

There's No Debate: The Format Works

By Jeff Greenfield

It's become almost compulsory these days to bemoan the format of national campaign debates. You know the patter — and you'll certainly hear it tonight — "Why, it's not a real debate at all, but a joint press conference where intrusive journalists pose disconnected questions and the rigid time limits guarantee little more than scripted recitations of carefully packaged positions."

Well, is that what happened when George Bush and Michael Dukakis squared off at Winston-Salem, or when Lloyd Bentsen and Dan Quayle squared off in Omaha? Not at all. Instead the much-maligned format produced the most significant impacts we have had into the thinking and character of the candidates since the general election campaign began on Labor Day.

Remember what happened when Annie Grover of the Orlando Sentinel asked Mr. Bush to expand on his anti-abortion position? What, she asked, would happen to women who sought abortions after they had been re-feminized?

Mr. Bush's uncertain answer, which raised the distinct possibility of pursuing criminal sanctions, was more than a temporary campaign embarrassment. The exchange told us that in fact Mr. Bush hadn't pursued the subtleties of the abortion issue. It was exactly the kind of tough but fair prodding that debates are supposed to produce.

And what happened when my ABC colleague, Peter Jennings, asked Governor Dukakis about the impression that he was "passionless . . . tech-

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nocratic . . . the smartest clerk in the world"?

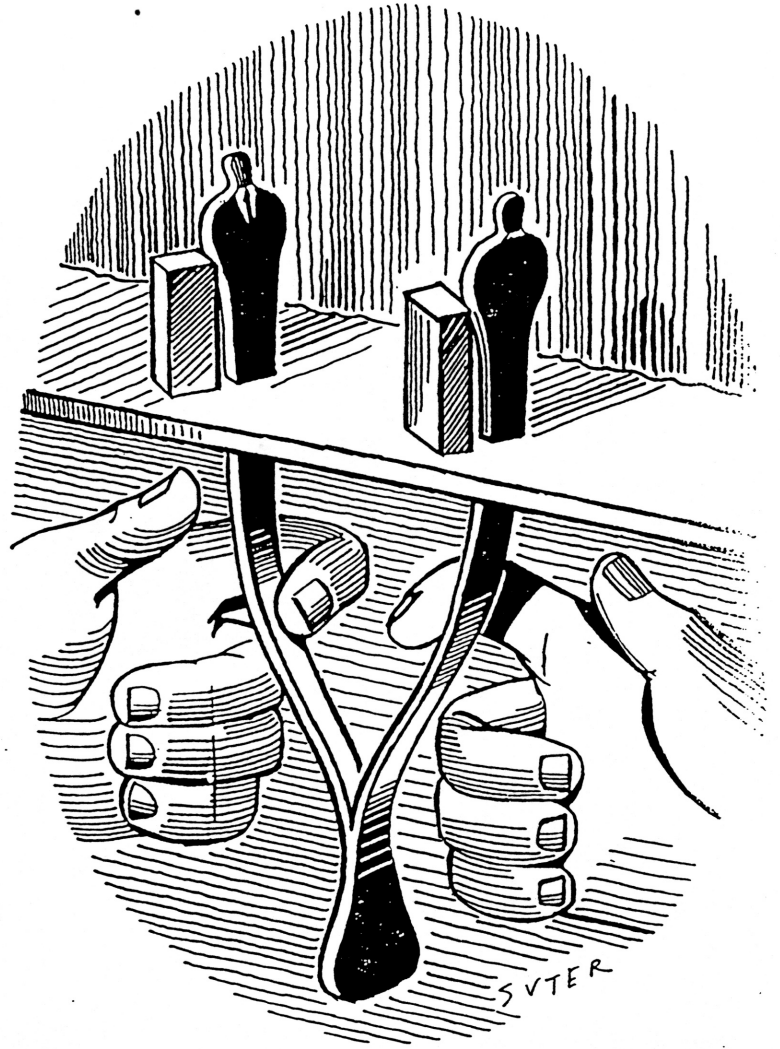
Instead of talking about the link between competent government and better lives for citizens — how safe streets and good schools result from taking public service seriously — Mr. Dukakis offered a mechanical assertion that "I care very, very deeply about people." Why? Because Mr. Dukakis is in fact — as his biographers and closest aides have asserted again and again — a man immersed in process. The question proved a political Rorschach test, and the Governor reinforced the sense that he is a public figure who does not care to, or does not know, how to touch the heart.

