

The Kennedy-Nixon debates: television comes to politics

Conrad Black

In this excerpt from *The Invincible Quest: The Life of Richard Milhous Nixon*, Conrad Black weaves a narrative of the Kennedy-Nixon debates, the seminal event of the 1960 presidential campaign, which vaulted modern politics into the television age. Who won? Kennedy on appearance on television, Nixon on substance on radio. Though Nixon lost, barely, he would be back eight years later and finally won the White House.

Dans cet extrait de *The Invincible Quest: The Life of Richard Milhous Nixon*, Conrad Black retrace les faits entourant les débats Kennedy-Nixon, événements décisifs de la campagne présidentielle de 1960 qui aura marqué le passage de la vie politique moderne à l'âge télévisuel. Le vainqueur ? Kennedy au petit écran pour l'image, Nixon à la radio pour la substance. Ce dernier allait rater de justesse la Maison-Blanche avant d'y faire son entrée huit ans plus tard.

The first presidential debate was in Chicago on September 26. Nixon prepared the day before and flew to Chicago, touring the wards in a motorcade when he arrived and speaking to the Carpenters' Union in the morning. He studied the issues in the afternoon and arrived at the studio in a light suit with a shirt collar too large, which made him appear drawn and fatigued, as his clothes seemed to hang on him like a bat. He had light makeup only. Nixon had bumped his knee again as he got out of his car (perhaps if he had not eschewed Cadillacs for reasons of image, he would have had the legroom to spare his knees the severe battering they suffered). He was standing uncomfortably as a result of the bump he had sustained. Kennedy had prepared in his own fashion, relaxing on a sun deck and enjoying the pleasures of a professional woman procured for him by the specialists on his staff who supplied him in this regard before, during, and after the campaign.

Kennedy found it so refreshing, he insisted on the same preparatory therapy for all the debates. As is notorious, Kennedy won the battle of appearances. He wore a dark suit, was tanned and confident, while Nixon seemed haggard and at times a little nervous. Nixon's five o'clock shadow, jowls, dark eyes, and tendency to perspire under television lights were all in evidence. Both candidates knew the material, and the contrast between the 1960 encounters and future presidential debates, which have been sound-bite exchanges circumscribed to superficial treatment of subjects, is striking. Yet they were not so much debating as answering reporters' questions that they had addressed many times before.

They had an unprecedented audience of over 80 million people. Kennedy opened with his "get America moving again" theme. "I am not satisfied, as an American, with the progress we're making." He wanted faster progress on everything from steel production to civil rights to teachers' pay. Nixon replied defensively, but argued

that the Eisenhower years had shown a good deal more progress than had the Truman years. The fifties were not slow-motion times, he pointed out, but in fact the greatest years of progress and generally improving living standards in the country's history. Nixon extolled Republican faith in the private sector and unlocking America's creative energies, and only lightly broke out the violins on the issue of the poor, saying that he had been poor himself, but having the taste to avoid saying that Kennedy had not.

Nixon handled very competently the inevitable questions about whether he had really done anything in the administration or just been an observer, referring to the reports he gave on returning from foreign trips, the setting up of the inter-American lending agency, the admission of Hungarian refugees, his role in various foreign exchange programs, and his work on the Cabinet Committee on Price Stability for Economic Growth.

To the follow-up question of Sander Vanocur (who was intermittently paid by the Kennedys while working for NBC) about Ike's inability the month before to think of an initiative of Nixon's that he had adopted, Nixon said that Ike was "facetious" and that he had suggested a great many things. "Sometimes my advice has been taken. Sometimes it has not. I do not say that I have made the decisions."

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. They agreed almost exactly on civil rights. When Nixon returned to his hotel, feeling fairly good about his performance, he was advised by Rose Mary Woods and others that he had spoken well but looked sick. It quickly became clear that he had lost on appearance but not on content. Those who heard the debate on the radio felt, by a slight margin, that Nixon had won. For television viewers, there was an edge, though not a decisive one, to Kennedy, and this was more a press consensus than a genuine opinion sampling. Republicans who had expected Nixon to eviscerate Kennedy were disappointed, and Democrats were correspondingly happy, but the race was still close and all was still to play for.

