

THEODORE H. WHITE

THE  
MAKING OF  
THE PRESIDENT

1960

---

NEW YORK  
ATHENEUM PUBLISHERS

1964

North Dakota, 55.4; South Dakota, 58.3), making all together the most solid and decisive expression of will of any of the major regions of the United States (see Chapter Fourteen).

Analysts were later to ascribe this farm-belt Nixon victory to the influence of religion and bigotry; while this was certainly true in other states of the union, it seemed to this writer that in the farm belt it was not religion that operated, but much more the culture of the small town. These were Nixon's people, by nature and upbringing, by speech and culture; he spoke for them. The cadence and Harvard prose of John F. Kennedy, the meticulous grammar and elegance of the Democrat's style, were to such people alien and suspect.

Even in Iowa, though, as his spirit revived in the sun and the cornfields, the volatility of Nixon's moods was conspicuous. He had spent an inspiring morning traveling through the small towns; had lunched on a box lunch (fried chicken and ham sandwiches) at Atlantic, Iowa, in Sunnyside Park by the Memorial of the Grand Army of the Republic; and had then proceeded to the crown piece of the day—his farm-policy speech at Guthrie Center, where the State Plowing Contest was being held. The speech went badly—the farmers and their wives sat on the slopes of a hill in the sun and listened to his proposal for disposition of surplus stolidly, indifferently, as if they were alienated from both parties of American politics, as if no one, not even Nixon, could reach them. Flustered, he telescoped his prepared remarks as much as he could, then made a transit to the issue of peace and war. "Peace without Surrender" found him on solid ground again with his certified punch lines, and he left to take to the road once more. On the move again, he was excellent, joshing the children who gathered to greet him in the late afternoon ("Imagine coming to see me in the afternoon, when they aren't even letting you out of school for it"), and he entered Des Moines just before dark at peak form.

Round One of the Nixon campaign could not help but please him. He had done magnificently well on his Southern appearances; and as he moved through the Midwest, he had found resonance wherever he went. He was moving according to plan and pace; some of his advisers grumbled that his speeches were too "defensive," but he told them that he had several weeks to go before he would erase the image of pugacity. He was, to be sure, overstraining himself physically with travel and speech making; but there was not to be another Black Thursday, and as he attempted to cut down on his flexible schedule, his health began to mend and some of the weight to come back.

So Nixon (like Kennedy) approached the second round of the campaign and the hazards of television in an episode not only new to this campaign but entirely fresh in the sweep of American political history.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### ROUND TWO:

## THE TELEVISION DEBATES

AT 8:30 P.M., Chicago time, on the evening of September 26th, 1960, the voice and shadow of the previous show faded from the screen; in a few seconds it was followed by another voice and by a visual clip extolling the virtues of Liggett and Myers cigarettes; fifteen seconds were then devoted to Maybelline, the mascara "devoted exclusively to eye beauty, velvety soft and smooth." Then a deep voice regretfully announced that the viewers who turned to this channel would tonight be denied the privilege of viewing the Andy Griffith Show—and the screen dissolved to three men who were about to confirm a revolution in American Presidential politics.

This revolution had been made by no one of the three men on screen—John F. Kennedy, Richard M. Nixon or Howard K. Smith, the moderator. It was a revolution born of the ceaseless American genius in technology; its sole agent and organizer had been the common American television set. Tonight it was to permit the simultaneous gathering of all the tribes of America to ponder their choice between two chieftains in the largest political convocation in the history of man.

Again, it is the census that best describes this revolution. Ten years earlier (in 1950), of America's then 40,000,000 families only 11 per cent (or 4,400,000) enjoyed the pleasures of a television set. By 1960 the number of American families had grown to 44,000,000, and of these no less than 88 per cent, or 40,000,000, possessed a television set. The installation of this equipment had in some years of the previous decade partaken of the quality of stampede—and in the peak stampede years of 1954-1955-1956 no fewer than 10,000 American homes had each been installing a new television set for the first time every single day of the year. The change that came about with this stampede is almost immeasurable. By the summer of 1960 the average

use of the television set in the American home was four or five hours out of the twenty-four in each day. The best judgment on what television had done to America comes from the research departments of the large television networks. According to them, it is now possible for the first time to answer an inquiring foreign visitor as to what Americans do in the evening. The answer is clear: *they watch television*. Within a single decade the medium has exploded to a dimension in shaping the American mind that rivals that of America's schools and churches.

The blast effect of this explosion on American culture in the single decade of television's passage from commercial experiment to social menace will remain a subject of independent study and controversy for years.

