

Defining Moments, Presidential Debates, and the Dynamics of Quotability

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News coverage of presidential debates often focuses on a single defining moment which is taken to epitomize the debate in its entirety. This is a case study of the central defining moment of the 1988 vice presidential debate—the dramatic exchange culminating in Lloyd Bentsen's assertion that Dan Quayle is "no Jack Kennedy." The study documents the degree to which this particular excerpt dominated news coverage of the debate, explains why it received so much attention, and explores how it has survived and evolved in the media over time. More generally, it is argued that journalists select quotations and sound bites by reference to three basic considerations: (a) narrative relevance, (b) conspicuousness, and (c) extractability. These considerations guide processes of extract selection generally, and they can explain the genesis and survivability of prominent defining moments.

In 1976 it was Gerald Ford's unexpected assertion that Poland was not subject to Soviet domination. In 1980 it was the way Ronald Reagan deflected Jimmy Carter's attacks with "there you go again." In 1984 it was Walter Mondale's colorful "where's the beef" put-down of Gary Hart. And in 1988 it was Lloyd Bentsen's withering assessment of Dan Quayle: "Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy." Over the past two decades of presidential debates encompassing many hours of debating time, moments like these have received the lion's share of attention in the news media. It is, of course, inevitable that journalistic renderings of public events will include only a sampling of extracts in the form of sound bites on television or quotations in print. However, in some cases a single compelling

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remark or interactional exchange becomes the primary focus of attention as it is extensively replayed, quoted, paraphrased, referred to, and discussed. This process creates a *defining moment*, one that is taken to symbolize the original event in its entirety.¹

In general, the reproduction of quotations and sound bites can be a profoundly consequential matter. As the news media have become increasingly central to the conduct of public affairs, political battles are now waged largely through the brief verbal excerpts that make their way into the daily news. These selectional processes have broader cultural consequences as well, as collective memories of past interactional events are conditioned by those excerpts that are preserved in the mass media.

Why is it that certain segments of an event crop up repeatedly as quotations and sound bites in diverse journalistic outlets? Despite recent theoretic interest in the intertextual character of media texts, and popular concern about the superficiality of sound bite news, little is known about the actual mechanics of extract selection. There has been substantial empirical research on the general characteristics of journalistic quoting practices (Bell, 1991, pp. 204–212; Clayman, 1990; Geis, 1987, pp. 78–97; Roeh & Nir, 1990; Short, 1988), the changing character of television sound bites (Hallin, 1992), and how the use of such extracts serves to maintain journalistic authority and objectivity (Tuchman, 1972; Zelizer, 1989). However, the question of what journalists actually choose to extract has only recently been explored, most notably in research by Atkinson (1984a, pp. 124–163).

This paper addresses the issue of extract selection through a case study of the central defining moment in the 1988 vice presidential debate between Senators Lloyd Bentsen and Dan Quayle—the dramatic exchange culminating in Bentsen’s assertion that Quayle is “no Jack Kennedy.” I have examined journalistic coverage of this incident in the immediate aftermath of the debate. I have also tracked the long-term trajectory of media discourse concerning this incident over the years since its occurrence.²

My immediate objectives are to describe how this incident dominated news coverage of the debate, to explain why this particular incident was singled out for journalistic attention, and to explore how it has survived and evolved in the media over time. However, in explicating this particular case, I develop a gen-

¹ For a discussion of the synecdochic function of memorable quotations, see Jamieson (1988, chapter 5). For a much more general discussion of the cultural significance of certain “critical incidents,” see Zelizer (1992).

² The data sample of postdebate coverage includes immediate commentary or “instant analysis” on CNN, news coverage by four television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS) on the following evening, three major newspapers (the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post*) for the remainder of that week, and two weekly news magazines (*Newsweek* and *Time*) for 2 weeks following the debate. The long-term data sample includes over 380 items mentioning the incident from a wide range of television, newspaper, magazine, and wire service sources. The sample was generated by conducting a NEXIS data bank search on the phrase *you’re no Jack Kennedy* from the day of the debate through the end of 1993. I have supplemented the NEXIS sample with some additional items.

eral theory of extract selection which can explain the genesis and survivability of defining moments from a range of public interactional events. At the end of the paper, I explore the consequences of defining moment coverage for this particular debate, and for broader issues concerning collective remembering and the persistence of culture.

The Incident

In the 1988 vice presidential debate, Senators Lloyd Bentsen (a Texas Democrat and Michael Dukakis' running mate) and Dan Quayle (an Indiana Republican and George Bush's running mate) answered questions from a panel of journalists for 90 minutes. The modified press conference format had the journalists taking turns in a prearranged order, with each journalist asking one question at a time. This format tended to inhibit follow-up questions. However, any subsequent journalist could, in principle, follow up on an earlier question-answer exchange if the original answer appeared worth pursuing.

The trouble began early on in the debate when Dan Quayle was asked what he would do if the president became incapacitated and he suddenly had to assume the presidential "reins of power." His initial answer was perceived as inadequate, prompting journalists to reissue the question twice in later rounds of questioning. The problem, apparently, was that Quayle had said very little about the specific steps he would take in assuming the presidency, preferring instead to describe his general qualifications for the presidency. Each time the question was pursued, Quayle continued to present his qualifications for office rather than specify a concrete plan of action (Clayman, 1993). In his third attempt at answering, he sought to bolster his qualifications, and perhaps put an end to this line of questioning, by drawing an analogy between his own level of experience and that of John Kennedy in 1960. It was the Kennedy comparison that sparked what would become the defining moment of the debate. A transcript of the exchange, with a key to the transcription symbols, appears in Figure 1.

In response to the Kennedy analogy, Bentsen noted that he served with Kennedy, that he knew Kennedy personally, and that they were friends (lines 11–12), and he pointedly asserted that Quayle is "no Jack Kennedy" (line 13). This remark elicited a strong audience response—predominantly applause, but some booing as well (lines 15–16, 18, 20, 22)—and then retorts from Quayle (28) and from Bentsen (32–37) before the parties resumed a more normal course of debating.

The Defining Moment

This brief exchange, and particularly Bentsen's "You're no Jack Kennedy" remark, figured prominently in news accounts of the debate. One measure of its prominence is the range of stories that dealt with it. It was excerpted and

1 DQ: I ha:ve (0.5) far more (0.7) experience .hh than many others
2 (1.8) that sought the office of vice president 'this
3 country. (0.7) I have as much experience in the Congress
4 .hhh as Jack Kennedy did (0.7) when he sought (0.5) the
5 presidency. (1.1) I will be prepar:ed (0.2) to deal with
6 the people (0.2) in the Bush administration (0.7) if that
7 unfortunate event (0.3) would ever occur.
8 (0.5)
9 MOD: Senator Bentsen?
10 (1.1)
11 LB: .hhhh (0.4) Senator. (1.6) I served with Jack Kennedy. (0.5)
12 I knew Jack Kennedy. (1.1) Jack Kennedy was a friend o'mi:ne.
13 (1.3) Senator you're no Jack Kennedy.
14 (0.2)
15 AUD: xxx
16 xxx-
17 LB: [W- what has to be done.]
18 AUD: -xx-
19 LB: [What has to be done.]
20 AUD: -xx-
21 LB: [In a situation like that.]
22 AUD: -[XXxxxx]xxxx-x ((Aud response 15.8))
23 MOD: [Ple:ase]
24 LB: in [a situation like that (1.0) is to call in the joint-]
25 MOD: [Ple:ase once again, you're only taking time away from you]r
26 own candidate.
27 (0.8) ((A few isolated audience chuckles during this))
28 DQ: That was really uncalled for Senator.
29 AUD: xxxxxx[xx-
30 LB: [Uh huh [Senator,
31 AUD: -xx (8.5)
32 LB: [You're: the
33 one that was making the comparison:, Senator. (0.1)
34 and I'm one who knew him well. (0.1) And frankly (0.1)
35 I think you're so far apart in the objectives you
36 choose for your country .hh that I did not think
37 the comparison was well taken.

