

The First TV Debate

Lead: Neck and neck in the polls, John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon arrived in Chicago for their first televised debate.

Intro.: "A Moment in Time" with Dan Roberts.

Content: Television had been a part of presidential elections for a decade but lacked the powerful influence that later years would give. When the two candidates began this series of four debates they hoped to sharpen the issues they considered vital but each candidate also hoped to gain a

favorable advantage before a large national audience.

Actually Nixon made a strategic blunder in even participating in the debates at all, and this is unrelated to either candidate's performance. He was by far the best known of the two, had twice been elected to national office though admittedly on a ticket with the most popular politician in America, had vast experience in foreign affairs and solid personal support nationally. There was no reason why he should have met Kennedy. To give the junior Senator from Massachusetts Senator a platform in which he would appear to be an equal with the Vice-President of the United States could only work to

Nixon's disadvantage and he never made that mistake again in running for President. On the other hand, Kennedy had everything to gain and very little to lose.

Those who listened to the debate on the radio said the encounter was either a tie or gave the edge to Nixon. On television the result was different. In August Nixon had injured his knee while speaking in Greensboro, North Carolina and had to spend two vital weeks recuperating in the hospital. Therefore, when he arrived in Chicago he had lost five pounds, did not fit into his shirt collar, seemed haggard and pale, this last due in part to the make-up required to cover his very heavy beard, a classic five o'clock shadow.

Kennedy arrived rested and tan, made his points clearly and listened to Kennedy's with a slightly amused expression which reflected his growing disdain for his opponent.

Television magnified their differences and Kennedy looked better. In an election that was so close that 12,000 votes in strategic precincts nationwide would have changed its outcome, the first televised could very well have made the difference.

"A Moment in Time" is produced at the University of Richmond. This is Dan Roberts.

Resources

White, Theodore S. *The Making of the President, 1960*. New York, NY: Atheneum Publishers, 1961.

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