

Do Debates Matter?

It had been a long two weeks for President Reagan's re-election team.

Just fourteen days earlier, the campaign was humming. With a month left to go, the president enjoyed a wide lead in the polls and seemed destined to become the first Republican re-elected to the White House since Richard Nixon. A Harris poll released on October 3 put the president ahead by 13 points nationwide. The campaign of Democrat Walter Mondale was desperately searching for a way to change the momentum.

Although the Reagan machine appeared unconcerned about the prospect of debating Mondale, privately word started to leak in early October that there were some soft spots that could hurt the 72-year-old president.

Unnamed advisers told *The New York Times* a week before the first debate that they viewed the President's tendency to make misstatements as a "wild card." The piece by Howell Raines went on to say that the Republicans were preparing for a "scenario" where they might need to react to some gaffe and they were ready to correct any mistake before it became a major controversy.

"If we make a mistake, it won't take 10 days to deal with it," said a White House official involved in preparing President Reagan for the debates. "It will be over in 12 hours."¹

As it turned out, it would not take 12 hours, but nearly 14 days to right the Reagan boat after the first presidential debate.

The two candidates took the stage in Louisville, Kentucky for the first of their meetings on October 7, 1984. First lady Nancy Reagan would later call it "the worst night of Ronnie's political career."²

Mondale came out with tough criticism of the president, taking on the Republican for the relative weakness of the economy and turning one of Reagan's signature lines from his debate with President Jimmy Carter four years earlier.

VICE PRESIDENT WALTER MONDALE
(Debate): Mr. Reagan, after the election is going to have to propose a tax increase...

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN: You know, I wasn't going to say this at all, but I can't help it: There you go again. I don't have a plan to tax or increase taxes. I am not going to increase taxes. I can understand why you are, Mr. Mondale, because as a Senator you voted 16 times to increase taxes...

VICE PRESIDENT WALTER MONDALE:
Mr. President, you said, "There you again." Right? Remember the last time you said that? You said it when President Carter said you were going to cut Medicare, and you said, "Oh no, there you go again Mr. President."

And what did you do right after the election? You went out and tried to cut \$20 billion out of Medicare. And so, when you say, "There you go again," people remember this.

VICE PRESIDENT WALTER MONDALE (Interview): I had anticipated that he'd say, "There you go again," and I was ready for that because I opened up the Social Security issue, because he would again, and this was really something he shouldn't have done, and I figured he was going to do it.

But even more than having a line turned against him, President Reagan repeatedly struggled to respond to specific criticism, often appearing lost in details.

At the time, the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* reports described the president's supporters as "subdued" following the debate. Mondale's backers, while pleased by their boss' performance, did not publicly discuss the issue of the president's age.

It was not until October 9, two days after the debate, that *The Wall Street Journal* raised the issue in a story headlined "New Question in Race: Is the Oldest U.S. President Now Showing His Age?" When the *Journal*, a conservative paper aimed at the business world, asked the question, the floodgates opened.

The next day the *Washington Post's* Lou Cannon took the issue head-on and raised some troubling questions. In the front page article, an anonymous adviser to the president acknowledged the question of whether Reagan, already the oldest president in history, was up to the job, saying, "It's the one issue that could change the

course of this campaign. We don't think it will, but the potential is now there."³

In an interview with Jim Lehrer five years later, Reagan said it was not a matter of fatigue or age, but a question of preparation.

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN (Interview): No, it wasn't tired. I was over-trained. We then—being there in office and all, everyone available, I want to tell you, I just had more facts and figures poured at me for weeks before than anyone could possibly sort out and use, and I call it overtraining. When I got there, I realized that I was wracking my brain so much for facts and figures on whatever subject we were talking about, that I knew I didn't do well.

VICE PRESIDENT WALTER MONDALE (Interview): The main thing, I think, that hurt him was he seemed to be ill-focused, seemed to lose his way, stumble, roam around in irrelevancies, and ... it was an impressively unimpressive personal performance on his part.

The debate raised an issue previously forbidden, allowing the press and pundits to question the ability of the president to lead, to deal with the still-dangerous Soviet Union and to guide the large federal bureaucracy.