Key to transcription symbols:
— *Underlining* denotes audible stress.
: *Colon(s)* indicate that the prior sound was prolonged.
hhh *Strings of "hhh"* mark audible breathing.
xxx *Strings of "xxx"* mark applause.
(1.3) *Numbers in parentheses* denote elapsed silence in tenths of seconds.
= *Equal signs* connecting two events indicate that they follow one another with no intervening silence.
() *Square brackets* enclosing events on adjacent lines indicate that those events occurred simultaneously.

Figure 1. The Bentsen-Quayle Exchange

discussed in every major newspaper, television, and magazine story focusing on the debate. It was the only sound bite to appear in all four network newscasts the next evening. Many editorials, letters to the editor, and political car-

toons also dealt with the incident. Finally, unlike almost everything else that was said in the 90-minute debate, this exchange had a unique staying power in subsequent campaign coverage. As the week wore on, if any particular episode from the debate was mentioned in the news, it was almost always the You're no Jack Kennedy incident.

This incident also figured prominently within each news story. The following day, among newspaper articles dealing primarily with the debate, five out of eight mentioned or alluded to the incident within the headline, and six out of eight quoted Bentsen's "You're no Jack Kennedy" line before anything else from the debate. In both printed and broadcast stories, the amount of space directly or indirectly devoted to the incident typically ranged from 10% to 30%, although a few stories greatly exceeded this range. The front-page *Los Angeles Times* story (Times Wire Services, 1988) was almost entirely devoted to the incident. And while debate coverage on ABC included a segment correcting several inaccurate statements made by both candidates, the only sound bite to be featured as a topic in its own right was the You're no Jack Kennedy exchange.

Perhaps the most striking pattern involved how journalists characterized the incident in question. Almost without exception, it was rendered in superlatives which portrayed it as the single most noteworthy moment in the debate, if not the entire 1988 campaign. What follows is a list of such characterizations as they appeared in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post* the following day:

the emotional high point of the nationally televised 90-minute debate (Dionne, 1988, p. A1);
one of the sharpest exchanges of the debate (Times Wire Services, 1988, p. 11);
the most dramatic moment in the 90-minute debate (Nelson, 1988, p. 118);
the most dramatic blow of the night (Shogan, 1988a, p. 118);
what will be replayed and remembered of this debate (Rosenstiel, 1988, p. 125);
the moment everyone is going to remember about this debate (*ibid*);
the debate over Quayle's experience and qualifications was crystallized in an exchange (Barnes & Melton, 1988, p. A1);
one of the most dramatic moments of the 1988 campaign (Broder, 1988a, p. A1);
one of the indelible moments of an otherwise lackluster campaign (*ibid*);
the one dramatic moment stood out like a tornado on a flat plain (Shales, 1988, p. C1).

Significantly, there was no time lag in the use of such characterizations—reporters did not wait until the incident received widespread coverage before pronouncing it a defining moment. From the outset it was almost invariably characterized in such terms.

Moreover, newspaper journalists rendered this particular exchange at a level of detail unequalled in coverage of the remainder of the debate. In addition to quoting the words themselves, journalists often characterized each party's facial expression, body posture, and other aspects of comportment. Bentsen was characterized as having "[lain] in wait" (Beckel, 1988, p. V1) for Quayle, as allowing

a “dramatic pause” (Shales, 1988, p. C1) to pass while he “looked his . . . opponent in the eye” (Broder, 1988b, p. A23) or “fixed him with a steely stare” (Simon, 1988, p. V2) or “a look of sad reproof” (Newsweek Correspondents, 1988, p. 137) before “dropping the avuncular manner” (Broder, 1988a, p. A1) to render his critical assessment. Bentsen was said to have delivered that remark “in a somber tone” (Dionne, 1988, p. A1), “in quiet, deadly tones” (McGrory, 1988, p. D1), or “with precision and rhetorical balance” (Stengel, 1988, p. 20). In his response, Quayle was variously characterized as “stony-faced” (Broder, 1988a, p. A1), “momentarily stunned” (Evans & Novak, 1988, p. A23), “obviously angered” (Dionne, p. A1), “tight-lipped and chafing” (Nelson, 1988, p. 118), or as having a “hurt-puppy look” (Shales, p. C1). It was also noted that Quayle’s “Adam’s apple jumped” (Newsweek Correspondents, p. 137), and that he “began to shake his head slowly” in protest (McGrory, p. D1). Such subtle behavioral details were almost never mentioned in relation to other debate quotations. Their inclusion here expands the reader’s temporal experience of the moment, heightens its dramatic aspects, and thus further contributes to its journalistic prominence.

Finally, journalists sometimes rendered the overall exchange in terms of elaborate and highly colorful metaphors. It was likened to a boxing episode (“Bentsen . . . paused for a moment and seemed to measure his opponent like a boxer ready for a haymaker,” Shogan, 1988a, p. 116), a Western movie gunfight (“Bentsen rounded on him, drew, and fired—right between the eyes,” McGrory, 1988, p. D1), an adult-child exchange (“It was as though a respected uncle had reprimanded his young charge for cheekiness,” Stengel, 1988, p. 20), and an effort to discipline a wayward pet (“Bentsen had . . . a chance to roll up a newspaper and smack Quayle in the nose as if he were a playful puppy,” Newsweek Correspondents, 1988, p. 137). These metaphorical characterizations appeared for the most part in feature stories, stories labeled “news analysis,” and editorials. In those contexts, journalists are freed from the restrictive conventions of straight newswriting (Tuchman, 1972) and hence are able to incorporate more literary devices into their stories. However, they do not do so indiscriminately—elaborate metaphors were applied primarily to this exchange only, while the rest of the debate was rendered in much more straightforwardly descriptive terms.

In these various ways, “You’re no Jack Kennedy” was singled out as the most significant moment of the debate. Eventually, this incident would come to symbolize the debate as a whole, so much so that the larger event can now be referred to as “the Quayle-Bentsen (‘You’re no Jack Kennedy’) 1988 matchup” (Carmody, 1992, p. E1).

Why *This* Moment?

Why did journalists treat this particular moment as the defining moment? One explanation that can be quickly dispensed with is that the quotability of this incident rests upon the informational content of what was said. The most

widely excerpted segment—"You're no Jack Kennedy"—is massively self-evident and hence, as a factual proposition, not particularly newsworthy. To explain its quotability, we must consider the process of quotation/sound-bite selection more generally.

Extract selection is a pervasive aspect of journalistic practice, but it arises with particular force in coverage of presidential debates. Debates are major "media events" (Dayan & Katz, 1992) and involve a civic ritual which is central to the democratic process. Consequently, news coverage of debates is obligatory, and all major news organizations dispatch reporters to summarize and interpret the event. A news slot is thus available which must somehow be filled with stories containing relevant excerpts from the event. At the same time, debates are seamless interactional events which lack a clear-cut conclusion or climax. Unlike those public events where an obvious climactic segment renders the selection process straightforward (e.g., on the last day of a trial, the reading of the verdict is a natural focus for news coverage), debates lack such an obvious focal point. Accordingly, reporters are faced with the task of portraying the event in part through excerpts which cannot be anticipated in advance.

Under these circumstances, I argue, extract selection is informed by three basic considerations: (a) narrative relevance, (b) conspicuousness, and (c) extractability.