What concerns us here is politics and power; and the power of television to shape the American mind, concentrated, as it is, decisively in three commercial network offices in Manhattan, New York, has long perplexed the American Congress and its agent, the Federal Communications Commission. What perplexes Congress, fundamentally, is whether the hallowed doctrine of freedom of the press can responsibly be applied to the modern reality of American broadcasting. If, as Walter Lippman has pointed out, there were only three printing presses available to publish the written word for the entire country, then the concern of the nation with the management of those printing presses would probably transcend "freedom of the press" too. Thus, Congress and the FCC, down into the summer of 1960, had monotonously repeated their respect for television's freedom of expression, yet persistently restricted the power of the proprietors of TV to express this freedom politically. In essence, the regulations over our new communications system have permitted its proprietors any freedom of vulgarity, squalor or commercial profit—but little or no freedom of political expression.

These restrictions had, for years before 1960, liked the men who control and direct the great television and radio networks. However much they might be compelled to operate their companies as profit-making enterprises, they, too, were not only infected with the responsibility of American press tradition but also tantalized by the fantastic opportunities television offers for informing, educating and shaping the American mind. At its worst—which is common—television is one of the most squalid expressions of American culture; at its best—which is rare—it can achieve a breath-taking magnificence. Like most normal human beings, those who direct television yearned to show their best once their worst had made them rich.

In 1960 this yearning of the television networks to show their best was particularly acute. For the men who direct television are sensitive to public criticism; they wince and weep in public like adolescents at the

slightest touch of hostility in print—and in 1959 they had suffered the worst round of public criticism and contempt since their industry was founded. The shock of the "payola" scandals of 1959, the Congressional hearings on these scandals; the editorial indignation in the "Gutenbergs" media not only at these scandals but at the drenching of the air by violence, vulgarity and horse opera—all these had not only given the masters of television an inferiority complex but also frightened them with the prospect that the franchise on the air given to them so freely in return for their legal obligation of "public service" might be withdrawn, curtailed or abolished. It was a time for the "upgrading" of television; and the Presidential campaign of 1960 seemed to offer a fine opportunity for public service—if only Congress would relax those regulations and laws that had manacled and prevented television from doing its best.

Thus in the winter and spring of 1960 the networks, led by NBC and CBS, had pleaded with Congress that they be allowed to do their best, and had fastened, in public hearing and testimony, on the abolition of a technical passage of communications law called Section 315. Section 315, more generally known as the "equal time" rule, is that section of the law that requires every radio and television station when offering "free" time to any candidate to offer similar "free and equal" time to every other candidate for the same office. But as interpreted by the FCC (and particularly in the Lar Daly decision of 1959), it required broadcasting stations to offer equal time not only to candidates of the two major parties but to *every candidate of every party competing for the same office*. For 1960 it meant, in effect, that not only must the television networks offer time to the Republican and Democratic candidates but also to each of the tiny splinter parties that have always operated on the American scene. (In 1960 there were actually fourteen other candidates for the presidency besides John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon.<sup>1</sup>) The Lar Daly decision not only curtailed the offer of direct free time to candidates of the two major parties, but also sternly diminished television's previous freedom to offer the public reportorial coverage, press conferences, or discussions and visits with

<sup>1</sup>C. Benton Coiner (Conservative Party of Virginia), Merritt Curtis (Constitution Party), Lar Daly (Tax Cut Party), Dr. R. L. Decker (Prohibition Party), Farrell Dobbs (Socialist Workers Party, Farmer Labor Party of Iowa, Socialist Workers and Farmers Party, Utah), Orval E. Fambus (National States Rights Party), Symon Gould (American Vegetarian Party), Eric Hass (Socialist Labor Party, Industrial Government Party, Minn.), Glennon King (Afro-American Unity Party), Henry Krajewski (American Third Party), J. Bracken Lee (Conservative Party of N.J.), Whitney Harp Slocomb (Greenback Party), William Lloyd Smith (American Beat Consensus), Charles Sullivan (Constitution Party of Texas). This listing is taken from a statement of Frank Stanton, President of CBS, before the Senate Subcommittee on Communications on January 31, 1961.

anybody acknowledged to be a candidate. Hearings on the public plea of the broadcasting networks to abolish such restrictions were held in the spring; by May, bills were offered in Congress permitting a temporary suspension of Section 315 for the campaign of 1960 alone; on June 27th, Section 315 was officially suspended and the leash slipped on television's power of political participation.

It is important to understand why the debates of 1960 were to be different from previous political use of the medium.

Television had already demonstrated its primitive power in politics from, at least, the fall of 1952, when, in one broadcast, it had transformed Richard M. Nixon from a negative Vice-Presidential candidate, under attack, into a martyr and an asset to Dwight D. Eisenhower's Presidential campaign. But from 1952 until 1960 television could be used only as an expensive partisan instrument; its time had to be bought and paid for by political parties for their own candidates. The audiences such as partisan broadcasts assembled, like the audiences at political rallies, were audiences of the convinced—of convinced Republicans for Republican candidates, of convinced Democrats for Democratic candidates. Generally, the most effective political broadcast could assemble hardly more than half the audience of the commercial show that it replaced. This was why so many candidates and their television advisers sought two-minute or five-minute spots tacked on to the major programs that engaged the nation's fancy; the general audience would not tune out a hostile candidate if he appeared for only two or three minutes, and thus a candidate, using TV "spots" had a much better chance of reaching the members of the opposition party and the "independents," whom he must lure to listen to and then vote for him. The 1960 idea of a "debate," in which both major candidates would appear simultaneously, thus promised to bring both Democrats and Republicans together in the same viewing audience for the first time. Some optimists thought the debates would at least double the exposure of both candidates. How much more they would do than "double" the exposure no one, in the summer of 1960, dreamed.