The second debate was in Washington on October 7. Nixon did not rest much before the debate, but had the temperature reduced in the studio, arranged for minimal lighting in his face, and wore adequate makeup. His clothes fit properly and he was in sharper form. The whole tenor of the exchange was more aggressive. Kennedy started with the allegation that if the Republicans were going to claim that the Democrats had "lost China," the Republicans had

lost Cuba. Nixon denied that it was lost, reminded Kennedy that there was a non-intervention treaty in the Americas (which the United States frequently violated and which had not received much consideration as Eisenhower and Nixon planned the invasion of Cuba by exiles), and said that the Cubans "who want to be free are going to be supported and ... they will attain their freedom."

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There were frequent references to Khrushchev. Nixon said that the United States could not allow Khrushchev to point to the mistreatment of black Americans, and debunked Kennedy's claim that American prestige had sunk. When Kennedy was asked why he attacked the administration but not Eisenhower, he replied that he had been given to understand that Nixon was a prominent member of the

administration. Nixon pointed out that the Democrats had expended a great deal of effort claiming that he had played almost no role in it.

Kennedy attacked the Quemoy-Matsu policy and said the islands, which were only five miles offshore from China, were militarily useless and should be abandoned. Nixon scored well on this point that the United States must not oblige its nationalist allies to give up territory: "This is the same kind of woolly thinking that led to disaster for America in Korea." Nixon a couple of times emphasized that he did not question Kennedy's sincerity and he hoped that Kennedy would accord him the same courtesy. Kennedy did not respond, and it seemed slightly importunate of Nixon. The press and the polls concurred in Nixon's own judgment that he had done well and had a slight edge. The audience had declined from eighty million in the first debate to sixty million in the second.

The third debate was on October 13, with the candidates on different coasts: Nixon in Los Angeles and Kennedy in New York. The Quemoy-Matsu policy was again a big issue, as both candidates demonstrated the brilliance of the Eisenhower-Dulles Formosa Resolution and Doctrine, which gave the president authority to use any means he wished to defend Formosa and "closely related localities," a formulation that enabled Eisenhower, a specialist in dissimulation, to play poker with Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai.

The policy differences between the candidates were relatively subtle, and centered on the role of the public sector. Both candidates favored construction of low-cost housing, extension of medical care, and aid to education, but Nixon thought the private sector could be incentivized to deal with the first two and that money should be given to the

states to address educational needs. Kennedy was for direct federal government funding and operation of these programs, including supplements to teachers' salaries. In foreign policy, Nixon accused Kennedy of being an apologetic appeaser and Kennedy accused Nixon of being a warmonger. Kennedy claimed the country's defenses were in disarray; both put on an invasion-tease in respect of Castro, and they

except for medicine and food, and the recall of the ambassador from Havana. Kennedy replied that these measures were inadequate and late, and that there should be stronger sanctions (presumably the cut-off of supplies of medicine), aid to the democratic exiles, and a general aid program for Latin America. This was all very frustrating for Nixon, as he had been advocating such an aid program since his first visits to Latin

case. The trouble was, he did not believe a word of what he said." Nixon would have done better, since Castro had publicly predicted an American-sponsored invasion, to state that a variety of options were under consideration, that Kennedy had had a full intelligence briefing, and that he knew as a result that what he was alleging against the administration was dishonest. It could have been a knockout

There was extensive debate about the debates. If it had been expected that Nixon would win, he lost, because he did not win. But this reasoning is overused. The two candidates were running neck-and-neck going into the debates, and they were in the same position at the end of them, so there cannot have been a great disappointment in Nixon or adherence of new believers to Kennedy. To the extent that neither candidate flattened the other, as Jimmy Carter was deemed to have done with Gerald Ford in 1976, or Ronald Reagan did with Carter four years later, or Bill Clinton did with George Bush Sr. and Bob Dole in 1992 and 1996, both failed and both succeeded.

said virtually the same things about civil rights and stimulative tax cuts.

