Finding a starting point for a production diary of the 1976 presidential and vice-presidential debates was not easy. Such grand schemes do not spring up full-blown at any one moment, and there was much preliminary activity that contributed to the evolution of the debates as they finally appeared on the air. Other parts of this book cover much of that pre-1976 legal and organizational activity which made it possible for the debates to take place. Our purpose is to examine, as we did in 1960, the influences and pressures that shaped the debates into TV and radio programs broadcast to millions of Americans in the fall of 1976.1

In September 1975 Jim Karayn had been hired by the League of Women Voters to produce a series of primary election forums to be televised on PBS. Serious thinking about the prospect of the League presenting presidential debates began in March 1976.2 Karayn was named project director.

Karayn had spent twenty years in local and national television news and public affairs. He had been with NBC News and was bureau chief and producer for NET in Washington; in the early 1970s he was a founder and president of NPACT, the National Public Affairs Center for Television. In that capacity he had supervised the production of documentaries and special events coverage, including Watergate and impeachment hearings for PBS.

On April 26, Karayn, Ruth Clusen, president of the League of Women Voters, and Peggy Lampl, League executive director, met in New York with top executives of the three commercial television networks to discuss the possibility of holding presidential debates.3 The meetings were brief and circumscribed by the political, legal, and regulatory constraints treated elsewhere in this book. The dialogue was strained. On May 5 at the League’s annual convention in New York, Clusen announced that the League would sponsor the debates. In May and June the presidents of NBC and ABC endorsed the idea and agreed that their networks would carry the debates, if they occurred; CBS did not firmly commit itself to broadcasting the debates until the Monday before the first debate in Philadelphia in September. The League staff was still small, and money was thin. By early July the League was deeply committed to the debates. A steering committee made up of such national figures as Theodore H. White, Douglass
Cater, and others had been formed; former FCC chairman and present Chicago communications attorney Newton Minow, former Undersecretary of the Treasury Charles Walker, and New York attorney Rita Hauser were named co-chairs of the debates project.

Karayn had become, by his own admission, the leading student of the 1960 debates. He interviewed virtually everyone still alive who was connected with the Nixon-Kennedy confrontations. He had distilled out of that effort the basic ideas he felt were crucial to the success of the debates in 1976. More ideas would come later, and more problems would emerge, but Karayn's thinking in July and August clearly delineated the shape the debates were to take.

Karayn told the authors that the League had to try to make the debates more than prime-time, super-publicized, "Meet The Press" style events. He was concerned that holding the debates at any cost might easily become the prevailing attitude, as it had in 1960. He referred to the authors' earlier conclusions regarding the 1960 debates:

...the networks did not produce the programs—they had no choice concerning the talent, did not choose the time and place, date or script (format). The networks came out second best on the formats for the programs, but this, to them, was not as important as having the programs on the air.5

Karayn told us that at first he felt our statement was too strong, but that former CBS President Frank Stanton had agreed that it was not. He clearly understood that many of the problems the League would face would be the same problems that had confronted the networks in 1960. He felt it would be hard to innovate too much since it was in the framework of 1960 that the candidates were basing their thinking; it would be difficult to get them to agree to much that was radically different from the previous events.

Karayn and many others who would be close to the debates in 1976 had looked at the 1960 recordings, and had found the broadcasts stilted, formal, and as one observer put it, "antique in style, demeanor, audio, and everything else."6 Karayn said that he wanted the debates this time to deal with the big issues facing the nation, that a major flaw of the 1960 debates had been that the questions tended to be too topical and controversial and were not aimed at getting responses on major issues. So, though he felt the candidates were "thinking '60," he wanted to try to develop a format that would give the American voters more information about the candidates than they could get from the evening TV news, the Sunday afternoon panel shows, political commercials, or reading newspapers and news magazines. Karayn had referred to the primary election forums as "voter comparative shopper's guides," and said he thought about the debates in the same way.7

The options talked about at the time included pure debate, but Karayn thought that would be dull viewing. He was intrigued by steering committee member Douglass Cater's strong support for the so-called Oregon debate format.8 But again, he thought the candidates would resist radical change, although he said it might be possible to get them to try out a version of the Oregon format in the last debate.

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Karayn had said repeatedly that he was against opening statements. He showed that the 1960 debate format allowed eight-minute opening statements, and four-minute closing statements, which took up approximately half of the program. He did think there might be closing statements to allow the candidates to summarize what they had said, and perhaps to respond to each other. As to time, Karayn wanted the debates to be sixty minutes long. At the first steering committee meeting it had been agreed that each debate would have a broad theme: the first would focus on domestic affairs; the second, on foreign affairs; the last, on the role of the presidency. Further, Karayn advocated limiting the number of issues taken up in each debate, and he continued to urge that throughout the debate period.

Karayn wanted a panel of newsmen and newswomen to ask the questions, but he thought the number should be reduced from four to three—one from broadcasting, one from print, and one to represent the editorial side of news magazines or newspapers. The selection of the news panel had been a big problem in 1960, and it became a bigger problem in 1976. Karayn maintained that the selection of the questioners ought to be done by the League steering committee. But, he had learned that in 1960 Kennedy's press secretary, Pierre Salinger, had raised a ruckus about the lack of newspaper representation on the questioners' panel (which led to an elaborate lottery system and changes in the later panels). Karayn therefore devised a plan to have the League draw up a large list of reporters and then winnow it down. Those names would be shown to the candidates' representatives, and the League would then eliminate any persons to which either or both sides had strong objections. Karayn thought that that procedure would be diplomatically sound and that it would be acceptable to the candidates. Later, he would change his mind. Panel selection was to become a major issue with the broadcast networks, and a frustrating and time-consuming hassle for the project staff.

Karayn's background in television news and public affairs, of course, made him very aware of the other elements of such a huge undertaking, e.g., logistics and staging, and of the implications of televising the events. Later, there would be charges that the debates were staged for TV, but Karayn had said all along that the League had to be realistic about the needs of television—lighting, set design, positioning of the cameras and of the candidates.

The League of Women Voters had always had an audience at its candidate events, no matter where they had taken place, so an audience was part of the League's (and Karayn's) plan from the beginning. While it isn't always easy to fill the hall when the candidates are running for minor offices, in the case of presidential debates everyone wants to get in, and there is a huge press contingent as well. Karayn wanted to stage the debates in small auditoriums and in locations with nearby facilities to take care of the hundreds of reporters who would follow the events. How the audience would act was another problem. At the Forums, he said, the audience reaction had had an effect on the way the candidates responded.

As to location, Karayn knew that the networks and the candidates would have to have a say. Candidate travel schedules could dictate some locations, as they had in 1960. The networks would be less concerned about locations (they were much more flexible technically in 1976 than in 1960), but coverage
requirements would still demand close liaison. Finally, such matters as how to arrange the set, where people would stand or sit, and whether there would be reaction shots of one candidate while the other was speaking, and/or of the audience, would be matters the candidates would have to agree on in advance.

A remarkable amount of Karayn's summer planning survived to become the core of the 1976 debates. Douglass Cater pushed hard for the “Oregon debate” and wrote a long report, and a column about it in the *Washington Post*. The planners still wanted more give and take between the candidates. Karayn promoted the idea of having some panel questions and some face-to-face discussion. By August 24 Karayn was encouraged that this might be arranged, since Carter press secretary Jody Powell and Rogers Morton, GOP campaign chairman, had said so on a television news program. Powell said Carter wanted less of a news conference format and more of a free exchange of views. Morton said he thought the 1960 debates had prevented real discussion between the candidates. But Karayn seems to have cooled on the “Oregon debate” idea. He told the steering committee he thought the questioner panel was needed to stimulate the candidates, and was also aware that past man-to-man and Oregon-style primary debates didn't generate any excitement.

The first negotiation session with the candidates' representatives took place in Washington, D.C., the afternoon of August 26 at the Mayflower Hotel, the site of some of the 1960 meetings. Earlier that day Karayn had met with members of the League steering committee for a final strategy session and had asked for some final guidance. He said, “I want to know if we have any other ground rules; is there a place where we will refuse to step across in terms of conditions. I want to know—in 1960 it was said by everybody who participated that they felt that the need to get the debates on television was so important that any kind of issue about content, format, number, dates, all of that, was so miniscule in comparison to having the debates.” Karayn says that question was really never answered, except to say: “Jim, we want these debates, period, and I understood what that meant.”

Newton Minow emphasized that it was important to have a place and a time firmly in mind and to present them to the candidates' representatives as a certainty, at least for the first debate. So, the steering committee chose Tuesday, September 28, at the Chase Park Plaza Hotel in St. Louis. Karayn later commented: “We just picked a place, we wanted some place neutral, not Chicago because that was where the first debate had taken place in 1960. And, nobody ever goes to St. Louis for this, so why not St. Louis? We always assumed the place and date would change.”

Those attending the first negotiation session were: Karayn, Minow, Charls Walker, Rita Hauser, Ruth Clusen, and Peggy Lampl for the League; for Ford: presidential counsel Michael Raoul-Duval, former FCC chairman Dean Burch, and former attorney-general William Ruckelshaus; for Carter: press secretary Jody Powell, TV advisor Barry Jagoda, and campaign advisor Gerry Rafshoon. Observing for Democratic vice-presidential candidate Walter Mondale was his administrative assistant, Richard Moe. GOP vice-presidential candidate Robert Dole was not represented.

The League proposed the format for the first debate: one hour in length, no opening statements, questions from a panel of journalists, the last twenty

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or thirty minutes to include face-to-face discussion between the two candidates, closing statements. Limits on answers to questions and rebuttals would be 2:30 and 1:30, respectively.

The League also proposed that the project co-chairs, Minow, Walker, and Hauser, and League president Ruth Clusen handle the moderator's role through the four debates. That idea was turned down by the candidates' representatives, and it was agreed that moderators with professional experience would be chosen by the League.¹⁴

The League had suggested specific titles for each debate: no. 1: “America’s Challenge at Home”; no. 2: “America’s Goal in the World”; no. 3: “The Vice-presidential Debate”; no. 4: “Making Government Work, the Role of the Presidency.”¹⁵ The Carter people wanted the sessions to be open and freewheeling. They feared that Ford would be well briefed on a specific subject, and initially they held out for open discussion in all debates. This issue was not settled at the August 26 meeting.

Also discussed were the length of the debates and the dates on which they would occur. The Ford representatives wanted longer debates—ninety minutes—on the theory that Carter would not hold up as well as Ford during an extended period. They also wanted to start as early in September as possible. Karayn suggested a compromise from the League's one-hour proposal: that the debates last seventy-five minutes. That was rejected by both sides because it would assure instant analysis by the commentators, as the networks filled out the remaining fifteen minutes until the next normal program break.

The Ford people were still toying with the possibility of four presidential debates, instead of three, so a compromise was worked out. William Ruckelshaus said he would agree to three debates by the party ticket leaders, if the Carter side would be willing to start the debates earlier in September. Tentatively they agreed on September 23.

The issue of an audience was also discussed. The League had both historic and practical reasons for the presence of an audience, and it had been told by its lawyers that an audience would make the sessions “more legal” as bona fide news events. The candidates' representatives were wary that an audience's reactions might be disruptive. Then too, they feared that the candidates would play to the studio audience rather than to the much larger TV audience. This matter and many others were also left up in the air. What came out of the first negotiation session was a tentative agreement that there might be some debates. They agreed that if debates were held, at least the first one would be ninety minutes and would deal with domestic policy and the economy. They agreed that there would be an audience, but that television would not be allowed to take pictures of it. They agreed to meet again on September 1.

In the meantime, Karayn was concerned about the cool reception given to the proposal that the candidates question each other directly. He held several separate sessions with the candidates' representatives in the five days between the two meetings, to try to get them to agree to the concept, but he was not successful. At the September 1 negotiation session both candidates' groups firmly rejected the idea.

Also on September 1 the date of the first debate, September 23, was made firm. The other dates were still undecided, but it was agreed those could be
worked out later, roughly in the weeks of October 3, 11, and 18. Neither side wanted to have a debate during the week before the election.

The sticky issue of how the questioner panel would be chosen had been on Karayn’s mind since he first proposed that the candidates’ representatives might have input into who might be considered. He had told the steering committee that he now thought the issue could be troublesome, and that instead of letting the candidates’ representatives see the list of proposed panelists, the League should make its own decisions and announce them to the candidates. But when the candidates’ representatives heard that the League would select the panelists, they asked to be allowed to make suggestions. The candidates’ representatives were told that they could suggest up to fifteen names in each of the three categories—print, broadcast, and magazine/wire services—for each debate. The League would then choose the three panelists from among those and other names, and would inform the candidates of the selection before inviting the panelists. To alter the League’s decision, the candidates’ representatives would have to show proof that a panelist was extremely biased in favor of the opposing candidate. Finally, all agreed not to discuss this arrangement with anyone else.

The negotiators did not agree on any of the sites, but they did decide the debates would not be held in hotel ballrooms or in Washington. Unresolved was a whole list of things: technical details, set design, whether the candidates would sit or stand, staging.

**On to Philly**

The League of Women Voters has emphasized that the negotiations for the debates were handled in two meetings, as compared to the dozen or so before the 1960 debates. Of course, this view has a lot to do with how they defined a meeting. The League project group had many meetings and there was a lot of internal discussion about format. And, it is clear that the candidates’ representatives and Jim Karayn had meetings and phone calls about the production of the debates even before the final agreements on September 1. The two men closest to the broadcast production for Carter and Ford, respectively, were Barry Jagoda and William Carruthers. Jagoda, thirty-three, had worked for NBC and CBS news in New York and Washington in the late sixties. He moved up to associate producer and producer with CBS, covering major news stories; pools, documentaries, instant specials, political campaigns, and election nights followed. In 1975 he became a partner in a media and production firm. In 1976 he joined the Carter campaign as television advisor. Carruthers, forty-six, had an extensive background in television entertainment production and direction. In 1956 he did “Soupy Sales” on ABC. “Ernie Kovacs” and “The Steve Allen Show” ensued, along with numerous game shows and entertainment specials. In 1969 he formed the Carruthers Company, based in Los Angeles. In 1970–71 he was special consultant to President Richard Nixon. After that he continued to produce game shows and entertainment specials such as “Sinatra, The Main Event” and “Daytime Emmys.” In 1976 he became a campaign TV advisor to Gerald Ford.

According to Carruthers, Duval, Powell, and Jagoda were concerned that the League of Women Voters had little previous experience in television—the
Forums aside. Each camp feared that the other would have greater influence with the League in determining the shape and form of the debate broadcasts. Carruthers later said: "We kept bouncing it around, and there were dialogues between Jagoda and Duval and Duval and Jody Powell, making sure that no one was taking advantage of the other." Also, Carruthers said, he met with Karayn at the Executive Office Building and took a kind of father-figure stance with the League project director. Carruthers told Karayn to protect himself from the networks by hiring top-level consultants. He related the conversation in this way: "I said unless you protect yourself with a substantial staff of recognized TV people who have experience in this sort of thing, you're going to get your head handed to you by the networks. They're going to say, 'You're not capable of doing this on your own, and what business does the LWV have staging debates?'"

Carruthers also relates that even before he met with Karayn, he had talked to Imero Fiorentino, a nationally known lighting-production consultant. Carruthers and Fiorentino had worked together on special events, including the Ford rally at Ann Arbor, Michigan, and the Republican national convention: for years before that, they had collaborated on entertainment specials and political telecasts.

