November 1986

Complete Issue 24(1)

Follow this and additional works at: https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/speaker-gavel

Part of the Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Complete Issue is brought to you for free and open access by Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. It has been accepted for inclusion in Speaker & Gavel by an authorized editor of Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato.
Quarterly Journal of
DELTA SIGMA RHO-TAU KAPPA ALPHA

Published by Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato, 1986
DELTA SIGMA RHO—TAU KAPPA ALPHA
National Honorary Forensic Society

NATIONAL OFFICERS:
President  James F. Weaver, Iowa State University
Vice President  Austin J. Freeley, John Carroll University
Secretary  Sheryl Friedley, George Mason University
Treasurer  James A. Johnson, The Colorado College
Trustee  Annabelle Dunham Hagood, University of Alabama
Historian  John A. Lynch, St. Anselm College

NATIONAL COUNCIL MEMBERS:
At Large  Robert Rowland, Baylor University
At Large  Gregg Walker, University of Utah
Past President  Robert O. Weiss, DePauw University

REGIONAL GOVERNORS:
Region I  Edward J. Harris, Jr., Suffolk University
Region II  James J. Hall, St. John's University
Region III  Theodore F. Sheckels, Jr., Randolph-Macon College
Region IV  Michael Hazen, Wake Forest University
Region V  Stephen C. Koch, Miami University
Region VI  Vernon R. McGuire, Texas Tech University
Region VII  Jack Kay, University of Nebraska–Lincoln
Region VIII  Larry Schnoor, Mankato State University
Region IX  James A. Johnson, The Colorado College
Region X  Lawrence D. Medcalf, San Francisco State University

STUDENT OFFICERS:
President  Sarah M. Carroll, Capital University
First Vice President  Owen C. Hatch, University of Alabama
Second Vice President  Guy Craig Vachon, Emerson College
Secretary  Tony Justman, Weber State College

DSR-TKA REPRESENTATIVES:
To the CIDD  Thomas Burkholder, University of Kansas
To the ACHS  James H. McBath, University of Southern California

EDITORIAL STAFF:
Editor  Jack Kay, University of Nebraska–Lincoln
Editorial Assistants  Roger Aden, University of Nebraska–Lincoln
                      Jane Heinicke, University of Nebraska–Lincoln
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Presidential Debates: Public Understanding and Political Institutionalization
.................................................. J. Jeffery Auer 1

An Insider’s View of the Constraints Affecting Geraldine Ferraro’s Preparation for the 1984 Vice Presidential Debate
.................................................. Dayle Hardy-Short 8

A Goals Criteria Approach: Preparing the Public to Evaluate Presidential Debates
.................................................. Brant Short 23

Presidential Debates: Political Tool or Voter Information?
.................................................. Mary M. Gill 36

Rebuilding the Presidential Debates
.................................................. Stephen Mills 41
The editorial policy of *Speaker and Gavel* is to publish refereed articles dealing with the theory, practice, or criticism of public argument. Preference is given to topics drawn from the contemporary period, i.e., since 1960. *Speaker and Gavel* will also publish articles about major society projects, including articles on academic forensics. Articles featuring society projects may be commissioned.

Authors should submit three double-spaced, typed copies of a manuscript, documented with endnotes beginning on a separate page at the conclusion of the text. Manuscripts should conform to the latest edition of the *MLA Handbook* and should use nonsexist language. Include a cover letter identifying author(s) and affiliation, but remove all such references in the manuscript in order to facilitate blind reviewing. Manuscripts should normally be in the 1,500–3,500 word range.

Manuscripts and correspondence should be directed to the editor at the above address.
PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES: PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONALIZATION

J. Jeffery Auer

One hundred twenty-five years ago, Abraham Lincoln became president of the United States after defeating Stephen Douglas in the election of 1860. The two candidates never met in presidential debates, but they had debated each other in seven central Illinois towns during the senatorial campaign of 1858. The idea of debating emerged as the candidates, contesting for a Senate seat, were addressing voters who would elect members of the state legislature who would in turn elect the senator. In that event, Lincoln challenged Douglas to the debates; and Douglas claimed as the incumbent the right to set the terms. Thus, he made the opening and closing speeches in four debates; and Lincoln did the same in three. Each man spoke for ninety minutes: the opener for sixty minutes; his opponent for ninety minutes, combining refutation and argument; and then the opener again, closing with a thirty-minute rebuttal.

The two men were in direct confrontation on the platform. They addressed each other as well as the audience; they questioned each other; each refuted the other’s arguments; and they stayed pretty well on the single issue of the future of slavery in the territories. The nub of the matter, you may recall, was the series of direct questions put to Douglas by Lincoln in establishing the Freeport Dilemma. Douglas was forced to choose between repudiating the Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision, which had declared illegal any action by the voters to prohibit slavery in the territories, and repudiating his own cherished doctrine of Popular Sovereignty. Retrospectively, it is agreed that Douglas won the 1858 debate—at the price of losing the 1860 election.

In any case, these are the facts from which has grown one of America’s most cherished political myths: that competing candidates’ direct interrogation of each other and direct clashing over ideas, assumptions, evidence, and argument are healthy experiences for the debaters and are especially good for the electors. This is the mythic heritage of the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

I suggest that the sharp confrontation aspect of the Lincoln-Douglas myth has been reinforced by another myth of equal vintage. Just a few months before Lincoln’s election in 1860, the first of the dime novels was published.
It was an adventure yarn, based in the Wild West and featuring a cowboy as its hero. In time, the mythic backwoodsman heroes, like Daniel Boone, and the mythic mountain man heroes, like Kit Carson, gave way to the mythical cowboy, like Owen Wister's "The Virginian," like Hopalong Cassidy, or like any of Zane Grey's heroes. For most of us, that mythical cowboy doubtless lives most memorably in the movie character portrayed by Gary Cooper in 1952. He was the chief lawman of Hadleyville, Marshal Will Kane, who confronted the outlaw, Frank Miller, in a shoot-out on the deserted, dusty main street at "High Noon." This cowboy myth always pits a noble hero who lives by the "code of the West" against a villain who desecrates that code. The inevitable resolution of justice is in a lonely one-to-one confrontation, a sanctified shoot-out. And this method parallels the Lincoln-Douglas tradition of political resolution by one-to-one debate.

In his recent book Myth and Meaning (1983), Stephen Ausband argues that most of the traditions that make up our myths have the effect of imposing some order and stability into our national self-perceptions. In my view, the twin myths of the Lincoln-Douglas confrontation and the "Cowboy at High Noon" have contributed to our self-perception the idea that we are a people who resolve our questions about public men and measures by such reasonable procedures as presidential debates. So let us hear no more about Sander Vanocur's judgment that the Carter-Ford debate was "an unnatural act between two consenting adults in public."

In his constant and often inconsequential grasp for a laugh line, Ronald Reagan would probably begin a retrospective look at presidential debates by saying that he was in the audience for Lincoln and Douglas. I must confess that I was not. However, I did hear the 1948 nationally broadcasted radio debate of candidates Harold Stassen and Thomas Dewey in the Oregon primary, the 1956 nationally televised debate of Adlai Stevenson and Estes Kefauver in the Florida primary, and the 1960 widely televised debate of Jack Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey in the West Virginia primary. Buoyed by these experiences, and ever-optimistic, I was one of many in the speech communication community who urged that party convention nominees—not just candidates in state primaries—quadrennially take part in public debates, presumably in the mythic style of Lincoln-Douglas and the "Cowboy at High Noon."

In retrospect, when we asked for public presidential debates, what did we get in 1960, 1976, 1980, and 1984? In the first place, we wedded the debates to television. As Professor David Swanson said in a distinguished lecture to an Indiana University audience just a few days ago, contemporary political communication has become "The Living-Room War." So it was with the first debates between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960: in living rooms and in barrooms all over the country, individuals and small groups gathered in front of their television screens. Like the citizens of Hadleyville, who peeked from behind closed doors to watch Marshal Will Kane and outlaw Frank Miller, we peered at our screens to see and hear our political version of the "white hat" versus the "black hat."

Whatever else may be said about this first experience, which NBC board chairman Frank Stanton was apparently the first to call "The Great Debate," it was clearly an epic event. Although the debate was staged as a public
affairs program, the concern for stage setting, lighting, candidates’ makeup, and camera angles indicated it was obviously viewed as a show. Young Richard Nixon was momentarily gulled by the event when he wrote in 1962 in Six Crises that presidential debates “are here to stay . . . the candidates have a responsibility to inform the public on their views before the widest possible audience.” But in his Memoirs, the mature Nixon reflected on his thoughts after having heard the Ford-Carter debates of 1976: “I doubt that they can ever serve a responsible role in defining the issues of a presidential campaign. Because of the nature of the medium,” he concluded, “there will inevitably be a greater premium on showmanship than on statesmanship.” After the Carter-Reagan debates in 1980, Nixon repeated his characterization of the “show business medium” and concluded that “more often than not, what is emotionally appealing—and therefore dramatically captivating—is intellectually vacuous and substantively wrong. What makes good television,” he said, “often makes bad policy.”

The fact is, of course, that in national politics, much more than at state and local levels, television provides the primary access to the voters. As Walter Mondale realistically observed in a press conference the day after the 1984 election, “I think that, more than I was able to do, modern politics today requires a mastery of television. . . . I don’t believe it’s possible anymore to run for president without the capacity to build confidence and communications every night. It’s got to be done that way.”

Mondale’s comments came in an expression of candor, not recrimination. “I think you know,” he told the reporters, “I’ve never really warmed up to television. And in fairness to television, it’s never really warmed up to me. I like to look someone in the eye and say it and listen, and there’s something about that that I’ve never been comfortable with and I think it’s obvious.” Indeed, any communication critic would agree with Mondale, both in assessing his own television limitations and in projecting the necessity for future candidates to be what I would call television-congenial.

Being a television-congenial candidate means more than just showing a pleasant personality. Not only does it require effective delivery techniques, like Reagan’s “Aw, shucks” manner and his management of his voice, facial expressions, and gestures; it also requires invention and arrangement. Careful study of what speech writers do for presidents and for presidential candidates in the television age reveals an increase in the generality of arguments and the universality of proofs. Benjamin Page found, in his 1978 study Choices and Echoes in Presidential Elections, that the most common characteristic of presidential candidates’ speeches in the sixties and seventies was ambiguity. It is, of course, in the choice of words that the appeal to “Everyman” is reflected. Roderick Hart’s splendid pioneer computer-based analysis Verbal Style and the Presidency (1984) makes this clear. For example, he states that “Ronald Reagan is a semantic egalitarian who resolutely insists that no philosophical concept is so subtle that it cannot be turned into a political slogan. In this sense,” I am delighted to quote Hart, “Ronald Reagan is the Mortimer Adler of American politics.”

Let me conclude these observations about the wedding of presidential debates to national television by citing Henry Fairlie, England’s gift to American journalism. Just a few days ago, in the New Republic, Fairlie reported
that the editor of *The Washingtonian* had said that an article ought to be written that described what the world would be like if suddenly there were no television. As Fairlie immediately responded, "For one thing, there would be no elections. We have forgotten how to hold elections without television."

On to my second contention: when we wedded the debates to television, we created media events; but these events were not in the true Lincoln-Douglas at high noon tradition. Now, *media event* is not necessarily a pejorative term. It can, for example, emphasize the extent of the audience. In 1858, no more than 75,000 people heard Lincoln and Douglas in all their seven Illinois debates. More than 85,000,000 people heard at least one of the encounters between Kennedy and Nixon. More than 100,000,000 viewed the first Ford-Carter debate. In 1980, over 50,000,000 tuned in on the Reagan-Anderson debate, and twice as many watched Reagan debate Carter. The audience for the first Reagan-Mondale debate in 1984 numbered over 70,000,000, and for the second Reagan-Mondale debate it numbered over 75,000,000 for ABC alone, plus the CBS, NBC, and PBS viewers. We may not be certain whether these people were informed on the issues more than they were impressed by personalities or whether they changed their minds significantly or merely confirmed their prejudices. In any case, the electronic media made it possible for so many to see so much.

There is also, however, a pejorative sense of the term *media event*. Sometimes it means a minor event, made to seem important by exaggerated publicity. Other times, in the Daniel Boorstin tradition, it means an event deliberately staged for maximum exposure by both the print and the electronic media. Referring to the latter sense, I began in 1960 to speak and write critically on the "Great Myths about the Great Debates." Now, speaking to a new generation, I repeat that not one joint press conference participated in by Anderson, Carter, Ford, Kennedy, Mondale, Nixon, or Reagan was faithful to the tradition of Lincoln-Douglas. The 1858 debates had five essentials, as have true debates throughout American history, whether in debate as an educational method, as a legislative process, or as a judicial procedure. These critical components of true debate are (1) participant confrontation, (2) equal and adequate time for the participants, (3) a fair matching of participants, (4) debate on a stated proposition, and (5) the goal of gaining an audience decision.

I hope you agree with me that the so-called Great Debates have been deficient on each of these counts. Nevertheless, I am perfectly willing to agree that imperfect debates are better than no meetings of the party nominees on the same platform, better even if the debaters must share the platform with a panel of journalists. But let us also agree that as educators we should hope and work for improved quality and context for all public communication, especially communication by those whose guiding goal is to become our president.

I believe that we should expose and attack every aspect of joint appearances on television that tends to make them media events at the expense of their being true debates. I further believe that now is the time for public exposure of the deficiencies of past presidential debates. Whereas there is evidence of public understanding of the general purpose of these events,
there is substantial evidence that both the format and the role of the panelists are in question. Never in the history of the presidential debates has there been so much criticism of these elements as there was immediately following the 1984 debates. The criticism came from broadcast commentators, respected columnists and editorial writers, and many members of the general public. Even some advisors to political candidates objected. But by 1988 it will be too late to protest. By then the media will have hyped what they think has worked to attract audiences in the past, the League of Women Voters will again have failed to hold serious public hearings for advice on what should be done, the expert political scientists and communication critics will have been forgotten, and we will again complain about panel-selection procedures when we should be asking how Lincoln and Douglas managed to debate at all without any itinerant journalists on the platform to guide (and distract) them. Let me remind you that 1988 must be our year because, for the first time since 1960, neither major-party candidate will be a White House incumbent. Both will be able to write on a clean slate.