Kennedy was exploiting Cuba to try to turn the tide on Nixon as a paper tiger, and on October 17, Nixon met with Eisenhower and Undersecretary of State C. Douglas Dillon and urged that something be done about Cuba and that, for political reasons, Nixon be seen to be involved in it. Eisenhower agreed on both counts. While this was being concerted, Kennedy spoke to the American Legion in Miami and accused Nixon of "vicious distortions" over Quemoy and Matsu. Nixon spoke to the same audience the next day and described Castro's regime as "an intolerable cancer" and promised "the strongest possible economic measures." (The Legion was composed of veterans of the armed forces and had about fifteen million members; they tended to be fairly hawkish, and liked both candidates because of their tough stances and distinguished war records.)

The following day, October 19, the United States announced the imposition of a complete trade embargo on Cuba

America, and an outright invasion of Cuba by the exiles. Kennedy claimed that the exiles were being given no support, even though he had had intelligence briefings from Allen Dulles at Eisenhower's instruction, clearly stating that they were being assisted and prepared. The crowning irony of this exchange came in the fourth and last debate, on October 21, when Nixon gave a brilliant answer to a question about Cuba and excoriated the whole idea of an invasion of Cuba, which he had, in fact, been advocating, and which Kennedy did, in fact, carry out with disastrously humiliating results. Nixon emphasized the problems of violating the 1948 Organization of American States Treaty, which pledged nonintervention in the internal affairs of signatory countries, and predicted that any such course would alienate all of Latin America, open that continent up to the Russians, and probably fail militarily.

As Stephen Ambrose wrote, "In his long political career, Nixon made any number of predictions, some of them amazingly accurate, but never was he more exactly on the mark than in this

blow. The other main point of contention was Kennedy's claim that Nixon was suppressing a report showing the decline of American prestige in the world. Nixon said the report referred to was obsolete and that American prestige was in fine fettle, and then tore into Kennedy for "running America down," citing a speech of nine months before when Kennedy had claimed "seventeen million Americans go to bed hungry every night." Kennedy replied that he didn't "need Mr. Nixon to tell me what my responsibilities are as a citizen." He said that he was running down the country's leadership, not the country — regarding, for example, Nixon's statement to Khrushchev that the U.S.S.R. was ahead in rockets and the United States was ahead in color television. "I think that color television is not as important as rocket thrust."

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John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon chat after one of their debates during the 1960 presidential campaign, which brought television to politics. The debates, which Kennedy won on appearance, may have decisively swung a narrow outcome in his favour.

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With one week left, Kennedy had the lead, though narrowly. All polls showed Nixon narrowing the lead to a statistical dead heat on the last days. He was alone, except for his wife, with defeatism afflicting his staff. The Kennedys were rampaging in their irritating, noisy, physical Irish way, like a caricature of boisterous Boston Southies (except for the elegant JFK himself). Nixon oddly liked to be the underdog, and in any case thought it his destiny, and strove mightily to salvage his supreme life's effort. He flew with his family from Chicago to Los Angeles and had a final campaign rally in the City of Angels at 1 a.m., on elec-

tion day, and went to the Royal suite of the Ambassador Hotel, which was tarted up in all the vulgarity L.A. could muster, in gold, purple, violet, pink, and red. His wife and daughters stayed a floor above, and his mother one floor above that. Nixon slept only two hours, and then drove with Pat to Whittier to vote. He and a couple of aides drove to Tijuana in an open convertible for lunch, and Nixon took the wheel for the return trip, stopping at the mission at San Juan Capistrano.

He returned to the Ambassador Hotel at 5 p.m., as the polls were closing in the East. Kennedy leapt to an early lead, which shrank as the votes moved west. As in all things, Nixon's tenacity was formidable. The Kennedys and their friends in the media became impa-

tient, but Kennedy's lead, as the last polls had predicted, dropped to almost nothing. At about midnight in California, Nixon and his wife descended to the ballroom to thank the campaign staff. He said that "If the present trend continues, Senator Kennedy will be the next president of the United States ... and if he does ... he will have my whole-hearted support." Pat, the strongest, most dignified, most admirable of political soul mates, wept silently and motionlessly. But there was no concession, and none was called for. He expected to win California, and did, as the Golden State voted for him for the fourth time in ten years. If he had won Illinois and Michigan or Minnesota or Texas, he would have won the election. (Lodge, an ineffable

defeatist, had prepared his concession statement some days before, though he did not release it prematurely.)

