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Keywords
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Abstract
For George H. W. Bush and Ronald Reagan, the debate in Nashua, New Hampshire marked a crossroads in their respective bids for the 1980 Republican presidential nomination. A month earlier, Bush had emerged from a seven-man field by upsetting Reagan in the Iowa caucuses. Reagan had run a relaxed and aloof campaign in Iowa. At the behest of Campaign Manager John Sears and most senior staff, Reagan had refused even to participate in a candidates’ debate on grounds that debates were bad for party unity. Iowa voters responded by giving Bush a small plurality in their caucuses on January 21. Reagan’s failure in Iowa had knocked conventional wisdom on the Republican race into a cocked hat. Before Iowa, his own polls showed him with a 19-point lead among New Hampshire Republicans. Five days after the caucuses Reagan was six points behind him an falling. [excerpt]

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That Defining Moment: The 1980 Nashua Debate

Michael J. Birkner

Nashua was the battle that lost the war
To Reagan and the Gang of Four
—Lyrics by Jerry TerHorst
and David Broder

Jim Lake knew the plan would go forward when Nancy Reagan signed on.

It was noon on Saturday, Feb. 23, 1980, three days before the New Hampshire primary. Ronald Reagan was sitting on a bed, phone in hand, at his hotel suite just across the state line in Massachusetts. Reagan was talking with a supporter, trying to raise money. Nancy Reagan was applying her lipstick when Lake — the Reagan campaign’s press secretary — knocked on the door and burst into the room, press release in hand.

Hurriedly composed that morning, the release announced a twist to a scheduled debate with George Bush that evening in Nashua. Lake needed Reagan’s approval before releasing it to the media.

As Reagan talked on the phone, the press secretary handed a copy of the release to Mrs. Reagan and described its content. It announced Reagan’s desire to include in the Nashua debate all of the active Republican candidates for president. This was directly contrary to the original agreement that the event would be one-on-one, Reagan versus Bush.

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Nancy Reagan read the release with approval. "I think that's just great," she said "I know Ronnie will love this too." They waited impatiently for Reagan to get off the phone, to discuss the change with him. Mrs. Reagan finally had to keep an appointment. Nodding at Lake, she took the release, walked over to her husband, poked him and kissed him goodbye. Pointing to Lake and the release, she said, "I agree, I agree." And she left.

When the candidate got off the phone, he turned to Lake and said, "I don't know what you're selling, Jim, but whatever it is, you sure have sold my wife."

Reagan then briefly examined the paper he held and nodded his assent.

For Bush and Reagan, the debate in Nashua marked a crossroads in their respective bids for the 1980 Republican presidential nomination.

A month earlier, Bush had emerged from a seven-man field by upsetting Reagan in the Iowa caucuses. Reagan had run a relaxed and aloof campaign in Iowa. At the behest of Campaign Manager John Sears and most senior staff, Reagan had refused even to participate in a candidates' debate on grounds that debates were bad for party unity. Iowa voters responded by giving Bush a small plurality in their caucuses on Jan. 21.

Reagan's failure in Iowa had knocked conventional wisdom on the Republican race into a cocked hat. Before Iowa, his own polls showed him with a 19-point lead among New Hampshire Republicans. Five days after the caucuses, Reagan was six points behind him and falling.

After telling an ethnic joke to reporters on a bus rolling through New Hampshire, Reagan lost seven more points, according to a Richard Wirthlin poll. George Bush seemed to be within striking distance of front-runner status and, with a solid victory in New Hampshire, perhaps a lock on the Republican nomination.

The debate scheduled for Nashua on Feb. 23 was part of a broader bid by Reagan's team to stem Bush's momentum, or "The Big Mo" Bush repeatedly crowed about.
Two days after the Iowa upset, Reagan's inner circle met in Chicago and decided to revamp their approach. There would be no coronation march for Ronald Reagan. "We had to face the facts," Lake recalls. "We'd blown it in Iowa. And we had to figure out how we'd pull ourselves up in New Hampshire."

They decided to have Reagan campaign strenuously in New Hampshire. Reagan would meet the public in the time-honored tradition, by shaking hands, talking over coffee, attending forums and meeting with editors and DJs. He would also participate in joint sessions with other candidates. Most critically, Reagan would challenge Bush to a head-to-head debate.

