

By **WINSTON P. LLOYD**
Staff Writer

Televised presidential debates have come a long way since Kennedy-Nixon in 1960. Then the issues were overlooked, and a bad makeup job and a strategically placed camera made Nixon look like a pasty white shifter. Of course, he may have been a shifty character, but there is no reason to come across like one on TV. Directors know better than that. Today we focus more on the issues. Yeah, right!

In their first debate, the issue that won the night for Mondale in 1984 was that Reagan came across as old. Big issue. The next time a Reagan adviser fiddled with the lights and Walter, eyes in shadow, looked like a raccoon. So all the president had to do was

not act senile. "I won't make an issue out of my opponent's youth and inexperience," — or something like that — became the sound-bite of the season.

In 1988 we are no better. The debate over the debate lasted for months. Everyone worried how his candidate would look on TV. Dukakis had the immediate advantage coming in. He was elevated to equal with the vice president of the United States. He was also literally elevated with a lower podium and a small "riser."

Who won? The analysts are saying it was Dukakis. But "who looked better on TV?" is more the question than who actually won. Television as a medium is unique because it is often only a distraction for its viewers. Therefore a long detailed explanation by a candidate can be lost on an inattentive audience, and the other candidate can make the same charge which was rebutted earlier with equal affect.

For example, Vice President Bush explained that Panamanian drug-runner General Manuel Noriega had been involved with seven previous administrations and it was Reagan's who indicted him. Yet, knowing television's inability to relay detailed information to most of its viewers, Dukakis was able to assert later that Reagan-Bush dealt with a Panamanian drug-trafficker, with equal audience response.

It is the nature of television not to be issue-oriented. The viewers must be entertained, and a detailed discussion of how a deficit is created won't do it. In the past Dukakis has been hampered by his proclivity for

discussing obscure policies, and the entertaining sound-bites of Bush have propelled him into the lead.

This desire to be entertained caused the candidates to coordinate their decisions with TV in mind. Knowing that nothing earth-shattering was going to happen at the Republican National Convention, Bush waited until then to choose his running mate. Having no news to entertain their viewers, the networks took the Dan Quayle National Guard issue, and ran with it.

But that is the nature of television. Whether you do it by pursuing Gary Hart or by hoping the United States will win a lot of gold medals, you have to entertain. And Sunday night the entertainment was slim for non-politicos. People saw two stereotypes on TV. The non-leading second-in-command and the diminutive unknown, who also wants to be president.

Is this bad? Not necessarily. If a candidate can break a stereotype, than that should show considerable power. Our president's leadership with the rest of the world will be via television, and the better he handles himself in this medium, the better he should look to the world. Look at Mikhail Gorbachev. He looks like a nice, honest guy on TV, and we can't even speak Russian. He is currently giving a more positive image to Europeans than is our president. You know, the "Great Communicator" Ronald Reagan.

So, even though issues are the main thing, don't underestimate the importance of doing well on television.

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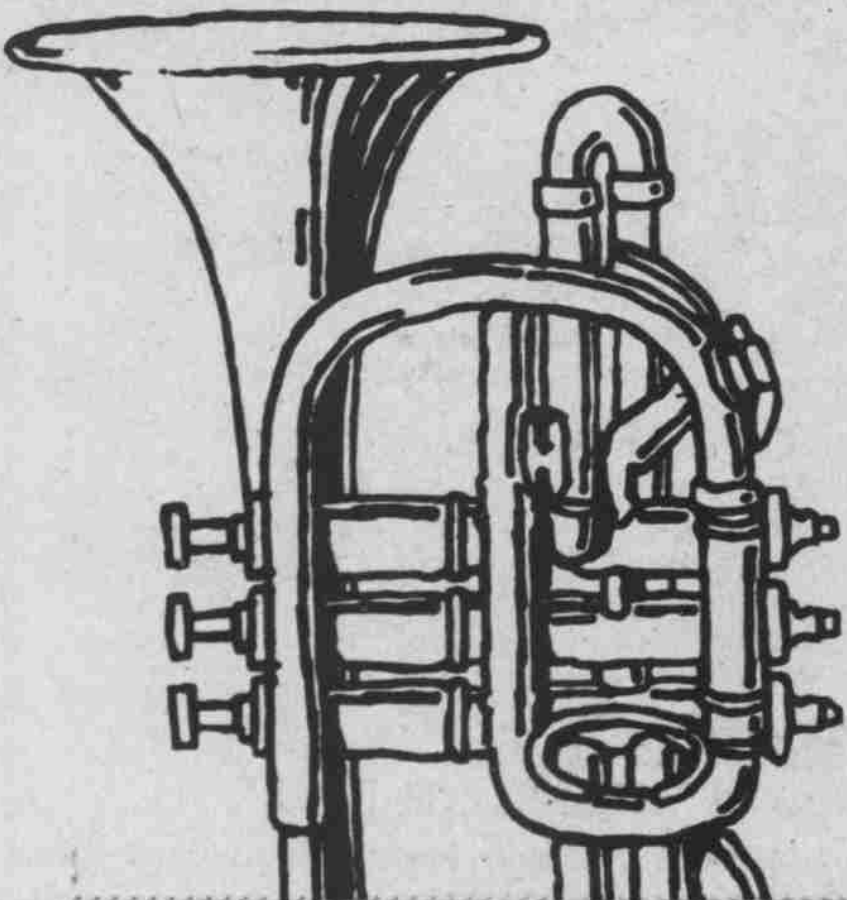
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