Finally, I turn to my third argument: whether we succeed or fail to revive the true Lincoln-Douglas tradition and cowboy at high noon myth, we are about to see the political institutionalization of the presidential debate. In 1981 I wrote a piece for Speaker and Gavel in which I said it was a great myth to believe that one day all presidential candidates would voluntarily, regularly, and cheerfully take part in real debates. In rereading this gem, I find that I said “the only way to ensure debates of any sort between presidential candidates in 1984 and after is to find a way to mandate them.” And I cited a number of widely discussed proposals to do just that, ranging from simple supplication to the withholding of presidential campaign funds from those who would not agree to debate. But I then questioned whether Americans really wanted any kind of debate so much that they would consider commanding presidential candidates to hold them.

In reviewing this erroneous prediction, all I can plead is that, as the drunk said after he had tossed a brick through the glass window, “It seemed like a good idea at the time.” The only escape I left open was a jaundiced statement that whatever candidates did was what would serve their own political ends and that future presidential debates would not evolve simply from the candidates’ desire to inform the electorate about critical political issues.

This was, indeed, the explanation for the 1984 debates. Mondale knew he had nothing to lose and perhaps something to gain by debating. Elizabeth Drew talked with the Reagan advisors and reported in the New Yorker that they gave her two reasons for letting their man debate. First, “they did not think it would be politically acceptable to refuse to debate,” and second, they conceived that the race might “tighten sufficiently” by late October for Reagan to need a debate to win.

I am now convinced that in the future, the American public will not look with approval on any candidate who refuses to debate. In short, the debates are now institutionalized. What we have to fear in this is that the media people and some political advisors will hype the debates so much that they will become the most important element of the campaign. As one of Reagan’s staff members told New York Times reporter Hedrick Smith in 1980,
a debate with Carter was "one big crapshoot that could blow it all." In fact, no matter how many nationally televised debates there may be, the voters also need opportunities for face-to-face contact with those who seek their votes.

We cannot predict what kind of debates lie ahead. Certainly the elements of the Lincoln-Douglas model would be ideal. But of course it really depends on what the participants want, and how can we know that? Perhaps we can imitate the young student at a medieval university: after listening to a group of his professors debate for hours about how many teeth a horse has, he was bold enough to bring a horse into the meeting so that the scholars could count them. If we want to go to the "horse’s mouth" with this question, we need to check the opinions of those who have debated in the past and those who have served on the journalist panels.

Warren Decker of George Mason University reported at the 1984 Speech Communication Association convention that he had sent a questionnaire to the seven politicians who had participated in presidential or vice presidential debates. Reagan declined to respond; but Anderson, Carter, Dole, and Ford returned questionnaires, as did another who remained anonymous but who must have been Mondale or Nixon. From Decker’s detailed report on thirty-five items, I gratefully cite the findings on seven:

1. Four of the five agreed that there should be more opportunities to debate during the campaign. Dole disagreed.
2. Three of the five agreed that debates should be a part of all presidential and vice presidential campaigns. Dole and “anonymous” were undecided.
3. Four of the five agreed that the speaking style of the participants has greater impact than the quality of argument in the debates. Ford disagreed.
4. All five agreed that the debates provide an opportunity for the public to see the candidates exhibit spontaneous behavior.
5. All five agreed that the exhibition of spontaneous behavior is important.
6. All five agreed that the opportunity to directly question your opponent is desirable.
7. All five agreed that candidates should be given a certain amount of time during the debates to use as they wish.

Professor Decker provided a prudent caveat that of course the ex-candidates might well now approve something they would have rejected when they were personally involved in a debate.

Now we turn briefly to what those who have served as panelists think about their intrusive debate roles. Cindy L. White, while at Indiana University, completed an investigation into this topic. Eleven of the thirty-five extant members of panels in the 1960, 1978, and 1980 debates responded to her questionnaire. Three of her extensive findings are relevant here. In the panelists’ judgment of how well the debaters responded, three felt that the debaters “evaded” the questions, seven felt that they “answered directly, but not adequately,” and one declined to respond. When asked how to improve the debates, five said “eliminate the panel,” three said “include
more follow-up questions," and two urged more opportunities for the debaters to question each other. And when asked whether the purposes of the debates were served by the use of panels, only one respondent gave an unqualified "Yes."

To summarize, on the basis of a seventy-one percent response from the debaters, a majority favored campaign debates, even though they felt that speaking style was weightier than argument. They unanimously wanted the debaters to question each other and thus exhibit spontaneous behavior, but they wanted the debaters to be given some time to use in any way they wished. Accommodating these views obviously would require a change in format in the direction of the Lincoln-Douglas model.

On the basis of a thirty-one percent response from the panelists, all but one felt that the debaters gave evasive or inadequate replies to their queries. Consequently, nearly half would eliminate the panels, nearly another half would make substantial changes, and only one respondent stood pat. These responses also call for a changed format, again in the Lincoln-Douglas direction.

In conclusion, if this brief contrast of contemporary presidential debates against the national mythology of Lincoln and Douglas at high noon has any merit, it is to underscore the need for securing a change in the format of the 1988 debates.
AN INSIDER’S VIEW OF THE CONSTRAINTS AFFECTING GERALDINE FERRARO’S PREPARATION FOR THE 1984 VICE PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

Dayle Hardy-Short

A New York Times-CBS News poll released in April 1984 suggested that if the Democratic party ran a woman as a vice presidential candidate, it would probably gain “as many votes from women as it would lose from men.”¹ The idea of including a woman on the Democratic ticket had been gaining support for months. In assessing the chances for a victory in November, Mike Ford, Walter Mondale’s field director, suggested that the Mondale campaign “must consider dramatic and perhaps high-risk strategies,”² which might include choosing a female running mate. After three weeks of interviews with seven potential running mates,³ Mondale announced an unprecedented “dramatic” strategy—he would ask a woman, the representative from Queens, to run as the Democratic vice presidential candidate. By accepting, Geraldine Ferraro helped assure a place in history for both candidates and for the Democratic campaign. In September 1984, Ferraro invited me to be on her debate staff; and in early October, she called to ask me to join the team in New York City.

As rhetorical critics, one of our goals is to examine public communication in an attempt to understand its place in and effect upon our society. J. Jeffery Auer suggests that a critic fulfills “three functional roles”: reporter, analyst, and judge. The reporter may “work from first-hand observations” or from others’ firsthand observations, without attempting to analyze or interpret the information. As analyst, the critic “builds upon the reporter’s narration” by using “special knowledge of rhetorical theory and criticism” to illuminate the rhetorical event. Finally, the critic as judge evaluates the event and its effect based on the work of the reporter and the analyst. Auer refers to this procedure as “narration, explication, and evaluation.”⁴ In this paper, I shall play the role primarily of reporter and provide limited analysis of the rhetorical event. Any judgment I might offer would undoubtedly be

Dayle Hardy-Short is Visiting Instructor of Speech Communication in the Speech and Theatre Department at Idaho State University. A version of this paper was presented at the 1985 Speech Communication Association meeting in Denver, Colorado.


https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/speaker-gavel/vol24/iss1/1
biased. However, there is a place in rhetorical criticism for more participant observation, because despite our most careful research, we must to some extent speculate about events. Firsthand observation might help us to confirm or reject some of our work or allow us to redirect our research and analysis. In this paper, I focus on Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro’s debate preparations in an attempt to understand more about the constraints she faced in her debate with Vice President George Bush on 11 October 1984. Comparison of these constraints with those of similar situations may provide a generic basis for analyzing debate constraints, although the purpose of this essay is only to suggest a possible direction.

Background

Almost immediately after the announcement that Ferraro would be Mondale’s running mate, Mondale and Ferraro challenged their opponents, President Ronald Reagan and Vice President George Bush, to debate. "Everybody keeps comparing me to Vice President George Bush," Representative Ferraro said, "and that’s delightful because I should think we would have a debate or two during the course of this campaign," adding, "we'll let the people of America see whether or not I'm able to keep up with George Bush."6 Bush initially said he would debate but avoided committing himself until after the Republican convention.8

Mondale and Ferraro originally asked for six presidential debates and three vice presidential debates, each of which would focus on one issue. After much negotiation, it was agreed that there would be two presidential debates and one vice presidential debate. The debate between the two vice presidential candidates was to be ninety minutes long, with a moderator and four panelists who would be mutually agreed upon by the two campaigns’ negotiating teams. The first four questions were to deal with domestic issues, and the second four would cover foreign affairs. The process for selecting the panelists was unexpectedly complex. The League of Women Voters submitted a list of journalists’ names to each campaign, and each indicated the questioners it found acceptable. Names appearing on both lists were to make up a third list from which the League would select the final four panelists. Bush’s campaign rejected most of the names submitted,

---

5 Lloyd Bitzer defines constraints as "persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence." He adds that "standard sources of constraints include beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives and the like...." See "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 (Jan. 1968): 1–14.


and by the time the process was finished, sometime during the week of the debate, over one hundred names had been submitted for consideration.9

Debate Preparations

Anne Wexler, Ferraro's senior political advisor, and Robert Barnett, a Washington, D.C., lawyer who had worked on the 1976 Mondale-Dole vice presidential debate, were responsible for organizing Ferraro's debate team.10 Two sets of briefing materials were prepared: domestic issues materials, under the supervision of Wexler and Barnett; and foreign issues materials, under the supervision of Madeleine Albright and Barry Carter. Albright was part of Ferraro's regular traveling staff, but most of the work for the briefing books was done by outside people, “high-level volunteers” who did not travel regularly with the Ferraro campaign. By using outside people, the campaign intended to bring a fresh perspective to the work and to ease the burden of the regular staff.11 About two to three weeks before the debate, the briefing materials were delivered to Ferraro, and she began studying them on weekends and in her spare time.12 About a week before the debate, formal preparations began.

The debate team and the candidate moved to the New York Sheraton Centre Hotel to concentrate on informal question-and-answer sessions and to begin some audiotaping and videotaping in order to analyze answers and strategies.13 On Tuesday, 9 October, Ferraro and the debate team began videotaping practice debates at Modern Telecommunications Incorporated in New York. The intent was to “reconstruct” the hall in Philadelphia as well as the debate format so that Ferraro would become familiar and comfortable with the situation. Four practice debates were scheduled—two each on Tuesday and Wednesday—using the same format as that negotiated for the debate on Thursday. Robert Barnett role-played George Bush, and Ferraro played herself. Each debate was taped, analyzed, and replayed. No observers interrupted the practices, and Barnett and Ferraro took the rehearsals seriously. Occasionally, one or the other would muff an answer but would quickly go on to the next question. The purpose of the rehearsals was not for Ferraro to “memorize” answers but rather for her to practice putting together the information she had learned in ways that would demonstrate the superiority of the Mondale-Ferraro ticket. After each session, Ferraro would go off with one group of advisors to watch a replay of the tape and make any necessary phone calls, while another group (usually the questioners and moderator along with some regular staff members) would sit and review her answers, looking for strengths, weaknesses, and factual

9 Anne Wexler (Ferraro campaign senior political advisor), telephone interview, 24 Sept. 1985.
10 Members included Ben W. Heineman, Jr.; Robert Liberatore; Kay Castevens; Barry Carter; Richard Goodstein; Anne Karalekes; Marcia McGraw Olive; and Richart Betts.
11 Wexler interview; Steven Engelberg (Ferraro campaign issues director), telephone interview, 26 Sept. 1985.
12 Eleanor Lewis (Ferraro campaign executive assistant), written questionnaire, 9 Aug. 1985.
13 Wexler interview, Engelberg interview, Lewis questionnaire.
errors. This second group would reach consensus about what in the answers they felt needed changing and would then meet with Ferraro and the first group to discuss the answers.\(^\text{14}\) The entire group would reach consensus on the substance of answers, after which I would talk about delivery and presentation for a few minutes. We would then break for lunch. In the afternoon, we would run through a second set of possible questions, following the same procedure. After the second debate each day, we went back to the Sheraton to work, while Ferraro went home to study further and to work on her closing statement.

Ferraro and the press have both documented her public speaking characteristics. She is "witty and forceful" and "does well on TV," although her "tendency to speak her mind" might be a "mixed blessing."\(^\text{15}\) Early in the campaign, there was some concern that she might be "too New York wise guy" to appeal to voters, but crowds enjoyed her "colloquial diction" and "frank approach." They found her "honest and approachable." Her Queens accent includes "an energetic pace that runs words together five at a time."\(^\text{16}\) Ferraro is quite conscious of her accent and pace. When I first met her, she asked me if I could teach her "to talk slower." When remembering her preparation to accept the Democratic nomination for vice president, she recounts that her thoughts were "speak slowly and don't trip.... speak s-l-o-w-l-y."\(^\text{17}\) Ferraro felt she "talked too fast" and "swallowed" her syllables.\(^\text{18}\) Still, crowds reacted favorably, and she was even able to take advantage of her "sassy Queens speaking style"\(^\text{19}\) in quieting some particularly persistent hecklers in Arlington, Texas. "You're wonderful," she told them. "You've figured out how to stop this New Yorker from talking too quickly."\(^\text{20}\)

But the group feared that Ferraro's direct and hard-hitting stump style might not work quite as successfully on television; both she and her staff wanted to make sure she looked capable, serious, and thoughtful during the debate. Part of our videotape analysis focused on her delivery. The notes I took during the practice debates indicate that Ferraro frowned when she listened to questions from the panelists and answers from Bush/Barnett, so despite some misgivings from a couple of the other team members, I urged her to wear her glasses. She often wore glasses when speaking at rallies, but there was concern that these might not look good on television, that she might look too serious. I knew Ferraro was not frowning so much as she was straining to see the panelists. Previous observation of her had shown that if she wore her glasses, she would not squint or grimace. Ironically, although we had not expected him to, Bush wore his glasses to the debate,

\(^{14}\) Engelberg interview.
\(^{15}\) Chaze 21-23.
\(^{18}\) Ferraro, My Story 187.
\(^{19}\) Dowd, "Whaddyamean Accent?" 1.
which made moot the whole concern about how she would look compared to Bush.