Narrative Relevance

Journalists are guided in part by the contours of the story narrative. They approach events with at least a rough sense of what the resulting story will look like, a sense which is elaborated and adjusted as information is gathered. This emerging sense of the story's overall contours has been variously characterized as the "story line" (Epstein, 1973, pp. 164–180), "angle" (Altheide, 1974, pp. 73–83), or "frame" (Gitlin, 1980, pp. 6–7), and it can profoundly affect the newsgathering process. Some genres of news (e.g., crime news, campaign news, etc.) have become highly conventionalized and formulaic, so much so that reporters complain about the need to fit source material into standard narrative molds (Epstein, 1973, p. 165; see also Darnton, 1975, pp. 188–92). This constraint may be more acute in television news than in print, given television's greater tendency toward narrative coherence and thematic unity (Robinson & Sheehan, 1983, pp. 214–216; Weaver, 1975).

Insofar as journalists orient to such narrative frameworks, they tend to gravitate toward quotations and sound bites that relevantly fit into the developing narrative. The relevance of a segment may hinge not only on its thematic content, but also on the type of social action it embodies. For example, stories about domestic politics typically adhere to a dialectical story format (Epstein 1973, pp. 168–69) emphasizing dramatic conflict between opposing factions (e.g., the President vs. Congress, Democrats vs. Republicans, etc.). Use of this format leads to a general preference for quotations and sound bites exhibiting clearly divergent points of view, particularly those that show one side to be attacking the opposition. For instance, when President Clinton rounded up three former U. S. Presidents to make speeches endorsing the North American

Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), each president presented lengthy and specific arguments in support of the trade agreement. However, one remark in particular dominated news coverage of the event: the line in which former President Jimmy Carter attacked Ross Perot (an ardent NAFTA opponent) as a “demagogue.”³

This emphasis on dramatic conflict is manifest quite strongly in coverage of election campaigns and debates in particular. It has been widely documented that campaign stories generally tend to concentrate on the dynamics of the “horse race” to the exclusion of the candidates’ issue positions, policy proposals, or other substantive matters (Patterson, 1993; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983, pp. 147–151; Weaver, 1972). The horse race emphasis also dominates coverage of campaign debates (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1988, pp. 170–173; Kraus, 1988, pp. 73–101; Sears & Chaffee, 1979, pp. 228–230). Thus, rather than simply review and contrast the candidates’ political views and proposals as expressed in the debate, journalists focus on the overriding question of who won and who lost. *NBC Nightly News* anchor Tom Brokaw began his October 8, 1988, account of the Bentsen-Quayle debate by raising this question explicitly: “Good evening. Who won? Who knows. The vice presidential debate had America talking today . . .” To answer this question, journalists may consult partisan spin doctors, or poll results if they are available, but they also draw on what transpired within the debate itself. Of particular relevance to the winner-loser question are segments involving seemingly fatal blunders (e.g., Ford’s 1976 assertion that Poland is not subject to Soviet domination) or knockout punches (e.g., Reagan’s “there you go again” dismissal of Carter in 1980, Mondale’s “where’s the beef” put-down of Gary Hart in 1984) that can be taken as indicative of the outcome. When fatal blunders or knockout punches cannot be found, journalists often report that there was no single decisive incident. For instance, concerning the Bush-Dukakis debates, one reporter pointed out that “neither candidate appeared to make a serious blunder” (Hoffman & Walsh, 1988, p. A1), and another noted that “not even [Dukakis’] aides claimed he scored a knockout” (Associated Press, 1988, p. 11). This tendency to comment on the absence of a decisive moment provides strong evidence that in this context journalists do indeed search for such moments and report them whenever possible.⁴

Narrative relevance is necessary but insufficient to fully explain most instances of extract selection. Relevance considerations may narrow the pool of

³ For example, NAFTA stories in both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post* the next day (Sept. 15, 1993) contained a brief quote from Clinton followed by a quote of Carter’s “demagogue” remark. The stories then noted that Bush also attacked Perot, although less forcefully. No other speech extracts received significant attention. This preference for expressions of hostility has a parallel in audience behavior—Heritage and Greatbatch (1986) have shown that audience members are more likely to applaud hostile than nonhostile remarks.

⁴ Recently, a new genre of debate story has emerged to take its place alongside the usual horse race narrative. The major networks have begun to run “fact-checking” stories designed to correct the candidates’ misleading, exaggerated, or erroneous assertions. This narrative frame plainly leads journalists to search for those extracts containing assertions which can be regarded as somehow inaccurate.

appropriate story material, but various excerpts could in principle fit within a given story line. Hence, additional considerations come into play which involve the intrinsic properties of the source material.

Conspicuousness

Certain remarks and interactional exchanges are intrinsically quotable, regardless of reporters' narrative preconceptions, because they are highly conspicuous. If a particular episode stands out prominently from the background of a larger event, it is more likely to come to the reporter's attention, and thus stands an increased chance of being excerpted.

A variety of rhetorical and interactional design features may enhance the conspicuousness of an episode. One broad set of features may be grouped under the rubric of compelling rhetorical devices. Atkinson (1984a, pp. 124–163) has demonstrated that certain rhetorical formats, such as three-part lists and contrasts, operate as significant determinants of quotability. Metaphorical formulations also seem to be highly quotable, particularly if they are unusual, colorful, or involve an analogic stretch. A case in point is Mondale's "Where's the beef" put-down of Gary Hart, a metaphorical phrase cleverly borrowed from the discourse of popular culture (namely, a commercial slogan for Wendy's hamburgers).

In situations involving a live audience, the elicitation of applause (or other audience responses) may also render a remark conspicuous and hence quotable. Because applause is indicative of audience support for what was said just previously, journalists refer to applause to determine which remarks are significant enough to be excerpted (Atkinson, 1984a, pp. 136–137).

Finally, departures from established norms or local interactional conventions are apt to stand out noticeably. Even mild departures from routine seem to generate a disproportionate share of news coverage. For example, when public figures decline to answer a reporter's question, such resistance is regularly singled out in coverage of press conferences and interviews (Clayman, 1990). At the other extreme, an unusual or dramatic violation can become a major news story. When Ross Perot abruptly walked out of an interview on *60 Minutes*, thus breaching the norm that interview closings should be managed by interviewers (Clayman, 1989; Greatbatch, 1988), that moment was regarded as newsworthy enough to be included in a special 25th anniversary retrospective program. More recently, when President Clinton aborted a press conference after only a single accusatory question had been asked, that premature ending became a major news story in its own right. Such violative actions may be so extraordinary that they become the primary focus of media attention, overwhelming whatever narrative frameworks reporters began with.

Extractability

The intrinsic quotability of an episode depends not only on the degree to which it stands out, but also on the ease with which it may be extracted from the larger event. This factor tends to rule out obscure, oblique, or highly context-dependent remarks that would require extensive background information to

be made intelligible to the audience; it tends to favor remarks that can stand on their own with little or no journalistic elaboration. Furthermore, for broadcast journalists the extractability factor tends to favor segments that are temporally disjoined from the surrounding talk, so that they may be easily edited into sound bites (Atkinson, 1984a, p. 137). This preference is rooted in deeply institutionalized journalistic conventions which place great importance on editing unobtrusively so as to sustain the impression that reality has not been unduly tampered with (Altheide, 1974, pp. 85–95; Tuchman, 1978, pp. 109–110). Thus, episodes of applause represent convenient natural boundaries where taped extracts can be cut cleanly, without incorporating any jarring remnants of the speaker's next remarks, and hence "without it appearing to viewers that the flow of a speaker's argument was too abruptly interrupted" (Atkinson, 1984a, p. 137).

Against this backdrop, I will argue that considerations of narrative relevance, conspicuousness, and extractability led journalists to converge on Bentsen's remark as the defining moment.

