

PREPARING FOR YOUR DEBATE

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Since 2006, Ron Klain and John Neffinger have separately written a series of general distribution memos each election year, based on lessons they have learned preparing top candidates for debates. In 2018, they decided to combine their efforts to provide their shared insights in one place. While every campaign is different, this memo hopefully offers a good starting place for thinking about how to make debates a part of winning your race.

I. OVERVIEW: BIG PICTURE GOALS

1. Recognize the competitive, combative nature of the endeavor.

As our politics have changed, so too have expectations for political debates: This change has accelerated in recent years. The debate “judges”—the media (old and new) and the voters—have come to see debates as a competitive exercise, not just an information delivery opportunity, and they are looking for a winner to crown and a loser to shame. “Staying above the fray,” “just getting my own message out,” and “pretending like my opponent isn’t there” are NOT viable debate strategies. This mandate to win (not just “endure” or “survive”) can be uncomfortable for some candidates, and jarring for incumbents who must deal with an upstart opponent they may have largely ignored until debate night. Debates today are pugilistic encounters: There is no playing for a tie. This does not mean that you should be overly aggressive, antagonistic, or harsh: The most critical piece of debate advice that we give any candidate is “Smile...and attack.” The key point here is that neither smiling alone, or attacking alone, is enough by itself.

2. Write your “dream” post-debate headline.

The starting point for developing your debate strategy is figuring out what your ideal headline the day after the debate would be. (“Jones Smashes Smith” is not realistic, and overlearns the point above.) Potential headlines can be about a particular substantive point you press (“Jones Questions Smith’s War Stance”), a point about your opponent’s credentials (“Jones Calls Smith Unqualified”), or some point about your own record you want to emphasize (“Jones Says She 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?

This version of the memo is adopted for The Arena, with permission from the authors, from the complete memo, which is available at: <http://bit.ly/2PCohLi>

3. Avoid unforced errors.

Some people believe that in the era of Trump there is no such thing as a “gaffe” anymore: We think that candidates who hold this view will get a rude awakening this coming debate season. Remember that even in statewide races, most voters will not see the debate itself, but, rather, only the coverage of it—and mistakes or gaffes will dominate that coverage. Thus, start with the debate execution of the Hippocratic Oath: First, do no harm. You want to appear confident and competent, and avoid doing anything that would look bad in media coverage or paid ads afterwards. Your opponent may make snappy points or tell lies: Even the best boxer takes some blows in a fight, and loses a round or two. The answers and responses to attacks that you practice with your team will serve you well.

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4. Debate goal: Create a consistent theme.

What overarching message do you want to leave with voters? You want to work this key message into several different answers (in slightly different ways) beginning early in the debate so it jumps out at reporters, social media influencers, and the audience. This might be your overall campaign slogan, or it might be more tailored to the moment. For instance, you might paint your opponent as too reckless or not ready to lead. You can define for voters what the election’s about: “This election is a choice about our future: Do we want X, or do we want Y?” “This election is about who you trust to stand up for you...” The issues that are top of mind for voters should be front and center in your debate answers. If polling reveals the top issue is jobs and the economy, you can pivot to jobs and the economy every chance you get. Know your message and drive it home so it can lead the coverage (as per #2 above).

5. Making the “great moment.”

You want to think about your performance with an eye toward the coverage, both in traditional and social media. Most of what is said during the debate will be forgotten. Usually a few interesting moments will define the debate. The most interesting exchanges will get tweeted, replayed, and talked about. Some of those will be spontaneous, but many can be planned and practiced in advance. Given how disproportionately impactful those standout moments are, you want to spend a similar amount of time and effort to make them work for you. (More on how to land a great line in #20 and #21 below).

6. Debating a Trump wanna-be:

Not surprisingly, in the current moment, many Republican candidates are patterning their political performances after Donald Trump: arrogant, antagonistic, filled with insults and nicknames and lies. Your Republican opponent may have ridden such a strategy to victory in his/her GOP primary debates. While this can be disconcerting if you’re not ready for it, we are skeptical that approach will

do well in general election debates. Trump's style worked in GOP primary debates that had raucously supportive audiences and were judged by GOP base voters, but produced a staggering series of defeats for him in the general election debates: Nate Silver concluded the public reaction to Trump's general election debate performance was the most negative of any candidate's in a quarter century of debate polling. If you face a wannabe-Trump, don't get rattled: If you follow the advice in this memo, you can turn his strength into a weakness, and score a win in your debate.

