorage, AK.

that was hardly a contentious gesture, such as Al Gore's sighs in 2000 and George W. Bush's scowls were in 2004, it added to Palin's uniqueness as a debater. Horst Arndt and Richard Wayne Janney described sighing as a "vocal characterizer of a disruptive nature," but Palin's smile and winks do not fall into that category, because, though possibly distracting, they are not the polemic or abrasive gestures of sighs, scowls, and the other types of nonverbal communication to which Arndt and Janney referred.¹²⁵

With unanimity, the press described the debate as cordial, concluded that neither candidate made any notable blunder, and focused on Palin avoiding a disastrous performance. The *New York Times* acknowledged in an editorial that there were never lower expectations for a debater's performance than for Palin, and the *Wall Street Journal* determined that Palin disappointed those who wanted to see her fail.¹²⁶ Political correspondents for the *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, and *Wall Street Journal* concurred that the debate was essentially even.¹²⁷

A *Boston Globe* editorial, titled "For Palin, Catastrophe Averted," noted that Palin achieved the moral victory she needed by avoiding any major gaffes.¹²⁸ Other analyses focused on the populism she injected into the campaign, to a greater extent than at any

¹²⁵ Horst Arndt and Richard Wayne Janney, *Intergrammar*, Berlin, Germany: Walter De Gruyeter & Company, 1987, 227.

¹²⁶ Editorial, "The Vice Presidential Debate," *New York Times*, October 3, 2008, 24; Editorial, "Free Sarah Palin," *Wall Street Journal*, October 3, 2008, 20.

¹²⁷ Susan Milligan and Scott Helman, "No Fatal Slips as Biden, Palin Tussle for the Title of Reformer," *Boston Globe*, October 3, 2008, 1; James Oliphant, "The Winner...It's Debatable," *Chicago Tribune*, October 3, 2008, 1; Cathleen Decker and Michael Finnegan, "Biden, Palin Trade Jabs in Fight for Middle Class," *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 2008, 1; Patrick Healy, "Cordial but Pointed, Palin and Biden Face off," *New York Times*, October 3, 2008, 1; Joseph Shulman, "No Harm, No Foul at the VP Debate," *Wall Street Journal*, October 3, 2008, 1.

¹²⁸ Editorial, "For Palin, Catastrophe Averted," *Boston Globe*, October 3, 2008, 14; Adam Nagourney, "Surviving One Test," *New York Times*, October 3, 2008, 1; Peter Wallsten, "A 'Heckuva' Night, Palin Holds Her Own in Debate," *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 2008, 1. Nagourney and Wallsten also wrote that Palin did well by avoiding any notable blunders.

time since Ross Perot's candidacy in 1992, particularly by referring to "Joe Six-Pack."¹²⁹ A notable factor, conspicuous by its omission, was that no one thought that Biden performed poorly. The eight-point lead Obama held over McCain ever since the latter's ambivalence about partaking in the first debate barely changed after the frontrunners' first contest, and Biden did not hurt the ticket by his own debate performance.¹³⁰

With the curiosity about Sarah Palin somewhat abated, attention turned again to the frontrunners. As the second Obama-McCain debate neared, less than a month before the election, Obama continued to enjoy a ten-point Gallup poll lead.¹³¹ A *Wall Street Journal/NBC News* poll tabulated a closer race, with Obama leading 49 to 43 percent, and 33 percent of respondents said they were confident in Obama's ability to handle the economic crisis, as compared to only 25 percent for McCain.¹³²

The town hall debate, at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, moderated by *NBC News*' Tom Brokaw, favored the younger, more mobile Obama. McCain walked more slowly, lacked agility, and looked every bit his seventy-two years.¹³³ Like Bob Dole in 1996, McCain was a septuagenarian decorated war veteran with a visible and permanent injury: Dole's right arm was paralyzed, whereas McCain had limited mobility in his. A full twenty-five years older than Obama, the age difference was the largest ever among presidential debaters.¹³⁴ Even so, the *Wall Street Journal's* Amy Chozick

¹²⁹ Anonymous, "Mission Accomplished," *Chicago Tribune*, October 3, 2008, 3; Editorial, "The Running Mates' Moment," *Washington Post*, October 3, 2008, 22; Perot evoked a populist theme throughout the campaign, particularly in the debates. For more discussion about Perot's candidacy, see George Grant and Susan Adler, *Perot: The Populist Appeal of Strong-Man Politics*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1992.

¹³⁰ Gallup.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Laura Meckler, "Independent Voters Move Toward Obama," *Wall Street Journal*, October 7, 2008, 12.

¹³³ Obama-McCain Debate 2, October 7, 2008, C-SPAN, retrieved on March 19, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebate3>.

¹³⁴ David Leip's Presidential Atlas.

thought that the town hall format would favor McCain, as it played to his strength of engaging audience members in spontaneous and even witty conversation.¹³⁵

An audience member asked how the American people could trust either candidate with their money, considering that both parties were responsible for the economic crisis. Obama said “I understand your frustration and your cynicism,” though clearly more dispassionately than Bill Clinton’s widely-praised response to the woman who asked about the national debt in the 1992 town hall debate. Clinton was arguably the best exponent of Johnson’s feminine style rhetoric. Obama went on to explain that the Bush Administration doubled the national debt in eight years, from five trillion dollars to ten trillion, and linked McCain to those policies.

Speaking in a soft tone and referring to the crowd as “my friends,” McCain portrayed himself as a kind and reassuring elder statesman, an affable man of mature years, in the Ronald Reagan mold.¹³⁶ McCain was rather successful in squelching the image that he had a volatile temper, although even as he spoke in almost a whisper at times, he appeared far more tense than relaxed, which was in sharp contrast to Obama’s omnipresent aura of calmness.¹³⁷

Even though Obama’s dispassionate engagement was more cool than chilly, and fared well in comparison to McCain’s seemingly constant state of tension, the Democrat’s perceived physical advantages were not overwhelmingly evident. Although Obama was expected to perform favorably in the town hall forum, McCain also did

¹³⁵ Chozick, “Debate Plays to McCain’s Strengths,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 6, 2008, 9.

¹³⁶ Dinesh D’Souza, *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader*, New York, NY: The Free Press, 1997, 35. D’Souza described Reagan as immensely likable and conveying optimism and reassurance.

¹³⁷ Michael Kranish, “Famed McCain Temper is Tamed,” *Boston Globe*, January 27, 2008, retrieved on June 9, 2013, http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2008/01/27/famed_mccain_temper_is_tamed. Kranish wrote about numerous times when McCain screamed at Senate colleagues in a rage.

surprisingly well. Rather than appear old, slow, and frail, McCain demonstrated that his mind remained quite sharp, his deadpan quips indicated a sense of humor behind that tense exterior, and his ability to connect with the audience depicted his decades-long experience as a politician.¹³⁸ Nonetheless, Obama moved throughout the auditorium more fluidly, and some randomly damaging camera angles, caused McCain to appear as if he was wandering around aimlessly.¹³⁹

Obama continued accentuating his differences with McCain, portraying himself as the candidate of change and McCain as the perpetuator of the *status quo*: “When Senator McCain was cheer-leading the president to go into Iraq,” Obama continued, “he suggested that it was going to be quick and easy, we’d be greeted as liberators. That’s going to change when I’m president,” Obama concluded, “but we can’t change it unless we fundamentally change Senator McCain’s and George Bush’s foreign policy.” In fact, in a span of a few words and a few seconds, he used the word “change” three times.

In an editorial the morning after the debate, the *Los Angeles Times* determined that although McCain seemed less angry, and “gone were the smirks and winces of the first debate” – he failed to deliver a cogent, coherent proposal about why the voters ought to turn to him.¹⁴⁰ The *Times* pointed out that he needed to be aggressive but not mean, as time was running out, with Obama leading by roughly 51 to 42 percent, according to Gallup.¹⁴¹ Doyle McManus, also of the *Times*, pointed out that if the town hall was

¹³⁸ For more discussion about the use of humor in presidential debates, see David M. Rhea, “There They Go Again: the Use of humor in Presidential Debates 1960-2008, *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Volume 49 No. 2 (Fall 2012), pp. 115-131; Paul Skalski, Ron Tamborini, et al., “Effects of Humor on Presence and Recall of Persuasive Messages, *Communication Quarterly*, Volume 57 No. 2 (2009), pp. 136-153; and Hans Speier, “Wit and Politics: an Essay on Laughter and Power,” *American Journal of Sociology* Volume 103, No. 5 (1998), pp. 1352-1401.

