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ABC's Jeff Greenfield Has Fun With Politics

A Great Fix For a Political Junkie

Jeff Greenfield's Monday night election series is fun for him and enlightening for the viewer

BY DAVID FRIEDMAN

It's the morning after — and Jeff Greenfield is still feeling the glow. Call it the romance of politics.

The night before, Greenfield, political and media analyst for ABC News' "Nightline," had been part of the horde that descended on Winston-Salem, N. C., site of the first presidential debate of the 1988 campaign. Now, his digestive system still doing battle with an airline breakfast, Greenfield is back in Manhattan, about to give birth to a television show.

In a few hours, he will anchor what many call the best regularly scheduled political program on television. Airing 30 minutes after "Monday Night Football," it's "Nightline's" Monday night political series. The one dealing exclusively with the 1988 presidential campaign. The one without Ted Koppel (he gets the night off). The one with Jeff Greenfield.

Greenfield has carried this series on his own since October, and he'll continue to run with it until Election Eve. In many ways, it's a job Greenfield was born to do — even if he does prefer baseball metaphors to those from football. One thing's for sure: He's having a ball doing it.

At this particular moment, Greenfield's talking with "Nightline" executive producer Rick Kaplan in Kaplan's office on West 66th Street. The subject of tonight's show is the fallout from the Bush-Dukakis debate. The two men are discussing a satire they commissioned for the broadcast, a puppet show in which figures representing Bush and Dukakis spoof what happened in Winston-Salem. Kaplan and Greenfield have just read the script. They're happy, up to a point.

"I'm worried about the way Bush and Dukakis take shots at each other's

wives," Kaplan says. "Seems a little scuzzy. I don't mind if they get personal. But only if it's about each other."

"I agree," Greenfield says. "Maybe Bush should say, 'Why don't you get out your 25-year-old lawnmower and mow those eyebrows.'"

A production assistant interrupts to say that one of Greenfield's guests that night, columnist William Safire, has expressed reservations about appearing with a "circus act."

"Just tell him he's on with [New Republic editor] Michael Kinsley and two puppets," Greenfield says. "The rest of the circus has the night off."

The conversation turns to the broadcast's opening tease.

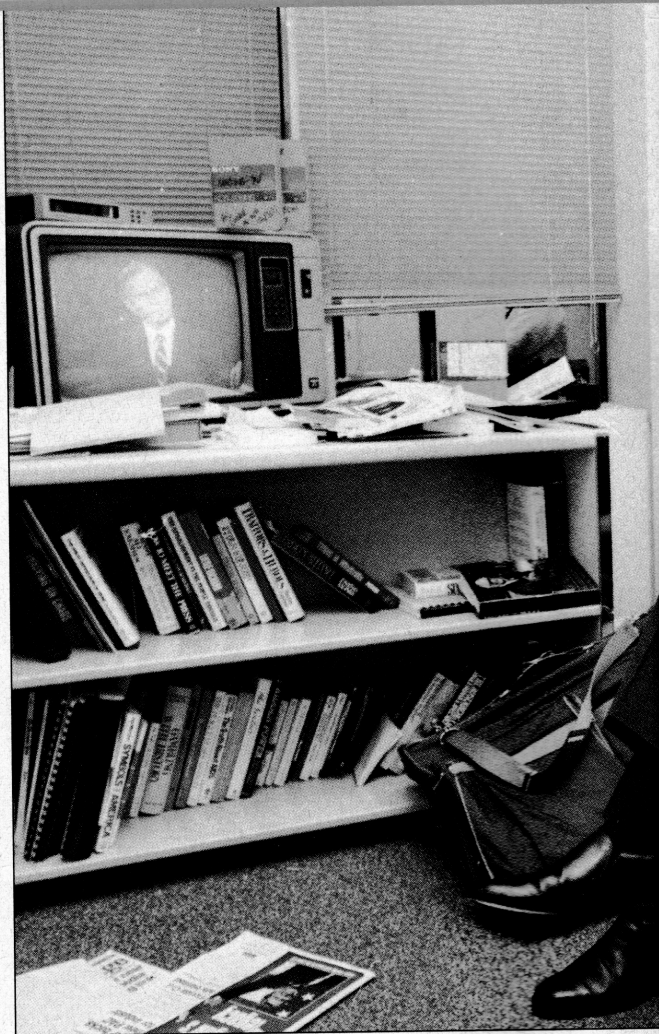
"We need something to put the debate in context," Kaplan says. "Something showing what it was — and wasn't."

"Well, it wasn't the Three Stooges," Greenfield says, "or the Founding Fathers."

Kaplan and Greenfield lock eyes. Seconds later, they agree. The show will open with a clip of the Three Stooges, then one from the film "1776," then one from the Bush-Dukakis debate — over which Greenfield will say, "Somewhere between this [the Stooges] . . . and this [the Fathers] . . . was *this* [Bush and Dukakis]."

The meeting ends on a high note — with no one higher than Jeff Greenfield.

"This," he says, while walking out of Rick Kaplan's office, "is like being



Greenfield prepares for a 'Nightline' broadcast by

paid to watch baseball."

