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**TO:** Interested Parties  
**FROM:** Ron Klain  
**RE:** Debate Prep

As we move into the final few months before the election, many candidates are facing the most significant test of the campaign—head-to-head debates with their opponents. Debates can be dry recitations of well-rehearsed talking points or they can be dynamic and hard-hitting exchanges. Either way, a candidate's performance in a debate can help propel them to victory or can derail their campaign. Consequently, there are few activities that candidates undertake that hold so much opportunity and so much risk.

After 20 years of work on Presidential, Vice Presidential, Senate and Congressional debate prep, I have developed a few "rules" for how to get candidates ready for this very important element of a campaign. While each candidate, campaign, and state is different, this advice should be helpful (at least to some extent) in most situations.

### **Developing an Approach for the Debate: Preparing to Prepare**

Some of the most important debate preparation work is done before you engage in formal "debate preparation." There are the obvious things—assembling briefing books, reading up on key issues, and locking in dates and locations. But here are a few less obvious points to consider in this period:

- 1) **Start by writing your "dream" post-debate headline.** The starting point for developing a debate strategy is figuring out what your ideal headline, the day after the debate, would be. ("Jones Smashes Smith" is not realistic.) Potential headlines can be about a particular substantive point you press ("Jones Questions Smith's War Stance"), a point about your opponents credentials ("Jones Calls Smith Unqualified,"), or some point about your own stands or record you want to emphasize ("Jones Says He Has Delivered for State"). Your debate strategy—what answers you give, what posture you strike, what points you emphasize—should be driven with this objective in mind. As you consider potential answers, or lines, or any other element of debate strategy and tactics, ask yourself: Is this approach helping to win that "dream" headline?
- 2) **Develop a list of the three items you MUST say in the debate.** Everyone comes to a debate with an agenda: the questioners, the audience, your opponent. You should come with three points—about yourself, your opponent, the race, or whatever—that you WILL make in the debate. These three points can be one-liners, or new attacks, or just a key argument you want to get across. They should be

chosen because they will help achieve the headline you have developed per point #1 above. The goal of your debate performance is to make sure that, whatever else happens, you make these three points. When you step to the podium on debate night, write the points down on the pad of paper before you, and use it as a “checklist” before **each** answer—see if you can fit one in your answer. And, as discussed more below (see point #13), make sure you make at least two of these three points in the first 30 minutes of the debate.

- 3) **Study what your opponent has been saying, especially in the days just before the debate.** All candidates are creatures of habit. You can use that to your advantage: 90% of what your opponent will say in the debate will have come out of his mouth in the week before the debate. Make sure you have transcripts of everything he has been saying, and study them for counter-punching opportunities. The most famous take down line in political debating—Bentsen v. Quayle—came from such an exercise: in debate prep, a briefer showed Bentsen a recent transcript of Quayle comparing his credentials to JFK’s, and Bentsen exclaimed, “You mean he’s comparing himself to Jack Kennedy? I knew Jack Kennedy...” The rest is history.
- 4) **Study the local papers where the debate is being held for the few days before the debate.** If the debate is a “town hall” style debate, with audience questioners, research shows that 4 out of 5 questions will be based on articles the audience members have read in their hometown paper in the days just before the debate. Even journalists are similarly influenced. Most of the apparently “offbeat” questions at a debate (from a journalist or a citizen) are not pulled from thin air: they are pulled from a feature in the local news.
- 5) **Devote sufficient time to trying to identify the questions.** A typical 90-minute televised debate will involve just 18 questions. More than 2/3rds of them are absolutely, positively predictable. Study local news outlets (as discussed above) to get a leg up on questions. If journalists are asking questions, look at questions they have asked in previous debates and interviews, and read their stories: like scouting a baseball pitcher, awareness of past “curve balls” the journalist has thrown is the best predictor of what will be hurled at you in the debate. Consider the questions you have been asked in recent interviews. *Your goal should be to build a list of 25 likely questions that will be the focus on your debate prep*—the odds are high that 15 of those 25 questions will be asked at the debate. Your debate prep should be focused on these core questions (and their answers).