The Narrative Relevance of "You're no Jack Kennedy"

Bentsen's remark was generally regarded as the central "knockout punch" of the debate. It thus neatly fits into the predominant journalistic story line for campaign debates, which centers on the identification of winners and losers by reference to particular decisive moments. As we have seen, this remark was almost universally treated as emblematic of, and decisive in, Bentsen's "victory" over Quayle. But if this verbal punch comes across as a knockout, what is the source of its muscle? More fundamentally, what makes it a punch in the first place?

A Criticism

Bentsen's remark embodies, first and foremost, a derogatory criticism of his opponent. This much is clear; what is less obvious is precisely how his remark achieves the pragmatic force of a criticism. "You're no Jack Kennedy" might at first glance seem to be nothing more than a harmless statement of the obvious. Its status as a criticism is signalled not only by the sequential context in which it occurs (i.e., subsequent to, and in disagreement with, Quayle's favorable Kennedy comparison), but also by aspects of its internal design.⁵

Notice that Bentsen says "You're no" rather than "You're not." This may seem like a trivial distinction, but the choice of *no* over *not* is crucial to the derogatory sense of this remark. The hypothetical alternative version, "You're not Jack Kennedy," can be heard as a simple statement of nonidentity which asserts that Quayle is not, in fact, the former President. The actual "You're no Jack Kennedy" comes across as something quite different. It asserts that Quayle does not belong in the *category of persons* for which Kennedy is the prototype—he is not a "Kennedy-type" person.

⁵ I am indebted to Andy Roth for this observation.

In support of this analysis, consider that *no* frequently appears in syntactically similar idiomatic expressions that characterize a person by reference to a generic—and often desirable—type: that is, “She’s no spring chicken,” “He’s no angel,” and so forth.⁶ When a proper name is used as the comparative reference point within such a formulation, it is hearable as defining a generic type or category, as in “You’re no Albert Einstein/Mother Theresa/etc.” Thus, given Kennedy’s status as a charismatic leader and a political martyr, it would be difficult to hear this remark as anything other than a hostile put-down—an assertion that Quayle does not measure up to the Kennedy mold.

A great many attacks were launched in the course of the debate, but only this one became the defining moment. To explain why this particular remark received so much attention, we must consider not only what makes it a verbal punch, but also what makes it a knockout.

An Open-Ended Criticism

Bentsen’s criticism has a distinctly open-ended character. Rather than explicitly characterizing Quayle in unfavorable terms (e.g., as inexperienced, unintelligent, cowardly, etc.), he merely asserts that Quayle is “no Jack Kennedy.” Thus, in a variation on the rhetorical device known as *litotes*—in which an affirmative is expressed through the negation of its opposite (Bergmann, 1992)—Quayle is characterized by reference to who he is not.

How are audience members to interpret the assertion that Dan Quayle is “no Jack Kennedy”? If this is a criticism, what is it about Quayle that compares unfavorably to the former President? In general, social actors consult the immediate circumstances to disambiguate what they hear in talk. However, because the context can be multifaceted (Schegloff, 1992), the specific meaning of “You’re no Jack Kennedy” will depend on what aspect of context is invoked as a frame of reference for making sense of the remark. Quayle originally compared himself to Kennedy specifically in terms of their experience in office, which he asserted was comparable (see Figure 1, transcript lines 1–7). Since this is what set the whole exchange in motion, Bentsen’s remark might be heard as a straightforward disagreement with Quayle on this point, and hence as a narrow commentary on his relative inexperience as an elected official.

However, since Bentsen never actually refers to the matter of experience, his remark is open to broader and more damaging interpretations. For instance, the remark can also be heard to encompass aspects of Quayle’s personal character. Recall that a wide range of character issues had dogged Quayle in the preceding weeks of the campaign, including his mediocre performance in college, and his avoidance of military service during the Vietnam War. These were well-known and salient matters at that time, and they differ sharply from what was also widely known about Kennedy’s academic and military achievements. Moreover, Bentsen’s lead-up to the remark (see lines 11–12) actively encourages the audience to consider such character issues. By asserting that he knew

⁶ Correspondingly, there are similar expressions involving undesirable person-categories or types: “I’m no fool,” “She’s no slouch,” and so forth.

Kennedy as a friend, and by using Kennedy's nickname Jack, he invokes his acquaintance with Kennedy-the-whole-person and not simply Kennedy-the-politician as a framework for interpreting what follows. Thus, viewers were primed to hear the focal remark upon its occurrence as a broad swipe at Quayle's character, and Quayle's strong objection ("That was really uncalled for Senator" in line 28) suggests that he took it as such.

In the face of Quayle's objection, Bentsen (in lines 32–37) elaborates on the meaning of his remark in a way that narrows its focus to specifically political concerns. He observes that Quayle and Kennedy are "so far apart in the objectives you choose for your country," thus implying that the remark was originally intended as a condemnation of Quayle's sociopolitical values rather than his personal character. This elaboration provides grounds for hearing the remark, at least in retrospect, as a more narrowly political commentary.

Interestingly, back on the campaign trail later that week, Bentsen recast the remark once again, broadening it to encompass the personal as well as the political. Speaking to his partisan supporters, Bentsen reinvoked the Kennedy comparison to denounce Quayle's courage and intelligence, as well as his political accomplishments.

After standing up there on that stage [with Quayle] for 90 minutes and thinking about how John Kennedy faced down [Soviet Leader Nikita Krushchev], I could not imagine Dan Quayle doing that with Gorbachev . . . When I think of Jack Kennedy, I think of a war hero, a man who was a Pulitzer prize winner, a man who helped bring about an atmospheric nuclear test ban, who stood up to Krushchev. What an incredible misfit. (in Sherwood & Jenkins, 1988)

In any case, it is clear from these divergent interpretations that the remark can be understood as something far more global and damaging than a narrow commentary on Quayle's experience in office. Bentsen's lead-in evokes an open-ended field of possibilities, encouraging audience members to ponder all of the various ways that Quayle does not measure up to the heroic and beloved president. This presumably resonated with journalists at a time when Quayle was widely suspected of being a lightweight in so many respects.

A Directed Criticism

The force of Bentsen's attack also derives from the directness with which it is delivered. For most of the debate, the candidates addressed their remarks either to the journalist-questioner at the foot of the stage, or to the audience beyond. Usually they did both, in that order, over the course of an answer—each candidate would first briefly face the questioner, and would then shift to face the main camera situated amid the studio audience for the remainder of the answer (see Figure 2, top). This pattern of address was facilitated by the spatial arrangement of the podiums, which were positioned side by side facing out toward the audience, although they were angled slightly toward one another. Thus, while the candidates could easily turn to face one another, their

respective podiums defined a default or home position which faced the studio audience. Correspondingly, each candidate would often refer to his opponent in the third person, as in the following exchange on the issue of campaign finance reform. The phrases containing third-party reference terms have been capitalized.

LB:	...I WISH THAT SENATOR QUAYLE (0.2) uh:: would change HIS MIND on that particular piece of legislation, and give us the kind of a campaign finance reform law (0.1) that I think is needed in America. (0.5)
MOD:	Senator Quayle your response.
DQ:	SENATOR BENTSEN IS the: number one PAC raiser. (0.1) As a matter of fact .hh HE USED TO have a s- ten thousand dollar breakfast club....

Thus, the candidates generally refrained from addressing one another directly.

However, as Bentsen launches into his attack, he departs from the usual pattern to confront Quayle directly. This is evident in the term of address (*Senator*) with which Bentsen initiates his response: "Senator, (1.6) I served with Jack Kennedy." Although the television camera initially provides only a long shot showing both candidates, midway through Bentsen's second assertion ("I knew Jack Kennedy"), the camera cuts to a close-up of Bentsen (Figure 2, middle), and his head and eyes are turned sharply to the right, toward his opponent. His gaze remains fixed on Quayle throughout the remainder of his attack. Moreover, Bentsen reinforces the directness of his attack at its climax by repeating the address term *Senator* ("Senator you're no Jack Kennedy"). This repetition is by no means necessary for the remark's intelligibility, and yet it is not simply redundant, for it serves to heighten the directness of the attack just as it approaches its peak.