The future was thus still obscure when the representatives of the two candidates and the spokesmen for the broadcasting networks first met at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York in September to discuss the conditions and circumstances of the meetings. By this time each of the two major networks had offered eight hours of free time to the campaign, and the third had offered three hours, for a total of nineteen hours of nationwide broadcasting, worth about \$2,000,000; they had also made it clear to the candidates that this was not "gift" time but time over which they, the networks, meant to exercise an editorial control to insure maximum viewing interest. Slowly, in discussion, the shape and form of the debates emerged—a controlled panel of four press inter-

locutors; no notes; dignity to be safeguarded; opening statements of eight minutes by each candidate in the first and last debates; two-and-one-half minute responses to questions. The Nixon negotiators fought to restrict the number of debates—their man, they felt, was the master of the form and one "sudden-death" debate could eliminate Kennedy with a roundhouse swing. They viewed the insistence of the Kennedy negotiators on the maximum possible number of debates as weakness. ("If they weren't scared," said one Nixon staffer, "why shouldn't they be willing to pin everything on one show?") The Kennedy negotiators insisted on at least five debates, then let themselves be whittled to four. ("Every time we get those two fellows on the screen side by side," said J. Leonard Reinsch, Kennedy's TV maestro, "we're going to gain and he's going to lose.")

By mid-September all had been arranged. There would be four debates—on September 26th, October 7th, October 13th and October 21st. The first would be produced by CBS out of Chicago, the second by NBC out of Washington, the third by ABC out of New York and Los Angeles and the fourth, again by ABC, out of New York.

In the event, when all was over, the audience exceeded the wildest fancies and claims of the television networks. Each individual broadcast averaged an audience set at a low of 65,000,000 and a high of 70,000,000. The greatest previous audience in television history had been for the climactic game of the 1959 World Series, when an estimated 90,000,000 Americans had tuned in to watch the White Sox play the Dodgers. When, finally, figures were assembled for all four debates, the total audience for the television debates on the Presidency exceeded even this figure.

All this, of course, was far in the future when, on Sunday, September 25th, 1960, John F. Kennedy arrived in Chicago from Cleveland, Ohio, to stay at the Ambassador East Hotel, and Richard M. Nixon came from Washington, D.C., to stop at the Pick-Congress Hotel, to prepare, each in his own way, for their confrontation.

Kennedy's preparation was marked by his typical attention to organization and his air of casual self-possession; the man behaves, in any crisis, as if it consisted only of a sequence of necessary things to be done that will become complicated if emotions intrude. His personal Brain Trust of three had arrived and assembled at the Knickerbocker Hotel in Chicago on Sunday, the day before. The chief of these three was, of course, Ted Sorensen; with Sorensen was Richard Goodwin, a twenty-eight-year-old lawyer, an elongated elfin man with a capacity for fact and reasoning that had made him Number One man only two years before at the Harvard Law School; and Mike Feldman, a burly

and impressive man, a one-time instructor of law at the University of Pennsylvania, later a highly successful businessman, who had abandoned business to follow Kennedy's star as Chief of the Senator's Legislative Research.<sup>2</sup> With them, they had brought the portable Kennedy campaign research library—a Sears Roebuck foot locker of documents—and now, for a twenty-four-hour session at the Knickerbocker Hotel, stretching around the clock, they operated like young men at college cramming for an exam. When they had finished, they had prepared fifteen pages of copy boiling down into twelve or thirteen subject areas the relevant facts and probable questions they thought the correspondents on the panel, or Mr. Nixon, might raise. All three had worked with Kennedy closely for years. They knew that as a member of the House and the Senate Committees on Labor he was fully familiar with all the issues that might arise on domestic policy (the subject of the first debate) and that it was necessary to fix in his mind, not the issues or understanding, but only the latest data.