## Preparing for the Debate: The Most Important Part

Most of the time, debates are won or lost long before the debate itself. Almost always, the candidate who has prepared more effectively wins (or at least avoids defeat). Here are a few pointers for this critical process.

- 6) **“Practice, practice, practice.”** When *Newsweek* asked me, as director of Sen. Kerry’s debate prep operation in 2004, to explain how John Kerry achieved a stunning defeat of George Bush in their first debate, my answer was simple: “practice, practice,

practice.” Even if you are an experienced candidate, and an experienced debater, you need to devote sufficient time to practicing. An acknowledged failure to practice cost experienced candidates George Bush and George W. Bush devastating debate defeats in 1992 and 2004—even Bill Clinton was rocked in mock debates in 1996 until he buckled down and practiced. Your scheduler, your political director, and your fundraising chair will all seek to squeeze your debate prep time: don’t let them! Taking the time to prepare for the debate, and doing very well, will do more to boost your political and fundraising success than anything else you can do. One more (or less) rally or fundraiser cannot win (or lose) the campaign. But a better (or inadequately) prepared debate performance can be dispositive. In all of my years of working on debate prep, I’ve never had a candidate leave the debate hall, turn to me, and say, “You know, we really should have put **less** time into getting ready.”

- 7) **No practice is more effective than mock debating.** There are many useful ways to get ready for a debate. Read the debate briefing books. Do some Q-and-A. Chat about the debate with advisors. BUT, whatever you do, make sure you devote considerable time to engaging in “mock debates” where you practice your answers with a stand-in opponent in the format that will be used in the actual debate. No form of practice is more valuable than mock debating. No less than half your time in debate prep should be devoted to this sort of practice—making sure you leave plenty of time for evaluation and learning from mock debates (see point #11 below).
- 8) **They key to effective mock debate practice is the “stand-in” for your opponent.** The two best that I have worked with—Bob Barnett and Greg Craig—make no effort to imitate the candidate they are portraying, or write new, clever lines for him. Rather, they meticulously study the candidate they are portraying, and base their mock debate performances on lines and statements the opposing candidate has already used publicly. They also aren’t afraid to launch harsh attacks on the candidate: batting practice isn’t very useful if the pitcher only lobs softballs. Also, make sure you don’t let your stand-in’s political biases color his performance: one reason why Jack Kemp did poorly in his 1996 debate with Al Gore is that the Gore stand-in used during Kemp’s debate prep played Gore as an ultra-liberal, dogmatic ideologue. Kemp was completely unprepared for the moderate, reasonable, pragmatic Gore who showed up for the real debate.
- 9) **Practice the basics, inside and out, backwards and forwards.** The most common—and serious—mistake candidates make in debate prep is spending too much time making sure they practice *every possible* question—and not enough time really running to ground their answers on the *most likely and central questions*. As noted above, good preparation and analysis can identify 25 highly likely questions, from which 80% of the questions asked on debate night will be drawn. Spend the vast majority of your time in debate prep working on those questions, not exotica or esoterica. For key questions, practice answering them both as the first and the second responding candidate; practice them with a mock opponent who is on the attack and one who is more defensive; practice them with more critical material and more affirmative material. If debate formats include some longer and some shorter replies, practice these questions in both formats.

