

Demystifying The Great Debates: What Really Happened in the Kennedy-Nixon  
Presidential Debates of 1960

by  
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## **Abstract**

The first televised presidential debates between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon took place between September 26<sup>th</sup> and October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1960. The mythos surrounding the debates has become clouded over time through embellishment and selective memory. The first debate has gone down in history as a significant political blunder and the remaining three debates are often ignored. The research consults debate preparation papers from the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum archives, the John F Kennedy Library and Museum archives, and the Albert Gore Research Center at Middle Tennessee State University. The preparation papers will be compared to the actual text of the debates in order to explore what was really said and what mistakes were truly made.

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Chapter 2.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Chapter 3.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Chapter 4.....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>48</b>

## **Introduction**

Four political debates took place on national television between September 26th and October 21st of 1960. The two candidates, John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon, debated head-to-head live on national television. This event marked the beginning of televised national politics and was a turning point in the political prioritization of image in political campaigns.

Many argue that John F. Kennedy was the clear winner of these revolutionary debates, especially the first. Generally revered as young and handsome, Kennedy had a leg up on the 47-year-old Nixon who had taken no break from his rigorous 50-state campaign schedule, despite having just recovered from a stent in the hospital from an infected wound on his knee. Much embellishment ran through the minutes leading up to the first debate on September 26th of 1960, including hostile glances between candidates and deception surrounding who would be wearing makeup. At 9:30pm Eastern Standard Time, the two candidates appeared before a national television audience of about 75 million people (Farrell, 2017, p. 283), making history as the first presidential candidates to appear together on live television.

They would do this thrice more on October 7th, 13th, and 21st. As stated by Quincy Howe, moderator of the fourth debate, they had “. . . used a new means of communication to pioneer a new type of political debate” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). Because of popular opinion holding, even 60 years later, that Kennedy won and Nixon made a fool of himself in the first debate, a deeper look at the content of the first debate is usually sacrificed and the results of the other three debates are often

overlooked. Although viewership waned, masterful knowledge and tact was shown by both candidates throughout the debates, particularly in the area of foreign affairs.

Due to the passage of time and rapid pace of change in the world, viewers of the debates today may struggle to see why they were so important. Modern political debates owe much of their roots to the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, which was a series of seven debates across the state of Illinois. Unlike the debates of 1960 and the presidential debates of today, the Lincoln-Douglas debates were held before in-person audiences and were neither recorded nor filmed. Surviving transcriptions of the debates are based on firsthand and newspaper accounts. By the time the 1960 debates happened, 88 percent of American households had a television set (Farrell, 2017, p. 283). The proportion of people who could be reached by a single political address had exploded. Both candidates, but especially Nixon, failed to understand how much this changed the political game. Because of the razor thin margins of the final vote on November 8, 1960, some attribute Nixon's loss to his performance in the debates. However, the fault may lie with the fact that he engaged in the debates in the first place. Kennedy was generally thought to be inexperienced, and by debating him, Nixon allowed Kennedy to meet him as an equal and gave him a great opportunity to prove his knowledge (Donaldson, 2007, p. 112).

Senator Albert Gore Sr. was the leader of a secondary unofficial campaign research team that met regularly throughout Kennedy's campaign. Senator Fulbright of Arkansas was also part of this preparation team. This group was separate from Kennedy's official debate preparation team and they presumably never worked together. Throughout the research, primary sources from these two groups will be noted as being separate from each other and as having not been crossed referenced in their creation.

Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy were balanced in their presidential debates in 1960 and no clear intellectual winner emerged from the event. The debates served less as a test of knowledge and more as political publicity and the forging of a political tradition.

Primary sources from the debate preparation team for Nixon were collected from the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum archives. Primary sources from the main debate preparation team for Kennedy were collected from the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum archives. Additional primary debate preparation materials from Kennedy's secondary debate preparation group led by Albert Gore Sr. were collected from Middle Tennessee State University's Albert Gore Research Center.

## **Chapter 1**

The most notorious of the Kennedy-Nixon debates of 1960 was the first one. Seventy-five million Americans tuned in on the night of September 26, 1960. Howard K Smith of WBBM-TV in Chicago introduced the candidates along with their parties and offices. He then explained the rules of the debate, stating that each man had the opportunity to give an opening statement that would be eight minutes in length. The candidates would then answer questions put to them by a panel of correspondents and conclude with closing statements of approximately three minutes. The panelists included: Sander Vanocur of NBC, Charles Warren of Mutual, Stuart Novins of CBS, and Bob Fleming of ABC.

Kennedy's opening statement lasted seven minutes and thirteen seconds. The John F. Kennedy Library and Museum archives hold two early drafts of the opening statement of this first debate. The first was written by Thomas B. Morgan of the Kennedy Writers Group. This draft clearly was not intended to be a completed proposal for the speech as it barely reaches the length of two pages, but it is interesting to examine the points it made and which attributes made it into the final speech. Morgan took a more combative stance in this draft than can be seen in the final speech. He began by highlighting Nixon's party affiliation and describing the "cross-country" debate that they had been carrying on up until that point in the campaign. Morgan refers to Nixon as "the Republican candidate" before moving on to speak about broader issues, having never called him by name. He quoted Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Harry Truman while talking about moral leadership and the choice voters have for president. The fourth paragraph of the draft is a list of hard-hitting points:

In Oregon, we have talked about dam building. In Georgia, we have talked about integration. In Minnesota, we have talked about farm prices. Almost everywhere, we have talked about the cold war. (Papers of John F. Kennedy. Pre-Presidential Papers. Presidential Campaign Files, 1960)

In the actual opening statement he gave on September 26, Kennedy referenced hydropower, civil rights, and the Soviet Union, which are approximations of these original points. It is worth noting the recurrence of the subject of the cold war and the Soviet Union. The first debate was supposed to be confined to domestic topics, but those two subjects appeared many times throughout all four debates. The cold war was a huge issue on the minds of American citizens at the time and everyone wanted to know how the next president would approach the issue and uphold the security of the United States.

In the final speech, Kennedy also referenced Lincoln and Roosevelt. Kennedy only referenced Nixon in the very beginning of his speech as a formality. After stating simply, “Mr. Smith, Mr. Nixon,” Kennedy launched directly into his speech: “In the election of 1860...” After those first four words, he never mentioned Nixon or even his own candidacy. In his book *Kennedy & Nixon: The Rivalry That Shaped Postwar America*, Chris Matthews (1996) pointed out that by calling his opponent “Mr. Nixon” rather than his proper title of “Vice President,” Kennedy “slyly” delivered the insult of placing a two-term Vice President and a newscaster on the same level (p. 150). He made no promises of what he would do as president and instead lumped himself in with the average people who were watching the debate. He used the pronouns “we” and “us” throughout the speech. It is possible that Kennedy was doing this to relate to the average

citizen and convince them to overlook the wealth and status of his family. Overall, Kennedy's opening statement looked more like an excerpt from a generic campaign speech than the beginning of a debate.

What seems to be a later draft of the opening statement can be found in the John F. Kennedy Library archives. It began less articulately than the final product that the nation heard by saying, "I want to speak tonight about the central issue we confront in our domestic affairs." This draft directly addressed the official subject for the first debate at the very beginning, unlike the final speech that barely mentioned the topic and then dove straight into international affairs within the first four sentences. More so than the other draft, this one encapsulated some of the main ideas that made it to the final draft, including strength and forward movement. Where the final speech did not touch on it, this draft placed leadership at the center of its argument. Additionally, this draft referenced Roosevelt and Lincoln, but not in the same capacities that the final speech did. Also, unlike the final draft, this one made several references to Kennedy's opponent, acknowledging the fact that this is the opening statement of a debate the same way that Morgan's draft did.