Early on Monday they met the candidate in his suite for a morning session of questions and answers. The candidate read their suggestions for his opening eight-minute statement, disagreed, tossed their suggestions out, called his secretary, dictated another of his own; and then for four hours Kennedy and the Brain Trust considered together the Nixon position and the Kennedy position, with the accent constantly on fact: What was the latest rate of unemployment? What was steel production rate? What was the Nixon stand on this or that particular? The conversation, according to those present, was not only easy but rather comic and rambling, covering a vast number of issues entirely irrelevant to the debate. Shortly before one o'clock Goodwin and Feldman disappeared to a basement office in the Ambassador East to answer new questions the candidate had raised, and the candidate then had a gay lunch with Ted Sorensen, his brother Robert and public-opinion analyst Louis Harris. The candidate left shortly thereafter for a quick address to the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (which Nixon had addressed in the morning) and came back to his

<sup>2</sup> These three young men today still remain Kennedy's "personal" Brain Trust, as distinct from his "academic" Brain Trust (Schlesinger, Galbraith, Bundy, Rostow), or his "political" Brain Trust (O'Donnell, O'Brien, Donahue and Dungan). Although somewhat aloof with outsiders, this trio has a fey, intellectual quality that is quite captivating. They like to amuse themselves with double-dome guessing games too complicated to be readily described. On election day, for example, they tried for the first time the standard Question Game and found it quite easy. The Question Game is that game in which one person offers a phrase or a statement and the other players are summoned to imagine the question to which the statement replies. On their drive from Boston to Hyannisport on election day the trio played the game intensely and the best Answer-Question of their contest was "Nine-W." To what question is "Nine-W" the best response? Question? According to the trio, the best question to the answer, "Nine-W" is, "Do you spell your name with a V, Mr. Vagner?"

hotel room for a nap. About five o'clock he rose from his nap, quite refreshed, and assembled brother Robert, Sorensen, Harris, Goodwin and Feldman for another Harvard tutorial skull session.

Several who were present remember the performance as vividly as those who were present at the Hyannisport meeting in October, 1959. The candidate lay on his bed in a white, open-necked T shirt and army suntan pants, and fired questions at his intimates. He held in his hand the fact cards that Goodwin and Feldman had prepared for him during the afternoon, and as he finished each, he sent it spinning off the bed to the floor. Finally, at about 6:30, he rose from his bed and decided to have dinner. He ate what is called "a splendid dinner" all by himself in his room, then emerged in a white shirt and dark-gray suit, called for a stop watch and proceeded to the old converted sports arena that is now CBS Station WBBM at McClurg Court in Chicago, to face his rival for the Presidency of the United States.

Richard M. Nixon had preceded him to the studio. Nixon had spent the day in solitude, with no other companion but Mrs. Nixon, in his room at the Pick-Congress. The Vice-President was tired; the drive of campaigning in the previous two weeks had caused him to lose another five pounds since he had left the hospital; his TV advisers had urged that he arrive in Chicago on Saturday and have a full day of rest before he went on the air on Monday, but they had been unable to get through to him, and had not even been able to reach his press secretary, Herbert Klein. Mr. Nixon thus arrived in Chicago late on Sunday evening, unbriefed on the magnitude of the trial he was approaching; on Monday he spoke during the morning to the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, an appearance his TV advisers considered a misfortune—the Brotherhood was a hostile union audience, whose negative reaction, they knew, would psychologically disturb their contender.

When Nixon returned to his hotel from the Brotherhood appearance at 12:30, he became incommunicado while his frantic TV technicians tried to reach him or brief him on the setting of the debate, the staging, the problems he might encounter. The Vice-President received one long telephone call—from Henry Cabot Lodge, who, reportedly, urged him to be careful to erase the "assassin image" when he went on the air. For the rest, the Vice-President was alone, in consultation with his wife. Finally, as he emerged from the hotel to drive through Chicago traffic to the studio, one TV adviser was permitted to ride through him and hastily brief him in the ten-minute drive. The adviser urged that the Vice-President come out swinging—that this was a contest, a fight, and that Kennedy must be jolted at the first exchange. The Vice-President was of another mind, however, and wondered whether the

Kennedy -  
well bridged -  
Red

suggestion had originated with his adviser or with someone else, like Frank Stanton, President of CBS, who, said the Vice-President, only wanted a good show. Thus they arrived at the studio; as Nixon got out, he struck his knee again—a nasty crack—on the edge of the automobile door, just as he had on his first accident to the knee at Greensboro, North Carolina. An observer reports that his face went all “white-and-pasty” but that he quickly recovered and entered the studio.

Spokesmen of both candidates had been in consultation with Don Hewitt, CBS producer of the debates, from morning on.

Mr. Nixon's advisers and representatives, understandably nervous since they could not communicate with their principal, had made the best preparation they could. They had earlier requested that both candidates talk from a lectern, standing—and Kennedy had agreed. They had asked several days earlier that the two candidates be seated farther apart from each other than originally planned—and that had been agreed on too. Now, on the day of the debate, they paid meticulous attention to each detail. They were worried about the deep eye shadows in Nixon's face and they requested and adjusted two tiny spotlights (“inkies” in television parlance) to shine directly into his eye wells and illuminate the darkness there; they asked that a table be placed in front of the moderator, and this was agreed to also; they requested that no shots be taken of Nixon's left profile during the debate, and this was also agreed to.

The Kennedy advisers had no requests; they seemed as cocky and confident as their chief.