- 10) **Punches are good, counterpunches are better.** While the importance of one-liners and “zingers” in debates is probably overestimated, preparing a set of such material is an important part of debate prep. But in addition to working on such “punches,” be sure to also devote some time to developing “counterpunches:” lines you will deploy in response to your opponents’ favorite lines. If you develop five zippy replies to your opponents’ five most commonly-used lines, the odds are high that you will get a chance to use two or three. And remember to also game out your opponents’ likely replies to *your* most common lines: nothing is more effective in a debate than a counter-counter punch!
- 11) **Make sure you get feedback from a prep team that is compact and candid.** Of course, all the practicing in the world is only useful if you are learning from practice sessions—a key part of debate prep is getting good advice about what is working and what isn’t; what needs to be improved and what needs to be scrapped altogether. While you obviously want the best possible team of debate prep advisors, there is such a thing as too much of a good thing—i.e., you need to keep the debate prep team small (no more than six) if it is to be effective. Having too many advisors means you will hear too many different opinions—which is almost always unhelpful. Your advisors should huddle during breaks in practice to develop a consensus on their counsel, and speak to you with a single, clear point-of-view. Nothing undermines the effectiveness of debate prep as when sessions become debates about advice, strategy, or feedback. But as you narrow your circle of advisors, don’t weed out truth-tellers: make sure the team includes folks who can tell you when your answers stink, your jokes aren’t funny, and your attacks have missed the mark. Say “no” to “yes men” in debate prep.
- 12) **On debate day, insist on a walk-through of the site, and bring your media advisor.** When you hear about a debate where the audience inside the hall believed that one candidate won, and the audience who watched it on TV scored it the other way, it is probably because the TV “loser” failed to complete his prep with a thorough understanding of the television production elements of the debate site. Particularly when the debate site is NOT a permanent TV studio, the odds are high that one candidate will be lit improperly, have an odd camera angle, or be positioned on stage to his disadvantage. Go to the debate site, and practice under the lights. Can you easily see the questioners and any timing system? Where are the camera sight lines for various shots? Where will your opponent be? And have a media advisor look at a TV monitor as you test these various angles and TV shots to see how they actually look, on screen. You’ll be surprised how big a difference this can make in how your debate performance is perceived on TV.

### **During the Debate: Advice on Presentation and Style**

If you have prepared well for a debate, you should have few (or no surprises) on debate day and come with a real game plan. Having done these things, you are most of the way to success. Still, there are a few tips for the debate itself.

- 13) **While you can lose a debate any time, you can only win it in the first 30 minutes.** A stumble, fumble, or gaffe can cost you a debate, right up to the last second. But while you can LOSE a debate at any point, you can only WIN a debate in the first 30 minutes. The viewers, the reporters, and even your opponent form a sense of the debate dynamic in the early going. Indeed, for debates held at night, reporters (on deadline) usually write first drafts of their stories before the debate is half over. Analysts and observers form a sense of the debate early on (e.g., “Smith was on the defensive,” “Jones seemed sure of himself,” “Smith couldn’t defend his position on jobs”), and spend the final two-thirds watching for proof points for the story line they have adopted. Hence, the most important issues you want to raise; the most important attacks you want to launch; the most important points or lines or contrasts you want to suggest MUST come in the first 30 minutes of the debate.
- 14) **Assume that you are on camera, and that your microphone is live, at all times.** An obvious point. But even the President of the United States forgot it during the 2004 debates (making un-Presidential faces, which he assumed would not be broadcast, while his opponent was talking), and the list of candidates who have made this mistake is too long to provide here. Once you are within earshot of a mike, say nothing that you wouldn’t want on TV—and once you are on stage, assume that you are onscreen at all times.
- 15) **You are there to debate your opponent—not the moderator or the rules.** On air complaints about the fairness of the proceedings (e.g., “He’s gotten three follow-ups and I’ve only gotten two...”) or adherence to the format (e.g., “I thought these were supposed to be foreign policy questions...”) or your opponents’ fidelity to the debate rules (e.g., “No props are allowed in this debate...”) will almost certainly do you more harm than good. At best, you will come off as a lawyerly, picky, and whiny—hardly qualities that voters want in a candidate. At worst, you will be seen as exhibiting weakness to observers and the press. You’ve got a staff: assume that they are backstage, screaming at producers, demanding redress on your behalf, and pointing out your opponent’s transgressions to the press. Your job is to rise above such pettiness, and deliver on your debate game plan. And remember: no one ever lost a debate because their opponent got an extra minute out of a 90-minute program.
- 16) **Begin answers with “yes” or “no” if possible: answer first, then explain.** For many voters—especially undecided ones, late in a campaign—debates are more about assessing a candidate’s character than her positions. And for these voters, evasiveness is the ultimate character defect. The more questions you begin with a simple “yes” or “no” reply, before going on to elaborate or qualify—rather than doing it the other way around—the more voters will see you as candid and responsive. Similarly, if you want to use an answer to a question to also cover unrelated ground, or to bring back a previous point, answer the question FIRST, and go off on the digression SECOND. The four worst words you can use to start a debate answer are: “Before I answer that...” Answering candidly and directly doesn’t mean that all your answers have to be sympathetic with the question posed. Don’t be afraid to disagree flatly with a questioner, so long as you do so civilly.

