

AN ANALYSIS OF THE 1984

PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

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For another four years, the television debates are over and we are in for "FOUR MORE YEARS", of Ronald Reagan. Despite the landslide victory of Ronald Reagan, the television debates proved to be the most interesting part of the campaign from the rhetorical standpoint.

The first debate moved to Louisville Kentucky, where for 100 minutes the two candidates went podium to podium over everything from social security to abortion. In this paper, this writer will attempt to look critically at the development of the rhetorical style of both candidates from their respective viewpoints.

THE GREAT DEBATE: PART I.

In the first debate in Louisville Kentucky, the opponent, Walter Mondale appeared to be calmer and more presidential than he ever has on television and he did put Reagan on the defensive frequently. "On the whole, the exchanges were more substantive than heated, more insightful than dramatic. In all, there were few epic lines. Mondale chose the high-risk strategy of making his proposal to raise taxes to staunch the deficit the centerpiece of the performance."¹

Reagan - either by choice or by circumstance took surprisingly few opportunities to invoke the patriotic symbolism and imagery that has been his hallmark. Instead, he often rattled off economic statistics like a CPA. In the closing statements, Reagan chose to mainly rework his famous question: Is America better off than it was four years ago? Mondale kept his rhetoric focused on the future saying in conclusion, "The real question is, will we be better off? Are we building a future that this nation needs."²

In the first debate, Mondale seemed to be the clear winner. A special NEWSWEEK POLL taken immediately after the broadcast of the first debate showed that 54 percent of the viewers said that Mondale did a better job, appearing more confident, thoughtful and well-informed. With Election Day looming on the horizon, "equal numbers of voters said that because of the debate, that they would likely vote for Reagan (48 percent) as for the Democratic challenger (46 percent). Among the swing voters, however 63 percent said that they were more likely to vote for Mondale as a result of the debate."³

After the debate, White House Chief of Staff James Baker said: "The President far and away got the best of it."⁴ Yet, some of the president's other handlers said that the president overdid the statistics, and appeared sometimes "too defensive."⁵ On the other side, the Mondale aides were more than just a little happy with the performance of their man "Fighting Fritz." Many of the Mondale aides were quoted in newspapers and magazines as saying that the president's performance was lackluster. Senior Mondale Adviser John Reilly said: "If this guy is the GREAT COMMUNICATOR, I think he slipped a gear."⁶

The strategy of the Mondale camp was to keep Reagan off balance for much of the debate, a ploy which worked in the first debate, but faltered in the second debate.

The debate, to some degree was precisely what Mondale had wanted all along: a detailed dialogue on the issues. As we all remember, the most heated portion of the debates was in the area of abortion, truly the one most sensitive issue of the 1984 campaign. The president has contended that there is no scientific data to prove that an unborn child is not a person and therefore entitled to constitutional protection under the law. On the other hand Mondale has asked rhetorically should "the government be reaching into our livingroom?"⁷

Here we can see how Mondale has used a question and one of Reagan's own themes as a weapon against Reagan in order to keep him off balance as noted earlier in this paper.

Perhaps the most serious factual error of the debate was made by Reagan in contending that there was no need to cut social security benefits "because social security has nothing to do with the deficit."⁸ The President argued that social security taxes go into a separate fund, but the fact is that since the Johnson administration, social security taxes and benefits have been counted in the overall budget totals and are a central part of the budget arithmetic.

As we can see, up to this point in the Presidential race, Mondale had Reagan on the defensive most of the time, and the two biggest issues of the campaign were the issues of abortion and social security. This is not to say that other issues were

not discussed; they were. In both of the debates, the issues of arms control, advanced weapons systems, unilateral talks with the Russians on arms reductions, and the U.S. policy in Central America, were among the top priority of the Presidential debates of 1984.

WHERE DO THEY STAND

Consistently throughout the debates and press interviews, the candidates were asked where they stood on the issues of the campaign and what they would do if elected. Here is a synopsis of some of the points of the campaign, taken from U.S. NEWS AND WORLD REPORT.⁹

Reagan on Defense Spending: Push for consistent increase in defense outlays, including a 7.8 percent increase for the coming year, and modernizing major new weapons systems while improving the conventional forces."

Mondale on Defense Spending: Mondale has suggested that spending should be boosted but at a rate roughly half of what Reagan has proposed in his package. Shift the focus from costly equipment such as nuclear-powered aircraft carriers in favor of building up the readiness of conventional forces and crackdown on Pentagon waste and fraud.