Overall, these two drafts of Kennedy's opening statement show part of the creation process for his speech. References to past great presidents clearly remained important between drafts as the writers worked to craft the story that Kennedy would tell with this speech. Having been criticized as young and inexperienced, Kennedy destroyed those accusations with his opening statement and responses throughout the debate. On a physical presentation level, Kennedy made eye contact with the camera, used minimal hand and head movement, and wore a dark suit that contrasted with the light gray

background. He presented himself well as an experienced senator and a worthy candidate for the presidency.

Nixon's opening statement lasted just over eight minutes and it was in these eight minutes that his initial bad impression was made on the American people in the debates. Two early drafts of this opening speech survive in the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum archives. Unlike the final speech, the first draft began with a wider perspective: "The decade of the 60's presents the greatest challenge our country has ever known. We must not enter it with any sense of complacency or self-satisfaction" (Richard Nixon Presidential Library Archives, Campaign 1960. Presidential Debates). This would be an interesting statement from the candidate who was effectively arguing for the status quo. By the end of the first page, the draft both quoted Kennedy and agreed with him, not setting it apart much from the final speech that was given. The draft then went on to make several "you" statements toward Kennedy, referencing things the senator talked about in various addresses, and explicitly agreeing with him again on a matter regarding the Primer of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, who would be a huge topic of discussion in the later debates. Finally, this draft provided a list of things that the Eisenhower administration had made progress in, and it is unclear whether the writer meant for these points to remain in list form or be fleshed out in a later draft. Although it responded to and agreed with Kennedy much like the final speech did, this draft came off stronger and more combative than its eventual counterpart. This might have something to do with the advice of Attorney General William Rogers and Henry Cabot Lodge, who both told Nixon to "be the good guy" and "erase the assassin image" (Matthews, 1996, p. 147).

Nixon was notorious for being a tough debater and campaigner. He destroyed Jerry Voorhis in 1946 during a candidates' forum that defined their congressional race (Farrell, 2017, p. 35). Although no official debate took place, Nixon ran a dirty campaign against Helen Douglas for Senate in 1950 and earned himself the reputation of being a tricky politician (Farrell, 2017, p. 156). Americans expected these same tactics from Nixon in the campaign of 1960, but they did not really get them, especially not in the debates. For some unclear reason, Nixon chose to be *nice*.

The second of these two drafts seemed to be somewhat more complete and was printed on a document that also included notes on "Economic progress in America" and keywords for Republican talking points. Unlike the other draft and the final speech, this draft did not refer to Kennedy at all. It made some allusions to the values of the Democratic party, for example, "Methods that encourage [the citizens'] dependence on government are wrong, for increasing dependence by a people upon government is not a sign of strength – it is a sign of weakness" (Richard Nixon Presidential Library Archives, Campaign 1960. Presidential Debates). It focused on the Republican platform and encouraged party loyalty by saying things like "*our* Republican program [emphasis added]" and expressing concern for the Republican individual. It seems that this draft was written earlier, written by a different person, or was the result of a request for a completely different approach to the speech. The inclusion of a section on economic growth in this document suggests the idea that those preparing for the debate intended for Nixon to capitalize on the subject in his opening statement and questions throughout the debate. The purpose of this would be to highlight that the Eisenhower administration, which Nixon was part of, had promoted growth in America.

In the final speech, Nixon said very little about economic progress in America. It is unknown at what point this version of the opening statement was dropped and exchanged for the reactive version that Nixon gave in the end. The opening statement that Nixon gave at the debate sounded more like a formal debate opening of the negative side, arguing for the status quo, in response to the side of the affirmative. Although Nixon had formal debate experience, he should have realized that this debate was nothing like that. This debate was about politics. This debate was about issues and presentation. There would be no points given; the verdict was up to the 75 million people watching, very few of whom cared about formal debate technique in the slightest.

In nearly every book about Nixon and the presidential campaign of 1960, authors focus on the candidates' appearances in the first debate. It is true that Kennedy's suit was darker and therefore stood out better against the light gray background. It is true that Nixon can be seen sweating and subjectively looks underweight due to his recent hospital stay. Kennedy is notoriously one of the most physically attractive candidates for presidential office, but after examining just these opening statements and their progressions through the drafting stage, the public's verdict was not entirely or even mostly based on what could be seen on the television screen. Kennedy simply gave a better opening statement. He sounded presidential whereas Nixon sounded like a follower. Kennedy presented his position, hardly ever glancing at his opponent. Nixon nearly stumbled over himself to agree with Kennedy on everything except the "*means* to reach [their] goals [emphasis added]" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). This tiny detail of where the candidates, according to Nixon, disagreed was insignificant. Why vote for Nixon when his policies and goals sound nearly identical to Kennedy's? Nixon

may have scored every point in a formal debate, but he scored few points with the American people.

The very first question in the debate was for Kennedy and concerned the argument of experience and maturity. Kennedy gave a decent answer, pointing out that he and Nixon went to Congress at the same time in 1946 and argued that they had the same amount of experience. This effectively placed fourteen years of legislative experience on the same level as fourteen years of legislative and vice presidential experience combined. Kennedy then went on to compare their parties' records. Although the response was fine, there was an opening for Nixon to detail how the vice presidency better prepared him for the presidency than Kennedy's experience in Congress.

Instead, Nixon said, "I have no comment." This was the biggest mistake that Nixon made in the first debate and viewers quickly picked up on it. Nixon's opening statement had its flaws, and it would have been better for him to agree with Kennedy less, but this choice not to comment on the first question highlighted Nixon's attitude of deference more than anything else. It is unclear why Nixon chose not to comment because both candidates commented on every single question thereafter. Perhaps he was nervous or thinking about the advice of Attorney General William Rogers and his running mate Henry Cabot Lodge about backing off the tough debater image. Even though Nixon mostly got back on his game throughout the rest of the debate, he never shook the consequences of his choices in those first several minutes.

Stuart Novins gave Nixon an opportunity to elaborate when he asked the second question of the night:

Mr. Vice President, your campaign stresses the value of your eight year experience, and the question arises as to whether that experience was as an observer or as a participant or as an initiator of policy making. Would you tell us please specifically what major proposals you have made in the last eight years that have been adopted by the Administration? (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020)

Since Nixon chose not to comment on the previous question, this one gave him the perfect opportunity to expand upon his executive experience. Although he stuttered some, Nixon listed areas in which he gave suggestions in the Eisenhower Administration, largely in foreign policy. He stated that he “strongly recommended that we increase our exchange programs...” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). This mention of exchange programs connected Nixon to his experience in foreign policy, bringing attention to the amount of travel he has been asked to do as Vice President. This gave him an advantage over Kennedy because the president had personally sent him on specific diplomatic missions abroad and Nixon had taken full advantage of the experiences, doing and learning as much as he could.

Kennedy’s response was a little jumbled, but he made some strong points against Nixon’s answer. He stated that Nixon’s figures in his opening statement about the Truman Administration were “unsatisfactory.” He responded to Nixon’s comment about the advances of the Committee on Price Stability and Economic Growth, saying “I’m not aware that that committee did produce recommendations that ever were certainly before the Congress...” He also stated a point that contradicted the statement Nixon made about foreign exchange programs, “I am chairman of the subcommittee on Africa and I think

that one of the most unfortunate phases of our policy towards that country was the very minute number of exchanges that we had” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). This put it up to the American people to decide who was lying about their facts and which man spoke with more authority on the issue. Overall, this question and its responses was a good demonstration of how the rest of the debates were going to go, unlike the opening statement and first question.