Nixon entered the studio about an hour before air time and inspected the setting, let himself be televised on an interior camera briefly for the inspection of his advisers, then paced moodily about in the back of the studio. He beckoned the producer to him at one point as he paced and asked as a personal favor that he not be on camera if he happened to be mopping sweat from his face. (That night, contrary to most reports, Nixon was wearing no theatrical make-up. In order to tone down his dark beard stubble on the screen, an adviser had applied only a light coating of “Lazy Shave,” a pancake make-up with which a man who has heavy afternoon beard growth may powder his face to conceal the growth.)

Senator Kennedy arrived about fifteen minutes after the Vice-President; he inspected the set; sat for the camera; and his advisers inspected him, then declared they were satisfied. The producer made a remark about the glare of the Senator's white shirt, and Kennedy sent an aide back to his hotel to bring back a blue one, into which he changed just before air time. The men took their seats, the tally lights

on the cameras blinked red to show they were live now.

“Good evening,” said Howard K. Smith, the gray and handsome moderator. “The television and radio stations of the United States . . . are proud to provide for a discussion of issues in the current political campaign by the two major candidates for the Presidency. The candidates need no introduction. . . .”

And they were on air, before seventy million Americans.

Rereading now the text of the first of the great debates (and of the following three also), one can find only a blurred echo of the emotions that rose from the performance, and the intense, immediate and dramatic impact of the debate on the fortunes of the two candidates.

This, the first of the debates, was committed to a discussion of domestic issues—an area in which the Democrats, by their philosophy and record, make larger promises and offer a more aggressive attitude to the future than the Republicans. Kennedy, opening, declared that the world could not endure half-slave and half-free, and that the posture of America in the world rested fundamentally on its posture at home—how we behaved to each other, what we did to move American society forward at home, this affected not only us, but the world too: “Can freedom be maintained under the most severe attack it has ever known? I think it can be. And I think in the final analysis it depends upon what we do here. I think it's time America started moving again.”

Nixon's opening statement, as it reads now in print, was one of good-willed difference: he agreed with Kennedy in all the goals Kennedy had outlined. He differed with Kennedy only in the methods to reach those goals. He lauded the progress made under the seven and a half years of the Eisenhower administration—hospitals, highways, electric power, gross national product, growth rate, were all moving at a rate, he said, never matched before in any administration.

The clue to what was happening can be remembered only in rereading the penultimate passage of Mr. Nixon's opening remarks: “The final point that I would like to make is this: Senator Kennedy has suggested in his speeches that we lack compassion for the poor, for the old, and for others that are unfortunate. . . . I know what it means to be poor. . . . I know that Senator Kennedy feels as deeply about these problems as I do, but our disagreement is not about the goals for America but only about the means to reach those goals.”

For Mr. Nixon was debating with Mr. Kennedy as if a board of judges were scoring points; he rebutted and refuted, as he went, the inconsistencies or errors of his opponent. Nixon was addressing himself to Kennedy—but Kennedy was addressing himself to the audience.



that was the nation. In these debates, before this audience, there could be no appeal to the past or to the origins of any ethnic group—there could only be an appeal, across the board, to all Americans and to the future. This across-the-board appeal to all Americans had been Mr. Nixon's basic strategy from the very beginning—a generalized pressure that would fragment the minorities coalition of the Democrats. Yet here, before the largest audience of Americans in history, Nixon was not addressing himself to his central theme; he was offering no vision of the future that the Republican Party might offer Americans—he was concerned with the cool and undisturbed man who sat across the platform from him, with the personal adversary in the studio, not with the mind of America.

Ten questions followed from the panel of television reporters who sat before the debaters: on the importance of a candidate's age; on the quality of decision in presidential affairs; on farms; on taxes; on schools; on congressional politics; on subversion; and on schools again. In each pair of answers, the same contrast repeated itself: the Senator from Massachusetts, ignoring the direct inquiry when it suited him, used each question as a springboard for an appeal to the mind and the imagination of the audience assembled before the countless sets. But the Vice-President's mind and attention were fixed there in the studio. As one rereads the text, one finds him, over and over again, scoring excellently against the personal adversary in the hall beside him, yet forgetful of the need to score on the mind of the nation he hoped to lead.

The defensive quality of Mr. Nixon's performance (evident from his first enunciation: "The things that Senator Kennedy has said many of us can agree with. . . . I can subscribe completely to the spirit that Senator Kennedy has expressed tonight, the spirit that the United States should move ahead. . . .") can still be reconstructed from the texts. What cannot be reconstructed is the visual impact of the first debate.

For it was the sight of the two men side by side that carried the punch. There was, first and above all, the crude, overwhelming impression that side by side the two seemed evenly matched—and this even matching in the popular imagination was for Kennedy a major victory. Until the cameras opened on the Senator and the Vice-President, Kennedy had been the boy under assault and attack by the Vice-President as immature, young, inexperienced. Now, obviously, in flesh and behavior he was the Vice-President's equal.

