



Home
Current Issue
Archive
Forum
Site Guide
Feedback
Subscribe
Search

Browse >>
Books & Critics
Fiction
Food
Foreign Affairs
Language
Poetry Pages
Politics & Society
Science & Technology
Travel & Pursuits

Send this page to a friend

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BUSH vs. GORE

Scenes from the first presidential debate of the 2000 election campaign

by [Jack Beatty](#)

March 8, 2000

Judy Woodruff, of CNN: Governor Bush, by prearrangement between you and Vice President Gore, we begin with you.

Governor, the Vice President has charged that your nomination as the Republican presidential candidate is tainted, because in his view you won by running highly misleading ads against Senator McCain and by, in effect, colluding with so-called independent groups to mount million-dollar ad buys -- millions in soft money -- that stretched the campaign-finance laws to the legal limit, if not beyond. What do you say to that?

Governor Bush: First, let me thank the good people of this city, this great state, for puttin' on this important debate. Also, in the audience -- my mom and dad, here, and I want to acknowledge their contributions to me and to America. People ask me all the time, "Does your dad give you political advice?" and I always say, "No, but my mom sure does, and I'm very grateful, usually!" [Laughs] I believe in the First Amendment, the free speech, and that's what these debates are all about, and America is all about, and even you people in the press -- you know, you get under my saddle, which is how we'd call it in my state of Texas, sometimes -- but you, as part of America, part of the press, are all about it, too. You're about it too, America.

On the question, wow, I don't know where to begin on that one, the question you asked. But for starters, my ads did not distort John McCain's record, which was -- I've said he's a good man, John McCain is a good and decent man, and I've said we honor his service -- his record is a record with many votes against what he calls "pork," things like breast cancer research and the other ... but those were really good programs, and the ads just pointed it out, so folks can judge which of us should be the President, the qualifications, who -- five years of progress on the scores, they're going up -- and working down the aisle, working with Democrats in my state.

But Judy, I'm takin' the high road tonight. Takin' the high road in this debate. I'm on that high road. I can't respond to questions that -- through you from my opponent with his question, not from you personally -- not to questions that make insinuations, are beneath the dignity, and I pledge to restore dignity and decency to the White House when we end the Clinton-Gore Administration in November, when this election is gonna be held. So I'm goin' to stay on the high road in this debate tonight. I'm gonna talk about my visions in this debate tonight. I'm here to talk about my plan to review education in this debate. Tonight, I'm here to talk about my *heart* -- about where my *heart* is, in this debate tonight, to tell the people -- in this debate, tonight, I'm askin' your vote, for the vote of the American people, at this debate tonight.

Woodruff: Do you mean, Governor, that you won't answer questions about possible ethical violations by your campaign?

Bush: Judy, I'm taking the high road here. I want people to see me takin' that high road and resorting dignity to the office. I'm here to talk about my tax plan, my education plan, my other plans and visions, my hopes for America, my heart -- I want to tell about it in this debate tonight.

Woodruff: Mr. Vice President, your response?

Vice President Gore: First let me convey my thanks to the organizers of this debate, and I too would like to acknowledge Governor Bush's parents. We salute you, sir, for your service.

Let me begin by saying that I understand why Governor Bush would prefer *not* to discuss the issues in his campaign that you raised, Judy, in your question. It *must* be painful to recall the controversies about his ads and also about the financing of his campaign. And by the way, Governor Bush is the first presidential candidate since public funding of presidential elections began -- he is the first to pay for his campaign wholly from private contributions made to his campaign by wealthy friends and big corporations. I don't want to be seen interfering in the investigation that the FEC is making into some of these charges that have been leveled against Governor Bush, except to say that they are serious, the ones I've seen anyway, and Governor Bush has got to answer for them.

Woodruff: Governor Bush, you have thirty seconds to respond.

Bush: He was a friend. Did I talk to him every hour, every day, every month or even every week -- no, I don't. So this charge of conversion between him and my campaign -- no way. This is not the high road. I'm on the high road, I'm takin' it. The Vice President here is showing by his statement, negative campaigning, that he is takin' the low road. He's on his high horse, but he's on the low road. I'm on the high road.

Woodruff: The next question goes to you, Mr. Vice President. Some critics say that you are the last person who should press Mr. Bush on his campaign ethics, considering yours. For instance, your campaign ran an ad in Iowa that distorted Senator Bradley's -- your challenger, former New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley -- record on a vote for relief for flood victims in Iowa. And of course there is the famous Buddhist Temple episode from the '96 campaign. How do you answer these critics?

Gore: Well, for one thing, let me point out once again that I am observing the public-funding limits in my campaign and that I favor campaign-finance reform. Governor Bush is not and does not. For another, every ad my campaign has put out is accurate...