The Mondale debate negotiation team viewed the fact that these issues were being discussed as a victory. Reagan's people had wanted the debate to run for 60 minutes, but after weeks of back-and-forth, the

two sides agreed to two 90-minute contests. In fact, the Louisville debate went another 10 minutes longer.

In her history of the 1984 campaign, Elizabeth Drew concluded, "Getting the debates to last an hour and half was one of the Mondale negotiators' major strategic achievements, even though they held few cards; they figured that Reagan would not have sufficient stamina to last that full time in good form."⁴

Mondale agreed. In weighing what happened between the first and second debate, he said Reagan's advisers, "protected him from working hard and so on, so he was fresh. I think they got him into sort of a fighting mood. They spent a tremendous amount of time demanding that that debate end precisely in 90 minutes." As the first debate went long, Mondale reflected, Reagan "just kept getting worse and worse and worse."

The media analysis of the expectations for President Reagan's ability to perform in the second debate reached a fevered pitch. ABC News White House correspondent Sam Donaldson said "people will be watching tonight because of Louisville, to see whether the president stands up, makes sentences that make sense from the standpoint of not stammering and stuttering, and doesn't drool."⁵

Reagan felt much better headed into the second contest, telling Jim Lehrer that for "the second debate, I wasn't over-trained."

The culmination of the age issue came about 30 minutes into the debate when Henry Trehitt, diplomatic correspondent for The Baltimore Sun, directly addressed the topic.

MR. HENRY TREWHITT (Debate): Mr. President, I want to raise an issue that I think has been lurking out there for two or three weeks, and cast it specifically in national security terms.

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN (Interview): I couldn't believe that question when it came at me from that press board that was there and asked me about my age, and was that going to be an issue in the campaign. And I thought, that had to be turned around.

MR. HENRY TREWHITT (Debate): You already are the oldest President in history, and some of your staff say you were tired after your most recent encounter with Mr. Mondale. I recall, yet, that President Kennedy, who had to go for days on end with very little sleep during the Cuba missile crisis. Is there any doubt in your mind that you would be able to function in such circumstances?

PRESIDENT REAGAN: Not at all, Mr. Trehitt 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.

If I still have time, I might add, Mr. Trehitt, I might add that it was Seneca or it was Cicero, I don't know which, that said if it was not for the elders correcting the mistakes of the

young, there would be no state.

MR. JIM LEHRER (Interview): The line that came up where he said "I'm not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience." Was that when you knew you were in trouble?

VICE PRESIDENT WALTER MONDALE: He got the audience with that, yeah. I could tell that one hurt.

MR. LEHRER: Did that strike you as obviously a pre-programmed line?

VICE PRESIDENT MONDALE: Well, I'll tell you, if TV can tell the truth, as you say it can, you'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.

MR. JIM LEHRER (Interview): Was that one you were laying for?

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN: I never thought about it coming up; that was really off the top of my head.

MR. LEHRER: And you did not do the kind of preparation at all for the second one you did for the first one, right?

PRESIDENT REAGAN: No, I felt we had learned our lesson.

MR. LEHRER: You won that election by a huge margin. How important do you think the debates were to your victory?

PRESIDENT REAGAN: Well, I have no way of knowing how much they might have contributed. I think if you judged them at all, they had to contribute something; if you won, then it was favorable to you. But I have no way of knowing how many people it might have swayed or changed.

MR. JIM LEHRER (Interview): And did you know that, that night, when it was over?

VICE PRESIDENT WALTER MONDALE: Yes, I walked off and I was almost certain the campaign was over, and it was.

MR. LEHRER: Did you say that to anybody?

VICE PRESIDENT MONDALE: My wife.

Reaction from the press was generally positive and Reagan's poll numbers went back up. Sixteen days later, on Election Day, President Reagan trounced Mr. Mondale by 18 percentage points in the popular vote and 525-13 in the electoral vote.

The 1984 clashes between President Reagan and former Vice President Mondale bring to life many of the issues candidates at the podium have struggled with since the advent of the modern presidential debate: the battle with expectations, the importance of pre-debate negotiations, the power of media analysis after the debate, and, most importantly, the power of the modern political debate to change the campaign in an instant.