The camera work across this sequence underlines and reinforces this direction of address. During Bentsen's third assertion ("Jack Kennedy was a friend o'mi:ne"), and specifically during the penultimate word *of*, the camera cuts from a medium shot of Bentsen (Figure 2, middle) to an over-the-shoulder shot of both candidates from stage left (Figure 2, bottom). This shot is sustained throughout the remainder of Bentsen's attack. The shift in camera angle alters the television audience's participation status (Goffman, 1981) in relation to the unfolding interaction. Previously, and for much of the debate, viewers watched from a vantage point similar to that of the studio audience—they were positioned as the primary addressees of the on-stage talk. With this new camera angle, viewers are drawn into an on-stage vantage point which is much closer to Bentsen's perspective as he delivers his verbal punch, but which encompasses both parties at this crucial moment. Thus, just as Bentsen redirects his talk away from the audience and toward Quayle, the camera shift casts the television audience not as addressees but as onlookers to a combative exchange between the candidates themselves.

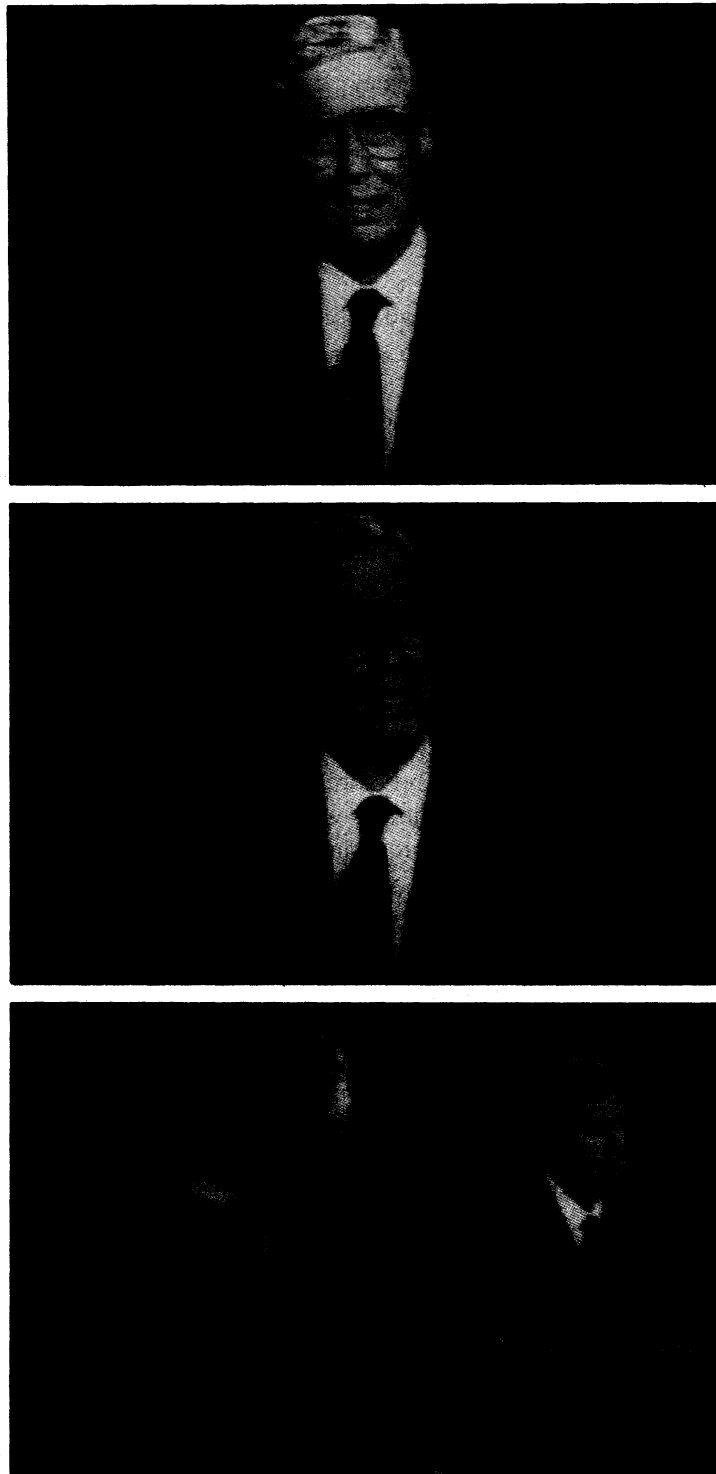


Figure 2. Bentsen addresses Quayle directly.

In summary, the open-ended character of this attack, together with the directness with which it is delivered, helps to elevate it to the status of a decisive knockout punch. Bentsen's remark was thus irresistible to journalists who organize their narratives around such decisive moments.

"You're no Jack Kennedy" As Intrinsically Quotable

In addition to its relevance to the predominant journalistic story line, Bentsen's remark is also intrinsically quotable. We turn now to consider various design features which make it both conspicuous and extractable.

Rhetorical Formatting

Bentsen's remark is formatted in a strikingly elaborate and compelling way. Instead of launching directly into "You're no Jack Kennedy," he leads up to that comment with a series of three assertions about his own relationship to Kennedy. Each preliminary assertion is similarly structured:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 | I served with Jack Kennedy. (0.5) |
| 2 | I k new Jack Kennedy. (1.1) |
| 3 | Jack Kennedy was a friend o'mi:ne. (1.3) |
| 4 | Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy. |

Moreover, while the first three are affirmative assertions, the fourth is a negative assertion and thus contrasts with the previous three. In short, Bentsen's remark is formatted as a three-part list of items,⁷ coupled with a fourth contrasting item.

Previous research has demonstrated that lists, contrasts, and list-contrast combinations are powerful rhetorical devices (Atkinson, 1984a, 1984b; Heritage & Greatbatch, 1986). They serve to emphasize a message and provide a completion point which may be anticipated well in advance, so that in public speaking contexts messages formatted this way are more likely to receive applause. Rhetorically formatted assertions are also intrinsically quotable, and hence are more likely to appear in news stories as quotations and sound bites (Atkinson, 1984a, pp. 124–163). The reasons for this are undoubtedly complex, but Atkinson suggests that it may have something to do with the repetitive and formulaic nature of such formats, which endow an assertion with heightened emphasis and prominence. These same qualities may also make formatted assertions more readily retrievable from memory (cf., Havelock, 1963). Such for-

⁷ The form of Bentsen's third assertion does not precisely mirror the first two assertions, each of which begins with *I*. This departure in form has certain strategic advantages. If he had preserved the pattern by saying "I was Jack Kennedy's friend," the result would have been an assertion about Kennedy's perspective rather than his own. Such an assertion would not be verifiable and would thus be vulnerable to attack. Hence, Bentsen veers away from the developing pattern just enough to avoid these potential difficulties.

mats also tend to be readily understandable without much elaboration, making them self-sufficient and hence easily extractable.

The Studio Audience Reaction

The audience responded to Bentsen's attack with a mixture of applause, cheering, booing, and jeering, although applause audibly predominates over the other responses. The fact that there was some audience response enhances the prominence of this episode, because the audience remained silent through most of the debate. Excluding isolated claps or laugh particles, there were only 41 audience responses during the entire 90-minute debate, so that on average the audience responded only once every 2 or 3 minutes. About a third of these occurred at points where a candidate was winding down and completing an extended turn at talk, places where applause regularly occurred regardless of the substance of what was said. Other than these semiobligatory end-of-turn responses, most of what the candidates had to say received no significant audience response. Against this backdrop, the reaction to Bentsen's remark—which occurred early on in his rebuttal of Quayle—endows that remark with a special prominence. The reaction provides tangible evidence that the remark was taken by the studio audience to be unusually compelling.

