

THE UNKNOWN “GREAT DEBATES”

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In the eight years that have passed since the Nixon-Kennedy “Great Debates,” Section 315 has remained unchanged, incumbents have shown little interest in debating, and a media legend has flourished. In retrospect, the sights and sounds of those four hours of broadcast history are easier to remember than the behind-the-scenes planning and plotting, that was employed to determine the pattern and course of the debates. What follows is an examination of what could be termed the non-public debates; the in-fighting between the candidates’ representatives to select a format and to consider a never-to-materialize fifth debate.¹

It was clear that the networks were going to provide extensive free time for the candidates in the 1960 election, either under existing “equal-time” provisions or under a desired suspension of Section 315. Some of the proposals made by the networks included time for the candidates to appear on existing or specially designed public affairs programs.² The network’s formal presentations were made to both parties immediately following Nixon’s nomination in Chicago, on July 27. Apparently the NBC offer reached Kennedy first, and he accepted eagerly and without qualifications.³ Nixon stated his acceptance through his press secretary, Herbert Klein,

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that same day, and confirmed it three days later. The other network proposals were also quickly accepted. Since both candidates favored the debates, it is not surprising that the House of Representatives approved Senate Joint Resolution 207 temporarily suspending Section 315 on August 24, during its post-convention session.

THE FORMATS

The *Meet the Press* proposal, the debate idea, and Vice President Nixon's formal-acceptance wire all played major roles in determining the formats for the programs which were planned during the next six weeks. The details were hammered out in 12 meetings between a committee of network news executives and the representatives named by the candidates. For the networks, the committee consisted of William McAndrew, Executive Vice President for News, NBC; Sig Mickelson, President, CBS News Inc.; John Daly, Vice President for News, ABC; and Joseph Keating, Vice President, MBS. Leonard Reinsch served as the chief adviser for Senator Kennedy, and William Wilson was his production adviser for radio and television; Fred C. Scribner Jr., Under Secretary of the Treasury served as Nixon's chief representative, with Herbert Klein and Carroll P. Newton as advisers for radio-TV, and Edward (Ted) Rogers as technical adviser for radio and TV during the campaign.⁴

The first meeting took place at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York, August 9. It was agreed then that the "debates were desirable," that they should be on all networks simultaneously, one hour in length, end by October 21, and be worked into the candidates' travel schedules by mutual agreement.⁵ The Democrats wanted a later closing date but agreed on October 21. Subsequent meetings between the candidates' representatives helped to determine the dates. And, according to network representatives, the candidates' teams also talked about the format.⁶ Nixon, in his acceptance wire, gave the following general outline of what he wanted: "joint television appearances of the presidential candidates should be conducted as full and free exchanges of views, without prepared texts or notes, and without interruptions...and with time for questioning by panels of accredited journalists."⁷ The network committee also came up with proposals. All of these ideas were discussed at a meeting in the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, on August 31, where the formats were established although, apparently, not agreed upon.

Formats for the first and fourth debates were quickly approved: opening statements, questions from the news panel, and closing statements. Kennedy drew the first position in the first debate, a turn of fate his advisers considered very important. Nixon, therefore, went first on the last debate. The candidates' representatives also gave the networks the dates and the cities agreed upon. The place of the second debate was later changed twice, and its date was moved up twenty-four hours.⁸

The format for the first and fourth meetings was the choice of the candidates' representatives. At the August 31 meeting, the networks, led by Mickelson, proposed that the candidates engage in what is known as "Oregon Debate."⁹ Under this form, debaters present opening statements, then are permitted to question each other directly. This suggestion was rejected by the candidates' representatives.¹⁰ Neither the networks nor the candidates' teams were in favor of an outright debate, on the grounds that it would not hold an audience. Furthermore, a major consideration for a good debate must be a relatively narrow, clear-cut issue on which the debaters can take definite stands. However, the candidates' representatives were frank to admit no such clear-cut issue existed in the campaign. While the candidates disagreed on methods and approach, degree and application of policy on both foreign and domestic issues, their representatives and the networks feared that use of a debate format to present such "shades of gray" arguments would result in rapidly diminishing interest from the audience. In the immediate background were the West Virginia Primary debates between Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey. Both men had been overly polite and the results had been disappointing. The debate format, in the view of at least one of the leading representatives, held hidden traps because accuracy of statements could not be checked immediately, and because one of the candidates, in the heat of an argument, could make an injudicious remark which would have immediate international repercussions.¹¹