Carruthers says that he told Fiorentino he was concerned about how the debates would look on the air, and recommended that if Fiorentino were hired by the League of Women Voters, to avoid a possible conflict of interest, he should set up two separate groups within his company to handle Republican campaign assignments and the debates. Carruthers says that a day or two after his conversation with Karayn, Karayn called back and said he had hired Fiorentino. He also hired Jack Sameth, one of three people involved in major roles in both the 1960 and 1976 debate broadcasts, to be the production coordinator. Karayn says that Carruthers may have suggested the hiring of Fiorentino, but that he doesn't remember it specifically. Karayn met with Fiorentino and his vice-president, Bill Klages, September 8, while attending a meeting in New York. At that time, the lighting consultants gave him a cost estimate for their work that was far higher than the League project budget had anticipated.

Fiorentino recalls telling Karayn the cost would be about $25,000, or $7,000 dollars per debate, and that Karayn responded that this was beyond his budget. Fiorentino and Klages went back to their New York office and decided they had to do the work for the League as a matter of prestige and competition. The following day they told Karayn they'd do the job without charge, if necessary. Karayn responded that such an arrangement would be illegal for the League, so they settled on a total charge of $7,500 plus expenses, in return for which the Fiorentino firm would be the lighting and production consultant and packager. Fiorentino suggested, and Karayn hired, Robert Wightman as the scenic designer.

Karayn now had his "top-ranked team." Karayn says that Barry Jagoda questioned the hiring of Fiorentino because of his close relationship to Carruthers. But when challenged by Karayn to come up with anyone else as well known in the lighting-consultant business, Jagoda agreed he couldn't.

In regard to the site for the first debate, the League had been talking about Philadelphia for some time. It was thought that the debate could take place in...
an historic shrine like Independence Hall or Carpenters Hall. But surveys of
those spots showed them to be much too small: not more than a hundred peo­
ple could have squeezed into Independence Hall, let alone the TV equipment.

Again, it was Carruthers who came up with the answer. Carruthers's secre­
tary had suggested the Walnut Street Theater. Her father, William McGuinn,
was a member of the theater's board of directors. Karayn, Sameth, and the
League staff, along with Jagoda and Rafshoon for Carter, and Duval, Carruth­
ers, and the White House security people for Ford, went to the theater on the
seventh. Everyone liked it. Carruthers said he especially liked it because the
stage was relatively small.

"It would," he said, "force the candidates closer together, and the closer
they were, the better it would be for us."25 Jagoda said it was fine with the
Democrats. For a TV production, the theater had everything needed—good
source and volume of power, a good house-lighting board, small but adequate
dressing rooms and staff areas, convenient access to the Ben Franklin Hotel
and press center two blocks away. It was settled.26

Two major aspects of the production of the first debate began the next day.
Karayn and company went to New York to meet with the networks for the
first time, and Sameth started rounding up his production team. Sameth con­
tacted Fiorentino, Klages, and Wightman, and the set-building project was
launched. At the same time, in Los Angeles, Carruthers was having his own
company's designers sketch a set, based on his trip to the theater the previous
day. Carruthers says he sent a copy of these plans to Fiorentino and discussed
them with Karayn, but Karayn doesn't remember seeing them. Fiorentino is
not certain that he saw them, and Wightman is sure he didn't.27

Carruthers's concept of the set was that it should compliment the president.
He felt that Gerald Ford's height advantage over Carter (6 feet 1 inch com­
pared to 5 feet 9 1/2 inches) could be communicated to the viewer more dra­
matically if the debaters stood.

"In terms of directing the show," he said, "the guys who would be doing
the shows for the various networks would be showing the two debaters in one
shot, and there was no question about the fact that we would be showing the
three to four inch advantage."28

Jagoda's concept was just the opposite. He envisioned something like the
set for the ABC program "Issues and Answers": participants seated close to
each other, relaxed, even casual. But at this point, it doesn't appear that he
pushed very hard for this idea.

Karayn also fancied himself a set designer. He wanted the set to look some­
what like the one CBS designed for the first debate in 1960. This included
seating the questioners with their backs to the audience, together with the
moderator.29 He also wanted a less conventional lectern.

These suggestions aside, it was Bob Wightman who designed the set that
appeared on the stage September 23. Karayn's ideas reached Wightman through
Sameth. Wightman says, "We [Sameth and Wightman] evolved this plan . . .
where the panelists would be facing the candidates and there could be cameras
literally in a 360 degree arrangement."

Although they knew there was going to be an audience, Wightman was
asked to design a television set. Wightman said, "The debate was being staged
in front of people, that was the premise. But the people . . . would be a tiny
group in comparison with the television audience, so we were thinking about
that television audience, and that, I'm sure, was what the League was think-
ing about.30

Cost and portability were also considerations. Wightman said the set had
to be used for all the debates, and "they wanted an efficient set that would be
able to travel well." He also said he was aware of budget limitations, "so we
couldn't do just anything that came into our heads."

On the ninth Wightman and Sameth met at Fiorentino Associates. They
talked over the project in general, and decided to look at furniture for the
set. They went to the Manhattan showrooms of the Herman Miller Company.
Wightman, Sameth, and Miller personnel spent some hours looking at various
styles of chairs, stools, and modular desk units. They also considered some
curved components as possible lecterns.

Wightman and Sameth picked out a 2 foot by 12 foot light oak desk unit
from the company's "Action Office Line," two "Eames" engineering stools, and
four "Ergon" management chairs. All six were covered with dark brown leather.
The League had said it could not receive the furniture as a gift—the Miller
Co. had suggested that—so they worked out a negotiated "token" charge of
$1,000.31

On the eleventh, the design team went to Philadelphia, placed some chairs
on the theater stage, and for the first time got a feeling for how the set might
look there. It was Wightman's first view of the theater. It was also then that
"the wall" was born. Sameth, looking into the house, realized that the candi-
dates would be looking at the panel; behind them would be TV cameras, and
behind those, the audience. So, he made a television decision—to build a wall,
and since the wall would block the view of the audience, to move the audience
to the balcony. He also worked out camera shooting patterns based on the 360
degree concept.

Back in New York, Wightman worked late into the night, and the next
morning had designs, storyboards, and color samples for Sameth and his as-
assistant Reed Jackson to look at. In less than twenty-four hours they would be
back on the stage in Philadelphia to start a two-day series of unveilings for the
candidates' representatives, the League, the pool, and the networks.32

The other major production process going on at the same time as the set
design was the League's contacts with the networks and their pool. The idea
that the events would be covered by a pool was part of Karayn's late-summer
thinking. Pooling means that one or more of the television networks assembles
a pool of equipment and personnel to provide common aural and visual cov-
erage of a news event. The members split the cost on an equal share basis. Pools
often cover entire proceedings "gavel-to-gavel," and subscribers to the pool can
broadcast any or all of it. Pooling is used for political conventions and other
major special events such as space trips. On top of the general pool coverage,
each network usually has its own cameras and audio installations—"unilaterals."
This makes it possible for an individual network to select shots from the pool
and add its own pictures and sound at various points in the coverage.

On September eighth, Karayn and Sameth met with the networks for the
first time. Attending were: for ABC, Wally Pfister, vice-president for special
Designer Robert Wightman's original plan for the Philadelphia debate, complete with camera positions and fields of view. Several changes were made when the set was put up on the stage of the Walnut Street Theater. The principal close-up cameras, #3 and #4, were moved toward the center of the stage. Their actual positions are indicated by asterisks.

The lecterns were moved closer together and forward on the platform; step units were placed at the front and sides of the riser; and the single camera in back (#5) was replaced by two vertically stacked cameras shooting the press panel through the test-tube-shaped camera portal. (Courtesy of Robert Wightman)
TOP: Wightman’s storyboard sketches of what the front shots from the balcony and the stage would look like. BOTTOM: Wightman’s sketches for an alternative lectern design. Project director Jim Ka­rayn had hoped that the set would incorporate a lectern that would not hide the candidates but would still provide support and a writing surface. Various designs were considered, but the candidates’ representatives wanted, and got, a traditional lectern. (Courtesy of Robert Wightman)
events, and Elliot Bernstein, senior special events producer; for CBS, Bob Chandler, vice-president for special events, Sanford Socolow, Washington bureau chief, and Russ Bensley, executive producer for special events; for NBC, Robert Mulholland, executive vice-president of NBC News, Christie Basham, director of news operations, NBC Washington Bureau, Gordon Manning, vice-president for special events, and Paul Klein, vice-president for programming; for PBS, Wallace Westfeldt, director of news and public affairs and senior executive producer, WETA, Washington, and Gerald Slater, executive vice-president, WETA.

Karayn had convened the meeting to tell the network executives how the League of Women Voters was going to conduct the debates. He announced that the first one would be September 23 at the Walnut Street Theater in Philadelphia. The next three would be during specific weeks in October. The ninety-minute length was set only for the first debate. He explained that the debates were going to be news events. If the networks wanted to cover them, that was fine. If they didn't, that was okay too.

The networks had been thinking they would have to pool at least some of the coverage. Karayn suggested they form an internetwork unit to cover all four debates. They rejected that idea but did set up a pool. Midway through the meeting they asked the League group to leave the room, and the networks drew lots and worked out the PBS participation in the pool.

This was the first time in its history that the Public Broadcasting Service was to become a full partner (a voting/producing member) in a pool. Slater told the authors he had talked with PBS executives about this. Normally PBS had paid a 17 percent share of the costs when they took a program from the network pool. Slater's view was that it was important to pay the additional cost—another 8 percent—and to participate in the decisions. PBS also wanted to produce one of the debates.

With just the four networks present, Slater announced PBS's interest in full partnership, and it was agreed upon. Westfeldt, who had had a long career with NBC before joining public broadcasting, later commented, "PBS as a full participant in the pool is a rare thing for two reasons: absence of money, and a general reluctance on the part of the commercial networks to believe or accept public broadcasting as an equal member in terms of its technical capabilities." Pfister says he suggested that each of the three commercial networks take one of the presidential debates, and that PBS do the vice-presidential one. Slater and Westfeldt agreed. Questioned about their technical capabilities, they assured the others they could handle the job. The draw gave ABC first choice, and Pfister chose the first debate. NBC drew second choice and picked the third debate. CBS took the remaining one.

Because the networks and their pool were to be covering a "bona fide news event" to comply with the Section 315 exemption, they considered their relationship to the debates a very sticky matter. Concerned about their legal stance, they felt that the pool could not get involved in the staging or the arrangements for the debates. It could not in any way assume control of the event. Philadelphia pool producer Elliot Bernstein summed it up: "At any point, if we began to assume control of this event, our ability to cover it would be jeopardized. And so the original approach for the networks, and the original guid-
ance that I got from my bosses—and my bosses were representatives of all four networks because we were a pool—was that we just go in, and whatever they do, we cover; and not produce this event in any way. . . . we cover this as we would cover any other news event. We show up with our cameras and turn them on.”

Consequently, they told the League some of the things they would not do. Legally, they were not permitted to aid the League in any way, with communications devices, stage managing, timing, public address system, and the like. For example, Sameth was asked how he intended to use the timing devices that would tell the candidates the amount of time they had left. He said he thought they should be mounted on the cameras, as they had been in 1960. The networks replied, according to Sameth: “No, you won’t, because we cannot allow your equipment to be mounted on our cameras; that would be an illegal no-no.”

To get around the problem of pool involvement in the event, and to provide more journalistic freedom for each network, CBS asked for unilateral cameras in the theater. They had sent producer David Buksbaum to scout the Walnut Street Theater early in the morning of the eighth. Based on their thinking at that time—that there would be no audience in the balcony—Chandler thought all the networks could put their own cameras in the balcony and direct their programs from those positions. There was also a suggestion by CBS that each network receive what are called “isolated feeds” from some of the pool cameras. This meant that instead of getting a mix of shots determined by the pool director, each network’s director would select from those for his own broadcast. This plan was not well received by the other networks. ABC’s Pfister and NBC’s Mulholland explained their views. “If we had a pool,” Pfister said, “and we wanted to cut from one camera to another, and they were cutting their own program, they might miss our shot, or get a flash of our shot in theirs. We could not be in a position of telling everyone moment-by-moment what shot we were going to take.” Mulholland didn’t like having all those cameras in the balcony. He said: “Even though the networks might have agreed to do that . . . then all the Philadelphia stations, all the newsreels, everybody else would have been in there . . . and ultimately the poor candidates would look up and they could have seen five, ten, maybe fifteen cameras sort of facing them, and they’d have no idea where to look.” It was in internetwork argument, and CBS lost.

Allowing unilateral cameras was an issue between the League and all of the networks, and Karayn ruled at the meeting that no unilateral cameras would be permitted in the house. There was objection to his rule.

Karayn also informed the networks for the first time that they could not take pictures of the audience. This caused a bigger uproar, and the networks raised what they believed—and still believe—to be an important journalistic issue. They said that coverage of the debates as a bona fide news event included their right to cover the audience. They inquired whether the candidates had made the decision. Karayn’s response was: “We do not feel we’ve agreed to any condition that would inhibit TV coverage.” All the network people spoke vigorously about the principle.

The issue of televising the audience touched off a long and sometimes bitter controversy between the League and the networks. In a broader context,
it bred suspicion on both sides that there were hidden agendas and motives. The League felt that the networks were raising issues like this out of pique at not producing the debates this time. The networks felt that the League was not being honest with them, and that the candidates had more to do with the planning of the debates than had been revealed. The networks wanted to know everything, they said, so they could at least tell their audience the ground rules. NBC pool producer Christie Basham summed it up in her reflections about the relationship between the League and the networks:

We had a lot of semantic arguments with Jim Karayn at that time . . . what the League was doing because the candidates had asked for it, and if the candidates asked for it, wasn't the League in a sense agreeing with the candidates . . . everytime you would get up to that point where [the networks] would say, “Well, haven't the candidates set those rules?” No, they are our rules . . . it was a circle.

The “Four” Philadelphia Debates

There were not just four debates, there were seven, and four of them took place in and around Philadelphia. There was the growing debate over the journalistic freedom of the networks versus the League's own dictums as to how the debate would be staged and covered. There was a debate between the League and the network pool about how they would interface, and there were two Ford-Carter debates: the one on the stage before millions, and the other behind the scenes, where the Carter and Ford handlers haggled over just how the main event would be staged.

The action at the site started on Monday, September 13. At one o'clock Karayn had his first meeting with the candidates' representatives since the site survey on the seventh. On the theater stage, they looked at Wightman's plans and talked generally about the lecterns, the colors and physical aspects of the set, and the logistics of entering and leaving the stage.

Karayn met later in the afternoon with Elliot Bernstein. Bernstein says his first impressions of the theater were mild and general: “There was a stage, and there would be an event . . . the two candidates would be playing to the audience, and we would come in and set up our cameras somewhere in that orchestra.”

Karayn met again with the candidates' representatives, a marathon meeting which went on into the early hours of the next day. Ten or eleven hours were spent arguing over the most minute details of staging the first debate. Even today, some of the participants remain passionate about some of the events. At the center of the hostility was an unspoken suspicion that, somehow, one or the other side might gain an advantage that might just cost the election.

There was not much form to the meeting. Karayn served as moderator. The arguments surged back and forth. How would the candidates look? Would they sit or stand? What shape and height for the lecterns? Who would supply stand-ins for camera rehearsals, makeup, timing devices? Where would the candidates look? Should there be stools on the set?

Carruthers was adamant that Ford would stand during the whole event. Jagoda, on the other hand, kept suggesting different ways the debaters might
sit down. He remembers saying, "Why don't we sit down and relax, and have the debate in that format? The Ford people responded, 'The President of the United States will stand up and address the American people.' . . . It was a very rigid notion." 