Not only that, but the contrast of the two faces was astounding. Normally and in private, Kennedy under tension flutters his hands—he adjusts his necktie, slaps his knee, strokes his face. Tonight he was calm and nerveless in appearance. The Vice-President, by contrast,

was tense, almost frightened, at turns glowering and, occasionally, haggard-looking to the point of sickness. Probably no picture in American politics tells a better story of crisis and episode than that famous shot of the camera on the Vice-President as he half slouched, his "Lazy Shave" powder faintly streaked with sweat, his eyes exaggerated hollows of blackness, his jaw, jowls, and face drooping with strain.

It is impossible to look again at the still photographs of Nixon in his ordeal and to recollect the circumstances without utmost sympathy. For everything that could have gone wrong that night went wrong. The Vice-President, to begin with, suffers from a handicap that is serious only on television—his is a light, naturally transparent skin. On a visual camera that takes pictures by optical projection this transparent skin photographs cleanly and well. But a television camera projects electronically, by an image-orthicon tube, which is a cousin of the x-ray tube; it seems to go beneath the skin, almost as the x-ray photograph does. On television, the camera on Nixon is usually held away from him, for in close-up, his transparent skin shows the finest hair growing in the skin follicles beneath the surface, even after he has just shaved. And for the night of the first debate, CBS, understandably zealous, had equipped its cameras with brand-new tubes for the most perfect projection possible—a perfection of projection that could only be harmful to the Vice-President. (In the later debates, Nixon was persuaded to wear theatrical make-up to repair the ravage TV's electronic tube makes of his countenance; but for this first debate he wore only "Lazy Shave.")

The scene of the debate, the studio of WBBM, had, further, been tense all day long, as furniture, desks, lecterns, background, had been rearranged and then rearranged again for best effect. Nixon's TV advisers had been told that the background would be gray-scale five, a relatively dark tone; therefore they had urged their principal to dress in a light-gray suit for contrast. Yet the backdrop, when they saw it, was so markedly lighter than they had anticipated that they insisted, rightly, it be repainted. Several times that day it was repainted—but each time the gray tone dried light. (The background indeed was still tacky to the touch when the two candidates went on the air.) Against this light background Nixon, in his light suit, faded into a fuzzed outline, while Kennedy in his dark suit had the crisp picture edge of contrast. The Nixon advisers had, further, adjusted all lighting to a master lighting scheme for their candidate before he went on the air; but in the last few minutes before the debate a horde of still photographers from newspapers and magazines were permitted on the set, and as they milled for their still pictures, they kicked over wires and displaced lights and television cameras from their marked positions.

There was, lastly, the fact that the Vice-President had still not

recovered from his illness, and was unrested from the exertions of his first two weeks of intense campaigning. His normal shirt hung loosely about his neck, and his recent weight loss made him appear scrawny. And, most of all, psychologically, his advisers now insist, he lacked the energy to project—for Nixon does best on television when he projects, when he can distract the attention of the viewer from his passive countenance to the theme or the message he wants to give forth, as in his famous "Checkers" appearance on television in 1952.

All this, however, was unknown then to the national audience. Those who heard the debates on radio, according to sample surveys, believed that the two candidates came off almost equal. Yet every survey of those who watched the debates on television indicated that the Vice-President had come off poorly and, in the opinion of many, very poorly. It was the picture image that had done it—and in 1960 television had won the nation away from sound to images, and that was that.

The Vice-President was later to recover from the impression he made in this first debate. But this first debate, the beginning of the contest, was, as in so many human affairs, half the whole. The second debate concerned itself with foreign policy and ranged from Cuba's Castro through the U-2 and espionage to the matter of America's declining prestige, and closed on the first sharp clash of the series—the defense of Quemoy and Matsu.

The third debate resumed, like a needle stuck in a phonograph groove, with the subject of Quemoy and Matsu, hung there almost indefinitely, then broke away with Nixon's stern disapproval of President Truman's bad language, and went on to other matters such as bigotry, labor unions and gold outflow. This, according to all sample surveys, was Nixon's best performance in terms of its impact on the audience. This was the debate in which Nixon spoke from Los Angeles while Kennedy spoke from New York, and it was as if, separated by a continent from the personal presence of his adversary, Nixon were more at ease and could speak directly to the nation that lay between them.

The fourth debate was the dreariest—both candidates had by now almost nothing new left to say, and they repeated themselves on all the matters they had covered in the three previous debates. Curiously enough, the audience which had been highest for the first debate and dropped off slightly for the second and third, returned on the last debate to almost match the total of the first.

No accurate political measurement or reasonable judgment is yet possible on a matter as vast as the TV debates of 1960. When they began, Nixon was generally viewed as being the probable winner of the

election contest and Kennedy as fighting an uphill battle; when they were over, the positions of the two contestants were reversed.

No reporter can claim any accuracy in charting the magic and mysterious flow of public opinion between the time a campaign starts and the ultimate tally of feelings at the polls; and so opinion seesawed back and forth for weeks, as it still seesaws back and forth now, long after the debates are over, as to what, specifically, the debates achieved in shaping the campaign and American opinion.