Jeff Greenfield and politics. You'd be hard-pressed to find a better marriage. Put this combination on television — a medium Greenfield has written for, about and criticized on camera (for "CBS Sunday Morning") — and you have an even better match. Oddly, it all began on radio.

The year was 1952. Greenfield — in his own words, a "normal, neurotic 9-year-old Jewish kid from the Upper West Side" — was at his grandfather's country house. His mother, a political junkie, spent that summer listening to the Republican and Democratic national conventions on radio. She had company.

"I listened with her and couldn't get enough," Greenfield said, just over 36 years later. "What passion! It was like a pitched battle. This kid was hooked."

The kid eventually became editor of the student newspaper at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where he



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / V. RICHARD HARG

rewinding videotapes in his office at ABC.

“Remember them?”

After graduating from Yale Law School, Greenfield took a low-level job in Sen. Robert Kennedy’s office. When Kennedy sought the Democratic presidential nomination in 1968, Greenfield became one of his speechwriters. The boy who’d grown up listening to political conventions on the radio might have been happier playing shortstop for the Yankees. But not by much.

But the euphoria died on the floor of a Los Angeles hotel. And, after a period of mourning, Greenfield took a job with political consultant David Garth and worked on campaigns for New York Gov. Hugh Carey and California Sen. John Tunney.

Greenfield liked being on the inside of the political process. But there was a “but.” There were things he wanted to say about politics — but, as an insider, he couldn’t say them. Better to become an outsider, he realized. Better to cover politics, than to let politics cover him.

So he left Garth and wrote books about the

things that interest him most — politics and television. Among the results: “The Advance Man: An Offbeat Look at What Really Happens in Political Campaigns” and “Television: The

First Fifty Years.”

In 1979, Greenfield signed on as TV critic for “CBS Sunday Morning.” No wimp, he panned CBS’ entire fall lineup. CBS used him in the anchor booth to cover the 1980 political conventions. But in 1982, Van Gordon Sauter, the newly installed president of CBS News, told Greenfield he wouldn’t be part of CBS’ off-year election coverage. Political analysis is “boring,” Sauter said. Greenfield’s agent called ABC and his client joined “Nightline” a few weeks later as political and media analyst. CBS received no compensation. Not even a first-round draft choice.

Having been a TV journalist, TV critic and TV image maker, Greenfield probably understands television as well as anyone.

“Sure, television’s powerful,” Greenfield said in a recent interview, “but not as powerful as some people think. Does it elect our presidents? No. If it were that simple, Reagan would have died after the first debate with Mondale. Those who think TV does elect our presidents confuse the stage with the script.”

What TV political coverage does best, according to Greenfield, is convey a sense of character. “No matter how much a media analyst tries to coach someone, a level of reality comes through. TV gives a sense of who these people really are. Mike Dukakis’ problem with warmth is no media creation. It goes to the roots of who Mike Dukakis is. And the electorate learned this on television.”

Still, Greenfield’s not blind to TV’s
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Jeff Greenfield says that covering politics ‘is like being paid to watch baseball.’

Greenfield works with senior researcher Margaret Kolal.

Greenfield Gives Political Junkies a Fix

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faults. "There's still too much emphasis on process over issues — the 'horse race' syndrome," he calls it. "And, as a result, people often forget that the election is really about something."

Except on "Nightline." With Greenfield sitting in the anchor chair each Monday night, "Nightline" is the place where a new generation of political junkies finds the sizzle *and* the steak — not only who's ahead and why, but the substance of the candidates' positions.

"Politics is important, but it's also fun," Greenfield said. "Listen, the last thing I want to do is open a show by saying this is Part Twelve in a continuing series on Third World debt."

Instead, Greenfield's the kind of guy who took a crew to New Hampshire

the day after the 1984 election to mark the beginning of the 1988 campaign. "Do you have a reservation for Bradley, initial B," Greenfield asked a Manchester, N.H., innkeeper on the air.

He's also the guy who, at the 1988 Republican convention, answered the question, "Who will be Bush's running mate?" by musing, "Billy Martin?"

It's this talent for winging it that caught Rick Kaplan's eye in the first place. "We wanted Jeff for 'Nightline' because he's one of the sharpest political minds in the business — and one of the wittiest," Kaplan said. "It's not a combination that comes along too often."

Which isn't to say there isn't room for improvement. "Just once," Kaplan said, "I'd like to see Jeff arrive on the set without food on his tie." But seri-

ously, folks, Kaplan's biggest hope is that, over time, Greenfield will learn how to get more of the off-camera Greenfield wit and warmth *on* camera.

Greenfield sees the need for polishing up his presentation. But there's a line he's wary about crossing.

"Sure, I want to do better," he said. "I *like* this business. A lot. But it's important to me that I never become *too* hooked on this TV thing, because I've seen what it can do. There are some people around here who are like vampires. If they're not on TV for three days, they shrivel up and die."

Here, Greenfield paused for effect.

"You know, there are lots of wonderful ways to spend your life," he said, "and, God knows, being on television is one of them.

"It is, however, only *one* of them." ●