The third question of the first debate was the only one of all four events that addressed farmers. Questioner Charles Warren explained that many people do not understand why the government pays farmers for their surplus, compared them to auto manufacturers, and mentioned that presidential candidates tend to make promises to farmers. He asked, “why can’t the farmer operate like the business man who operates a factory? … Why this constant courting of the farmer?” Kennedy’s debate preparation team predicted a question of this type. Their prediction was, “Why do you continually emphasize the importance of the “family farm”?” (Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. Presidential Campaign Files, 1960). Although the pre-written answer to this question had little overlap with the answer Kennedy gave in the debate, they both conveyed Kennedy’s understanding of agriculture and the influence it had on the economy. He succinctly explained why the government had to intervene with the farming market and then went on to explain the difference between the agriculture industry and the automobile industry. He also took the opportunity to comment on his disapproval of the current farming policy and stated that “Mr. Benson’s program has failed.” Ezra Taft Benson was the United States Secretary of Agriculture under President Eisenhower, making this an attack on the Eisenhower administration. The debate preparation teams of

both candidates mentioned Benson multiple times in their papers, but he was hardly brought up in the debates at all.

On the same document that predicted that Kennedy would be asked a farming question, his debate team listed a question under “Questions that might be fed to the press to ask Nixon” that stated, “Why didn’t you say one single word against Benson or Benson’s policies during the 7½ years before you received your party’s nomination for President?” (Papers of John F. Kennedy. Pre-Presidential Papers. Presidential Campaign Files, 1960). So, Kennedy’s inclusion of a direct attack on Benson might have been a tactic to goad Nixon into engaging in that discourse. It remains unknown whether that question was fed to the press because it was never asked in the debates.

Nixon did not mention Benson at all in his response. His first sentence was used to establish that he disagreed with Kennedy – the first time he had done this clearly in the debate. He expressed that America did not need to move in the direction of more governmental controls for farmers as Kennedy had suggested. He further answered Warren’s question, stated that the government still needed to help the farmer with surpluses, and argued that Kennedy’s suggestions would raise prices. Overall, it was a quality response that avoided some potential pitfalls.

Sander Vanocur brought the conversation back to the question of experience, quoting President Eisenhower from a few weeks before on the question of how Nixon contributed to the Administration: “If you give me a week, I might think of [an example]. I don’t remember” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). Vanocur pitted Eisenhower’s statement against the claims of the Republican party’s campaign that Nixon’s experience was important. Nixon handled this question well, saying,

Well, I would suggest, Mr. Vanocur, that if you know the President, that was probably a facetious remark. I would also suggest that insofar as his statement is concerned, that I think it would be improper for the President of the United States to disclose the instances in which members of his official family had made recommendations, as I have made them through the years to him, which he has accepted or rejected... The President has asked for my advice. I have given it. Sometimes my advice has been taken. Sometimes it has not. (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020)

Of all his answers up until this point, this one was the best from Nixon. It made light of a comment that could have caused a lot of trouble for him. He was careful not to go against the president and set a precedent for how he would conduct himself as president. Kennedy's response held no bite; he talked about vague ideals that the president needed to hold and how unclear the road to the presidency is. The latter subject was an attempt to point out that a person did not need to be vice president before becoming president.

It must be noted that this questioning of experience was predicted by Nixon's campaign team. Their phrasing of it was this: "In what respects do you believe that your experience is better than Senator Kennedy's for the Presidency?" (Richard Nixon Presidential Library Archives, Campaign 1960. Presidential Debates). It is unclear when this list of predicted questions was made or if Nixon ever even saw them. Allegedly, one of the members of his campaign was instructed to brief him in the car on the way to the studio (Farrell 2017, p. 284). However, this issue was well known, and even without preparation, Nixon would have seen this question coming.

The next question from Stuart Novins was directed toward Kennedy and seemed to hit on a point that the senator was rearing to answer, as he interrupted the end of the interviewer's question and continued to interrupt him for several moments while trying to defend his position. The issue of the federal debt and the Democratic platform's method of paying for their programs was a recurring one throughout the debates and it made its debut in this question. Novins asked how, if elected, Kennedy would pay for the welfare programs he promised to expand while reducing the federal debt. The candidate jumped in at the end of Novins' question, interrupting him to say, "I did not advocate reducing the federal debt..." (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). He got in several sentences before Novins cut in to try and finish his question and they had an awkward back and forth until the question had been stated in full and Kennedy launched into his response. He outlined the programs that he wanted to expand and explained how they would be paid for, including medical care for the aged and the development of natural resources. He talked about increasing teachers' salaries but did not note where that money would come from. One of Kennedy's biggest defenses of Democratic spending was that he would maintain a balanced budget except in extenuating circumstances.

Nixon's response pointed out inconsistencies between the Democratic platform and Kennedy's positions. He claimed that Kennedy's and the Democratic Party's programs would raise taxes. Although he did not talk about his own plans to remedy these issues, Nixon's reply was relatively effective.

In another question partially predicted by Nixon's debate team, Warren asked about teachers' salaries and the nuances of the candidates' positions on who should be the steward of that funding. This question brought Nixon and Kennedy into more combative

positions than most of the others. They discussed the differences between giving the states money to give to teachers and the money coming from the federal government. Of all the positions the two candidates were on opposite sides of, this one best explained Nixon's declaration in his opening statement about agreement on the goals and disagreement on the means. Both men agreed that teachers' salaries needed to be raised, but they disagreed on the means, as Nixon had argued in his opening statement. Conrad Black (2007) states in *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full*, "The candidates repeated their positions on a number of issues, Kennedy generally favoring government action to remedy all problems, and Nixon favoring the same ends but through the private sector, incentivized, if necessary, by the federal government" (p. 409). Even though Nixon was right in what he said in his opening statement, it was not what the American people wanted to hear. In politics, catering to the people matters more than the truth.

The debaters went on to talk about working with a congress that had their party's majority versus working with a congress that did not. There were two questions to this effect where Kennedy and Nixon went back and forth about bills and votes. The final two questions were about communists in the United States and the building and financing of schools. All questions and responses were solid with no major blunders.

In his concluding statement, Nixon spent some time on communism in response to the second to last question. This tangent highlighted his willingness to discuss communism and its effects in later debates. In that part of his speech, Nixon talked about the growth of the Soviet Union in comparison with the growth of the United States. However, he did not use a statement written in the debate preparation papers that suggested poking at Kennedy's wealth in an example talking about Soviet growth

(Richard Nixon Presidential Library Archives, Campaign 1960. Presidential Debates). He went back over several points brought up throughout the debate, tactfully excluding the question of experience. Thankfully, his conclusion had a stronger ending: “But it is also essential that [the president] not allow a dollar spent that could be better spent by the people themselves” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). Although there was no way to recover his appearance in this first debate, he at least somewhat recovered his position.

Kennedy’s closing statement also responded to the question of the Soviet Union. He got into the specifics of the Kerr bill on Social Security and other matters brought up in the debate. He reiterated that the past eight years had been stagnant under Eisenhower and that he wanted America to move ahead. He finished with a moving statement about the cause of freedom. Howard Smith concluded the first debate with little fanfare.

After leaving the debate, Nixon was informed by staff and friends that “he had spoken well but looked sick” (Black, 2007, p. 409). Black argued in his biography that television viewers gave Kennedy the win, but only by a slight margin, while radio listeners gave it to Nixon. He said that Henry Cabot Lodge, Nixon’s running mate, said “That son-of-a-bitch just lost us the election” (2007, p. 409). Though Black argued that it was not the debate that lost Nixon the election, it sounds like Lodge was right. John Farrell (2017), author of *Richard Nixon: A Life*, argued with Lodge and against Black, stating that the debates helped only Kennedy and that the margin by which he won was not narrow at all.

In *Richard Nixon: Rhetorical Strategist*, Hal W Bochin (1990) attempted to put the radio listeners versus television viewers conversation to rest. He suggested that the

legend of radio listeners believing that Nixon won and television viewers believing that Kennedy won came from a poll done soon after the debate that was problematic and inaccurately portrayed the beliefs of the listeners. He stated that problems permeated the study's methods (p. 50). Therefore, there is no reason to believe that the claim is accurate, and it is more likely that Kennedy was perceived as the winner by the majority of viewers and listeners.