Jim Lake claims the idea of a two-man debate. He says he felt that regardless of the result in New Hampshire, it would cement the two-man race concept in voters' minds. And he was convinced that Reagan could not ultimately lose to George Bush.

The others who met in Chicago quickly agreed, though one member of the inner circle, Charles Black, was skeptical the Bush campaign would "bite off on that." Said Lake: "Leave it to me."

Reagan's New Hampshire chairman, Gerald Carmen, also doubted that Bush would accept a head-to-head matchup. But Carmen and the rest of Reagan's advisers felt it was worth a try. As Carmen recalls, "we needed the debate."

The Bush Strategy

Late in January, Lake and Carmen spoke frequently with Bush's New Hampshire campaign chairman, Hugh Gregg, trying to persuade him that the debate made sense for both sides.

In fact, the Bush campaign did not need its arm twisted too vigorously. It had several compelling reasons to accept a debate with Reagan.

First, a debate could strengthen the perception that it was a two-man race among voters who might otherwise choose one of the other alternatives to Reagan: Senators Howard Baker and Bob Dole, Representatives John Anderson and Philip M. Crane, and former Texas governor John Connally.

A direct debate with Reagan offered a way of bringing the lesser-
known Bush into clear relief as Reagan’s equal in poise and knowledge of issues. Not least, it could highlight the difference between Reagan’s age (69) and Bush’s (51). “We thought it was the best thing since sliced bread,” Bush Campaign Manager Jim Baker recalled.

Bush could not have known that the encounter with Ronald Reagan in Nashua would have a very different impact — an impact devastating to his own presidential campaign. His first mistake lay in accepting the challenge to debate. But it was not his, or his backers’, last one.

The Interlude

In the month between the idea and the execution of the twoman debate, Reagan began putting his campaign back on track. He had a solid organization in New Hampshire, headed by the canny Carmen.

Because the Reagan national staff was paralyzed by infighting between a faction led by Reagan’s California crony Ed Meese and another led by campaign manager Sears, Carmen had exceptional latitude to do what he felt needed doing. Believing it was “do or die” in New Hampshire, Carmen decided to “go for broke.”

He felt reassured by the Union Leader’s energetic support and massive coverage of Reagan, coupled with publisher William Loeb’s negative coverage of Bush. Carmen also knew he had a large and enthusiastic cadre of activists. Perhaps most important, he had a candidate who was not only willing to work hard but who also pleased voters everywhere he went.

Time magazine offered a snap-shot of Reagan on the hustings in New Hampshire. On a campaign bus driving through a heavy snow, Reagan joked about the “next leg” of the trip being “done by sled.” Typically, Reagan would stop at a meeting place, give a short speech from 4-by-6-inch cards, followed by a question-and-answer session. Time reported: “He loves to roll words around and test out lines, noting and then repeating at the next stop whichever ones get the loudest laughs or applause.”

As the primary drew closer, almost all observers perceived that Reagan was addressing bigger, more appreciative crowds wherever
he went. Not unnoticed by his aides, Reagan was steadily regaining the ground he'd lost to Bush.

For his part, Bush's "incessant braggadocio" about his Iowa victory, according to one news weekly, and his failure to talk specifics, according to another, put his own campaign into a lower gear. The numbers were changing, and the changes did not favor Bush.

By primary week, Bush's once commanding lead in New Hampshire had slipped to between 4 and 10 points, according to most newspaper polls. Reagan's rise in these polls put a different face on the one-on-one debate planned for shortly before the primary. Carmen put the situation in a nutshell: "We didn't need [the debate] anymore," he told Concord Cablevision interviewer John Groener.

The Risk Factor

With debates, moreover, comes risk. As Jim Lake has recalled "whenever you put Ronald Reagan in front of a crowd without a prepared script, you've gotta hold your breath."

After a forum in Manchester on Feb. 20, in which all the candidates participated (and in which even his staffers agreed that Reagan had seemed off stride), pollster Richard Wirthlin let Sears and company in on some startling news.

According to an account published after the New Hampshire primary by David Broder of the Washington Post, Wirthlin found that 37 percent of the Republican voters had seen or heard about the Manchester forum, and a substantial plurality thought Reagan had performed best of the six candidates.

Equally important, almost twice as many respondents thought that Reagan, not Bush, had won the debate. Overall in the GOP electorate, Reagan had closed a once formidable 13-point gap to 2 points.

"I knew at that point," Wirthlin told Broder, "that we would win it."