Presidential debates are a fairly new phenomenon in the political history of the United States. The first general election debate between the leading candidates

for the highest office in the land did not take place until 1960 when Vice President Richard Nixon and Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy met on live television for the first of four debates.

Before that fateful contest, debates had played a limited role in selecting the president. The first instance of debates helping shape the campaign came in 1860 between Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln and Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas. Lincoln and Douglas did not debate during the 1860 presidential race, but rather two years earlier when they were campaigning for the U.S. senate seat from Illinois.

Douglas and Lincoln debated seven times in an effort to sway the state legislature – at this point senators were selected by these bodies, not directly by the public – but their clash set the groundwork for the 1860 presidential campaign. The debates were seen as one of the clearest manifestations of the great argument of the time over slavery. Douglas used them to outline his belief that states should have the right to decide whether to ban slavery or not. Lincoln, on the other hand, contended that slavery was a moral, not political issue, saying in one meeting, “that is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world. They are the two principles that have stood face to face from the beginning of time and will ever continue to struggle. The one is the common right of humanity and the other the divine right of kings.”

These debates, while two years ahead of the presidential campaign, were quoted over and over throughout the contest. The media, drawn by the face-to-face

nature of the debates, ran excerpts of the debates throughout the campaign. This was the first example of debates being used to frame the issues of the campaign and clearly outline the position of the men running, but that had as much to do with the fluke of history—the two men meeting again in the race for the presidency two years after their senate contest.

It was not until the modern era that debates became more common in presidential campaigns. But early on, they were seen primarily as a tool for the parties to help vet candidates and for the underdog to have a shot.

The first official request for a presidential debate came from Republican Wendell Wilkie who challenged sitting President Franklin Roosevelt to a debate in 1940. Roosevelt, a two-term incumbent who was still widely popular for his efforts to combat the Great Depression and his perceived efforts to keep the United States out of World War Two, saw no benefit to facing his lesser-known rival and declined.

Wilkie sought to use the debate as an example of Roosevelt's lack of support for democracy. He told a crowd that Roosevelt, "has strained our democratic institutions to the breaking point... I warn you - and I say this in dead earnest: If, because of some speeches about humanity, you return this Administration to office, you will be serving under an American totalitarian government before the long third term is over."⁶ Wilkie's challenge to debate played to the larger anti-incumbent message he stressed throughout the campaign, but to no avail. Wilkie won only 10 states and President Roosevelt cruised to reelection.

But even as Wilkie was unsuccessful, there appeared an increasing interest in the idea of the debate. Writing

in *The New York Times*, New York University Professor Elmer Nyberg said the debate offer raised an important opportunity to renew the dormant idea of political debate. While acknowledging that such presidential debates “may never take place,” he said there was a growing desire to consider the issues of the day and that debates could be an important way to do this, saying after decades of political campaigns being too focused on format and not content, “public interest is again aroused.”⁷

And interest in debates was growing among candidates for the presidency. Although no debate took place in 1940, eight years later Republicans Thomas Dewey and Harold Stassen conducted a live radio debate ahead of the Oregon primary. The debate, broadcast nationally, was hailed as an “historic occasion”⁸ by *The New York Times* and helped solidify the campaign of New York Governor Thomas Dewey. Democrats had their own primary debate eight years later, but by 1960 interest in a presidential debate had reached a new level.

THE GREAT 1960 DEBATES

The 1960 debates have become political mythology.

The story goes that John F. Kennedy, a young junior senator from Massachusetts, needed the debates to establish himself as someone of presidential stature and Vice President Nixon, having recently bested Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in the televised “Kitchen Debate,” was too confident when he agreed to the contest.

On September 26, 1960, the two men met in the first-ever televised clash between the two leading candidates for president.

The story that emerged was that those who watched the debate favored the tanned, dark-suited Kennedy over the pale vice president who had recently lost weight and whose suit blended into the background. Those who listened on the radio thought Nixon came out on top. Don Hewitt, the CBS News producer who was in charge of the debate, helped fuel the idea that the debate, and the way it came off on television, changed history that night. "Nixon looked so bad that people who listened on radio thought Nixon had won and people who watched on television thought Kennedy had won... now should a presidential debate turn on makeup? No, but this one did.... That election turned on makeup,"⁹ he told the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences years later.