Furthermore, this particular response stands out because of its length. Applause episodes within a speech typically last for about 7–9 seconds (Atkinson, 1984a, pp. 25–31). This regularity has a normative character, so that longer episodes of applause are hearably strong or enthusiastic. Bentsen's applause lasted for very nearly 16 seconds, which is twice the normal length, and which turned out to be the longest and most enthusiastic response episode in the entire debate (excluding responses to the closing statements). In addition to enhancing the conspicuousness of "You're no Jack Kennedy," this unusually lengthy response makes the remark particularly attractive to broadcast journalists because of its extractability. The response constitutes, in effect, a sizable buffer zone which facilitates the task of editing the segment into sound bites.

The Candidates' Reactions

Bentsen's remark also elicited strong reactions from the candidates themselves, reactions which were argumentative in character. After the applause died down, Quayle countered with "That was really uncalled for, Senator" (see Figure 1, line 28). This in turn led Bentsen to retort, "You're the one that was making the comparison., Senator . . . I did not think the comparison was well taken" (lines 32–37).

It is not at all unusual, in a debate, for candidates to react argumentatively to one another's comments. However, these particular responses are distinctive because what is at issue is the fundamental propriety of Bentsen's remark. Quayle does not merely disagree with Bentsen's assertion; he objects to it, treats it as improper, and in effect sanctions Bentsen for having said it. And Bentsen, in turn, defends himself by questioning the propriety of Quayle's original Kennedy comparison. As a consequence, the initial exchange has become

topicalized and elevated to the level of a moral issue by the candidates themselves.

Furthermore, these reactions embody many of the same features that made the original remark newsworthy and quotable. They are verbal attacks, directly addressed, and Quayle's retort is applauded. This may explain why many early debate stories excerpted Bentsen's "no Jack Kennedy" line together with the ensuing reactions. Bentsen's remark touched off an intensely combative exchange which not only treated the initial remarks as a moral issue, but was highly newsworthy in its own right.

The Moment Lives On

Bentsen's remark has survived far beyond the original circumstances of the debate and news coverage of it. Bentsen recently observed that he should have copyrighted the line (Reuters, 1992), and for good reason. Once journalists had cast it as the defining moment of the debate, it subsequently became a resource and an object of contention for the candidates and their partisan supporters. Bentsen referred to the incident repeatedly in stump speeches, and his supporters disrupted Quayle rallies carrying signs emblazoned with versions of the "You're no Jack Kennedy" line. Quayle and his colleagues (including President Reagan) attacked it as an unwarranted cheap shot. This, in turn, led Bentsen to defend and justify his use of the line. All of this discourse concerning the incident provided weeks of grist for the news mill.

Even after the election, the line continued to be replayed. A NEXIS data bank search on the phrase *You're no Jack Kennedy* for the years 1989 through 1993 yielded 155 television, newspaper, magazine, and wire service items in which this expression has appeared. This search only captured reports that quote or replay the line verbatim, omitting those that merely paraphrase or refer to the incident, and yet the number is substantial. However, the extract is not evenly distributed over time. As the yearly breakdown in Figure 3 indicates, it crops up disproportionately in 1992. In part, this is explained by the Bush-Quayle campaign for re-election and Quayle's participation in another vice presidential debate, events which made the topic of his 1988 debate performance salient. Indeed, the incident was often recalled as a benchmark against which to assess Quayle's performance in the 1992 debate with Al Gore.

More generally, the new round of debates led many journalists and commentators to reflect on the problems of recent campaign debates in the electoral process. In this context, "You're no Jack Kennedy" served to epitomize various problematic characteristics of debates as they had previously been handled: that news coverage tends to focus on memorable one-liners rather than substantive issues, that this in turn encourages candidates to frame their remarks in such terms, thus trivializing the political process, and so forth. Some of these themes have been touched upon in the present paper. Indeed, I have used "You're no Jack Kennedy" in a similar way: as the apotheosis, not merely of the

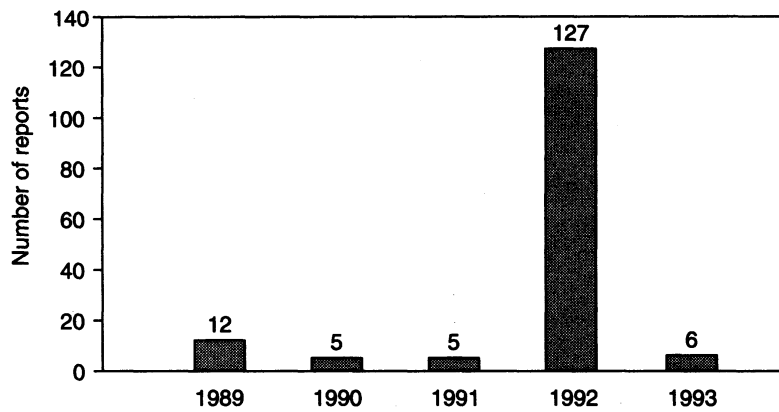


Figure 3. Media reports quoting or replaying “You’re no Jack Kennedy”

1988 contest, but of the entire run of modern-day campaign debates and the manner in which they have been covered and remembered. Hence, this paper simultaneously analyzes extract selection and defining moment processes while reflexively contributing to those selfsame processes in the world of academic discourse.

The incident is also quoted and replayed in other nondebate circumstances as well, not only by reporters but by a variety of public officials, celebrities, and others in popular culture. Understanding this process requires that the principle of narrative relevance introduced earlier be broadened and generalized. Just as narrative relevance is a prerequisite for initial news coverage, survival beyond that point requires that a remark be relevant and adaptable to other discursive and interactional purposes. Thus, while the Bentsen-Quayle incident initially served to define the original 1988 debate, it has also become detached from that event and is invoked for other rhetorical ends. It is now employed to exemplify, epitomize, or otherwise define a wide range of phenomena. What follows are some of the more prominent uses to which this moment has been put.

Defining the Careers of Bentsen and Quayle

Since the election, journalists have continued to make use of the You’re no Jack Kennedy incident when discussing the larger career trajectories of the Bentsen and Quayle. The incident is often recalled in stories profiling either Bentsen or Quayle, where it is juxtaposed with other biographical events exemplifying a pattern of political fortunes. For Bentsen, the pattern is almost always one of increasing stature, and the You’re no Jack Kennedy incident is often cited to exemplify and in some instances to explain his growing political clout. For example, as the 1992 election was approaching, one journalist invoked the incident to explain why Democratic partisans were encouraging Bentsen to make a run for the presidency.

In Texas, the elderly Senator Lloyd Bentsen is being pressed to stand in again, on the basis of his sterling vice-presidential run four years ago, when he crushed his counterpart Dan Quayle in a TV debate with the line: "Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy." (Walker, 1992, p. 21)

For Quayle, the pattern is almost always one of continuing political difficulties, and this incident is typically cited along with a litany of others to exemplify his ongoing troubles. For example,

. . . the formerly little-noticed Senator has been through the political equivalent of a torture chamber. Only hours after the choice of Quayle was announced, controversy erupted over his background, especially his avoidance of the war in Vietnam and his qualifications to be a heartbeat away from the presidency. The questions were exacerbated by Quayle's performance in the vice presidential debate with Senator Lloyd Bentsen. [Cut to a sound bite of Bentsen in the debate] I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy. (Educational Broadcasting and GWETA, 1989)

Thus, despite efforts by Quayle and his supporters to argue that Bentsen's line was an unwarranted cheap shot, the incident is usually treated as indicative of Bentsen's strength and Quayle's weakness. For journalists seeking to depict their divergent career trajectories, "You're no Jack Kennedy" provides a handy resource.

