

Kennedy-Nixon Debates a Key To What '76 Clashes May Hold

By JOSEPH LELYVELD
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Aug. 29— Proud of what they took to be a big advance in the way Americans select their President, the television networks promoted the events as "the Great Debates." But at the time, a number of critics asked what was so great about the encounters and whether they were even real debates.

"The dialogue was largely a paste-up job containing bits and snippets from campaign rhetoric already used many times," wrote a Washington journalist, Douglass Cater, shortly after he had participated as a panelist in the third set-to between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. "As the series wore on, the protagonists were like two weary wrestlers who kept trying to get the same holds."

Yet no one doubted that the four debates were the central campaign events of 1960. And after Mr. Kennedy came out ahead by a tissue-thin margin of fewer than 113,000 votes, it was widely concluded that what had happened on television had determined the result.

Estimating the Risks

Now, 16 years later, that televised debates between the two major-party Presidential candidates appear to be an idea whose time has come again, looking back at 1960 is one way to estimate the risks President Ford and Jimmy Carter will take and the benefits they may derive when they meet before the cameras.

A reviewing the

A viewing the other day of the first two Kennedy-Nixon debates in a CBS studio helped to correct some old impressions and reinforce others. In one way, the experience was similar to that of sitting through an old movie that was considered bold and exciting in its day but now seems mannered and coy.

The narrow neckties, short haircuts and Armageddon rhetoric all contribute to this effect. The issues—from Quemoy and Matsu to whether President Eisenhower should have expressed regrets for U-2 flights over the Soviet Union—no longer seem compelling, if they ever did.

Personalities Mattered

But that hardly detracts from the fascination of the contest, for it was the interplay of personalities, not ideas, that really mattered.

This removed in time, it is easy to see how carefully the candidates manipulated their disagreements for maximum tactical advantage. The hottest exchanges came on questions on which their differences appeared to be narrowest, usually, cold war issues.

The first debate was supposed to be confined to domestic matters. But Mr. Kennedy, who got to speak first, immediately began a grim exhortation on "our struggle for survival with Mr. Khrushchev." His rival, who had made his reputation as a globetrotting Vice President and militant anti-Communist, thus found himself on the defensive in what was supposed to be his area of greatest strength.

Aim at Same Target

But while they magnified their differences on foreign policy, the candidates seemed to mute them on domestic issues. Mr. Kennedy warned of stagnation; Mr. Nixon, of inflation. But they were aiming at the same middle-of-the-road voters, so they confined themselves to broad generalities, cautiously expressed.

Reactions to the first debate made it clear that what was said mattered less than how it was said. The show opened with the two candidates seated in chairs on either side of the moderator, Howard K. Smith.

Mrs. Kennedy has one leg crossed over the other; as he is introduced, he nods gravely.

The Vice President's hands fidget on his lap; his feet slide around aimlessly under his chair. As he is introduced, he breaks into a sudden smile and nods, swiveling his body awkwardly toward Mr. Smith, then back to the camera.

Ignores Rival

Instead of spontaneous give-and-take, there is a counterpoint of capsulized statements. Mr. Kennedy speaks directly into the camera without acknowledging the presence of his rival. Mr. Nixon, beads of perspiration forming on his lower lip, seems to want to engage both Mr. Kennedy and the TV audience. Three times he asks his opponent to acknowledge that they both are "sincere."

The camera switches for "reaction shots" of the Senator while the Vice President is speaking. His eyes are steady and alert; his face, impassive except for a slight suggestion of amusement, even disdain, at the corners of his mouth. There is a stillness about him that gives an impression of composure.

The close-up shots of Mr. Nixon when Mr. Kennedy speaks show his glance darting around the studio set. He

purses his lips, cranes his neck and, twice, almost seems to nod in agreement. Twice also, he is shown wiping his chin with a handkerchief. The impression is one of strain.

Cosmetic Problem

His suit is not dark enough to set him off distinctly from the gray background, and his face has a chalky look—the result, the press soon discovered, of a last-minute application of a cosmetic called "Lazy Shave" after he had refused professional makeup.

So much was eventually written about Mr. Nixon's makeup problems that the biggest surprise in seeing the debate now is that he looks much better than legend leads one to expect. His discomfort was real: He had come to the debate tired and ill and had then banged a previously infected kneecap on a car door before entering the studio.

But the impression of stress, while distinct, is fleeting. Most of the time he effectively commands attention.

But Mr. Nixon's problem in the first debate was more than cosmetic. It was finding a way to match his rival's sharp and assertive tone and to defend the record of the Eisenhower Administration without sounding defensive.

Issue of Experience

Also, "experience" had been one of Mr. Nixon's major campaign selling points; the suggestion being that it would be dangerous to turn over the country to his lesser-known rival. But experience did not prove to be a something that "televised" well.

His opponent seemed to know at least as many facts as Mr. Nixon did. For Mr. Kennedy, television was a great equalizer. He closed the "maturity gap," Mr. Carter wrote at the time, by proving himself "able to stand up to the man who stood up to Krushchev," a reference to Mr. Nixon's impromptu televised "debate" with the Soviet Prime Minister.

If there is a parallel between 1960 and 1976, it only serves to underscore the risk President Ford is running as the first incumbent to debate a foe. A White House aide, Richard B. Cheney, said the other day that Mr. Ford would demonstrate "Presidential experience and knowledge of the issues."

Mr. Carter's newness on the national scene and lack of foreign policy experience are obviously going to be price Republican issues. But if 1960 provides any clues, the debates could give the Georgian an opportunity to neutralize them.

Round Two

Presumably, Mr. Ford's aides hope that Mr. Carter will crumple under pressure as Mr. Nixon is sometimes supposed to have done in 1960. But the Vice President came back to the second debate in fighting trim: He was better-tailored; professionally made-up, more aggressive and obviously intent on keeping his gaze steady and his hands from fluttering.

In the numerous opinion surveys made at the time, there is scant evidence that he lost support as a result of the debates. Their most important effect, it appears, was to solidify support for Mr. Kennedy among wavering Democrats who had previously been unenthusiastic about him.

Of course, the analogy between 1976 and 1960 breaks down in a number of ways: Mr. Ford is President; also, he is regarded as the underdog as Mr. Nixon was not. Moreover, neither candidate has demonstrated the forensic skills of his 1960 precursors. And, finally, the electorate may be more volatile and open to impressions.

In this latter connection, Professor Michael Robinson, a political scientist at American University, notes that party loyalties have loosened dramatically in the last 16 years.

A major change is in the role of the television networks in producing the debates. The 1960 encounters took place in television studios, with the television consultants of the candidates on hand in the control rooms to bargain and badger on every

detail—the lighting, the camera angles and, because of Mr. Nixon's perspiration problem, even the temperature.

Don Hewitt, the CBS producer who handled the first debate, said that it would have been better if it had been performed before an audience rather than produced as a television show. In a memo distributed in Congress last week, however, CBS took the opposite view, contending that "the studio atmosphere" would be "less of a personal, physical and psychic drain on each of the candidates" than a debate before a live audience.

This view is likely to be tested, for Mr. Ford and Mr. Carter are negotiating on the debates with the nonpartisan League of Women Voters, which proposes to stage them in front of audiences in hired halls.

The league also proposes to have a debate by the Vice-Presidential candidates. It is a curious footnote, but that idea also dates back to 1960 when it was put forward by Vice President Nixon to counter a demand by Mr. Kennedy for a fifth debate.