II. PREPARING FOR THE DEBATE (THE MOST IMPORTANT PART)

Debates are generally won or lost long before the debate itself: Almost always, the candidate who has prepared more effectively wins. Here are some pointers on this critical process.

7. Stand up a professional preparation process.

If the campaign doesn't take the process seriously, neither will the candidate. Sitting around a room and batting answers back and forth does not count. Make a schedule based on the time you have. Preparing for a debate with three months to go is a different exercise than starting three weeks out. Both can be done, but your timetable will dictate the emphasis of your prep. While your campaign will spend more time on research earlier than later, be sure also to schedule enough mock debates early in the process to understand where you stand so you can allocate time and resources accordingly.

8. Get feedback from a prep team that is compact and candid.

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, what needs to be improved, and what needs to be scrapped altogether. Think carefully about who you need involved at which stages to do this effectively. Make sure that among your team are people with strong knowledge of the candidate, the issues, the opponent, the moderators, and the preparation process. Importantly, there is such a thing as too much of a good thing. You need to keep the debate prep team small—no more than six—if it is to be effective. Having too many people offering advice to a candidate is a recipe for too many different opinions, which is almost always ineffective. 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 people 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.

9. Understand—and negotiate—the format.

The format will shape many aspects of your strategy. Fifteen-minute free-form discussion segments are different than two minute responses followed by one minute rebuttals. A moderator trying to make a name for him or herself also presents a very different challenge from someone trying to stay

out of the story. Figure out what and who is likely to work out best for your candidate and least well for the opponent—and negotiate accordingly. The sooner you understand the setup, the better. Once you know what you’re dealing with, practice accordingly. If you will get either one or two minutes to address an issue, you can have your initial answers largely ready. A free-flowing format won’t allow many uninterrupted two-minute answers. Because that’s harder to prepare for, spending time practicing live becomes even more important.

10. Spend time to try to identify the questions.

A typical ninety-minute televised debate will involve 15 - 18 questions. More than two-thirds of them are absolutely, positively predictable. Major categories include national political issues, local political issues, questions about partisan politics and other political figures (“Grade X’s performance. Where do you and X disagree?”), factual quiz questions (“What’s the minimum wage?”), and on-political getting-to-know-you questions about the candidate (“What’s your favorite movie?”). Study local news outlets to get a leg up on possible topics. If journalists are asking questions, look at questions they have asked in previous debates and interviews, and read their stories and social media feeds. Like scouting a baseball pitcher, awareness of “curveballs” the journalist has thrown before is the best predictor of what will be hurled at you in the debate. Also consider questions you have been asked in recent interviews. Your goal should be to build a list of twenty-five likely questions to focus on in debate prep—the odds are high that fifteen of those will be asked at the debate.

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11. Don’t overlook local media and issues.

Especially if the debate is a “town hall” style debate with audience questioners, research suggests that four out of five questions will be based on articles the audience members have read in their hometown paper in the days just before the debate, some about very local stories. Even journalist questioners are similarly influenced by local media. A lot of the seemingly “offbeat” questions at debates (from a journalist or a citizen) are not pulled from thin air: They are pulled from a story in the local news.

12. Drafting answers is the real starting point for debate prep.

Depending on a candidate’s level of expertise, he/she may start with a big binder (or live staff tutorials) to explain each issue thoroughly. As things progress, the candidate should focus on actual answers, with no more than two pages—or several index cards, if the candidate prefers—for each important topic. During the debate, it will be important to stay flexible and attuned to the moderator’s questions and the opponent’s answers, but it is essential to identify and prepare good answers on the most important topics. In addition to memorable lines, you can also identify specific elements of your answer for each topic. Some useful elements include:

- Words and phrases to use and avoid: A short list to make sure you use language that supports your point and connects with your audience. (For instance, on Social Security, rather than saying “raise the taxable income cap,” you say “make everyone pay the same rate.”)
- Connecting language that demonstrates you understand and honor the legitimate concerns even of the people you don’t agree with. By showing you “get it,” you put concerns at ease, play against type, and show you can lead the whole community.
- A brief story—about a constituent, a personal anecdote, or hypothetical situation that illustrates the issue—is another great way to connect.
- Your diagnosis of the issue, including key facts and evidence. (“We’ve seen the stock market hitting new highs, while wages for people working hourly have fallen behind.”)
- Any policy prescriptions, and a short explanation of how they would work. (“We’ll move to \$15 an hour over three years, so our small businesses can adjust gradually.”)
- Your larger vision of what things will look like when you’ve resolved the issue. (“Every American who works hard for a living should know they can afford to make ends meet.”)
- A sound bite or rhetorical flourish to make your point memorably.
- Distinguishing language that explains the difference between your opponent’s point of view and what you and the voters believe.
- A direct attack on your opponent. (“I’d like to know, what does [my opponent] have to say to [constituents], who work full time and still can’t afford the basics for their kid?”)

If you are asked a broad question about an issue, a time-honored approach to answering is to: (1) start with connecting language (which could be a story), (2) go on to present your basic policy argument and vision, and (3) finish by distinguishing or attacking. (Candidate Obama used this approach to great effect.) Note that ending your answer with a direct attack is both high-risk and high-reward: If your attack demands a response and your opponent can’t come up with a decent one, they look weak (or maybe callous). But if they respond well, they look great.

13. Find moments to show strength and warmth.

Voters look for leaders who show both strength—competence and toughness to get the job done—and warmth—friendliness and caring about regular people. You want to show voters both. To show strength, find points you can deliver with determination, like you would talk to someone who was threatening to cross you, so voters can see you're tough enough to stand up for them. (The classic of the genre is Ronald Reagan shedding his kindly grandfather image by declaring in his New Hampshire primary debate, "I paid for this microphone!") You don't want to look angry or "upset," but you can be stern. To show your warmth, find a moment to talk about something apolitical that you enjoy so you naturally relax and smile as you talk. Show people you're not just a politician, but also a relatable, regular person. This combination of strength and warmth is part of why "Smile... and attack" is such great advice.

14. Practice, practice, practice.

Ron directed John Kerry's debate prep, and when he was asked how Kerry achieved his stunning defeat of George Bush in their first debate, his 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, George W. Bush and Barack Obama stinging debate defeats on the national stage. Your scheduler, your political director, and your fundraising chair all may seek to squeeze your debate prep time: Don't let them! Taking the time to prepare for the debate, and (as a result) doing well in that debate, will do more to boost your political and fundraising success than anything. One more rally or fundraiser cannot win the campaign. But a better (or inadequately) prepared debate performance can be a "game changer." No candidate has ever walked out of a debate hall and said, "You know, we really should have spent less time getting ready."

15. No practice is more effective than mock debating.

There are many useful ways to get ready for a debate. Read the briefing book. Do some Q-and-A. Chat about the debate with advisors. But whatever you do, make sure you devote considerable time 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. Do a full hour of mock debate, warts and all, and have your team take notes and work on fixes after, not during. Videotape all of these sessions for review afterwards. You won't be able to stop in a live debate and you need to get used to doing them from beginning to end. About half your time in debate prep should be devoted to this sort of practice.

16. The key to mock debating is the "stand-in" for your opponent.

The best stand-in's make no effort to do an impression of candidate they are portraying, or write new, clever lines for him. Rather, they meticulously study the opposing candidate, and base their mock debate performances on lines and statements they have already used publicly. A good stand-in is not afraid to launch harsh attacks on the candidate: Batting practice isn't useful if the pitcher

only lobs softballs. Debating is unlike normal human interaction. Standing across from someone you may hate and/or fear and having them repeatedly lie, or insult you, or just attack you takes some getting used to. You need to become acclimated to that, so you expect it, and you can stay calm and respond strategically. Also, make sure you don't let your stand-in's political biases color his performance. Jack Kemp did poorly in his 1996 VP debate with Al Gore because during Kemp's debate prep, the Gore stand-in played Gore as a dogmatic liberal ideologue. Kemp was completely unprepared for the moderate, reasonable, pragmatic Gore who showed up at the real debate. Practice with your opponent striking a number of different strategic postures and tones so you will be ready for anything.

17. Decide how to address your opponent.

It's a small point, but what you call your opponent reflects on both them and you. You can try out multiple options in practice, but pick the one that works best and use it consistently. Congressman or -woman is respectful but ties them to an unloved institution. Mr. or Ms. is still respectful but gives them no credit for their professional accomplishments. Using a first name can make you both seem friendlier. You can also deliberately switch midstream to get people's attention; if you have something memorable to say and you've been calling your opponent Congressman repeatedly, suddenly calling him by his first name will make everyone's ears perk right up.