Woodruff: But Senator Bradley disputes the accuracy not only of that ad but of others. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the Dean of the Annenberg School, has said that *your* campaign is tainted -- since you won by a record vote in Iowa, which started this race -- resting on what she calls "a significant public deception."

Gore: I *reject* that charge unequivocally. Throughout my public career -- my sixteen years in Congress and my seven years as Vice President -- I have *never* used negative personal attacks, nor will I in this campaign, though Governor Bush's visit to Bob Jones University, which discriminates against minorities and calls the Pope a "devil," was shameful, in that he either lacked the knowledge or the gumption to object to these objectionable policies and beliefs when he was there. It's my opponent who is making the negative personal attacks. Heck, he's made "no controlling legal authority" the best known political punch line since "Where's the beef?" [laughing]. No, in answer to your question, Judy, I stand by my ads. Naturally, Senator Bradley complained about them: that is what you do in politics when an ad is cutting into your support.

Woodruff: So are you using a double standard here -- one for you, and one for Governor Bush?

Gore: Not at all. And, with all due respect, I might add that these questions about process are not what the public is interested in -- only people in the media. It trivializes presidential politics, and I think the people are tired of it. [Applause]

Woodruff: Governor Bush, your response?

Bush: Judy, it was all I could do to hold my peace as I was listening, what he said -- though I agree, I agree with the last thing, which -- that's somethin' I've said before and now and in the campaign, throughout this presidential campaign, this ... visionary contest ... between visions.... This is about the country. About whose vision for education, whose vision for tax cuts? Whose vision for medical savings accounts is the right vision for this country, America, the country I want to restore integrity and dignity to its highest office.

Woodruff: Okay, Governor Bush, a question on substance...

Bush: At long last! [Laughter]

Woodruff: ...on taxes...

Bush: Now you're talkin'!

Woodruff: Governor Bush, you want to cut tax rates over five years, but the poorest workers will only get a 10 percent cut while the richest among us will receive a 33 percent cut. Is that fair?

Bush: Judy, universal tax cuts are what's fair. That means everybody. Not these targeted cuts on a precious few like he's got [pointing to Gore]. We don't play favorites. We don't do that in this country. Everybody gets the cuts! Universal -- not all these separate groups. Across that board.

Woodruff: Yes, but why do the rich get triple the cut, percentage-wise, that the poor get under your plan? That's what I meant by fair. It's the favoritism, to use your term, your plan shows to rich people.

Bush: Why discriminate? I want to *incriminate*, to inclusion. I'm a uniter, not a divider. I bring people together. In my state I brought Democrats together... But taxes. Hey, let's stop this class warfare. That's setting one group against another. Divisive not unitive. Everybody gets that tax cut. I want voters to know my heart on this.

Woodruff: Okay, Governor Bush, we know that everybody will get a tax cut; that is not in question. My question was about the fairness...

Bush: Is it fair to send your tax money to Washington, D.C., where the politicians will spend it? That is where the unfairness comes in. We want to be fair to all taxpayers, to leave nobody ... and we won't. Fairness. Letting people keep more of their hard-earned money for themselves and their families. That is what's fair. Not class warfare, playing favorites to one group. I'm a uniter, not a divider.

Woodruff: Vice President Gore, your response?

Gore: Doesn't this sound *familiar*? We have been down this road before, in the 1980s, with tax cuts for the rich, and it left us in a *recession* and with a huge deficit. This economic scheme is as dangerous as it is unfair. It would stop the progress we have made over the past eight years -- over the longest recovery in history, a boom -- end the progress we've made by close coordination between fiscal and monetary policy, by not only wiping out the deficit but putting the budget in surplus for the first time in a generation. Governor Bush's tax scheme would cause a huge deficit, force cuts in every program, including Medicare, education, and the environment. As the deficit soars, the Fed will sharply increase interest rates, and that will be the end of

the good economy that we enjoy today thanks to our careful stewardship. Yes, let's have *modest* tax cuts, but to help working families pay for higher education, not make the well off better off.

Woodruff: Governor Bush?

Bush: I won't touch the Medicare! And I want to be the education Pres... Education is my issue that is at the center of my campaign for President of the United -- not Divided -- States. On education, the key is accountability -- hold schools and teachers accountable. The scores are up. In my state the scores are up, and that's what we want to do across this great land of ours. Get those scores up! Up for America! No, we won't cut Medicare. And we won't increase the deficit. Or push the economy into a downturn of the GDP, which used to -- we called it the NGP, the *national* gross product, as opposed to the domestic gross product like we do now. No, our cuts will make the economy grow. Investors will have more of their own money -- theirs, not some bureaucrat's -- in which to invest. In my state that's what we did -- a big tax cut, universal -- in my state, and it is working. In my state it is working. Those scores are up ... jobs, lots of them, new, good jobs because people had the money to invest in entrepreneurship and they did and it's working in my state of Texas, it's working, and give it a chance America....

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