The reality appears, in retrospect, more complicated. The debates were not seen at the time as such a pivotal moment. In fact, there was no formal polling of viewers done to gauge the impact of the debate on voters' opinions of the candidates.

In his book on the televised debate, Alan Schroeder dug into the facts behind the myth. It all began with the publisher of the Atlanta Constitution Ralph McGill.

He arranged for 'a number of persons' to listen to the first Kennedy-Nixon debate on radio, to see if they would react differently than television viewers did. 'It is interesting to report they unanimously thought Mr. Nixon had the better of it,' McGill concluded. Despite later, more-scientific data to the contrary, this early finding took root as a shibboleth.

McGill's poll, specifying neither sample size nor methodology, reflects the casual approach the news media of 1960 took towards the audience reaction story.¹⁰

Later research by CBS found that six percent of respondents said the debates had been a major factor in their decision that year and of those voters Kennedy won 2-to-1.

“I think the evidence is convincing that the debates were the determining factor,” historian Richard Norton Smith said. “What the debates allowed JFK to do was, if nothing else, establish himself on the same footing, an equal footing in terms of experience, command.”

SEPARATING MYTH AND REALITY

The 1960 debates represent the mix of fact and dramatic fiction that plays such an important role in the history of presidential debates. Kennedy was able to establish himself as a presidential figure in those debates, but the dramatic claim that this was an election that turned on appearance appears less sure-footed.

The same can be said about the 1984 debates. Despite his age, Ronald Reagan had not been challenged on the question of whether he was too old to lead until his struggles that October night. And in 1960, it was clearly the case that then-Senator Kennedy established that he was at least on par with Vice President Nixon. In a campaign where .17 percent separated the two candidates in the popular vote, that night on television could have made the difference.

The fact is, we don't know.

What we do know is the presidential debates are the one time that the candidates for president face one another on the same stage, largely unscripted. Although who qualifies for the debate is a source of controversy, the candidates in the debate appear on equal footing, unaffected by the amount of money they

have raised or their standing in the polls.

Indeed, the campaigns themselves, spend an enormous amount of time and effort preparing for and reacting to the events. As we shall see, the art of debate negotiation, preparation and "spin" are all critical factors for candidates and their campaigns. Debates are major milestones in the race from the primaries through the conventions and to the ballot box.

They also are moments when a large population tunes in to consider what the men and women who would lead this country have to say about themselves and how they perform off the cuff.

To historian Michael Beschloss, the role of debates within the election process is both positive and negative.

MR. MICHAEL BESCHLOSS (Interview):
The debates have become so important that for many Americans the debates equal the campaign. They almost don't pay attention to any other speech or anything else they learn about a candidate. They think that they can watch two or three debates and look into that person's soul. They can't.

There are a lot of things that are important to find in a president that you will never see evidence of, pro or con, in a debate – how thoughtful someone is; how much knowledge they have about certain issues that may seem arcane but may turn out to be very important to know about, especially when a president has to make a fast decision in a war or an economic crisis; what a potential

president's ability is in choosing people. You don't see anything about that in a debate.

So I think the problem is debates are great, but for Americans to think that just by watching one or two or three debates, that's all the work they have to do in choosing a presidential candidate, that's very dangerous. And most people don't say that....

The biggest argument for debates, as the media universe continues to evolve, is this: If you have candidates spending on the scale that they did in 2012, \$1 billion or more, that \$1 billion is basically spent to show the candidate they're backing in a completely, you know, airless environment that shows him at his best – Mitt Romney in this case, or Barack Obama, and to the extent they deal with the opponent, you know, it shows the opponent as Satan or someone who's not worth of being elected.