My notes also indicate that in practices, Ferraro "seemed to be reading notes—too much," that during the Wednesday practices she was "taking too many notes," which differed from Tuesday, when she seemed not to be taking enough notes, but that her "listening style [was] much better," because she was "either writing or listening." Earlier in the practices, Ferraro appeared not to be listening carefully to Bush/Barnett answers, although her answers indicated that she had listened carefully. Throughout my notes I had written "leaning on lecturn too much" which "prevents gesturing" and that she should "try to stand up straight—stand on both feet." She had always tended to put weight on one foot or prop a foot up on the lecturn. We encouraged her to put her pen down after she had finished writing something so that her gestures would be more natural. We also suggested that she step away from the lecturn to avoid using it too much. Of course, because she is only five feet four inches tall, a riser had been built for Ferraro's lecturn so that she could be seen over it and so that Bush would not seem to overwhelm her. Consequently, she could not move too far away from the lecturn or from side to side because she would either fall off the riser or appear to get shorter. This problem plagues most women candidates. Ferraro and I had worked on this before—how to compensate for the fact that standing lecturns are built for an average-height man rather than for an average-height woman.

On Wednesday, I noted that her gestures seemed to be "more open today," that she was "listening better to Bush," but that when standing straight, she had a tendency to stand almost in a military pose: hands behind her back, shoulders high, and chest out. I told her I could see her mother telling her "stand up straight, Gerry" and advised her to rest her hands on the sides of the lecturn to demonstrate control of the situation.

I also noted that there was a "marked difference in tone" when she delivered her closing statement compared with when she answered questions. Ferraro and Fred Martin, her chief speech writer, had worked very hard on her closing statement; it was the real Ferraro. She really believed in and cared about what she was saying, and we could see and hear her conviction. This is not to suggest that she believed her closing statement more than her answers. Rather, in the answers, just as in a court case she might be prosecuting, she was trying to establish the facts of the case, and she needed to be careful to get the facts correct. Her closing statement, her peroration, was designed to summarize the Democratic position on the important issues and involve the audience emotionally in her ideas. Her closing statement was meant to be spoken directly to the audience-at-large.

The final draft of the final statement was ready Wednesday. Early Thursday morning I went out to Ferraro's home to be available in case she was ready to go over it. She greeted me by saying she was not ready and wanted to go over it some more by herself. A couple of hours later, she was ready and we marked up the final draft. When I had first worked with Ferraro, we had devised a method of reading the speech out loud to a listener to gauge reactions and highlight phrases and words. She had continued to follow this procedure, and her texts usually showed evidence of her having underlined...
and accented words and phrases for emphasis. We decided the closing statement was divided into four major points that were important to emphasize and convey: American values, patriotism, Mondale's history, and Mondale's leadership. Because the rules of the debate forbade candidates to bring notes to the lectern with them, I suggested that Ferraro might walk out on stage, shake hands with Bush, then go to her lectern and jot down these four points. These would then stimulate her memory when she was ready for the closing statement. She agreed to try it; so we spent more time working on her memorization. However, we also said that while she should try to remember the “right” things to say, no one would know if she “forgot” something. She knew the substance of her speech; and using exact wording was less important than conveying her general ideas. She appeared to be nervous, but she was clearly ready for the debate.

The motorcade trip to the airport was brief. Once on the plane, Ferraro appeared much more confident and prepared to do her best against Bush. For most of the short flight to Philadelphia, she went over her closing statement in the entry area near the cockpit. She delivered it for John, Jr., then called me forward. She didn’t “want everyone on the plane to watch,” she said. She delivered it to me twice, with conviction and fervor. I told her it was near-perfect, that if she did it half as well that night she would have everyone crying. Some staffers who were also understandably nervous asked me afterwards how she was. “She’s fine,” I said. “She’s ready. She’ll be just great.”

Debate Constraints

In preparing the briefing books, the team had focused on the twelve domestic and twelve foreign issues we thought most likely to be covered by the panelists during the debate. These would be the issues most actively pursued by the press so far in the campaign and the questions the staff thought might come up because Ferraro is a woman.21 Staffers saw the briefing books as a particular strength of the debate preparations, because every question panelists asked had been anticipated and rehearsed.22 Ferraro faced four constraints in her debate with Bush. The first comprised the issues she had had to deal with throughout the campaign. The other three were high expectations by the press, her sex, and the debate format itself. These four constraints affected Ferraro’s preparation for and behavior during the debate. To prove she could fulfill her vice presidential responsibilities, Ferraro had to overcome public concern surrounding three issues that constituted the first constraint: abortion, family finances, and level of experience.

The press had focused on the abortion issue largely because of the pro-life hecklers who had turned out at most rallies and because the Catholic bishops, particularly Archbishop John J. O’Connor of New York, repeatedly and publicly attacked Ferraro’s pro-choice position. Ferraro had explained her position on abortion time and again, but the debate was a national forum

21 Wexler interview.
22 Wexler interview, Engelberg interview, Lewis questionnaire.
was speaking. Some of her staffers did not remember her having done this in rehearsal, but my notes indicate that she had. When she later saw a tape of the debate, Ferraro said she was “unhappy about my staring down at my notes” and “not looking up at the camera” but was “responding to the circumstances” of a “debate between two candidates for the Vice Presidency of the United States.” Throughout the campaign, Ferraro had decided how she wanted to appear, and the “I am qualified” demeanor and subdued tone were her choices. Part of the problem was that she was trying to look at the audience in the debate hall in addition to the blue light above the television cameras. Thus, her attempt at eye contact with the immediate audience meant a loss of eye contact with the larger audience. One staff member noted that Ferraro did not regret her decision to be more calm, although on a recent Donahue show, Ferraro laughingly admitted that she would raise her head more “the next time” she debated on television.

The immediate reaction of some television commentators was that Ferraro’s manner and foreign policy responses had been second to Bush’s. The later polls and newspaper reports, however, gave the edge to Ferraro. She was “poised, informed, articulate” and “made consistent sense,” noted one columnist. “At critical moments, as with her comments on religion and the nuclear button, she showed a superb mixture of firmness and thoughtfulness.” Another reporter observed that she “showed she could stay in the ring with the incumbent,” which might have been “enough to win her the respect of many skeptics.” Her careful and factual responses and comments proved to be more important than her delivery—which is the principle we try to teach our public speaking students.

The second constraint Geraldine Ferraro faced in her debate with George Bush was high expectations from the press. Not long after the debate had been agreed to, one columnist made this observation: “I’d bet . . . on the outcome of the Bush vs. Ferraro bout. Ferraro has to win.” Ferraro was expected to win. Furthermore, after Mondale’s strong showing against Reagan in the first debate, the vice presidential debate “assumed added importance,” although the Bush campaign tried to emphasize the presidential debates as most important and the Democratic campaign tried to decrease the pressure by claiming Ferraro “doesn’t need to score a knockout.” Members of Ferraro’s staff believed that her press conference performance had been so impressive that reporters expected her to “blow Bush away” with a “slashing, acerbic” debate style, which probably would have been detrimental to her campaign in the long run. Had she not answered ques-
tions about her family finances so well, the press might have had more questions about her skill but been more impressed by her debating. After the debate, both staffs continued to argue that the vice presidential debate would have little effect on the presidential campaign, that it would not change many votes. At least part of the press agreed. The debate would "probably go down in the history books," one editorial noted, "as an interesting but inconsequential aspect of the 1984 presidential campaign." Ferraro aides wanted the media and the public to focus on the issues raised during the campaign and the debate rather than on the confrontation between the two candidates. Bush aides may have wanted to keep the focus on the ticket's real strength—the top.

Ferraro's third constraint was that she was the first woman to run as a party-endorsed vice presidential candidate. In a sense, this constraint interacted with the issue of her leadership ability and experience. Ferraro was certainly aware of the problems she might face as a woman in the campaign. "A woman has to be very, very careful about the way she's perceived," she told Mother Jones magazine. "A woman can't be pushy, or she's called a shrew." Her femaleness caused problems for Bush and his staff—they had no experience campaigning against a woman and did not know whether to ignore her, treat her as they would a man, or hope that she would make some tremendous gaffe and destroy herself. When the campaigns agreed to a debate, Bush had to face the question of how to respond to a woman candidate. The Washington Post noted that Bush "would have to be careful not to appear a brute or a condescending MCP...." An unidentified Republican detailed the pitfalls awaiting Bush. "If he's too gallant she'll dominate him. If he's too tough, he'll look like a bully. And we all know," the politician continued, "George Bush has not been a great debater."

The strain on Bush and his staff showed. On the Monday before the debate, Barbara Bush, the vice president's wife, commented to reporters that she and her husband were wealthy and enjoyed it, "not like that four million-dollar—I can't say it, but it rhymes with rich." She later apologized, saying she "would never call Congresswoman Ferraro a witch." A Democratic staffer said Mrs. Bush's comments were "another reflection" of the unease the Republicans felt about opposing a woman on the ticket. The day before the debate, the vice president's press secretary, Peter Teeley, told a Wall Street Journal reporter that Ferraro was "too bitchy" and "very arrogant." He later explained that he meant she should avoid "being screechy or scratchy" in the debate but that "bitchy" was an "adequate" word to

---

45 Engelberg interview.
49 "No Debate?" 27.
50 Grady 5.
53 "Bush's Wife Assails Ferraro" 20.
describe what he meant. Later Teeley told the *New York Times* that “getting into a cat fight with Bush is not going to win the election.”\(^{55}\) Apparently Bush hadn’t learned anything from the negative reactions his wife and staff had been receiving all week, because the day after the debate, he “used an old Texas football expression” when he claimed “we tried to kick a little ass” during the debate.\(^{56}\) The remarks were at best insensitive and at worst sexist. And of course they angered the Democrats. Ferraro said later that she thought the remarks had been “planned,” that they were “a bit of a put-down” because the Bushes were “not the type of people who accidentally let something like that slip out.”\(^{57}\) The comments might have been made, she thought, because the Republicans were “beginning to get a little worried” about the polls.\(^{58}\)

It seemed that no one in the Republican campaign knew how to behave. A White House staffer said before the debate that it “would be horrible,” because Bush would “have to walk a very tight rope between not appearing patronizing and making it appear that this man is beating up on a woman.”\(^{59}\) All of this skirmishing about how the Republicans and Bush should treat Ferraro set up a no-win situation for her, and she knew it. She remarked that the off-color comments “might be a bit of a statement” on her candidacy—“who am I to challenge this man?”

Bush could be a gentleman during the debate, which might be interpreted as patronizing; or he could be aggressive, which might be interpreted as brow-beating or bullying. Ferraro, on the other hand, could be ladylike, which would make her appear uninformed and too delicate to do the job; or she could be assertive, which would make her appear bitchy. Culturally, though we may wish to deny it, we still have a double standard for men and women who seek power. Men who seek power are strong-willed and aggressive, whereas women who seek power are unnatural, strident, and bitchy. Bush and his staff can attribute innocence to their remarks, but they are astute enough to have known how to set up a particular psychological atmosphere for the debate, and intentional or not, they succeeded. If Ferraro had been “feisty Ferraro,” she would have walked right into the trap; voters would have agreed she was just as bitchy as Pete Teeley had suggested. One columnist observed that “setting a woman up as bitchy because she has the temerity to seek national office . . . reeks of chauvinism” and “of trying to exploit sex stereotypes for political gain.”\(^{61}\) This is exactly what the Bush campaign did. Ferraro was understandably angry about the

---

60 “Mondale Portrays as ‘Hoax’” 10.
61 Fain 8.
widely printed comments. Even so, not once in rehearsal was there any
discussion of how to “put down” Bush. It was important for her to be calm
and controlled and to behave as if she belonged there.

Thus, Ferraro made the decision to tone down her delivery and to deal
with issues rather than innuendos. She succeeded, although at one point
she told Bush she “almost resent[ed]” his “patronizing attitude” toward her
concerning foreign affairs. Her remark was spontaneous—it had not been
discussed previously—and undoubtedly was not directed solely at Bush’s
comment on the difference between Iran and Lebanon. Though the ques-
tioners/press panel had agreed to direct their questions to “Congresswom-
an Ferraro” and “Vice President Bush,” Bush referred to Ferraro as “Mrs.
Ferraro” throughout the debate. She said nothing about it and consistently
addressed him as “Vice President Bush.” Had she complained throughout
the debate about his attitude, she most certainly would have lost far more
than she would have gained. As it was, she did the right thing at the right
time. If she had said nothing, the public might have thought she “couldn’t
take it,” that she would give in to her “betters”—men. That was not the
image for a vice president.

The fourth constraint, although not affecting Ferraro alone, was the de-
bate format. The close-ups that television allows would force both candi-
dates to tone down their styles; and because the debate was aimed at an
audience not present, the candidates would have to speak much differently
than they would at rallies. This factor accounts in part for the impression
that Ferraro had changed her style to debate Bush. The press and the public
had perhaps been paying more attention to Ferraro’s stump speaking than
Bush’s because she was the first woman candidate; the press had reported
her style in much more detail than they had Bush’s. Her “Reagan-bashing”
was little different in purpose from Richard Nixon’s, Robert Dole’s, and
Spiro Agnew’s hatchetman task in previous campaigns—which the press and
public seemed to have forgotten. This time, however, it was a woman “talk-
ing back.” Vice presidential candidates have often had the task of attacking
the incumbent or the opponent’s top-of-the-ticket. Bush said repeatedly
that he wanted to keep the focus on the presidential race, and so did Mon-
dale-Ferraro. Bush spent as much time attacking Mondale’s “doom and
gloom” as Ferraro spent attacking Reagan. That is part of the process. So
when Ferraro reverted to her nonrally style, the style she used with non-
partisan groups and hostile crowds, the reaction was that she had changed,
that she had been told to tone it down. Apart from the fact that Ferraro
does not take orders, she was simply adjusting to the situation, which re-
quired a performance more subdued than one she would give at a rally of
twenty thousand supporters.