¹³⁹ Nixon’s coloring looked aesthetically unflattering, particularly on camera.

¹⁴⁰ Editorial, “McCain’s Dilemma,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 2008, 22.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

indeed McCain's favorite type of format, he clearly missed his chance to gain ground.¹⁴² Apparently, McCain did not tone down the nastiness enough, as a post-debate CNN poll, which declared Obama the winner by a commanding 54 to 30 percent, also revealed that Obama was the more likable of the two, by an even wider margin: 65 to 28 percent.¹⁴³ The *Daily Telegraph's* United States Editor, Toby Harnden, observed that McCain "looked old" in the debate, and almost looked lost at times.¹⁴⁴ Harnden's comments were strikingly similar to those made about Ronald Reagan in 1984 after his first debate with Walter Mondale, when observers, and not least of all his own son, Ron, Jr., thought he exhibited age-related disorientation.¹⁴⁵ Harnden concluded that the town hall format clearly did McCain more harm than good.

With one debate remaining and less than a month until the election, Republican voters began turning away from McCain, to some extent because of an "unsteady response" to the economic crisis, wrote Peter Wallsten and David Zucchino of the *Los Angeles Times*.¹⁴⁶ A *Washington Post/ABC News* poll released two days before the debate indicated that Obama had a ten-point lead over McCain, 53 to 43 percent, and was the first time Obama reached that high above the 50 percent mark.¹⁴⁷ Further establishing the influence of the debates, 33 percent responded that they favored Obama more based on his debate performances, and 25 percent replied that they

¹⁴² Doyle McManus, "Candidates Battle to a Draw," *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 2008, 1.

¹⁴³ Paul Steinhauser, "Obama Picks up Second Debate Win, Poll Says," *CNN*, October 8, 2008, retrieved on June 9, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/10/08/debate.poll>.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Ron Reagan, *My Father at 100*, New York, NY: Penguin, 2011; Herbert S. Parmet, *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee*, New York, NY: Scribner 1997, 295.

¹⁴⁶ Peter Wallsten, David Zucchino, *et al.*, "Obama Rides a Wave of Bad News," *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 2008, 1.

¹⁴⁷ Anne E. Kornblut and Jon Cohen, "Obama up by 10 Points as McCain Favorability Ratings Fall," *Washington Post*, October 13, 2008, 1.

avored McCain less.¹⁴⁸ Further cementing the importance of change in the 2008 election, 51 percent of the respondents believed that McCain's policies essentially would be no different than Bush's, and they overwhelmingly preferred Obama.¹⁴⁹

The final debate, moderated by *CBS News*' Bob Schieffer, took place at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York, on October 15.¹⁵⁰ A few days earlier, a person who attended an Ohio rally asked Obama a question about his tax plan, to which Obama answered at length. During his detailed response, Obama talked about "spreading the wealth," which immediately prompted his detractors to take advantage of the situation, portraying Obama as a socialist who wants to take from the rich to give to the poor.¹⁵¹ The man, Joe Wurzelbacher, became popularly known as "Joe the Plumber," and enjoyed some fleeting moments of widespread fame throughout the remainder of the campaign before reverting to obscurity shortly thereafter.¹⁵² Joe the Plumber epitomized the common man, and McCain jumped at the chance to be his champion. In his response, McCain mentioned Joe the Plumber, and discussed how Joe planned to buy his own business, but was discouraged because he would have to pay more under Obama's proposed tax increases.¹⁵³ Obama responded that his tax cuts would help 95 percent of Americans, and that they were the ones most in need and who could create the most jobs. Effectively, McCain extended the populist message Palin conveyed in the

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Obama-McCain Debate 3, October 15, 2008, C-SPAN, retrieved on March 25, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebate4>. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

¹⁵¹ Charles Hurt, "Obama Fires a 'Robin Hood' Warning Shot," *New York Post*, October 15, 2008, retrieved on June 9, 2013, http://www.nypost.com/p/news/politics/item_iQRtIQHjYPcEoMZ0IJX0hI. Hurt described Obama's exchange with Joe the Plumber as letting "the cat out of the bag" vis-à-vis his plans to take from the rich and give to the poor.

¹⁵² Wurzelbacher unsuccessfully ran for Congress in 2012.

¹⁵³ Obama-McCain 3. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

running mates' debate about the generic "Joe Six-Pack" to apply to the actual person "Joe the Plumber."

McCain's most poignant line of the debate, if not the entire debate season, came when Obama mentioned how President Bush doubled the national debt, and McCain, manifesting Holbrook's observation, replied: "Senator Obama, I am not President Bush. If you wanted to run against President Bush, you should have run four years ago." Obama's strongest argument was to link McCain to Bush, much as Bush's father tried to link Bill Clinton to previous Democrats, prompting the latter in their first debate to exclaim: "Mr. Bush is trying to run against Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter and everybody in the world but me in this race."¹⁵⁴ The difference, however, was that Clinton's proposals, particularly his focus on tax cuts and spending cuts, were clearly different from Johnson's and Carter's. McCain's staunch defense of the Iraq War, however, mirrored Bush's policy.¹⁵⁵ Obama's contrast to the Bush-McCain foreign policy was stark, and the Democrat continued to use the debates to identify himself as the agent of change.

Perhaps even more important than the content of their arguments, however, was the candidates' tone and body language. Psychologist Albert Mehrabian pioneered the study of nonverbal communication in the 1960s, contending that 38 percent of a message is paralinguistic: that it is not the words themselves but the way in which they are said.¹⁵⁶ McCain looked tense and irritated, whereas Obama remained calm, even when McCain interrupted him. McCain's uninvited interjections seemed borne of

¹⁵⁴ Clinton-Bush-Perot Debate 1, C-SPAN, October 11, 1992, retrieved on September 29, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33071-1>.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Albert Mehrabian, *Silent Messages: Implicit Communication of Emotions and Attitudes*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1972, 75.

frustration, much like Al Gore's excessive sighing in his 2000 debate against George W. Bush. Obama, however, seemed completely at ease, and responded in near-perfect measure: he neither allowed McCain to browbeat him, nor did he match McCain's anger. Instead, he calmly insisted on finishing his thought, thereby expressing his displeasure at McCain's poor manners without mirroring his opponent's ire. McCain's irritability, when combined with his indecisiveness about whether or not to reschedule the first debate, might have conceivably cast some doubt as to his ability to control his actions and emotions under pressure.

Much like the questioners in the 1988 debates probed George H.W. Bush about his selecting Dan Quayle as a running mate, so did Schieffer *vis-à-vis* McCain and Palin, albeit more diplomatically. Schieffer asked each candidate why his running mate would make a better president than his opponent's counterpart. Evidently, the inclusion of Joe Biden was a polite way of appearing unbiased. Obama answered first, never mentioning Palin by name; even earlier in the debate, he referred to her when speaking directly to McCain as "your running mate."¹⁵⁷ He spoke about Biden's extensive foreign policy experience, and, evoking more populism, as Palin did throughout the running mates' debate – commended Biden for never forgetting where he came from, resulting in a lifelong practice to "fight for the little guy." McCain, then, was left with the difficult task of convincing the American people why Palin was a good choice as well, and an even better one than Biden. McCain spoke about Palin's qualities as a reformer as Alaska's governor, how she was willing to fight against corruption, how she cut government spending and gave the money back to the taxpayers, and how she would march into Washington, DC, and "sweep out the old-boy network and the cronyism." McCain's

¹⁵⁷ Obama-McCain 3. Until otherwise noted, subsequent references are attributable to this source.

answer was effective insofar as he emphasized Palin's strengths as a candidate of change, rather than trying to justify or camouflage her lack of mastery of world affairs.

