

BUCKLEY VS. VIDAL.

2 MEN.

10 DEBATES.

TELEVISION WOULD NEVER BE THE SAME.

BEST OF ENEMIES



MAGNOLIA PICTURES AND PARTICIPANT MEDIA PRESENT IN ASSOCIATION WITH
MOTTO PICTURES AND ITVS A TREMOLO AND MEDIA RANCH PRODUCTION "BEST OF ENEMIES"
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TREMOLO [rva] JustFilm motto Media Ranch Participant media magnolia pictures

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A film discussion guide for 11th and 12th grade students
based on Common Core State Standards

BEST OF ENEMIES

Discussion Guide

In the summer of 1968 television news changed forever. Dead last in the ratings, ABC hired two prominent public intellectuals to debate each other during the Democratic and Republican national conventions. William F. Buckley Jr. was a leading light of the new conservative movement. A Democrat and cousin to Jackie Onassis, Gore Vidal was a leftist novelist and political commentator. Armed with deep-seated distrust, Vidal and Buckley believed each other's political ideologies were dangerous for America. Like rounds in a heavyweight battle, they debated over policy and personal insult—their explosive exchanges devolving into bitter name-calling. Live and unscripted, they kept viewers riveted and a new era in public discourse was born.

This discussion guide takes you through the film and beyond, exploring how Vidal and Buckley created the televised fireworks that boosted ABC News ratings and transformed political debate into the contentious, shouting, political punditry we know so well today.



- 1 How would you characterize Buckley and Vidal’s early relationship as portrayed in the film? How does their relationship evolve? How does the film present the legacy of their relationship? How does history view their relationship?

Common Core Anchor Standards:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4

- 2 William F. Buckley, Jr said that there is a “conflict of interest between that which is highly viewable and that which is highly illuminating.” Gore Vidal stated that “great debates are nonsense” because there is “no exchange of ideas” and “little of personality,” and “hardly anyone listens.” Jon Stewart said, of contemporary news shows, “you’re doing theater when you should be doing debate.” With whom do you most agree? Can “illuminating” also be highly viewable? Why or how? What is the real goal of contemporary political debate? What should it be?

Common Core Anchor Standards:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7

- 3 Compare and contrast the Vidal/Buckley debates with a current political debate by non-candidates. Use both video and the written transcripts and consider all aspects of the debate including rhetoric, location, sets, etc.

Common Core Anchor Standards:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7

- 4 Choose one of the 1968 debate clips and one point that Vidal or Buckley is making. What point is he trying to advance? Do you agree with him? Why? Is his rhetoric effective? Compare and contrast your example to a contemporary politician. Is his/her rhetoric effective? What made for effective political rhetoric before, during, and after these debates?

Common Core Anchor Standards:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6



- 5** In the first part of the debates how do Vidal and Buckley characterize the Democratic and Republican parties' developing policies on poverty? What are the policies of the current Democratic and Republican parties? How have they changed?

Common Core Anchor Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7

- 6** What overall argument is the film trying to make? Quote and/or cite specific instances in the film to support your position. What does the film imply, but not necessarily state explicitly, to support its argument? Does the film leave anything unclear or uncertain? What, how, and why?

Common Core Anchor Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6

- 7** What have the filmmakers done to enhance their argument? Consider lighting, editing, interviewees (and their locations, presentation of themselves, etc.), length of clips, arrangement of clips, etc. Have the filmmakers made their argument clear, convincing, and engaging? How or how not? Consider what else you might include to bolster the film.

Common Core Anchor Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5

- 8** In the film, Richard Wald, former *NBC News* President, said he is not “sure whether politics leads what argument is or argument leads what politics is.” Which do you think leads? Should it lead? Why or why not?

Common Core Anchor Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7



- 9** Two notable moments in the film concerning women include a mention that “lady delegates” attending the Republican Convention “have received careful instruction about how to dress so as to appear vivid but not garish” and a female audience member asking William F. Buckley if “mini skirts are in good taste?” (to which he responds, “On you I think they are”). Have women’s roles in political discourse changed? How or why not?

Common Core Anchor Standards:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4

- 10** At the beginning of the film, Gore Vidal states that he debated “so well and so terminally that [he] left the bleeding corpse of William F. Buckley, Jr. on the floor of the convention hall in Chicago.” Then an interviewer states that a rematch between Vidal and Buckley “held out the possibility of something...” at which point Buckley interrupted to finish the sentence with “violence.” How is this idea that political debates have become a type of violence supported throughout the film? How do other ideas presented by the film interact with and support (or weaken) this idea?

Common Core Anchor Standards:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3

- 11** The film does not shy away from noting the elements of Buckley and Vidal’s personalities that could be elitist caricatures. What does calling a politician “elitist” mean? What does calling a politician a “caricature” mean? What were the implications of these labels on their campaigns? How are these words used to characterize candidates today? Think about a recent candidate who has been called “elitist” or a “caricature.” Do these words mean anything different now than they did in 1968? How do the labels impact the campaign? Does anyone embrace these labels or are they always negative?

Common Core Anchor Standards:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5



12 The film discusses “the race question” following the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the riots in 1968 after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. How did Buckley and Vidal discuss race issues? How does the Civil Rights Act seem to have informed the party platforms of 1968? How has the Buckley/Vidal discussion evolved into the current political discussion of the parties, including that of #BlackLivesMatter?

Common Core Anchor Standards:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.8

14 Having learned that ratings-driven political commentary on television had a beginning date in 1968 with the Buckley vs. Vidal debates, do you feel more or less optimistic that ratings-driven politics on television can also have an end date? Do you think political commentary can become more educational and more respectful? Or did those debates change television news forever?

Common Core Anchor Standard:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1

13 Towards the end of the film, we learn that Buckley and Vidal continued their battle in the pages of *Esquire* magazine, in lawsuits against each other, and in their other writings, all the way until their deaths. Why do you think it was so difficult for these men to stop their feud? Do you consider Buckley and Vidal to be stubborn, passionate, neither, or both? What does their long-term animosity say about the potential for the rest of us to disagree amicably? Is it possible for people to disagree politically without getting upset or offended?

Common Core Anchor Standards:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4

15 What about televising political debate (and the political process in general) changed the American idea of how politics is covered on TV? What technology prior to the TV changed politics? How has the internet changed politics?

Common Core Anchor Standards:
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.4,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.6,
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7

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Join the discussion about *Best of Enemies* on Twitter.

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Best of Enemies, a film by Participant Media and Magnolia Pictures, was directed by filmmakers Robert Gordon and Academy Award-winning Sundance Film Festival alum Morgan Neville. Best of Enemies is available for rent and purchase on iTunes, Amazon, and Netflix.