

Ford's Gaffe, Carter's 'Cool' Shift Momentum

Just as in their first debate on domestic policy, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter had the same general strategic intent in their debate on foreign policy last week: Each was trying to denigrate the leadership capacities of the other. But the result was opposite from the first time. It was Mr. Carter, and not the President—despite his presumed advantage in the subject matter—whose tactics, style and self-possession predominated.

More important, Mr. Ford may have made, through inattention, careless language or for a reason even he does not know, a major political mistake that could cost him dearly on Election Day. Mr. Ford twice asserted that the nations of Eastern Europe are not under the domination of the Soviet Union, a statement that the facts show is not true.

It is the fear of just such an error that has made both men very cautious about the debate format and led them to what sounded like prepared answers to questions instead of direct answers.

The political effects. Mr. Carter, who started the campaign far ahead, then slumped badly according to poll results, had already seemed to be recovering before the foreign-policy debate began. Almost all postdebate surveys showed he had "won"—that is, that most persons surveyed thought he had done better than the President.

Mr. Ford's blunder on Eastern Europe may have dramatic effect. The second- and third-generation Americans from Soviet-dominated nations—Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Rumania—are concentrated in the large industrial states of the North and Northeast, and Mr. Ford must win in those states to win the election. Their reaction to his statement was one of incredulosity.

In answer to a question suggesting an accretion of Communist strength in Europe, Mr. Ford said, among other things, " . . . there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and there never will be under a Ford Administration." When the questioner

(Max Frankel of The New York Times) repeated the question with a "Did I understand you to say . . ." Mr. Ford in effect repeated the answer, though limiting it to Yugoslavia, Rumania and Poland.

It did not take long for Mr. Carter to judge the political potential in the gaffe. In his rejoinder, he said, " . . . I would like to see Mr. Ford convince the Polish-Americans and the Czech-Americans and Hungarian-Americans in this country that those countries don't live under the domination and supervision of the Soviet Union. "

In the days after the debate, Mr. Ford and his staff offered a series of explanations intended to minimize the political damage. In effect, Mr. Ford was saying it was all a misunderstanding, that he meant only to show his refusal to accept Soviet domination in Eastern Europe. But he never said publicly that he simply misspoke and did not mean what he said.

Mr. Carter was able therefore to ignore the postdebate explanations; on the stump, he said Mr. Ford lacked "common sense and knowledge," especially when he had to discuss foreign affairs without Henry Kissinger to guide him.

That was not the only slipup by the President during the debate. Apparently seeking to blunt Mr. Carter's repeated references to the immorality of an Arab-nation boycott against American firms that do business with Israel or have Jews on their boards, Mr. Ford unexpectedly said that "I am going to announce tomorrow that the Department of Commerce will disclose those companies that have participated in the Arab boycott."

That intention was apparently news to the Commerce Department, which said it would release the names of future violators, not past ones; at the White House it was suggested Mr. Ford had simply used the wrong tense. Jewish voters, however, may not accept a grammatical explanation for what they could regard as a politically cynical exploitation of a sensitive issue.

The expected. In general the content of the debate was as expected. Both men competed in stressing their support of Israel and a strong national defense (Mr. Carter preempting an expected strike by Mr. Ford on that score, since the Democrat proposes a modest reduction in the defense budget). Mr. Carter, pursuing his theme that the President lacks leadership ability, said flatly that Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger was the President so far as foreign policy is concerned.

The style. While the debate met expectations in that it produced no meaningful new insights into the future foreign policy either candidate

would conduct, the image-making of the debaters was of considerable importance.

Mr. Carter, who has conceded he was too deferential in the first debate, was this time both aggressive and relaxed, and seemed to have achieved the "cool" quality best suited to television. He attacked on the first question—not really answering it—and had Mr. Ford on the defensive for the entire 90 minutes. He too was transparently programmed with set answers. On two occasions he listed seven subjects that had allegedly hurt America's self-esteem, reciting the same seven with all but one in the same sequence.

In addition to his major error, Mr. Ford seemed somewhat less self-possessed than in the first debate; he also was more restrained and cautious.

Both men showed they were not above striking slightly low blows. Mr. Ford at one point defended the Helsinki agreement with the Soviet Union by pointing out that the Vatican had signed it, suggesting that Mr. Carter was really arguing with the Pope. Later, when Mr. Ford argued that Democrats had kept the economy strong by production for war, Mr. Carter noted that the President and Karl Marx were in agreement.

The final debate between the candidates is Oct. 22; questioning will be open to all subjects.



N.Y. Times 1976 Oct. 10.