



Photos by J. Michael Krouskop

**B**elmont University in Nashville is the proud home of the Tennessee Eta chapter of the Alpha Chi National Honor Scholarship Society. For more than twenty-five years at Belmont, Alpha Chi has been instrumental in the growth of academic achievement of students by providing opportunities for leadership, scholarships, community service, and presenting research at regional and national conventions. However, even the long-standing presence of Alpha Chi at Belmont took a back seat to a recent *little* debate in the 2008 election cycle.

Perhaps no event so quickly transformed Belmont University as the announcement made by the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) that the Nashville school had been chosen as a site for a Town Hall-style debate between the candidates for President of the United States. The mission of the CPD is to organize debates for the leading presidential and vice presidential candidates and to support educational activities relating to presidential elections.

*This is the third in a series of articles about distinctive programs or projects at Alpha Chi colleges and universities.*

The nonprofit, nonpartisan organization CPD, established in 1987, has sponsored all general election debates held since 1988.

Sixteen sites were chosen as finalists for consideration as possible locations for the three Presidential Debates, and Belmont learned of its acceptance in October 2007. The Belmont debate took place on October 7, 2008, but required months of preparation. As one of the older “frontier” states, Tennessee was home to three nineteenth-century United State Presidents (Andrew Jackson, Andrew Johnson, and James K. Polk), but the Belmont Debate was the first time the CPD has selected the state to host a debate. The Belmont Debate planning committee welcomed approximately 3,000 members of the media to Nashville, along with the candidates’ campaign staffs and supporters. With interest running high in the 2008 election, the historic event was seen by as many as 40 million people across the country.



Student rally at Belmont Mansion

According to CPD rules, universities agreeing to host a debate had to be willing to contribute at least \$1.35 million towards infrastructure production expenses such as technology upgrades, temporary buildings, offices and facilities for visiting media, and security services. Belmont was required to install additional telephone and computer lines, add some new sidewalks, erect a temporary building for media members known as “Spin Alley,” and do some landscaping and campus beautification—bringing the total cost to around \$3 million. All of Belmont’s faculty, staff, and students were affected by the debate in some way. Some faculty members were required to move their offices temporarily to make space for visitors. The fall semester break was moved one week earlier in October so that the campus would be empty of classes, freeing up space for meeting rooms and planning sessions. The athletics department was required to vacate their offices, making space for about 700 journalists. Belmont constructed the temporary “Spin Alley” building for the media over the school’s soccer field, requiring the men’s and women’s teams to play most of their games away from home.

Wanting to capitalize on the educational opportunity, Belmont scheduled several outstanding guest speakers in connection with the debate, including award-winning documentary filmmaker Ken Burns, *New York Times* best-selling author and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner historian David McCullough, and University of Vermont sociologist James Loewen. In September, Burns gave a presentation titled “Telling the American Story” about his work on the World War II documentary series *The War*, which debuted on PBS

last fall. Loewen's book *Lies My Teacher Told Me* was selected as the First Year Seminar common book required for all first-semester students, and he came to Belmont on October 23 to address the campus about the weaknesses of American high school history textbooks. McCullough is scheduled to lecture on "Beginning a Presidency" and discuss his latest book on March 19, 2009. "The opportunity to host the Town Hall Presidential Debate provides an invaluable educational experience to our students, allowing them to observe firsthand our nation's political process and to be participants in American history," said Belmont Provost Dan McAlexander. "Bringing such distinguished guests as Ken Burns and David McCullough on campus is just one component of the debate experience we plan to offer our students."



Obama and President Fisher

As the time for the debate drew near in Nashville, signs that security was being tightened on campus were everywhere. Some students complained about being asked to leave their dormitories during the fall semester break, but most were willing to put up with inconveniences given the magnitude of the event. The Beaman Student Center with its popular exercise equipment and Curb Event Center (site of the debate) were shut down a week before the debate. A temporary chain-link fence was erected around campus, restricting entry to a few spots. The city of Nashville stepped in to help renovate the neighborhood, adding some pedestrian crossing markers and a new flashing sign over Belmont Boulevard that read "Congested Area Ahead."

In the Town Hall format used at Belmont, audience members were allowed to question the candidates directly instead of listening to formal, prepared opening and closing speeches. Former President Bill Clinton famously excelled at this more casual format when debating against George H. W. Bush, Ross Perot, and Bob Dole in 1992 and 1996. The audience played a direct role in determining the topics addressed by the candidates. The selected audience who could post questions was made of about eighty undecided voters identified by the Gallup Organization and randomly chosen from the 1.5 million residents of Metropolitan Davidson County, which includes Nashville. Some tickets went to national sponsors, local government officials, and members of the state's Congressional delegation. Approximately fifty tickets were set aside for Belmont students, who applied for admission through an online lottery. The remaining audience was composed of about 500 people who sat on multi-tiered seating on the floor of the Curb Event Center at Belmont but were not allowed to ask questions or respond to the speakers with applause. When hosting a basketball game, the normal seating capacity for the Curb Event Center is 5,000, but much space was required for the Town Hall format seating and the media. ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox, C-SPAN, and PBS sent video journalists and reporters to cover the event along with writers from the national print media such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*.