Carruthers recalls: "The big bone of contention was that Carter wanted to sit, and Jagoda started throwing out . . . late-night talk-show concepts. I said, hey look, Jimmy Carter can do anything he wants to. The President's going to stand at the lectern for ninety minutes; he doesn't want a chair, he doesn't want to sit down, he's coming to debate." 

Obviously, neither side would have agreed to allow one candidate to do one thing while the other did something else. Both sides phrased their argument "in the interests of uniformity."

They discussed the lecterns. Karayn had pushed for lecterns that wrapped around the candidates from behind, so that they could stand in front of them and lean or write on them. Since Carter is right-handed and Ford is left-handed, this would have worked. Jagoda claims he would have gone along with that arrangement, but Carruthers didn't like the idea and it was shoved aside.

They did reach agreement about the height of the lecterns. They decided to measure both candidates from the floor to their belt buckles and then split the difference. The distance turned out to be approximately forty-two inches. Carruthers and Jagoda were happy with the belt-buckle compromise, but they kept needling each other about the difference in the height of the two men. Jagoda says that he had looked at the recordings of the 1960 debates, and even though there was a similar height difference between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, he didn't see it on the screen. "So I dropped my argument," he related. "But since I had seemed to be concerned about it, it was useful to continue to have that on the table as an issue. And at one point I said, what do you mean you have to equalize these lecterns . . . and someone made a facetious remark: 'Why don't we just cut a hole?' And then Carruthers, or one of those guys went out and said that Jagoda wants to put the President of the United States in a hole. That got on the news wires, and Jagoda recalls a day later his mother called him from his hometown and said: 'Why are you trying to put the president in a hole?'" 

Through all of this, the others involved sat around and listened. Karayn said, "I felt like John J. Anthony in a court of domestic relations." Bob Wightman made sketches of various kinds of lecterns, in case they were wanted. There was a lot of telephoning, or pretending to telephone higher-ups. Both Carruthers and Jagoda say the other telephoned. It was: "Well, if you don't believe me, I'll call my man, and we'll settle it." Or, the reverse of that: "Do you or don't you speak for your man?" At about 3:00 A.M. the first Ford-Carter debate yawned to an end.

At ten the next morning all hands met on stage at the Walnut Street Theater for the unveiling of the set plans. Sameth had marked on the stage where the candidates would stand. There were tables and chairs where the panel would be. Copies of Wightman's plans, samples and colors of fabrics, and story-board sketches were handed out. Sameth made a formal presentation, while the network representatives, the pool team, the League staff, and the candidates' representatives looked on. The story-board sketches showed what the shots might
look like if the nets put their cameras where Sameth thought they should. The plans also had the camera shots marked in.

First impressions varied considerably. The size and importance of “the wall” sank in. It was the first time the network people realized the extent to which the shape of the set and the wall were going to dictate the nature of the production.

Elliot Bernstein had been named the pool producer. At forty-two, Bernstein had spent twenty-three years in various aspects of commercial TV. While in college, he worked as a shipping clerk for Fox Movietone News. He had been with CBS as a film librarian, with UPI as a reporter-producer for the wire-service syndicated television newsmagazine, covering civil rights protests in the south. He had been Midwest bureau chief for ABC and news director of their television station in San Francisco. In 1971 he joined the ABC special events unit, covering space shots and two Nixon trips to Russia. On the second Nixon trip to Russia and on Ford’s trip to China, Bernstein was the pool producer. He had also been pool producer for the Republican national convention the previous summer.

When Bernstein saw the set plans on September 14, his impressions were radically different from his view of the empty theater the day before. “They unveiled,” he said, “what was in effect a television studio that they were going to install. This was not my understanding of the 315 exemption. My feeling of a news event is something that happens spontaneously . . . or something that is scheduled as an event. The only way this would be scheduled as an event is that it would be scheduled for the people in the room, and obviously the people in this room were being ignored.” After the debates were over, Bernstein broadened his impressions: “I felt, ‘nobody is ever going to believe that this is not a network event.’ Here was a television studio laid out on the stage. In order for the event to be staged successfully, it was obvious from the start that the League had designed and was conducting these debates for a television audience, and not as something that we show up to cover. . . . I’m not an attorney. And the reaction on the part of lots of us was that we were getting into a situation that could subject us to violations of Section 315 of the FCC code.”

Bernstein was not alone in his concern. CBS’s Chandler said that when he saw the camera angles on the set plans, “I screamed bloody murder to Sameth and Karayn.” Wallace Westfeldt’s response was: “I didn’t think that PBS should participate if the rules were being set by others.” Some of the objections must have seemed gratuitious to Karayn. “Naturally we created a set. . . . I insisted that the set designer we used be somebody familiar with television. We were very cognizant that a horrendously large part of this whole audience would be viewers on television, and so it would be foolish, I thought, to create a set that was untelevisable. In that set plan, we even showed a position for cameras, which I guess diplomatically we should never have done.”

Karayn also says that part of the difficulty stemmed from the hands-off attitude of the networks. He remembers two instances. Once, he called a network to ask for prime-time fall sports and specials schedules and was told that the lawyers had advised them not to talk to the League about such things. Later, Karayn says, a network board chairman called him to complain about
the scheduling of the first debate. Recalled Karayn, "That really annoyed me; when I was seeking information—not advice and not permission, but information—nobody on any of these networks would help me."

Karayn says: "If we had set up some kind of relationship, I would have talked with them. I would have maybe cut out that wall. The idiot thing about the wall is that it was never bitched about except in that one hour session . . . because the minute you pointed out to them that we were going to have cameras ringing the thing, they no more wanted to show the cameras in the background than anyone else." 52

So, the second of the four debates in Philadelphia—the one between the networks and the League—had been joined. The networks and their pool were getting more nervous about their involvement in the event. They were also becoming more suspicious that there were hidden agreements between the League and the candidates. There was still some internal friction among the networks over the use of unilateral cameras.

They met again that day with Karayn in the hotel room where the candidates' representatives marathon had taken place the night before. The session wasn't nearly as long, but issues surfaced that were to echo through the following week, and beyond. These issues reveal quite clearly the core of misunderstanding and distrust between the League, as sponsors of the debates, and the networks, as pool producers and transmission belts of the events to the American public. The networks argued that journalistic principles were at stake. The League responded that it had made the rules and that the agreements between the candidates' and the League were not the networks' concern.

The question of unilateral cameras was settled quickly; CBS wasn't winning the argument with the other networks, and Karayn ended it by ruling once again against unilateral cameras inside the theater. There would be, and were, unilateral cameras in the lobbies and outside the debate sites, but none in the hall while the debates were on.

The networks again stated what they wouldn't do, so as to avoid charges of collusion in the staging of the broadcasts. At this point it was a long list. They would not put the timing devices on the cameras. Pool personnel would not even hold up cue cards for the candidates. They would not schedule time for the candidates to come in and check out the set and the microphones. They would not provide TV monitors in the house so the audience could see the TV broadcast while watching the live action. They would not provide feeds of pictures and sound to the press area in the hotel a block away. They would not provide feeds to the dressing rooms, or to the League command post in the theater. They voted down requests from the League to allow League personnel in the pool truck before or during the broadcast. They wouldn't allow Fiorentino or Klages to go into the pool truck to check out the lighting on the set. They would not provide communication circuits for members of the League project staff to use to communicate with each other and with the pool. 53

Why this stiff-necked attitude? It goes back to the Section 315 exemption to allow coverage of the debates as bona fide news events. All of the networks were worried about becoming too deeply involved. And all had been talking to their legal staffs for guidance. Bob Chandler says the guidelines were understood:

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The guidelines were simple. The exemption was based on the bona fide news event. . . . therefore the guideline was simply that our behavior, our conduct, had to be governed by what we normally did when covering a bona fide news event. Normally, when we cover a bona fide news event, we’re not involved in the planning of the event; we’re not involved in the staging of the event; we’re not involved in the negotiations that lead to the event.

Once all those things are determined, we simply come in and cover the event. That was the whole basis for our comments. Every dispute . . . sprung from that basic premise.54

Karayn told the networks again that they could not take pictures of the audience during the debates. The issue had smoldered since the meeting on the eighth. It now burst into flame. It became such a major issue that for a time it appeared, at least on the surface, that the networks might not cover the debates. Statements were wired and phoned back and forth, the news media got wind of it. It blew up into a confrontation that brought the news executives face to face with the debate project’s co-chairs.

While fussing about the audience shots, the networks picked up information about the agreement that had been made between the League and the candidates during the negotiations that the candidates would have a hand in suggesting names for the panel of questioners. If the candidates had a hand in deciding there would be no audience shots, and if they had a hand in picking the press panel, did this challenge the legitimacy of the debates? The networks said they wanted no part in negotiating the debates themselves, but they were now very interested in who had been involved. The face-off took place on Saturday, September 18, at the League headquarters in Washington. The array included Chandler and CBS news president Dick Salant. NBC sent a member of its Washington legal staff along with its representatives. The League entourage included Clusen, co-chairs Newton Minow and Charls Walker, and the other regulars.

Questions flew. The NBC attorney, Howard Monderer, said he thought the presence of an audience was a legal question; without an audience there might be doubts about whether it was a bona fide news event.

ABC’s Pfister said that being prevented from taking pictures of the audience was the most important issue. He said it was the first time in his memory that television had been restricted on the pictures it could take, once it had been admitted to an event. He gave as examples the trips to China with Nixon and Ford, coverage of state meetings in Russia, and coverage of the House Judiciary Committee hearings.55

On the issue of whether or not the League had agreed to allow the candidates to help choose the questioners, the networks’ hackles were sticking straight up. Salant, especially, wanted to know how this had come about. Walker and Minow explained. Walker reviewed the categories of questioners and also said they agreed that the questioners should be viewed as “fair” by both Ford and Carter. The final decision, he said, would always rest with the League. He also told the networks, and Minow concurred, that the League had agreed with the candidates’ representatives that they would not discuss the selection process agreement with others.56

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That upset Salant; he and Walker argued. Everyone agrees that Walker used the words “shut up.” Some say it was as plain as: “Would you please shut up.” Others say it was milder than that. Whatever the specifics—there is no transcript—Salant thought he was told to shut up, and as Chandler tells it: “It was like somebody had shot a bullet at him.” Walker tried to apologize, did apologize; but Salant refused him.

Salant grabbed his papers and stalked out, telling Chandler to come with him. From here on the incident contains elements of slapstick. The two walked down narrow corridors to get to the elevators, and there Salant discovered he had left his briefcase in the meeting room. Chandler went back and got it.

Salant told reporters waiting outside the League headquarters that CBS would have to consider whether or not it would carry the debates, given the offensive ground rules. The other network spokesmen joined Salant with statements opposing the ban on audience shots. Questioned by reporters, Ford advisor Duval said he could see no reason to change the agreement with the League, and he quoted from a letter that CBS president Arthur Taylor had sent to a congressional committee in August, in which Taylor had said a live audience might detract from the substance of the debates. Carter advisor Barry Jagoda felt the decision remained entirely with the League.

Whatever the CBS threats not to cover the debates amounted to, Elliot Bernstein said that the first thing he saw when he arrived at the Walnut Street Theater the following Monday was a CBS remote truck—not even the pool equipment had yet arrived.

None of the other networks was as upset about the questioner issue as Salant. ABC’s Pfister likened the setup to a news event staged by any organization: “If you say it’s a news event, then the people staging the news event... have a right to pick whom they want as their panelists.”

NBC’s Mulholland said that the issues of the audience shots and the picking of the questioners added up to a broader issue: “We tried to get the League to understand that in pursuing its end... even with good intentions... it was trampling on the rights of other organizations or other principles... That’s what I think it really boiled down to and we lost.”

The networks asked that the audience-shots question be taken up by the League and the candidates again. Minow agreed, but it’s not clear whether there actually was another review. The first debate was now five days away. While the networks left the impression they might not cover the debates, they were caught in a bind.

**Pfister:** We were squeezed, and they had the cards... we had to cover it.

**Chandler:** As much as our journalistic principles were offended... we knew deep in our hearts... that this was simply an event that couldn’t be ignored, whether it was bona fide or not.

**Mulholland:** In our terms of what’s a news event, a debate between an incumbent president and a challenger is a news event whether it happens in the street... in a theater... in one of our television studios, it’s a news event.
Meanwhile, the candidates prepared for the debates. Ford did more of this than Carter, and, in a more formal way. Lecterns and a questioners' panel table were set up in the family theater at the White House. Ford and his advisors met there four or five times prior to Philadelphia, and several times later. At these sessions, usually in the evening, the president practiced answers to questions posed by his staff. Portable video-tape equipment was used to record these rehearsals. They had two purposes. The first was to check on wardrobe, makeup, appropriate gestures and postures, and how the president would look. The second was to determine whether or not the briefing books prepared for the president were comprehensive enough. If he found he could not answer a question based on the material given him, more material was gathered.

Carruthers said that the sessions were useful because they made Ford more familiar with the physical setup and got him to polish his answers and presentation. Duval told the authors that they usually ran forty-five minutes, and that afterward Ford and the others would review the video tapes, although Ford watched the tapes only for a few minutes.

Carter did not rehearse in this way, but he did go over questions and answers in informal situations with his advisors in Plains, Georgia, and while campaigning. He did not use lectern, scenery, or cameras.

**The Show Goes On**

Journalistic principles, grand strategies, postures, maneuverings for advantage, and insults aside, the debate on the twenty-third was to be produced by the network pool. Elliot Bernstein had that responsibility. For ten days he'd been submerged in what he later called “hocus-pocus,” juggling the networks hands-off restrictions as well as the League’s ground rules. “I was the funnel,” he said. “If NBC had a problem or complaint with the League, they would call me, and I would call the League. If CBS called with a point of view about the audience shots, ... I would relay that to the League.

On Monday, September 20, Bernstein and his pool team arrived at the Walnut Street Theater and started to work with the lighting. Parking the pool truck was a problem: the Secret Service wanted it across the street, not next to the theater stage door. Bernstein went to the candidates' representatives—and the problem was solved.

The set arrived on Tuesday and the crew spent all day putting it up. The curved back wall was a series of flats covered with magnolia-white carpeting. It was 12 feet high, 36 feet long, and 14 feet deep. A neutral color was chosen because it could be tinted with set lights. The candidates would stand on a one-foot-high, carpeted, kidney-shaped riser, 19 feet wide and 9 feet deep. The carpet was a vivid blue.

After all the talk about sitting and standing, the lecterns came out in a traditional design. They were 42 inches high, covered with dark oak formica. The tops were semicircular, with an area cut out to hold a digital clock. There was a shelf under the top for water glasses. The crescent-shaped wall behind the press panel was 5 feet high and about 34 feet long, if fully extended. It was covered with a magnolia-white rug on the inside, and on the outside with the formica used on the lecterns. On the stage floor was a 50-foot square of
black linoleum, with a blue oval rug design painted on it. The set wall behind
the candidates had a test-tube-shaped camera port that hid two vertically
stacked cameras for shots of the press panel. The chairs, desk unit, and stools
picked out in New York were delivered and set in place. The original design
for the set was a little fancier and costlier. A trim unit around the edges and
top of the back wall had been planned as a three-dimensional moulding. To
save money, painted masonite was used. The floor covering originally had been
planned as a large ground cloth with a real rug on top of it.