The knowledge that Reagan was pulling even with Bush changed the entire complexion of the one-on-one debate scheduled for Nashua.

Carmen was having heartburn just thinking about it. What
seemed like a great idea three weeks earlier now seemed like exactly what he did not want to happen. Carmen’s discomfort was intensified by the arrangements worked out to hold the debate in Nashua.

Carmen’s sponsor of choice — Foster’s Daily Democrat in Dover — had frustrated him by insisting it would sponsor only an all-candidate forum. That left him no option but to accept an invitation from the Nashua Telegraph. That Nashua was the hometown of Bush chairman Hugh Gregg was bad enough, from Carmen’s perspective. That the Telegraph’s publisher, Herman Pouliot, and its editor, Jon Breen, were Bush supporters made a disagreeable situation worse.

A Critical Error

Reagan’s managers still had cards to play.

Once the Reagan-Bush debate became public knowledge, the other Republican candidates began to complain about being locked out. Dole protested to the Federal Elections Commission that sponsoring a two-man debate was an illegal campaign contribution by the Telegraph to candidates Bush and Reagan. The FEC agreed.

At this point, Gerry Carmen went to the camp and asked them to split the expenses for the debate. The Bush people refused.

Years later, Bush adviser Judd Gregg would laugh ruefully about the “gamesmanship” that backfired on the Bush camp. Bush’s advisers had refused to split the bill because, one writer has noted, “they wanted it made clear that Reagan was desperate to have the two-man debate — which, they felt, would foster the impression that the race had already narrowed to the two candidates alone.”

It was a critical error in judgement. Reagan’s backers quickly agreed to pick up the $3,500 tab, which gave them leverage in the debate they might not otherwise have had. This point was not fully grasped by the Telegraph or the national press until the night of the debate.

The Reagan staff worked over-time during the two days before
Feb. 23, playing out scenarios that might work best for their candidate. They were influenced by phone calls to Sears from Dole and former New Hampshire governor Walter Peterson, who was directing Howard Baker's presidential bid. Both men argued that fairness dictated an open debate.

Dole's press secretary at the time, Bob Waite, has recalled that "Sears was obviously intrigued by the idea. He must have seen it would be to his candidate's advantage to be the fellow calling for the open debate."

In fact, Sears had more in mind than fairness. He later told Stephen Bates: "one of the things you look for in campaigns is an opportunity for your opponent to have to make decisions in public . . . on his feet, on the spot." He added: "That's not unfair in relation to seeking the nomination for president; a president has to do that fairly often. To a certain degree, you try to look for situations where you can assist the occurrence of that."

What Sears had in mind was to throw the Bush campaign off stride by changing the rules of the Nashua debate at the last minute.

11th-Hour Maneuvers

By Saturday — the day of the debate — a rough consensus among the Reagan staff had been reached.

They would contact the other campaigns and invite them to join in the debate. They would encourage the Bush campaign to open the debate to the other candidates. At minimum, Reagan would have fewer chances to err in a larger forum. And if the Bush people responded poorly to the Reagan's request to open the debate up, there was advantage in that too.

Once Reagan signed off on the plan in his hotel room that noon, Sears, Black and Lake began to call the other presidential campaign staffs, inviting them to come to Nashua. All but John Connally, who was campaigning in South Carolina, quickly accepted. "We didn't want to hold a party no one came to," Lake recalls.

Lake began negotiating with the Bush staff and Telegraph editor Jon Breen about the revamped format. He hinted that something
was in the works but did not indicate that they had already invited the other candidates. The *Telegraph* was adamant. It would not change the format.

Lake recalls that this did not end the matter. At Howard Baker's urging, Reagan's managers made one more plea for an open debate. Lake and campaign director Charles Black again approached Jim Baker in the hallway of the classroom area at Nashua High School. When Baker saw them, he stepped forward and shouted: "No! Absolutely not!"

At that point, Lake recalls, the Reagan strategists felt a clear conscience. "We'd given George Bush every chance to do the right thing. After all the 'No-Ways' from the Bush camp, we didn't care what happened, so long as Reagan didn't walk off the stage."

Breen's explanation for the *Telegraph*’s decision was simple: He felt he had a commitment to the "recognized frontrunners" [Bush and Reagan] not to open the debate. Jim Baker of the Bush campaign told Breen he would not oppose opening the debate, but he was not going to try to argue that it be opened. The *Telegraph* held firm.

