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# BEYOND DEBATES

Some radical ideas for improving America's most important face-off. **BY LEON NEYFAKH**



KYLE T. WEBSTER FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

UNTIL ABOUT THREE WEEKS ago, most Americans had never seen Mitt Romney and Barack Obama in a room together. That's what made the prospect of their debates so exciting: After months of posturing, spinning, and sniping from afar, the two rivals would finally go toe-to-toe, stepping into the ring without a protective shield of advisers.

What actually happened when the candidates met, of course, was more posturing, spinning, and sniping, which is more or less how it goes every election year. Even in their best moments—and there are always a few—presidential debates end up telling us very little about the things we really need to know about our leaders. A president needs to make painful decisions under pressure, negotiate with those who disagree with him, find creative ways through seemingly intractable problems, and delegate with ruthless efficiency. Instead what we learn is how good the candidates are at redeploying their political talking points, or in some cases inventing new ones on the fly.

Presidential debates might seem to have a long, distinguished history in America, harking back to 1858, when Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, competing for a Senate seat in Illinois, argued deeply

and thoughtfully over the most important issues of the day. But the debates we see today are, in fact, almost entirely a product of the TV age—born in 1960, when John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon met in Chicago for a televised back-and-forth that was seen by almost 70 million people, and little changed since then.

Today we still fall back on the same old format: two people in a room, taking turns answering questions and hardly ever addressing each other directly. It's hard to imagine this is the best we can come up with. The debates are—or should be—crucial to our democracy, virtually the only time the candidates appear unscripted before the American people. If we were to design them with only the voters in mind, as opposed to bowing to the demands of campaign officials seeking to protect their candidates from spontaneity, what could we do differently? Ideas asked experts in a variety of fields—from political science to psychology to mixed martial arts—to pretend they were in charge of staging the next confrontation between Romney and Obama, and asked them to imagine what a genuinely useful American presidential showdown might look like.

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## What JFK didn't know

In 1962, did a historian's mistake save the world?

**BY JORDAN MICHAEL SMITH**

**F**OR 13 DAYS in October 1962, President John F. Kennedy faced the task of avoiding Armageddon. American reconnaissance planes had just detected Soviet missiles in San Cristóbal, a city in western Cuba, and the United States was determined to expel them. The Soviets and Cubans were equally determined to keep those weapons in place.

In deciding what to do, Kennedy found himself facing off against his own Joint Chiefs of Staff, who unanimously recommended a full-scale attack and invasion of Cuba, as did other top advisers. Kennedy feared that such an attack would lead to the Soviet Union using nuclear weapons against the United States, to which America would have to respond in kind. Millions, perhaps billions, would be killed.

Desperate for an escape hatch, the president found one in history—more specifically, in a book published earlier that year, Barbara Tuchman's "The Guns of August." In her sweeping account of World War I, which would later win the Pulitzer Prize, Tuchman argued that European leaders slipped into the Great War essentially by mistake. Every country on the continent miscalculated, underestimating the economic and military costs of a potential war, the likelihood of one breaking out, the possibility of a single event spiraling out of control, and their opponents' willingness to fight. No country wanted a continental war, but

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## Kennedy

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they all got one. It became the costliest and most horrifying conflict the world had yet seen, and it was essentially an accident.

To Kennedy, the lesson was clear: Great powers could accidentally slide into war if their leaders were inattentive to the dangers ahead of them, and it was his job to prevent that from happening. “I am not going to follow a course which will allow anyone to write a comparable book about this time [called] ‘The Missiles of October,’” Kennedy told his brother Bobby during the crisis. He wanted to “send a copy of that book to every Navy officer,” he said. JFK made his aides read “The Guns of August” and had copies distributed to every US military base in the world. Quite possibly, Kennedy’s careful reading of the book helped prevent a nuclear war.

Nobody disputes that what Kennedy found in that book was crucial: It helped him step back, appreciate what was truly at stake, and stand up to the generals. “It had a huge impact on his thinking, becoming the dominant metaphor for JFK on the crisis,” says Graham Allison, a Harvard political scientist and the author of “Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis.”

But historians now know something else as well: Barbara Tuchman’s thesis about WWI was wrong. In fact, the war wasn’t the accident she portrayed. Subsequent research in the archives of Imperial Germany has conclusively shown that Germany did want a war, one that would allow it to dominate the continent. Today, “Hardly any scholars accept the Tuchman thesis that WWI was an accidental or inadvertent war,” says John Mearsheimer, a University of Chicago professor.

Kennedy, in other words, pulled the world back from the brink on the basis of a book that misread history. The story of the missile crisis has long been seen as an example of the wise use of history in making decisions. But it also raises a question: If a leader can come to the right decision for the wrong reason, what purpose is history actually serving?

AS LONG AS lawmaking has existed, practitioners have looked to the past for guidance. The ancient Roman statesman Cicero said, “To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child.” Today’s leaders have another 2,200 years of recorded history to look back on—a nearly bottomless trove of human experience. Some history programs have been developed specifically to close the gap between history and lawmaking: The universities of Cambridge and London, for example, recently launched a high-profile program in which academics tutor British politicians on historical events in order to help them formulate policies. American presidents are routinely photographed with history books tucked under their arms.

