21. PRESIDENTIAL TELEVISION DEBATES

Presidential television debates, broadcast live on network and cable TV into all of the 50 states, have a nationalizing and unifying effect on presidential election campaigns. For a brief period, almost always in mid-October just prior to the November presidential election, the Democratic and Republican candidates for President appear before and speak to the national electorate as a whole. Millions of Americans, although sitting in their own living rooms in front of their own TV sets, are gathered together into what might be called a national "electronic community." The electorate watches television and sees, hears, and evaluates the major presidential candidates.

The first presidential debates on televison were held in 1960, just about ten years after television ownership became widespread in the United States. The Republican nominee for President in 1960, Vice President Richard M. Nixon, agreed to do a series of face-to-face TV debates with the Democratic nominee, U.S. Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts.

A number of observers believed it was unwise of Vice President Nixon, who was well-known to the American electorate, to give the relatively unknown John Kennedy the distinction and added television exposure of appearing in a presidential debate. But Nixon had great confidence in his own command of the

issues and his skills as a debater. He believed the debates would reveal Kennedy to be both uninformed and ill equipped to be President.

Nixon badly underestimated the effect of John Kennedy's good looks and effective speaking style when transmitted to the average voter through the medium of television. Kennedy appeared suntanned and well rested. Instead of turning toward Nixon and speaking to Nixon as a debater would do, Kennedy looked directly into the camera and spoke to the television audience. The image of Kennedy that came over the airwaves was warm, personal, attractive, and appealing.

The TV persona of Vice President Nixon, on the other hand, was badly damaged by a poor makeup job. In the era of black-and-white television, a heavy and pasty makeup made Nixon look dark, unshaven, and almost sinister on TV. The visual contrast between the two candidates was so great that it reduced the significance of what Nixon and Kennedy were saying to each other. Some experts who only listened to the debate on radio thought Nixon had won on debating points, but no one who saw the debate on television came to that conclusion.

John F. Kennedy narrowly won the 1960 presidential election. It was one of the closest elections in American history. Many reporters and commentators attributed Kennedy's razor-thin margin of victory to his strong presentation of

himself in the television debates.

From the point of view of supporters of presidential television debates, John F. Kennedy overdid it. For the next 16 years, from 1960 to 1976, there were no TV debates between presidential candidates. After seeing what Kennedy had done to Nixon in 1960, no frontrunner in a presidential race would give the trailing candidate the added free exposure of a debate on television. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, it appeared that the presidential TV debates of 1960 were going to be a one-time thing that would never be repeated.

The situation changed in 1976. Gerald R. Ford, the incumbent Republican President, had previously been Richard Nixon's Vice President. Although Nixon lost the presidential election to John Kennedy in 1960, Nixon ran for President a second time in 1968 and was elected.

Vice President Ford gained the White House when Richard Nixon resigned the presidency following the Watergate scandal. In an effort to raise his "presidential stature" in the eyes of the American people, President Ford agreed to a television debate with his lesser-known Democratic opponent, Jimmy Carter, the former Governor of Georgia.

As so often happens, history repeated itself. A major "gaffe" by the better-known candidate, President Gerald Ford, enabled the lesser-known candidate,

Jimmy Carter, to gain points. Responding to a question, President Ford said the major nations of Eastern Europe were no longer under the domination and control of the Soviet Union. This statement was greeted with incredulity by reporters and commentators throughout the news media. At that point in time, the Soviet Union maintained large standing armies in Eastern Europe. The various nations in the region were universally referred to as "Soviet puppets."

The Ford campaign issued a series of "clarifications" as to just what the President had meant to say. But the entire matter left voters with the inescapable impression that Gerald Ford did not know as much about world politics and foreign policy as he ought to know. Jimmy Carter narrowly won the 1976 presidential election. Gerald Ford's big mistake in the presidential television debates frequently was cited as a major factor in Carter's victory.

President Ford's willingness to debate Jimmy Carter on television in 1976 pretty much obligated President Carter to debate his opponent on TV in 1980. The opponent was Ronald Reagan, the Republican nominee for President, who previously had served as Governor of California. Sparks flew once again in this third set of presidential television debates. President Carter had presided over a sagging national economy characterized by both high unemployment and runaway inflation. In a skillful effort to exploit public displeasure with the sour economy,

Ronald Reagan looked directly into the TV camera and asked the American electorate: “Are you better off than you were four years ago?”

For millions of viewers, the obvious answer was a definite “No!” Ronald Reagan easily defeated incumbent President Jimmy Carter. Many observers and commentators saw Reagan’s incriminating question of Carter, fired off on a presidential television debate, as a major turning point in the campaign.

By 1984, presidential television debates had become an established precedent. No Democratic or Republican candidate for the White House, no matter how well-known or how far ahead in the public opinion polls, could avoid a series of TV debates with his or her opponent. For a major candidate to refuse to debate would result in an immediate storm of criticism. For better or worse, presidential television debates had become a permanent and expected, for some people even revered, part of the presidential selection process.

But two big rules of TV debate strategy have become crystal clear over the years since Richard Nixon first met John Kennedy before the television cameras back in 1960. Rule one is to not commit a major gaffe by saying something that sounds uninformed or just plain stupid, as President Ford did in 1976. Rule two is to be on guard against “zingers,” those damaging and demoralizing attack phrases, such as the one Ronald Reagan launched against Jimmy Carter in 1980.

