

Memorandum about the First Nixon-Kennedy Debate

David L. Rosenbaum

ON the morning of September 1, 1960, Herb Klein and Pierre Salinger met in the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. to discuss the details of what would be the first televised presidential debate. Klein was press secretary for Republican candidate Vice President Richard Nixon and Salinger was press secretary for Democratic candidate Senator John F. Kennedy. Following this meeting, Salinger met with Ted Sorenson, a Kennedy advisor, and wrote the two-page memorandum to Klein featured in this article. Copies were also sent to Senator Kennedy, Sorenson, and J. Leonard Reinsch, Kennedy's radio and television strategist. The memo specifically addressed the number of media panelists that would be chosen and who would be allowed in the studio during the live sessions, including photographers hoping to capture the candidates in action. A total of 12 meetings between television network executives and each candidate's representatives would lay down the ground rules related to format, staging, directing, and technical issues.

A few weeks before this meeting, Richard Nixon had agreed to debate his opponent face-to-face on national television. Many on the Nixon staff and President Eisenhower felt it was a mistake to allow his lesser-known opponent a chance to share the stage in front of millions of American viewers. Nixon feared constant criticism from Kennedy and the media if he refused to debate. He also believed he could demolish the Massachusetts senator in a one-on-one meeting. Kennedy wanted five debates, and Nixon sought three; the logical compromise was four. The first debate was to take place in Chicago on Monday, September 26. The candidates would debate in Washington, D.C., on Friday, October 7, then on Thursday, October 13, in split locations—with Nixon in Hollywood and Kennedy in New York; and finally on Friday, October 21, in New York City.

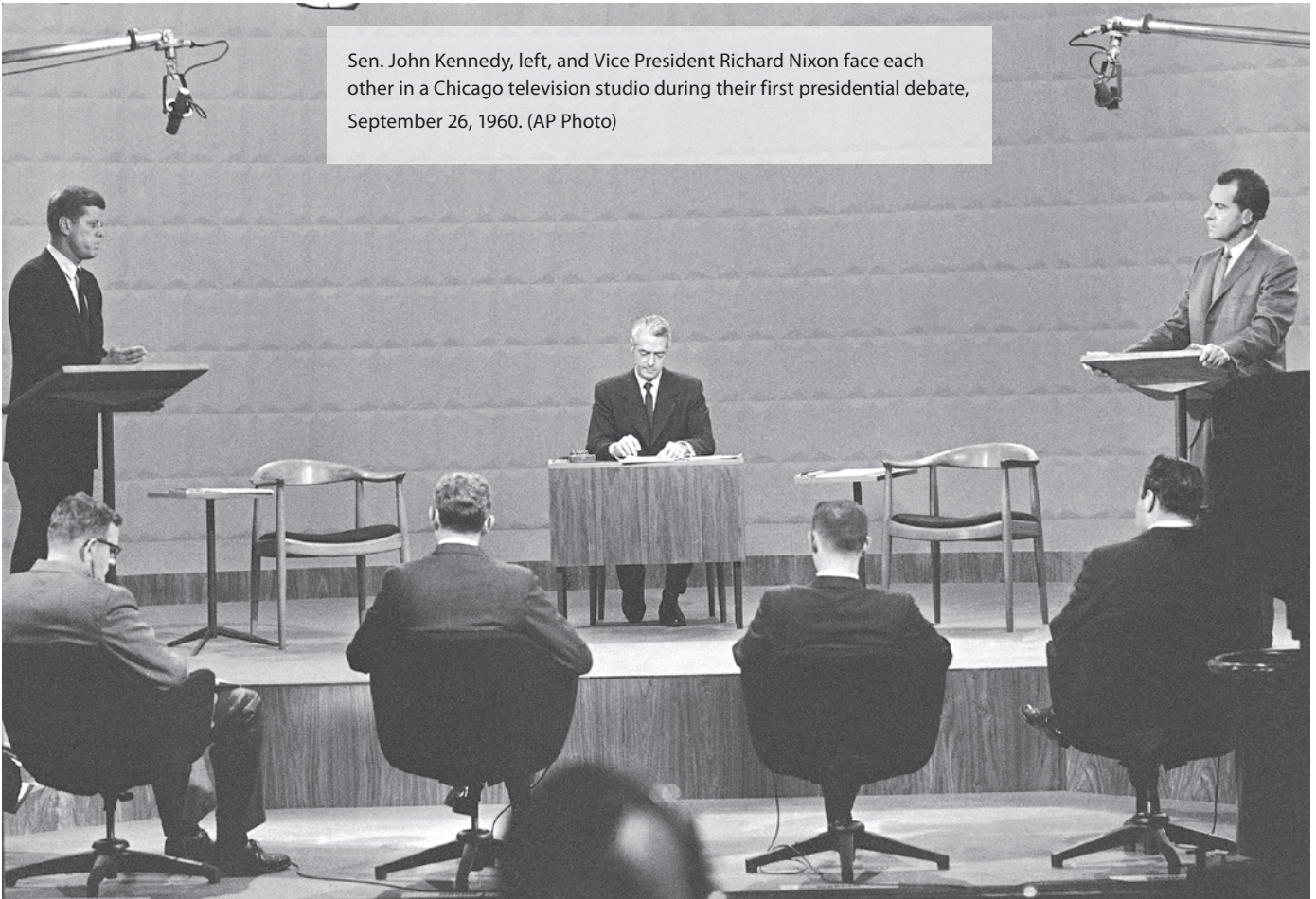
The two candidates took different approaches to prepare for the first debate. Kennedy was aware that Nixon had a history of doing well in political debates. This inspired the Kennedy team to conduct extensive research on each state's particular concerns, key national issues, and anything about Nixon. The Kennedy brain trust of Mike Feldman, Ted Sorenson, and Richard Goodwin brought a suitcase full of documents that were divided into 13 subject areas to the Ambassador East Hotel, where the Kennedy team occupied the top two floors. They then created cards with questions and answers for Kennedy to absorb and with which to quiz the candidate. Kennedy had also insisted early in the campaign to videotape all of his rallies and speeches. They analyzed each one to assess