All of these considerations seemed to have prompted the candidates' representatives to insist upon the interposition of a panel of newsmen who would ask the questions. The representatives of both the candidates and the networks felt that such a format was well known to the American TV audience. To be fair, it must be pointed out that Nixon's telegram suggests a form closer to a straight debate than that used in the actual programs. The *Meet the Press* type of program, however, was specifically urged by

Nixon's representatives during the negotiations. Kennedy's representatives said that they were not as interested in the format as in getting the Senator on the same TV program with the Vice President. They realized Kennedy's skill with the question and answer setup, and were really happier with it than with a straight debate format.¹²

Final format of the second and third debates was not established at the August 31 meeting. The candidates' representatives wanted the form that finally appeared on the air—question to candidate A, answer, comment by candidate B, question to candidate B, answer, comment by Candidate A. The network representatives objected to this form, claiming it would be confusing to the audience and would not permit much follow-up or expansion of views. They continued to battle for the "Oregon Debate" system up to a few days before the second debate went on the air in Washington; but they never succeeded.

Concerning the subject areas of the first and fourth debates, it is not clear just how the idea of having one program devoted solely to domestic issues and another solely to foreign policy evolved, but once the idea of having a news panel ask the questions was established, it must have become clear that some control over the direction of at least some of the programs would have to be exercised.

With the moderator, news panel format rather firmly entrenched, the question of who would serve in these roles also became an issue. The various factions wrestled with the idea of using a public figure as moderator. Along with other notables, the President of the American Bar Association was suggested. In the end, all sides agreed on a TV professional, to be selected by the network responsible for a given debate.

The selection of the news panel was a more difficult problem. Since the networks were putting on the programs, they insisted that the panels for programs one and four be made up of network newsmen, but agreed to 50-50 representation between the electronic and print media on debates two and three. Not more than 10 days before the first debate, however, Press Secretaries Pierre Salinger and Herbert Klein opened the question again with a protest—that the lack of newspaper reporters on the panels was discriminatory. But the networks stuck to their guns, and told Klein and Salinger to devise a method for picking the print media representatives on debates two and three. An elaborate lottery system

was established by the press secretaries to provide for newspaper, wire service, and magazine representation as the argument concerning discrimination went on right up to the day of the first debate. There is evidence that Senator Kennedy was pushing most strongly for more newspaper representation; the Republicans did not seem to have been as much involved in this discussion. Immediately after the first debate, Klein, who was prompted by requests, suggested the possibility of representation on the panel of special interest groups such as the civil rights advocates. The networks rejected the suggestion on the grounds that it would be impossible to satisfy all.

Shortly after the August 9 agreement that there would be debates, at least one network received inquiries from prospective sponsors as to whether the programs would be for sale. When the question was raised by House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee chairman Oren Harris, NBC publicly explained that it would consider sponsorship of the programs unless the candidates objected.¹³ At the August 31 meeting, it was announced that there would be no sponsorship.

THE FIFTH DEBATE

The idea of a fifth debate was brought up publicly by Democrat Senators Pastore, Monroney, and Magnuson on October 8.¹⁴ The trio had sponsored the legislation permitting temporary suspension of Section 315 of the Communications Act, which made the debates possible. Consequently, when they wired the networks that they favored a fifth debate which was closer to election day, the Senators received immediate consideration. The networks implemented the idea immediately, and Senator Kennedy wired a blanket acceptance two days later, on October 11.¹⁵ The Nixon reply the same day was not quite as all-inclusive, but he did accept the idea of more time. His proposal was to extend the fourth debate to two hours, with the second hour to be taken up with questions phoned in by the public.

The situation developed into a barrage of public statements in which the candidates accused each other of not wanting to go ahead with the fifth debate idea. Kennedy, in all his public pronouncements about the fifth debate, kept hammering away at the idea that the fourth debate was too far from election day. And, he flatly accused Nixon of being afraid to meet him again after October 21. Nixon's television representative, Fred Scribner, con-

tinued to request an extension of the fourth debate to two hours. He proposed that telephone calls with questions from the public be handled by a moderator, and that each candidate have three minutes to answer. This is essentially what Nixon himself did in a nationwide TV marathon answering session from Detroit the day before the election.