There were fragmentary and episodic achievements that no one could deny.

Any reporter who followed the Kennedy campaign remembers still the quantum jump in the size of crowds that greeted the campaigning Senator from the morrow of the first debate, the morning of Tuesday, September 27th, when he began to campaign in northern Ohio. His crowds had been growing for a full seven days before the debates, but now, overnight, they seethed with enthusiasm and multiplied in numbers, as if the sight of him, in their homes on the video box, had given him a "star quality" reserved only for television and movie idols.

Equally visible was the gloom that descended on Republican leaders around the country; they were angry with their own candidate, angry at his performance, angry most of all at his "me-too" debating style. At Nixon headquarters in Washington, the telephones rang incessantly, demanding that someone get to this "new Nixon" and convince him that only the "old Nixon" could win.

There were other measurable hard political results. On the evening of the first debate, the Democratic governors of the Southern states were gathered for one of their annual conferences at Hot Springs, Arkansas. Except for Governor Luther Hodges<sup>8</sup> of North Carolina, they had until then viewed Kennedy with a range of emotions that ran from resigned apathy to whispered hostility. Watching him on TV that night, they too were suddenly impressed. We do not know whose idea it was to send Kennedy the telegram of congratulations which ten of the eleven signed that evening—but the enthusiasm and excitement of the telegram was not only genuine but a tidemark in the campaign. The Southern governors were with him now; and if they were with him, it meant that the machinery of their political organizations would be with him, too.

It is much more difficult to measure the debates in terms of issues, of education of the American people to the tasks and problems before them. For there certainly were real differences of philosophy and ideas between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon—yet rarely in American history has there been a political campaign that discussed issues less or clarified them less.

<sup>8</sup> Now Secretary of Commerce.



The TV debates, in retrospect, were the greatest opportunity ever for such discussion, but it was an opportunity missed. It is difficult to blame the form of the debates for this entirely; yet the form and the compulsion of the medium must certainly have been contributory. The nature of both TV and radio is that they abhor silence and "dead time." All TV and radio discussion programs are compelled to snap question and answer back and forth as if the contestants were adversaries in an intellectual tennis match. Although every experienced newspaperman and inquirer knows that the most thoughtful and responsive answers to any difficult question come after long pause, and that the longer the pause the more illuminating the thought that follows it, nonetheless the electronic media cannot bear to suffer a pause of more than five seconds; a pause of thirty seconds of dead time on air seems interminable. Thus, snapping their two-and-a-half-minute answers back and forth, both candidates could only react for the cameras and the people, they could not think. And, since two and a half minutes permit only a snatch of naked thought and a spatter of raw facts, both candidates, whenever caught out on a limb with a thought too heavy for two-minute exploration, a thought seemingly too bold or fresh to be accepted by the conditioned American mind, hastily scuttled back toward center as soon as they had enunciated the thought. Thus Kennedy's response to the first question on Quemoy and Matsui was probably one of the sharpest and clearest responses to any question of the debates; in that response, actually, Kennedy was tentatively fingering at one of the supreme problems of American statecraft, our relation with the revolution in Asia. Yet he was out too far with such a thought for a two-minute response<sup>4</sup> and, in succeeding debates, in reply to succeeding questions, he fuzzed the distinction between his position and Nixon's until it was almost impossible to tell them apart.

If there was to be any forum for issues, the TV debates should have provided such a forum. Yet they did not: every conceivable problem was raised by the probing imagination of the veteran correspondents who questioned the candidates. But all problems were answered in two-minute snatches, either with certain facts or with safe convictions. Neither man could pause to indulge in the slow reflection and rumination, the slow questioning of alternatives before decision, that is the inner quality of leadership.

If, then, the TV debates did little to advance the reasonable

<sup>4</sup>For a full development of this two-minute answer, one had to wait for days, until Kennedy's extraordinarily lucid half-hour speech on Quemoy and Matsui in New York on Columbus Day, October 12th. That speech was heard only by a local audience, and its full text was reprinted, so far as I know, in only three newspapers in the country. It was as fine a campaign discussion of an issue of national importance as this correspondent can remember—yet its impact on the nation was nil.

discussion of issues that is the dream of unblooded political scientists, what did they do?

What they did best was to give the voters of a great democracy a living portrait of two men under stress and let the voters decide, by instinct and emotion, which style and pattern of behavior under stress they preferred in their leader. The political roots of this tribal sense of the whole go as far back as the Roman Senate, or the beer-blown assemblies of the Teutonic tribes that Tacitus describes in his chronicles. This sense of personal choice of leader has been missing for centuries from modern civilization—or else limited to such conclaves of deputized spokesmen of the whole as a meeting of Tammany Hall captains, a gathering of Communist barons in the Kremlin or the dinners of leaders of the English Establishment in the clubs of London. What the TV debates did was to generalize this tribal sense of participation, this emotional judgment of the leader, from the few to the multitude—for the salient fact of the great TV debates is not what the two candidates said, nor how they behaved, but how many of the candidates' fellow Americans gave up their evening hours to ponder the choice between the two.