his performance, seeking ways to improve his delivery style, correct any speaking errors, and to observe crowd reactions to his speeches. Kennedy was aggressive; taking the offensive to confront what was perceived as his greatest weakness, his lack of experience, by focusing on his work in Congress. Kennedy polished his opening and closing statements and continued to respond to questions from his team. On the night of the debate, Kennedy was well rested, confident, and ready.

Richard Nixon told his campaign manager Bob Finch, "I know how to debate." While preparing, Nixon refused to use film or a video recorder. His isolated approach did not use technology or much assistance from his staff. Nixon had pledged to campaign in all 50 states, which he accomplished, but at an exhaustive pace. He was forced to leave the campaign for 11 days when he was hospitalized to treat an infected knee. As the debate in Chicago approached, he largely ignored a book prepared by his staff that was filled with potential debate questions and responses. Nixon concentrated on his opening and closing statements rather than the debate's give-and-take. He did this alone. CBS producer Don Hewitt invited both candidates to a pre-production meeting to go over all aspects of the broadcast. Nixon declined, while Kennedy used the session to probe every staging detail. Hewitt said, "Kennedy took the thing far more seriously than Nixon. The vice president treated the debate as just another campaign appearance."

That night, September 26, 1960, the largest audience for a political event in the United States to that date saw and heard the

Sen. John Kennedy, left, and Vice President Richard Nixon face each other in a Chicago television studio during their first presidential debate, September 26, 1960. (AP Photo)



first of four presidential debates. Moderator Howard K. Smith opened the debate just after 7:30 p.m., Central Time, stating, “The candidates need no introduction.” And for the next hour, more than 70 million viewers out of America’s 179 million people witnessed four panelists ask, and the two candidates respond, to a total of 10 questions on domestic issues.