Much was made after the debate about McCain's response to the difference between his philosophy of governing versus Obama's: "If you notice that in all of this proposal, Senator government wants – Senator Obama wants government to do the job. Senator Obama wants government to do the job." Some speculated that McCain's reference to Obama as "Senator government" was a Freudian slip, revealing the Democrat's affinity for big government spending.¹⁵⁸ Others thought it was not a slip at all, but an extremely well-placed dig disguised as a slip. Most probably, it really was a slip, because McCain frantically repeated what he actually meant to say – "Senator Obama wants government to do the job," immediately after uttering it correctly the first time. It is a common reaction for those who misspeak to correct themselves and then, for emphasis, repeat the corrected statement, to confirm that they knew the right answer all along. Earlier in the evening, in wanting to describe Palin as a "breath of fresh air," McCain became tongue-tied and called her a "bresh of freth air" before correcting himself. Although any candidate of any age can have moments such as those, the fact that McCain experienced two of them late in the debate and so close to one another certainly did not help him make the case that he was not too old to endure the rigorous daily regimen that a president typically undergoes. That, too, was similar to age-related speculation

¹⁵⁸ Quin Hillyer, "Senator Government! Wow!" *American Spectator*, October 15, 2008, retrieved on June 9, 2013, <http://spectator.org/blog/2008/10/15/senator-government-wow>. Hillyer thought that McCain's line was so effective that his campaign should have created "No to Senator Government" bumper stickers.

about Reagan in 1984, regarding lack of stamina to endure the “witching hour” (the last third of a ninety-minute debate).¹⁵⁹

Obama concluded by again linking his opponent to George W. Bush and implying that if McCain were to be elected, the country would essentially suffer through another four years of Bush. By equating McCain with the past, Obama was able to present himself as the candidate of the future – of change.

According to a CNN poll, Obama won the debate by almost a two-to-one margin, 58 to 31 percent.¹⁶⁰ A CBS poll of uncommitted voters revealed that Obama won, 53 to 22 percent.¹⁶¹ A week after the final debate, the *Washington Post* reported that Obama enjoyed double-digit leads in all of the battleground states, and that the McCain campaign was reeling.¹⁶² Ever the cautious campaigner, Obama warned his staffers not to become overconfident.¹⁶³

The *Post*'s Robert Kaiser wrote that the debates had a significant impact on the election, strongly contending that Obama's rise in the polls was linked to his superior debate performance.¹⁶⁴ Peter Hart, a Democratic pollster and Obama supporter, acknowledged that Obama was the “least credentialed” presidential contender in the modern era, but that the debates afforded Obama the opportunity to display his calm,

¹⁵⁹ Alan Schroeder, *Presidential Debates, 50 Years of High-Risk Presidential TV*, 2nd Ed., New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008, 78-79. Many of the debates' most notable mistakes were made during that time, including Ford's comment about no domination of Eastern Europe, and Dan Quayle's leaving himself wide open for Lloyd Bentsen's “you're no Jack Kennedy” remark in 1988. For more discussion about the “witching hour” in debates, see Roger Simon, *Show Time: The American Political Circus and the Race for the White House*, New York, NY: Random House, 1998.

¹⁶⁰ Sam Stein, “Who Won the Last Debate? Obama Dominates by Largest Margins Yet,” *Huffington Post*, October 15, 2008, retrieved on June 9, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/10/15/who-won-the-last-debate-o_n_135066.html.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Dan Balz, “Polls Point to Struggle for McCain,” *Washington Post*, October 24, 2008, 1.

¹⁶³ Dan Balz and Shailagh Murray, “As McCain's Road Gets Steeper, Obama Warns of Overconfidence,” *Washington Post*, October 17, 2008, 8.

¹⁶⁴ Robert G. Kaiser, “The Debates: No Drama but a Dramatic Effect,” *Washington Post*, October 31 2008, 1.

collected, intellectual, and reassuring way of problem-solving compared to McCain, who seemed more erratic and volatile.¹⁶⁵

Less than three weeks after the final debate, Barack Hussein Obama was elected the forty-fourth president of the United States. The candidate of change became the president of change. He was the first ever African-American, the first ever born in a non-contiguous state, and the first non-incumbent and non-governor to be elected president in almost fifty years – the president of change. Moreover, McCain’s defeat extended beyond the candidate himself, to the policies of the incumbent Republican president, George W. Bush, if not to the low-regulation pro-business ideology of the Reagan Era Republican Party. For that reason, former Democratic National Party Chairman Donald Fowler acknowledged shortly after the election that to a significant extent, Obama did not win as much as the Republicans lost, and he advised the president-elect and the Democratic Party as a whole to keep that well in mind.¹⁶⁶

In an article written for the American national legal directory, trademark attorney R. Sebastian Gibson concluded that at no time was the word “change” intentionally injected into a presidential campaign as prominently as in 2008, and though not exclusively, predominantly by Obama.¹⁶⁷ The candidate who most campaigned on change in the election year when change seemed most in political demand, Barack Obama, won the election convincingly, by more than ten million votes than McCain, and

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ John Harwood, “The Democrats Have the G.O.P. to Thank, At Least in Part,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2008, retrieved on June 10, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/10/us/politics/10caucus.html?_r=0.

¹⁶⁷ R. Sebastian Gibson, *The Marketing Of Presidential Candidates Using Trademarks and Campaign Slogans*, retrieved on October 1, 2014, *The Marketing Of Presidential Candidates Using Trademarks and Campaign Slogans*. Gibson wrote that Hillary Clinton in the Democratic Primary, and John McCain and Sarah Palin in the general election, also portrayed themselves as candidates of change, but not to the extent that Obama did.

over twice as many electoral votes.¹⁶⁸ Obama's near-landslide victory, which by its sheer magnitude necessarily included Bush voters, the 2000 and 2004 races being far tighter, supported Kevin Coe's and Michael Reietzes' theory that Obama's message of hope and change transcended partisan politics.

Moreover, as in every previous debate season in which one candidate appeared to outperform the other in a majority of the debates, as reflected by post-debate polls, Obama prevailed in both the debates and the election. Although the correlation between success in the debates and in the ensuing election is not conclusive, it further strengthens the notion that the debates do matter. The 2008 debates also reinforced some other common themes that were established over their forty-eight-year history: the power of television again was prevalent, particularly in juxtaposing the obvious age difference between the two candidates, and in Fey's and Maher's comedic exaggerations of Palin's words and Bush's actions that blurred fact and fiction. The Biden-Palin debate was such a tremendous draw because of television, namely, Palin's prior blunders in two nationally televised interviews that were regularly rebroadcast. The perils of making a gaffe were evident as well, though in a somewhat different way than in the past: a major gaffe that McCain made was not in a debate, but concerned a debate; his ambivalence about whether he could multitask helping to create an emergency bailout and attending the first debate. In that sense, McCain indeed committed a debate-related gaffe that evidently cost him in the polls.

Insofar as there are lessons to be learned from history, the 2008 debates revealed aspects drawn from the previous nine seasons. That Obama and McCain spent several days huddled with their respective advisors in pre-debate preparations is a lesson

¹⁶⁸ Leip.

learned long before 2008. In fact, debaters in every season since 1960, when Richard Nixon, even by his own admission underprepared, made sure not to adopt a cavalier attitude.¹⁶⁹ Exceeding low expectations, as Palin did against Biden, first occurred in 1976, when Jimmy Carter was expected to struggle in having the same command of the issues that the incumbent Gerald Ford did; in the end, it was Ford who made the gaffe about Eastern Europe. Palin's plain-spoken charisma and even her use of "there you go again" echoed Reagan's successful use of the debates in 1980 and 1984 to connect with the audience, which was a technique Bill Clinton also used successfully in 1992 and 1996. Biden's caution not to bully Palin was a lesson learned from George H.W. Bush in 1984, when he debated Geraldine Ferraro. Biden's and Palin's roles in attacking the opposing ticket's headliners, all the while engaging in a contentious albeit cordial debate, was reminiscent of the very first running mates' contest, between Walter Mondale and Bob Dole in 1976.

Perhaps more than any other aspect, what underscored how the 2008 debates mattered, was the curiosity to see if Palin would perform miserably in her debate. It conjured memories of James Stockdale in 1992 – who was clearly out of his element on prime time television. That almost seventy million viewers watched that debate is a powerful statistic that, in itself, demonstrates how much the debates matter. That the debaters in that contest were not even the ticket headliners, and that the running mates debate could command such national attention, reveals how much the debates, which have been important since 1960, came to matter by 2008.

¹⁶⁹ Jennifer Parker, "Obama, McCain Prep for Presidential Debates, *ABC News*, September 23, 2008, retrieved on November 18, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/Vote2008/story?id=5857679&page=1&singlePage=true>.