What a debate does is if that's what the preponderance of the campaign is, and as we're talking that's what it's become, unfortunately, a debate is one of the very rare opportunities where the two candidates are forced to get into a situation where they have to confront their accuser, their opponent, and they also have to be asked questions that are not scripted. There's nothing in the law or in public expectation that will force a candidate to go on the *PBS NewsHour* or on *Meet the Press*. I wish there were. But there is a public

expectation that a candidate subject him- or herself to debates. So that helps. If we didn't have debates, we wouldn't have that.

The power of the debate as a central moment of the campaign may be faltering. As the media itself fragments and the Internet gives rise to more partisan or individualistic views of politics, these seminal events are also changing.

Still, the presidential debates reflect their times and help us construct a narrative about our destiny as a nation with important insights into the media, American politics and the democratic experiment.

Style vs. Substance

Headed into 1992, re-election should have been a cakewalk for President George H.W. Bush. Bush had emerged from the shadow of Ronald Reagan, the man he had served as vice president for eight years, and had come into his own on the world stage.

Since assuming office in 1989, President Bush had guided the nation through the end of the Cold War, watching the great rival Soviet Union dissolve and Eastern Europe declare its independence. In Germany, the Berlin Wall fell –and soon the country, long divided between the communist East and democratic West, reunited.

President Bush spoke of a New World Order, forging international coalitions to deal with issues of trade, but also issues of regional security. When Iraq invaded its oil-rich neighbor Kuwait in 1990, Bush spearheaded a coalition of scores of nations declaring, “This will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait.”

In early 1991, the coalition launched a military operation and within hours had won a major victory, forcing Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi forces from Kuwait. In the wake of the success, President Bush’s approval rat-

ing soared to the highest level many polling firms had ever seen. In one Roper Poll at the end of February, 89 percent of Americans approved of the job their president was doing.¹

But here it was, October of 1992 and President Bush was facing a challenge from Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton and Independent Texas businessman Ross Perot. In fact as the debates opened, Gov. Clinton had a 10- to 15-point lead in public opinion surveys.

What had happened?

In two words: the economy. Despite the popularity of the Gulf War and his stewardship of foreign affairs, Bush was dogged by a weak economy and public perceptions that the U.S. was domestically on the wrong path.

By August of 1992, only 17 percent of Americans felt the country was on the right track, according to the Gallup Poll.² The nation's sour mood helped propel the candidacy of Bill Clinton, whose campaign headquarters featured a well-publicized sign taunting, "It's the economy, stupid." Clinton focused almost exclusively on the nation's domestic issues, discussing plans to create a new health care system and reinvest in the nation's workforce.

Headed into the debates, Clinton knew his lead was a product of the times, not a reflection of President Bush or even himself. He would later tell Jim Lehrer, "even though I was ahead in the polls by then, that it was a product of the fact that we had a relentless focus on the economy and on the social problems in America - crime, welfare, other issues - and that he (President Bush) was in trouble because people thought that while he was a very good man, he just wasn't involved

in what was going on in the domestic economy, in the domestic problems of the country.”

So for the Clinton campaign, the debates were an opportunity to hammer home this storyline and establish the Arkansas governor as an acceptable alternative.

News coverage at the time reflected the impression that President Bush needed to do something dramatic to change the course of the campaign and the only place this could happen, reflecting their continued power in presidential politics, was the three debates.

“This race needs to be fundamentally recast in some different shape, and the only realistic event of such magnitude is these debates,” Republican pollster Bill McInturff told the *Washington Post’s* Dan Balz on the eve of the first contest. Democrats gleefully piled on the pressure, with Clinton’s pollster Stan Greenburg saying in the same piece that the president had to “introduce his economic ideas, show he can be trusted, show he has a decent record as president, show that he is a better leader than Bill Clinton. That’s a lot to do.”³

Such ratcheting up of expectations is a critical part of all debates, where each campaign and its supporters seek to outline what to expect, set unrealistic goals for the competition or lower expectations about their own candidate to help with post-debate analysis by the media.

And, as confident as the Clinton people sounded that night, Mr. Clinton later said he felt he had more on the line than the president.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON (Interview): If you’re an incumbent President, or if you’ve been on the national stage for a long time, I

think the downside potential of a not very good debate is not as great as if you're the new guy on the block, if you're young, and if you've never worked in Washington as an elected official. Then I think if you err, if you make a mistake, it could potentially be much more costly.