The situation on the afternoon of Feb. 23 can only be described as volatile. Bush and Breen knew something was cooking on the Reagan side, but they did not know they would be confronted at the Nashua High School gymnasium by five candidates rather than one.

The Reagan camp felt a rush of excitement at the prospect of a major, and probably spontaneous, confrontation, at the high school. It was the staff's responsibility to use what time it had to increase the odds that things would work to Reagan's advantage.

*Briefing Reagan*

Jim Lake rode in the limousine to Nashua with Ronald and Nancy Reagan, explaining as they drove what he thought would happen. "Everyone," he told Reagan, "is going to show up at the school." Lake explained that the *Telegraph* was unlikely to open the debate up, as Reagan sought, and that Bush could not be counted on to call for an open debate either.
"There'll be pressure on you to pull out of the debate," Lake told Reagan. He recalls that "I told him why he shouldn't, and he agreed."

At the high school, each of the camps had its own holding room. In Reagan's, the candidate was again briefed. He would tell the sponsors and the audience that he believed, in fairness, that all the candidates ought to be heard. Above all, Lake told him, stand your ground. Under no circumstances should Reagan walk out, no matter how much his temper might be tried.

As Lake briefed Reagan, the crowd in the gym was building. It included dozens of press people, many of them tipped earlier in the day to the possibility that a big story was brewing. As David Broder would recall in his 1987 book, Behind the Front Page, neither he nor the other journalists on the scene yet appreciated how big a story was brewing.

Shortly before the debate was to commence, John Sears sent a message to Bush asking for a quick meeting. He got Jim Baker instead, and the two had an unsatisfactory exchange. Sears pressed for an open debate; Baker said it was no time to alter anything.

As their brief discussion ended, a door opened and Baker noticed not only Reagan but also the other four candidates gathering backstage. "That was the first time we knew the other candidates were there," Baker recalled. He realized the meeting "would be an ambush."

That did not end the preliminary skirmishing. Yet another Reagan delegation, this one consisting of Lake and Sen. Gordon Humphrey, also tried to persuade Bush to accept an open debate. "If you don't come right now," Humphrey told Bush "you're doing a disservice to party unity."

According to Jack Germond and Jules Witcover, in their campaign book Blue Smoke and Mirrors, Bush was unswayed by this plea. "Don't tell me about unifying the Republican Party," he snapped at Humphrey. I've done more for this party than you'll ever do!" Bush added: "I've worked too hard for this and they're not going to take it away from me."
As Reagan and the other candidates began marching toward the platform, nobody could predict what was going to happen. Lake has recalled that Reagan, who had never been comfortable with the one-on-one debate, was getting increasingly worked up about the Bush camp's refusal to open it up. Carmen and others remember the "tremendous pressure" of the situation and the electricity in the air.

Just what would Bush do when confronted with five rivals, not one? And what would Reagan do if the Telegraph and Bush refused to bend?

Onstage At Nashua

The next 15 minutes in a jammed, overheated Nashua high school gymnasium have entered American political folklore.

Robert Shogan of the Los Angeles Times was one of the many reporters who witnessed the explosive scene that ensued. As he wrote on deadline that night:

"By the time J. Herman Pouliot, publisher of the Telegraph, made his welcoming remarks, the crowd had become restive and raucous. . . . The atmosphere became even more tense when Reagan tried to make a statement explaining his reasons for trying to include the other candidates."

What happened next made for the kind of theater that reporters dream of. As Reagan made his appeal to fairness, the debate moderator Breen, shouted an order to cut off Reagan's microphone. The crowd booed. One man shouted, "Stop these gestapo tactics!"

When Reagan tried to speak again, Breen again demanded that his microphone be shut off. "I paid for this microphone, Mr. Green!" Reagan boomed.

"The roof just blew off the place," Lake recalls.

At this point, the situation was a marked plus for Reagan. It improved further when George Bush froze. Lake recalls that Bush "could have brought things back pretty close to even" had he gotten up from his seat and cheerfully extended a word of welcome to the other candidates. But Bush did not. He remained silent and seated, staring grimly at his notes.
An angry Ronald Reagan looks back at fellow Republicans. Editor Jon Breen is seated, in center. (AP; photo courtesy of Michael Birkner)
Breen, meanwhile, regained the floor, and with Reagan looking increasingly angry, he announced that the other candidates would be allowed to speak only at the end of a 100-minute debate limited to Bush and Reagan.