Defining the Kennedy Mystique

The incident is also useful as an illustration of what is sometimes referred to as the Kennedy mystique—the nation's continuing fascination with the life and presidency of John Kennedy. One manifestation of that mystique is the tendency for many politicians to present themselves as Kennedyesque, resulting in an ongoing battle between Republicans seeking to appropriate Kennedy's legacy and Democrats seeking to preserve that legacy as their own. The Bentsen-Quayle episode neatly encapsulates that whole process, and it is often cited as such. For example:

In this 25th year after his death, the handsome young leader still sets a political mark for Democrats and Republicans. Vice President-elect Dan Quayle sought to compare himself favorably during the campaign to John Fitzgerald Kennedy and was stung when his opponent, Sen. Lloyd Bentsen of Texas, scolded: "You're no Jack Kennedy." (Horrock, 1988, p. C1)

Not surprisingly, stories in which "You're no Jack Kennedy" was used in this way were clustered around the 25th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination, when the topic of his legacy became journalistically salient.

Defining Other Interactional Incidents

The incident has also been used analogically, to convey the sense of wholly unrelated incidents that may have a similar interactional dynamic. For example, consider an article about Representative Joseph P. Kennedy II, the two-term congressman from Boston (Mandel, 1989). The author points out that the Democratic leadership in Congress repeatedly denied him membership on important committees. To elaborate on the meaning of this snub, the author compares it to Bentsen's well-known snub of Quayle—just as Bentsen demolished Quayle by asserting “You're no Jack Kennedy,” “today the Democrats seem to be saying much the same thing to young Joe” (Mandel, p. 23).

The Bentsen-Quayle incident is also used to elucidate incidents which are unrelated to politics. For instance, the rock group U2 once received a scathing review in which they were accused of trying to assume the mantle of various rock legends, including the Beatles. In recalling this review, one journalist noted that it was “reminiscent of Lloyd Bentsen's you're-no-Jack-Kennedy line against Dan Quayle” (Hilburn, 1988, p. 80).

Finally, such analogies also crop up in fictional contexts. A recent episode of the television series *Seinfeld* provides a case in point. When *Seinfeld*'s friend George was recounting a particularly embarrassing encounter he had experienced, he likened his own facial expression at the time to Quayle's the moment after Bentsen's zinger.

Across these examples, the texture of an interactional incident is elucidated by reference to the well-known Bentsen-Quayle clash. It would be much more difficult to provide audience members with a feel for the incident by other descriptive means. But because “You're no Jack Kennedy” is available as a general cultural reference point, it provides a concise way of characterizing, in terms that will resonate with the audience, any number of other incidents.

Commemorative Usages

One recurrent journalistic story genre is the review of quotable quotes over the course of some naturally bounded period of time—most commonly, the campaign, year, or decade. “You're no Jack Kennedy” appeared in more than a dozen stories of this sort, juxtaposed with other memorable quotations of the period. It is also featured in a museum exhibit of television campaign material (Lovece, 1992), and in a book of political quotations (Baker, 1990: 147). In such contexts, the incident is no longer used to define any particular person or event; it is used to commemorate the rhetoric of some large-scale historical era.

The Rhetorical Form as a Resource

This remark has become so famous that its underlying rhetorical form is now a resource for doing things. Lloyd Bentsen did not invent the form *you're no person x*, but it is now closely associated with his 1988 debate performance, and the encompassing list-contrast structure *I served with person x, etc.* is highly distinctive and indelibly linked to that event. This rhetorical form, or segments of

example, after Quayle repeatedly attacked “the cultural elite,” some critics compared him to Nixon’s Vice President Spiro Agnew. Asked about the Agnew analogy, he said:

The President talked to me about that the other day. He said, “Dan, I knew Spiro Agnew. Spiro Agnew was a friend of mine. And you’re no Spiro Agnew.” (in Lippman, 1992, p. A9)

However, more than innocent modesty is being accomplished here. Because Quayle draws upon the rhetoric of the opposition in a self-deprecating manner, he manages to disarm the original attack. One journalist, commenting on a joke of this sort, observed that Quayle had apparently come to grips with Bentsen’s remark (Ball, 1992).

These observations explain why, among politicians, it is often Republicans who continue to use the *you’re no person x* format. Such borrowings can in a sense domesticate what was once a vicious creature of the opposition, and in some instances (e.g., Reagan’s “You’re no Thomas Jefferson”) they enable Republicans to give Democrats a taste of their own medicine.

A Note on Normalization

As Bentsen’s remark has been adapted for various purposes, it has also been reduced and simplified in subtle ways. Many renderings include only the climactic “You’re no Jack Kennedy” line. While others also include the elaborate lead-in, it often appears in a slightly reduced form. A common pattern has been to omit Bentsen’s first assertion while preserving the rest of his remark, thereby transforming it from a four-part list of items to a three-part list. For example,

In the 1988 debate, Quayle invoked the name of President John F. Kennedy and Bentsen answered, “Senator, I knew Jack Kennedy. He was a friend of mine. And Senator, you’re no Jack Kennedy.” (Ball, 1992)

Both quotations and sound bites appear in this reduced three-part form, and since 1992 they have become almost as common as fuller four-part versions in the media.

This pattern may reflect a more general tendency for quotations to be normalized, that is, rendered as slightly more typical in form than the original expression.⁸ Since lists are prototypically three items long and are expectably complete after the third item (Atkinson, 1984a, 1984b; Jefferson, 1990), Bent-

⁸ This possibility was suggested by John Heritage during a 1986 colloquium at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He noted that while Emile Durkheim’s theory of suicide originally consisted of four distinct types, he wrote less about the fourth type (fatalistic), and is generally remembered as the author of a tripartite theory of suicide. Similarly, Churchill’s original remark that “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat” is now often reduced to the three-part “blood, sweat, and tears.”

sen's original remark can be regarded as slightly overbuilt, and successive replayings have normalized its length. A similar pattern of reduction toward the canonical three-part form has occurred in instances discussed previously where the underlying format has been appropriated as a resource. Recall Reagan's attack on Clinton: "I knew Thomas Jefferson/He was a friend of mine/And Governor, you're no Thomas Jefferson." More recently, when President Clinton chose Robert Rubin to succeed Lloyd Bentsen as treasury secretary, he used a three-part parody of Bentsen's remark to praise Rubin at a December 6, 1994, press conference: "I know Lloyd Bentsen/Lloyd Bentsen is a friend of mine/And Bob Rubin will be a worthy successor to Lloyd Bentsen."

It is probably not coincidental that the item omitted from Bentsen's original four-part list is almost always the first item. Bentsen's first assertion (I served with) proposes an impersonal professional relationship, while the second (I knew) and third (a friend of mine) propose increasing degrees of intimacy. Hence the first assertion is the most expendable part of Bentsen's original remark, the part that may be jettisoned with minimal loss of rhetorical power.

There are additional normalizing changes worthy of note. In some of the preceding examples, the second assertion begins with a pronoun instead of a repetition of the full proper name, and the third assertion is prefaced with *and*. These features diverge from Bentsen's original remark, but they are highly commonplace practices in the construction of lists.

In summary, the present case suggests that certain remarks survive in the media over time by virtue of their formal rhetorical properties and their practical utility. Once they become widely known, such remarks serve as general cultural reference points whose substance or underlying form can be invoked for various rhetorical purposes. In the course of successive replayings, the sense of the original incident inevitably evolves: its wording may become streamlined, and its meaning particularized, modified, and at times subverted. At the same time, however, it persists as a feature of the cultural landscape.