The Chicago debate was the first time that so many Americans saw their candidates face-to-face in a real competition. Each candidate presented an eight-minute opening statement followed by four reporters’ questions in rotation. Each candidate could respond to the other’s answers. Cameramen were allowed to show the reaction of each candidate while the other was speaking. John Kennedy looked tanned, wore a dark suit, and with the light background presented a sharp visual image. Richard Nixon was gray-faced and gray-suited. He was feverish and sweated under the hot overhead lights. His pale complexion blended into the background, exaggerating his ghostly appearance. Kennedy was calm, attentive, and alert, while Nixon looked tense, sickly, almost frightened. Keeping in mind that in 1960, most television sets only aired black and white, the visual impact of the first debate was remarkable; the stark contrast of the two faces was shocking. Richard Nixon responded to the questions as though judges were scrutinizing every word. He addressed all questions looking at his opponent while John Kennedy looked into the

camera and addressed himself to the television audience. As the first debate came to a close, moderator Smith said, “Thank you gentlemen. This hour has gone by all too quickly.” All in all, most people who watched agreed, Nixon had the edge on issues, Kennedy won on looks and image.

Before leaving the studio, Kennedy and Nixon posed for a final round of photographs. Nixon slipped out the back, while Kennedy emerged at the front entrance to greet his supporters. He had accomplished his goals; he had stood up to Nixon in a tough but non-confrontational manner. He projected a mature persona, and spoke directly to millions of Americans.

The results and impact of the debate rippled across the nation. Before the debate, many viewed Nixon as the favorite, with the little-known Kennedy as the underdog. Afterwards, the positions of the two were reversed. Reporters following Kennedy noticed a huge increase in the size and enthusiasm of the crowds after the first debate. Reporters traveling with Nixon said the vice president was disappointed in his performance. A Gallup Poll taken in the days following the Great Debate, as it has come to be called, found that Kennedy had a three-point edge over Nixon when Americans were asked who they would vote for. When asked, who won the debate, the result was Kennedy 43%, Nixon 23%, and those who called it even, 29%. More importantly, John Kennedy had a new level of confidence and

✓ Senator Kennedy
J. Leonard Reinsch
Ted Sorensen

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September 1, 1960

MEMORANDUM TO : Herb Klein
FROM : Pierre Salinger
SUBJECT : Joint Debates

Following our conversation this morning I discussed the arrangements with Ted Sorensen and he is in agreement with the plan we outlined.

For the record I would like to review our discussion of this morning:

(1) We will press for a selection of a five-man panel for the debates: two newspapermen, one magazine reporter and two representatives from radio/TV. This panel is to be selected from among the correspondents who cover Vice-President Nixon and Senator Kennedy from the period September 1, 1960 to September 21, 1960. On September 21, 1960 there will be a drawing by an impartial party of ten from among this group consisting of four newspapermen, two magazine representatives and four radio/TV correspondents. The night before the Chicago debate a group of five (as outlined above) will be selected from the ten. These five will then appear as the panel for the debate on September 26th. We will repeat this procedure for the subsequent debate. The subject of the panel for the two other shows will be discussed further when the format for these shows is clearly established.

(2) No press other than the panel members will be permitted in the studio during the time of the debate. A separate studio will be set up for the press with working arrangements so that they can file during the progress of the debate. We will attempt to have the networks set up a large screen in the viewing room.

(3) No photographers will be allowed in the studio other than two pool men represented ^{by} the United Press International and the Associated Press respectively. They will be allowed to shoot during

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the first five minutes of the debate without the use of flash bulbs.

Other photographers will be allowed to shoot before the debate begins. I suggest a cut-off time of 10 minutes before the debate starts for clearing the studio.

It was a pleasure meeting you this morning.

momentum. He began to speak and act like a president. Kennedy said after the election, “It was TV more than anything else that turned the tide.” Nixon would later say in his book *Six Crises*, “I had concentrated too much on substance and not enough on appearance. I should have remembered that a picture is worth a thousand words.”

