

The Inside Story of Ferraro's 1984 Debate Prep

By Ben W. Heineman Jr.



The moment of truth for vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro was her debate against George H.W. Bush on October 11, 1984.

How would she, a three-term member of Congress, stand up against the man who had been ambassador to China and the U.N, headed the CIA, and for the previous four years served as vice president of the United States?

The high command at the headquarters of presidential candidate Walter Mondale may have been worried. Her own campaign staff may have been concerned. But one person was utterly self-confident: the candidate herself.

I was fortunate to have worked closely with Geraldine Ferraro on this historic debate. In mid-September of 1984, the Mondale campaign asked Anne Wexler (former senior advisor to President Carter) and Bob Barnett (former Mondale Senate staffer and already a leading Washington lawyer) to organize a debate team to work with candidate Ferraro. As a former

Department of Health, Education and Welfare assistant secretary for lost causes (planning and evaluation), I was asked to co-head domestic affairs prep with Rob Liberatore, then chief of staff to Minority Leader Robert Byrd. Madeleine Albright, former member of the National Security Council under Zbigniew Brezinski and then at Georgetown University, was the lead on foreign policy.

Rarely have so few had so much fun in so short a time under so much pressure (Mondale was behind, but with presidential debates ahead, anything could happen -- unless the vice presidential debate was a Democratic disaster). And, of course, this was because Gerry Ferraro was a tough, smart, savvy, fearless, funny woman who was totally authentic -- there was no difference between the public person and the private person. She knew she was carrying the hopes of women everywhere, and she thrived on the chance to make a powerful statement.

My first encounter with the candidate was on a Sunday afternoon about two weeks before the debate when Bob Barnett and I lugged two huge briefing books to her home in Queens. The debate team had vacuumed the universe on all imaginable issues, and we had produced enough indigestible material to choke a PhD candidate preparing for oral exams. Gerry was watching a Jets game, calling out for her husband John to bring us coffee and petting her dog (which as I recall, though I could be wrong, was a large black lab). She greeted us warmly but regarded our briefing materials with appropriate disdain -- a view shared by the dog which, with tail wagging, put his head on our multi-tabbed work product to have his ears rubbed and slobbered all over them. "Perhaps you could reduce this to essential points and responses," the candidate said with an equable smile as we slunk out the door, lugging our rejected offerings.

When serious trial debates began a short while later, Gerry Ferraro showed a remarkable ability to assimilate information on a wide variety of subjects and then to articulate her position in a concise form in her own common sense way. She needed grist for her mill, but she didn't need handlers. With each session, we could see her appetite was whetted and that she was savoring the chance to go up against the vice president.

But just as memorable as the honing of positions was the bantering, self-deprecating atmosphere. One of Gerry Ferraro's wonderful qualities was to keep everyone loose and not take herself too seriously (even as she knew the importance of the coming confrontation in the Philadelphia Civic Center).

Bob Barnett, who played Bush in the mock debates, showed up with a colored cloth preppy wristband for his watch. Ferraro developed her own outrageous mock answers which she would slip into serious practice sessions. She told her team that she planned to walk on stage, kiss the vice president on the lips and call him "Poppy." And during the run-up to the debates, when it came out that the Ferraros had substantial net worth and several houses, Barbara Bush remarked that Geraldine Ferraro was a "four million dollar.... I won't say it but it rhymes with rich." Mrs. Bush later "clarified" that she meant "witch." Inside the studio, Ms. Ferraro did a number of riffs about herself (and others who shall go unnamed) on words that also rhymed with rich, always with great good humor.

The debate itself showed that Gerry Ferraro's self-confidence was well-founded. With poise, humor and substance, she went toe-to-toe with the vice president for 90 minutes.

Afterwards, instant polls showed the debate a draw, and that was the view of many other commentators. But a draw for a three-term congresswoman against someone with Bush's vaunted resume.....

The most famous line of the debate, of course, was Geraldine Ferraro's. The vice president began an answer by saying: "Let me help you with the difference, Ms. Ferraro, between Iran and the embassy in Lebanon." To which the first woman national candidate in American history replied: "Let me first of all say that I almost resent, Vice President Bush, your patronizing attitude that you have to teach me about foreign policy." This was the debate clip shown the day after -- and to this day.

In the years after, I would see Gerry Ferraro at this occasion or that. I had only worked for her for a couple of weeks in a minor role, but she was always warm and enthusiastic and full of that smart, savvy humor which she displayed so unfailingly during the debate episode. Like so many who knew her so much better, I will greatly miss this pioneer in American politics.

After the debate was over, Vice President Bush remarked into a still open mic that he had "kicked a little ass." Given the expectations before the debate, I felt, along with so many others, that it was actually the other way round.

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