**DO THE DEBATES MATTER? AN EXAMINATION OF THE PROGRESSIVELY
INFLUENTIAL ROLE OF MAJOR PARTY DEBATES ON
AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: 1960-2008**

CONCLUSION: THE DEBATES MATTER

This thesis demonstrates that the debates matter in presidential elections. The major party candidates and their staff are profoundly aware of their significance, if not preeminence, in presidential campaigns. Political reporters and analysts discuss them extensively before, during, and after the events themselves. Consistently viewed by tens of millions of people, the debates, since their inception in 1960, are the single most-watched phenomenon of any presidential campaign. They matter so much, that any major party candidate's failure to participate in them would be unthinkable. The central themes that the first ten debate seasons, both individually and collectively, convey are the power of television, the influence of image and perception, the inherent danger of debating for incumbents, and the role of the debates as lenses through which contemporary aspects of American political and social culture can be viewed.

The very first debates, in 1960, clearly illustrated television's emergence as the primary political medium, as the election shifted in John F. Kennedy's favor after his poised and articulate performance against a sick-looking Richard Nixon. Visual appearance aside, the substance of Kennedy's performance boosted his gravitas in competing against the incumbent vice president. Jimmy Carter in 1976 was also taken more seriously as a candidate when Gerald Ford's perceived foreign policy advantage was neutralized following his debate gaffe about Eastern Europe. That the gaffe was rebroadcast on newscasts and televised post-debate analyses made a great deal more

people aware of it who had not watched it live when it originally aired, demonstrating that debates also matter insofar as their content often remains and at times dominates political conversation in the ensuing weeks.

Television played an instrumental role in presidential campaigns, particularly via the debates, both enhancing and damaging candidates' images. Beyond Kennedy's and Nixon's aesthetic appearances in 1960, Ronald Reagan's affable charisma in 1980 and Bill Clinton's ability to connect with voters one-on-one in 1992 were captured most prominently during the debates, as was Reagan's disorientation in 1984, and Al Gore's incessant sighing in 2000. Other aspects of technology, beyond the broadcasted image, also affect debate performance and audience perception: a split-screen feature, which allows the audience to observe a candidate's facial expressions when the other candidate is speaking, and instant post-debate polls, originally by telephone and increasingly via the Internet, are among the most prevalent. Televised debates are profoundly influential in shaping a candidate's image, and the perceptions of the tens of millions of voters who watch the debates are vital to electoral success or failure.

Moreover, the debates historically disfavor the incumbent, whose record is open for attack by the challenger. From 1960 to 2008, only one incumbent, Bill Clinton in 1996, proceeded through the entire debate season without suffering some political damage along the way. That he was also the only incumbent during that period who did not make a noticeable debate gaffe is telling. In five of the ten debate seasons, the incumbent president or vice president lost the ensuing election, and in the other five, they struggled to rebound from a stumble.

Beyond the elections specifically tied to each season, the debates effectively capture the political and social climate of the times. In 1960, television's ascension was prevalent, whereas in 1976, the aftershocks of Watergate permeated the political climate. The voters in 1980 responded to optimism, nationalism, and reassurance amid a feeling of malaise, but in 1984, the anxiety over aging affected the campaign. In 1988, deemed the "issueless" campaign because most Americans described times as good, personality and likability were particularly important electoral criteria. A widening wealth gap and increasingly caustic campaigning resulted in appeal for populism and civility in 1992 and 1996, respectively. The ubiquity of television and the rise of the Internet rendered the visual image even more prevalent in American society, and the 2000 debates reflected the influence of body language. The first debate season in time of war was 2004, and the country, true to its tradition, remained with the incumbent, George W. Bush, in whom they saw decisive leadership. For the first time in the debates' history, an entire political party, the Republicans, was repudiated by the electorate in 2008, as the debates' overriding theme, more so than ever, was change.

Emblematic of the debates' progressively impactful role is the growing emphasis placed on how prospective presidential and vice presidential candidates might fare in them. No longer analyzed solely after the fact, the debates are much-discussed components of campaign strategy long before they take place. That phenomenon became even more evident in 2012, as the debate-centered strategy unfolded in the primary stages.¹ Republican presidential candidate Buddy Roemer, a former governor and member of Congress from Louisiana and the only challenger with both chief

¹ Although this thesis specifically focuses on general election debates from 1960 to 2008, primary debates and debates after 2008 further underscore the debates' progressively impactful role.

executive and federal legislative experience, focused his campaign on why he was excluded from all twenty Republican primary debates, in which as many as eight other candidates participated at once.² Roemer insisted that was excluded because of his stance that money was too large a factor in political campaigns.³ More generally, unlike the rest of the Republican hopefuls that year, Roemer criticized his own party as much as he did the Democrats.⁴

Newt Gingrich, also a Republican contender, centered his campaign on being the most effective challenger to defeat Obama because he would out-debate him.⁵ Gingrich, in fact, publicly promised to challenge Obama to a number of multiple-hour debates, in which he vowed the president would be at a distinct disadvantage.⁶ Although Gingrich did not win the Republican nomination, his showing in the primary debates elevated him from low poll numbers to frontrunner status, until he fell from first place after a poor debate showing against Mitt Romney, who claimed that position and won the nomination.⁷

² Nia-Malika Henderson, "Buddy Roemer: Let Me Participate in the Republican Debate," *Washington Post*, October 11, 2011, retrieved on February 23, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/post/buddy-roemer-let-me-in-the-debate/2011/10/11/gIQAoU7tcL_blog.html.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Mallie Jane Kim, "Newt Gingrich Envisions Lincoln-Douglas II Debates With Obama," *U. S. News & World Report*, November 29, 2011, retrieved on February 23, 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/ken-walshs-washington/2011/11/29/newt-gingrich-envisions-lincoln-douglas-ii-debates-with-obama>

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Chris Cilizza, "Newt Gingrich, Frontrunner," *Washington Post*, December 12, 2011, retrieved on February 23, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/post/newt-gingrich-frontrunner/2011/12/12/gIQAlMqDqO_blog.html. Cilizza attributed Gingrich's ascension in the polls to his strong performances in the Republican primary debates; Paul West and Seema Mehta, "Aggressive Mitt Romney Gets the Best of Newt Gingrich in Florida Debate," *Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 2012, retrieved on February 23, 2015, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jan/29/nation/la-na-gop-debate-20120127>. The authors wrote that Romney's strong debate performance helped him to erase Newt Gingrich's national lead in the polls; Ewen MacAskill, "Mitt Romney Reclaims Position as GOP Frontrunner with Crushing Florida Win," *The Guardian*, January 31, 2012, retrieved on February 23, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/01/mitt-romney-frontrunner-florida-win>. Five days after the Florida debate, MacAskill wrote that Romney overtook Gingrich and emerged as the Republican frontrunner.

Moreover, the first primary debate among 2016 Republican presidential contenders, held on August 6, 2015, drew an audience of twenty-four million, rendering it the most-watched non-sporting event in cable television history.⁸ The following month, the Republican contenders debated again, on September 16, and by consensus of viewers and pundits, Carly Fiorina had the strongest performance.⁹ In a CNN poll taken on September 19, three days after the debate, 15 percent of the respondents selected Fiorina as their choice for president, as compared to only 3 percent in CNN's poll of September 8.¹⁰ Those statistics reflect the progressively impactful role of the debates on the elections, as the primary debates evidently matter progressively more and more as well.

Over half a century has passed since Kennedy and Nixon walked into the television studio of WBBM, the CBS affiliate in Chicago, for the first of forty-eight debates among major party presidential and vice presidential candidates between 1960 and 2008.¹¹ That very first debate mattered, and the rest of them did as well, growing more influential with each election.

Although this thesis makes clear that debates matter far more broadly than as election determinants, it is important to note that a correlation between debating success and winning the ensuing election is evident. There is no formal, quantifiable method of selecting a debate winner, but a consensus among the post-debate analyses

⁸ Lisa Richwine, "Republican Debate Sets TV Record with 24 Million Viewers," Reuters, August 7, 2015, retrieved on November 22, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/07/us-usa-election-ratings-idUSKCN0QC20520150807>. The debate was broadcast on the Fox News Channel cable television station.

⁹ Eric Bradner, "Poll: Fiorina Rockets to No. 2 behind Trump in GOP," CNN, September 21, 2015, retrieved on November 22, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/20/politics/carly-fiorina-donald-trump-republican-2016-poll/>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ All of the participants were Democrats and Republicans except for Independent presidential candidates John Anderson in 1980 and Ross Perot in 1992, and Perot's running mate, Admiral James Stockdale.

by pundits in the media regarding who “won” an individual debate or the season collectively, was commensurate with who won the election in all of the debate seasons from 1960 to 2008. While there is no available evidence to confirm an unequivocal cause and effect, those results support the contention that the debates matter not only to the voters because they view them directly, but also because they base their decisions on the media’s perception of them.

