



## Best of Enemies Discussion Guide

Directors: Robert Gordon, Morgan Neville  
Year: 2015  
Time: 87 min

### You might know these directors from:

#### Robert Gordon:

Very Extremely Dangerous (2012)  
Respect Yourself: The Stax Records  
Story (2007)  
Stranded in Canton (2005)  
Johnny Cash's America (2008)

#### Morgan Neville:

Keith Richards: Under the Influence (2015)  
The Music of Strangers (2015)  
Twenty Feet from Stardom (2013)  
Troubadours (2011)  
Johnny Cash's America (2008)  
The Cool School (2008)  
Shotgun Freeway: Drives Through Lost L.A. (1995)

## FILM SUMMARY

People have debated one another since the dawn of time. Not content with reaching universal agreements, we learn from our differences and express our individualities through the power of argument. Whether in the privacy of our homes or on the mass stage of political campaigning, we debate one another.

Both Gore Vidal and William F. Buckley Jr. were no strangers to debate. Highly outspoken in their political and moral ideologies, both men spent their lives engaging in public discourse. Intellectually potent at a time of great uproar in the American political scene, they provided a voice for their respective political sides.

TV was the public square of the time, the place to receive a barometer reading on society at large. Programming was limited, and as ABC executive Richard Wald states, "Networks were centers of ideas, not disrupters of ideas." That changed in 1968, when ABC televised a 10-round Buckley-Vidal debate. "It wasn't necessarily sensible," stated ABC President Sheehan. "It was a shot in the dark, and it changed television forever."

Co-directors Gordon and Neville knew they were onto a tale of larger-than-life personalities when they viewed bootlegged copies of these heated debates. BEST OF ENEMIES bears witness to the transformation of televised debate, in ten full-color theatrical moments, by hearing from those who played a role over the course of those historical Vidal-Buckley sessions.

In the words of Socrates, "When the debate is lost, slander becomes the tool of the loser." With a dose of slander and all degrees of insult, BEST OF ENEMIES looks back to reflect on one of America's great rivalries and just how the U.S. arrived at its current spectacle media has become, low punches and all.

## FILM THEMES

Mass media plays a large role in modern American life, setting standards and mirroring present-day society. *BEST OF ENEMIES* harks back to the beginning of this modern-day spectacle.

### PUBLIC DEBATE

Language is a tool to communicate not only survival necessities but also ideas, concepts, and thoughts. Through the power of language, people debate, and through this debate, express themselves and understand the society in which they exist. We are drawn to the fire of an argument, a place to connect and commune, to disagree and reflect. The very fact that the televised Vidal-Buckley debates propelled ABC to all new viewer-rating highs speaks to the public's thirst for controversy and conflict, so eloquently expressed by Richard Wald, former Vice President of ABC News: "Argument is sugar, and the rest of us are flies."

### A MEDIA MACHINE FOR THE MASSES

In the 1960s, television programming was limited. If you watched, chances were that you watched precisely what your neighbor and everyone else for miles around was watching. The stories were the same, the images shared, the pictures identical. So when raging liberal Vidal and explosive conservative Buckley hit the screen, the masses experienced the momentous turn in programming approach simultaneously. Likewise, the masses overwhelmingly approved, shouting "more, more, more," ushering in a new age of media spectacle unlike anything before. With the limited channel of television now diluted through multiple media options, a united public is harder to reach.

### PERSONALITY OVER ISSUES

"I think these great debates are absolute nonsense. There's almost no exchange of ideas," Vidal purported. Although speaking of the 1968 presidential debates, he could have been speaking about any recent U.S. election. Theatrical journalism was being born in the 1960s, the media spectacle was just finding its feet. The public was showing their interest in people who could play the part best when the camera's lens was focused in their direction, people who had the best television personality—a term so common in today's media world that it serves as an actual job title. According to Vidal, in this anti-intellectual space, "hardly anyone listens. They sort of get an impression of somebody and think they've figured out just what he's like by seeing him on television." A superficial precedence of personality over content has come to be what we expect, with few outstanding exceptions, on TV today.

### THE ISSUES ARE STILL THE SAME

While technology continues to push the medium of televised media beyond its former boundaries, the issues the U.S. faces today are much the same as those Vidal and Buckley tackled in 1968. The questionably problematic nature of capitalism, violence and war, the shrinking middle class, and news becoming increasingly biased are still the issues that Americans grapple with in the political sphere. While spectacular media takes precedence, the issues remain the same.

**“Does television run America? There is an implicit conflict of interest between that which is highly viewable and that which is highly illuminating.”**

William F. Buckley Jr.