18. Focus your practice on the basics.

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 nailing their answers to the most likely questions. As noted above, good preparation can identify twenty-five most likely questions, from which 80% of the questions asked in the debate night will be drawn. Spend the vast majority of your time in debate prep working on those questions, not 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.

19. Study what your opponent says, 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 already come out of his or her mouth in the week preceding. Make sure you have transcripts of everything your opponent has been saying, and study them for counter-punching opportunities. Also, make sure that you are checking the local headlines and your opposing campaign's social media accounts. The most famous takedown 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.

20. Punches are good, counterpunches are better.

While the importance of one-liners and “zingers” in debates can be overestimated, preparing a set of such material is an important part of debate prep. In addition to working on such “punches,” be sure to put in significant time to develop “counterpunches” i.e., lines you will deploy in response to your opponent’s favorite lines. This is particularly important for facing a “Trump-style” candidate whose wild swinging and over-the-top rhetoric will leave them very open for a counterpunch. If you develop five zippy replies to your opponent's five most commonly-used lines, the odds are high that you will get a chance to use two or three. This is the most straightforward and most likely way to land a debate-defining line. Remember also to game out your opponent’s likely replies to your most common lines.

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21. Develop a list of things 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 to five points—about yourself, your opponent, the race, or whatever—that you WILL make in the debate. These points can be one-liners, or new attacks, or just a key argument you want to get across. These should be chosen because they help achieve your dream headline. The goal of your debate performance is to make sure that, whatever else happens, you make these points. When you step onto the podium on debate night, write the points on the paper on your lectern, and use this as a “checklist”—as you listen to each question, see if you can fit one of these points in your answer. If there’s a point you want to make multiple times to emphasize your key theme, put three checkboxes next to it. Make sure you hit your top points in the first twenty minutes of the debate, if not in your opening statement.

22. Create content that can go viral.

Today, debates don’t just take place on TV, radio, and in the newspaper—they also reach voters via social media, new media, and all the other channels that voters connect with candidates. As you formulate your debate strategy, develop a plan for how to advance your debate-related messages—before, during, and after that debate—on Twitter and Facebook; how you intend to use clips of the debate on YouTube; and how email can engage your supporters in real time during the debates (and raise money). You can also consider saying specific things in the debate that will appeal to specific audiences on social media and can be turned into clips or memes to get out to those audiences.

23. Insist on a walk-through of the site with 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 or her 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 the timing system? Where are the camera sight lines for various shots? Where will your opponent be? Sometimes producers put candidates practically on top of each other; if that's going to make your candidate more uncomfortable than your opponent, staff must insist on moving them. Finally, have a media advisor look at a TV monitor as you test the 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 performance comes across on TV.

III. DURING THE DEBATE

The following live debating tips apply when game time arrives, but you should also practice following them in your mock debate practice sessions to get them in your muscle memory.

24. Dress so no one will talk about it.

The general rule: Dress in a way that looks good but attracts as little attention to your appearance as possible. If people notice what you are wearing, they are not paying attention to what you are saying. Avoid flashy or swinging jewelry, or other loud items. Fabrics with small repeating patterns or closely packed stripes create strange visual effects on high-definition TV; avoid them. Common, strong colors are best. And for women candidates especially, be sure your outfit doesn't clash or blend into the backdrop of the set.

25. Assume you're on camera and that your microphone is live, always.

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). Once you are within earshot of a mic, say nothing that you wouldn't want on TV—and once you are on stage, assume that you are onscreen at all times. The social media age adds to this as well. Avoid non-verbal theatrics like making faces or sighing. While your opponent is talking, you may wear a slight smile to project to the audience that you totally expected as much from your opponent, and that you are ready to respond when the time comes.

26. To project strength, get physical.

Debating is not the most strenuous activity, but standing on your feet for ninety minutes can sap your energy, and you need energy to project confidence and engagement. Remember, voters are judging your character as much by your demeanor as by what you say. Before the debate, make time to get rest, do your favorite exercise, and relax. A few minutes before you take the stage, warm up: Stretch out and bounce and move around to get your energy and mood up. This will reduce jitters and help put you in a confident frame of mind. Both during practice and during the real thing, be sure to carry yourself with confidence: Stand up straight, and remind yourself that you can, in fact, do this, and do it well.

