

(The set is much the same as the set of the presidential debate of 2004 at the University of Miami's Convocation Center: two lecterns, a moderator's desk, all with microphones, and a bright red carpet. The carpet, however, is a square and it defines the playing space absolutely. Beyond its edges is darkness. No one leaves the carpet until the end.)

(Lehrer is at his desk when the audience comes in, shuffling his papers, adjusting his suit, etc., in preparation for broadcast.)

LEHRER

Ninety seconds to air. *(To audience:)* Everybody okay?

(Thirty second pause.)

One minute. *(To audience:)* Thank you all very much—in advance. We're going to have a great debate.

(Thirty second pause.)

Thirty seconds. We are now gone to our "mute mode."

(Thirty second pause.)

Good evening from the University of Miami Convocation Center in Coral Gables, Florida. I'm Jim Lehrer of "The NewsHour" on PBS.

And I welcome you to the first of the 2004 presidential debates between President George W. Bush, the Republican nominee, and Senator John Kerry, the Democratic nominee.

These debates are sponsored by the Commission on

Presidential Debates.

Tonight's will last ninety minutes, following detailed rules of engagement worked out by representatives of the candidates. I have agreed to enforce their rules on them.

The umbrella topic is foreign policy and homeland security, but the specific subjects were chosen by me, the questions were composed by me, the candidates have not been told what they are, nor has anyone else.

For each question there can only be a two-minute response, a ninety-second rebuttal and, at my discretion, a discussion extension of one minute.

Candidates may not direct a question to each other. There will be two-minute closing statements but no opening statements.

There is an audience here in the hall, but they will remain absolutely silent for the next ninety minutes, except for now, when they join me in welcoming President Bush and Senator Kerry.

(The sound of applause. Bush and Kerry come on stage, shake hands, take their places at the lecterns.)

LEHRER

Good evening, Mr. President; Senator Kerry.

As determined by a coin toss, the first question goes to you, Senator Kerry. You have two minutes.

Do you believe you could do a better job than President Bush in preventing another 9/11-type terrorist attack on the United States?

KERRY

Yes, I do.

But before I answer further, let me thank you for moderating. I want to thank the University of Miami for hosting us. And I know the president will join me in welcoming all of Florida to this debate. You've been through the roughest weeks anybody could imagine. Our hearts go out to you. And we admire your pluck and perseverance. I can make America safer than President Bush has made us.

(Bush takes out a knife and approaches Lehrer's desk. He stabs Lehrer in the back. Lehrer collapses. Bush steps back. Lights fade slowly to black, as a softly dramatic, melancholic closing theme plays over the sound of a rising wind. After a brief blackout: lights up. Lehrer is back at his table, the candidates at their lecterns.)

LEHRER

Good evening, again. Again, I'm Jim Lehrer of "The NewsHour" on PBS and this is the first of the 2004 presidential debates sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates between President George W. Bush, and Senator John Kerry.

If you're just joining us, or if you've been with us to this point, some explanation is in order. We've just returned from a blackout—if that is the correct term—a blackout of the lights, accompanied by music and the sound of wind, here on the Convocation Center's stage. A blackout which was immediately preceded by President Bush leaving his lectern, approaching me with a knife, and stabbing me with that knife between my shoulder blades, appearing to draw the blade down my spine to the small of my back.

Now, above all it should be made clear: the knife that you saw, the knife President Bush appeared to murder me with, was not an actual knife. It was a prop. A stage knife, in fact, if that is the term used by, uh, stage people. Without my prior knowledge, it was agreed upon by the candidates and their representatives that this debate should open with a staged murder followed by a blackout. It was also agreed upon by the candidates and their representatives that I was to be the “murder victim.” But I should stress: in no way was I actually harmed. I did not die, nor did I approach death. At no time did I lose consciousness. When the president initially advanced upon me with the knife, I felt some small surprise. But I’m something of an expert on knives—I have an extensive collection of knives in my home—and I realized almost immediately that the knife in the president’s hand was not real. And so I played along. I “play-acted,” if that is the term. I was brutally “murdered” by President Bush and the lights went to black.

I should also emphasize that the mystery of the president’s action does not bear in any way on this evening’s proceedings. The topic this evening is foreign policy, not the question of why the president would stage a theatrical attack on a seasoned, even-handed member of the press on national television before a live audience. It is a mystery which for the purposes of this debate must be content to remain a mystery.

The question, again, was to you, Senator Kerry. Two minutes. Do you believe you could do a better job than President Bush in preventing another 9/11-type terrorist attack on the United States?

KERRY

Yes, Jim, I can make America safer than President Bush has made us. And I believe President Bush and I both love

our country equally. But we just have a different set of convictions about how you make America safe.

(Bush pulls out a handgun, strides over to Lehrer, takes aim and fires, once. Lehrer clutches his chest, gasps, falls onto the floor. Bush then fires four shots into his prostrate body. The “blackout music” and wind begin, as before, and the lights slowly begin to fade. Blackout. After a moment: lights up. Lehrer back at his desk, the candidates at their lecterns.)

LEHRER

And again, good evening. I'm Jim Lehrer and this is the first of the 2004 presidential debates between President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry. And if you're just joining us, or you've been with us to this point, an explanation: We've just returned for the second time from a blackout. A blackout, accompanied by music and the sound of wind. Time has passed. In that time I have refreshed myself with some crackers and juice. I was in need of refreshment because when we were last visible, President Bush left his lectern, stood approximately three yards from my desk and drew from his suit jacket what appeared to be an actual handgun. He aimed it at me, fired one time and, after I collapsed, fired four more times at my motionless, prostrate body. Well. It was not an actual gun. It was a starter's pistol. With blanks, not bullets. As with the “murder” of myself which began this debate, this, as well, was a staged murder. However, unlike that first murder of myself, on this occasion at no point prior to the firing of the false gun did I come to an awareness that it was, indeed, false. I have no in-depth knowledge of guns or ammunition, only knives. My floor-to-ceiling collection of knives fills my entire apartment, so there's no possibility, indeed there is no space to be made for the collection of firearms or anything else.