Reagan on Weapons Systems: The President has said all along that he is in favor of new space-based anti-missile defense systems and the deployment of sea-launched nuclear cruise missiles and continued development of the MX missile and the B-1 bomber, as well as the Trident 2 submarine-launched missiles.

Mondale on Weapons Systems: Mondale has suggested that the U.S. hold up on the testing of anti-satellite systems and concentrate on deploying sea-launched nuclear cruise missiles pending negotiations with the Soviet Union. Mondale has further suggested that the MX missile be scrapped as well as the B-1 bomber while proceeding with the single warhead missile, Trident 2 submarine missiles and the Stealth bomber technology.

These are just a few of the points where the president and his opponent, Mr. Mondale differed with some regularity during this campaign and during the televised debates. As the debates moved on to Kansas City, the issues of the campaign moved along with the candidates, and it seemed that the same set of issues set the tone of the second debate.

One point that does stand out in this round of the debates was the statement that was made that it would be easy to call back missiles once they were fired. Staunchly the President denied that he said such a thing and the furor began in both camps. In the Kansas City debate, Mondale said "How could any man think that a nuclear missile, once fired could be called back. That's the most ridiculous thing that I've ever heard.

In response to that, the president said that what he meant was that sea-launched nuclear missiles could not be called back, but to avert a war, the submarines carrying the missiles could be called back before the missiles were launched.

Hours before the second televised debate, Reagan had charged Mondale with a faulty foreign policy record saying that "He is exposing us to dangerous, unnecessary risks." Meanwhile in the

Mondale camp, the Democratic challenger had accused the Reagan administration of illegal war actions in Nicaragua.

During the course of the debate, Mondale said, "A president has to know what is going on in order to make the right decision." Mondale alluded to the claim of a Nicaraguan rebel leader that it is the practice of his CIA-backed group to execute government officials who are deemed "criminals." A Pentagon intelligence report informed top Reagan administration officials of such assassinations more than two years ago. Secondly, Mondale brought out the controversial 90-page CIA manual written for rebels fighting the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. In his concluding remark, Mondale said, "I don't know which is worse, a president who doesn't know what his government is doing or a president knowing of this illegal action and approving it."¹⁰

During the second debate, the candidates mainly re-emphasized points in defense spending and domestic issues with no other points really coming to the forefront of this debate. And with this the debates ended, with Reagan holding a large lead over Mondale.

CONCLUSIONS

If prizes were awarded for "best verdict," I would have to say that it would go to the panel of debate judges selected by the Associated Press. The experts used a scorecard modeled after those used in student competition and came up with a quantified result: 174 points for Mondale and 157 points for Reagan, with six of the seven judges picking Mondale as the winner.

Mondale "was not whiny, he was not small, he was not picky," said the panel's chairman Dr. James J. Unger. "He met the GREAT COMMUNICATOR and he demonstrated that he was as much in command of the facts as Mr. Reagan was."¹¹

On a more downbeat note, some of the judges felt that Mondale was too bland and professorial while others thought that both men were off their feed.

Before the debate, Mondale's handlers had devised a plan to throw Reagan off-balance by totally upsetting expectations.

Kathleen Jamieson of the University of Maryland, who analyzed the forensics of the 1980 debates for the networks, theorizes that there are only four moments during the campaign when the voters might "open up" to the Mondale message. One was after the successful convention, and Mondale squandered it. The others came after the debates, including the October 11 vice-presidential face-off. "If Mondale wins, he's got to reinforce the message fast. If he doesn't win, it doesn't matter much what he does."¹²

This writer might add here that as one watched the debates, they were almost like invisible ink: it takes a few days for the message to fully develop and then a few more days to fully absorb the content of both messages in order to make a commitment to one candidate for whom we feel will give his all for four years.

NOTES

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- ¹NEWSWEEK, October 15, 1984 THE GREAT DEBATE
- ²NEWSWEEK, October 15, 1984.
- ³NEWSWEEK, October 15, 1984.
- ⁴NEWSWEEK, October 15, 1984.
- ⁵NEWSWEEK, October 15, 1984.
- ⁶NEWSWEEK, October 15, 1984.
- ⁷NEWSWEEK, October 15, 1984.
- ⁸NEWSWEEK, October 15, 1984.
- ⁹U.S. NEWS AND WORLD REPORT, September 24, 1984, WHERE THE CANDIDATES STAND.
- ¹⁰THE TENNESSEAN, Sunday October 21, 1984.
- ¹¹NEWSWEEK, October 15, 1984.
- ¹²NEWSWEEK, October 8, 1984.