This first debate overshadows the remaining three in history. Although Nixon partially redeemed himself throughout the second half of the debate, in examining all the facts and angles, a narrow victory must go to Kennedy.

## **Chapter 2**

The second debate of the series took place on October 7, 1960, in Washington D.C. at NBC studios. In many ways, it looked much different from the first debate. Nixon had made sure to wear a darker suit that fit better, and he prepared more this time around (Matthews, 1996, p. 158). Instead of focusing only on domestic issues, the second debate opened questions to any issue of the campaign. The candidates' campaign teams and the news networks had agreed that the second and third debates would not include opening or closing statements, which gave the middle two debates an odd quality of feeling like they were in the middle of a conversation with no resolution at the end of each hour-long program. However, they fit well overall between the first and last debates. This debate had 20 million less viewers than the first, which went against the theory of Nixon's staff that debate viewers would increase in number throughout the series. Although they retained a large viewership, none of the other debates reached the viewership of the first (Bochin, 1990, p. 50). The reporters were Paul Niven of CBS, Edward Morgan of ABC, Alvin Spivak of United Press International, and Harold Levy of Newsday. The moderator was Frank McGee of NBC.

This debate felt more like a debate. The candidates carried a back-and-forth rapport and the reporters occasionally asked follow-up questions rather than immediately shifting to a new topic. As was seen in the first debate, both the candidates and the reporters were itching to discuss foreign policy, so in this debate with no specified topic, the first two questions pertained to foreign relations with a balance of domestic and foreign issues throughout.

Paul Niven asked the first question of Nixon about the validity of the claims that the Eisenhower Administration should take responsibility for the loss of Cuba and that

the Truman Administration should take responsibility for the loss of China to communism. Nixon's preparation team predicted this question. Their version was simply, "Why did the Eisenhower Administration lose Cuba?" (Richard Nixon Presidential Library Archives, Campaign 1960. Presidential Debates). Niven's question did not make such a direct accusation but allowed room for comparison and nuance. Nixon's response was longer than the one written for him, and he did not use any of the pre-written information. The proposed answer blamed Roosevelt for the loss of Cuba, saying that it was lost in the 1930s. Nixon's response in the debate began with, "I don't agree with Senator Kennedy that Cuba is lost" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). He went on to defend his actions when visiting Cuba and stated that those in Cuba who wanted freedom would "rise up" and take it. It would have supported his points to use the last sentence in the pre-written response: "If elected, I propose that American economic assistance shall be linked to progressive programs for human betterment and social reform" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). It is difficult to know whether Nixon ever actually read those pre-written question responses. Nixon allegedly prepared more for this debate due to his performance in the first, so it is more likely that he saw some of the preparation material.

From the beginning of this second debate, the tone was set up to be more combative. Kennedy's very first response of the hour began with "In the first place I've never suggested that Cuba was lost except for the present" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). It was somewhat defensive, but it answered Nixon's accusation and gave Kennedy room to explain himself. He detailed his criticisms of Nixon's actions in Cuba and the choices of the Eisenhower Administration in the matter. In the face of debating

the Vice President who went to Cuba in the name of the United States for negotiations, Kennedy demonstrated his knowledge well and managed to step up and match him.

The next question asked the candidates to address the nuanced issue of the U-2 flight that was shot down by the Soviet Union and how the President should have responded. Their responses touched on the summit conference of May 1960 between the United States and the Soviet Union, which came up again later in the debate. Questions in these debates asking for the candidates' opinions on something Eisenhower or his Administration did struck an interesting tone that more objective questions did not. Questions like this put Nixon on the defensive because he was part of the Eisenhower Administration. They allowed Kennedy to be mostly on the attack from a place of easy criticism as it was much easier for him to argue against the status quo.

Kennedy argued that the United States was acting outside the law by flying reconnaissance missions over the Soviet Union and therefore the President should have "expressed regrets" to Khrushchev. He gave several examples of times when the United States apologized to other countries, saying that it "is the accepted procedure between nations..." (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). To strengthen this point, Kennedy quoted Theodore Roosevelt on being strong and speaking softly. He claimed that expressing regrets could have possibly kept the summit conference going.

In Albert Gore Sr's papers, there is a record from the Library of Congress of instances of the United States expressing regrets to other countries. It can be presumed that Gore or someone in his debate preparation group sent for these records. The examples of the United States expressing regrets were these: to Japan for nuclear testing damage (1955), to the Soviet Union for a wayward "Jet Flight" (1958), and to Cuba for a

plane wrecked in their territory (1960) (Albert Gore Research Center, Albert Gore Senate Papers, 1960). In his response, Kennedy mentioned the above apology of 1958 and an apology made to Castro. He also mentioned two instances of other countries expressing regrets to the United States. Kennedy used some of the proposed response to this question written by Gore and his team, but not all.

On the other hand, Nixon began by saying that “[Kennedy] is wrong in even suggesting that Mr. Khrushchev might have continued the conference if we had expressed regrets” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). He also said that Kennedy’s analogies did not apply because the United States had essentially not been doing anything wrong because the U-2 flights were being done for the purpose of security. Nixon’s driving point was that gathering intelligence was essential and that neither he nor any president should apologize for actions that ensure the security of the United States.

This question clearly illustrated some fundamental differences between the two candidates and how they would go about governing. The discussion of the Chinese islands of Quemoy and Matsu would demonstrate this same difference in the last two debates. Kennedy, in theory, would be quicker to apologize, negotiate, and look to history. Nixon, as this response demonstrated, would be more likely to defend, stand his ground, and push limits.

Nixon’s debate preparation team partially predicted several questions in this debate, the first of which was about civil rights. The predicted question was, “When you [Nixon] were in the South you spoke of civil rights but in such general terms as to be playing down your Republican platform. Is this not so?” (Richard Nixon Presidential Library Archives, Campaign 1960 Collection Presidential Debate Preparations). Alvin

Spivak's question brought in Kennedy and prompted the candidates to place blame. "Mr. Vice President, you have accused Senator Kennedy of avoiding the civil rights issue when he has been in the South and he has accused you of the same thing. With both North and South listening and watching, would you sum up your own intentions in the field of civil rights if you become president" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). The difference in the pre-written answer and Nixon's actual answer to these questions is interesting. The response written for the predicted question is as follows:

I speak of civil rights the same in the South as in the North. I am most interested that, to the best of my knowledge, my opponent has not mentioned civil rights in any of his Southern stops.... I have not spoken in more or less detail on civil rights in the South than in the North. I have made it clear that this is a national problem and that its international significance for us is very great. (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020)

Nixon's response in the live debate was longer and more detailed. He outlined several areas that specifically needed progress in the area of civil rights, including employment and education. He did still hit the point that he believed the issue of civil rights was important for everyone, not just the South. However, he did not claim that he had spoken of civil rights the same everywhere the way that the pre-written response did. Nixon did not take such a direct jab at Kennedy in claiming that he had not talked about civil rights in the South, but he did call for both the presidential candidates and the vice-presidential candidates – with a callout for Senator Johnson by name– to talk about civil rights “at

every opportunity” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). Nixon also mentioned the sit-in strikes which would be brought up more specifically in the next question.

Rather than defending himself, Kennedy went on the attack in his response. He accused Nixon of ignoring the Brown vs. Board of Education decision, Title Three, and fair employment practices. He stated that “Sixty to seventy percent of our colored children do not finish high school.” To avoid the accusation that he did not address these issues himself, he tacked on at the end, “Those are the questions to which the president must establish a moral tone and moral leadership. And I can assure you that if I’m elected president we will do so” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). Although Nixon pointed to Kennedy’s running mate to try and call him on the issue, Kennedy successfully gave concrete examples of Nixon’s own transgressions on civil rights.