Vice President Bush commented a month before the debate that he would
view it as “not any different to any press conference.” According to the
format, the two candidates would stand at lecturns approximately eight feet
apart, and a panel of four journalists would address similar questions to each

---

63 Steven R. Weisman, “Reagan and Mondale to Debate Twice, Running Mates
of them through a moderator. There would be no direct confrontation between the candidates, although each would have an opportunity to address the other's comments during a rebuttal. Auer has stated that the five requirements of a debate are "(1) participant confrontation, (2) equal and adequate time for the participants, (3) a fair matching of participants, (4) debate on a stated proposition, and (5) the goal of gaining an audience decision" and that contemporary political "debates" do not truly meet all of these requirements. Analysis of the debate format by Ferraro staff members supports Auer's conclusions. Anne Wexler would like to see "real" debates between candidates, rather than the "Meet-the-Press" format currently used. "Why should the issues be filtered through questioners?" she asks. "Direct confrontation is better." Wexler suggests that the format include an opening statement by each candidate, with a strong moderator to control time, statements and questions directed by the candidates to each other, and closing rebuttals. This would "serve the candidates better and serves the public better" because it allows an open forum where the voters can "see the experience and knowledge of the candidates." Wexler also feels that if the debates were to focus on one issue instead of many, the public would learn much more about the candidates and the issues.

Steven Engelberg, Ferraro's issues director, agrees. He says the debates are very "sterile," just "press conferences with the occasion to pick at the opponent"—a "Meet-the-Press" format. He would like to see a "looser, give-and-take atmosphere" in which candidates "are free to contradict each other"—perhaps somewhat similar to the New York round table used in the Democratic primaries. His main criticism of the present format is that the debates are "televised press conferences ... which we already have." The "more sterile they are," Engelberg adds, "the more they can be set up to meet the candidates' needs" rather than the public's needs, and the more they can be used as "tricks." The current format allows the voter to see only "some glimpses of character." He believes the debates can be useful. "Speaking as a citizen," Engelberg observes, the debates' "purpose is to let us see the candidates as realistically as possible," to "see how they think, feel, react, and their intellectual ability." He would suggest a format that includes the candidates and a "very strong moderator."

These observations shed further light on Ferraro's perceived change in style. The press may have expected her to lash out or to be hard-hitting and confrontational. But her subject throughout the campaign had been Reagan and his policies, not the press. Had she continued in her former style for the debate, she would have been attacking the press. At one point, she responded to a question by asking "are you saying that I would have to have fought in the war in order to love peace?" During rehearsal, she had planned to say that to Bush, not to the journalist. Other than this comment, the "don't patronize me" remark was the only bit of direct confrontation

---

65 Wexler interview.
66 Engelberg interview.
in the whole debate. The format was probably as responsible as anything else for Ferraro’s subdued manner—it simply did not permit any hint of her usual rally style, even if she had wanted to speak that way.

Discussion

Apart from what the candidates may or may not have done correctly and the vantage point of hindsight, there are some other issues at stake when we look at the place of nationally televised debates in presidential and vice presidential campaigns. Auer has suggested that when “we asked for public presidential debates” we created a situation in which a “media event” was “wedded” to television and that “we are about to see the political institutionalization of presidential debate.” Although Auer was speaking specifically of presidential debates, the debate forum can be so useful in allowing the public to get to know both members of the ticket that vice presidential debates will probably also continue. Most critics seem to agree that the debates are now almost a permanent fixture of the campaigns. A number of critics have called for those of us in the speech discipline to work with the League of Women Voters to devise a more useful format. Certainly members of the campaign staff I worked with and interviewed would like a different format, one with more direct confrontation between the candidates and less interference from the journalists. One topic we in academics have hardly discussed is the need for those of us who study debate and public communication to work with members of the media to provide more intelligent analysis of the debates in the period immediately following each debate. Jody Powell observed that “major news organizations” continue to refuse “to devote the minimal resources necessary to assemble a small squad of researchers who” would “provide post-debate commentators and analysts with the information needed to call baloney on candidates who make clear misrepresentations. As a result,” Powell continued, “the public was again treated to musings on who looked more presidential, who was ‘in charge,’” both of which “viewers are perfectly capable of deciding for themselves.” We critics have complained long and bitterly about the “instant analysis” the national networks provide, although they have toned it down somewhat. Nonverbal communication, to be sure, does give the public an impression of what a candidate may be like. However, I am concerned that in the case of the Ferraro/Bush debate, the media were more worried about Ferraro’s “looking down” than about Bush’s rambling and unorganized answers. I am concerned that the media commentators seemed to describe only how the speakers looked rather than why they might have said or done what they did. We who teach debate teach our students to make sure they take careful notes and get their information right. Ferraro was trained as a lawyer; all of her experience has shown that she must be careful with her information, take accurate notes, and make sure that she

---

uses the facts correctly. Having also been trained to do careful research and to refer to my notes for accuracy, it simply never occurred to me that anyone could fault Ferraro for referring to her notes. I see this priority problem in my student speeches as well. Students often seem to feel that the best speech is the one in which the speaker uses no notes—regardless of the effect on accuracy.

We have a responsibility as teachers of speech to establish criteria for the public to use in evaluating political debates. We certainly do so in academic debate; but when it comes to public debates, we let journalists set the standards for how the debates ought to be judged. We have a responsibility as professionals in speech communication to make every effort to redirect the media’s attention and the public’s attention to the other components of good and ethical speaking. After all, delivery is only one of six components on a debate ballot, yet it becomes the only component for public presidential and vice presidential debates. And we call memory the “lost canon of rhetoric.” I am not yet convinced that the best plan is to set up a panel of “expert” debate coaches to “judge” the debates every four years, although this move is certainly one we can make. I would like to see our discipline take the lead in establishing a task force to devise ways of conveying information about the commonly accepted standards of rhetorical criticism to those in the media who cover the debates. Perhaps in this way we could encourage the media to work with us in providing a real service for the public—a discussion of the debates that focuses on something besides appearance and outdated elocutionary gestures.
A GOALS CRITERIA APPROACH: PREPARING THE PUBLIC TO EVALUATE PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

Brant Short

The rise of political debate in recent years, especially at the presidential level, has provided a rich source for research and teaching. This essay seeks to broaden our concern with debates to the area of public service. As teachers of communication, we operate under certain assumptions every time we grade a speech, give a lecture, or write an exam. Through such activity, we endorse the belief that communication is a consequential activity that can be improved through practice, analysis, and feedback. As a result, we promote skills for both practitioners and consumers of communication. With this shared goal in mind, I propose that teachers of speech communication ought to consider possible methods of helping the public to understand and to evaluate political debate.

Like academic debate, presidential debates seem to have as many detractors as proponents. For every argument advanced in favor of debates, someone issues a counterpoint. The danger of the presidential debate, writes Richard Cohen, is that it "obscures what we already know. It comes so highly trumpeted, so charged with high school images of ancient Greece, that it is hard to realize that it is nothing more than yet another performance having next to nothing to do with the presidency." Historian Henry Steele Commager agrees, noting that debates "submit the greatest elective office in the world to the chance of arbitrary and miscellaneous questions, not so much to elicit information or illuminate problems as to titillate the public." No less an authority on presidential debates than Richard Nixon observed that many pundits in 1984 wildly exaggerated the "importance and impact of the debates." "The reason for this," Nixon concluded, "is that their historical perspective is skewed." On the other hand, supporters identify varied benefits. Nelson Polsby claims that debates help arouse the voter's attention, allow the candidates to speak without a filter or interruption, and give the candidates the opportunity to delineate the differences between themselves. After an extensive review of the research, Sidney Kraus and Dennis K. Davis conclude that debates transmit information to voters who have a "moderate to strong interest in politics" and that the debates serve

Brant Short is Assistant Professor of Speech Communication in the Speech and Theatre Department at Idaho State University. A version of this paper was presented at the 1985 Speech Communication Association meeting in Denver, Colorado.


Published by Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato, 1986
an important symbolic function by helping to "legitimize rational voting."^2 Dealing the merits of debate will probably continue every four years, at least in the foreseeable future. Rather than confirming one side or the other, this essay assumes that presidential debates are significant events that have become de facto institutions in presidential campaigns. Having established that assumption, I turn to a different matter: How can speech communication professionals help the public to understand and to evaluate future presidential debates? In this essay, I discuss problems inherent in the media's evaluation of the debates, offer a different perspective for teaching the public to watch such encounters, and assess how the perspective might have been useful in 1980 and 1984.

Should academic observers be concerned that the public watches presidential debates without having any special knowledge or preparation? Will not professional politicians present their views in an understandable and ethical manner? I believe that there are legitimate reasons for all voters, especially those who teach communication, to be concerned. The media's obsession with the horse race metaphor and efforts to declare a winner and a loser after each debate have created a situation in which voters are led to believe that a victor should be obvious to the skilled critic. The result tends to be joy in the camp of the "winner" and criticism from the "loser" on the value of "debating points" and "debating tricks." In an attempt to determine how the public decides who "won" the debate, David Vancil and Sue Pendell propose that at least six criteria provide possible explanations. Their conclusion that no single criterion appears to be dominant suggests to me that while debates are important, they are viewed with no systematic means of evaluation.^3

To help viewers better analyze a debate, some newspapers print college debate ballots and even hire forensics coaches to judge the debate. Again, the notion that a skilled analyst can somehow score the debate is advanced by this practice ("Mondale won twenty-two to Reagan's seventeen, close but not enough to overcome the president's lead"). The media's effort to evaluate the debate seems to be even less useful for observers who want to understand the event. Analyzing media coverage of the 1980 election, especially that of television, Jeff Greenfield believes that reporters perceive "speeches and issues" as tinsel behind which the real campaign occurs. Obsessed with reporting "who's ahead," the media failed to reveal basic differences between the candidates and spent a disproportionate amount of time discussing behind-the-scenes strategy and tactics. Greenfield concludes that "The failure to cover consistently and conscientiously the struggle among competing views about the nature of government—which was the heart of the real campaign—effectively helped disenfranchise the voter

---


by stripping him of any reason to care about the outcome."* Regarding the Carter/Reagan debate, Greenfield found that the sports mentality of the press ("Was there a knockout? If not, who won on points? Who landed the deepest hits? Who parried better?") led the media to miss the significance of the encounter. Virtually ignoring Reagan's closing statement, which crystallized his entire campaign, the press missed the debate's real import: "no one was left to consider the prospect that large numbers of undecided Americans might be listening to the arguments the candidates were making." In reality, Greenfield maintained, the debate enabled Reagan to "contrast his beliefs with the record of Jimmy Carter's Presidency. That argument was powerful and influential in the outcome of the 1980 election."^ 

Rather than simply berating the media's failure to provide insightful evaluation of debates, I advocate that speech communication teachers, whether debate coaches or not, serve their campus and local community by providing an evaluative framework for viewing political debates. With the proliferation of "television debates," especially those sponsored by the major networks, primary and general election debates should continue unabated. Moreover, with no incumbent in 1988, debates may prove essential to the large fields of candidates from both parties seeking nomination. As a result, 1988 should offer many opportunities for presidential debates, from January in New Hampshire to the national campaign in the fall.

To back my challenge with a workable method, I propose a "goals criteria" approach to help the public watch and analyze debates. Although I searched for a better label, this very loose borrowing of that academic debate term aptly summarizes my suggestion. I developed the goals criteria approach to watching debates for a public lecture that I gave at Trinity University in October 1984. Instead of detailing a history of presidential debates or listing standard methods of judging debate, I sought an alternative that would be different, interesting, and useful for an audience of college students and faculty. To provide such a perspective, I examined the Carter/Reagan debate, considering the debate itself, pre-debate and post-debate predictions and pronouncements, and the numerous campaign books. Combining this information, I presented the following suggestions for viewing the Mondale/Reagan debates.

The goals criteria approach suggests that voters gain insight by perceiving a debate as a process, not as a single, independent activity. Rather than watching only the debate, viewers are asked to examine pre-debate posturing by campaign officials, party leaders, and media commentators. Debates in 1980 and 1984 demonstrated the abundance of pre-debate discourse in both the print and electronic media. Using these strategic pronouncements to identify salient issues and goals for the debate, the viewer should be better equipped to evaluate the actual encounter as well

---

^ Greenfield 245-47.
+ For an analysis of why the "TV debates" will probably continue to proliferate, see Kurt Ritter, "A Television Perspective on Presidential Debates: The View from 1984," Texas Speech Communication Association annual meeting, Austin, Texas, 6 Oct. 1984.
as the post-debate efforts by both candidates to define the reasons for victory (or loss). In simple terms, the goals approach can be detailed in four steps:

1. Observe pre-debate analysis (in newspaper, television, and radio reports), paying attention to both media and partisan speakers.
2. Watch the debate and decide if each speaker has met his or her goals.
3. Examine post-debate analysis (expert and partisan) to determine the "consensus" of who "won" and who "lost" the debate.
4. Determine from our individual perspective which candidate successfully achieved his or her goals in the debate.

If the public were made aware of the goals approach in time to use it while viewing the debate process, there would be at least five possible benefits. First, viewers would be brought into the debate process as active participants. Instead of viewing ninety minutes of debate as a passive observer, the voter would be encouraged to seek information to put the encounter in a clear context. As a result, the voter could see the issues in the debate emerging from the overall campaign. From this perspective, the debates can be seen for what they really are, an important component of a much larger event. Debates may change votes, alter momentum, but they are not in themselves the stuff of victory or defeat.

Second, the debaters would establish their own criteria for analysis through pre-debate rhetoric and surrogate assessments. By establishing possible issues, strategies, and goals, the candidates would attempt to set a standard that would give them an advantage in the debate. The goals perspective emphasizes the candidates rather than evaluating the contest from a list of designated guidelines.