Whereas other debate analyses focus only on the net gain or loss in a candidate’s standing in the polls before and after a given debate season, this thesis examines the important ebbs and flows in between, and does not assume that in the instance of no substantial net change in the pre- and post-debate season polls, the debates did not affect the candidates’ approval ratings along the way. Suggesting that some presidents, like Kennedy and Reagan, might not have been elected at all were it not for the debates is speculative. Nonetheless, the fact that this hypothesis is at least considered plausible, and is often strongly advocated, underscores that the debates do indeed matter.

Conceptualized by Newton Minow in 1956 in order to benefit Adlai Stevenson’s presidential campaign, the debates commenced as an experiment four years later and were initially diminished by some in the media as “discussions,” but by the end of the 1960 election their impact was appreciated. After permanently overcoming legislative hurdles in 1976, the debates resumed and in each ensuing presidential election have been an integral part of the campaign, with their role growing larger each time. It would be difficult to imagine the last fifty years, and more difficult, the next fifty years of presidential politics without them.

REFERENCES

The following references were used in the preparation of this thesis. The primary sources used were the complete footage of the debates contained herein, and articles within each debate's election season from the print and broadcast media sources specified.

Secondary sources included books, journal articles, media articles not within the timeframe of a specific election season, court cases, statutes, dictionaries and atlases, and information from government entities and other organizations. All specified presidential libraries were consulted (there is no presidential library for Barack Obama as yet).

Other sources consulted but whose information was not utilized do not appear in this bibliography.

DEBATES

Biden-Palin Debate, October 2, 2008. C-SPAN, retrieved on March 3, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/VicePresidentialCandidate>.

Bush-Dukakis Debate 1, September 25, 1988. C-SPAN, retrieved on September 10, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/4309-1>.

Bush-Dukakis Debate 2, October 13, 1988. C-SPAN, retrieved on September 23, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/4256-1>.

Bush-Ferraro Debate, October 11, 1984. C-SPAN, retrieved on August 20, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33136-1>.

Bush-Gore Debate 1, October 3, 2000. C-SPAN, retrieved on November 14, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/159295-1>.

Bush-Gore Debate 2, October 11, 2000. C-SPAN, retrieved on December 15, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebat>.

Bush-Gore Debate 3, October 17, 2000. C-SPAN, retrieved on December 22, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebate>.

Bush-Kerry Debate 1, September 30, 2004. C-SPAN, retrieved on December 27, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/DebateCan>.

Bush-Kerry Debate 2, October 8, 2004. C-SPAN, retrieved on February 8, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/FullScr>.

Bush-Kerry Debate 3, October 13, 2004. C-SPAN, retrieved on February 18, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/DebateFu>.

Carter-Ford Debate 1, September 23, 1976. C-SPAN, retrieved on April 10, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33353-1>.

Carter-Ford Debate 2, October 6, 1976. C-SPAN, retrieved on April 19, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33210-1>.

Carter-Ford Debate 3, October 22, 1976. C-SPAN, retrieved on April 30, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33391-1>.

Cheney-Edwards Debate, October 5, 2004. C-SPAN, retrieved on February 4, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/FullSc>.

Cheney-Lieberman Debate, October 5, 2000. C-SPAN, retrieved on December 8, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/VicePresidentialCandi>.

Clinton-Bush-Perot Debate 1, October 11, 1992. C-SPAN, retrieved on September 29, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33071-1>.

Clinton-Bush-Perot Debate 2, October 15, 1992. C-SPAN, retrieved on October 14, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33137-1>.

Clinton-Bush-Perot-Debate 3, October 19, 1992. C-SPAN, retrieved on October 26, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33253-1>.

Clinton-Dole Debate 1, October 6, 1996. C-SPAN, retrieved on November 1, 2010. <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/74271-1>.

Clinton-Dole Debate 2, October 16, 1996. C-SPAN, retrieved on November 11, 2010, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?74273-1/presidential-candidates-debate>.

Gore-Kemp Debate, October 9, 1996. C-SPAN, retrieved on November 9, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/75772-1>.

Gore-Quayle-Stockdale Debate, October 13, 1992. C-SPAN, retrieved on October 2, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33086-1>.

Kennedy-Nixon Debate 1, September 26, 1960. DVD, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, MA.

Kennedy-Nixon Debate 2, October 7, 1960. DVD, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, MA.

Kennedy-Nixon Debate 3, October 13, 1960, DVD, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, MA.

Kennedy-Nixon Debate 4, October 21, 1960, DVD, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, MA.

Mondale-Dole Debate, October 15, 1976. C-SPAN, retrieved on May 4, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/75693-1>.

Obama-McCain Debate 1, September 26, 2008. C-SPAN, retrieved on February 23, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebate2>.

Obama-McCain Debate 2, October 7, 2008. C-SPAN, retrieved on March 19, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebate3>.

Obama-McCain Debate 3, October 15, 2008. C-SPAN, retrieved on March 25, 2011, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PresidentialCandidatesDebate4>.

Quayle-Bentsen Debate, October 5, 1988. C-SPAN, retrieved on September 24, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/4127-1>.

Reagan-Anderson Debate, September 21, 1980. VHS, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA.

Reagan-Carter Debate, October 28, 1980. C-SPAN, retrieved on June 5, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33229-1>.

Reagan-Mondale Debate 1, October 7, 1984. C-SPAN, retrieved on August 6, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33459-1>.

Reagan-Mondale Debate 2, October 21, 1984. C-SPAN, retrieved on August 9, 2010, <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/33260-1>.

Republican Primary Debate in Iowa, January 5, 1980. VHS, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA.

Ronald Reagan and Robert F. Kennedy Town Meeting of the World, May 15, 1967. University of Virginia – Miller Center, retrieved on November 19, 2012, <http://millercenter.org/president/reagan/essays/biography/3>.

PRINT, BROADCAST and DIGITAL MEDIA

ABC News

American Heritage

American Spectator
Associated Press
Atlantic
Australian
Baltimore Sun
BBC
Bergen Record
Boston Globe
Business Week
CBS News
C-SPAN
Chicago Tribune
Christian Science Monitor
CNN
David Leip's Presidential Atlas
Florida Times-Union
Forbes
Gadsden Times
Guardian
Hartford Courant
HG.org
History News Network
Huffington Post

Independent

Los Angeles Times

McLaughlin Group

MSNBC

Museum of Broadcast Communications

National Institute of Aging

National Review

NBC News

Network Journal

New Era

New York

New York Daily News

New York Observer

New York Post

New York Review of Books

New York Times

Newsweek

Nielsen

Northwest Indiana Times

NPR

Patriot Post

Philadelphia Inquirer

Playboy

Psychology Today

Reuters

Saturday Night Live

Scientific American

Seattle Times

Slate

Southeast Missourian

St. Petersburg Times

Tagean Gaddard's Political Dictionary

Tara Hunt

Taxi

Telegraph

Terre Haute Tribune Star

Time

Toastmasters

TV History

United Press International

U.S. News & World Report

USA Today

Wall Street Journal

Washington Monthly

Washington Post

Washington Times

Weekly Standard

Wine Economist

POLLS

ABC News

CBS News

CNN

Gallup

Los Angeles Times

NBC News

New York Times

Pew

Roper

Time

USA Today

Wall Street Journal

Zogby

BOOKS

Ackerman, Bruce (ed.). *Bush v. Gore: The Question of Legitimacy*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002.

Adkin, Mark. *Urgent Fury: The Battle for Grenada*, Philadelphia, PA: Trans-Atlantic Publications, 1989.

Arndt, Horst and Richard Wayne Janney. *Intergrammar*, Berlin, Germany: Walter De Gruyeter & Company, 1987.

Banville, Lee. *Debating Our Destiny: Presidential Debate Moments That Shaped History*, Arlington, VA: MacNeil-Lehrer Productions, 2012.

Barnouw, Erik. *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Baumgartner, Jody C. and Jonathan S. Morris. *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2008.

Beasley, Maurine H. *Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010.

Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970.

Bernanke, Ben S. (ed.). *Essays on the Great Depression*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Black, Christine M. and Thomas Oliphant. *All By Myself*, Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot Press, 1989.

Bliss, Edward. *The History of Broadcast Journalism*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1991.