The next question allowed him to elaborate somewhat by asking what the president can do specifically on the issue of civil rights, namely in respect to events like “Little Rock or the lunch-counter sit-ins.” Kennedy responded by saying that the president is responsible for legislative, executive, non-discriminatory, and moral leadership. In answering the issue of Little Rock specifically, he said, “I would have hoped that the president of the United States would have been possible for him to indicate it clearly that the Supreme Court decision was going to be carried out. I would have hoped that it would have been possible to use marshals to do so” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). This was another example of how Kennedy had the opportunity to criticize as an observer where Nixon had to take some responsibility.

Nixon approached his response the same way Kennedy responded to him in the last question. He pointed to Kennedy’s running mate, Lyndon Johnson, who had opposed

civil rights, to show that Kennedy was not practicing what he was preaching. Also like Kennedy's previous response, he tacked on a sentence at the end supporting his own position. Nixon was fortunate in that he did not have to answer the question that his debate preparation team predicted on this subject. "Were you involved in the decision to send the 82nd Airborne Division to Little Rock, Arkansas to police the integration of the high school there? Did you protest this action in any way?" (Richard Nixon Presidential Library Archives, Campaign 1960 Collection Presidential Debate Preparations). No pre-written response to this question is evident, so perhaps the parties involved were hoping this question would not be asked.

Another question predicted by Nixon's team was on the subject of Nixon admonishing Kennedy for criticizing America when Khrushchev was in the country. The predicted question was more brutal, bringing up the issue of limiting free speech and political thought control. The actual question compared Kennedy criticizing America to the situation Nixon was in in 1952 when he was running as Eisenhower's vice-presidential candidate during the Korean War. Nixon claimed that he did not criticize the Korean War itself, but the policies necessary to wage that war. He then moved on to Kennedy's position that American foreign policy had led to failure. He effectively answered the question with the response,

I think he [Kennedy] has a perfect right and a responsibility to criticize this Administration whenever he thinks we're wrong. But he has a responsibility to be accurate, and not to misstate the case.... I think this is very harmful at a time Mr. Khrushchev is here... (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020)

The pre-written response on this subject stated most of these ideas similarly, including two sentences that could have been used to great effect in the live debate:

I made the point that such a negative, downgrading approach to America was particularly suspect when this nation's arch-enemy is in our country. I have been pleased to note, especially in our first TV debate, that the Senator has begun to recognize the strengths of America in this critical moment. (Richard Nixon Presidential Library Archives, Campaign 1960 Collection Presidential Debate Preparations)

Overall, the language used in the pre-written question responses was often stronger, leaning more towards the old-Nixon image of a tough and brutal debater. It is unclear whether this was simply the writing style of the preparation team or if they were under the impression that Nixon would be fulfilling his harsh debate reputation.

The final question fell to Nixon about party labels, prompting the candidates with the blatant question at the end of Harold Levy's statement, "Why do you say that party labels are not important?" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). Essentially, Nixon said that the party label does not really matter because there have been great presidents from both sides of the aisle. "It isn't the label that he wears or that I wear that counts. It's what we are. It's our whole lives. It's what we stand for. It's what we believe" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). He urged voters to put America first rather than a political party. Unfortunately, Nixon fell again into his ploy of agreeing with Kennedy's motives and urging his opponent to do the same. He ended his statement with "I'm sure he believes just as deeply that his [programs] will move [forward]. I suggest, however, that in the interest of fairness that he could give me the benefit of also

believing as he believes” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). Right at the end of the second debate, Nixon ruined himself again with this sentiment. Members of the Republican Party who expected him to be a tough debater in these programs would roll their eyes again, if they had even chosen to watch the second debate after Nixon's performance in the first. It is almost comical that “Tricky Dick” Nixon, the dirty and brutal politician, would argue for fairness.

Kennedy began his response by directly disagreeing with Nixon. “Well, let me say I do think that parties are important in that they tell something about the program and something about the man” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). He explained what the two parties stood for, building up Democratic programs and tearing down Republican elected officials and programs. He said, “[The parties] do stand for something. They stand for a whole different approach to the problems facing this country at home and abroad” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). Kennedy made good use of the fact that he was given the last word of the debate. Nixon could not answer anything he said in the moment, and it would be the thing that remained in the minds of viewers.

Although Nixon made a stronger performance in the second debate than the first, Kennedy still held his own and it was shown to be an even match. Both candidates demonstrated their knowledge in the areas covered and neither came off as unprepared. For all intents and purposes, this debate was a tie between the two candidates. These meetings were not making Kennedy seem young or inexperienced as Nixon and his campaign team had hoped.

## **Chapter 3**

The format of the third debate would look very familiar to Americans today, including younger generations who were born long after the debates of 1960. The third debate was held in split screen format with the candidates debating from opposite sides of the country. There was no Zoom in 1960, but they made it work. On October 13, 1960, Kennedy and Nixon debated while 3,000 miles apart. The questioners were Frank McGee of NBC News, Charles Von Fremd of CBS News, Douglass Cater of Reporter Magazine, and Roscoe Drummond of the New York Herald Tribune. They were in the studio with moderator Bill Shadel. Nixon was in a separate studio in Los Angeles and Kennedy was in a studio in New York. The topic was open to the questioners for foreign and domestic policy.

The topic that took over this debate was that of the Chinese islands of Quemoy and Matsu. It was mentioned in the previous debates, but four questions directly addressed it in this one, foreshadowing the huge topic of foreign policy in the final debate. Frank McGee kicked it off by quoting Kennedy in calling Nixon “trigger-happy.” He connected this with the possibility of a crisis in Berlin and asked Kennedy if he would act if Berlin was attacked.

Kennedy gave a relatively short answer, only acknowledging the Berlin portion of the question. He said, “the United States must meet its commitment on Berlin” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020), meaning that he would fulfill that duty as president. He said nothing about Quemoy and Matsu. Nixon, on the other hand, had to defend himself, saying, “The statement that Senator Kennedy made was... that my stand on Quemoy and Matsu was an indication of trigger-happy Republicans. I resent that comment” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). He went on to talk about the

record of the Democratic party in the last fifty years, saying that no Republican presidents had led the United States into war, while Democratic presidents had. He closed out his response by indicating that he would also defend Berlin as president.

The next question more intimately dealt with Quemoy and Matsu, asking Nixon what he would do as president if the islands were invaded suddenly and whether he would engage the use of nuclear weapons. Nixon handled this question very well, saying, “it would be completely irresponsible for a candidate for the presidency, or for a president himself, to indicate the course of action and the weapons he would use in the event of such an attack” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). This statement virtually locked Kennedy out of answering the question, had he wanted to. Nixon went on to say that he would only engage if the attack seemed to be a prelude to an attack on Formosa, the island that the United States was bound to protect by treaty. He compared the hypothetical scenario to the case of Berlin, connecting his response to the previous question. He reiterated again that surrendering the islands “is not something that would lead to peace” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020), which summarized his previous statements on his stance on the defense of Quemoy and Matsu. Additionally, Nixon tactfully mentioned his high level in the current presidential administration when he said, “I’ve often heard President Eisenhower in discussing this question...” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). Overall, Nixon’s response to his first question of the debate stands as one of his best from the series. This trend would continue as Nixon seemed to have debated his best when he was not in the same room with Kennedy.