The light plot was designed for television. Lighting consultant Imero Fiorentino observed: "It was no secret that television was going to cover the event . . . and we might as well light it sufficiently for television. Obviously, television lighting requires more light than stage lighting, so it would be foolish to spend money to light it with little instruments, and then on top of it put big instruments."67 Fiorentino described his lighting approach as straightforward:

"You could phone it in . . . it's very easy, but what's different is that one of
the two men could be president. We chose to stay away from anything that
approached great portraiture, because it's dangerous, it can kill you . . . we
chose to play it a little safe and standard."

Fiorentino and Bill Klages discussed the plan, and Klages drew the plot.
He employed the usual elements: key, back, side, fill, cross, and background
lights. For fail-safe, there were back-up key lights on separate circuits.

Fiorentino said there was little difference in the lighting of the two candi-
dates. "It was practically a mirror image, one side to the other. And there is
a good reason for it. The two men look basically the same, physically, except
for the hair. That's the only place there was a difference . . . in the intensity
of the back light. There was a back light in each case . . . very dim and prac-
tically nonexistent for Ford; and the other was brighter because he has hair."68

The actual lighting in Philadelphia was up to Everett Melosh, who had held
the same assignment in 1960. Melosh ran fresh cable to the lighting instru-
ments, used the theater control board, and doubled up only the main key
lights, as the plot had dictated. Additional lights were aimed into the house,
to light the audience for the opening and closing shots.

It was time to be practical. With just two days to go, the timing devices
were placed on two of the main cameras instead of on floor stands, which
would have gotten in the way. The pool agreed to provide pictures and sound
to various places within the theater and the League agreed to assume some of
the cost. TV monitors were installed in the candidates' dressing rooms, in the
League command post, and in the house. The League rented television sets
and had them set up in the hotel press center.

There were still some sticky points. How would the pool communicate
with the League and with those on the stage, and still maintain a hands-off
attitude? It was decided that a private-line communication circuit would be
run to the League command post, and a pool representative would be stationed
there to relay communications in both directions. The pool installed its own
stage manager, who could, of course, communicate with Bernstein.69

There was no communication between the pool and the moderator. The
stage manager was installed at the last minute, not to do the traditional job of
cuing people to start and stop, but to help the pool line up shots on the press
Nothing is left to chance. A page from the White House staff plan for Ford's trip to the Philadelphia debate showed the route he would take to his dressing room and to his place on the stage.

A couple of old hands at presidential-debate lighting. Everett Melosh (standing), the ABC lighting director for the Philadelphia debate, had performed that function for the third and fourth debates between Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy in 1960. Imero Fiorentino (seated) had been a lighting consultant for Nixon in 1960; in 1976 the League of Women Voters hired his firm as lighting/production consultant and packager for the four debates. (Courtesy of League of Women Voters)
"Where did you say the lecterns should go?" A detail of Wightman's floor plan for the first debate reflected later adjustments in the placement of the lecterns and the rear cameras to allow better TV shots of the candidates and the questioners' panel. (Courtesy of Robert Wightman)

So that all could "hear." The PBS broadcast of each debate included a signer, who appeared in a lower corner of the TV screen so that the approximately fourteen million hearing-impaired Americans could follow the debates. (Wide World Photos)
panel. Since there were to be follow up questions, it was important for the pool director to know when they would occur. So, it was arranged that the panel members who wanted to ask follow up questions would signal with their hands.

Unlike most bona fide news events, there were rehearsals. In Philadelphia, students from a Temple University radio-TV class were recruited to act as the questioners and as Jimmy Carter. Bob Salica stood in for Carter. He told the authors he was a Republican but that he qualified to stand in for Carter because he was 5 feet 9 inches tall. John Kostic, not a student, stood in for Ford. He said Mark Goode of the White House staff had invited him. The rehearsals were long. The night before the debate they ran through the whole thing. Bernstein was very cautious about getting everything right—could they hear each other, which camera shots were the best, how to cut between the panelists?

The final rehearsal turned out to be time well spent. As the rehearsal went on, it became apparent that the panelists' stand-ins and the candidates' stand-ins couldn't hear each other. Bernstein took the problem to the League. Because of the restrictions, Bernstein was concerned that if his pool team worked out a solution, they would be participating in the event. But he pushed hard on the problem. The afternoon of the debate, when Carter and Ford came to the theater for what were called audio-visual (AV) checks, Bernstein sat down at the questioners' table and asked both Carter and Ford if they could hear him speaking. They said they were having difficulty. So, the pool bought two sets of speakers, and placed them on the stage floor behind the candidates and the panelists—a miniature public address system just for the participants.70

The set was also adjusted. The candidates' lecterns were moved about a foot and a half closer to the questioners and to each other. This had more to do with camera shots than with the hearing problem. Bernstein was concerned that the cross two-shots—those showing one candidate in the foreground with the other candidate in the background—had too much empty space in the middle.71 Steps were added to the front and sides of the candidates' riser to make it easier for them to step on and off. There had been discussions earlier about widening the cut out in the back wall to accommodate two side-by-side cameras, but this was dropped in favor of stacking one camera over the other.

Early in the meetings between the pool and the League, the networks had said they would not provide the sound from the pool for the theater public address system. It was an unusual decision since, for practical reasons, television and radio networks customarily provide a feed of their sound to such house systems. Two separate amplification systems, competing with each other, can cause the screaming and howling known as “feedback.” Karayn had agreed that the League would provide its own PA system for the audience, but he predicted to Sameth that the networks would change their minds.72 And, in fact, they did: the pool sound from the stage was fed to loudspeakers facing the audience in the theater balcony.

The basic broadcast setup was the same at all four debate sites. At broadcast time, there were nine cameras in the theater—one a spare in case of failure. Two cameras were placed behind the set, one mounted above the other, to take pictures of the press panel and wide shots of the stage looking into the theater. There was a camera on each side of the set to take reaction shots of
the candidates and side shots of the panel. Three cameras were positioned on the front apron of the stage. These were the main cameras, which took the head-on shots of the candidates. The eighth camera was high in the back of the theater, for wide shots of the stage and the opening and closing shots which included the audience.

The audio pickup was handled by ABC radio technicians and was standard for this kind of public affairs program. Each candidate wore two tiny microphones on a tie-clip. The wires from those microphones were run inside their clothing—down their pants legs—and were connected by cables to the audio mixers when Ford and Carter came on stage. The moderator and panelists used microphones (again, two for each) placed on the table in front of them.

A unique feature of the 1976 debates broadcast on PBS was the use of signers for the hearing-impaired. Nancy Kowalski and Mary Ann Royster repeated everything in sign language; they were shown in an oval insert in the lower portion of the television screen.

“Fine tuning” of the stage setup involved some minor re-positioning of the cameras. The original camera plot by Sameth was laid out with the understanding that each candidate would talk directly to a separate camera. These cameras were positioned at the sides of the questioners’ panel and fairly wide apart—one aiming across the stage to Ford, the other across the stage to Carter. Bernstein, and the candidates’ representatives, did not like this setup. Bernstein said that it would have had the candidates looking past the panel when they talked to the camera. So, he moved the candidates’ cameras behind the panel closer to the center of the stage, making it easier for the candidates to talk either to the panel members or to the camera with a minimum of head movement.

The theater’s star dressing rooms were immediately behind the stage. Each had a gold plaque on the door bearing the autograph of the most famous person to have used it—Cornelia Otis Skinner on one door, Helen Hays on the other. Each was a two-room suite, with a bath. Ford’s had two sinks, Carter’s only one. A New York newspaper carried the headline: “President Leading Carter in Sinks, Two to One.” The dressing rooms were decorated by Gimbels department store. In Carter’s suite, a large glass jar held peanuts. For Ford, a similar bowl held hard candies—or “boiled lollies,” as an Australian journalist described them during a press tour.

The afternoon before the debate, the candidates and their handlers came to the theater to check things out. Carter walked to the building from a hotel two blocks away. Ford was driven there in the presidential limousine, with motorcycle escort ahead and Secret Service car and press buses behind. The candidates’ representatives, Carruthers and Jagoda, had been in the pool truck to check out the lighting the night before, but they visited it again with Bernstein to take another look.

The off-white carpeted set wall was lit with both white and blue lights, so that the amount of blue—a color that complements flesh tones—could be adjusted. There was some disagreement. The Carter people, as they would throughout the debates, wanted the background to be less blue—or warmer, as they put it. The Ford handlers wanted it to be more blue. Imero Fiorentino now became “the mediator in the blue background division.” As Fiorentino de-
scribed it: "The blueness of the background changed all the time. Now, if there was anything that was of interest to the candidates' representatives, and befuddled me to death, it was the blue background, because one wanted a lot of blue, and one—God knows why—naturally didn't want it blue . . . that was one of the big challenges." The background was the bluest in Philadelphia, but blue, bluer, discussions continued in San Francisco, Houston, and Williamsburg, and Fiorentino's act got better all the time.

Fiorentino told the authors that lighting wasn't his main usefulness to the League. He was intensely aware of the attention that air conditioning, makeup, and lighting had received in 1960. Fiorentino's professionalism was the League's insurance that problems encountered in the 1960 debates would not recur. "What does an Imme do? . . . Both of the candidates' reps knew me personally, they knew me by reputation. And I gave the thing they hired me for in the first place, and that was the easing of the pressure—being there."76

If blue was something for the candidates' representatives to chew on, the stools on the stage were something for them to gnash their teeth over. Back at the marathon nit-pick session between the League and the candidates' representatives, the question of sitting or standing had taken hours. It wasn't settled yet. Carruthers says that President Ford told him he didn't want the stool behind his lectern. At the audio-visual checkout, Carruthers introduced Jack Sameth to the president, and told him Ford wanted the stool removed.

Said Sameth: "I guess it was in the afterglow of meeting the president of the United States that I did say to a stagehand, 'Strike the president's stool.' I did it, not thinking of all those arguments and discussions about parity on the stage. . . . If Carter had a stool, the president had to have one. There was a large argument following that."77 There certainly was. Jagoda walked onto the stage, found that the stool was missing, and raised the roof. Karayn tried unsuccessfully to soothe him. Jagoda demanded that Carruthers be called back for an explanation. Carruthers says, "I got about thirteen phone calls in forty-five minutes."78 Karayn tried unsuccessfully to soothe him. Jagoda demanded that Carruthers be called back for an explanation. Carruthers says, "I got about thirteen phone calls in forty-five minutes."79 Karayn tried unsuccessfully to soothe him. Jagoda demanded that Carruthers be called back for an explanation. Carruthers says, "I got about thirteen phone calls in forty-five minutes."79 Jagoda says he accused Carruthers of reneging on an agreement. Carruthers told Jagoda he just took his instructions from his boss. They shouted at each other and at Karayn: "How could the League be so treacherous?" Sameth tried to calm them by assuming the blame, but that didn't quiet matters. Jagoda demanded that the stool be put back, and Karayn told Carruthers to do so.

Carruthers relates that he went back to the theater before the debate. "There was nobody in the theater except a lonely stagehand. He told me he couldn't put the stool back because an hour ago the advisor to the president had ordered it taken off. I told him, 'I am the advisor to the president, and I'm asking you to put it back.' Well, he picked that stool up like it was the crown jewels of England, and placed it gently and carefully behind the lectern." The stool made one more move. Just before the debate, Ford signaled Carruthers to remove the stool. Carruthers picked it up and moved it back away from Ford, not off the riser, but near the center of almost every two-shot from the stage right camera throughout the debate.80

The order in which the candidates would speak was determined by a coin-flip the day before. It turned out that Carter would get the first question and Ford would go last for the closing statement. The flip also determined that the
order would be reversed for the final debate in Williamsburg. (In San Francisco, they flipped again and there Carter won and went first.) The members of the questioners' panel drew lots to see who would ask the first question, and that task went to Frank Reynolds of ABC.81

Thirty minutes before the broadcast, PBS asked Bernstein to put up a picture of the stage from the back of the theater to be used in their pre-debate program. He did so, and Karayn objected. Karayn was under the impression that no pool video would be aired prior to the debate. Bernstein didn't remember any such agreement and went along with the PBS request.

In an age of transistors and digital electronics, the first debate was started with a procedure reminiscent of getting a small-town broadcast of a high-school football game on the air. Again, because of concerns over collusion, the stage manager could not cue moderator Ed Newman to start, and the pool refused to give the League any of their synchronized clocks.

Says Sameth: “I had to cue from an old clock the theater had hanging in the green room. I checked it out with the telephone time service, to find out how far off it was.” Sameth couldn't talk to the pool truck, nor to Ed Newman, but he could talk to the timer in the wings offstage. Sitting next to Sameth was the pool assistant director, who could talk to the pool truck.

Sameth described what ensued: “I had to yell down 10-9-8... looking at the clock in the green room... loud enough so that the pool could hear it over their intercom to the truck... and the timer repeated my countdown into her line to Ed Newman. By this unbelievable, nonprofessional way, Ed Newman did speak his first words exactly on time.”82

The Audio Failure

The program began at 9:30 P.M. The candidates fielded the panel’s questions, and their words and images went out to an audience of some 85 million persons in the United States. The theater audience listened quietly, as they had been instructed. Bernstein became concerned about how hot it might be on the stage. Jimmy Carter perspired noticeably, and Bernstein was on the intercom to Sameth with suggestions about boosting the air conditioning. Otherwise, everything was rolling along smoothly. Bernstein recalled: “The best moment was when Newman said ‘We’re running short of time and we’re going to modify the format in order to get another sequence of questions in.’ The feeling at that point was that everything had gone lovely, gone very well, and we had something to be proud of.”

A few minutes after the best moment, one of the worst moments in the history of American broadcasting hit Bernstein and everyone else. At 10:51:05,83 just as Jimmy Carter said:

Well, one of the very serious things that happened in our government in recent years, and has continued up until now, is a breakdown in the trust among our people, and, the...84

the sound failed.

There were several loud hums and pops. Carter's lips were moving, and for about 25 seconds he was seen to continue talking. Within 35 seconds he had
stopped. The screen showed both candidates frozen in their positions on the stage, the panel members in front of them. Various silent shots of the candidates and others continued for 27 minutes and 2 seconds.85

The sound from the stage microphones traveled to a small table offstage left, where two portable mixers and a sound technician controlled the levels. There were two microphones for each of the speakers. The cables for each mike went into a different mixer, i.e., Carter mike one went to mixer A, Carter mike two went to mixer B. This is standard backup procedure.

From the stage mixers, cables carried the sound to an audio booth in the rear of the theater where they were plugged into a distribution amplifier. From that distribution amplifier, the pool truck and all of the subscribers—radio and TV networks, independent stations, Voice of America, foreign broadcasters, and the house public address system—received their sound. From that point a subscriber, such as CBS-TV, would run a line to its nearby remote truck, and from there to the Philadelphia telephone company, which relayed it to New York for network distribution.86

On such occasions, it is not uncommon for the networks to be very cautious and to put in further backup systems of their own. In fact, CBS-TV had such a backup. They ran a separate line from the pool truck to their remote truck.87

With no sound coming from the theater, everyone involved picked up a telephone or a private line headphone and started calling everyone else. It was a nightmare. To one of the authors, stationed near the radio pool in the press center, it sounded like this:

"This is ABC New York, we've lost sound . . ."
"This is NBC New York, we're not getting sound . . ."
"This is CBS New York, we've lost sound . . ."

"Elliot, this is George Murray, what's going on . . ."
"I have no idea what's going on . . ."