Third, the goals approach asks voters to withhold immediate judgment. In doing so, the viewer can better assess the conflicting claims that may be made in the debate. In 1980, both campaigns had staffs ready to answer questions raised by candidate claims; and in 1984, the Reagan campaign announced before the debate that any errors would be clarified. Moreover, the news media offer detailed assessments of conflicting factual statements made in the debate.7

Fourth, this perspective allows for a win-lose, win-win, or lose-lose judgment by the viewers. By basing the final evaluation on the goals, the perspective rejects the horse race notion that one person must always win and one always lose in the encounter. Some analysts, for example, point out that in 1976, both Carter and Ford gained from their debate, suggesting the possibility of a win-win situation. Stephan Lesher, Patrick Caddell, and Gerald Rafshoon reported that the 1976 debates "helped both candidates by diminishing, if not eradicating, the general public's negative perceptions of each." In their words:

Thus, the debates offered Carter the opportunity to appear for uninterrupted chunks of time before the electorate and discuss matters of substance—and thereby demonstrate that he was neither weird nor fuzzy on

---

the issues. For Ford, the debates gave him a chance to demonstrate he had a command of the presidency and of the issues.\(^6\)

The other extreme, a debate involving two candidates who both muddle the issues and fail to give voters reason to vote for them, could be subject to a lose-lose judgment.

Fifth, the goals approach helps viewers to better assess media evaluations of the debate. Because television and newspaper commentators often base their analysis upon pre-debate posturing, the viewer would understand more clearly why specific conclusions might be drawn regarding who won and lost the debate. Making a judgment on a similar basis, the viewer could accept or reject the conclusions advanced by the journalists. The important point is that viewers would have some idea why Dan Rather called the debate a tie, a victory, or a loss.

A look at the 1980 presidential debate suggests that pre-debate rhetoric shaped media expectations, that candidates employed explicit strategies to achieve their goals, and that post-debate commentary reflected the media's acceptance of such goals. One week before the debate, Pat Caddell told Carter what he must accomplish to win the debate and the election. In summary, the president had to emphasize Reagan's flaws and downplay his own record in the White House.\(^9\) Carter needed to talk about the future and ignore the past. Significantly, the Carter campaign made their goals known to the media. In a memo to Carter, Caddell gave this advice:

> Setting expectations is a critical game in debates particularly with the press. It is also with the public—usually the candidate expected to do well will “lose”—does not meet expectation. . . . The more crucial and dangerous game is that with the press. They have an inordinate role in convincing the public not only about who won on “points” but more critically on the nature of the debate itself.

Caddell suggested that to achieve victory in the eyes of the press and the public, the Carter staff had to set the criteria for judgment: “Thus, we cannot let the press go into the debate with the simple notion of looking just for a winner and loser. Nor with the idea that both will do well. Not only must we win on points, more importantly we must win substantively and have the press judge the debate on that criterion.” After posing typical questions to give to the press, he concluded that “This is a crucial area. It cannot be overemphasized.”\(^10\) Not only did Carter have to win the encounter, but he had to shape an evaluative framework for the public as well. The “debate about the debate,” or “meta-debating,” recognized as crucial by some observers, helps to confirm the assumption that a goals approach may be useful for viewers.\(^11\)

Reagan's goals for the debate were similarly straightforward. As a memo to Reagan advised: if the “Governor succeeds Tuesday in making Jimmy

---

\(^6\) Stephan Lesher, with Patrick Caddell and Gerald Rafshoon, "Did the Debates Help Jimmy Carter?" The Past and Future of Presidential Debates 139.


\(^10\) Caddell, memo to Carter 436.

Carter's record the major issue of the debate and campaign, we will succeed in the debate and win the general election. If however, Carter makes Ronald Reagan the issue of the debate and campaign, we will lose both.” Thus, Reagan's advisors wanted the candidate to show his competence and to destroy his image of being a saber ratter. Myles Martel, an advisor to Reagan, summarized how the debate was to overcome these obstacles. “Reagan felt, and no one disagreed, that he could defuse his ‘dangerous’ image by remaining presidential. This could be accomplished by his projecting an overall good-natured approach to the debate, by focusing as much as possible on Carter’s domestic failures... and by allowing Carter to establish the attack tone of the debate.” Moreover, aides to Reagan claimed that he did not have to dominate the encounter to win. A memo relayed this conclusion: “The goal of this debate is to perform very respectably. Therefore we do not seek to hit a home run or to win the World Series.”

Media accounts revealed that the pre-debate message was filtering out. Newsweek (24 October) predicted that Carter would demonstrate his competence while Reagan would show “presidential timber.” The CBS Morning News reported that “Carter will show the sharp differences, the stark differences,” between himself and his challenger. On the Today Show, Robert Strauss claimed that Carter would hammer away at the “stark differences,” and Rosalynn Carter suggested that her husband would point out the “stark differences” between himself and Reagan. On the other hand, Edwin Meese claimed that Reagan would concentrate on the “economic issue.” More important from the view of the Republican campaign, Tom Pettit and Jack Germond declared on the Today Show “that Reagan would gain points just by standing on an equal footing with Carter.” By the beginning of the debate, the media had set the expectation for a battle pitting a display of “stark differences” against a showing of “presidential timber.”

Post-debate reports suggest that the criteria articulated by both camps had been adopted by many critics as a standard for evaluation. According to the Los Angeles Times, “Presidential was the most used word in the post-debate analysis on the three networks at 11:30 p.m. and on public tv earlier. Whether a candidate was perceived as ‘presidential’ became critical.” Moreover, the print reaction mirrored televised conclusions. According to Greenfield, “The initial press responses tended to produce the same analysis as the networks: no clear winner, pretty much of a draw, which favored Ronald Reagan by making him appear ‘Presidential.’” Many national opinion leaders said the same thing. William Safire, Anthony Lewis, Hedrick Smith, James Reston, Joseph Kraft, Martin Schram, and David Broder seemed to agree that a tie in the debate went to Reagan.

13 See Greenfield 232–34.
The importance of post-debate commentary was reflected by the planned responses of both camps. Surrogate speakers infiltrated the airwaves attempting to explain how each candidate met his goals. The post-debate strategy was clearly planned. As Caddell wrote to Carter:

We must have post-debate follow-through a la the expectation section. We must push the idea of victory of substance, depth, specific answers. We cannot accede to the idea of just who won or lost. "We won but we won because." We must hit Reagan hard, immediately, for not answering, lack of knowledge, etc. This will obviously be easier if the press is pre-conditioned themselves.

Ironically, the Carter campaign failed to execute its surrogate strategy very effectively.

Days after the election, a second wave of more in-depth analyses was offered to explain who won the debate. Surprisingly, James Golden and Goodwin Berquist report that these efforts were still short of critical insight. The press continued to provide superficial commentary. Golden and Berquist conclude that because debates are media events, delivery, appearance, and overall manner proved more important than substance, in both the immediate and the long-term feedback. Television thrives on images. That the concepts of "presidential" and "dangerous" are easily conveyed in images explains the media's delivery and image-centered perspective. Hence, warmth, formality, and humor become the standards the media employ to judge the debates.

However, the qualities of "presidential" and "dangerous" do not necessarily have to be evaluated in terms of delivery. Instead, legitimate policy questions ("How would you handle terrorism?" "What will lead you to negotiate an arms-control agreement?") may also demonstrate a candidate's "presidential" or "dangerous" qualities. Carter's plan to reveal the "stark differences" between himself and Reagan suggested that if voters really understood how far apart the men were on the basic issues, they would settle for another four years of Carter.

A review of the 1984 presidential debates confirms that the goals criteria perspective can provide insight for voters. Examining pre-debate comments by both candidates reveals their obvious effort to guide expectations for the debate. A month before the first encounter, the Mondale campaign called attention to Reagan's isolation from the public and the press. "I think a candidate has an obligation to be available not only to the public but to the press," declared James Johnson. Mondale's goal for the debates was to bring about an "engagement." According to Tom Donilon, a Mondale aide, the Democratic candidate "knew that if he was going to win the general

---

15 See Jack Germond and Jules Witcover, Blue Smoke and Mirrors: Why Reagan Won and Carter Lost in the Election of 1980 (New York: Viking Press, 1981) 282: "Afterward the Carter strategists tried to peddle to reporters the notion that the President had won because he had delineated 'the stark differences' between himself and Reagan. 'Talking points' were sent out to state campaign coordinators to make the same argument to visiting reporters, and many did—often using exactly the same phrases, unwittingly revealing that they were spewing out the campaign line dictated from Washington." See also Caddell, memo to Carter 437.

election it would have to be in a face-to-face confrontation with Ronald Reagan. That became particularly true as we went into September and saw the Reagan strategy of non-engagement with Mondale, of treating Mondale like he did not exist." As a seasoned politician, Mondale certainly realized that when a candidate becomes a nonperson (Barry Goldwater in 1964, George McGovern in 1972), his ability to maintain striking distance is severely curtailed. Accordingly, Mondale made it clear that he would "engage" the president. The New York Times reported that Mondale had been advised "that the electorate has not yet been engaged in this campaign." To reinforce the campaign's goal, Johnson announced that in the debates, the Democratic candidate had two goals: "Mostly, we want to engage the electorate," show that Mondale is in "touch with the concerns of the average American family." Second, Mondale would stress Reagan's lack of leadership. Reporting that Mondale had changed his tactics, Hedrick Smith also advanced the theme of leadership as a criterion for the debate. He quoted Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas, who observed that "The leadership thing is just beginning to come through." Indeed, Smith concluded, "The leadership issue has become the crucial touchstone for Mr. Mondale." Democratic strategists told Smith that for the first time in the campaign, their candidate was beginning to "tarnish Mr. Reagan's aura of leadership."^7

Reagan aides returned to a tactic they had employed quite successfully in 1980: claiming that the president needed only a tie to win. In fact, some campaign officials worked to minimize the importance of the debate. Campaign director Ed Rollins claimed that voter apathy was of greater concern to him than the outcome of the debate. As the debate neared, both candidates reflected their strategic goals through their campaign appearances. Mondale sought to engage Reagan to make the race reflect two distinct views of government. In contrast, Reagan refused to mention Mondale by name, attacking the "terrible economic difficulties" and the "decline" and "defeatism" of the Carter administration. The morning of the debate, Robert Beckel appeared on ABC's This Week with David Brinkley and announced that Mondale would use the debate to "engage the electorate." Similar sentiments were echoed by James Johnson on Face the Nation and Richard Leone on Meet the Press.79

Viewers who carefully observed the media accounts knew that Reagan hoped to get through the debate without committing a gaffe. Mondale, on the other hand, wanted to engage the electorate and Reagan, show that the president was incompetent, and capture some of Reagan's aura of leadership. This strategy seemed the only hope of shifting the campaign's momentum from the Republicans to the Democrats.

National opinion leaders agreed that Mondale accomplished a large mea-
sure of his goal. Smith of the New York Times observed that the debate gave Mondale an "opportunity to engage Mr. Reagan for the first time in give-and-take about his record and his future agenda." In addition, Mondale "confronted doubts about his own leadership qualities with a strong, confident performance. On the issues, he kept the President largely on the defensive, explaining his record." To further support the idea of an engagement, Beckel claimed that Mondale "got on a level table with Ronald Reagan tonight and beat him." The next morning on the Today Show, Beckel bragged that they had an "engaged debate." Leone also characterized the debate as a successful engagement. "What's on the table are all our issues," he noted. "It's our issues against his color scheme." Mondale himself emphasized the theme, claiming that he had "smoked out" Reagan's real plan to cut Social Security. "Maybe the President is out of touch with the impact of his policies," he observed. "Maybe he doesn't understand what he's done. We need a President who knows what's going on." In contrast, officials in the Reagan campaign attempted to explain how they won the debate. "I think the President won," insisted James Baker, "because Mondale had to score a knockout to win the debate... Even if we did as poorly as a draw, we won."20

Reagan's problems answering questions brought up another issue that had been simmering in the minds of some Democrats—the president's age. From a goals perspective, the age issue became salient after the first debate, as commentators and partisans attempted to analyze what had happened. Television reports started to advance the age issue the next morning. Al Hunt of the Wall Street Journal told the CBS Morning News that Reagan seemed "rusty" and offered a "striking contrast" to his strong performance in the 1980 presidential debate. On the Today Show, Bryant Gumbal cited "Democrats" who said that the president appeared "halting, confused, and tired" in the encounter. On the same newscast, John Chancellor observed that Reagan had "tired visibly" by the end of the debate. By the third day of post-debate reaction, the age issue was on the nation's headlines. As the Houston Post proclaimed: "Democrats Rap Reagan on Age Issue." And in the words of the Houston Chronicle: "Debate Raises Reagan's Age As Issue in Presidential Race." Representatives Claude Pepper and Tony Coelho both raised the issue of age. Thus, the issue continued to escalate. One of the debate questioners, James Weighart, said it was apparent "to him and the others on stage that Reagan visibly tired near the end of the 90-minute session," while Newsday reported that Reagan's performance was "halting, defensive and tired."21

James Reston offered an explanation for the relevancy of the age issue when he implied that "age" served as a euphemism for "incompetence."
Arguing that the debate exposed no problems with Reagan’s age, Reston charged that the debate exposed the president’s mind. “This is what has been covered up in the last four years by his amiable personality, and his superb reading of speeches from invisible mirrors,” noted Reston. He concluded that while public debating is “not a good test for Presidents ... mastering the facts and details of complicated issues is.”

To explain Reagan’s poor performance in the first debate, campaign officials told of the president’s being “brutalized” by over-preparation. Close friend Senator Paul Laxalt criticized those who had changed Reagan’s natural style of confrontation. Rowland Evans and Robert Novak reported that “Intensive debate rehearsals brought to Louisville a president confused by notebooks full of statistics and short of any vision.” George Will echoed those sentiments, telling his readers that Reagan had “passively accepted the discipline of elaborate preparation” but had failed to decide what vision to communicate to the voters. Implying that the age issue was a moot point, Will argued that Reagan had always had ups and downs as a campaigner: “What you saw in Louisville was the Reagan of the stumbling 1980 campaign between the convention and Labor Day; and of the 1976 campaign against President Ford, between the New Hampshire and North Carolina primaries.”