Boller, Paul F. *Presidential Campaigns from George Washington to George W. Bush*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Bormann, Ernest. *Communication Theory*, New York, NY: Holt, Reinhart & Winston, 1980.

Brady, John. *Bad Boy: The Life and Politics of Lee Atwater*, Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996.

Bremer, Francis J. *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founding Father*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Brinkley, Douglas. *Gerald Ford*, New York, NY: Times Books, 2007.

Brisby, Christopher (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Brown, Mary Beth. *The Faith of Ronald Reagan*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004.

Buell, Emmett H. Buell and Lee Sigelman. *Attack Politics: Negativity in Presidential Campaigns Since 1960*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008.

Burns, James MacGregor and Georgia J. Sorenson. *Dead Center: Clinton-Gore Leadership and the Perils of Moderation*, New York, NY: Scribner, 1999.

Busch, Andrew. *Reagan's Victory: the Presidential Election of 1980 and the Rise of the Right*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005.

Bush, George W. *Decision Points*, New York, NY: Random House, 2010.

Canellos, Peter S. *Last Lion: The Rise and Fall of Ted Kennedy*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2009.

Cannon, Lou. *The Role of a Lifetime*, New York, NY: Public Affairs, 1991, 2000.

Carter, Jimmy. *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President*, New York, NY: Bantam, 1982.

Chase, James. *1912: Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft and Debs—the Election that Changed the Country*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004.

Clinton, Bill. *Putting People First: How We Can All Change America*, New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1992.

Coffman, Steve and Zack Coffman. *Founders v. Bush*, Los Angeles, CA: One World, 2007.

Colacello, Bob. *Ronnie and Nancy: Their Path to the White House – 1911 to 1980*, New York, NY: Warner Books, 2004.

Corrado, Anthony. *Let America Decide*, New York, NY: Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1995.

Corrigan, Matthew T. *American Royalty*, New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2008.

Crotty, William (ed.). *America's Choice*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001.

Dallek, Robert. *An Unfinished Life*, Boston, MA: Little Brown, 2003.

Nixon and Kissinger, New York, NY: Harper-Collins, 2007.

Davis, Patti. *The Long Goodbye*, New York, NY: Knopf, 2004.

DeFrank, Thomas. *Write it When I'm Gone*, New York, NY: Putnam, 2007.

Derrida, Jacques. *Positions*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1972, 1981.

Draper, Robert. *Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2007.

Drew, Elizabeth. *Portrait of an Election: The 1980 Presidential Campaign*, New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1981, 411-412.

D'Souza, Dinesh. *Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader*, New York, NY: The Free Press, 1997.

Dukakis, Kitty. *Now You Know*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1990, 220.

Dunn, Charles W. (ed.). *American Exceptionalism*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013.

Edgerton, Gary, *The Columbia History of American Television*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009.

Edwards, Janis L. *Political Cartoons in the 1988 Presidential Campaign*, New York, NY: Garland, 1997.

Emery, Fred. *Watergate*, New York, NY: Touchstone, 1994.

Erikson, Robert S. and Christopher Wlezien. *The Timeline of Presidential Elections*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Farah, George. *No Debate*, New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2004.

Faucheux, Ronald A. (ed.). *Winning Elections*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

Felzenburg, Alvin Stephen. *The Leaders We Deserved*, New York, NY: Perseus, 2008,

Fischer, David Hackett. *Growing Old in America*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Fiske, John. *Television Culture*, London, England: Methuen & Co, 1987.

Flanagan, William H. and Nancy H. Zingale. *Political Behavior of the American People*, 12th Ed., Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2010.

Ford, Gerald. *A Time to Heal*, New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1979.

Formisano, Ronald P. *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

Germond, Jack and Jules Witcover. *Whose Broad Stripes and Bright Stars? The Trivial Pursuit of the Presidency*, 1988, New York, NY: Random House, 1989.

Gibbs, Nancy and Michael Duffy. *The Presidents Club*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2012.

Gillon, Steven M. *The Pact: Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, and the Rivalry that Defined a Generation*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Golbin, Pamela. *Power Dressing: First Ladies, Women Politicians, & Fashion*, New York, NY: Merrell, 2011

Goldman, Peter and Thomas DeFrank, *et al.* *Quest for the Presidency 1992*, College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1994.

Goodwin, Lawrence. *The Populist Movement*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Gorman, Carol Kinsey. *The Silent Language of Leaders, How Body Language Can Help – or Hurt – How You Lead*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2011.

Gould, Lewis. *Grand Old Party: A History of the Republicans*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Grant, George and Susan Adler. *Perot: The Populist Appeal of Strong-Man Politics*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1992.

Greenberg, David. *Nixon's Shadow*, New York, NY: Norton, 2003.

Griffith, Samuel B. (ed.). *The Art of War*. London, England: Oxford University Press, 1963.

Grubb, Norman Percy. *Modern Viking: the Story of Abraham Vereide, Pioneer in Christian Leadership*, New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1962.

Hacker, Kenneth L. (ed.). *Candidate Images in Presidential Elections*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1995.

Hagen, Shelly. *The Everything Body Language Book*, Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2008.

Halberstam, David. *The Fifties*, New York, NY: Random House, 1993.

Haight, Robert L. *Bubba Between the Bushes*, New York, NY: iUniverse, 2008, 35. Clinton, because of his Southern background, is often referred to as “Bubba.”

Heilemann, John and Mark Halperin. *Game Change*, New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010.

Hellweg, Susan A., Michael Pfau, *et al.* *Televised Presidential Debates*, New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1992.

Holmes, Kim R. and Michael Novak. *Rebound: Getting America Back to Great*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013.

Howell, William J. and Saul P. Jackman. *The Wartime President*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Hunt, Michael H. *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987.

Huston, James L. and Robert W. Johannsen (ed.). *The Lincoln Douglas Debates of 1858: 150th Anniversary Edition*, New York, NY: Oxford, 2008.

Isseman, Maurice and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: the Civil War of the 1960s*, 2nd Ed., New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Jaffa, Harry V. *Crisis of the House Divided*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. *Packaging the Presidency*, 3rd Ed., New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996.

and David S. Birdsell. *Presidential Debates – The Challenge of Creating an Informed Electorate*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Johnson, Paul. *A History of the American People*, New York, NY, Harper-Collins, 1997.

Kalb, Marvin. *One Scandalous Story*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

Kane, Joseph Nathan and Janet Podell. *Facts about the Presidents*, 8th Ed., New York, NY: H.W. Wilson, 1964, 2009.

Kaplan, Fred. *1959, The Year Everything Changed*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2009.

Kaufman, Burton I. and Scott Kaufman. *The Presidency of James Earl Carter*, 2nd Ed., Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006.

Kazin, Michael. *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1995.

Kendall, K. E. (ed.). *Presidential Campaign Discourse: Strategic Communication Problems*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995.

Kimball, Jeffrey. *Nixon's Vietnam War*, Lawrence, KS, University Press of Kansas, 2002.

Klein, Joe. *The Natural: The Misunderstood Presidency of Bill Clinton*, New York, NY: Random House, 2002.

Knott, Stephen F. and Jeffrey L. Chidester. *At Reagan's Side*, Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009.

Kohn, Bob. *Journalistic Fraud*, Nashville, TN, WND Books, 2003.

Kondracke, Morton and Fred Barnes. *Jack Kemp: The Bleeding-Heart Conservative Who Changed America*, New York, NY: Random House, 2015.

Kornbluh, Peter (ed.). *The Iran-Contra Scandal*, New York, NY: New Press, 1993.

Kraus, Sidney. *The Great Debates*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1962.

Televised Presidential Debates and Public Policy, 2nd Ed., Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000.

Lehrer, Jim. *The Last Debate*, New York, NY: Public Affairs, 1995.

Tension City, New York, NY: Random House, 2011.

Levin, Linda Lotridge. *The Making of FDR*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008.

Levine, Elana. *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

Lichter, S. Robert and Richard E. Noyes. *Good Intentions Make Bad News*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996.

Lieven, Anatoly. *Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Lim, Elvin. *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency: The Decline of Presidential Rhetoric from George Washington to George W. Bush*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Lowry, Richard S. *The Gulf War Chronicles*, New York, NY: iUniverse, 2003.

Lunz, Frank. *Words That Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear*, New York, NY: Hyperion, 2008.

Mansfield, Stephen. *The Faith of George W. Bush*, New York, NY: Penguin, 2003.