In the audio booth, activity even more frantic was taking place. The sound engineers were checking everything. Phillip Levens, ABC director of TV operations, dashed from the pool truck to the booth. Or, tried to dash. It took him more than 5 minutes to cover about 250 feet. He had to go through several Secret Service check points, and people were milling around. He walked across the back of the stage to check first with the stage audio operator. He was assured that the trouble wasn't there. When he got to the booth, he had a pretty good idea where the trouble was, and he found the engineers taking the distribution amplifier apart.

Engineers checked each of the audio circuits, one at a time. With all twenty-four of them inspected and with no improvement, it was obvious that something common to the whole distribution system had failed. They thought it might have been the power supply, but checking that did not help. A backup battery power system showed an electrical overload. "It was obvious," Levens said, "that there was a short across the power supply. This process of elimination should have caught the thing within minutes, and repaired it. Why it didn't we'll never know, but it didn't. So then we started concentrating our efforts on finding another way to get the program going again."88

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No one is sure just how long this process took. Elsewhere in the theater it must have seemed like years. The candidates were still standing at their places. Moderator Ed Newman told the authors: “Neither Carter nor Ford spoke to the other. I talked to them, over and over again, telling them what was going on, or what wasn’t going on. They were very cooperative, and neither seemed to get upset by what was happening. I asked them if they wanted to sit down, but neither did.”

Newman also said he was glad to find out that he couldn’t talk to the broadcast audience either. “For a moment,” he said, “I thought Carter’s mike had failed, but I knew they had double mikes so that didn’t make much sense. I thought my mike was still on, so I started to ad-lib something about how there had been a failure. I don’t think I’ve ever been in a situation as sticky as that... because I immediately thought to myself, what in God’s name am I going to talk about. I can’t talk about what they’ve said... or review it... or evaluate it, since I’m the moderator and supposed to be impartial.”

Off stage, Karayn and Sameth were worrying about how to get started again. They knew there would be critical legal questions raised if the debate were not finished because of the broadcast interruption. At the same time, they expected the sound to be restored at any minute. Karayn recalls moving back and forth between the command post and the stage. On stage, he told Newman that the debate would be finished even if the broadcast was not resumed. He talked to Bernstein in the pool truck and got into a row. “Jim began having a long and heated dialogue with me,” Bernstein remembered. “He wanted to begin the debate for the people in the theater and said that we should turn our cameras off. I said, you do whatever you want, we are not going to turn these cameras off, if you want to resume the debate, resume the debate.”

Karayn later said: “The only thing I could have thought there was the embarrassment of seeing two presidential candidates with their lips moving, with a conversation going on, and questions being asked... the world seeing that there was no sound.”

According to Sameth, Karayn also asked for exteriors or wide shots during the period the candidates were standing mute on stage, “so that the candidates could mop their brows, or be at ease.” Bernstein says he doesn’t recall that request, but does remember watching the separate network pictures in the pool truck, and noting that the networks were not using the pool pictures from the stage very much of the time. (They were showing pictures of their correspondents interviewing people in the lobby, analyzing the debate up to that point, and making dark jokes about the audio failure.) Karayn also wanted the theater PA system restored, so that the debate could continue at least there. He made several trips to talk to the on-stage audio man. He was told first that the PA could not be restored, and later, close to the time audio was restored, that the audio engineers would try to get it back for him. Bernstein, outside in the truck, never realized that the PA system wasn’t working.

In the balcony, League president Ruth Clusen was getting her share of advice. Witnesses say that Theodore White, a steering committee member, became very upset that Carter and Ford were just standing on the stage. He and others told Clusen she should do something about it. Says Clusen, “The gen-
"Is that my camera, Mr. Jagoda?"
Barry Jagoda and vice-presidential candidate Walter Mondale on the stage of the Alley Theater in Houston during the audio-visual check for the third debate. (Courtesy of League of Women Voters)

"There's your camera, Mr. President." In Philadelphia during the audio-visual check ABC pool producer Elliot Bernstein (pointing) shows President Ford where to look. William Carruthers is at the left and Mark Goode is between him and the president. Facing Ford is ABC-TV director Richard Armstrong. (Courtesy of William Carruthers)
Two perspectives in Philadelphia. TOP: a rehearsal, with stand-ins for the candidates but with the real press panel, seen from the balcony of the Walnut Street Theater. (Courtesy of League of Women Voters) BOTTOM: a view of the candidates, press panel, cameras, and theater audience from backstage during the audio outage. The wall separating the set from the audience is clearly seen in both shots. (Courtesy of William Carruthers)
eral thrust of it was you can’t leave those candidates standing there . . . call up, exert your leadership.”

So she decided to approach the candidates’ representatives about taking Ford and Carter offstage to wait it out. “When I went,” she said, “it was like lemmings to the sea, they all followed me.”93

Clusen, Minow, Walker, Rita Hauser, and perhaps others, went backstage, but the group found there really wasn’t anything they could do but agree that the debates should continue as long as the candidates wanted them to. And they returned to their seats.

Backstage, the candidates’ representatives were also wringing their hands. The candidates’ campaign staffs met and worked out an agreement that when the debate resumed, Carter would finish his interrupted answer to a question about controlling U.S. intelligence agencies, and then both men would make closing statements.

There was a rule that the candidates’ representatives could not be on the stage during the debates, but both Carruthers and Jagoda went to the wings and encouraged their man with hand signals and smiles. The two sides also discussed whether they would take Carter and Ford offstage and agreed they would not, unless there was no way to continue.

As the time dragged on, Carruthers and Rafshoon decided they ought to go out onto the set and explain to Ford and Carter what was happening and what was going to happen. As Carruthers relates it, Rafshoon was tying his tie in preparation for going on stage when the audio returned.94

The sound came back because the engineers simply twisted some wires together. In the audio booth in the back of the theater they took the wire from the stage mixer, and wrapped it together with a wire going to the pool truck, by-passing entirely the disabled distribution amplifier. They did this because CBS had run a backup line from its truck directly to the pool truck. In the radio pool, about 20 minutes into the failure, one of the authors heard:

“I understand CBS local has a unilateral audio line and is monitoring something in their truck. Yes. Well, tell them to feed it to New York. They say they will.”

CBS, New York: I only hear background noise.
Voice: That’s the noise in the hall,
That’s what we’re hearing too.
That’s what you’re supposed to hear . . .
Do you hear Newman?
CBS, New York: Yes
Voice: O.K. Well feed it out straight.
CBS, New York: Now, we’ve got it. All nets, do you get it?
ABC: Yes.
NBC: Yes.
CBS: Yes.
Voice: O.K., we’re cuing Newman.

Twisting those wires together got the sound to the pool truck, and from there, by way of the CBS backup line, to the CBS truck, and from there, to

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the telephone company and to New York. Levens said: "I'm not certain we even got the wires taped, I think we said, 'Don't touch it, it's working.'"95

The broadcast resumed at about the same time that the League had decided to continue the debate, broadcast or not, public address system or not.

None of the principals realized it had been 27 minutes. As Carruthers said: "We were frozen in time, we were suspended . . . there was nothing anybody could do."96 Nerves were stretched tight after all this. Bernstein remembers getting into a shouting match with Karayn about pictures of the action on the stage after the debate ended. Bernstein said that Karayn got on an intercom line and told him to turn his cameras off. There had been an agreement that the pool would not take shots that might embarrass the candidates, such as someone pulling up a shirttail to take the microphones off. But they had also agreed that the cameras would follow incidents of editorial interest. Bernstein thought Karayn was violating that agreement. While they argued, Carter and Ford shook hands; the pool missed the shot, and the TV audience didn't get to see it. Karayn says it was not he who talked to Bernstein. Bernstein says it could have been Sameth—it was the end of a very long day.

Bernstein and the pool were now part of the debate story. He said there must have been at least fifty television people gathered around the truck. "I was so surrounded by television people," Bernstein recalls, "I was seriously trying to figure out a way to hook the van onto the cab and drive it back to New York."97

The next day network newscasters displayed the part that had failed—a shiny, foil-wrapped capacitor worth twenty-five cents. President Ford invited Bernstein and Pfister for coffee in the morning, and he told them he understood it wasn't their fault. Carter communicated with them, too. He told them that, coming from an engineering background, he knew how technical problems could develop.

"I was very depressed," Bernstein recalled. "For a couple of weeks after that I really felt awful. The meeting with the President was like taking two aspirin, I felt better for about two hours . . . but this is the American Broadcasting Company, the network of the Olympics . . . sending pictures back from the top of the Alps."98

Summary of First Debate

DATE: September 23, 1976, 9:30 P.M., EDT
PLACE: Walnut Street Theater, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
PRODUCER: Pool—ABC, Elliot Bernstein
DIRECTOR: Richard "Ace" Armstrong, ABC
DESIGNER: Robert Wightman
LIGHTING: Fiorentino Associates/Everett Melosh, ABC
MAKEUP: For Carter, Joe Cranzano; for Ford, Harry Blake
TIMING: Production assistant Merrily Mossman operated the timers. Karayn made the decisions about adding to or cutting the questions sequences. Professional debate timers were on hand as neutral arbiters for any timing controversy.
TECHNICAL SUPERVISOR: Pool—Joe Debonis, ABC

THE GREAT DEBATES
PRODUCTION COORDINATOR FOR LEAGUE: Jack Sameth
MODERATOR: Edwin Newman, NBC
PANELISTS: Frank Reynolds, ABC; Elizabeth Drew, New Yorker; James Gannnon, Wall Street Journal
FORMAT: Domestic and economic issues, 90 minutes. Answers to questions, up to three minutes. Answers to optional follow-up questions limited to two minutes. Comment by opposing candidate, limited to two minutes. Closing statements, limited to three minutes. Candidates could not use scripted comments or notes, but could take notes and refer to them during the debates.

PROGRAM ANALYSIS
OPENING: Pool (video only). Exterior, Walnut Street Theater Long shot of stage from balcony, candidates on set Carter left, Ford right—audience in lower foreground. Cut to closer two-shot of candidates on stage, press panel in lower foreground. Cut to two-shot, Carter in foreground. Cut to two-shot, Ford in foreground. Cut to four-shot from backstage camera showing press panel, zooms and pans to Newman. At 01:00, Newman speaks.
SHOTS: Armstrong used four basic one-shots; the tightest showed the candidates’ shirt-collar points: Others ranged from the candidates’ hands on top of the lectern, to the bottom of the candidates’ coat lapels, to the top of the microphone tie-clip.
REACTIONS: There were side and front reaction shots, which tended to be loose. The side two-shots in particular revealed a great deal of empty center. The two-shot with Carter in the foreground usually showed Ford’s stool in the center of the frame. There were also shots taken from the center front camera which showed some or all of the press panel in the foreground and the two candidates in the background. These were more like re-establishing shots, since they did not show facial expressions or reactions by the candidates. There were also one-shot reactions from the side cameras. These were loose; Carter often appeared ill at ease and looking straight ahead rather than at Ford.
COMMENTS: The director’s cutting was conservative, slow paced, and reflected the restraint of the candidates. It was a rather formal and stiff 90 minutes. There were 11 reaction shots of Carter for a total of 2:20, and 13 of Ford for a total of 2:38.

San Francisco

From the beginning, the League’s intention had been to hold the debates at various sites around the country, at locations with some historic importance. Philadelphia had been a natural choice for the bicentennial year. San Francisco was selected for the second debate largely because the subject was to be foreign policy, and San Francisco had been the scene of the signing of the United Nations Charter in 1945. For a time the League considered holding the second debate in the building where the signing had taken place, the War Memorial Auditorium. Before the Philadelphia debate, Jack Sameth had gone to San Francisco to look at it. Sameth reported that there were serious lighting problems and that the site would be barely adequate. After a second inspection, by CBS pool producer Jack Kelly and Bill Klages, the War Memorial was ruled out.

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Following the first debate Sameth left the League to return to his job as a producer for WNET, New York, and Mike Pengra, took his place as League production supervisor. Pengra, who had worked with Karayn previously, was brought in two days before the Philadelphia debate to observe that one, and to coordinate the rest. Pengra had been a producer-director of television films in commercial and educational broadcasting and for the USIA. He worked on political campaigns as a free-lance producer, and as a writer for television and film companies around Washington, D.C., and is now vice-president and co-owner of Eli Productions in the capital.

Pengra went to San Francisco almost immediately to look for a place to stage the second debate. It had been suggested that he look at a theater in the Palace of Fine Arts, a building originally constructed for the Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1915. Armored tanks had been stored in the building during World War II. In the 1950s it had been restored, and a theater had been constructed at one end of the long, cavernous, curved structure.

Pengra arrived in the middle of the night, and met with theater personnel in the early dawn hours. He was concerned that the theater was not air conditioned, but was told what all visitors to San Francisco are told: that the whole city is naturally air conditioned. Refreshing bay air was pumped inside the building at night, and it remained cool through the day. Pengra may have had some reservations about this civic salesmanship, but time was pressing, and on September 28 the Palace of Fine Arts theater was announced as the site for the second debate.90

The CBS pool producer was Jack Kelly. He had fifteen years with CBS behind him, about seven years as a producer. Like the others, Kelly's forte was special events. He had done major pool coverage for political conventions, space shots, overseas presidential trips, and the spring primary elections.

During the week, Kelly and the pool worried about parking and arranged for a light grid to be built and installed. But by the weekend before the debate new problems developed. The weather wasn't cooperating; an early fall warm front moved in and stayed. Now all that assurance that there was no need for air conditioning began to disappear. Pengra, Kelly, and Klages held a meeting on the stage seventy-two hours before Carter and Ford would face each other again, and they decided to put in air conditioning.

The stage at the Palace of Fine Arts is large, and the job of cooling it was a big one. Air-conditioning contractors were called in. One suggested renting the kind of air-conditioner used to cool off jet airplanes as they sit at airport gates. That turned out to be prohibitively expensive. Another suggested putting 10-ton units outside, and piping the cooler air onto the stage through flexible duct-work. That was expensive too, but San Francisco's mayor and public relations people came to the rescue, working out an arrangement to cover the cost, helped by a donation from a member of the Magnin department-store family.100

After the audio failure in Philadelphia, CBS was not about to have anything like it happen to them. Elaborate backup systems were installed for virtually every phase of the production. The audio had backups to the backup. CBS used two separate systems—mixers and separate distribution amplifiers—and backed them with a third. The League hired a San Francisco firm to run the public address system. In the event that all three of the broadcast sound setups failed,
they had separate PA microphones ready to be rushed on stage for the candidates and the press panel.

The pool lighting director, Bill Schelling, used the basic Fiorentino plot, but with a few changes to get a little more modeling on the candidates' faces. The day before the debate, CBS had some problems with overheated dimmers. Spares were brought in, and the broadcast was not affected. Special precautions were taken to make sure there wouldn’t be a power failure during the debates. The San Francisco power company could switch from one source to another, and CBS brought in a large portable generator that could handle everything except the air conditioning. They even practiced switching from city power to the generator three or four times. CBS backed up the video switcher with one that could handle at least five of the nine cameras, in the outlandish event that the main one quit during the broadcast. To be quadruply sure, each network ran a separate audio line to the CBS pool truck, and CBS ordered a separate audio circuit from the pool truck all the way across the country to New York, in case the primary circuit failed.

Kelly was apprehensive, but was glad he was the producer of the second debate and not the first. “Elliot [Bernstein] really went through a grinder,” Kelly commented. “I was expecting to walk into another windmill, and I had the additional pressure of the loss of audio. . . . The relationship . . . between the League and the networks was awkward . . . but it went very smoothly. . . . I was really surprised every day that things went as well as they did. Part of the pressure came from the press: ‘Is it going to go wrong again, are you going to lose audio, are you going to lose video . . . what are you doing differently from ABC?’” Recalled Kelly, “I spent more time answering questions on that remote than I’ve ever done before in my life. . . . Every time I turned around, somebody was asking the same question . . . ‘What are you doing differently?’”