What is the benefit of assessing the first debate from a goals framework? Most observers agreed that Mondale had won the debate, even though the immediate press reaction was not as absolute as the Democrats’ claims of victory seemed. The goals approach helps viewers to understand how Mondale seemed to gain the consensus. In terms of engagement, Mondale forced the president to commit himself on Social Security and to refute numerous attacks on his record. Moreover, Mondale symbolically engaged Reagan by asking him the question “Do you remember the last time you said, ‘There you go again’?” This question, along with Mondale’s subsequent charge that Reagan had misled the public regarding Medicare cuts, clearly engaged the president. Although some critics might call the question a trick, Mondale’s tactic forced the president to listen to an apparent contradiction between his rhetoric and his policy making. As a result, Mondale engaged the president and called into question Reagan’s competence by provoking the age issue.

Reaction to the second presidential debate, both media and surrogate, indicates that Mondale failed to keep Reagan engaged. Employing his often-used tactic of humor, Reagan disposed of age questions by holding his own on the issues and by joking about his opponent’s age. By competing on the same level with Mondale, the president diminished attacks upon his age and competence. Part of his success probably stemmed from the fact that viewers had questioned his capability after the first debate. Aides to the president were “delighted to have him enter [the] arena an underdog rather
than a favorite in the debate.” Because of Reagan’s problems in Louisville, Hedrick Smith reasoned that “in Kansas City the yardstick was considerably less demanding.”24 Agreeing that Reagan performed better in the second debate, many Democrats attempted to define a margin of victory for their candidate. Governor Charles Robb of Virginia claimed that Mondale “scored the substantive points and dealt with the facts very well,” while New York’s Governor Mario Cuomo observed that Mondale was a “clear winner” on the “merits and issues.” Calling the debate “even-steven,” Governor Harry Hughes of Maryland suggested that throughout the debate, “Mondale showed a greater knowledge of the facts than the president.”25

John Dillin of the Christian Science Monitor demonstrated what most media analysts were reporting about the debate. He suggested that “political experts” had three conclusions about the Reagan/Mondale encounter: 1) the president needed a draw to be satisfied, and he achieved that goal; 2) Mondale needed a decisive victory similar to the first debate, but he failed to achieve that goal; and 3) Reagan was far ahead in the opinion polls before the debate, and he was ahead after the debate.26 The conclusion that the debate was a tie resulted in part from the numerous public opinion polls taken after the debate. Significantly, most major polls gave Reagan a slight victory.27

Both Reagan and Mondale sought to use post-debate attention to articulate their claims of victory. Reagan returned to a popular theme during the Republican convention—that the Democrats wanted a weak America. As he observed the day after the debate, “Those who believe a weaker America is a safer America have no business guiding the destiny of our nation.” Rather than continuing to ignore Mondale, the president attacked the challenger’s record. Listing the various weapons systems that Mondale voted against in the Senate, Reagan concluded that if Mondale had been successful, “America would barely have any defense, any real means to protect the peace, any chance to preserve freedom.” Meanwhile, Mondale kept quoting Reagan’s debate responses to prove that the president was not an able leader. Calling Reagan the “most detached, the most remote, the most uninformed president in modern history,” Mondale cited specific issues brought up in the debate that supported such conclusions.28 While he admitted that Reagan “didn’t do as poorly” in the second debate as in the first, Mondale argued that the second debate revealed “an American president who cannot discuss any major issue without making a major mistake.”29

How can we explain Mondale's failure to win the "decisive victory" or "score a knockout" in light of the fact that many experts believed he won on the issues? By using the goals perspective, voters may be able to explain this paradox, even if they disagree with the experts' conclusions. In other words, understanding how opinion leaders analyzed the debate may illuminate the apparent consensus in the media. Mary McGrory claimed that Reagan was able to be judged on his own terms in the second debate, using "quips and quotes and one-liners and comebacks." However, Mondale appeared too cautious as well. According to McGrory, Mondale "obviously did not want to tangle with Reagan at close quarters." Noting that Mondale handled the second debate "perfectly well," McGrory complained that "the genial, nimble-witted, surefooted self he presented in Louisville was supplanted by the cautious politician of melancholy memory."^29 George Will implied that Mondale had lost his mission of engagement; he suggested that Mondale was obsessed with himself, using the words strength and strong thirty-nine times and the word knowledge twenty-one times.^30 Because the general public pays little attention to the post-debate debate, observed Edwin Yoder, Reagan probably appeared to be the winner to many people. Yoder suggested that at first glance, the president's "responses were deft, and brilliantly crafted for the limited attention level of television." More carefully analyzed after the debate, Reagan's answers "give substance to the suspicion that the President is uncommonly relaxed, underinformed and imprecise about vital matters of detail."^31

Reaction to the second debate demonstrated general consensus among the media. Ted Knapp of the Scripps-Howard News Service observed that Reagan "eased doubts about his ability to think on his feet for 90 minutes." Although Mondale did well, he did not "score the knockout he needed." Larry Eichel of the Knight-Ridder Newspapers suggested that the president "seemed in command of his own arguments, generally responding to questions asked of him with forceful and documented defenses of his administration's record." According to Loye Miller, Jr., of the Newhouse News Service, Mondale needed to "show up Reagan again, either with a superior performance or another weak showing by the president." However, concluded Miller, "That did not seem to happen." Robert Shogan of the Los Angeles Times reported that Reagan "appeared to reassure those who might have begun to worry about his age or his commitment to peace." Although Mondale probably won by "technical debating standards," Shogan added, "in political terms he seemed to fall short of the kind of decisive victory that seemed necessary if he is to overcome Reagan's still-substantial lead in the polls."^32 Such conclusions reveal an important characteristic of political debate evaluation: ascertaining the political realities of the situation, as de-

fined by the media and the candidates. David Broder provided an insightful assessment of the debate, taking this notion into consideration. "An awful lot of voters just wanted to know that Reagan had not lost his faculties—including his sense of humor—before they followed their inclination to give him another term," he reported. If the debate had been between two challengers for the presidency, Mondale could have been pleased with his performance. "But this debate," observed Broder, "occurred 45 months after Reagan became president and two weeks before the election. It was hardly a contest of equals." Noting the president's problems in the second debate, including his rambling closing statement, Broder pointed out that most voters "were predisposed by the events of the past 45 months to grant Reagan a second term—unless he did something that made them distinctly uncomfortable doing so." Reagan's problems in the debate "may well be rationalized away by those voters who want to give Reagan another four years. So long as he did not disgrace himself—and he did not."

Does the goals criteria approach offer insight into the 1984 debates? I think that it can help voters appreciate and understand the process of debates in the context of the presidential campaign. If speech communication teachers were to take such a framework to various audiences in an election year, a higher degree of interest and rationality could be advanced. Rather than training viewers to be debate critics from an academic model, we can use the goals approach to provide an alternative to passive viewing. The goals criteria will probably not change the manner in which many Americans look at presidential debates—they do not desire any more information about politics or politicians. But there may be individuals and groups (our students and colleagues, for example), who could benefit from a systematic method of watching such encounters. The alternative of maintaining our present approach only promotes the shouting match every four years over the value of debates in the political process. People committed to the cause of public communication realize that a middle ground exists between those who dismiss the debates and those who sanctify the contests. We must teach interested Americans that understanding the debates requires healthy doses of patience, interest, and skepticism. Our discipline has knowledge to share; making the commitment and finding the forums seem to be the obstacles. I hope that before the hallowed words presidential debate are uttered again, members of the speech communication field will be working on their public service presentations.

PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES: POLITICAL TOOL OR VOTER INFORMATION?

Mary M. Gill

The media have for decades been a topic of discussion. Scholars debate about how the media affect voter opinion. Joseph Wagner contends that the media alter voter attitude. He reports that the media produce consistent and systematic effects on public opinion. James Clotfelter and Charles Prysby report that television is now the most important medium. Theodore White describes television as the "great transmission belt of impression." Regardless of the documented effect of television, most critics agree that it does exert an influence on viewers. Recently the media's coverage of presidential debates has come into question. Scholars report varied results on the measurable effect of televised presidential debates on voters. What is generally agreed on is that voters are influenced, although this influence may only strengthen existing conviction. Wagner reports that a general increase in information about the candidates occurs because of both the reinforcement and the altering of attitudes for a significant number of voters. Given that televised debates wield a degree of influence, the presidential debate process needs reform so that information can be transferred to voters without a political weapon being created. I intend to demonstrate that the debates have had an influence on the elections and to propose that reforms must be made in the format of these debates.

Presidential debates were first held in 1960. This year offered a number of exceptions. Section 315 of the Communications Act, which provides equal air time for all candidates, was suspended by Congress to allow John Kennedy and Richard Nixon to debate. Because Kennedy and Nixon were only two of the candidates, a special provision was needed. This suspension of Section 315 proved to be a single occurrence. It was not until sixteen years later that presidential debates were held. Only after an independent group, the League of Women Voters, became responsible for the debates were they allowed to take place. In 1976, Congress would not suspend Section 315. However, the Federal Communications Commission ruled that if an independent group hosted the debates, the media could report the event as a news event. Thus, Section 315 and the equal time provision were not contested. It was under this situation that the presidential debates of 1976, 1980, and 1984 took place.

In each of the debates, the format remained similar. News correspondents

Mary M. Gill is Instructor and Director of Forensics at the University of North Dakota.

4 Wagner 409.
SPEAKER AND GAVEL

asked candidates questions regarding various issues and concerns of the day. In each debate, the amount of time given the candidate to respond to the question remained rather short. In the 1984 debates, each candidate was given two and one-half minutes to initially respond to a question. Opening and closing remarks of varying lengths were utilized in each of the debate series.

Although the debates have undergone changes, the influence and effect of the debates have remained similar. When each of the debates is analyzed, an interesting parallel emerges. In each instance, the media's reported and perceived winner of the presidential debate also won the general election. In 1960, the debate was held before an estimated audience of 65–70 million people. The debate between Kennedy and Nixon was perceived by the media and viewers as a close debate. In the final analysis, however, it was determined that because of his command and charisma, Kennedy won the debate. He also later won the election.\(^5\)

As the debates continued in 1976, the number of viewers increased. It is estimated that as many as 100 million people viewed the Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter debates.\(^6\) During the 1976 election, surveys of previously uncommitted voters showed that the debates influenced their ultimate voting decision and provided an impetus for them to vote at all in the election. Moreover, both candidates in the debates viewed them as the turning point in the campaign. Carter felt if it had not been for the debates, he would have lost the election. Ford also theorized that the debates were a major factor in the outcome of the election.\(^7\) The media reported Carter as the stronger of the two men during the debates. As in 1960, the perceived winner of the debates won the election.

In 1980, a new situation developed in the presidential election. John Anderson, a candidate for the Republican nomination, ran in the general election as an independent candidate. Although Anderson held substantial public support and wished to debate Carter and Reagan, both candidates refused to debate him. Carter asserted that Anderson had no party or candidacy to claim. Reagan suggested that he would debate Anderson after Carter agreed to debate Anderson. Carter, who continued to refuse to debate Anderson, did extend an invitation to debate Reagan. The Carter campaigners hoped that this strategy would be effective. By having their candidate debate Reagan, they hoped to create the impression that there were only two serious candidates in the election, for they feared that Anderson might split the vote in November. The strategy was unsuccessful. The 1980 presidential debates were perhaps among the closest. On points about various issues of the day, Carter and Reagan were judged equally effective. However, Reagan was perceived as the winner based on personality and the image presented during the debates.\(^8\) As in the past, the perceived winner of the debates won the election that followed.

\(^5\) White 401.
\(^6\) White 401.
\(^7\) Raymond L. Fischer, “Presidential Debates: Maximizing the Media,” USA Today May 1980: 63.
\(^8\) White 401.
In 1984, the incumbent Reagan initially stated that he would not debate Democratic nominee Walter Mondale. Later in the campaign, when it became apparent to the Reagan campaign staff that the choice was to debate or to appear weak, they decided the debate must take place. Reagan said he would debate if the event could be arranged to accommodate his schedule. This debate series demonstrates the extent to which debates have become yet one more political tool for a candidate. The dates agreed upon for the debates between Reagan and Mondale did accommodate the president's schedule, but they also conflicted with other major events. The first debate was scheduled on the night of a major Mondale fund-raiser; it proved disastrous for Reagan. The media declared Mondale the winner of this first debate, claiming that Reagan was out of control, uncomfortable, and lacking in knowledge of significant affairs. The second debate was televised opposite a National Football League game. The Reagan campaign hoped that the football game would draw viewers away from the debates. Reagan also changed his appearance for the second debate. He appeared more at ease with the situation and able to handle the questions and Mondale's responses. The second debate reversed the viewers' perception of Reagan, and Reagan was reported as the victor. Moreover, based on his extraordinary performance change between the debates, Reagan was considered by the media to be the winner of the series of debates. In the final analysis, the Reagan campaign's strategies were effective. Once again, the candidate perceived as the winner of the debates won the following election. Thus, the presidential debates have become merely another political tool. But that is not their only shortcoming. When the basic debate structure is analyzed, a number of problems become apparent. For example, news correspondents have participated in the debates by asking questions of the candidates—questions that often do not reflect the concern of the public but rather the biases of the questioners. Such was the case during the Carter/Ford debates in 1976. In addition, the questions asked by various correspondents have overlapped questions previously asked during the debate. As a result, many questions have seemed pointless in acquiring new information about the candidates' positions on issues. With the format focusing on questions asked, the exchanges have often appeared as "two ships passing in the night." Little direct exchange is made between the candidates. Consequently, much of the debate appears tedious at best. Furthermore, the format has fostered the misuse of information: the setting creates an artificial environment; and the candidates are hesitant to use any material because appearing unknowledgeable could cost the election. Therefore, rather than referring to notes and/or campaign documents, the candidate repeats information to the best of his recollection. Misinformation becomes introduced as fact. This occurred occasionally during the Reagan/Mondale debates.