Political Consequences

Defining moment coverage undoubtedly affects what people remember about the original interactional event, although this effect varies for different segments of the audience (Lang & Lang, 1989). For those who watched the entire debate, memories of the You're no Jack Kennedy incident should be retained longer and more vividly, whereas other aspects of the debate should tend to fade or be forgotten. For those who did not see the original event, media coverage should generate an even more circumscribed understanding of what took place.

Furthermore, recent agenda-setting research (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) would suggest that the intensive focus on this particular incident will also have persuasive consequences. Coverage should heighten the perceived importance of this moment, and this should in turn affect the criteria that audience members use

to evaluate the candidates' performances and to judge who won and who lost. Consistent with this argument, studies of the second Carter-Ford debate in 1976 indicate that the extensive commentary on Ford's Eastern Europe gaffe made it the most memorable and salient remark in that debate. As a result, the percentage of the public perceiving Carter to be the winner increased significantly in the days following the debate as the defining-moment coverage took its toll (Sears & Chaffee, 1979). Studies of reactions to the Bentsen-Quayle debate reveal a similar trajectory of rising public perceptions of Bentsen as the victor (Lemert, Elliott, Bernstein, Rosenberg, & Nestvold, 1991, pp. 143–168).

However, these persuasive effects do not automatically follow from the sheer fact of intensive coverage. Such effects undoubtedly depend, at least in part, on how journalists actually portray and interpret the incident in question. If "You're no Jack Kennedy" ultimately benefitted Bentsen, was there anything about the media's treatment of this incident that may have contributed to the asymmetrical outcome?

In some respects, the coverage was scrupulously evenhanded. Spin doctors for both sides were equally represented. Democratic sources criticized Quayle for overreaching in attempting to assume Kennedy's mantle, and they praised Bentsen for properly putting Quayle in his place. Republicans argued that Quayle was making a narrow point about his level of experience vis à vis Kennedy; hence, they defended Quayle's Kennedy comparison as factually accurate and appropriate, and criticized Bentsen's remark as an uncalled-for cheap shot. Thus, when consulting sources for commentary and analysis, a high degree of balance was sustained.

However, journalists' own independent analyses tended to cast the incident as a triumph for Bentsen. Moreover, when it came to simply reproducing the incident in quotations and sound bites, at least some of the excerpts were rendered in a way that may have benefitted Bentsen over Quayle. While many debate stories excerpted the entire exchange—including Quayle's Kennedy comparison, Bentsen's remark, and the various reactions—others excerpted only the distinctively quotable "You're no Jack Kennedy." As a result, Quayle's precipitating action, if it was discussed at all, tended to be summarily characterized rather than rendered verbatim.

This focus on Bentsen's remark works to his advantage. Since that remark is clearly a reaction to something Quayle had said, quoting it in isolation can create the impression that Quayle had actually done what Bentsen is attacking him for; it can lead readers to infer retrospectively that Quayle was in fact guilty of trying to assume Kennedy's mantle. In some cases, Quayle's action was summarily characterized in ways that further encouraged this interpretation, implying that Quayle had likened himself to Kennedy in a general way. For example,

... in the debate's most dramatic moment, [Bentsen] countered Quayle's attempt to liken himself to the late President John F. Kennedy by telling him, "Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy." (Shogan, 1988b, p. 116; emphasis added)

"The moment everyone is going to remember about this debate is that moment when Dan Quayle was waxing eloquent about comparisons between himself and John Kennedy, and Lloyd Bentsen said, 'Just a minute here, cut it out. You're not John Kennedy,'" said CBS correspondent Bob Schiffer. (Rosenstiel, 1988, p. 125; emphasis added)

In effect, this way of portraying the incident favors the interpretation of the situation offered by Bentsen and his supporters: that Quayle was trying to cloak himself in Kennedy's aura, that he had thus overreached, and that Bentsen responded appropriately. Correspondingly, it undermines Quayle's perspective: that he had compared himself to Kennedy only on the narrow issue of their respective years in office, that his comparison was factually accurate, and that therefore Bentsen's response was uncalled for.

It might be tempting to see this as evidence for the thesis that U. S. journalists are biased toward the liberal-Democratic side of the American political spectrum (Lichter, Rothman, & Lichter, 1986). However, the liberal bias thesis fails to explain the large number of stories that reproduce the exchange fully and accurately. Even for the cases cited above, other explanations are equally plausible: The brevity of a quotation may result from an essentially pragmatic, albeit sloppy, decision guided by the need to tell the story as quickly and concisely as possible. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that seemingly minor editorial decisions can have significant political consequences.

Quotability, Collective Memory, and Culture

It is now widely recognized that a society's cultural heritage, as that heritage becomes inscribed in collective memory, is in many respects a social construct.⁹ The mass media clearly play a central role in this process, in part by selectively preserving synecdochic quotations and sound bites which come to epitomize the events from which they are drawn. We have been exploring how this process worked in relation to a particular debate event. However, this analysis is generally applicable to campaign debates and, presumably, other interactional events in the public sphere such as speeches, press conferences, and the like. Because many such events lack a predetermined climax, media accounts tend to converge on certain conspicuous and extractable moments, particularly those deemed relevant to established journalistic story lines.

For the case of the Bentsen-Quayle debate, these generic selectional principles led diverse journalists to converge on a single defining moment. However, these same principles can result in very different patterns of coverage depending on how the debate in question is perceived. The second Bush-Dukakis debate, also from 1988, provides an appropriate contrast. That debate was seen

⁹ This insight may be traced to Halbwachs (1950) and Mead (1929). For examples of empirical research on the construction of core societal memories, see Schudson (1992) and Schwartz (1987, 1991a, 1991b). Studies focusing on the role of the mass media in this process include Lipsitz (1990) and Zelizer (1992).

as a clear victory for Bush, although no single moment stood out. Consequently, network news stories were more numerous and more variable in depicting Dukakis' "missed opportunities" and Bush's generally "superior performance." Accordingly, debate coverage varies, not because the principles of extract selection change, but because the events themselves are perceived as differing in ways that bear on considerations of narrative relevance, conspicuousness, and extractability.

The significance of journalistic extract selection extends beyond the forging of synecdochic collective memories; it can also affect ongoing processes of discourse and social interaction. Widely excerpted remarks become common cultural reference points which can be recurrently invoked and used to accomplish diverse practical activities. News excerpts thus enlarge the cultural "tool kit" (Swidler, 1986) or reservoir of resources for the conduct of social life

However, many quotations do not survive beyond the confines of initial news coverage; only a few have a substantial life span. There are a variety of factors which could in principle figure in the persistence of certain remarks. One factor is cultural resonance: a quote is more apt to survive if it resonates with established cultural themes (cf., Schudson, 1989, pp. 167–171). This factor is undoubtedly significant; John Kennedy is a potent cultural symbol. However, Bentsen's overall sentiment does not easily fit within any of the thematic categories typically found in dictionaries of quotations. Indeed, its lack of aphoristic resonance seems to have inhibited the scope of its survival, so that it appears disproportionately in a limited range of discursive contexts.

Another factor is rhetorical form (Atkinson, 1984a, pp. 124–163): a quote is more apt to survive if it is expressed in a compelling way. As we have seen, the list-contrast structure of Bentsen's remark, culminating in the litotes formulation, makes it both forceful and memorable. Indeed, this underlying form has been appropriated independently of its content, so that the form has quite literally taken on a life of its own.

There is a third factor, perhaps not adequately appreciated, which centers on the utility of a quote. Some remarks survive not simply because of their resonant content or their rhetorical form, but also because of what they can be used to do. "You're no Jack Kennedy" was initially a resource for journalists covering the debate, but later on it was adapted by diverse social actors pursuing various discursive and interactional purposes. Accordingly, some quotable quotes persist in part because of the range and variety of tasks that they may be used to perform.

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