

**TEACHER GUIDE**

# 2000 DOC. #10: Gore-Bush First Debate

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

While many people may think that the first presidential debates were the Lincoln-Douglas debates just before the Civil War, those debates actually took place during the 1858 senatorial campaign in Illinois between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas (see 1860 docs. #1 and #2). The first U.S. presidential debates between major candidates of different parties didn't take place until 1960, when John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon took part in three televised debates prior to the November election (see 1960 doc. #1a). These debates are best known for demonstrating the new and powerful role that television would play in American politics, emphasizing image over issues.

After the lessons learned from the 1960 debates, presidential candidates apparently avoided debates all together until 1976 when Democratic challenger Jimmy Carter debated incumbent President Gerald Ford. Since that time, there have been televised presidential debates during every election, although their formats and sponsors have varied. These debates have benefited some candidates enormously, particularly Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984, and Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996. Clinton, in particular, perfected debating in a "town hall" atmosphere with questions coming directly from audience members; Clinton appeared relaxed and engaged easily with audience members, and many feel the debates were central to his win in 1992.

The presidential debates have caused problems for other candidates, however. Gerald Ford was criticized soundly in the press after he misspoke in the 1976 debate, saying "There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe." Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis reinforced his "wooden" image when he gave an overly intellectual response to a hypothetical question about what he would do if his wife were raped.

One of the most controversial aspects of presidential debates has to do with which candidates are invited to participate. In 1970, Congress passed a comprehensive campaign reform bill, including a repeal of the equal time provision (Section 315) of the Federal Communications Act, because of concerns about having to include many potential candidates from small third parties in any presidential debates. While Nixon vetoed that bill, the Federal Communications Commission later created a loophole regarding the equal time provision. It ruled debates were "bona fide news events" which meant that if debates were sponsored by some organization other than the networks, coverage of such a "news event" was exempt from the equal time requirements. The League of Women Voters quickly volunteered to sponsor, or "initiate" the debates. Its job of sponsoring debates was taken over by the Commission on Presidential Debates in 1988.

> **Play** the video clip.

**QUESTION** | **What were the two main issues discussed in this four-minute clip from the debates?**

**SUGGESTED ANSWER** | The candidates debated tax cuts and Medicare reform.

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**Gore-Bush 1st Debate**

**Video Clip**  
Length: 4 min.

QUESTION

**What were George W. Bush’s main points about cutting taxes?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER

Bush stressed that the money belongs to the “hard working people who pay the bills” and 5% of that money should go back to them over the next 10 years. He stressed that the government shouldn’t make the decisions about how to spend that money, the people should.

QUESTION

**What was Al Gore’s response?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER

Gore stressed that nearly half of the tax cut would go to the nation’s wealthiest 1% of the population.

QUESTION

**What was Gore’s plan for Medicare?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER

Gore said that he would put Medicare in a “lock box” so that it cannot be spent on anything else.

**SEE NOTE** →

QUESTION

**How did Bush respond?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER

He accused Gore of scaring voters using “the old style Washington politics.”

QUESTION

**What did Bush mean by “I’m beginning to believe that not only did he invent the Internet, he also invented the calculator”?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER

Bush was referencing a quote attributed to Al Gore in which he allegedly said that he had invented the Internet. Although the quote was based on a misinterpretation of a statement made by Gore in 1999, the story helped fuel questions about Gore’s honesty.

**SEE NOTE** →

**NOTE**

Medicare administers health care for approximately 40 million Americans and is the nation’s largest health insurance program. It covers elderly people 65 years or older and disabled individuals under 65. Medicare represents 12% of all federal spending, with a cost of almost \$222 billion in 2000; that amount is expected to more than double by 2011.

**NOTE**

Al Gore did not actually claim to have invented the Internet. In a 1999 interview, Gore stated that during his service in the United States Congress he “took the initiative in creating the Internet,” referring to legislative actions concerning Internet access. This was immediately picked up by the popular press, which printed stories about Gore claiming to have “invented the Internet.”

QUESTION **Why did Gore tell the story about George McKinney from Milwaukee who was in the audience?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER He was trying to make his point about the need for Medicare reform by pointing to the plight of a real person.

**SEE NOTE** →

QUESTION **Why did Bush say, “I’m not of Washington, I’m from Texas”?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Bush wanted to distance himself from Washington politicians since most voters do not trust them. Al Gore had been a long-time Senator and could be cast as a “Washington insider.”

**SEE NOTE** →

QUESTION **Why wasn’t Ralph Nader in the debates?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Ralph Nader wasn’t invited to participate in the debates.

**SEE NOTE** →

**FURTHER QUESTIONS**

- Who did you think did better in the clip you watched and why?
- What impression did you get about each man and his personality from this clip?
- Are debates a better way to assess the fitness of a candidate to be President than other forms of campaigning such as TV commercials and convention speeches?

**NOTE**

Ronald Reagan began the tradition of picking people in the audience that his staff had researched and telling a little bit of their life story as a way of illustrating a point he was making.

**NOTE**

Previous Presidents including Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton have campaigned successfully for President as “Washington outsiders,” not corrupted by the “politics of the beltway.”

**NOTE**

The Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) excluded Nader from the 2000 debates because he did not meet the requirements for participating in the debates (see <http://www.debates.org>). The CPD was established in 1987 to ensure “the best possible information to viewers and listeners.” Its primary purpose is to sponsor and produce debates for presidential elections. It sponsored the 1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000 debates.

**CONNECTIONS**

(see thematic listing)

- Attack**
- Economic Issues**
- Media Bias**
- Target Audience** (seniors)