Kennedy also reiterated his position on this issue, explaining that he voted on the treaty in 1955 and knew very well where the treaty line was drawn. He agreed that the commitment to Formosa must be met, but he stated the fact that the agreement did not include Quemoy and Matsu. He quoted the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Green, and military commander Admiral Yarnell as saying that no American lives should be lost over the two islands. Therefore, he refused to commit to defending the islands. He concluded by saying, “This is a serious issue, and I think we ought to understand completely if we disagree, and if so, where” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). This final sentence summed up exactly how narrow the difference in the candidates’ opinions were. Nixon believed that Quemoy and Matsu should be defended if the attack seemed to be a precursor to an attack on the treaty-protected Formosa. Kennedy believed that only Formosa should be defended in the event of an attack because Quemoy and Matsu were outside the treaty lines. In the end, the issue never came to pass, and the islands were left alone soon enough afterwards (Norris, 2010). However, Kennedy’s position on the issue indicated that he harbored more hesitancy toward engaging in potentially explosive confrontation, no matter who would have been right if the islands were attacked while either man was president. Because this was such a hot-button issue in the debate, it makes sense that both candidates were thoroughly prepared to debate this topic. This was not the end of it. The next question pertained to the opportunity for another summit conference and the following question returned to Quemoy and Matsu.

The fifth question of the debate allowed the candidates somewhat of a breather as it pertained to a rude statement by former President Harry Truman. Mr. Fremd asked:

Senator Thruston Morton [of Kentucky], declared earlier this week that you owed Vice President Nixon and the Republican party a public apology for some strong charges made by former President Harry Truman, who bluntly suggested where the Vice President and the Republican party could go. Do you feel that you owe the Vice President an apology? (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020)

Although there were much fewer “gotcha” style questions in these debates than there seem to be in more modern debates, this was one of them. Kennedy responded civilly and seriously, contributing the comment to Truman’s age and speaking style. He did not address the idea of apologizing to anyone, especially Nixon. He added a note of humor by saying that perhaps Mrs. Truman could change Mr. Truman’s style of speaking. This response to a humorous or crass statement by a previous president contrasted with the way Nixon answered a similar question about what Eisenhower said in respect to the Vice President’s contributions to the administration. In the first debate, Nixon took a different approach than the one Kennedy took here. Although they both made light of the comments, Nixon smiled and laughed where Kennedy remained stoic. It is unclear why Kennedy’s disposition did not seem to go along with his humor; this could have been due to nerves or the quick shift from more serious topics. One might wonder whether the candidates were thinking about how their own comments would probably be made light of in the same way in the future.

Nixon took the opportunity to speak when asked about his response to the question and Kennedy’s answer. Rather than reenforcing Senator Morton in asking for an apology, Nixon chose to relate to Kennedy by saying, “both Senator Kennedy and I have felt Mr. Truman’s ire” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). He went on to talk

about the importance of “dignity and decency” in the presidential office and the way that Eisenhower had restored it. It was not a completely hypocritical statement in light of his response to the question about Eisenhower’s comment in the first debate, but it was a change of tune on the part of Nixon. Evidently, it can be difficult to grapple with the voice and reputation of past presidents.

The candidates repeated their stances on Quemoy and Matsu in their responses to the next question before moving on to Roscoe Drummond’s question about the involvement of the Klu Klux Klan in the election. It was asked of Kennedy, but the driving point of it was really for Nixon, mainly due to the quote Drummond gave of Representative Adam Clayton Powell,

The Klu Klux Klan is riding again in this campaign. If it doesn’t stop, all bigots will vote for Nixon and all right-thinking Christians and Jews will vote for Kennedy rather than be found in the ranks of the Klan-minded (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020).

For the first time in the debates, a question involved the issue of religion, if only barely. Religion was a huge issue in the presidential campaign of 1960 because Kennedy was the first Catholic to successfully run for presidential office. Drummond’s and Powell’s implication that “*all* right-thinking Christians and Jews [emphasis added]” would vote for Kennedy in any event was a precarious claim. In his response, Kennedy vehemently objected to the idea that he had ever stated that Nixon had ever had “the slightest sympathy, involvement, or in any way imply any inferences in regard to the Klu Klux Klan” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). He even referenced, “this whole matter that’s been involved with the so-called religious discussion in this

campaign” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). Kennedy did not want to “sling mud” on this issue and took the high route of respecting Nixon in this.

For once, Nixon’s agreement with Kennedy was the best option. His response began, “Well I welcome this opportunity to join Senator Kennedy completely on that statement” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). He stated that the nation needed the best man as president and that religion had nothing to do with it. He completely rejected the Klan and the controversy of the religious issue before he closed it out with a few rousing sentences about believing in America. They both performed well in their responses to this question and shut out the Klu Klux Klan from national politics.

Nixon’s debate team prepared for the religious issue to be brought up (Richard Nixon Presidential Library Archives, Campaign 1960 Collection Presidential Debate Preparations), but this was the only question that mentioned it at all. It was a big problem in the campaign, as evidenced by the numerous letters sent by constituents that are preserved in Middle Tennessee State University’s Albert Gore Research Center, but many voters’ concerns were alleviated in September before the debates began when Kennedy gave a speech addressing it (Unite for America). As a result, it was not brought up in the debates.

Frank McGee asked the next question on what the next president could do about the power of labor unions. Nixon began by stating that he was “planning a speech on that subject next week” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). He stated that he disagreed with Kennedy on what tools the president should use when getting involved in labor strikes. His argument was, in summation, that the president should get involved as

little as possible and that the parties involved in the strike needed to figure it out between themselves for the best outcome.

Kennedy started his response with the line, “Well, I always have difficulty recognizing my positions when they’re stated by the Vice President” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). He went on to clarify some of the nuances of his actual position on this issue. In the end, they basically had the same stance on the issue, with Kennedy giving only a few more details about his plan.

The next question by Roscoe Drummond tried to trap Nixon in his obligation to defend the Eisenhower Administration. He stated that the Republican platform and notable Republican politician, Nelson Rockefeller, had been claiming that the nation needed to “quicken economic growth.” He asked if it was fair to, “conclude that you feel there has been insufficient economic growth during the past eight years; and if so, what would you do beyond present administration policies to step it up?” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). Nixon gave a well-rounded answer to this question without mentioning the Eisenhower administration at all. He indicated that he believed that even if America was growing well enough, it needed to continue improving. He outlined new plans for taxation, civil rights, and higher education. Taking a shot at Kennedy, he said, “America has not been standing still.... Anybody who says America’s been standing still for the last seven and a half years hasn’t been traveling around America” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). It was one of Nixon’s most fully developed answers in the debates. Kennedy used his response to correct information that he felt was misstated earlier in the debates and he pointed out some areas where Nixon had voted against growth in the Senate.

The last two questions of the debate involved discussions of the integrity of the American dollar and American prestige. The candidates re-hashed their arguments from earlier discussions of this nature, particularly the discussion of prestige. Because of the small amount of time left, the debate was ended after the thirteenth question and moderator Bill Shadel spent some time re-stating the previously agreed upon rules. He closed with this, "... the fourth in the series of these historic joint appearances, scheduled for Friday, October twenty-first. At that time the candidates will again share the same platform to discuss foreign policy" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). This reminded viewers that the last debate would focus specifically on the long-awaited subject of foreign affairs.

It was clear that because of the split-screen nature of this debate, Nixon had been more confident (Donaldson, 2007, p. 122). He did not have to be in the room with Kennedy and he spoke directly to the camera and to the American people. It was Nixon's best debate performance and it showed that Kennedy's presence had been making him nervous. This is the only debate that most analyses state definitively that Nixon won, although both candidates put up solid performances in studios across the country from each other. A program ahead of its time, this third debate set the stage for the candidates' final major confrontation of the campaign.