27. To project warmth, enjoy yourself!

Nine times out of ten, the winner of the debate is also the person who seems to be enjoying themselves more. Each causes the other, but don't pass up the opportunity to project that you are winning. You want to adopt an attitude towards the proceedings that makes you smile naturally, whether that's satisfaction at how well you prepared, or black humor. This will be stunningly effective in the face of Trump-style tantrums. Make a note at the top of your paper on the podium that reminds you—not to grin stupidly—but to stay in a good mood so that a small, easy smile shows on your face when it's natural. That small smile shows you're a "happy warrior": You are comfortable going toe-to-toe with your opponent, and while you care about people, you don't take the politics or yourself too seriously.

28. Know where you are looking, and why.

In your pre-debate walk through, 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, 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. The exceptions are important though. When your opponent is speaking, you may look at them at first, then look down to take the occasional note or out at the moderator or audience, unimpressed. If your opponent addresses you directly, you may want to face them with a neutral, unbothered expression. When you want to make a particularly pointed or direct attack on your opponent, don't hesitate to face your opponent and make eye contact as you do. Lastly, for special emphasis, you can pick moments (not more than a few) 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.")

29. Be prepared, but don't be robotic.

Voters crave authenticity. You want to practice making your key points, but you also want to practice responding naturally in the moment. Talk like a real person. You don't want to hew so closely to standard answers that they wind up sounding canned or tedious to listeners. If you automatically shoehorn all answers into a single structure, you will pass up opportunities to make the strongest point in the moment. Some answers will fit your template—but others might best be devoted to an entirely critical/negative response, or conversely, an entirely positive/agenda-oriented response. Variation keeps your answers fresh and natural sounding. Try out different approaches in the safe space of practice.

30. Listen, listen, listen.

The best debate coach we have ever worked with—Bob Shrum— always made the cornerstone of his debate advice the simple injunction to “listen, listen, listen.” Your best counterpunching opportunities often come from things your opponent says—but you cannot seize on those opportunities if you are not listening to what he or she is saying. Once again, here is where a Trump-style candidate will create openings for you. Don’t let a focus on what you are going to say next (or your frustration with what you might have just said or failed to say) distract you from listening to your opponent and seeing what openings for counterpunches they have created for you. The only way you can hit a debate home run is to see the pitch coming—and that means listening for your opponent to give you an opening.

31. Answer decisively where you can.

For undecided voters late in a campaign, debates are more about assessing a candidate’s character than his or her positions, and for them, evasiveness is the ultimate character defect. Every single answer should keep in mind the overall goal of being confident and clear. If you are presented with a yes-or-no question that does not misstate your position, start your answer with the yes or the no, then explain. Don’t be afraid to disagree flatly with a questioner, so long as you do so respectfully. If the question is trying to trip you up, start by decisively stating the principle that animates your answer, then explain. If you want to use your answering time to cover unrelated ground or revisit a previous point, answer the question you have just been posed first, then go on your digression. The four worst words you can use to start a debate answer are: “Before I answer that...”

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32. Keep your cool fielding curveball questions.

Your response starts as soon as the questioner starts speaking: The camera and the audience will focus on your demeanor right away, before you even get to speak. If the question contains criticism, stay calm, especially if the criticism is biting. If your face registers that the question has landed its punch and thrown you off your stride, it’s likely to become YouTube fodder. If you appear unperturbed by the question and show confidence, the audience will maintain its confidence in you and the moment will pass. When an opponent or the moderator misstates an important fact, you may want to correct it. If the error is about something you don't want people to spend time thinking about, don’t litigate it. Sometimes it’s most efficient to just smile and shake your head rather than getting into a long explanation. You can begin with, “Actually...” to gently disagree without being disagreeable.