Still, while the public pressure was clearly on President Bush, the president was a practiced hand at the art of the debate. He had already participated in as many debates as anyone during his time as vice president and his successful run for president against Michael Dukakis in 1988.

The irony was that as experienced a debater as he was, President Bush loathed them.

PRESIDENT GEORGE H.W. BUSH (Interview): I don't like 'em... partially I wasn't too good at 'em. Secondly, there's some of it's contrived. Show business... There's a certain artificiality to it, lack of spontaneity to it. Those big time things... it was tension city, Jim."

The 1992 debates were a blizzard of events – three presidential and a vice presidential – over the course of eight days. The first, moderated by a traditional panel of reporters, had failed to change much in the way the candidates were perceived. Governor Clinton received high marks in the meeting and independent Ross Perot saw a bump in his support, but President Bush had failed to achieve the "game changer" McInturff said he needed.

Four days later, he got another shot.

The second presidential debate took place in Richmond, Virginia on October 15 and unlike the previ-

ous debate, it would be an historical milestone – the first time the candidates would participate in a town hall-style debate where most questions came from the audience.

The format posed two clear challenges to the president. First, it made it difficult for Bush to attack the front-runner and second he had to deal with questions that, at times, lacked the clarity of more traditional press queries. In addition, this was a format the Clinton team pushed for, knowing that their candidate's people skills shone in such environments.

President Bush started the debate by trying to raise the "character" issue against Gov. Clinton, and the reaction was something that could only happen in a town hall debate.

PRESIDENT GEORGE H.W. BUSH (Debate):

I think the first negative campaign run in this election was by Governor Clinton. And I'm not going to sit there and be a punching bag. I'm going to stand up and say, 'Hey, listen, here's my side of it.' But character is an important part of the equation.

AUDIENCE MEMBER (Debate): Can we focus on the issues and not the personalities and the mud? I think there is, there is a need, if we can take a poll here, with the folks from Gallup perhaps, I think there is a real need here to focus at this point on the needs.

CAROLE SIMPSON: How do you respond? How do you gentlemen respond to...

GOVERNOR BILL CLINTON: I agree with him. I worked 12 years very hard as a governor on the real problems of real people. I'm just as sick as you are by having to wake up and figure out how to defend myself every day. I never thought I'd ever be involved in anything like this.

CAROL SIMPSON: President Bush. How would you like to respond?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Let's do it. Let's talk about programs for children.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Could we cross our hearts; it sounds silly here, but could we make a commitment? You know, we're not under oath at this point, but could you make a commitment to the citizens of the United States to meet our needs, and we have many.

The exchange reflected an important element that made the Richmond debate different – voters. For the first time, candidates faced questions from “ordinary” Americans. These undecided voters forced candidates out of their talking points and framed questions in ways that traditional reporters did not.

But it was not just the questions that were different. “The town-hall format exposed the candidates in a way radically different from that of previous debates,” Sidney Kraus wrote in his 2000 study of the debates. “Because the candidates were open, at times moving away from their podiums, more of their physical statures was shown.”⁴ Additionally, this debate featured some of the first “reaction shots” of the candidate not speaking.

And it was these reaction shots that caused President Bush even more trouble.

MR. JIM LEHRER (Interview): The Richmond debate, Mr. President, you know you caught a lot of heat for looking at your watch. What was that all about, remember that?

PRESIDENT GEORGE H.W. BUSH: Well I wasn't too conscious of it at all.

MR. LEHRER: I know. Well do you remember that?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Yeah, oh God, do I remember. I took a huge hit. That's another thing I don't like debates, you look at your watch and they say that he hasn't any business running for president. He's bored and he's out of this thing, and he's not with it and we need change.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON (Interview): Well, I remember I saw it at the time.

MR. JIM LEHRER: You did see it at the time?