The moderator of the Belmont Debate was Tom Brokaw, former news anchor for *NBC Nightly News* and special correspondent for NBC. Brokaw also serves as moderator for *Meet the Press* and is the author of *The Greatest Generation*, a best-selling book about the World War II era.

As agreed in the format, John McCain and Barack Obama made no opening or closing statements. For the first time in the history of the CPD-sponsored debates, the general public could submit questions to Brokaw via the Internet using MyDebates.org, a partnership between MySpace.com and the CPD. A coin toss determined that Senator Obama was the first candidate to respond to a question.

Brokaw called on members of the Town Hall audience to ask questions directly to either candidate. The candidates had the option of standing or sitting on stools with chair backs during the debate. They were not allowed to carry



anything on stage with them but could use a pen or pencil to take notes during discussion. McCain and Obama had two minutes to respond to the question followed by a one-minute follow-up. Brokaw did his best to enforce the time limits, but both candidates frequently rambled and exceeded the limits.

Senators McCain and Obama responded to approximately fifteen questions coming from the audience, from Brokaw, and from the Internet as selected by Brokaw. Individual citizens in the audience stood up to state their questions directly. The debate became a 90-minute back and forth sparring between the candidates on issues of health care, the economy, foreign policy, the recently announced federal bailout package of the financial system on Wall Street, reform of Social Security, Medicare and other entitlement programs, environmental issues like climate change and “green” jobs, and the use of the military in humanitarian crises. The “elephant in the room” was clearly the economic downturn, which dominated two-thirds of the debate time.

The senators repeated themes mentioned many times before. Obama and McCain charted a course through well-travelled terrain, having participated in countless debates and media interviews over the course of a very long primary season. However, the feeling of a crisis moment stemming from the federal bailout of investment banks gave the debate unique importance. Most of the questions reflected some anxiety about the future of America relative to international affairs and the current financial breakdown.

“We are in the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression,” Obama said in response to the first question asked about how older workers close to retirement would be helped by the bailout. He added, “This is a final verdict on the economic policies of the last eight years.” McCain said, “Americans are angry, upset, and a little fearful...I would order the

Secretary of the Treasury to immediately buy up the bad home loan mortgages in America and renegotiate the new value of those homes, at the diminished value of those homes, and let people be able to make those payments and stay in their homes.” McCain’s statement was one of the few new ideas to come from either candidate during the debate.

The most anxious question appeared to come from Nashville resident Teresa Finch, who asked the candidates, “How can we trust either of you when both parties got us into this global economic crisis?” McCain’s primary strategy seemed to be to go after Obama aggressively as the tax-and-spend Democrat intent on raising taxes, which would hurt the American middle class. Obama insisted over and over that he would not raise taxes on the middle class and that McCain wanted to cut taxes on corporations and the super-rich. Obama argued for spending \$15 billion over the next ten years to develop alternative energy systems including nuclear power, biofuels, clean coal, solar, and wind power that would reduce America’s dependence on foreign oil and create new jobs. Obama claimed his new energy and jobs proposals would be financed through reductions in federal spending and increased taxes on wealthy individuals and corporations. McCain insisted that his role as a reformer with deep political experience in Washington and someone who has taken on the leadership of his own party gives him the advantage over Obama.

Brokaw asked Obama and McCain, if they were elected, whom they would nominate to run the Treasury. McCain hesitated before mentioning businessman and investment billionaire

Warren Buffet and eBay Chief Executive Officer Meg Whitman. Obama also mentioned Warren Buffet but refused to get more specific, trying to turn more attention to “fundamental differences” between himself and McCain concerning the tax burden on the middle class.



Neither candidate emerged as the undisputed debate “winner” in the fast-moving exchange of ideas, claims, and counter-changes. Both tried to capitalize on strengths and make a statement to the American people about why they deserve to win votes. Whereas McCain had earlier promised to “take his gloves off” and get more aggressive with Obama, the general style of both candidates was consistent with the University of Mississippi debate and numerous other campaign appearances.

McCain did manage to evoke some laughter with his one-liner that understanding Obama’s evolving tax proposals was like “nailing Jell-O to the wall.” Obama countered with the comment that when McCain charged that his tax increases would hurt small businesses, “the Straight Talk Express lost a wheel on that one.” Obama charged that McCain’s attempt to rescue a Savings and Loan bank in the 1980s financial crisis was a failure.