## Chapter 4

Few sources detail the events of the fourth debate. As Gary Donaldson (2007) states in *The First Modern Campaign: Kennedy, Nixon, and the Election of 1960*, “It was the least interesting of the four, generally a rehashing of the others” (p. 123). It was to focus solely on foreign policy, which was known to be Nixon’s strength, though Kennedy had shown that he was plenty versed in the subject as well throughout the previous three debates. Quincy Howe was the moderator, and the questioners were Frank Singiser of Mutual News, John Edwards of ABC news, Walter Cronkite of CBS News, and John Chancellor of NBC News. The broadcast was only 18 days before votes would be cast. Unlike today, candidates and their campaign teams would not have to worry about early voting. It would all come down to one day.

Like the first debate, this one had opening and closing statements with the candidates going in the opposite order than they did in the first debate. Both candidates’ openings were right at eight minutes in length. Nixon began by talking about his 50-state campaign strategy and how he had spoken with citizens from across the country. He addressed several foreign policy issues that had already been discussed in the debates in anticipation that they would be brought up again. Although he mentioned Kennedy a few times, he did not spend much time agreeing with his points or arguing with him. Demonstrating his experience as Vice President, he talked about several diplomatic trips he had been sent on and executive decisions that he had a hand in. Overall, he simply argued against Communism and for freedom.

Kennedy began his opening statement by “correcting” the record on Quemoy and Matsu. He outlined the Formosa resolution of 1955, which he voted for in the Senate, and stated that he was for the position of the Eisenhower administration. The position was

that the chief concern was to protect the island of Formosa and the Pescadores as agreed upon in the Formosa resolution. If Quemoy and Matsu were involved in a direct attack on the land within the treaty arrangement, then he would protect them. If not, then they would be left alone. This was the clearest explanation either of the candidates had given on this issue thus far, but somehow it would still be brought back up. Kennedy again reiterated the importance of prestige and that it had been declining in the United States. He demonstrated literacy in many United States foreign policy issues, although he had less experience to claim than Nixon. Generally, he called for more to be done and, of course, indicated himself as the man to do the job.

A list of suggestions for this debate developed by Albert Gore Sr. and his preparation group is assumed to have made it into Senator Kennedy's hands. Their very first suggestion was, "Stare at Nixon. This makes him nervous. He was at his best when 3000 miles away" (Albert Gore Research Center, Albert Gore Senate Papers, 1960). The analysis that the third debate was Nixon's best was not baseless and Gore wanted Kennedy to use that to his advantage. In a few cutaway shots from Nixon when he was speaking at given times in the debate, Kennedy can be seen looking at Nixon more than he did in the first two debates. Some other suggestions included "Try to simplify, or clarify answers somewhat" and "Don't call Nixon a liar, but be quick to point out inconsistencies. But be sure own position is clear and unequivocal first" (Albert Gore Research Center, Albert Gore Senate Papers, 1960). It seems that Kennedy did take the advice. Although he did not necessarily simplify answers, he did seem to pay more attention to ensuring that his positions were clear. In respect to the last suggestion, Kennedy was quick to call out inconsistencies. He did not, however, address his own

position first. Kenedy can be seen in some of his responses jumping quickly onto refuting Nixon rather than clarifying his own position.

The first question pertained to how each candidate would handle the Castro regime in Cuba. They both pronounced different plans to put pressure on Castro economically. Although it was a big issue at the time of the debates, ultimately neither candidate accomplished much in their terms as president. Castro was still in power in 2006, long after both Kennedy and Nixon were dead (Britannica). There would be an estimated 42 assassination attempts on him by the Kennedy administration and 184 by Nixon's administration (Brown, 2016). Therefore, the nuances of Nixon's and Kennedy's disagreement on this problem were moot. Predicted questions and answers on Cuba can be found in the Nixon debate preparation files. Some involve the accusation that although Kennedy went to Cuba, he did not meet any high-level officials and that he made an error in claiming that "Cuba is gone" (Richard Nixon Presidential Library Archives, Campaign 1960 Collection Presidential Debate Preparations). Some of these points were used earlier in the debates, but none were used in response to this question.

The next question asked both candidates to name who they might select as secretary of state if they were elected. Both men declined to answer, instead saying that it would be dangerous and unwise to name anyone before the election. Nixon used his remaining time to talk more about Eisenhower programs in Latin America, pulling the conversation back to foreign affairs.

Walter Cronkite took a nice shot at Nixon by asking about Kennedy's claim that there was a supposedly suppressed United States Information Agency report that "shows a decline in United States prestige overseas." Nixon's response began with this odd

statement, “I naturally am aware of it, because I, of course, pay attention to everything Senator Kennedy says.” He claimed that the report “was made many, many months ago and related particularly to the period immediately after Sputnik” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). Nixon would have been referring to the Soviet line of space launches that were given the name “Sputnik.” He probably meant Sputnik 3 specifically, a satellite launched by the Soviet Academy of Sciences. It had been in orbit from May 15, 1958 to April 6, 1960 (NASA, 2023). This sheds light on the candidates’ other mentions of Soviet space innovations as they directly correlated to American prestige. Space exploration was exciting to the general public, and it would have been easy for citizens to see Soviet success in that area and American failure. By pointing out that the survey was conducted soon after Sputnik 3, Nixon acknowledged that Soviet success was causing American prestige to recede. He then said, “I would have no objection to having it made public” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). He claimed that the level of prestige abroad was determined by the “spokesmen” of America, and because Kennedy had been talking down on America, prestige could decline. He gave an exaggerated list of all the things Kennedy had talked down about, from slums to education.

Kennedy naturally defended himself, saying first, “I really don’t need Mr. Nixon to tell me about what my responsibilities are as a citizen” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). Then, for the first and only time in the debates, Kennedy addressed Nixon directly, “What I downgrade, Mr. Nixon, is the leadership the country is getting” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). Kennedy looked at him as he said this, tone earnest and somewhat defensive. He refuted the claims that Nixon had said he made, specifically pointing out that it was clear that the United States was not first in space

exploration. This related back to the idea that the launch and success of Sputnik 3 and previous Soviet satellite projects had reduced American prestige and that people saw the Soviet Union succeeding and America failing.

The next question brought up an issue that would have been at the forefront of many American citizens' minds: nuclear weapons. John Chancellor asked Kennedy if, in light of evidence that Russia had started nuclear testing again, the United States would also resume testing or if there were any other circumstances under which the United States might begin testing again. Kennedy began by saying that the United States should make one more effort to agree on the termination of nuclear testing. If that was not possible, he said that he wanted to put a stop to atmospheric testing, but regardless he expressed worry for more countries acquiring the technology. He said, "...we're going to move through a period of hazard in the next few years" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020), which demonstrated an overall positive, but cautious outlook.

Nixon's response was generally in agreement. He stated that, "... we have been negotiating to get tests inspected..." (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). This identified him with the current administration, demonstrating that he already had one foot in the door on the issue. He contributed his own theory that the Soviets were "filibustering" on the testing issue. This showed that he had spent time thinking on the problem and could be innovative and original in his plans moving forward. He gave a clear timetable, stating, "I think that the next president immediately after this election should sit down with the President [Eisenhower], work out a timetable, and get a decision on this before January of next year," (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). This gave the impression of immediate action and decisiveness.

John Edward's next question returned to the idea of another summit conference. Both candidates re-stated their positions and plans for this. As summarized by Nixon, "Well the conditions I laid out in one of our previous television debates, and it's rather difficult to be much more specific than that" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). Kennedy did manage to get slightly more specific. He gave four subjects that he would want the Soviet Union to agree to discuss with the purpose of coming to a compromise before the conference: disarmament, Berlin, space innovation, and nuclear testing. He also stated that the United States should build up its strength in the meantime.

