

Pace University

1960 Presidential Election

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The 1960 Presidential Election was one of the most significant elections in American history. The candidates, Democratic Senator John F. Kennedy and Republican Vice-President Richard M. Nixon shared many differences between them which ranged from age to political experience. The most pronounced distinction was how they both viewed television as a tool in assisting their campaigns. This distinction became evident in the days preceding the first Presidential debate which was televised live. Gary A. Donaldson, a professor of history at Xavier University and author of the book *The First Modern Campaign Kennedy, Nixon, and the Election of 1960* writes “Kennedy took pains to meet with Hewitt before the event to grill the producer on how it would all work.”(Donaldson 112) Donaldson asserts that Kennedy had a greater understanding on the impact television would have on his campaign by going out of his way to meet CBS producer Thomas Hewitt before the debate. His astute precursory strategy gave JFK the advantage over Nixon going into the first debate. John F. Kennedy’s successful win in the 1960 Presidential election can be attributed to ingenious use of television coverage which was exemplified during the first Presidential debate.

By 1960 88% of Americans had televisions in the United States. It was a sharp jump from 11% percent or 40 million Americans in 1950. In 1960 the three major networks CBS, ABC, and NBC controlled television. During this era politicians did not comprehend the value of television

coverage. Candidates did not realize how powerful television was in permitting them to create and promote a potent image while at the same time propagate their agenda to a greater volume of people. Kennedy understood this and judiciously went on to utilize it to his advantage. By August Kennedy and Nixon had both agreed to the debates. Throughout the month of August only one percentage point had separated the candidates. A poll number released on August 16 had Nixon leading, but by August 30 Kennedy was in the lead. It was critical for the upcoming debates to be televised to enable Kennedy to exhibit his formidable persona that his campaign handlers believed would overshadow Nixon. Kennedy would need to manipulate the debates to his advantage to generate the edge he required to result in an increased lead over Nixon. The first and key debate was scheduled for September 26, 1960 in Chicago and was broadcast live television by CBS. The remaining debates were scheduled for October seventh, thirteenth, and the twenty-first. With the schedules agreed upon the candidates set about to prepare for the debates.(Donaldson 112; Matthews 144; Rorabaugh 149-150)

The morning of the pivotal first debate Kennedy was completely focused . He reserved two floors of the Ambassador East Hotel to guarantee that there would be no distractions. Kennedy had an “issues team” who transcribed fifteen pages of information into note cards for him to study. The three vital members of Kennedy’s campaign were Ted Sorenson his closest advisor, Mike Feldman a professor of law at the University of Pennsylvania, and Harvard Law School Professor Archibald Cox. He secured the best possible advisors available to aid him in his preparation. Kennedy dedicated the majority of the day studying note cards, and practicing Q & A sessions with his prep team. He was advised by his brother Robert Kennedy to nap before the debate, “He insisted that his brother take a nap. But it was not to be.” But he refused and instead

continued to prepare earnestly. Kennedy had a goal and he did everything in his power to reach that goal. Kennedy demonstrated he was devoted in his determination to be successful in the debate by his resolute tenacity. Nixon on the other hand did not convey as much fervor to prepare as Kennedy.(Donaldson 112; Matthews 145-146)

Nixon spent the early part of the morning speaking to the Carpenters Union leaving him only five hours to prepare. He felt it was important to cram as many public appearances as possible before the debate. This proved to be injudicious and ultimately cost him precious time to prepare. These actions communicate a lack of appreciation for how the debate via television could be beneficial for his campaign. He was uncooperative with his staff in their efforts to cajole him to study and review for the debate. Robert Finch, Nixon's campaign manager was quoted as saying "He hadn't done anything except tell me he knew how to debate. He totally refused to prepare. After all, he was the master debater. Who were any of us to presume?" Nixon displayed arrogance toward his campaign manager who was assigned to look out for Nixon's best interest. On the other hand, Kennedy not only listened to his staff but, he respected their advice and tips which speaks volumes of his calculative thought process. Nixon's pompous attitude was directly connected to the success he had with his Checkers Speech. (Donaldson 112-114; Matthews 145-147)

Nixon was over-confident in his television ability based primarily in the success of his famous Checkers Speech delivered in 1952 in which he addressed financial peculiarities relating to his campaign. Before the speech Eisenhower was on the verge of removing Nixon from the Republican Ticket. After the speech Nixon received waves of public support which resulted in

persuading Eisenhower to retain him on the Republican ticket. Nixon went on to become the Vice President and would eventually seek to become President of the United States.

This caused Nixon to become presumptuous in his ability with regards to political television.