33. You are not running to be the editor of Politifact.

We live in an era of “alternative facts” and outright lies. As a well-prepared and serious person, hearing lies thrown at you in front of an audience can be infuriating; it can be tempting to make

correcting such errors and deceptions the gravamen of your debate strategy. But that can be a mistake. The audience expects politicians (i.e. both of you) to bend the truth, won't necessarily believe your word over your opponent's, and won't relate to you if they can't follow your argument. Your opponent may be lying specifically to try to upset you and get you off your message. Always consider: Is the most powerful/effective/important response to what my opponent has said a fact check? Or is a counterattack, substantive rebuttal, or pivot a better use of time? If it's an important point, you might still mention in passing what's false so the audience knows you don't see things that way. For example: Your opponent says, "Obamacare is the reason Mercy Hospital closed." This is not true, but rather than spending your time explaining all the real reasons, you say, "That's not why Mercy closed, but the critical point here is this: If [opponent] has his way, your insurance company can deny you coverage for a pre-existing condition. And our premiums will skyrocket."

34. 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—not 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. Remember this: No one ever lost a debate because their opponent got an extra minute or two out of ninety.

35. You can lose a debate any time, but you can only win it early.

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 twenty minutes. The viewers, the reporters, and even your opponent form a sense of the debate dynamic in the early going. Social media exacerbates this: The debate is being spun, in real time, on Twitter and Facebook—with the dynamic being set early in the proceedings. Moreover, 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 herself," "Smith couldn't defend his position on jobs"), and spend the final two-thirds watching for proof points that buttress the story line they have already adopted. Hence, the most important issues you want to raise; the most important attacks you want to launch; the most important contrasts you want to suggest must come in the first twenty minutes.

36. In a town hall, visit with folks.

When taking a question from a constituent in a town hall format debate, use the freedom of the format to connect with the questioner. Maintain eye contact. Take a few steps slowly toward them until you get to a comfortable distance (not too close), then stand steady, listen actively, and nod to show empathy with their concern. Viewers at home should be able to see how you feel on your face even if the TV is muted. When it's your turn to talk, begin your answer speaking just to the questioner, use their name, and see if you can get them to nod at what you're saying. Then you can turn and address the broader audience. As you wrap up, you can return to the questioner and use their name again.

37. If someone crosses the line, be ready to stand tall.

Most criticisms are best handled with understanding and a smile. But occasionally, the only appropriate response will be to take strong exception to the charge or question directed at you. (Mike Dukakis famously learned this the hard way when he got what he felt was a silly question about the death penalty that imagined his wife being killed, and he responded dispassionately about the policy, to viewers' shock.) You do not want to take offense at every criticism that comes your way, but if someone throws something at you that is truly beyond the pale, be prepared to deliver a strong statement standing up for yourself in reply. You don't have to get upset; a stern tone will do. If the charge or question is false or out of line, say so. Then state simply what you stand for (i.e. "I love my family and would do anything to keep them safe..." or "I have spent my entire adult life working on...") You may then offer a very simple, concise explanation if you have a clear one handy (i.e. "I made all my money before I ever ran for office.") Finally, hit back—make the issue your accuser's lack of integrity in asking the question (i.e. "You ought to know better.")

38. 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. Debates are often lost due to statements about which the candidate later says, "You know, I just wasn't sure, but..."

IV. AFTER THE DEBATE

39. Social media changes the post-debate clock.

Journalists covering the debate may start writing their stories twenty minutes in, but the social media opinions will start flying right away and continue long after the candidates leave the stage. Enthusiastic social media commentary not only reaches voters and activists directly, it also shapes journalists' perceptions of what is resonating and how they report it. Your team's debate strategy must include an organized effort to impact the social media dialogue about the debate, a plan to use social media to "fact-check" your opponent; and the creative use of social media to drive post-debate criticism of your opponent (remember #HorsesAndBayonettes in 2012?). Wherever possible, connect discussion of the debate to larger audiences, using both the official debate hashtag(s) and other already-trending or established hashtags. The chance to win post-debate spin comes and goes just as fast as the debate.

**YOUR TEAM'S STRATEGY
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40. Drive narrow stories to shape and extend the coverage.

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 ten times larger (or more) than 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. Make sure your campaign puts as much effort into winning the post-debate spin war as you have put into winning the debate itself, including effective attacks on your opponent and quick responses to any negative trends in coverage that emerge. No matter how thoroughly you trounce your opponent during the debate, that result is a one-day story. Look for specific issues raised in the debate, especially (but not exclusively) gaffes or odd answers or behavior by your opponent, and drive those stories forward with creativity and third-party validators. That not only makes the most of those particular stories, but that coverage will reinforce the idea that you won the debate overall.