On October 19 Scribner called for "immediate meetings" in order to discuss the extension of the fourth debate to two hours, and Kennedy replied that he was agreeable to an extension, but that it was "...in no way a substitute for another joint appearance in the final days of the campaign."¹⁶

On the day of the fourth debate Kennedy wired Nixon again, urging a fifth debate, and perhaps more. He challenged Nixon to announce his acceptance of a fifth debate on the program that night. His wire said "...In fact I believe that more than five debates would be helpful if the record were to be corrected properly."¹⁷

Nixon seems to have been worried about his tactical position in all this. There is evidence that on the day of the fourth debate the Nixon camp had decided not to become involved in a fifth debate if they felt Nixon was ahead in the campaign at the end of the fourth.¹⁸

The Nixon strategists did, however, hold open the possibility of the fifth debate, if Nixon came off second best in the fourth.¹⁹ Nixon also proposed turning over the fourth debate to the Vice Presidential candidates, and held out the possibility of a fifth debate if Kennedy agreed to this.²⁰ In a 1,000 word telegram on October 23, Nixon renewed the idea of putting the Vice-Presidential candidates on for at least part of a fifth debate, and suggested the whole time period be devoted to the question of Cuba, and what to do about Castro—an issue which had been touched on briefly during the fourth debate. Nixon's long wire devoted much more space to his views on Castro and Kennedy's point of view on the same subject than it did talking about arrangements for the fifth debate. Kennedy's reply, on the same day, was similar since it was primarily an attack on Nixon's point of view, although it was shorter. But, Kennedy rejected the idea of limiting the subject of the fifth debate to one item.²¹

By October 25, the idea of a fifth debate seems to have been given serious consideration by both sides. Scribner and Reinsch met in Washington to discuss it once more, and the network com-

mittee—McAndrew, Mickelson, Daly, and Keating—met in New York to work out a format. They wired Scribner and Reinsch, suggesting a return to the original network proposal—one more try for a real “Oregon Debate.” The wire read: “We urge that you consider reverting to the original format; a face-to-face appearance without a panel, but with a moderator to preside and to provide for a fair division of time.”²² The network representatives also suggested another modification of this plan—that the candidates present statements on subjects previously stipulated and that they reserve some time for direct questions. Reinsch and Scribner reached no decision on the 25th and met again on the 26th. On the 28th the network committee met again, and must have been convinced that there really would be a fifth debate. John Daly withdrew ABC from the production of the fifth debate, since ABC had already presented two, and CBS drew the assignment with the probability that it would originate in Washington on October 31.

The next 24 hours must have been the wildest in the entire debate series as far as the network committee was concerned. Mickelson’s personal memoranda on the debates includes a complete record of the activities.²³ While the network committee was meeting in Mickelson’s office in New York, Reinsch and Scribner were meeting in Washington. Faulty communications resulted because all sides were firing off telegrams to each other, and releasing the texts of the telegrams to the press before they were received at the other end.

Scribner and Reinsch compromised on a format. First, they dictated that the two Vice-Presidential candidates, Lyndon Johnson and Henry Cabot Lodge, would each make a ten-minute statement at the beginning of the program. The Presidential candidates would then work with a panel of newsmen as they had in the second and third debates, with the exception that the answers and comments would continue for five minutes. An additional two minutes would then be given the first speaker for “sur-rebuttal.” Since twelve-and-one-half minutes were necessary for each complete sequence, time for only three questions would remain after the Vice-Presidential candidates finished. Reinsch was less in favor of using the Vice-Presidential candidates than Scribner, but a call from Scribner later in the afternoon indicated that he and Reinsch had agreed they would appear on the program.²⁴

Somewhere along the way, the Republicans suggested that cameras be set up in New York’s Central Park, so that the candidates

could answer questions from anyone who wandered by—a truly soap-box approach.²⁵ The networks pointed out that such a plan might attract a mob of 100,000 persons or more, and that it was impractical from the points of view of security, production, and engineering.

Reinsch and Scribner both asked that the network committee come down to Washington the following day, October 29, for a meeting to work out production details. Mickelson agreed that he and McAndrew would go to Washington for the meeting, and it was scheduled for 11 a.m. at the CBS Washington headquarters. Reinsch promised to call back to confirm the meeting, and it looked as if a fifth debate would materialize.