One of the most exciting presidential TV debates took place in 1992. Incumbent Republican President George Bush, the father of George W. Bush, was running for re-election to a second term in the White House. President Bush's Democratic challenger was Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton. What the 1992 presidential television debates demonstrated was that television is an all-revealing medium. Even body language and carefully choreographed movements across the television stage can make major contributions to who is judged the winner and who is deemed the loser of the debate.

Thus, in 1992, President George Bush attempted to answer a question from a woman in the audience. She asked how the national debt was affecting the President personally. It was a confusing question. Reporters later theorized that the woman probably meant to ask how the economic recession taking place at the time was affecting the President personally. George Bush appeared not to understand the question and mumbled, "I'm not sure I get it." He then gave an answer that was somewhat garbled and unclear.

Then it was Bill Clinton's turn to respond to the woman's question. With the television cameras following his every move, Clinton walked toward her and established eye contact with her. He assumed her question had been about the economic recession and thus was able to give a clear, concise, and meaningful

answer. It was a warm and personal answer in which he talked about the pain the recession caused when good people lost jobs through no fault of their own. As one reporter summed it up: "Clinton connected."[1]

Shortly after that, another seemingly minor event spoke volumes to the voters watching the debate on national television. The TV cameras showed President Bush looking at his watch to see if the debate was going to end soon. That simple act on the part of the President symbolized his discomfort with the way both the debate and his 1992 campaign for the White House were going. President Bush had been put on the defensive by Bill Clinton's superior debating and speaking skills. Clearly, President Bush wanted to escape from the political hammering he was taking from his younger and more vigorous opponent.

The "look at the watch" by President George Bush was prophetic. Time was running out on his campaign for re-election. Bill Clinton easily defeated the older George Bush in the 1992 presidential election.

Four years later, in 1996, it was Bill Clinton who was running for re-election. His Republican opponent was Robert Dole, a U.S. Senator from Kansas and a former Majority Leader in the U.S. Senate. The 1996 presidential television debates were dominated by the fact that President Clinton was leading Bob Dole in the public opinion polls by almost 20 percentage points.

Bill Clinton therefore presented a subdued and non-controversial persona in the 1996 debates. That was unusual for Clinton, who had a reputation as a dynamic and persuasive television personality. But the President did not want to dissipate his wide lead in the polls by saying anything that would antagonize any substantial group of voters. So, as is often said in politics, President Clinton "sat on his lead" in the polls.

It thus fell to Robert Dole to go on the offensive and provide all the action in the debates. Dole sought to accomplish this goal by attacking Clinton's character and the number of political scandals that had tarnished the Clinton White House. "We have seen more than 30 Clinton officials investigated, fired or forced to resign due to ethical improprieties," Dole charged. "We have seen...three investigations of the [President's] Cabinet and one looking at the President himself.... No Administration has shown more arrogance. But few have displayed more ethical failures."

Clinton's advisers had anticipated just such an attack. The President fixed his gaze on Senator Dole and began walking toward him. The tactic was designed to unnerve Dole and try to get him to back away from continuing his attack on Clinton's character. Then Bill Clinton laid down a line that had been pre-scripted for exactly this situation.

"No attack ever created a job or educated a child or helped a family make ends meet," President Clinton said directly to Bob Dole. "No insult ever cleaned up a toxic waste dump or helped an elderly person." This response by Clinton was the only real zinger of the 1996 presidential TV debates.[2]

Also aiding Clinton was a make-up disaster reminiscent of what happened to Richard Nixon in his legendary 1960 debate with John Kennedy. Only in 1996 the make-up problem was on color television rather than black-and-white TV. Robert Dole was almost 20 years older than President Clinton, so his make-up team tried to hide the facial wrinkles that characterize most older people. The end result was that Dole's cheeks appeared to the television viewer to be enlarged and sagging. In fact, Dole in the debate bore a humorous resemblance to the cowardly lion in the film "The Wizard of Oz." It was a reminder wake-up call that appearance is as important in presidential TV debates as what the candidates have to say.

Robert Dole's bad make-up job, combined with President Clinton's deft defense against all the charges of character flaws in his Administration, turned the 1996 presidential TV debates into something of a non-event, or at least a dead heat. Bill Clinton maintained his lead in the public opinion polls and easily defeated Senator Dole in the November presidential election.

And then it was time for the year 2000 presidential television debates.

George W. Bush and Albert Gore, Jr., began preparing for what had become an anticipated and obligatory event in October of every presidential election year. As the newspaper reporters and television commentators joined the American electorate in front of their television sets, the news media scribes and pundits mainly had two questions on their minds. Would one of the candidates commit a major gaffe that would doom his candidacy? Would one of the candidates lay down a sharp and memorable zinger that would pave his way into the White House?

Endnotes - Chapter 21:

1. "Face To Face In Prime Time,"*Newsweek*, Special Election Issue, November/December 1992, p. 91.

2. Dole and Clinton quotes from author's notes, CBS News coverage, Presidential Debate #2, October 16, 1996.