Quemoy and Matsu were then brought up one last time. John Chancellor asked for clarification on why the issue continued to be revisited even though both candidates had said they agreed with the position of President Eisenhower. Nixon started out strong by saying that Kennedy's position was, in his view, a "fundamental error." He claimed that Kennedy's position was confusing and that he was contradicting himself. He said that if Kennedy admitted that he was wrong previously and explained his current position, then the issue could be dropped from the campaign. The camera even panned to Kennedy smiling and laughing to himself at this statement. This made a huge opening for Kennedy to refute and defend himself.

All Kennedy had to do was re-state what he had said in his opening statement. Both of his mentions of Quemoy and Matsu in this debate seemed to have followed Senator Gore's advice. On his list of debate suggestions for October 21, Gore and his debate preparation team had said,

If Quemoy and Matsu come up again, state support of Eisenhower and Formosa Resolution –this has always been your position, ect– Point out

that if reckless course of belligerent is to be pursued, denying any possibility of easing tensions, urgency is lent to necessity for speedy defense buildup. Give fairly short answer and conclude by saying that you think the public has realized Nixon has altered his original position to coincide with Administration's as expressed in Formosa Resolution.

(Albert Gore Research Center, Albert Gore Senate Papers, 1960)

Kennedy did state his support of the Formosa Resolution, saying that he was very familiar with the United States' position as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He did not comment on Nixon's "reckless course," but he detailed very well the history of the situation and established once and for all his position that the islands were not within the bounds of the treaty and that military professionals had agreed that Quemoy and Matsu were indefensible. Following the suggested course, he did point out that it was Nixon who had changed his position from whole-heartedly defending the islands to agreeing with the Eisenhower Administration's position. He concluded with his own charge, challenging Nixon to, "deny that the Administration has sent at least several missions to persuade Chiang Kai-shek's withdrawal from these islands" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). Kennedy's challenge went unanswered.

In his closing statement, Kennedy used a note from the aforementioned list by Senator Gore and his team. They suggested, "State some [statistics] which are down, such as steel, industrial production, heavy construction –all related to defense and therefore to foreign affairs" (Albert Gore Research Center, Albert Gore Senate Papers, 1960). What Kennedy said was, "We're using about fifty percent of our steel capacity today" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). He had also used more statistics throughout

this debate than he had in previous ones. He reiterated that America must get moving again and that the Republican party had been standing still. He also commented again on communism and freedom. At the end, he quoted Franklin Roosevelt on the American “rendezvous with destiny.” All in all, a solid closing statement.

Nixon’s closing statement was also middle-of-the-road. He directly contradicted Kennedy, emphasizing that America had not been standing still. He mentioned education, civil rights, and the military. He used the statistic that he has used before about the number of dictators in the world and the Eisenhower Administration’s removal of eight of them. There was one direct correlation to be found between this speech and a document from his debate preparation team. There was a list of points created for incorporation into the debates and it is unclear at what point the documents would have reached Nixon. One sentence of “Point No. 17” is as follows: “Say that you will carry forward programs, building on the Eisenhower Record, to keep America first militarily, first economically, first in leadership of the free nations, first in space, first in education (underlines replicate pencil markings on the original document)” (Richard Nixon Presidential Library Archives, Campaign 1960 Collection Presidential Debate Preparations). In his closing statement, Nixon said, “Because we are first in the world in space, as I’ve indicated; we are first in science; we are first in education, and we’re going to move even further ahead with the kind of leadership that we can provide in these years ahead” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). This is one of the closest examples of one of the candidates pulling words directly from their preparation notes. Nixon hit every point in the pre-written sentence and delivered it well. He concluded with, “See that the young people of America, particularly, have faith in the ideals of freedom and

faith in God, which distinguishes us from the atheistic materialists who oppose us” (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). This finished out the series of debates on a resounding note of the “us vs. them” logic of the cold war: the United States vs. the Soviet Union and democracy vs. communism.

This debate, just like all the others, did not have a runaway winner or an obvious loser. It can be declared as a tie, although the case for one or the other of the candidates as the winner is arguable. Quincey Howe closed out with this statement,

As members of a new political generation, Vice President Nixon and Senator Kennedy have used new means of communication to pioneer a new type of political debate. The character and courage with which these two men have spoken sets a high standard for generations to come. Surely, they have set a new precedent. Perhaps they have established a new tradition. (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020)

With the debates over, it was up to the American people to decide who would be their next president. Much like all four debates, it was extremely close. As history knows, John F. Kennedy took the narrow victory.

## Conclusion

Some say that these four televised presidential debates were the defining factor of the outcome of the election of 1960. Although they may not have been the only factor, they were extremely important for that election and every United States presidential election that has come after. Lyndon Johnson declined to debate Barry Goldwater in 1964. Richard Nixon declined to debate Hubert Humphrey in 1968 and George McGovern in 1972. It was not until 1976, between Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, that the American people got another televised debate from their candidates for president (The American Presidency Project).

No more than three debates have been held between candidates for president in a single campaign after 1960 (The American Presidency Project). Apparently, candidates and their campaign teams agree that four debates are too many. In light of this, it is interesting that Kennedy and his team wanted to have a fifth debate in 1960. It seems that they wanted a debate closer to election day, especially because Kennedy was perceived to be doing very well in the debates. He had little to lose and a lot to gain. It was even mentioned on Senator Gore's list of notes for the fourth debate, "Renew debate challenge for week before election" (Commission on Presidential Debates, 2020). In a press release given by Kennedy on October 17, he said, "I have been informed that Mr. Nixon has run down the idea of holding a fifth debate. I wanted this debate. The networks were willing to give time for this debate. The American people wanted this debate. Only Mr. Nixon stands in the way" (Papers of John F. Kennedy. Pre-Presidential Papers. Presidential Campaign Files, 1960). Two other releases from October 19th and 20th held a similar sentiment. There is a copy of a telegram from Kennedy to Nixon thanking him for accepting a fifth debate dated October 23rd, but it seems that Nixon thereafter changed

his mind, or the scheduling fell through. No further information could be found on this correspondence.

The legend surrounding the first debate is mostly a myth. The simple factors affecting Nixon's appearance that day were his recent hospital stay and a lack of rest. Kennedy did not necessarily look or sound leagues better than his opponent. Although there are things that Nixon could have changed in order to do better in the first debate, he did not fail as miserably as history remembers. Whatever effect the debates were going to have on the election were going to happen whether Nixon had worn makeup or not. Kennedy had everything to gain, and Nixon had everything to lose. Kennedy's performance in the first debate established him as mature and experienced, which likely would have been the result even if Nixon had been at his best. However, the lasting impression of Nixon looking sweaty, nervous, and pale in the first debate made him conscious of his appearance on television throughout the rest of his political career. Candidates after him were not soon to forget his mistake. It was after that first debate that the world began to understand how important image is to political popularity.

Even though Nixon did not spend much time preparing for the first debate, it seems that he used some of the suggestions and tactics of his preparation team in the later debates. Kennedy prepared well for the confrontations and seems to have used some suggestions from his official team and the group of men who worked with Senator Gore.

For the first time in America's political history, it was conceivable that presidential candidates, particularly from the two major parties, could appear live together on national television. Their ideals and goals could be examined next to each other in a way that had never been possible before. This kind of program could draw

liberals, conservatives, moderates and independents. Everyone who watches a given presidential debate sees the same thing. The tradition of presidential debates allows voters to see the candidates in a light that they would not otherwise be brought under. Almost all other political programs and campaign appearances can be set up in a candidate's favor and allow them to show their best side. Organized debates level the playing field and force candidates to show what they are really capable of.

Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy were balanced in their presidential debates in 1960 and no clear winner emerged from the event. The debates served less as a test of knowledge and more as political publicity and the forging of a political tradition. This event marked the beginning of televised national politics and was a turning point in the prioritization of image in political campaigns. The two candidates were very evenly matched in speech, presentation, and, in the end, votes. It would do modern candidates good to look back on these historic debates and emulate these two great candidates.

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