It was only after another two hours' sleep, at 6 a.m. — 9 a.m. in the East — that Nixon learned that he had lost Illinois by 9,000 out of 4.757 million, and Minnesota by 22,000 out of 1.542 million ballots cast. Texas was carried by Kennedy and Johnson by 46,000 out of 2.312 million ballots cast. This appeared on its face to be convincing enough, but the Johnson-Rayburn machine in the state had performed prodigies of electoral mischief. There is little doubt that Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley cheated Nixon out of victory in Illinois, then the country's fourth state in population. The real winner of the 1960 presidential election has never been clear. The official popular vote was 34.221 million for Kennedy to 34.106 million for Nixon, the electoral vote 303 to 219. Nixon ran five points ahead of his party, and the Republicans gained twenty-two congressmen and two senators. Kennedy's popular margin was, in fact, very doubtful, because the Alabama Democratic vote was partly for electors pledged to Kennedy and partly for Dixiecrat Harry Byrd's electors. A reasonable division of the Democratic Alabama vote would have given Nixon an overall national plurality. The states won with a margin of approximately or less than a one-point swing were: by the Republicans, Alaska, California, Hawaii, and Montana; by the Democrats, Delaware, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Texas. Theodore White, and the Kennedy camp generally, assumed that Nixon was riding into the sunset, and they doffed their hats to a gallant foe. White referred to "the fight that Richard M. Nixon had so valiantly waged, under such personal suffering ... Nixon's skills in politics were enormous, his courage unquestioned, his endurance substan-

tial." "Substantial," in this case, was to prove one of the great understatements of American political comment.

He had fought a brave struggle, almost alone personally, comparatively undersupported by celebrities, intellectuals, and the media. His frictions with Eisenhower had been in evidence throughout the campaign, from the August 12 presidential request for a

With John F. Kennedy and his family, a mighty legend was born. Lyndon Johnson, too, would prove an epochal figure. But Richard Nixon, whom *The Reporter* magazine had not wished to "be bothered with again" in 1952, would prove the most durable American political leader since Jefferson, leading an army of the awkward, the ordinary, the unflamboyant, silent masses of millions of decent, unexceptional people, through important decades of American history.

week to think of a contribution Nixon made to the administration, through to the small role of Eisenhower in the campaign, and his wife's plea for her husband's health at the end. Nixon said to the author: "Eisenhower told me that his friends, by which he invariably meant his rich friends, would pay for a challenge and a recount. I thought it would be irresponsible to leave the country without a government for six months." Without most of the benefits of incumbency, representing a tired government led by an admired leader with non-transferable popularity, Richard Nixon had run about even against the most naturally attractive Democratic leader, apart from FDR, since Jackson.

By not campaigning on anti-communist innuendoes, wealth-envy, Kennedy's sexual indiscretions, the Kennedy intelligence scam on Cuba, any pitch to religious prejudice, Kennedy's severe health problems and addiction to painkillers, and finally, the theft of votes on such a scale that JFK was moved to exclaim (of Daley and Johnson): "Thank God for a few honest crooks," Nixon had been so gentlemanly that he shed his image as

an insufferable ogre, the Herblock sewer rat. He said to Peter Flanigan, "This campaign has laid to rest forever the issue of a candidate's religion in presidential politics. Bad for me, perhaps, but good for America." Nixon would be fifty-five eight years later, when Kennedy would have had two terms. The presumptuous Democratic notion that Nixon was finished and

would not be heard from again was one of American political history's colossal underestimations. Nixon had had a toss-up election, and lost the toss. Without his affecting the balance in the Republican Party, or Eisenhower playing a role, the party was approximately half divided between Goldwater conservatives and Rockefeller liberals. His party needed him, and so would his country, and Nixon would be back, much stronger and of surer judgment than in this campaign, and almost certainly against a less attractive opponent.

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