PRESIDENT CLINTON: I saw him look at his watch. And I - I thought, I felt, when I saw it, that he was - you know - uncomfortable in that setting and wanted it to be over with. And I was a little surprised in the aftermath that so much was made of it. But I think the reason so much was made of it is that the impression was forming that here was a very good man who was very devoted to our country but just didn't really believe

that this - all these domestic issues should be dominating in the way they were... I think if someone had caught me or Ross Perot looking at our watch, if it wasn't - unless it had been a bad moment in the debate - it probably wouldn't have resonated, but I think - now I always thought that President Bush would have been reelected if people had really believed that he had as clear a grasp of the way the economy and the society were changing and what needed to be done as he did of our foreign policy and where we needed to go in the world. I always felt that, because I think people thought he was a good person who loved this country very much, and that's what I thought. I mean, so I think the reason the watch thing hurt so badly is it tended to reinforce the problem he had in the election.

PRESIDENT GEORGE H.W. BUSH (Interview): I mean, they took a little incident like that to show that I was, you know, out of it. I mean, they made a huge thing out of that. Now, was I glad when the damn thing was over? Yeah, and maybe that's why I was looking at it, only 10 more minutes of this crap, I mean. (Mr. Lehrer laughs) Go ahead and use it. I'm a free spirit now.

MR. JIM LEHRER: That's in it, that's on the tape don't worry...

PRESIDENT BUSH: Run it. Make that the heading as far as I'm concerned... If I'd have

said that then I'd have done better. But you're on guard, you don't want to make a mistake. You don't want to say anything that's gonna offend.

The fallout from the Richmond debate was largely negative for the struggling Bush campaign. Two days later, the *Washington Post* ran a piece that made mention of the watch-watching and connected it to a larger campaign theme – how much Bush wanted to win. The piece, under the headline “Bush’s Demeanor Raises GOP Concern,” quoted one Republican official as saying it seems the “president now believes he is going to lose.” Even a Bush aide quoted in the piece said, the president “gets up every morning, morning after morning and hears on television and reads in the papers that he can’t do anything right, that he has not done anything right, that he is a bum and an incompetent. It is bound to affect his confidence and it has.”⁵

Of course it is fair to ask whether making a big deal of several glances at a watch during a 90-minute debate is good for the democratic process. But as President Clinton said, it was not the incident itself, but how it connected to larger questions. In this case, the glance at the watch served as an illustration of a candidate perhaps tired of the campaign itself, frustrated that no matter what he had accomplished as president and before, there was no way to fight back.

The style moment in the Richmond debate clearly connected in the minds of the press, many within the Republican establishment and at least some voters to a large substantive issue of President Bush’s desire to fight for the job.

NO BUSINESS LIKE SHOW BUSINESS?

The 1992 Richmond debate seems to have solidified President Bush's view of debates. He later told Jim Lehrer, "I'm trying to forget the whole damned experience for those debates, seriously, because I think it's too much show business, and too much prompting, and too much artificiality, and aren't really debates. I mean, they're rehearsed appearances."

The debate over whether the debates are substantive tests of presidential skills or made-for-TV political dramas continues to this day.

Political scientists and historians have often connected the debates to the medium that has dominated the way most people experience the contests – television.

"A winning debate strategy hinges in large measure on how well a candidate apprehends the experience as televised drama," Alan Schroeder has written. "Smart debaters understand that their mission, at least in part, is to stage a performance for an audience – an audience that expects to be simultaneously enlightened and entertained."⁶

In this view of the debates, President Bush's criticism rings true. If the debates are a television show, then what skills are they testing?

For former President Bush, the answer is essentially acting skills, not necessarily attributes needed to lead the country.

PRESIDENT GEORGE H.W. BUSH (Interview): You can have a good president that might not be the best, in the top of his game, in a staged debate. But maybe you can do it quietly, maybe you can do it without having

a hair parted and the make-up just right and the smile at the right time. Maybe you can do it by getting good people around you and giving them credit and trying to do a quiet, decent job for your country.

But the man who bested him in those 1992 debates disagrees about what a voter can glean from the encounters.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON (Interview):
They give the voters the best chance they can get to take the measure of a person under some fire and to hear people probing their ideas to see the way they think... they show whether you can understand a situation in a hurry and respond to it, particularly if there's a surprise question or, you know, a surprise development in the kind of the chemistry of the players.