Even when candidates retreat from such questions into canned responses, that maneuver itself can be revealing. When Judy Woodruff of the MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour asked Senator Quayle why so many in his own campaign held him in low regard, Mr. Quayle responded with an obviously rehearsed recitation of his qualifications, a response he offered, almost word for word, twice more.

One plausible explanation for the lopsided instant audience reaction — that Senator Quayle lost the debate — is that viewers saw the chasm between the questions and the answers.

Does this mean the debate format only works with provocative, Perry Mason-style questions? No. Sometimes the format can help save a candidate from a blunder — or at least, try to. At the second Ford-Carter debate in 1976, Max Frankel of The New York Times offered President Ford a chance to modify his startling opinion that Eastern Europe was not under Soviet domination.

Had Mr. Ford been listening, instead of stubbornly repeating his assertion, the whole question would have been quickly forgotten — and Mr. Ford might have won what



turned out to be a very close election.

Now suppose we had a "classic" open-ended debate, with no journalists posing sharply honed questions. What would candidates do? They would exchange the best scripts that their most talented wordsmiths could provide and we would be treated to the lyrical, tough-minded, programmatic formulations of speechwriters such as Peggy Noonan and Robert Shrum.

We saw this in 1960, when the very first Nixon-Kennedy debate featured

eight-minute opening statements. What resulted — apart from the unforgettable image of Richard Nixon looking as if he were awaiting root canal work — were undigested chunks of warmed-over campaign rhetoric.

Of course it would be exhilarating to try an alternative format. I'd love to see the candidates clash with a single moderator who posed questions, followed up distortions or exaggerations and probed for intellectual dishonesties.

In fact, my own fantasy includes a general knowledge snap quiz at the high school level.

"Mr. Vice President, a train leaves New York at 8 A.M. going 100 miles an hour. Another train leaves Chicago at 9 A.M. going 80 miles an hour. When do the two trains meet, and how much should Amtrak subsidize them?"

Such delicious possibilities, however, do not justify the denigration of a format that has admirably served the central purpose of these debates: to force the candidates out of their hermetically sealed campaigns and into an arena where the voters actually get a sense of who these candidates are and what they believe. □

The Persian Gulf crisis...the savings-and-loan scandal...the battle over the budget...those are the stories you're most likely to see covered when you turn on the nightly news these days. They'll also likely be among the events and issues prominently featured on those year-in-review segments. But what about the stories you *didn't* see very much of in 1990? The ones judged too complex to explain or simply not as dramatic as demonstrations, plane crashes and troop buildups? TV GUIDE asked five of the best-known journalists in TV news to tell what they thought were some of the big stories that, for one reason or another, failed to get the attention they deserved.

Our respondents surprised us. Several of the issues and trends they say were neglected by TV news

were, in fact, heavily covered—but, in the opinion of these journalists, they were reported from the wrong news angle. Other stories barely get reported at all—and for that, some of our experts blame news editors' refusal to see beyond each day's major events and consider long-range social problems. There seems to be no solution to this blind spot.

"In a funny way, we won't know for another year what stories have been under-covered," says ABC's Jeff Greenfield, one of the journalists we queried. "For example, some people say the Philippines is on the verge of complete collapse. If [that country] were to blow up in six months... we're going to look up and say, 'Gee, how come we didn't know it?'" Below, Greenfield and his colleagues tell what they know about their medium's shortsightedness.

Jeff Greenfield:
Are the banking and insurance industries in trouble? What happened to the war on drugs?