Martel, Myles. *Political Campaign Debates: Images, Strategies, and Tactics*, New York, NY: Longman, 1983.

Marty, Martin E. *A Nation of Behavers*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 11.

Maslon, Laurence and Michael Kantor. *Make 'Em Laugh: The Funny Business of America*, New York, NY: Hachette, 2008.

Mason, Jim. *No Holding Back: The 1980 John B. Anderson Presidential Campaign*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2011.

Mattson, Kevin. *What the Heck are You Up to, Mr. President?: Jimmy Carter, America's 'Malaise,' and The Speech That Should Have Changed the Country*, New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2009.

McMath, Robert C., Jr. *American Populism: A Social History 1877-1898*, New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1992.

McPherson, James (ed.). *To the Best of My Ability*, New York, NY: Dorling Kindersley, 2001.

Meacham, Jon. *Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush*, New York, NY: Random House, 2015.

Mehrabian, Albert. *Silent Messages: Implicit Communication of Emotions and Attitudes*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1972.

Melanson, Philip H. *The Secret Service: The Hidden History of an Enigmatic Agency*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002.

Menendez, Albert J. *The Religious Factor in the 1960 Presidential Election*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Merry, Robert W. *Where They Stand: The American Presidents in the Eyes of Voters and Historians*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2012.

Meyer, Donald. *The Positive Thinkers: from Mary Baker Eddy to Normal Vincent Peale and Ronald Reagan*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.

Minow, Newton and Craig L. Lamay. *Inside the Presidential Debates*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Mitchell, Greg. *Tricky Dick and the Pink Lady*, New York, NY: Random House, 1998.

Morris, Edmund. *Dutch*, New York, NY: Random House, 1999.

Moore, Jonathan (ed.). *Campaign for President: the Managers Look at 1984*, Cambridge, MA: Auburn House, 1986.

- Morreall, John. *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983.
- Morris, Kenneth E. *Jimmy Carter, American Moralist*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Naftali, Timothy. *George H.W. Bush*, New York, NY: Times Books, 2007.
- O'Neill, John E. and Jerome Corsi. *Unfit for Command: Swift Boat Veterans Speak out against John Kerry*, Washington, DC: Regnery, 2004.
- Palin, Sarah. *Going Rogue*, New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009.
- Parker, Philip M. *Indecisions*, San Diego, CA: Icon, 2009.
- Parmet, Herbert S. *George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee*, New York, NY: Scribner 1997.
- Partington, Alan. *The Linguistics of Political Argument*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2003.
- Pease, Allan and Barbara Pease. *The Definitive Book of Body Language*, New York, NY: Random House, 2004, 28.
- Pechman, Joseph A. (ed.). *Economics for Policymaking: Selected Essays of Arthur M. Okun*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.
- Perloff, Richard M. *Political Communication*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998.
- Pietrusza, David. *1960: LBJ vs. JFK vs. Nixon*, New York, NY: Union Square Press, 2008.
- Pomper, Gerald. *The Election of 1976*, New York, NY: David McKay Company, Inc., 1977.
- Popkin, Samuel L. *The Candidate: What it Takes to Win – and Hold – the White House*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Powell, Colin. *My American Journey*, New York, NY: Random House, 1995.
- Pusey, Perlo J. *Eisenhower the President*, New York, NY: MacMillan, 1956, 46.
- Ragone, Nick. *The Everything American Government Book*, Avon, MA: Adams, 2004.
- Ramney, Austin. *The American Elections of 1984*, New York, NY: American Enterprise Institute, 1985.

- Reagan, Ron. *My Father at 100*, New York, NY: Penguin, 2011.
- Reagan, Ronald. *An American Life*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1990, 326.
- Reaves, Wendy Wick. *Oliphant's Presidents*, Kansas City, MO: Universal Press Syndicate, 1990.
- Reeves, Richard. *Ronald Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2005.
- Remini, Robert V. *John Quincy Adams*, New York, NY: Times Books, 2002.
- Renshon, Stanley A. *The Psychological Assessment of Presidential Candidates*, New York, NY: Routledge, 1998.
- Ricci, Luigi (ed.). *The Prince*. London, England: Grant Richards, 1903.
- Rosenstein, Stephen J. Rosenstone and Roy L Behr, et al. *Third Parties in America*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Rose, Kenneth D. *One Nation Underground: The Fallout Shelter in American Culture*, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2001.
- Roundtree, Clarke. *George W. Bush: A Biography*, Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011.
- Rowe, John Wallis and Robert L. Kahn. *Successful Aging*, New York, NY: Random House, 1998.
- Sachleben, Mark and Kevin M. Yenerall. *Seeing the Bigger Picture: Understanding Politics through Film and Television*, New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2004.
- Sammon, Bill. *Strategery*, Washington, DC: Regnery, 2006.
- Sanders, Marlene. *Waiting for Prime Time: The Women of Television News*, Chicago, IL, University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- Schmemann, Serge. *When the Wall Came Down*, Boston, MA: Kingfisher, 2006.
- Schroeder, Alan. *Presidential Debates: Fifty Years of High-Risk TV*, 2nd Ed., New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008.
- Shulman, Marc J. *A History of American Presidential Elections: From George Washington to Barack Obama*, New Rochelle, NY: MultiEducator, 2013.

Simon, Roger. *Show Time: The American Political Circus and the Race for the White House*, New York, NY: Random House, 1998.

Simpson, John and Jennifer Speake (eds.). *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, Oxford: England, Oxford University Press, 2003.

Skinner, Kiron K. and Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson (eds.), *Reagan in His Own Hand*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

Snider, James G. and Charles Osgood, (eds). *Semantic Differential Technique*, Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1969.

Southwick, Leslie H. *Presidential Also-Rans and Running Mates, 1788 through 1996*, 2nd Ed., Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008.

Stahl, Lesley. *Reporting Live*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1999.

Stanley, Timothy. *The Life and Tumultuous Times of Pat Buchanan*, New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2012.

Steinberg, Neil. *Hatless Jack: The President, The Fedora and the Death of the Hat*, New York, NY: Penguin, 2004.

Stephanopoulos, George. *All Too Human*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1999.

Stimson, James. *The Tides of Consent*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

The Tides of Consent, 2nd Ed., New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 2015.

Strachan, Hew and Sibylle Schaeppers. *The Changing Character of War*, London, England: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Strock, James M. *Theodore Roosevelt on Leadership: Executive Lessons from the Bully Pulpit*, New York, NY: Random House, 2003.

Swerdlow, Joel L. (ed.). *Presidential Debates 1988 and Beyond*, Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1987.

Swint, Kerwin C. *Mudslingers*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005.

Taranto, James and Leonard Leo (eds.). *Presidential Leadership*, New York, NY: Free Press, 2005.

Thomas, Evan. *Ike's Bluff*, New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2012.

Unger, Irwin. *These United States*, 2nd Ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999, 2003.

White, Theodore. *The Making of the President* 1960, New York, NY: Athenium, 1961.

Wicker, Tom. *Dwight D. Eisenhower*, New York, NY: Times Books, 2002.

Will, George. *The New Season: a Spectator's Guide to the 1988 Election*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1987.

Williams, Daniel K. *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Witcover, Jules, *Marathon: The Pursuit of the Presidency 1972-1976*, New York, NY: Viking Press, 1977.

Wolfsteld, Gavi. *Making Sense of Media and Politics*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2011, 23.

Wright, Lawrence. *The Looming Tower*, New York, NY: Random House, 2006.

Zarefsky, David. *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Zelikow, Philip (ed.). *9/11 Commission Report*, New York, NY, SoHo Books, 2004.

JOURNAL ARTICLES

Abramowitz, Alan I. "Forecasting the 2008 Presidential Election with the Time-for-Change Model," *Political Science and Politics*, Volume 41, No. 4 (October 2008), pp. 691-695.

App, Betsy, Daniel N. McIntosh, *et al.* "Nonverbal Channel Use in Communication of Emotion: How May Depend on Why," *Emotion*, 2011 Volume 3 (June 2011), pp. 603-617.

Benoit, William L. "Newspaper Coverage of Presidential Debates," *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Volume 41 No. 1 (Summer 2004), 17-27.

Benoit, William L. and Heather Currie. "Inaccuracies in Media Coverage of the 1996 and 2000 Presidential Debates," *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Volume 38 No. 1 (Summer 2001), 28-39, 28.