They don't show whether you're good at putting together a team and, you know, carrying out a plan, but they do give people a feel for what kind of leader the debater would be, how much the person knows, and generally how they approach the whole idea of being president. I think they do.

A DIFFERENCE WITHOUT DISTINCTION?

For Clinton and many others, the idea of "style versus substance" is a false choice. The way a candidate relates to people, their ability to respond on the fly and their basic humanity are legitimate factors voters should weigh when choosing a president. And, they

argue, the debate represents one of the few chances the voters have to see glimpses of the unscripted candidate, an important factor in weighing the different candidates, but also, some argue, in helping legitimize the electoral process.

From this perspective, questions of “style” and emotional connection are no less important than a statement of clear policy goals or political beliefs. This argument contends that a voter can only know so much about the decisions and policies a given president will have to take while in office. During the campaign of 2000, then Gov. George Bush and Vice President Al Gore rarely discussed foreign policy issues, or views on Islamic extremism. Yet, less than eight months later, President George W. Bush was making decisions about how to battle al-Qaida and eventually ordered the invasion of Iraq. These decisions were almost unimaginable when voters entered the voting booth in 2000.

Given the fact that voters and the candidates do not know the issues the next president will face (what political scientists dub “contingent events”) the best these voters can do is select the candidate that has the right mix of issue stances and leadership qualities from their perspective. To decide this, the debates provide an insight into candidate’s ability to perform under pressure and articulate him- or herself off the cuff.

These are, at the end of the day, questions of character and temperament – what some call “style.”

The debates offer an important opportunity to see all of the candidates who might be the next president, together, interacting with one another and members of the press or the public; they provide critical moments

for not only the campaign, but also the process.

Political scientists have done many studies about the impact of debates. In 1976, a panel of communications professors looked at the impact on the voters' attitudes towards both candidates. These researchers found that, "the debates stimulated exposure to various kinds of communication about the campaign without, at the same time, causing voters to balance their increasing support for their own candidate by becoming more negative toward the opposing candidate."⁷ Put more simply, debates create a moment when voters learn about the candidate they didn't plan to vote for and see them not as the enemy, but as a largely legitimate option. The debates, unlike negative ads or a stump speech, help voters see the other candidate as a viable president.

Interestingly, this view was echoed in the comments of Jim Lehrer, who has moderated more of these encounters than anyone else. For Lehrer, the debates he moderated left him with a strong sense about the candidates.

MR. JIM LEHRER (Interview): There are no accidents at that level in American politics. Those candidates got a lot at risk. I mean, they got everything at risk. And, they got to have a lot of stuff in their heads and they have got to have their mind and they have to be agile enough to go with the flow and they're making split-second decisions and they are rolling all of the dice when they do it. I have yet to get up from a debate without being impressed with the quality of the candidates involved.

have gained the traction it did in the discussion of the campaign.

Style and substance appear to merge in the presidential debate, a point that makes sense if you consider one of the most commonly used analogies for the debate process – the job interview. As presidential historian Michael Beschloss argues, debates help weed out the candidates who can't think for themselves.

MR. MICHAEL BESCHLOSS (Interview): There have been suggestions, for instance, that candidates who are preparing for a debate will be advised by psychiatrists, sometimes at, you know, long distance, if you say this, this will knock your opponent off balance and your opponent is not very good at thinking on his feet and relies on talking points. So you might say, is that unfair to the opponent? I think not, because one of the things we want about a president is someone who actually can think on his feet. At some point he may be in a negotiation with a foreign leader, or he may be in a press conference where he's given a question that he hasn't expected. Unless you've got someone who can respond in a way that is presidential, you've got a big problem. So if a debate weeds out people who basically are reading off of cue cards and there's not much else there, that's a good thing.

For anyone who has been on a job interview or conducted one, a candidate usually does not get the position based on qualifications alone. It is a mix of

personality, skills, ability and personal interaction that convinces an employer to make the hire. In the most viewed job interview in the country, presidential candidates must do the same thing in a debate and, in the end, convince through both style and substance, that they are the man or the woman for the job.