The presidential debates seem to play an important role in the election process, and it appears that they are here to stay. Thus, it seems reasonable that the debate process should be changed to increase fairness and to assure

the communication of accurate information. Changes in both the format and the content of the debates need to be made. Initially, the candidates debating should be given a desk so that they can sit rather than stand for the ninety minutes. Reporters have often interpreted movement as discomfort with the procedure when in fact it was merely discomfort from standing for the extended period of time. Additionally, the candidates should have campaign information and statistics at their disposal. This change would facilitate a more realistic impression of the candidates. Few Americans believe that the president has committed to memory all the data relevant to every decision he makes. Rather, the president refers to information provided by his or her advisors. Candidates in presidential debates should be given the same opportunity.

In regard to the basic format of the debates, both the time limit and the subject matter should be changed. In the past, the debates have lasted ninety minutes. A presidential debate should last no longer than forty-five minutes. For a debate to serve as an effective information tool, its organizers must focus on the listener. That is, viewers would benefit more from the debates if each debate were shorter and if the number of debates were greater. Viewers would be able to grasp and, it is hoped, retain more of the information if it were presented more compactly. And reducing the length of each debate would allow for more debates to occur.

I suggest that more debates of shorter duration occur between the major party candidates. These debates should focus on issues grouped into issue areas. For example, a series of three debates could be held between the presidential candidates. Each debate would focus on a different issue area such as economic concerns, domestic concerns, and international concerns. Within each of these issue areas, specific issues could be debated by the candidates. During a debate on economic concerns, for instance, the candidates could reasonably debate issues such as taxes and inflation.

I further propose that news correspondents no longer appear to ask questions of the candidates. In the past, various correspondents have asked candidates a plethora of unrelated questions. A better format would involve a moderator, perhaps a news correspondent agreed upon by both candidates. The moderator would introduce the specific issues and direct the candidates’ responses. Each candidate would be given an opportunity to offer his or her analysis of the specific issue. This would allow the candidates an opportunity to interact with one another in their responses, thus limiting the talking past one another that has occurred in past debates.

With each debate in a series of three focusing on an issue area, each candidate would be allowed five minutes for an opening remark relevant to the issue area. For most of each debate, the moderator would direct responses to questions on specific issues. Each candidate would be allowed three minutes for a closing statement. To host a spirit of fair play, a flip of a coin could determine the order in which the candidates would make their opening and closing remarks.

Finally, the debates should be mandated by the party mechanism. Newton Minow, former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, recommended this change in 1984 with the justification that the debates have become too important of an information choice to allow them to continue.
to be used as a political tool. Present debate practices allow the debates to become a political weapon. Much of the hoopla surrounding each debate is generated not by what the candidates really say but by the impressions and images they create even before the debate itself. Consequently, Section 315 of the Communications Act should be altered to allow the major party candidates to debate. An explanation could be added to the section that would exclude presidential debates from the equal time standard. The debates could then focus on information dispersion and not on the perception of strength or weakness in the extending or accepting of an offer to debate.

In addition to mandating presidential debates, the party structure should mandate a debate between the major-party vice presidential candidates. Such a debate would provide the electorate an opportunity to assess the leadership and character capabilities of the potential vice president.

Obviously, opinions vary regarding the measured significance the presidential debates provide. Analyses of the debates suggest that perceived strength in the debate process is related to the outcome of the election. With the electorate's reliance on information gained through the debate process, it seems only reasonable that every effort be made to make the process as bias-free and as accurate as possible. To this end, substantial changes must be made in the format of future presidential debates.

---

REBUILDING THE PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

Stephen Mills

Thanks to the reelection of President Reagan, presidential debates will almost certainly be held again in the final months of the 1988 election campaign and are unlikely to include a White House incumbent. They will thus be the first since 1960 to involve two challengers to the presidency.

This situation will provide a rare opportunity for debate advocates to move swiftly to rebuild the structure of the debates. Debate organizers will be free from the decisive influence the White House has exercised since 1952 in determining debate formats, indeed, in permitting debates to take place at all. They will be dealing instead with non-incumbents who will be unable to refuse the kind of mass exposure the debates offer.

The opportunity to rebuild the debates must be seized now to correct three flaws that, in various forms, have dogged presidential debates since their inception and that recurred sharply in 1984:

1) The League of Women Voters has a precarious hold on the sponsorship of the debates. Debate advocates must decide whether they want League sponsorship to continue or whether they want to encourage the television networks or some other group to take over.

2) The current content of the debates does not fulfill their stated aims. Debate advocates must decide whether more specific content guidelines are desirable and, if so, what guidelines.

3) The current format of the debates creates misconceptions about the debating and electoral process and must be rectified.

This opportunity to rebuild the debates is unlikely to recur; if it is not taken now, the current structure of the debates will likely become institutionalized and unchangeable. This paper begins with the assumption that the presidential debates are a valuable addition to the electoral process but that they need improvement, rebuilding.

Improvements will remain elusive while debate negotiations are left to the last minute when the candidates’ tactical interests are paramount. An urgent first step must be to resolve the sponsorship problem. This paper argues that the League’s sponsorship is inadequate; a new sponsor—one with resources, reputation, and rule-making clout—should be found or created immediately. Such a sponsor should through research and public discussion determine improvements that are manifestly sensible, fair, and in

Stephen Mills is an Australian journalist with The Age newspaper of Melbourne. He recently spent two years in the United States as a Harkness Fellow to observe the 1984 presidential election campaign.

The author wishes to thank the Benton Foundation and its president, Mr. Charles Benton, for friendship and logistical support while this paper was being prepared late in 1984, as well as the Commonwealth Fund of New York for invaluable support to the author during his 1983-85 Harkness Fellowship in the United States. The views expressed here are the author’s alone.


Published by Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato, 1986
the public interest. Debaters in 1988 should be presented with a fait accompli that they would find costlier to avoid than to accept.

**Sponsor: The League versus the Networks**

I think the [CBS] debate shed more heat than light. . . . I was half expecting one of them [the candidates] to reach across the table and punch the other guy out. [Mrs. Dorothy Ridings, president, League of Women Voters]

The role of the League of Women Voters is to lend its name, and pay for the hall, and be the nominal conduit between the candidates, networks and whatever panel there is. . . . To say "sponsor" is a misnomer. [Mr. Dick Wald, ABC vice president]

The best behind-the-scenes story of the 1984 presidential debate series concerns the rivalry between the League of Women Voters and the three major television networks over who should sponsor the debates. The rivalry culminated in a nearly successful attempt by the networks to replace the League as sponsor and to produce the debates themselves.

This story, along with the saga of the blackballed panelists, illustrates the increasingly precarious nature of the League's hold on the sponsorship role.

Those who wish to see debates continue must soon make a fundamental choice about the future of debate sponsorship: for the 1988 debates, should the League's role be strengthened, should the networks be encouraged to take the League's place, or should a new sponsor be found or created?

The network bid for debate sponsorship originates with the 1983 revision of Section 315 of the Communications Act. This ruling by the Federal Communications Commission was the first to allow networks to sponsor, as well as to broadcast, candidate debates that were bona fide news events. The new ruling, which completed the work of the FCC's 1976 Aspen ruling, was contested in court unsuccessfully by the League.

Freed from the legal restraints that had effectively prevented network sponsorship of debates since 1960, networks sponsored some debates under a variety of formats during the 1984 Democratic primary season. One of these, moderated by CBS anchor Dan Rather and featuring candidates Mondale, Hart, and Jackson, was particularly memorable: tough, tense, fast. The networks liked the format; the League's Dorothy Ridings did not.

In May, each network made unilateral approaches to representatives of the Republican and Democratic parties seeking their cooperation in staging the Main Event: a series of debates to be held in the fall between President Reagan and his still-unselected Democratic opponent. In a conversation on the matter between James Baker, White House chief of staff at the time, and Dick Wald of ABC, Wald was asked to coordinate the requests of the three networks to simplify the talks. As network point man, Wald continued

---

1 Dorothy Ridings, telephone interview, Nov. 1984. (Unless otherwise noted, all attributions to Mrs. Ridings are based on this interview.)
2 Dick Wald, telephone interviews, Nov. 1984. (All attributions to Mr. Wald are based on these interviews.)
what he characterizes as a "lengthy conversation" with Baker and Mondale's campaign chairman Jim Johnson over the proposal.

According to Wald, the networks were motivated by three factors:

- In the wake of the new FCC ruling, the networks felt it "incumbent" on them to try to create such debates; network sponsorship would be "less complicated" because without the League only three parties (the two candidates and the networks as a unit) would be involved in the debate preparations; network presentation would create a "direct confrontation" between the candidates, to allow the greatest room for them to expose their views and differences [the format of the Rather debate].

Ed Leiser, CBS vice president, adds a fourth motivating factor: the League is "not expert" at the technical work of setting up a debate.

The networks may also be speculated as having a fifth, more self-interested, motive. In the past, networks have provided gavel-to-gavel coverage of the parties' nomination conventions, illustrating their concern for public interest "civics class" broadcasting. Such coverage has declined, however, as the conventions have become less newsworthy; debate sponsorship offers a new avenue for political broadcasting of substantial news and "civics" value. It would also reestablish network primacy over C-Span and other stations that have increasingly encroached on convention coverage.

The essence of the network proposal was for a minimum of three debates, two presidential and one vice presidential. This number was chosen in part so that the networks could produce one debate each; it is not clear whether this choice was unwittingly important in the White House negotiations aimed at whittling down Mondale's plea for six debates. Each debate would be between sixty and ninety minutes long. Most important, the debates would follow the Rather format: the two candidates would be alone on the stage with a single network moderator; there would be no panel of journalists asking questions.

Meanwhile, the League was pressing ahead with its own sponsorship plans. It successfully sponsored four debates during the primaries and was planning to raise $1.5 million from institutional and individual donors. Its army of volunteers was being mobilized.

Like the networks, the League preferred debates without a panel. However, Reagan staff and, initially, Mondale staff wanted a panel; like all debate participants, they saw the panel as providing dignity and predictability to the high-stakes contest. What is not clear is the relative strength with which the League and the networks were pushing their no-panel wishes. The candidates finally chose the League as sponsor, and the League agreed to stage debates with panels. According to Wald, the agreement showed that the candidates saw the League as malleable; according to Ridings, it showed that they respected the League as nonpartisan and trustworthy.

Having "won" the debates by agreeing to provide a panel, the League

---

4 That is, immediately after the convention. Ridings confirmed this Mondale stance at the time with Richard Leone of the Mondale staff. But by Sept. 1, Mondale staffers were being quoted opting for the "Dan Rather type of debate" by David Hoffman ("At least one debate by Reagan, Mondale agreed to by Aides," Washington Post 1 Sept. 1984: A4).
found itself under heavy attack from the media, which, like everyone else except for the candidates, wanted direct confrontation.

In an op-ed column headed "Real Presidential Debates," Washington Post columnist David Broder asserted:

There is no escaping that every time we [journalists] do that job [of being panelists] we inject ourselves into the campaign . . . and become players, not observers. . . . Let the debates be debates.5

A New York Times editorialist chimed in:

There's no need to inject a panel of outsiders; one skilled moderator is all the provocation that's required.6

Their case seemed to be proved, albeit in an unexpected way, when the panel selection process broke down completely in the lead-up to the first debate at Louisville. Some eighty senior journalists whom the League had suggested as panelists were one after the other blackballed by the candidates for reasons that have yet to be adequately explained. The selection process had become another arena of psychological warfare between the candidates' staffs. The scandal led the Washington Post's front page on the day of the debate, moderator Barbara Walters criticized it in her opening remarks, and both the New York Times and CBS decided to refuse their journalists permission to serve on future panels.7

It should be clear that, coming on top of the third-candidacy problem raised by the Anderson debate in 1980, such "debate debates" weakened the League's sponsorship role and weaken the debates.

Two points need to be made. First, the 1984 "debate debate" underlined again the fact that the League lacks negotiating weight. This does not imply that the League lacks dedication (it does not) or that a debate will always be organized smoothly and to everyone's satisfaction. But it is true nevertheless that on any dispute over the debate with other parties—networks or candidates—the League is unlikely to win. Network advice is dominant in all technical matters, while candidates have been able to dictate terms covering the number, content, and format of debates, even to the detriment of the debates themselves. Former FCC chairman Newton Minow comments:

The public is not well served when debates are negotiated in the heat of a campaign at the last minute with the candidates' tactical advantage taking precedence over the public interest. . . . The debates should not be left to chance as they are now.8

Ridings points out that in 1984 the League did insist on the time frame for the debates: it told the candidates it would not serve as sponsor if they agreed to hold only one debate or if the debates were scheduled before

---

8 Newton Minow, address, Speech Communication Association annual meeting, Chicago, 2 Nov. 1984.
the third-to-last week or after the last week of the campaign. Yet on no key feature of the 1984 debates did the League "lay down the law" and thus require other parties to accede to a ruling. Where disputes emerged, such as over the panel selection, the League was unable to prevent the candidates from eroding the integrity of its own debate structure.

This inability existed despite the rationale for League sponsorship; that it is an impartial community organization that can represent and defend the public interest. The League's effective role appears to be limited to that of the well-meaning but impotent honest broker.

Second, the League's weaknesses are highlighted by the networks' growing eagerness to sponsor debates. The rivalry between the networks and the League should not be underrated. With the progressive liberalization of Section 315, the networks are likely to feel the dispute is shifting favorably their way. As former CBS chairman Frank Stanton said, "I don't see any need for the League. We didn't have it in 1960." In any case, future candidates may simply prefer network sponsorship. Debate advocates must determine whether this is any cause for alarm.

Perhaps it is not. After all, we rely on network coverage for most of our political news; debates would hardly exist were it not for a mass television audience; the networks' primary debates of 1984 were of good quality; and the networks have not abused the mass debate audience for commercial gain.

Yet there are three areas for concern about network debate sponsorship that remain problematic:

1) Could network news reporters cover the "debate debate" with toughness and impartiality when their own corporate executives were involved?

2) Would network sponsorship lead to debates better characterized as "good TV" (shorter answers, fewer debates, more combative exchanges) than as "good campaigning" (thoughtful analysis, more debates)? And if so, would this be bad?

3) Would network sponsorship place further obstacles between voters and candidates? If League sponsorship implies candidate response to a citizens group, would network sponsorship imply that the candidates are "brought to you" by them?