- 17) **Know where you are looking, and why.** In your pre-debate walk through (see point #12 above), you will hopefully have developed some sense of your sight lines and camera shots for the debate. While the approach will vary somewhat based on layout, staging, and camera positions—and must be customized for your circumstance—in general, you will appear most natural on camera if, for most of the time, you look at the questioner and deliver your answer to her. However, you will want to depart from this general approach in two instances. First, when you want to make a particularly pointed or direct attack on your opponent, don't hesitate to pivot and direct that point—physically, and with eye contact—at your opponent. And second, for special emphasis (not to be overdone, not more than a few times in the debate), pick some times to look directly in the camera and address your answer to the viewers at home (e.g., “I want you all to know this: if I am elected, I will vote to bring the troops home.”)
- 18) **Do not be ossified in your approach to answering questions.** The temptation to develop a standard answer template is often strong (e.g., Start with a one-liner; make a contrast point; offer your vision; end with a specific proposal). While standard answer structures have their appeal, they can wind up sounding canned or tedious to listeners. And you might leave your best points on the debate hall floor if you try to shoehorn all answers into a single structure. Some answers will fit a particular template—but others might best be devoted to an entirely critical/negative response, or others an entirely positive/agenda-oriented response. Variation keeps your answers fresh and natural sounding.
- 19) **Listen, listen, listen.** The best debate coach I have ever worked with—Bob Shrum—always made the cornerstone of his debate advice the simple injunction to “listen, listen, listen.” Your real counterpunching opportunities (see point #10 above) will come from things your opponent says—but you cannot seize on those opportunities if you are not listening to what she is saying. Don't let a focus on what you are going to say next (or your frustration with what you just said or failed to say) distract you from listening to your opponent and seeing what openings for counterpunches she has created for you. While you can overdo this—do not repetitively pick on your opponents' words, or repetitively point them out—the only way you can hit a debate home run is to see the pitch coming—and in this instance, that means listening for your opponent to give you an opening.
- 20) **If in doubt, don't.** The moment will come in the debate when there is a point you think you want to make—but you just aren't sure if it will come out right, or if your facts are right. At that moment remember the advice that some elementary school teacher once gave you: “If in doubt, don't.” Better to fail to make a point during a debate (leaving open the possibility it can be made post-debate) than to make a point that goes awry. Very few candidates blow their debates because of statements made with *certainty*. Almost always, debates are lost due to statements about which, after the fact, the candidate says, “You know, I just wasn't sure, but...”

## After the Debate: The Work Has Just Begun

- 21) **The end of the debate is only the beginning of the winning.** The number of voters who will learn about the debate from what they read in the papers, or see on the news, is almost always five or even ten times as large as the number of voters who actually saw the debate when it was broadcast. Consequently, shaping the post-debate coverage is, in many ways, even more important than the debate itself. Ross Perot's win in the first debate in 1992, and George Bush's win in the first debate in 2000, were public perceptions that developed over the days that followed the debate—not the assessment of viewers or voters in the immediate aftermath of the debate. Make sure your campaign puts as much effort into winning the post-debate spin war as you have put into winning the debate itself—with a focused strategy (it goes back to the dream headline question identified in point #1 above); effective attacks on your opponent; and quick responses to any negative trends in coverage that emerge.

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