Lake's heart was in his throat. He could feel the crowd's support for Reagan, but he feared Reagan would squander his advantage by walking off the stage. "I looked at Reagan and saw he was outraged," Lake remembers. "I am saying to myself, he's going to walk off. He just can't do it!"

Galvanized by the moment, Lake walked around the podium to the other side of the stage, all the while trying to get Reagan's eye. "He was looking at Breen, and he was angry." Lake recalls yelling repeatedly at Reagan to get his attention. But amid the tumult he could not be heard.

"I got to where [NBC anchorman] John Chancellor was standing," Lake says. "I said to Chancellor, may I borrow a piece of paper? He got it and wrote these lines: 'Governor, everyone here is with you. You've got to hang in there.' Lake dispatched the paper to a Secret Service man with the instructions to give it to Reagan.

"I'll remember what happened next as long as I live," Lake says.

The paper was delivered to Reagan in the growing din. Most eyes were focused not on Reagan but on Jon Breen, who was explaining the rules of the debate. "Reagan read the paper, then turned three-quarters around, looking over his shoulder, to look for me. And he winked. He knew exactly what he was doing."

Bush was given two minutes to comment before the debate began. He used them to say that an agreement is an agreement and he was not going to ask for any change. The other candidates marched offstage amid whistles and catcalls.

According to one account, as Dole strode past Bush, he stuck his jaw forward and said, "There'll be another day, George Bush."

Bush maintained his silence and, ostensibly, his composure. Reagan stood his ground. He had won this showdown.
The Aftermath

The debate itself was anticlimactic. Virtually nobody can remember a single thing either man said. The nightly news, and all the Sunday network news shows, were dominated by clips of the “I paid for this microphone!” line.

Even without Nashua, Bush may have been heading for a defeat in New Hampshire. But for him, Nashua turned defeat into disaster.

The press was merciless. Hostile commentators like the editors of the Union Leader jumped on Bush for being a “poor sport.” Francis X. Clines in the New York Times suggested that Bush had been “snookered” by the Reagan forces. Elizabeth Drew suggested that Bush had played “the chump.”

In perhaps the most arresting image evoked by the debate, the Boston Globe likened Reagan to a sheriff in a western movie. By implication, Bush was the villain who’d been brought to justice. The Globe did not mention that Reagan’s “I paid for this microphone” line was a close paraphrase of a line uttered by Spencer Tracy in his 1948 film State of the Union.

Reagan’s camp was absolutely jubilant over Bush’s ineptitude and their man’s performance. Carmen jeered that if Bush couldn’t bring peace to a high school, how was he going to bring peace to the planet. Lake recalled that the moment Reagan talked about the microphone, “I knew we had the nomination.”

Hindsight makes such judgments seem simplistic. Far from being rattled by the surprise in the gymnasium, Bush performed well in debate with his main rival. Reagan himself still had to fight Bush through more primaries, several of which Bush won, before the numbers assured a Reagan nomination. Broder’s recent account goes so far as to discount the significance of Nashua.

Broder argues that Reagan already had New Hampshire in his pocket, and the events at Nashua merely iced the cake. He thinks that as a reporter he just did not get or write the full story at the time.

Broder may be too hard on himself and his colleagues in the press. What happened at Nashua was not merely great theater.
It energized the Reagan campaign — as they had not been energized before.

As the *Boston Globe*'s Robert Healy wrote two days after the debate, the debate had “aroused a tiger for Bush to contend with. If Reagan had a problem, it was that he was 69 years old and, more important, he was beginning to act that way in the campaign.”

In a single stroke, Nashua changed that perception of Reagan and set in motion a true political landslide. The last public polls in New Hampshire gave George Bush a slender lead while Reagan’s private polls showed him comfortably ahead.

What happened on Tuesday, Feb. 26, fit neither profile. Reagan won 50 percent of the vote in a field of seven candidates. Bush won 22. Nothing the Bush camp said about being “sandbagged” put a more positive spin on the New Hampshire results for its candidate.

What people remembered then about the Nashua debate — and what they remember today — was a fleeting moment of intense clarity in which an American presidential candidate defined himself to his public. Even as one accepts Lake’s insistence that Reagan’s great line was utterly spontaneous, it must be said that on the night of Feb. 23, 1980, Ronald Reagan began to play out his greatest role.

Thus began the Age of Reagan.