Suitable debate sponsors would seem to require three characteristics: resources to mount the events, reputation to win the confidence of other parties and the public, and—most important in the context of this paper—rule-making clout to impose conditions conducive to a satisfactory debate. The League lacks the third quality; and networks, if these concerns are valid, lack the second.

If neither the League nor the networks are satisfactory, other solutions can be crafted. According to Newton Minow, political parties, which do meet all three criteria, should become the sponsors. He believes the Republican and Democratic parties should, during their nominating conventions, commit their candidates in advance to a series of debates. (He suggests...

---

four debates, including one by the vice presidential candidates.) The debates should be televised live from the floor of Congress; they should be witnessed by an audience of congressmembers and senators, without the mediation of a panel of questioners.

Alternatively, a custom-built agency—a Presidential Debates Commission—has been suggested. Such a commission, jointly chaired by former debate participants, could also meet all three criteria above. It would have the advantage of absorbing rather than elbowing aside the League, which, for all its other drawbacks, still has an undisputed public reputation for probity. Drawing on the expertise of the League, the Twentieth Century Fund, and other capable organizations, a commission could also be well placed to conduct much-needed research on alternative debate formats and on education to win public support for debates.

However, a commission could realistically be established as sponsor only if the League, the networks, and the political parties chose to cooperate. Methods of funding it and making it administratively flexible remain to be worked out.

The sponsorship question needs urgent resolution through public debate by politicians, journalists, scholars, and foundations involved in public affairs. Once chosen, any new sponsor will need substantial lead time—at least two years—to develop new proposals for the content and format of the 1988 debates.

Content and Format: Better Than Nothing

The debates are intended to educate the public about the issues in the campaign and the candidates’ positions on the issues, as well as to stimulate voter interest and participation in the election. [Mrs. Dorothy Ridings] You can say anything you want during a debate, and 80 million people see it. (If reporters then document that a candidate spoke untruthfully) so what? . . . Maybe 200 people read it, or 2,000 or 20,000. [Mr. Peter Teeley, press secretary to Vice President George Bush] If Mrs. Ridings is right and educating the voters is what the 1984 debates were about, how well did Reagan, Bush, Mondale, and Ferraro make use of their 280-minute exposure to their largest campaign audiences?

The answer is: not very well. A brief survey of the content of the three debates indicates that any voter relying on the debates for political education would have been misinformed. The record of the debates shows that key issues were omitted. Trivial and transitory issues were exaggerated. Errors abounded unchecked.

For instance, debate on issues regarding the Middle East, an area of paramount importance in American foreign policy, was limited almost exclu-
sively to the Beirut terror bombings. There was no mention of current US policy toward the region as a whole—no appraisal of President Reagan's 1982 Peace Plan or of Democratic alternatives to it. There was no discussion of specific concerns outside Lebanon: the Iran-Iraq war, the new Israeli government, ties with Egypt and Jordan.

Similarly, debate concerning Central America was limited almost exclusively to the CIA guerrilla manual, with little mention of the candidates' different and similar views on more long-term regional problems.

The Louisville debate, allegedly on domestic policy, failed to cover substantively the topics of ERA, education, civil rights, and the environment.

Mondale skimmed past his tax-increase plans in the same way that, two weeks later, both he and the president skated over specific ways of talking arms control with the Soviets.

Most extraordinary, one of the sharpest foreign policy differences to emerge was over whether nonexistent "Star Wars" technology should be handed over to the Soviets in the remote event that it is ever perfected by the US.

If these imbalances and omissions were a hindrance to voter education, then so too was the proliferation of errors and misstatements. President Reagan's inaccurate depiction of the opponents of the Marcos regime in the Philippines was corrected politely but rapidly by the State Department after the debate. Reagan's statement about his refusal to risk innocent lives in retaliating against terrorists was undermined later in the week by the secretary of state himself in his "Hamlet" speech. The president's firm guarantee that current Social Security recipients would not have their benefits cut was modified in the following days to include future beneficiaries.

Mondale seemed to promise the "total repeal" of tax indexing after economic recovery; a month earlier he had declared his support for indexing. In the debate this contradiction went unchallenged, as did Reagan's baffling claim that fixed-income earners on $8,000 "in 1979 or 1980" were $500 above the poverty line and "in 1980" were $500 below the line.

In other words, issues that were addressed were often incorrectly addressed; viewers had no way of distinguishing the accurate from the misstated.

The running mates were similarly astray. Bush declared that "the experts" would support his assertion that funding for certain domestic programs had been increased; it had not. Ferraro declared that as president, Mondale would challenge the Russians to a ban on atmospheric nuclear testing; such a ban was instituted in 1963 and remains in force.

Most of these flaws were duly reported in the days following the debates. But as Teeley recognizes, these corrections drew small audiences. What attracted greater coverage were different "issues": the issue of the president's age; the issue of his one-liner at Kansas City, which disposed of the age issue; the issue of whether Ferraro had been patronized; the issue of Mondale's pat response to "There you go again"; and so on.

In addition to having these content problems, debates have been dogged by misperceptions created by format problems.

One of the enduring if not endearing features of debate commentary is the boxing metaphor. From the 1858 cartoon depicting Lincoln and Douglas squaring off in a “political prize fight” to “fighting Fritz” jetting about the campaign trail in a plane nicknamed “The Louisville Slugger,” the metaphor seems to fit the debates like a (boxing) glove. A poster issued for the third debate summed it up without embarrassment: “Kansas City welcomes you to a celebration of American democracy” read the caption under a picture of two boxing gloves, labeled Reagan and Mondale, hanging from a microphone.

Debates are not about issues alone. They are also about people, candidates, in conflict. As the New York Times editorialized, they are not only about the words but are also about the “music.” We need to know not only what is said but also who is saying it.

The boxing metaphor sums this up: we see the candidates, like boxers, alone, under equal conditions, and in confrontation. This format has dominated all televised debates since 1960. But how good is the format? I believe the debates and the electoral process have suffered as a result of this way of thinking about them and staging them.

Like boxers, debaters are alone, unassisted by their media consultants and press secretaries. Theodore White was mostly right in his famous judgment on the 1960 debate: through instinct and emotion voters do learn much about the style and patterns of behavior of the candidates under stress. But the drawback is that we also see them without policy advisors. Thus, White is wrong in this respect: the stress of debating is different from the stress of decision making in the Oval Office. Debating requires brevity, consistency, extensive briefing, and constant rebuttal of the opponent. Governing requires more time, perhaps some inconsistency, improvisation, and compromise with opponents. In particular, governing requires skillful management of a team of advisors. Debating, in contrast, focuses on the presidential candidates in isolation.

Second, like boxers, debaters are equalized. A good element of debates is that we see the candidates under identical conditions: equal time for answers and rebuttals, symmetrical handshakes and photo opportunities with the family. But the downfall here is that the equality is illusory, the result of the democratic myth that each election starts tabula rasa. The candidates in 1984 were not equal; one of them was the president of the United States. Debates, like election campaigns, have an inbuilt disequilibrium; in 1984 the debate imbalance against the incumbent president was such that one ninety-minute debate at Louisville nearly upset his reelection chances.

Incidentally, abolishing panels would reduce this illusion of equality. The League’s original intention was that panelists would ask the “same” question to both candidates; in practice this is impossible.

Third, like boxing, debates are about confrontation. We see candidates face to face; the air crackles when they challenge each other. Each side is looking to place the knockout blow; every word is part of a victory strategy. But as before, there is a drawback here. Having put the candidates in a ring, we feel compelled to declare one of them a winner.

How do we determine who wins? The pressures of news and politics to declare a winner overlook the distinct possibility that debating may not always produce one. Winners are declared even though political commentators, unlike boxing judges, lack objective scoring criteria for making that decision. While boxers are rated only on performance, debaters must be appraised on performance and substance. Journalists resort to counting errors and one-liners, guided by the subtle analyses of the “spin doctors.” They frequently shirk judging the substantive content of debates. Yet it is precisely this kind of judgment that voters must make.

Suggested Modifications

Given this balance sheet, most journalists and scholarly observers deliver the tepid decision that debates are better than nothing—better, anyway, than nondebate forms of campaign communication. Television advertisements are disparaged as costly, slick, and misleading; television news reporting likens a campaign to a horse race, unable to convey complicated ideas; newspaper reporting may be more substantive but is less read. Candidates conduct ever more structured campaigns aimed solely at manipulating television news coverage. This tactic was especially evident last year in the White House decisions to hold no press conferences, to adhere to prepared texts, and to minimize second-term promises.

So debates are seen as the only way to get to the candidates on other than their own terms, the only way to introduce uncertainty into their schedules.

Paradoxically, debates also allow the candidates their best opportunities for speaking to the voters without mediation and at length. Additionally, debates make issues palatable to mass audiences. Debates are important to many voters. According to exit poll data released by ABC News, twenty percent of voters said the presidential debate was “very important” to them in making their voting decision, while eight percent said the vice presidential debate had been very important.

The most obvious option for generating greater enthusiasm about debates is to have more of them. If each debate became less of a do-or-die effort,
candidates might relax more, and different formats could be tried. The last time two non-incumbents debated—Kennedy and Nixon in 1960—four debates were held. A good case could be made for repeating the dose in 1988 on the grounds that non-incumbents will need the greater exposure to a nation unfamiliar with them.

However, unless the content of the debates is also improved, increasing the number of them is insufficient. I believe the debate sponsor should **specify topics of discussion in advance with greater precision than they are now specified.**

Instead of stating that a debate will cover a broad topic such as domestic or foreign policy, the sponsoring organization should determine—perhaps after consulting the public, the candidates, and public opinion polls—three specific topics for debate within this broad topic. For example, the 1984 foreign policy debate could have focused on the Middle East, Central America, and superpower relations.

Under this format, candidates would be informed that debate on each of the three topics would last twenty minutes, totaling two-thirds of a ninety-minute debate. Each topic would be introduced by the moderator with a brief, two- to three-minute, outline of existing policy and recent events. For last year's topic of the Middle East, this introduction could have summarized Camp David, the Reagan Peace Plan, and the Beirut bombings. Each candidate would speak for five minutes on the topic and then spend the final seven minutes on argument and rebuttal.

The intention of this part of the debate would be to have candidates address a minimum number of key issues in a comprehensive fashion. Implicit in this approach is an important second benefit: it offers the chance of abolishing panels of questioners. Only the candidates seem to want panels; everyone else agrees that they have turned debates into joint press conferences.\(^\text{21}\) Candidates must be induced to sacrifice them. In exchange they should be offered, as they are in this proposal, other means of gaining some of the predictability they see panels as providing. This proposal suggests that candidates would know in advance the subject matter of two-thirds of the debate and could brief themselves accordingly. If panels were abolished, the final one-third of the debate could be used for a general discussion of other topics that the candidates themselves raise—a “real debate”—with only peacekeeping and timekeeping necessitating a moderator between the candidates.

Third, why not allow some policy advisors to join the candidates on the stage and to contribute occasionally to their leaders' arguments? One of the most striking features of Ferraro's lengthy press conference on her family finances was her willingness to seek technical information from her accountants seated to one side. The presence of advisors on the stage of a debate would pose television production problems, but not insuperable

\(^{21}\) With some exceptions. Sawyer's question on abortion prompted a useful discussion that probably would not have taken place otherwise. Candidates sometimes tacitly conspire to avoid dangerous waters by avoiding asking each other the toughest questions, as the Democratic primary debaters realized.
ones. More important, it would remind viewers that while they are voting only for elected officials, they are governed in large part by appointees.

Finally, more work needs to be done in developing alternative formats. Nelson Polsby has, for example, proposed a system of paired conversations in which first one candidate and then the other would speak and respond for ninety minutes to an expert nonjournalist panel made up of two supporters and two critics. If the topic were economics, half the panelists (all economic commentators) would be selected by the candidate and the other half by his opponent. Talks could be held on successive weeks on different topics.

Like many alternative formats, this one runs the risk of becoming simply a modified “Meet the Press.” It also lacks the spark of one-to-one confrontation; it is doubtful whether such seminars would attract very large audiences.

However, options do exist for improving presidential debates. The essential need is for a sponsor to emerge soon and to commence the long task of researching possible debate rules and leading a public debate on them. Previous experiences with debates have led to a sort of resignation among debate advocates that they are doomed to mediocrity because the candidates will always win out in the preliminary haggling over format. This attitude is, of course, self-defeating. Some imaginative thinking about the 1988 debates before the candidates are selected can perhaps turn the tables on them by presenting them with a format they may be unable to refuse.

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

The Delta Sigma Rho–Tau Kappa Alpha National Council has established a standard subscription rate of $5.00 per year for *Speaker and Gavel*.

Present policy provides that new members, upon election, are provided with two years of *Speaker and Gavel* free of charge. Life members, furthermore, who have paid a Life Patron alumni membership fee of $100, likewise regularly receive *Speaker and Gavel*. Also receiving each issue are the current chapter sponsors and the libraries of institutions holding a charter in the organization.

Other individuals and libraries are welcome to subscribe to *Speaker and Gavel*. Subscription orders should be sent to Allen Press, P. O. Box 368, Lawrence, Kansas 66044.

TO SPONSORS AND MEMBERS

Please send all communications relating to initiation, certificates of membership, key orders, and names of members to the National Secretary. All requests for authority to initiate and for emblems should be sent to the National Secretary and should be accompanied by check or money order. Inasmuch as all checks and money orders are forwarded by the Secretary to the National Treasurer, please make them to: "The Treasurer of Delta Sigma Rho–Tau Kappa Alpha."

The membership fee is $15.00. The official key (size shown in cut on this page) is $15.00, or the official key-pin is $17.00. Prices include Federal Tax. The names of new members, those elected between September of one year and September of the following year, appear in the Fall issue of *Speaker and Gavel*. According to present regulations of the society, new members receive *Speaker and Gavel* for two years following their initiation if they return the record form supplied them at the time their application is approved by the Executive Secretary and certified to the sponsor. Following this time all members who wish to receive *Speaker and Gavel* may subscribe at the standard rate of $5.00 per year.