However, early in the afternoon of the 28th, Reinsch sent a wire under Kennedy's name which Scribner took as a personal affront. Scribner felt that the wording of the wire accused him of bad faith, and tried to make it look like the Republicans were resisting the fifth debate. Furthermore, he pointed out later, Reinsch released the text of the wire close to the time he and Scribner were meeting to discuss the final details of the fifth debate.²⁶

Reinsch did not call back, but sent word to Mickelson late that evening that some sort of a hitch had developed.²⁷ Mickelson could not tell from Reinsch's message whether there would be a fifth debate; he and McAndrew went to Washington the following morning. Mickelson contacted both camps. He found Scribner very upset about Reinsch's wire. Scribner read Mickelson the text of his reply to Reinsch, in which he said that until Kennedy apologized for charging bad faith and withdrew what Scribner believed was an ultimatum, there could be no more negotiations, and there it ended.

NOTES

1. An attempt was made to suspend Section 315 for the 1964 presidential election but the White House showed little interest and the matter died. Early in 1968 the Radio-Television News Directors Association and others filed suit in the United States Court of Appeals for the 7th District challenging the so-called "Fairness Doctrine" and Section 315 on First Amendment constitutional grounds. The United States Supreme Court then set aside other Section 315 appeals until this case, "RTNDA et al" is heard. The Staggers Special Subcommittee on Investigations of the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee held hearings on suspension of Section 315 and the "fairness doctrine" in the spring of 1968.
2. The offer by NBC for 8 weekly hour long broadcasts of *Meet the Press* was made by NBC president Robert Sarnoff April 21, 1960 in a speech before the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences in New York. The offer by CBS of 8 hours of prime evening time between Labor Day and Election

was made by Dr. Frank Stanton in testimony before the Subcommittee on Communications of the Senate Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee May 17, 1960. He proposed a variety of program types. ABC president Oliver Treyz, in testimony before the same committee, proposed each network set aside 8 hours of its regular programming, picking the most-listened-to time periods, and pre-empting the regular programs for special programs by the candidates. Sarnoff used the term "The Great Debates" in a wire to House Speaker Sam Rayburn in urging House passage of the Senate Resolution.

3. Kennedy's advisers told the authors they felt it was very important to be the first to accept, and thus "challenge" Nixon to the debates. The decision was quickly reached during a luncheon at Hyannisport, Mass., July 28.
4. Not all of these people attended every meeting; the composition of the meetings varied depending on what was to be discussed and other considerations such as travel schedules.
5. Leonard Reinsch told the authors that the most difficult part of the negotiations was schedule arranging.
6. McAndrew told the authors that both sides had been working on formats between the August 9 and August 31 meetings, but that he felt the candidates had virtually agreed on what they wanted before the August 31 meeting.
7. Text of the telegram from Nixon to the networks is in the networks' files; the ellipsis indicated is that of the authors.
8. Interview with McAndrew, New York, April 6, 1961. Also "Ground Rules," memo adopted at August 31, 1960 general meeting.
9. For a fuller explanation see "The Oregon Plan of Debating," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, XII, (April 1926), pp. 176-180.
10. McAndrew, Mickelson files. Stanton testimony before the Senate Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, January 31, 1961, and interview with Reinsch, Washington, April 4, 1960.
11. Letter from Fred C. Scribner, April 9, 1961.
12. Reinsch, *op. cit.*
13. Text of wire from Sarnoff to Rep. Harris.
14. AP dispatch, dateline New York, October 11, contains the sense of the wire to the networks.
15. Text of telegram in Mickelson's personal files.
16. Exchange of wires between Kennedy and Scribner, October 19, 1960.
17. Text of Kennedy wire to Nixon, October 21, 1960, CBS films.
18. Mickelson files.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. Texts of exchange of telegrams between Nixon and Kennedy, Oct. 23, 1960.
22. Text of wire to Scribner and Reinsch from McAndrew, etc. October 25, 1960, CBS files.
23. Mickelson memorandum dated October 31, 1960.
24. Mickelson, *op. cit.*
25. McAndrew hand-written notes read to authors, April 6, 1961.
26. Text of telegrams exchanged between Scribner and Reinsch, October 29, 1960, CBS films.
27. Mickelson, *op. cit.*