Many problems had been solved in Philadelphia. The intercom and audio-video feed arrangements were the same, and there was no argument about them. The timing devices were mounted on the cameras as a matter of course. Stagehands hired by the League were there again to hold up cue cards if the electric timers went out.

There were two minor set changes. A small riser was placed under the chairs of the questioners’ panel, so that the candidates would not have to look down as far to talk to the panel members, and thus could play to the cameras more easily. The candidates’ riser was moved back one foot.

The low wall between the stage and the audience was still there. Besides, at the request and expense of the White House staff, a new wall, eight feet tall and about 100 feet long, was built across the back of the stage. Since the theater dressing rooms and office area were not separated from the stage, the wall was built to shut them off and block out noise.

Getting the air conditioning in and working wasn’t quite as easy. Two days before the debate, Pengra arranged for the system to be put in, and contractors dashed off to build it. The air-conditioning units were positioned outside the theater next to the wall. Large flexible ducts, looking like elephant trunks, wound their way onto the stage and the debate set, where they were suspended from the light grid and aimed at the lecterns.
Twenty-four hours before the debate, the system was running. There was no way to air-condition the whole theater, but, the contractors said, they could cool the area where the candidates would stand to between 60 and 70 degrees. Pengra said the contractors told him: “You can walk on stage tomorrow morning, and you’re going to love it.” But, Pengra couldn’t sleep that night. Around 4:00 A.M. he got a call from a theater official, who said that he couldn’t sleep either. He was on the stage with the air-conditioner running. He said the temperature was 75, with no lights on and no equipment running. Pengra went to the theater, and the two of them got a ladder and lowered the ducts six to eight feet. “It was just like a water hose,” Pengra said. “By God it was cool, it went down to 67 just like that!” Later that day the ducts were adjusted so they wouldn’t blow directly on the candidates. During the audio-visual check Pengra told Ford and Carter that if they got too warm during the debate they could just step a foot or so from behind their lecterns and stand under the main jets of cool air—like taking a shower.105

The day before there had been rehearsals all afternoon with stand-ins on the set. Mark Brand of the Carter campaign staff took the governor’s place, and Roger McPike, a San Francisco attorney and Republican worker, stood in for Ford. McPike “debated” well. He told the authors he did a lot of campaign speaking in the Bay area. He spoke knowledgeably about defense and foreign policy in answer to questions fired at him by stand-in panelists.

Kelly also had two sessions with the real panel of questioners. They came in around noon the day of the debate and returned about two hours before the debate to rehearse the opening of the program.

Because of the time difference the debate would go on the air at 6:30 P.M. San Francisco time. The candidates had come to the theater for the AV check that morning. Carter arrived at 10:45. He walked around the stage, shook hands with the crew, and was led over to the audio mixers, where CBS engineers solemnly explained the very carefully backed up system. Gerry Rafshoon and Carter went to his lectern, where they rehearsed various ways to stand and look at the Ford side of the stage.

Ford came to the theater after Carter had left. The president talked a bit, checked the location of his main camera, and told the press pool that these debates “were getting to be old stuff; I feel like a winner.” Ford also practiced a few lectern gestures, including various positions for his hands on its top and sides. As he left, the crew members came around to shake his hand.

During the AV check, “blue” again became a controversial color. Jagoda and Rafshoon started the discussion by asking for no blue, just the white lights on the off-white set. Fiorentino talked them into some blue light, and he got Jagoda to agree that if the Ford people wanted more blue, he could raise it higher. When Bill Carruthers arrived with Ford, he immediately asked for more blue. So, Fiorentino turned it up. He’d found the middle range acceptable to both sides. He told the authors: “I went to each guy and I said, ‘Remember the blue (or white) you saw that you didn’t want . . . well, I didn’t go that far. But, I went up a little bit from the blue (or white) that you did want. And, I’m doing the same for the other.’ That made them very happy.” “Of course,” he added, “we’re worrying about things that don’t matter . . . People tune
"If this one doesn't work, it's backed up by two others." During the audio-visual check in San Francisco Jimmy Carter is shown one of three CBS audio mixing systems by engineer Neal Weinstein. (Courtesy of League of Women Voters)

"It's always delightfully cool in San Francisco . . .," especially if technicians work around the clock to install a temporary air-conditioning system. Cool air is pumped in through the flexible pipes hanging from the grid. (Courtesy of League of Women Voters)
“Dear Jimmy . . .” While standing in for her husband’s opponent during President Ford’s audio-visual check in Williamsburg, Betty Ford writes a note to Jimmy Carter. (White House photo)

*Making it happen in Williamsburg,* NBC director Frank Slingland and debate project director Jim Karayn chat with moderator Barbara Walters. (*Courtesy of League of Women Voters*)
their sets all over the place. My mother said the backdrop was green in Phila-
delphia. I didn’t have the heart to ask her what the faces looked like.”

Shortly before 6:30 P.M., the temperature was about 85 degrees where the audience was; it was cooler on the stage with the air conditioning.

The candidates’ dressing rooms had been decorated with different but equal furniture and fittings gathered from ten San Francisco firms. There were potted palms and citrus trees, chrysanthemums, glass-topped tables, rattan chairs, and carved elephant benches. A press release from a San Francisco public relations firm said the objective was a “come-right-in, non-decorated look.”

The program got on the air, and the debate started in a much more professional manner. This time, the separation of League and pool was almost wiped out. Pengra got the countdown from the pool truck, where they knew exactly what time it was. It was relayed to the timer, and she cued the moderator. It was almost like twentieth-century television.

Summary of Second Debate

DATE: October 6, 1976, 9:30 P.M., EDT
PLACE: Palace of Fine Arts, San Francisco
PRODUCER: Pool—CBS, Jack Kelly
DIRECTOR: Arthur Bloom, CBS
LIGHTING: Fiorentino Associates, Bill Schelling, CBS
DESIGNER, MAKEUP; TIMING: Same as for first debate
TECHNICAL SUPERVISOR: Pool—Brooks Graham, CBS
PRODUCTION COORDINATOR: Mike Pengra, League of Women Voters
MODERATOR: Pauline Frederick, NPR
PANELISTS: Richard Valeriani, NBC; Henry Trewhitt, Baltimore Sun; Max Frankel, New York Times
FORMAT: Foreign and defense issues, 90 minutes. Timing, rules, rotation, closing statements—same as first debate.

PROGRAM ANALYSIS
OPENING: Pool (video only)

Exterior, outside Palace of Fine Arts, reflecting pond in foreground. Cut to long shot of stage from back of theater showing empty seats in center frame. Cut to side shot of panel, Frankel in foreground. Cut to stage right two-shot, Ford in foreground. Cut to center camera two-shot, panel in foreground. Cut to medium shot of Pauline Frederick.

SHOTS: Bloom used both wider and tighter one-shots than were used in the first debate. The tightest showed just the top of the candidates’ necktie knots.

REACTIONS: Bloom took more one-shot reaction shots of Carter and Ford, and they were tighter. The side two-shots were tight with little empty space in the center of the frame. The tightest side two-shot usually occurred when Carter was seated on his stool. Re-establishing shots from the front included either two or four members of the panel in the foreground.

COMMENT: Bloom worked for relationship shots from both the front and back of the stage, showing the candidate with a panel member asking a question. He also took single shots of the candidates while they were listening to the
questions. He used slow zooms both in and out while the candidates were answering.

Like Don Hewitt, CBS director sixteen years earlier, Bloom took a free-wheeling approach. His shooting and cutting matched the more lively, and at times, heated, second debate. He re-positioned his side cameras during the broadcast to trim and tighten two-shots. There were 27 reaction shots of Carter for a total of 2:31, and 29 of Ford for 2:35.


Houston: The Vice-Presidential Candidates on Stage

The one truly new element in the 1976 debates was the debate between the vice-presidential candidates. Long before the League's negotiations with the candidates, it had been a solid conviction of some League executives that there should be a meeting between the number two men on each side. The reasoning was sound: three vice-presidents had become president since 1945. It became something of a special project for League executive director Peggy Lampl. "It was," she said, "my suggestion. I said one day at a meeting, 'We ought to have a vice-presidential debate, given the recent history.' The reception at the beginning in the steering committee was an overwhelming bore. But we just plugged away. The candidates had no confidence in it, but I think both sides grew to assume that it would happen, and that actual negotiations would be left to the vice-presidential candidates."¹⁰⁷

There does not seem to have been any serious objection to a vice-presidential debate at the general negotiation sessions with the Ford and Carter representatives in late August. It is clear that the Democrats were more favorable to the idea than the Republicans, although they did not press the point very hard.¹⁰⁸ The Republicans, including vice-presidential candidate Robert Dole, almost ridiculed the idea during the debates period, and criticized it roundly after the elections. On the campaign trail Dole had frequently said that the voters were more interested in going to Friday night high-school football games than in listening to the vice-presidential candidates debate. He frequently referred to the event as the "Doyle and Mundale" debates, suggesting that many people didn't even know the names of the candidates. On the day of the debate, Dole said he would rather have had the four or five days' preparation time to spend campaigning.

After it was over, Raoul-Duval said the vice-presidential debate had been a very bad idea. Duval told the authors: "It never should have occurred. We didn't want to come right out and say it; we would have been accused of being unfair and not playing the game. It was unrealistic; they were not going to talk issues, so it was a question of who was better at using the TV medium. It's back in a dark corner somewhere, where I hope it will disappear and people will forget about it."¹⁰⁹

It wasn't as easy to put together as the rather casual assumption the League made in its invitation to Ford and Carter. When the debates were set up, the vice-presidential candidates were not issued a personal invitation. Jim Karayn said that the invitation went to the presidential candidates only, "because we knew, obviously, they [the vice-presidential candidates] could not accept without getting it from the boss."¹¹⁰ Peggy Lampl said the veep negotiations were
more difficult than those involving the top of the ticket. The length of the debate, the subject matter, the site, were all topics for discussion. Karayn's first idea was to hold it in the Midwest, because both men were from the area. He later suggested that both the vice-presidential debate and the last presidential debate be held in Williamsburg, Virginia, to save money and time. But in a conference call between Karayn and the two men's aides, the idea of taking it to Atlanta came up. Dole's side strongly favored debating in the South. The Mondale staff was at first suspicious that carrying the debate into Carter's home territory was a Republican political ploy, but they warmed to the plan. A survey trip to Atlanta was made, but no theater was available.  

Senator Dole's people suggested changing the set. They were concerned that Senator Dole would not be able to stand and write for a long period because of his damaged arm. Dole's representatives also suggested that the vice-presidential candidates be seated to distinguish this debate from the presidential ones. Karayn was receptive to simple changes that didn't involve new construction: the vice-presidential candidates could debate in front of a black curtain or choose different furniture, if they wished.

Regarding the format, the Dole people had suggested an unstructured one-hour period, with answers limited to one minute; the Mondale side wanted a session of 90 minutes and longer answers. The Democrats also urged organization of the questions into topic areas. Karayn continued to advocate a face-to-face format, as he had throughout the debates period.

A compromise finally evolved. The debate was set for 75 minutes. Answers were limited to two-and-a-half minutes, with the first respondent to have one minute for rebuttal. Opening and closing statements were to be two and three minutes, respectively. The debating period was to be divided equally among three areas: domestic issues, foreign issues, and questions on any subject. New York Senator Jacob Javits, an advisor to Dole, made two contributions to the agreement. He suggested that the VP debate be held in Houston, Texas, and he convinced the negotiators that it would be all right to have it on Friday, October 15, which was the end of Sukkoth, a Jewish holiday. It had taken ten days to settle the arrangements.

In Houston, the League chose the Alley Theater, one of the country's first resident professional theaters. Built in 1968, it had all the advantages of a modern house, among them, an arena with a thrust stage and plenty of lighting control. In addition, a main power company distribution point was located under the building.

The set, trucked in from California, had to be modified to fit on the Alley stage. The walls were compressed on the sides, and the questioners' panel was moved about four feet closer to the candidates. The painted linoleum floor-covering was no longer usable, after being put down and taken up twice. So, the stage floor was painted black.

The Alley Theater provided an intimacy for the audience that the other debate sites didn't have. Even though the wall was still in the way, the steep rake of the house seats put the audience much closer to the action.

The other unique aspect of the Houston broadcast was that the production for the pool was done by the Public Broadcasting Service. It was the first time PBS had produced for a national network pool. As a network, PBS had no
central headquarters production center. A staff and equipment had to be pulled together from stations that were part of the network. WNET, New York, and WETA, Washington, provided the operators and supervisors. The equipment was rented from public station WGBY, Springfield, Massachusetts, and from Continental Television, a New Jersey-based firm. The two remote trucks had been used before to originate PBS's "Live from Lincoln Center" broadcasts.

Wallace Westfeldt had been assigned as the pool producer. He had come to public television in January 1976 after fifteen years with NBC News as a reporter and producer. Much of his time had been spent on the "Huntley-Brinkley Report" and "NBC Nightly News." He became director of news and public affairs and senior executive producer at WETA, Washington.

To Westfeldt, forming a production team and doing the broadcast as a PBS pool effort were among the most interesting aspects of his assignment. Westfeldt wanted to see if it could be done by putting together a composite crew from New York and Washington. Lighting installation was simple. PBS used the house system with a portable backup dimmer unit. A special PA system was brought in, and the audio setup was given an extensive back up similar to that used in San Francisco. There were no serious technical problems in getting ready for the debate. Still, PBS wasn't taking any chances. Cables were carefully waterproofed the day before the debate. Director Bob Wynn staged disaster drills in anticipation of every conceivable audio and video problem.

Rehearsals were held the day of the debate, but they were much shorter than previously. During the AV checks with the vice-presidential candidates, Mondale and his staff arrived first. There was a lot of joking and informal talk. Mondale said he had played tennis that morning. Mondale and Barry Jagoda worked for a time on eye contact with the cameras. There was some practice with answers to questions, but Mondale seemed impatient with this and it was cut short after he said, "That's enough," several times.

The Dole group had technical and staging questions. A severe wound during World War II had rendered Senator Dole's right arm almost useless. To accommodate him, the senator's lectern was raised about two inches and turned toward the center of the stage and Mondale. This allowed Dole to lean on the podium with his left arm and to support his right arm with his left hand. Dole used this stance frequently throughout his campaign.

For the first time, a member of the candidate's family was involved in the AV check. Elizabeth Dole had accompanied her husband to the theater. Dole asked if he would be able to see the audience during the debate, fearing that it might be a distraction. He was told he would not see them, and the house lights were lowered. But, he still seemed concerned about it, so Mrs. Dole went out into the house, and more lights were turned off. The senator looked at Mrs. Dole for awhile and seemed satisfied that the problem had been solved. Dole did not practice questions and answers. When the press pool came in, Mrs. Dole posed with him for still pictures. The lighting adjustments regarding "blue" were minimal this time. Westfeldt says Jagoda wanted the set wall made bluer, but there wasn't the long colloquy about it that had taken place elsewhere. At the start of the program, cuing had become very simplified. As in any broadcast, the stage director cued moderator Jim Hoge, and the program began.
On the air, and in the theater the Houston debate was the most trouble-free. Summing it up, Westfeldt said: "It was really sort of cut and dried...it's fun to do live programs: the adrenalin flows."