Binstock, Robert H. "Older Voters and the 2010 U.S. Election: Implications for 2012 and Beyond?" *The Gerontologist*, Volume 52 No. 3, 2012, 408-417.

Burgoon, Judee K. "The Ideal Source: A Re-examination of Credibility Measurement," *Central States Speech Journal*, Volume 27 (1976) pp. 200-206.

Campbell, James E. "The Exceptional Election of 2008: Performance, Values, and Crisis," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Volume 40, pp. 225-246.

Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs. "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Volume 59 (1971), pp. 74-86.

Carlsson, Gosta. "Time and Continuity in Mass Attitude Change: The Case of Voting," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 29, No. 1 (Spring 1965), pp. 1-15.

Carney, Dana R., Amy J.C. Cuddy, *et al.* "Power Posing: Brief Nonverbal Displays Affect Neuroendocrine Levels and Risk Tolerance," *Psychological Science*, Volume 21, No. 10 (October 2010), pp. 1363-1368.

Cho, Jaeho. "Disentangling Media Effects from Debate Effects: The Presentation Mode of Televised Debates and Viewer Decision-Making," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Volume 86 No. 2 (Summer 2009) 383-400.

Coe, Kevin and Michael Rietzes, "Obama on the Stump: Features and Determinants of a Rhetorical Approach," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Volume 40, No. 3 (September 2010), pp. 391-413.

Eckman, Bruce. "Making Valid Nonverbal Judgments," *The English Journal*, Volume 66, No. 8 (November 1977), pp. 72-74.

Eichenberg, Richard C. and Richard J. Stoll, *et al.* "War President: The Approval Ratings of George W. Bush," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Volume 50, No. 6 (December 2006), pp. 783-808.

Gastii, John. "Generic Pronouns and Sexist Language," *Sex Roles*, Volume 23 Nos. 11/12 1990, pp. 629-643.

Gidlow, Liette. "The Great Debate: Kennedy, Nixon, and Television in the 1960 Race for the Presidency," *History Now*, Fall 2004, <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/sixties/essays/great-debate-kennedy-nixon-and-television-1960-race-for-presidency>.

Gregory, Stanford W., Jr. and Timothy J. Gallagher. "Spectral Analysis of Candidates' Nonverbal Vocal Communication: Predicting U.S. Presidential Election Outcomes," *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Volume 65, No. 3 (September 2002), pp. 298-308.

- Hall, Edward T. "A System for the Notation of Proxemic Behavior," *American Anthropologist*, Volume 65, No. 5 (October 1963), 1003-1026.
- Holbrook, Thomas M. "Incumbency, National Conditions, and the 2008 Presidential Election," *Political Science and Politics*, Volume 41, No. 4 (October 2008), pp. 709-712.
- Howell, William and Saul P. Jackman *et al.* "The Wartime President: Insights, Lessons, and Opportunities for Continued Investigation," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Volume 42, No. 4 (December 2012), pp. 791-810.
- Kaid, Linda Lee and John Boydston. "An Experimental Study of the Effectiveness of Negative Political Advertisements," *Communication Quarterly*, 35 (1987), pp. 193-201.
- Kimoto, Diane M. "The Taken-for-Granted Labor of Communication: Seeing beyond Words," *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, Volume 16, No. 1 (Winter 2010), pp. 31-51.
- Johnson, Danette Ifert. "Feminine Style in Presidential Debate Discourse, 1960–2000," *Communication Quarterly*, Volume 53 No. 1 (2005), pp. 3-20.
- Lang, Gladys Engel and Kurt Lang, "Immediate and Delayed Responses to a Carter-Ford Debate: Assessing Public Opinion," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 42 No. 3 (1978), 322-341.
- Lanoue, David J. "The One That Made a Difference: Cognitive Consistency, Political Knowledge, and the 1980 Presidential Debate," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 56 No. 2 (Summer 1992), 168-184.
- McKroskey, James C. "Ethos, Credibility, and Communication in the Real World," *North Carolina Journal of Speech*, Volume 4 (1971), pp. 24-31.
- Meiers, Franz-Josef. "The Return of the Imperial Presidency? The President, Congress, and U.S. Foreign Policy after 11 September 2001," *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, Volume 55, No. 2 (2010), pp. 249-286.
- Muhammad, Mahfouz Safi. "The Absence of Presence," *The Midwest Quarterly*, Volume 53. No. 4 (Summer 2012), pp. 392-409.
- Patzer, Gordon. "Marketing U.S. Presidential Candidates: Height Matters," *Proceedings of ASBBS*, Volume 19. No 1 (February 2012), pp. 693-703.
- Pfau, Michael. "The Subtle Nature of Presidential Debate Influence," *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Volume 38 No. 4 (Spring 2002), 251-261.
- Pryby, Charles. "Perceptions of Candidate Character Traits and the Presidential Vote in 2004," *Political Science and Politics*, Volume 41, No. 1 (January 2008), pp. 115-122.

Remez, Robert E., Philip E. Rubin, *et al.* "Speech Perception without Traditional Speech Cues," *Science, New Series*, Volume 212, No. 4497 (May 1981), pp. 947-950.

Rhea, David M. "There They Go Again: the Use of humor in Presidential Debates 1960-2008," *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Volume 49 No. 2 (Fall 2012), pp. 115-131.

Richmond, Virginia P. and James C. McKroskey. "Whose Opinion Do You Trust?" *The Journal of Communication*, Volume 25 (1975), pp. 43-50.

Scheufele, Dietram A., Eunkyung Kim, *et al.* "My Friend's Enemy: How Split-Screen Debate Coverage Influences Evaluation of Presidential Debates," *Communication Research*, Volume 34 No. 1 (February 2007), 3-24.

Skalski, Paul and Ron Tamborini, *et al.* "Effects of Humor on Presence and Recall of Persuasive Messages," *Communication Quarterly*, Volume 57 No. 2 (2009), pp. 136-153.

Speier, Hans. Wit and Politics: an Essay on Laughter and Power," *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 103, No. 5 (1998), pp. 1352-1401.

Stewart, Patrick A. "Presidential Laugh Lines: Candidate Display Behavior and Audience Laughter in the 2008 Primary Debates," *Politics and the Life Sciences*, Volume 29, No. 2 (September 2010), pp. 55-72.

Walker, Martin. "The Year of the Insurgents: The 2008 US Presidential Campaign," *International Affairs*, Volume 84, No. 6 (November 2008), pp. 1095-1107.

Wattenberg, Martin P. "Elections: Reliability Trumps Competence: Personal Attributes in the 2004 Presidential Election," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Volume 36, No. 4 (December 2006), pp. 705-713.

Weisberg, Herbert F. "Electoral Democracy during Wartime: The 2004 U.S. Election," *Political Behavior*, Volume 29, No. 2, (June 2007), pp. 143-149.

and Dino P. Christenson. "Changing Horses in Wartime? The 2004 Presidential Election," *Political Behavior*, Volume 29, No. 2, (June 2007), pp. 279-304.

Weiss, David C. "In Defense of the Post-Partisan President: Toward the Boundary Between 'Partisan' Advantage and 'Political' Choice," *Brigham Young University Journal of Public Law*, Volume 24, No. 259 (2010), 259-312.

PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARIES

Gerald Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI.

George Bush Presidential Library, College Station, TX.

George W. Bush Presidential Library, Dallas, TX.

Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Atlanta, GA.

John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, MA.

Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, CA.

Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA.

William J. Clinton Presidential Center, Little Rock, AR.

OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

Bully Free at Work

Conservative Political Action Committee

Council on Foreign Relations

Federal Bureau of Investigation

Georgia State University

Gilder Lehman Institute of American History

Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government

Indiana University, the Center on Congress

Institute of American History

Massachusetts General Court

National Archives and Records Administration

National Center for Public Policy and Research

National Organization for Women

New York Historical Society

Smithsonian Institution

Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations

United Nations Security Council

United States Army

United States Congress

United States Naval War College

University of Pennsylvania

University of Santa Barbara

University of Southern California, School of Planning, Policy and Development

University of Texas

University of Virginia, Miller Center

White House

STATUTES

Communications Act of 1934

United States Constitution

COURT CASES

United States v. Nixon, 418 U.S. 683, 716 (1974).

EXECUTIVE ORDERS

Presidential Proclamation 4311, September 8, 1974.

OTHER REFERENCE MATERIALS

Merriam-Webster Dictionary, retrieved on June 10, 2013, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>.