Towards the end of the 90 minutes, the final question asked by Brokaw came from the Internet. The moderator warned that the question had a certain “Zen-like” quality before he read it: “What don’t you know and how will you learn it?”

Obama responded by saying that his wife could give a much better list than he could, but

that he knew the President will always be challenged by the unknown. Obama said, “I know that I wouldn’t be standing here if it weren’t for the fact that this country gave me opportunity. I came from very modest means. I had a single mom and my grandparents raised me and it was because of the help of scholarships and my grandmother scrimping on things that she might have wanted to purchase and my mom, at one point, getting food stamps in order for us to put food on the table. Despite all that, I was able to go to the best schools on earth and I was able to succeed in a way that I could not have succeeded anywhere else in this country....the question in this election is: are we going to pass on that same American dream to the next generation? Over the last eight years, we’ve seen that dream diminish. Wages and incomes have gone down. People have lost their health care or are going bankrupt because they get sick. We’ve got young people who have got the grades and the will and the drive to go to college, but they just



don’t have the money. And we can’t expect that if we do the same things that we’ve been doing over the last eight years, that somehow we are going to have a different outcome. We need fundamental change. That’s what’s at stake in this election.”

McCain responded to the question by saying that he did not know what the unexpected will be, but “I have spent my whole life serving this country. I grew up in a family where my father was gone most of the time because he was at sea and doing our country’s business. My mother basically raised our family. I know what it’s like in dark times. I know what it’s like to have to fight to keep one’s hope going through difficult times. I know what it’s like to rely on others for support and courage and love in tough times. I know what it’s like to have your comrades reach out to you and your neighbors and your fellow citizens and pick you up and put you back in the fight. That’s what America’s all about. I believe in this country. I believe in its future. I believe in its greatness. It’s been my great honor to serve it for many, many years. And I’m asking the American people to give me another opportunity and I’ll rest on my record, but I’ll also tell you, when times are tough, we need a steady hand at the tiller and the great honor of my life was to always put my country first.”

The event was a chance for Belmont University and the Alpha Chi members who participated to showcase the campus and the Nashville area. Nearly 600 student volunteers were required to transport members of the media, hold doors open, carry supplies, drive golf carts, work security, and provide directions. They eagerly gave up their fall break and woke up at 4 a.m. on October 7 in order to be a part of the important event. Student volunteers had to endure the first heavy rain in Nashville in a month while working for the CPD, Belmont, and the media. University President Bob Fisher did his part in greeting visitors and giving

interviews with the local and national newspapers and television stations. Fisher said, “I have never been more proud and amazed at the competence, dedication, and creativity of the Belmont community...the feedback that we have received from the Presidential Debate Commission points back to you and your efforts as making this among the best, if not the very best, operation in their experience.”

Belmont students and Nashville residents of many political affiliations took part in the debate festivities. A crowd of more than 1,000 turned up at a university-sponsored viewing party at the Ryman Auditorium, the historic home of the Grand Ole Opry. In typical Nashville fashion, country music performers and various bands joined street vendors who set up booths to sell food, hats, and T-shirts across from the Beaman Student Center. Approximately 600 people marched down Magnolia Avenue towards the university in support of Senator Obama before the debate began while Belmont’s College Republicans student president George Scoville appeared on C-SPAN’s *Washington Journal* program. It was quite a mix.

At times, the debate looked more like a street fair than a political event with the musicians and social organizations jockeying for space. People who could not get inside the Curb Event Center waited in line for hours to get their photos taken with Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Sarah Palin impersonators. Chris Matthews, moderator of MSNBC’s *Hardball*, drew hundreds of fans to the Belmont Mansion for the taping of his program. About 50 people from the Nashville Peace Coalition gathered at a nearby intersection holding signs reading “End the War Now” and “Foreclose on Wall Street.” Nearby, the supporters of Ralph Nader argued that the media had ignored their candidate, who is running as an independent.

Some participants had nothing to do with politics, such as Andrea Lindsley, a representative from Johnston & Murphy. The Nashville shoe manufacturer has made shoes for every American president since the mid nineteenth century. Lindsley brought replicas of shoes worn by Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Ronald Reagan. Lincoln’s size 14 was the largest specially made by the company.

For Alpha Chi students, Belmont faculty and staff, and the Nashville community, the debate was the biggest one-day event to hit the state since the Tennessee Titans went to the Super Bowl in the year 2000. The candidates might not have changed voters’ opinions or scored an easy “win,” but the debate highlighted the deep troubles faced by our country. The new President will need to deal immediately with most of the issues raised in the Belmont debate. Perhaps the question of trust raised by one audience member was the intangible most hotly contested by Senators McCain and Obama. If the democratic political system works, it must rely on restoring citizens’ trust in all elected officials.



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