**Summary of Third Debate**

**DATE:** October 15, 1976, 9:30 P.M., EDT

**PLACE:** Alley Theater, Houston, Texas

**PRODUCER:** Pool—PBS, Wallace Westfeldt

**DIRECTOR:** Bob Wynn, freelance

**LIGHTING:** Fiorentino Associates; Stan Alpert, Paul Siatta for pool

**DESIGNER, TIMING, PRODUCTION COORDINATOR:** same as in San Francisco

**MAKEUP:** Tom Ellingwood for Dole, Joe Cranzano for Mondale

**TECHNICAL SUPERVISOR:** Pool, Mal Albaum, WNET

**MODERATOR:** James Hoge, Chicago Sun-Times

**PANELISTS:** Hal Bruno, Newsweek; Marilyn Berger, NBC; Walter Mears, Associated Press.

**FORMAT:** Domestic, foreign, 75 minutes. Opening statements of two minutes.

**Questioning:** answers from candidate A up to 2:30; response from candidate B, up to 2:30; rebuttal from candidate A up to 1:00. Closing statements, up to 3:00. Rules same as for presidential debates.

**PROGRAM ANALYSIS**

**OPENING:** Pool (video only). Long shot—balcony; audience and stage. Two-shot, stage right, Mondale in foreground. Panel, stage left. Long shot—balcony, zooming toward stage. Medium shot—moderator.

**SHOTS:** Wynn's approach was to start wide and work in tighter throughout the debate. At the beginning he used loose one-shots showing the top of the lectern or below. Both candidates used a lot of hand and arm gestures. There were no shots tighter than tie-clip until near the end of the debate, and the only tight closeups—tie knot—came during the closing statements.

**REACTIONS:** Many reaction shots came from the center stage camera, and included both candidates and two or three panel members, and sometimes even the moderator. Some were so wide they might be better described as re-establishing shots. Wynn also used a side two-shot showing much of Dole's back in the foreground and Mondale in the background. During one Mondale speech, Wynn took three reaction shots of Dole. He took one one-shot reaction during the entire debate: Dole for three seconds.

**COMMENTS:** Both candidates took extensive notes during the debate, and this action showed in the side two-shots. While most were past the speaker into the reactor in the background, Wynn frequently reversed this pattern by showing the reactor in the foreground and the speaker in the background: usually Dole was speaking. There were a couple of camera problems. In the one-shots on Dole, Wynn would start wide and zoom into a tighter shot, but on Mondale, Wynn used two cameras to get to the tight shot by starting to zoom in, cutting away to something else, like a wide shot from the center camera, then cutting back to a tighter shot. It appeared to the authors that the lens on Mondale's main camera was sticking in one part of its zoom range.
During Dole's closing statement, his main camera developed trouble, so Dole's statement was shot by another camera, which made him seem to be looking off to the left.

**Candidates' total speaking time: 66:12. Dole—33:01. Mondale—33:11.**

**Williamsburg**

In 1776 five students at the College of William and Mary met in the Raleigh Tavern in Williamsburg, Virginia, and formed Phi Beta Kappa, as they wrote, to "search out and dispel the clouds of falsehood by debating without reserve the issues of the day." In 1976, Phi Beta Kappa Hall, on the campus of William and Mary, appeared to be just the right size and shape to accommodate Carter and Ford in their last encounter, on October 22. The League opened negotiations with the college. A performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Sorcerer* was rescheduled, and the arrangements were made.

William and Mary students quickly launched debate-related projects. Dorms competed to make the best banner welcoming "Gerry and Jimmy." The students threw a wine and cheese party and a volleyball game for the Secret Service and receptions for the technicians and the foreign press. They invited TV correspondents, producers, and members of the candidates' staffs to speak to classes. The state-owned liquor store laid in more supplies. A faculty member commented that the debates had little to do with the college at all, that beating Michigan at football would do more for William and Mary.¹⁴

A big closed-circuit television screen was installed in the eleven-thousand seat fieldhouse, and the basketball team was moved out. Phi Beta Kappa Hall received a four-thousand-dollar face lift, including new carpeting and a gilded sign on the facade. Student volunteers oiled the seats so they wouldn't squeak during the debate.

As this euphoric atmosphere grew, NBC moved in its equipment. The set was unloaded and put up for the last time, and preprogram lighting began. The set needed some retouching, but there were no serious problems. A complete lighting setup and control board were installed. As had been done since Philadelphia, the audio was doubled up and backed up. This time NBC controlled the audio from the pool truck rather than in the theater.

A bit of a scare developed when the pool and debates people learned about the sometimes erratic habits of the local power supply. No one seems to have mentioned this during the earlier site surveys, but a couple of days before the debate NBC was told that there were sometimes power failures in the city. The NBC pool brought in a second and separate power system and actually operated from it, with the local power as a backup.¹¹⁵

The pool producer for the fourth debate was Christie Basham, another veteran of NBC. Basham had started as a production assistant in the NBC Washington bureau nineteen years earlier. She had been film-assignment editor for the network for nine years and Washington producer for "NBC Nightly News" for three years. Before the pool assignment, she had been Washington director of news operations for NBC, and she had been pool chairman on President Ford’s trip to Helsinki in 1975. She had observed all three previous debates.

The atmosphere at the AV check for this debate was noticeably more tense than it had been at any of the previous events, especially on the Carter side. It
was later explained to the authors that the tension was caused mainly by the closeness of the election, eleven days away. The Carter group came on the stage all business. Carter walked right to his lectern and launched into a series of real answers to real questions put to him by his staff—about unemployment and tax reform, priorities if elected, keeping promises made during the campaign, the Arab boycott, and foreign policy. That caused a serious problem. The pictures and audio of the AV check were not supposed to be seen or heard anywhere but in the pool truck. Somehow, the sound was distributed elsewhere, including the press center at the Williamsburg Lodge.

The Carter supporters learned what had happened almost immediately, and they became very upset. Jagoda said, "I didn't want to see a wire story saying, 'Carter said in rehearsal today this, that and the other.' That becomes part of the news generating process . . . . It might have been on the evening news that night." NBC quickly cut off the sound and spent the next few hours calling everyone who might have received it to tell them that it was not to be used.117

Fiorentino told the authors, "There was much more tension today, lots of nit-picking; all business and really tense people, it was 1960 for the first time." In contrast Ford came in laughing and joking. Mrs. Ford was with him. They shook hands and posed for pictures with League executives. Betty Ford stood behind Carter's lectern. The president sat down on the controversial stool. Betty Ford took out a piece of paper and started to write on it.

Ford: "What are you doing, writing a note to Jimmy?"

Mrs. Ford: "Yes, I am."

After Mrs. Ford had left, press secretary Ron Nessen released the note to the press. She had wished Carter good luck, and added: "I happen to have a favorite, my husband, President Ford . . . "118

Ford did not have a rehearsal.

The only problem that developed the day of the debate was with the PA system in the theater. There was feedback from time to time during the afternoon, and adjustments were made. But the problem continued during the debate; the audience in Phi Beta Kappa Hall had trouble hearing the candidates.

NBC controlled the broadcast audio from the pool truck and also supplied a feed to the house PA. The League, as it had done twice before, hired a local sound company to provide the PA system for the theater audience. There was a separate mini-PA system on the stage, as there had been at the other three debates, feeding the sound from the questioners and the candidates into small speakers placed inside the candidates' lecterns and on the floor close to the press panel. This is called a mix-minus system. There is disagreement about what caused the PA problem in Phi Beta Kappa Hall. The League accused NBC of cutting off the sound to the PA. NBC says it did not do that. NBC did tell the house PA operator that he would have to run his system at a low level. During the debate, the pool and the PA operator worked together to lower the PA each time one questioner—Bob Maynard—talked. The feedback that bothered the pool on the afternoon of the debate and caused the low-level PA that evening could have come from two sources: the house PA or the mix-minus on the stage. One or both, turned up too high or out of balance, could have caused the problem. During the ninety minutes that the debate was on the air, no one involved—producer, director, audio techni-
cian, or PA operator—was aware of the problem. They all say they learned about it after the debate or in the next morning’s papers. The broadcast audience could hear everything, the people in the theater could not.119

After all the talk about format changes, there was one for the final debate, and it was minor. The time for answers to questions was reduced by thirty seconds. Everything else remained the same.

Frank Slingland of NBC Washington had directed the second 1960 debate. Sixteen years later he was in Williamsburg for the final 1976 event. He told the authors he hadn’t wanted to do it again. “In 1960,” he said, “we had to show each and every shot to the candidates’ representatives. In Senator Kennedy’s case, it was his brother, and Bill Wilson and Leonard Reinsch . . . and in Nixon’s case, Ted Rogers and a couple of his people. Each and every shot was shown . . . and they were critical of backgrounds, of one lens being softer than another lens, of one side of the set being lighter than the other.”120

Slingland had watched the previous three 1976 debates and thought that the directors had felt restricted, their shooting conservative. He agreed to take the job, but decided to take a more freewheeling approach.

For the first set of questions and answers Basham and Slingland had agreed on a series of more or less matched shot sequences. That done, Slingland turned to Basham and said, “Look, I hope you’re not expecting me to do any equal sequencing of shots from now on. . . . We’re going to be on our own and we are going to be taking what looks good. I got the answer: ‘Go ahead, it’s yours, keep it coming.’” In the end Slingland enjoyed it.

The much discussed and often rejected face-to-face confrontation between the candidates might have happened at Williamsburg, if Jim Karayn had made a different decision about timing near the end of the debate. The questioners had agreed among themselves that when the time came to shorten the questions and answers, they were going to relinquish their time and ask Carter and Ford if they had questions for each other. Karayn didn’t know about this and instructed moderator Barbara Walters to proceed with two more rounds of regular length. The “plot” failed.121

There was only one tense moment that echoed the trouble in Philadelphia a month earlier. About twenty minutes into the debate a piece of cardboard that had been taped above a camera lens to shield it from the lights came loose and dropped over the lens. That camera happened to be on the air. Everyone jumped. Slingland cut to another camera immediately. Even though the incident took just a split second, another network called the NBC truck to ask what had happened. Bob Mulholland said: “I aged ten years in that one second.” Most people who watched the debate didn’t even notice it.122

Summary of Fourth Debate

DATE: October 22, 1976, 9:30 P.M., EDT
PLACE: Phi Beta Kappa Hall, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia
PRODUCER: Pool—NBC, Christie Basham
DIRECTOR: Frank Slingland, NBC
LIGHTING: Fiorentino Associates; Marvin Purbaugh, NBC
DESIGNER, TIMING, PRODUCTION COORDINATOR: same as in San Francisco

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THE GREAT DEBATES
MAKEUP: Same as in Philadelphia

TECHNICAL SUPERVISOR: Pool—Don Pike, NBC

MODERATOR: Barbara Walters, ABC


FORMAT: Open topics ninety minutes. Questions, answer 2:30, followup question, answer, 2:00. Response, 2:00. Closing statements, 3:00. During the debate the length of the closing statements was expanded to 4 minutes to balance out the time remaining. Rules: same as before.

PROGRAM ANALYSIS

OPENING: (Pool video only) Wide shot, balcony, Stage left two-shot, Ford in foreground. Medium shot, balcony camera, both men at lecterns. Backstage camera, Ford left, Carter right, press panel center, audience in background. Medium shot, moderator.

SHOTS: Slingland used a wide variety of one-shots ranging from a loose shot of Ford that included the entire top and some of the base of the lectern to what were the tightest one-shots of the entire debate series—closeups which did not include even the tie-knots. He did quite a bit of one-to-one cutting during the same speech, from lectern top to tie-bar; or the reverse, from tight closeups to medium shots to show the candidates writing notes.

REACTIONS: Slingland introduced some different reaction shots and shooting patterns. Once, when Ford was speaking, he put in two reverse angle two-shots. He also used a shot that started as a one-shot of the candidate speaking, and then zoomed back to include the other candidate listening or taking notes. He also used the balcony camera to get a high angle shot of the candidates listening to questions.

COMMENTS: There were 15 reaction shots of Carter for a total of 4:00, and six of Ford for a total of 1:40. The apparent imbalance in reaction shots is deceiving. With the exception of two one-shot reactions of Carter, both candidates were always in the picture. Slingland must have seen more motivation to cut away from Ford than from Carter. There were no one-shot reaction shots of Ford.

CANDIDATES’ TOTAL SPEAKING TIME: 70:08. Ford—38:57, Carter—31:11. (Carter passed or gave very brief answers to several rebuttal questions.)

Conclusions

The League of Women Voters, American public opinion, and the major-party candidates wanted the 1976 debates. The only obstacle to broadcasting them was Section 315 of the FCC code. The American radio-TV networks, and some independent stations, covered the debates as bona fide news events. League sponsorship gave the broadcasters a path around Section 315, and the candidates, a transmission belt to virtually every American voter.

Of the parties in this tripartite arrangement, the candidates had the most control. The League was committed to sponsoring the debates. The networks, despite their legal and journalistic doubts and fears, could not have avoided them—all three became, to a greater or lesser extent, prisoners of the process.

The League packaged and produced the debates for television and got the consent of the candidates on most matters. The format, the dates, sites, staging,
and method of selecting the questioners were worked out between the League and the candidates.

The candidates' representatives worked hard for their principals on both substantive and picayune issues. They made numerous moves aimed at gaining a real or imagined advantage, but they never pushed them to the point of foreclosure.

Foreclosure—refusal to broadcast the events—was never an option for the networks. It is inconceivable that the Republican and Democratic candidates for the presidency could have appeared together anywhere without network coverage.

The League of Women Voters. The League was somewhat idealistic about its role, influenced by the organization's tradition of nonpartisan voter service. It put together a highly competent and tough staff that got the job done under severe time limitations. Regarding the format, the League ended up with most of what it said it wanted in its early planning. One major desire was not achieved—they were never able to get the candidates to engage in face-to-face discussion. Most of the other elements—including the controversial choice of questioners and audience shots—were League positions even before they were agreed to by the candidates.

As far as the authors were able to find out—and we pursued it vigorously—there were no vetoes of panelists by the candidates. To this day there are rumors. There are journalists who believe they were blackballed by one side or the other. And, there are journalists who think the candidates had a hand in the selection. The candidates' representatives say they did not want to see the proposed lists, or to put themselves into a veto position. They say, and the League officials agree—and have said so publicly—that there were informal discussions about possible panel members before they were chosen. All agree that there were no panels on which all of the names suggested by the candidates' representatives appeared. Finally, at least once, and perhaps twice, the candidates' representatives were not informed of the makeup of a panel before the names were announced to the news media.

The League should have taken the network's advice and hired an audio consultant for the four debates to do what Imero Fiorentino did with the lighting and the set, and to pay particular attention to the public address systems in the theaters.

Jim Karayn played the key role as organizer and leader of the debates project, working with a small staff to bring off what many, including network executives, thought could never happen.

As sensitive as the selection of questioners was, Karayn could have saved himself and the League a lot of grief by being more candid with the networks, and more sensitive to their concern about the audience shots. It was almost deceitful that the television viewer got only the most fleeting impression that there was an audience in the theaters. There seems to be little foundation for the League's fear that the networks would have misused shots of the audience during the debates. Given the importance of the events, conservative production and journalistic values would have prevailed.

The Networks. To protect their legal positions and professional standards, the networks waged a sometimes egocentric, but mostly very serious rearguard
action. While they recognized clearly that Section 315 precluded them from being involved in the planning of the events, they also feared that agreements between the League and the candidates—particularly in regard to the picking of questioners and the ban on shots of the audience—would compromise their legal and journalistic positions. Because of their apprehension, the networks took steps to protect themselves—at least in the beginning—by setting complex hands-off procedures, which made the production of the broadcasts awkward.