There are many measures of the numbers of Americans who viewed the debates. The low measure is that of Dr. George Gallup, America's most experienced pollster, who sets the figure of Americans who viewed one or all of the debates at 85,000,000. The two most extensive surveys of audience were those made by NBC and CBS, the two great television networks. Their independent measures of the audience are so close that they must be taken seriously: NBC has estimated from its surveys that 115,000,000 Americans viewed one or all of the great debates; CBS has estimated the number at 120,000,000. With or without issues, no larger assembly of human beings, their minds focused on one problem, has ever happened in history.

Even more significant than the numbers who viewed the debates was the penetration upon them of the personalities of the candidates; and on the effect of this penetration the public-opinion samplers were unanimous.

There are any number of such surveys. The best localized survey (and that most respected by Nixon's television advisors) was performed in New York by a research-testing firm called Schwein Research Corporation. The Schwein Research Corporation, which operates a studio on Manhattan's West Side with scientifically selected audiences of three to four hundred people from the New York metropolitan area, is considered by some Madison Avenue experts as the best television-testing operation in the entire range of consumer-goods advertising. Testing each debate in turn before its audiences, the Schwein analysts reported that Kennedy outscored Nixon by 39 to 23 (balance un-

decided) in the first debate; by 44 to 28 in the second debate; lost to Nixon by 42 to 39 in the third debate (in which the contestants were separated physically by the space of the continent); and came back to win by 52 to 27 in the last debate.

The measurements of Dr. George Gallup coincide. After the first debate, 43 per cent of his respondents considered Kennedy to have been the best man, 23 per cent Nixon, 29 per cent considered them to have come off even, and 5 per cent were undecided. After the last debate Kennedy was held by 42 per cent to have won, Nixon to have won by 30 per cent, while 23 per cent considered the men even and 5 per cent were undecided.

There is, finally, the most extensive survey, that conducted for CBS by Dr. Elmo Roper. Sampling across the country, Dr. Roper estimated for CBS that 57 per cent of those who voted believed that the TV debates had influenced their decisions. Another 6 per cent, or over 4,000,000 voters (by this sample), ascribed their final decision on voting to the debates alone. Of these 4,000,000 voters, 26 per cent (or 1,000,000) voted for Nixon, and 72 per cent (or almost 3,000,000) voted for Kennedy. If these extrapolations are true, then 2,000,000 of the Kennedy margin came from television's impact on the American mind—and since Kennedy won by only 112,000 votes, he was entirely justified in stating on the Monday following election, November 12th: "It was TV more than anything else that turned the tide."

There is a politicians' rule of thumb, particularly hallowed by Democratic politicians, that no election campaign starts until the World Series is over. A campaign, according to them, begins only when the men at the bar stop arguing about the pitchers and batters and start arguing about the candidates. It was 3:45 in the afternoon of Friday, October 13th, 1960, when Bill Mazeroski, second baseman for the Pittsburgh Pirates, in the last half of the ninth swung deep and low into the second pitch and slammed it over the left-field fence for a home run, ending the game with a 10-to-9 win and the series with a 4-to-3 victory for the Pirates—their first World Series pennant since 1925.

Mazeroski had clubbed his homer at 3:45. At 6:45, the television cameras told of Mr. Khrushchev's farewell to America and the United Nations and showed him pounding his shoe in anger on the table. For twenty-five days the rotund chief of the Russians had made camp on New York's Park Avenue and had made sport at the United Nations. He had chuffed and puffed, hustled and busted, and succeeded in distracting a disproportionate amount of American attention from the serious business of choosing a President to his own meaningless but threatening presence. Now, as he announced that he was leaving in the

evening, Khrushchev let it be known without bluster that he was suspending his colloquy with America over the destiny of the human race until the Americans should have chosen a new leader. Whether or not he had watched the two rivals for America's leadership during their great debates, no one knows.

At 7:30, Eastern Daylight Time, that same day, the cohorts, flaks, servants and press corps of John F. Kennedy gathered in the barnlike studios of ABC in New York while those of Richard M. Nixon gathered in the Hollywood studios of the same company for their third debate. When they had finished at 8:30, with Kennedy proceeding to Illinois and Nixon staying to campaign in California, the last round of the campaign was about to begin. There was only one more debate to go—on the 21st. But now, finally, there were no other distractions—neither the World Series nor Mr. Khrushchev nor Mr. Castro—to divert the American mind from choice of the man who should lead them.

There were but three and a half weeks more to election day. It was up to Mr. Nixon now, who knew himself to be behind (the Gallup Poll read: 49 per cent Kennedy, 46 per cent Nixon and 5 per cent undecided) to bring his campaign to "peak," to prove what he could do.