By William Lasser

President Ford and Governor Carter will face off Thursday evening in the first presidential campaign debates in sixteen years. A year ago, the greatest fight since Ali-Frazier, as some would have us believe, I am inclined to think that the debate will turn out to be the biggest disappointment since Camel-Kohouts.

Candidates have no incentive to turn a televised debate into a great entertainment spectacle or even a worthy news event. Debates are contrary to the best interests of those running for public office. Such a forum forces candidates to take firm positions on issues. It requires them to think quickly and to make broad statements of policy without direct consultation with key advisors.

Debates are instruments of last resort. Traditionally, a challenge is made by an underdog who can see no other route to victory; his opponent calmly refuses the offer and goes on to win the election. Occasionally, a candidate will accept his adversary's challenge, being either convinced of victory or afraid that refusal would cause irreparable damage. Presidential candidates, of course, are.

The Ford challenge was indeed issued because the President could see no other way of winning the November election. The offer came in a climate of despair, the last night of the Republican National Convention, in which Ford was almost defeated by, incredibly, a man to his political right. The President's support was soft, and the polls showed Carter ahead by a seemingly insurmountable margin.

Carter, whose campaign had been one of personality rather than issues, would have been wise to refuse to debate, except that he would have then destroyed much of the credibility which he had established. Thus, he made the best of a bad situation and accepted with apparent relish even before the President had finished his speech.

But that was over a month ago, and new conditions are completely different. Carter still leads in the national polls, but the latest figures show the two candidates virtually even outside the South. Carter has made numerous errors in running what has been a defensive campaign, and when he has taken definite stands on issues he has been full of ambiguity and logical inconsistencies.

The Democratic nominee has pledged to support sweeping social programs while insisting that he will balance the budget, a logistical impossibility without raising taxes, to which no one wants to do. He has advocated the pardoning of draft resisters without granting them amnesty, a "half a loaf" proposal which pleases few. Carter's position on abortion is as clear as the US tax code.

Meanwhile, the President stands by his usual conservative positions, which, even if one disagrees with them, are at least self-consistent. Still, by controlling inflation at the expense of jobs, he has left himself open to Carter's charges that he is insensitive to his fellow citizens' sufferings.

Thus Ford will sit back, act "Presidential," and quote economic statistics proving that the country is in better shape than ever. And Carter will counter with the same statistics, showing by his interpretation that we are in a state of utter economic collapse. Neither man will be right. The President will attempt to force Carter into a mistake. "Ethnic purity" could have been more costly than it was - a similar error could literally cost Carter the election.

Richard Nixon, after the loss in 1960, gave the following advice to politicians: "be yourself." He soon learned the folly of that counsel, as did everyone else. So this year, each candidate will have a panel of experts who will brief them on how to speak, how to sit, how to act, and, least important of all, what to say. It is possible but unlikely that Carter will ignore the Madison Avenue image-makers and finally answer the persistent question: Who is Jimmy Carter? If that happens, the debates could have a dramatic effect on the election results - either way.

On the other hand, if on Friday, morning we still do not know who Jimmy Carter really is, maybe we will all wish that they hadn't pre-empted the debut of the Tony Randall show.