But “history” is not a single story, devoid of disputes and multiple interpretations. Past events are so complex and so specific to their contexts that they don’t necessarily yield a single correct lesson. As Oxford University historian Yuen Foong Khong wrote in



POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES

President Kennedy during emergency talks with his aides during the Cuban Missile Crisis.



AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The Soviet freighter Anosov carried missiles away from Cuba on Nov. 9, 1962.

his prizewinning book “Analogies at War,” “policymakers may learn the wrong lessons just as frequently as they learn the right lessons.”

Recent history is littered with examples of leaders falling back on history with, at best, mixed results. In making its case for Iraq’s invasion, George W. Bush’s administration often made references to the failure of democracies to confront Hitler earlier than 1939. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in August 2002 said that Hitler’s intentions were always clear but ignored for years. “Well, there were millions of people dead because of the miscalculations,” he said. Critics of the Iraq invasion might suggest that hundreds of thousands are now dead because that parallel itself was a miscalculation. The same analogy was used by Lyndon Johnson: “Surrender in Vietnam [wouldn’t] bring peace,” he said at a 1965 White House press conference, “because we learned from Hitler at Munich that success only feeds

The incident suggests something we might not always want to admit: that the value of history to leaders depends more on who applies it than how well they really grasp the past.

the appetite of aggression.” He chose to escalate the war, which continued for 10 more years.

History also applies in the domestic sphere. Early in his term, President Obama was spotted carrying a book on Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency, which is widely seen as shaping his approach to pursuing health care reform. “When FDR proposed Social Security, all

across what was I guess the equivalent of today’s Internet, right, all the newspapers and the radio shows and all that—he was accused of being a Socialist,” Obama said at a public forum in September 2009. Obama relied on FDR’s example as he withstood the immense criticism that came with his efforts to pass the Affordable Care Act.

To scholars who study the practical uses of history, instances like these suggest a pattern: Policy makers are as likely to use history as a way to validate their preconceptions, or endorse existing plans, as they are to scour it objectively for ideas. Around the time the former Yugoslavia was disintegrating, it was reported that Bill Clinton was reading the journalist Robert Kaplan’s 1993 book “Balkan Ghosts.” Kaplan’s book argued that the region was doomed to war because ancient hatreds among the various ethnic groups were unmanageable. The Columbia University historian Robert Jervis has suggested that Clinton didn’t initially

want to intervene in the Balkans in the early 1990s, “and so seized on a view of history that justified his conclusion.”

The late historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. called this susceptibility “history by rationalization.” What politicians are falling prey to is what psychologists call confirmation bias, whereby people tend to both seek out and trust only information that corroborates their judgments. And policy makers have lots to choose from. Billions of words have been written about historical events, offering modern-day thinkers plenty of material to convince themselves of their own wisdom.

JFK WAS AN AVID and close reader of history. His Harvard thesis, later published as a best-selling book, was about England’s policy towards Nazi Germany in the 1930s. “I think I was always interested in history, and have spent a lot of time on it,” he once said.

To Kennedy, the events of October 1962 were powerfully reminiscent of the lead-up to war 50 years earlier that Tuchman described. Once again, the world’s leading powers were on the brink of a war that none wanted, a conflict that might be averted if the leaders had enough will and diplomatic creativity. The president personally overruled the consensus of nearly all his advisers and offered the Soviets a secret compromise through intermediaries, among them Bobby Kennedy. They would remove their missiles from Cuba, Bobby secretly told the Russian ambassador, and in exchange America would remove its missiles from Turkey and Italy.

The offer was accepted, averting catastrophe. Had the crisis spawned a war, Allison estimates that approximately 100 million Americans and more than 100 million Russians might have been killed.

Did Kennedy’s reading of history reshape his plans, or just confirm them? David Welch, coauthor of “The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Concise History,” suggested the latter: that Kennedy was “already primed” to seek a peaceful way out of the crisis, and Tuchman’s book furthered his belief that a hasty turn to military action would be both disastrous and avoidable. “He was inclined to look for a way out without going to war, and Tuchman elevated his fear and made clearer in his own mind the consequences of unwarranted war,” Welch said.

Tuchman’s influence on Kennedy suggests something we might not always want to admit when considering the importance of history to leaders: that its value depends more on who applies it than on how well they, or even the historians whose work they’re reading, grasp the past. Had Tuchman seen the German archives and gotten things right, Kennedy might have disregarded the book—or perhaps found endorsement of his views elsewhere. And had a different, more bellicose president read Tuchman’s book, he might well have taken it to show that Khrushchev’s gamble to place missiles in Cuba made war inevitable. As it happened, in Kennedy’s hands “The Guns of August” became one of the most helpful incorrect books of all time. In the end, just as JFK hoped, a book called “The Missiles of October” never needed to be written.