The broadcasts presented by the networks’ pool were, with one major exception, flawless. In the authors’ view, the complicated procedures taken by the networks to head off potential legal problems may well have contributed, at least indirectly, to the Philadelphia audio failure. The list of things the networks said they couldn’t do made the first production by the pool more complicated. If the “can’t dos” hadn’t been there, or if they had been minimized from the start, the ABC pool producer would have had more time to devote to the details of the broadcast and might have caught the weak link in its audio system. Since the “can’t dos” were largely disregarded in the later debates, we wonder, even in view of Section 315, why they were necessary at all.

The essence of “hands-off,” or what Elliot Bernstein called “hocus-pocus,” may be in an item from the September 17 pool minutes relating to the AV checks for the candidates. It reads: “Members agree that pool will not schedule anything for candidates, but will not turn its back if candidates appeared while pool was working.”

It is clear to the authors that ABC played the long odds with their audio setup, and lost. When a part failed, the whole system failed. That could have happened to anybody. What ABC did not do was provide an alternate system to fall back on. Improvising a way to restore the sound, under frantic pressure, took too long.

In the debate series there were two instances in which the broadcasts themselves seemed to reflect the awkward atmosphere of the whole situation.

In Houston there was an obvious chance for audience reaction shots when the theater audience laughed at some of Senator Dole’s remarks. A director, operating freely, might have considered taking a shot of the audience if there was enough reaction to make it a significant part of the story. To do that, he would have had to have a camera aimed at the audience, and sufficient light. Because of the no-shot rule, neither was available at that moment. To have faithfully reported the whole story of that debate, the director should have had the option of shooting the audience.

In Philadelphia during the audio breakdown, the pool and the networks could have covered it. The networks had reporters and cameras in the theater, in the lobby and outside the building. When the failure occurred, the network anchor persons—Cronkite, Reasoner-Smith, and Brinkley, who were in studios in New York, were relaying fragmentary and sometimes erroneous information. Brinkley twice announced the debate was over. The correspondents in the lobby—whose job was to get reaction after the debate—had even less hard information, and said so. Outside the theater there were cameras and reporters all over, particularly around the stage door. But, during the sound failure, the only outside coverage to get on the air were brief CBS and NBC interviews with Mrs. Carter. Inside, the pool cameras remained on wide shots of the
stage. They did not show close-ups of the candidates waiting it out, or Ed Newman's attempts to communicate with Ford and Carter, or the technicians working to get things started again, or the audience.

The networks thus chose not to cover a sub-event. When they became a part of the story, they didn’t cover themselves.

**The Candidates’ Representatives.** The candidates’ television advisors, particularly those representing Gerald Ford, got what they wanted. The Ford people were methodical and persistent. They had the power and resources of the White House, and they used them. In the negotiations, the Republicans were aggressive. They had firm ideas about how the programs should look—Ford should look presidential, thus he would stand up to debate, there should be a panel to fire questions, and the programs should be ninety minutes so that Ford could demonstrate his experience. At the same time they felt style was more important than substance—that audiences have a short memory for issues, and would see the debates primarily as a beauty contest.

The Carter representatives protested at length about the stiffness and formality of what the Republicans were proposing and supporting. They say they wanted an informal, seated, “talk-show” format—which was more suited to Carter’s style—but they seem to have been doing more reacting than proposing, and they did not push as hard. They believed Carter could also handle the more formal atmosphere, and may have accepted that in the end as less of a risk than what they first proposed.

Both sides knew that the candidates’ representatives controlled the events, so when they were in agreement, there was little chance of other outcome. Both used control as strategy in the negotiating sessions.

**News Events?** In 1960, because Section 315 was suspended for the debates between Nixon and Kennedy, everything seen and heard, from the moderator’s “good evening” to his “good night” sixty minutes later, was identical on all the networks. This time, because the networks were covering a bona fide news event under Section 315, each devised its own broadcast around the pooled report. Each covered the debates as part of its overall election campaign coverage.

There is no doubt that the 1976 debates were bona fide news events. They could have been held anywhere—even, as one pool producer said, on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir—and they would have been news events.

**Contrasts?** There is much to contrast between the two sets of debates sixteen years apart. The vice-presidential candidates debated, and a new kid on the block, PBS, took its place with the commercial networks as a full-fledged member of the pool producing club. The programs were in color this time. Technology had advanced—the worries of the 1960s about soft zoom lens and camera tubes that didn’t match had disappeared. Huge boom microphones were replaced by fingernail-sized mikes worn on tie-clips. There was an audience this time, because the League of Women Voters had always had an audience at its political events. Besides, the League believed that the presence of an audience was related to the legality of the broadcasts. In 1960 the debates took place in studios; in 1976 they were held in theaters. For the Kennedy-Nixon debates, there were four different sets, the creations of network
designers. For the Carter-Ford debates there was only one set, the design of which was similar in some respects to several of the 1960 sets.

Lessons? Some lessons were learned in the sixteen years. Makeup, which made headlines in 1960, was not an issue in 1976. Both candidates used their own professional makeup artists. While there was still some discussion about lighting, it was minimal, compared to the adding and matching of lighting instruments, the discussions of shadows and intensity, that went on in 1960. In 1976 an outside consultant oversaw consistent and trouble-free lighting throughout the programs. Reaction shots were a big issue in 1960. Candidates' representatives and relatives were in the control rooms during the broadcasts and put pressure on the directors regarding the use of reaction shots. This time reaction shots were accepted as a normal part of coverage, and the candidates' representatives were kept away.

With time and distance, the issues discussed above may seem trivial. This may be, but at the time, and in the atmosphere of a close race for the presidency, the staging of part of that race, and the coverage of it, became an all-consuming matter. Much of the time and energy spent on "looking professional," "sitting or standing," or "cutting the risks" obscured the true purpose of the debates.

The League resisted the idea that any other organization could do the job, although the candidates claim that they had plenty of offers from other organizations to present one or more debates. The League said it was "the only game in town." And that is precisely the difficulty with this sort of arrangement. The debates, as they came to the air, were truly the "only game in town." They provided a sanitized, risk-free environment for the candidates and an artificial forum for the voters. The League's objective of true face-to-face confrontations was ruled out by the candidates, because it was risky.

The major influence on the 1976 debates was Section 315, not what the League would have thought best, or what the networks might have wanted to do. It is significant that Jim Karayn said at the outset that the 1976 debates would resemble the 1960 ones. Given the amount of influence the candidates had in 1960, and again in 1976, plus Section 315, this had to be the case.

The participants became trapped within the process. Each agreement and commitment, fully accepted or not, was shaped by the dynamics of the inevitable big event. The 1976 debates broadcasts turned out as they did because the presidential candidates were, as in 1960, clients to be served. The League of Women Voters played the role of intermediary. They could influence the final shape and form of the debates only to the extent that the candidates would agree to their plans. In the negotiations between the League and the candidates, the networks could have no control. When the time came for the broadcasts, the League and the networks produced events tailored by and for the candidates. The League accomplished its goal of presenting debates, but at a price.

The networks were shackled by the legal situation. Accustomed to being producers, they were uncomfortable as conduits. The three-way arrangement between the candidates, the League, and the networks facilitated the 1976 debates, but, as in 1960, debates at any cost did not best serve the American public.
In 1980, or four, or eight, or sixteen years from then, if there are debate broadcasts, it is likely that they will resemble the debates of 1976 and 1960. Before debates can become more useful to the voter, Section 315 must be repealed and a way must be found to reduce the candidates’ influence.

NOTES

1. The authors shared equally in both the research and the writing of this study, which was supported by a grant from the Office of Research and Graduate Development, Indiana University, Bloomington, and funds raised by Sidney Kraus.

Much of the material was obtained by personal observation and interviews at the time of the debates in Philadelphia, San Francisco, Houston, and Williamsburg, and with many of the program principals from November 1976 to May 1977. The authors acknowledge that the debates were also carried by radio, but this study deals almost entirely with TV.


4. The authors first interviewed Karayn before the second debate in San Francisco and in person and by phone on November 29, 1976; March 16, 1977; March 21, 1977; April 18, 1977; April 20, 1977; April 31, 1977; and May 1, 1977.


6. Interview with Bill Carruthers, President Ford’s TV advisor, March 18, 1977.


9. Interview with Karayn.

10. Interview with Karayn.


13. Theodore White suggested the first one be held before a joint session of the Congress with House and Senate committee members asking the questions.


15. The League had actually thought there might be five debates, four for the presidential candidates, but time considerations cut the number from five to four.

16. Interview with Karayn.


18. Interviews with Karayn, Jagoda, and Bill Carruthers.


20. Interview with Carruthers. While members of the Fiorentino firm worked for the Republicans during the debates period, Fiorentino did not. He told Carruthers that he would not personally light anything until after the debates. Near the end of the campaign Fiorentino formed a separate group to handle the Ford “media blitz” regional telecasts hosted by Joe Garagiola.

21. The other two were Everett Melosh, ABC lighting director, and Frank Slingland, NBC director.
22. Interviews with Karayn.
23. Interview with Fiorentino.
24. Interview with Karayn.
25. Interview with Carruthers.
26. At each debate the League paid the theater rental for the day of the debate, the pool paid for the setup days.
28. It did not show up in the television pictures because in the shots from the front of the stage the candidates were eight feet apart, and in the side shots, the camera next to Ford had been raised considerably to compensate for his height.
29. Karayn, Marriott debriefing. In 1960 the moderator was seated with the candidates on the set during the first and second debates. The Nixon-Kennedy set most like Wightman's was the ABC set for the fourth debate designed by George Corrin.
30. Interview with Wightman.
31. Interview with the Justin Thompson, regional manager, Herman Miller Co., February 7, 1977. After the debates, Miller bought the furniture back for a thousand dollars, and donated it to the Smithsonian Institution.
34. Interview with Pfister. Before going to the meeting with Karayn, executives of the commercial networks had met in Mulholland's office to discuss this.
36. Interview with Pfister.
37. Elliot Bernstein, ABC pool producer, Marriott debriefing.
38. Interview with Sameth.
39. Interview with Pfister; Bernstein memo to Pfister, September 17, 1976.
40. Interview with Mulholland.
41. Direct quote from Pfister's notes on September 8, 1976, meeting, and interview with Pfister.
42. Interview with Elliot Bernstein, January 26, 1977.
43. Interview with Jagoda.
44. Interview with Carruthers.
45. Interview with Jagoda.
46. Carruthers's version, backed by Karayn and Lampl, is that they took a dinner break sometime around 10:00 P.M. with the agreement each side would make some calls to try to break the "sit-stand-how-will-they-look" logjam.
47. Interview with Bernstein.
48. Bernstein, Marriott debriefing.
49. Interview with Chandler.
51. Karayn, Marriott debriefing.
52. Interview with Karayn.
53. Interview with Sameth.
54. Interview with Chandler.
55. Interviews with Pfister, Salant.
56. Pfister's notes of the September 18, 1977, meeting at the League headquarters in Washington. At the November 29, 1976, Marriott debriefing Raoul-Duval asked League president Ruth Clusen if the agreement was no longer operative, before he
would talk about it. She said it was not operative. All League and candidate sources interviewed confirmed that the agreement was as Walker explained it to the networks.

57. Chandler, Marriott debriefing.
59. Interview with Mulholland.
60. Interview with Pfister.
61. Chandler, Marriott debriefing.
62. Interview with Mulholland.
63. Interview with Carruthers.
64. Interview with Michael Raoul-Duval, March 15, 1977.
65. Interview with Jagoda.
66. Interview with Bernstein.
67. Interview with Fiorentino.
68. Interview with Fiorentino.
69. Interviews with Bernstein, Sameth.
70. Interviews with Bernstein, Sameth.
71. Interviews with Bernstein, Sameth.
72. Interview with Karayn. The pool minutes of September 17 show the networks suggested the League hire an audio consultant. The pool minutes of September 20 show the networks still consulting their lawyers on the propriety of doing the audio themselves, and laying off some of the cost to the League.
73. In 1960 the dressing rooms were a big, expensive item. ABC actually built identical cottages within a New York studio to accommodate Kennedy and Nixon.
75. Interview with Fiorentino.
76. Interview with Fiorentino.
77. Interview with Sameth.
78. Interview with Jagoda.
79. Interview with Carruthers.
80. This version of the story is mainly from Carruthers, but Karayn and Jagoda confirm many of the details.
82. Interview with Sameth.
83. ABC master control log, September 23, 1976.
84. Verbatim transcript, first debate.
85. There are various estimates of the exact length of the audio failure. The authors are using the ABC New York master control log which reads: "lost audio for 25 minutes, 55 seconds from 10:51:05 to 11:17:00 (all nets, ABC pool). Trouble due to blown main distribution aud. amp. in theater in Philadelphia."

There are time discrepancies between the network trouble reports. NBC's says the audio was lost from 10:50:46 to 11:18:00. CBS's says the gap went from 10:50:48 until approximately 11:20. PBS reported the loss from 10:51 to 11:19.

Viewers also got different impressions of the outage length, because none of the networks rejoined the debate at precisely the same moment. PBS missed all of Carter's 11-second finish to his interrupted answer, and had to take an off-air pickup to get any of the remaining sound since its link to Washington was never restored. ABC rejoined earliest—viewers of that network heard and saw Newman testing his microphones and asking: "Are we back on the air?" From the time the sound failed until Newman said: "Ladies and gentlemen, it is not necessary to tell . . ." was 27 minutes 2 seconds.

86. The PBS signal was sent to its Washington headquarters for distribution from there.
87. Phillip Levens, director of TV operations for ABC, says the pool offered backup to all networks, but only CBS took it.
89. Interview with Bernstein, and Marriott debriefing.
90. Karayn, Marriott debriefing.
91. Interview with Sameth.
92. Interview with Karayn. Persons in the theater heard intermittent remarks from the PA during the outage.
94. Interview with Carruthers.
95. Network and telephone company sources told the authors there were other audio circuits available. One ran directly from the pool truck to the telephone company. Another, installed for CBS News feeds, ran from backstage to the CBS remote truck. There are conflicting views concerning the involvement of these lines in the restoration of the sound. In any event, none had anything to do with the problem in the distribution amplifier.
96. Interview with Carruthers.
97. Bernstein, Marriott debriefing.
98. Interview with Bernstein.
100. Interviews with Pengra, Lampl.
103. Interview with Kelly.
104. Interview with Pengra.
105. Interview with Pengra.
106. Interview with Imero Fiorentino in the Palace of Fine Arts theater, October 6, 1976.
107. Interviews with Lampl.
108. Interview with Jagoda.
109. Interview with Raoul-Duval.
110. Karayn, Marriott debriefing.
111. Interview with Karayn. Karayn also tried to meet with the candidates' representatives in Atlanta to discuss format changes for the last presidential debate. But the Ford camp didn't show up, and Democratic support for changes evaporated.
112. Interview with Karayn.
113. Interview with Westfeldt.
117. Interview with Mulholland. NBC's embargo efforts apparently were successful.
119. Interviews with Lampl, Basham, Pengra; and interviews with Sam Sambataro, NBC pool audio supervisor, and Oliver Midgett, Jr., Audio International Inc., Norfolk, Virginia.
120. Interview with Frank Slingland, NBC pool director, April 6, 1977. Also see The Great Debates, Kennedy vs. Nixon, 1960, chapter 5.
122. Interview with Mulholland.