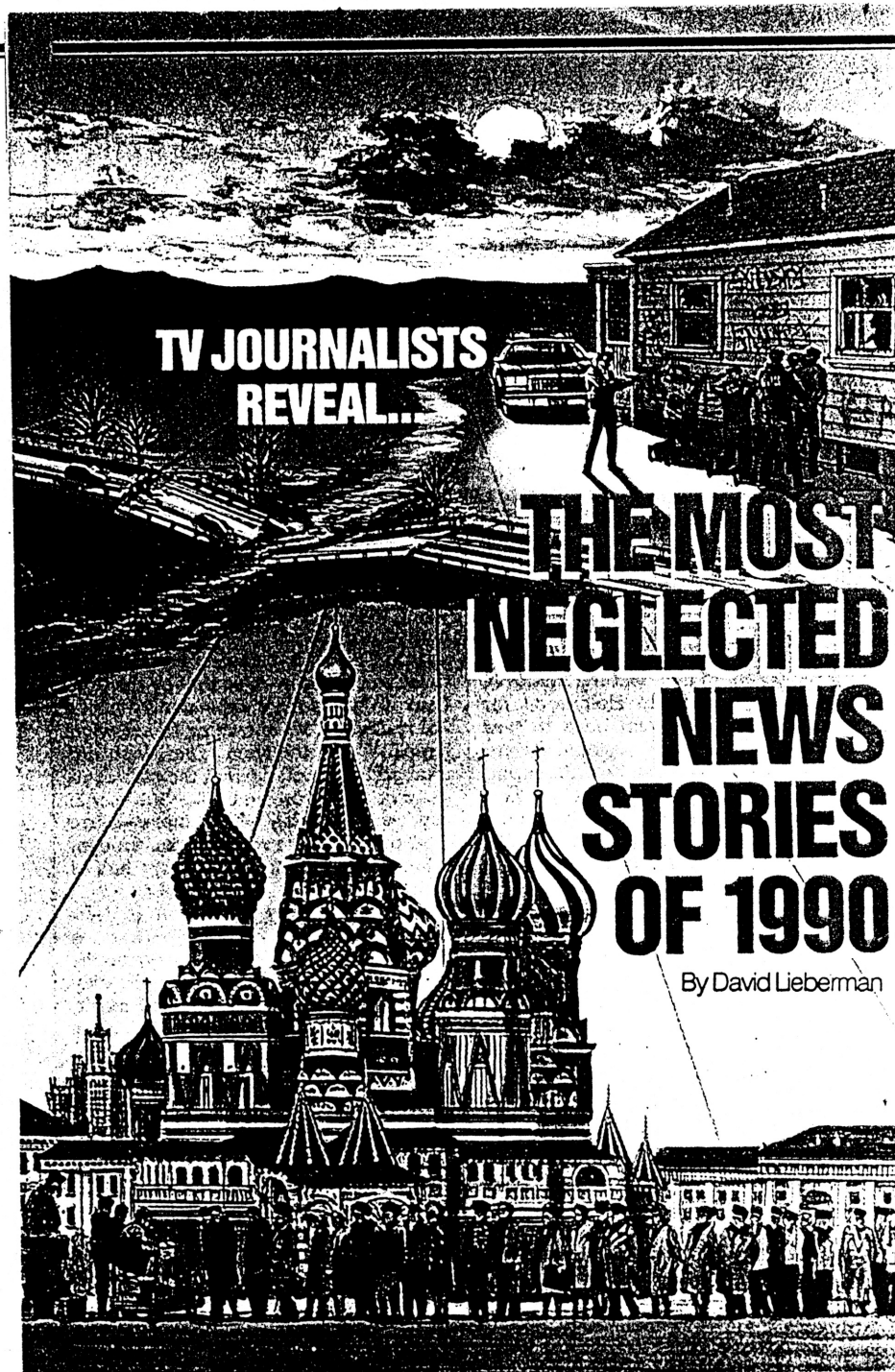


ABC's political and media analyst says that once the savings-and-loan crisis became apparent, reporters should have looked at other sectors of the economy that might be endangered by massive debt problems of their own. "If the disease that has afflicted the S&Ls is, in fact, lurking in the banking and insurance industries, then we've got a real problem," says Greenfield. He understands why producers have dragged their feet: "These are complicated stories that need a lot of research and investigation. They are picture-poor. Television is always better at communicating visceral rather than abstract in-

formation. And banking and insurance are words that put the average viewer and correspondent to sleep."

The same can't be said about the drug war: remember the ubiquitous stories last year about "a plague upon the land" and "a nation under siege"? Yet journalists apparently went cold turkey on the issue in 1990. "What happened?" asks Greenfield. "Did people stop

using drugs? I'm not saying we shouldn't have done what we did in 1989, but you went from this near-hysteria to a kind of, oh yeah, the war on drugs." The problem: the President moved on to other concerns and, once that happened, newscasters had trouble sticking with the story. Says Greenfield: "You've done it. You've done it twice. You've done it three times. Well, you sort of think you've done it." →



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