**“They were both very much aware that TV is the present and the future. You have to be on it, and you have to use it well.”**

James Wolcott, "Vanity Fair"

## FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Had you heard of the 1968 Buckley-Vidal debates before watching **BEST OF ENEMIES**? How much did you know about William F. Buckley Jr. and/or Gore Vidal before the film? Have you read any of their writings?
2. Discuss the film’s title. What did the directors intend by naming the film **BEST OF ENEMIES**?
3. The majority of the U.S. population gathered around their television sets during the 1968 U.S. presidential campaigns, united by the content they were fed. With such a vast multitude of content available today, which providers of content (if any) unite people?
4. Discuss the activity of debating. What purposes does debate serve? Do you enjoy debating with others?
5. When Buckley called Vidal “a queer” in one of the debates, it came as a huge insult and was viewed as an outrageous criticism on national television at the time. How is the word “queer” used in a contemporary context? Which words today possess as much power as “queer” did in 1968?
6. While debating real issues, Buckley and Vidal also generated a great media spectacle, theatrically acting out their personality differences, arguably setting a precedence for much of the state of modern media. Why do we as societies crave such spectacle? Why are networks driven to flood the airwaves with an excess of farcically demonstrative content?
7. **BEST OF ENEMIES** deals with two American personalities and delves into the U.S. media. Do you have any experience of another country’s media system? Do you know anything about how political debates and television are connected in other cultures? Do you think any generalizations can be made about present-day media content across the globe?
8. What makes a successful television personality in the contemporary context? Describe the ideal television personality.
9. Do you consider yourself to be more of a Vidal or Buckley figure, in terms of debate technique? In terms of ideology? Discuss the difference between the two, in terms of how they approached the debates. Did the film make you empathize with either or both characters? Why?
10. Is there space in the contemporary public sphere for the intellectual? Is there such a thing as a public intellectual in modern society, one who debates on a mass scale and is accessible to a wider public, or does a great divide exist between mass media and the intellectual, the academic?

## NOTES:

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## FILM FACTS:

- BEST OF ENEMIES had its world premiere at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize. The film went on to be nominated for numerous awards and won quite a few, including two from the International Documentary Association.
- Having watched a bootlegged DVD in 2010 of most of the Buckley-Vidal debates, director Gordon felt there was a film to be made out of this material and contacted Neville, with whom he had previously worked on four films. They both had primarily created music and cultural films, and were both drawn to characters and the social contexts in which they live.
- At his first job out of college, director Neville worked as Vidal's fact-checker at "The Nation" magazine. He explains that Vidal "didn't like to be challenged," and always dreaded the moment when he had to call Vidal to inform him that he had gotten a fact wrong. Neville interviewed Vidal for the film not long before his death. Vidal apparently opposed the film, as he did not like to be referred to in the same context as Buckley.
- Kelsey Grammar ("Frasier"), an outspoken conservative, provided the voice-over of Buckley speaking about Vidal in the film, while John Lithgow ("3rd Rock from the Sun"), a known liberal, recited Vidal's thoughts on Buckley.
- The first televised presidential debate occurred in September 1960 between Nixon and Kennedy.
- Gore Vidal was born Eugene Louis Vidal in 1925. He was given the name Gore in 1939 - his mother's maiden name - which he chose to use. Vidal was an only child, his father a high-ranking military lieutenant and mother a high-society actress. Vidal was a prolific writer, penning numerous non-fiction books, fictional novels, plays, and screenplays, in addition to appearing on television in a wide range of programs. He died in 2012 from pneumonia.
- William Frank Buckley Jr. was born in 1925, the sixth of 10 children. Educated as a young child in Paris and London, Buckley spoke Spanish and French before English. He had one son, Christopher, also a political satirist and author. Buckley wrote a wide range of material over the course of his career, primarily non-fiction but also travel and fictional works and a series of fictional writings about CIA agent Blackford Oakes. He died in 2008 of a heart attack.
- Nixon won the 1968 U.S. presidential elections against previous vice president Humphrey. 1968 was a big year in U.S. politics: the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., race riots, assassination of Democratic candidate Robert F. Kennedy, and mass demonstrations against the Vietnam War.
- ABC launched in 1943 as a radio network and expanded into television in 1948.
- Both Vidal and Buckley were paid \$10,000 to appear in all 10 of the 1968 debates.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Pore** over the contents of all 10 Buckley-Vidal debates. Published in 2015, the book *Buckley vs. Vidal: The Historic 1968 ABC News Debates* contains the entire uncensored transcripts of the debates, including an introduction by BEST OF ENEMIES director Robert Gordon.
2. **Learn** more about the infamous William F. Buckley Jr. and Gore Vidal by reading one of the many works of writing they each published throughout their prolific careers.
3. **Learn** more at IDEA, the [International Debate Education Association](#). Although Vidal and Buckley vehemently disagreed, debate can be a healthy way of understanding individual ideas and society in general.
4. **Use** your words wisely, as they are powerful and have the potential to elevate or destroy others.

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