Nixon once stated “I think I am a pretty fair judge of political television” Nixon considered himself well versed at political television based on one experience. It pointed to a false sense of confidence whereas Kennedy could boast about being confident because he was on television constantly. Kennedy and his staff “arranged for all events to be taped on a portable video recorder.” This in turn made his face familiar to America molding him into a household name. Unlike Nixon Kennedy proved to be more shrewd because he reviewed the videos of previous engagements to improve himself. This practice was crucial proven by how he dominated the debates. In addition to understanding the importance of experience he was conscious of how important his physical appearance was when appearing on television.(Donaldson 112-114; Matthews 145-147; Rorabaugh 148)

Nixon was the first to arrive at the CBS studio on the night of the debate. Upon Kennedy’s entrance into the CBS studio he was swarmed by reporters who up until his arrival had congregated around Nixon. It’s as though Kennedy had stolen the show with his mere presence which was a testament to how magnetic his charisma and personality were. It was at this moment that it most have become clear to Kennedy that his persona was now giving him an additional advantage over Nixon. Both candidates refused the services of top makeup artist, Frances Arvold offered to them by CBS producer Thomas Hewitt. This surprised Mr. Hewitt because Nixon’s appearance was gaunt and sickly as compared to Kennedy who sported a tan, and wore a sophisticated, dark tailored suit. Kennedy left no detail to chance when came to his

appearance evident by the suit color he wore. He knew the dark color would create contrast that would define his face. Nixon didn't pay attention to the little details of his appearance.

Days before the debate Nixon had fallen ill and was admitted to the hospital. Subsequent to his release from the hospital, he failed to rest adequately, and had lost ten pounds hence his appearance was unflattering. He was in such a haste to defeat Kennedy he ignored caring for himself. Nixon had his signature five o'clock shadow and one of his aides concealed it with a cheap drugstore powder called Lazy Shave which streaked off his face due to the perspiration from the heat of the studio lights beaming on him. Nixon had "pronounced jowls, a receding hairline, and deep eye socket which made him less appealing on television. To solve this dilemma an extra stage light was projected upward toward Nixon on top of an already projecting downed light. Thomas Hewitt stated that he believed Nixon "thought it wouldn't be good for his image if the public knew he was made up and Kennedy wasn't." What he was not privy to is that Kennedy did in fact have light makeup applied to his face just before the debate began. Kennedy was cognizant of the importance to manifest a debonair image on television because it would have a significant impact on the viewers. Kennedy's tactics were clever, discreet and were instrumental in helping to make Nixon appear unable to handle the national exposure.(Donaldson 109, 114-115; Matthews 149; Rorabaugh 150-151; Thomas 210-211)

Eighty million people tuned into the debate. Kennedy was the first to go and immediately he made a powerful impact. He appeared "poised, his legs crossed, his hands folded on his lap." Kennedy knew that there would be a considerable number of people viewing the debate. Previous experience, as well as knowledge of his impressive appearance conveyed a demeanor of confidence, control and readiness to debate making him appear as though he was in control. In

contrast to Nixon, who appeared awkward, with hands dangling by his side as would someone who lacks control and confidence Nixon emanated an aura of being unaware of the moment to millions of Americans watching the opening of the most important debate. To throw Nixon off Kennedy began the debate with a discussion about foreign policy an issue that Nixon believed would not be addressed. Kennedy followed this ruse by asserting noteworthy issues under the current Eisenhower administration for example “West Virginia Schools bringing their school lunches home” due to poverty or “steel mills operating with unused capacity.” This was done to put Nixon on the defensive and force him to defend policies of the Eisenhower administration as opposed to addressing his own campaign issues. Kennedy made Nixon appear as an apologist instead of someone who could solve problems. Kennedy’s opening statement resonated with the general public because he spoke of issues that could not be argued with and that many Americans identified. Nixon was boxed into a corner by Kennedy because to disagree with him at this point would make him appear contentious. Unfortunately, Nixon failed to understand the visual aspect of the debate. (Matthews 150-151)

In an effort to purge Nixon’s bad guy image he was advised by Attorney General William Rogers and his Vice-Presidential running mate Henry Cabot Lodge to be “the good guy.” In other words Nixon should not be confrontational during the debate. Nixon conceded to this counsel and it proved detrimental. Nixon was viewed as weak for agreeing with his opponent rather than put forward an effective and aggressive debate. By lacking aggressiveness Nixon made Kennedy appear strong, tipping the scales in his favor. Kennedy’s aim was to utilize television coverage to go before the cameras and make an impact on the American people. He knew he was capable of capturing the attention of the American people by his sheer presence and

he also knew that Nixon would not present or perform well in front of the cameras. At the end of the debate it was evident that Kennedy was the victor. “A gallop poll taken in the days following the Great Debate found Nixon with 46%, and Kennedy pulling ahead to 49%.” Kennedy’s victory was evidenced by the gallop poll taken after the debate which showed Kennedy was now in the lead.(Matthews 147, 155)

John F. Kennedy succeeded in winning the 1960 Presidential election primarily through his shrewd strategy of capitalizing on television coverage. While there were three more debates scheduled they became irrelevant because of the massive success he had with the first. Without the televised debates Kennedy would not have been elected President. Kennedy had such an influence on future debates that it wasn’t until 1976 that Presidential debates were resumed. Candidates post Kennedy which included Richard Nixon, feared that Americans would judge them on their appearance and not on their validity and presidential issues. Television had become a forceful instrument that changed the way in which people viewed candidates as well as how candidates were elected. Kennedy was pivotal in the changes that took place in future elections of our executive leaders.

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