When Election Day, November 8, finally arrived, the candidates were exhausted. Nixon had traveled approximately 65,000 miles, visiting all 50 states. Kennedy had logged nearly 44,000 miles, as he campaigned in 45 states, and the two had debated on live television four times. The American voters had made their choice. John Fitzgerald Kennedy became the 35th and youngest elected president of the United States, winning in one of the closest elections in United States history. He was the first American president to be Roman Catholic, Irish American, born in the twentieth century, and chosen in the first presidential election that included Alaska and Hawaii. This

one election, with its two candidates, three television networks, and four debates contributed to the highest voter turnout in American electoral history (63.1 percent). 

Note about the Document:

The memorandum from Pierre Salinger is from Collection JFK-POF: Papers of John F. Kennedy: President’s Office Files, 01/20/1961 – 11/22/1963. It is housed at the John F. Kennedy Library at Columbia Point in Boston, Mass.

DAVID L. ROSENBAUM is an education specialist and **LEE ANN POTTER** is the director of education and volunteer programs at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. Potter serves as the editor of *Teaching with Documents*, a regular feature in *Social Education*. You may reproduce the documents featured in this article in any quantity. For more information about the National Archives education program, visit www.archives.gov.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

Lee Ann Potter and David Rosenbaum

1. Ask students to brainstorm a list of events that people plan for (e.g., wedding, athletic tournament, school dance, or student council election). Next, ask them to list the tasks and details that go into planning such an event (e.g., logistics, location, materials, personnel, and materials). Compile their lists on the board, and discuss to what extent preparation influences an event’s outcome.
2. Provide students with a copy of the Salinger memo. Ask them to read it and respond to the following questions: When was it written? To whom was it sent? What was the memo about? Why was it written? Invite students to share their responses and discuss the importance of planning such an event. (This document can be found in the National Archives Archival Research Catalog [ARC] www.archives.gov/research/arc. Type ARC identifier number 193850 for the search.) Ask students to compare the details mentioned in the memo with the list they generated in teaching activity #1 and note the similarities.
3. Direct students to research and determine the differences in the organization and campaign strategies of both Kennedy and Nixon. Ask them to discuss these differences with a partner and together write a page detailing them.
4. Direct students to conduct research into the major issues of the 1960 election. Ask them to assume the role of one of the panelists and create three questions that they would have liked to ask both Kennedy and Nixon.
5. Divide the class into two groups. Find a quality recording on www.YouTube.com of the first debate between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Instruct the first group to watch the first debate between Kennedy and Nixon, and the second group to listen to it. (A sound recording is available on the John F. Kennedy Library website, at www.jfklibrary.org. Look under “Historical Resources,” Archives, Reference Desk, and Speeches of JFK. Click on “First Televised Presidential Debate, September 26, 1960.”) Encourage them to write down their impressions about how each candidate did and who they thought won the debate and why. Bring the two groups together to discuss their findings. Ask each group who won the debate, and record the results. Compare the findings. Lead a discussion with the entire class to analyze any similarities and differences that may have surfaced between these two groups regarding this first debate. Share with them information from the background essay about what contemporary polls reported.
6. Assign students to interview someone who watched the first Kennedy/Nixon debate and find out his or her impressions. Who did the person think won the debate? Why? Ask students to write a paragraph comparing their findings with the class conclusions in activity #5.
7. Visit the National Archives new www.Docsteach.org website to create an activity about Kennedy versus Nixon. From docsteach.org/tools, choose “Weighing the Evidence.” Choose from the approximately 120 documents about Kennedy and Nixon to populate an activity. Pose a central topic for students to explore about the election and pose two opposing historical conclusions in the interpretation boxes. Students will be able to closely examine each document and place it on the Weighing the Evidence scale according to how strongly it supports one of the interpretations. Share the completed activity with students in class or via the new activity’s unique URL.

For further reading on these historic debates:

- Kraus, Sydney (Editor). *The Great Debates: Kennedy vs. Nixon*, 1960. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977.
- Matthews, Christopher. *Kennedy & Nixon: The Rivalry that Shaped Postwar America*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- Rorabaugh, William J. *The Real Making of the President: Kennedy, Nixon, and the 1960 Election*, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2009.
- White, Theodore H. *The Making of the President 1960*, New York: Harper Collins, 1960.