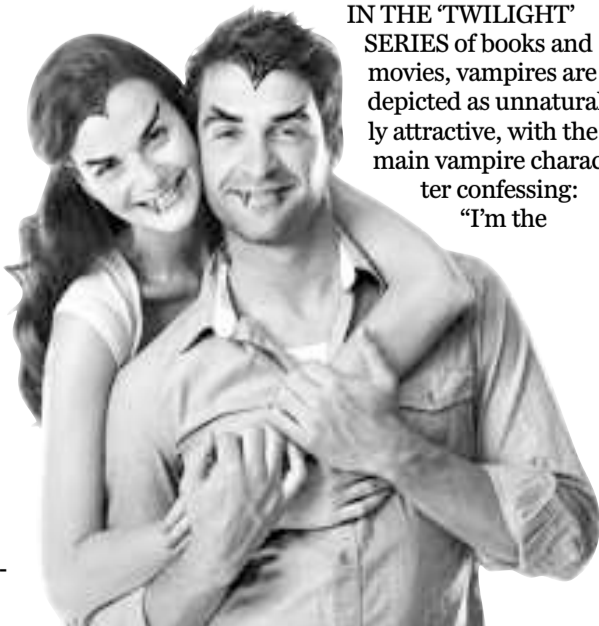
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## Uncommon Knowledge

Surprising insights from the social sciences BY KEVIN LEWIS

### Black Death, savior of the economy

IN THE MIDDLE AGES, Europe was arguably lagging behind its competitors to the East. So how did European nations come to dominate after the Middle Ages? According to a recent study, the answer is death, and lots of it. First, the Black Death, by killing a large fraction of the European population, allowed survivors to earn much higher wages, which allowed them to spend more on manufactured goods from cities and towns, spurring urban growth. Alas, this caused more death, because urban areas were overcrowded, disease-ridden “death-traps.” On top of that, increased trade spread more disease, and Europe was constantly at war, with armies causing deaths mainly by spreading disease, too. As the authors of the study put it, these “Horsemen of the Apocalypse effectively acted as ‘Horsemen of Riches’...because they jointly increased mortality, preserving post-plague wage gains.”



Although China suffered many deaths from the plague, too, its cities were cleaner and it wasn’t at war all the time, so it didn’t get the same creative destruction that Europe did.

Voigtländer, N. & Voth, H.-J., “The Three Horsemen of Riches: Plague, War, and Urbanization in Early Modern Europe,” *Review of Economic Studies* (forthcoming).

### Villainy makes you hot

IN THE ‘TWILIGHT’ SERIES of books and movies, vampires are depicted as unnaturally attractive, with the main vampire character confessing: “I’m the

world’s most dangerous predator. Everything about me invites you in.” New research from psychologists at Washington University in St. Louis appears to back this up: Vampire-like people really do know how make themselves alluring. Independent observers rated the attractiveness of full-body-length photos of people in either a normally adorned state or an unadorned state with basic clothing, no makeup or accessories, hair pulled back, and a neutral facial expression. Each of what are known as the Dark Triad traits—Machiavellianism, narcissism, and especially psychopathy—was associated with significantly more attractiveness in the adorned state relative to the unadorned state. In other words, villainous people were the best at making themselves hotter.

Holtzman, N. & Strube, M., “People with Dark Personalities Tend to Create a Physically Attractive Veneer,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (forthcoming).

### Have stocks, will vote

REPUBLICANS ARE KNOWN for advocating both for an “ownership society” and for tighter standards on voting. However, the results of a recent study suggest that at least in one context, these two objectives may conflict. Voter participation was associated with owning stocks, even with various

controls for wealth, income, education, occupation, age, race, gender, political affiliation, union membership, religion, risk tolerance, IQ, investor sophistication, and socializing. Indeed, political “battleground” states were found to have significantly more people who own stock. This association was largely explained by voters’ greater interest in the news, which often includes information relevant to investing.

Bonaparte, Y. & Kumar, A., “Political Activism, Information Costs, and Stock Market Participation,” *Journal of Financial Economics* (forthcoming).

### In friendship, class trumps genes

PREVIOUS RESEARCH has found evidence that teenagers tend to have friends with similar genes, in particular a gene related to neurological function and linked to political ideology and smoking. But new research suggests that such genetic friending isn’t a sign of some magical ability to sort ourselves by genes; it’s contingent on the social hierarchy. Only in schools with high inequality in socioeconomic status—as measured by mothers’ education—did teenagers tend to have friends with the same genes. According to the authors of the study, “one causal mechanism that could lead to

such a finding would be that highly unequal schools tend to institute academic tracking policies.”

Boardman, J. et al., “How Social and Genetic Factors Predict Friendship Networks,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (forthcoming).

### The unemployment unbenefit

IN TRYING TO EASE the pain of the Great Recession, one of the few things Congress has been able to agree on is extending unemployment benefits. Ironically, one effect of these benefits may have been to make unemployment worse. A study by an economist at the Federal Reserve finds that extensions of unemployment insurance by Congress increased the unemployment rate by 1.4 percentage points, almost a third of the total increase in unemployment from the recession. The theory is that unemployment insurance—while helping families make ends meet—eases the pressure to find a job.

Nakajima, M., “A Quantitative Analysis of Unemployment Benefit Extensions,” *Journal of Monetary Economics* (forthcoming).

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