PS1 for 10/20/88#THE UNANSWERED QUESTION IN THE QUAYLE DEBATE

The big unanswered question by the candidates in the Quayle-Bentsen debate was not what Dan Quayle would do if an unexpected event thrust him into the presidency, but what Lloyd Bentsen would do if he became President. The question was asked, but Bentsen never answered it and, funny thing, we don't hear the media taunting him for failing to respond.

The answer to the question of what Quayle would do if President George Bush were incapacitated is so obvious that it is unnecessary to ask it. Quayle would say a prayer and ""assemble Bush's people,'' and that is exactly what Quayle said he would do.

But the answer to the same question asked of Bentsen is not self-evident and is one of the provocative issues of this campaign. After pointing out the dramatic differences between Bentsen and Michael Dukakis on key issues such as aid to the Contras, capital punishment, and gun control, Judy Woodruff put this question to Bentsen: ""If you had to step into the presidency, whose agenda would you pursue, yours or his?''

If you don't remember Bentsen's answer, it's because he never gave any. He ignored the question totally and launched into one of his memorized two-minute responses prepared for a different question. He waxed eloquent about federal debt and trade policies, working himself up to the crowd-pleasing climax that ""any country that has full access to our markets, we should have full access to their markets!''

Brit Hume and Tom Brokaw didn't point out that Bentsen hadn't answered, and they didn't ask the same question a second and third time as they did to Quayle. And so, the most interesting question of the vice presidential debate went not only unanswered, but unexamined by the post-debate critics.

Dukakis chose Bentsen for his running mate in order to try to hold

the votes of conservative Democrats who have been alienated by Dukakis's radical liberal notions and actions. During the campaign and during a Dukakis presidency, Bentsen's function is window-dressing; he is just a listening post for conservative Democrats who have no influence whatsoever on the radical Dukakis agenda.

But in the event that Bentsen becomes President, is he committed to be a Dukakis clone? Did he make a secret promise to carry on the Dukakis brand of liberalism? We'll never know during this campaign because Brit Hume and Tom Brokaw preferred to spend their precious TV moments trying to embarrass Quayle.

Actually, Quayle gave a very credible and creditable response to the thrice-asked question. His answers drew heavy audience applause, and Bentsen, on rebuttal, found nothing substantive to criticize about those replies, instead using his time to talk about PACs.

It was on the third round of this same question that Bentsen came forth with his retort that Quayle ""is no Jack Kennedy.'' Quayle would never have pretended or wanted to be a Jack Kennedy, a man who betrayed the valiant freedom fighters at the Bay of Pigs and who shared a mistress with a mobster.

Quayle's mention of Kennedy referred only to Kennedy's youth and short years of service in Congress at the time he ran for the presidency. Bentsen knew that, so his retort was a cheap shot to give his media pals their 20-second sound bite.

On the other hand, Michael Dukakis, in speeches around the country, has been systematically (and falsely) trying to wrap himself in the Kennedy Massachusetts mystique. To apply the Lloyd Bentsen phrase where it really belongs, Dukakis is ""no Jack Kennedy.''

It would have been so tempting for Quayle to have given a smart-alecky retort to Bentsen several times during the debate, but he held his tongue, even in the face of booing from Bentsen's boorish claque.

The image left with viewers is that of an earnest, dedicated young man who believes in the American can-do philosophy and who can grow into a top leadership position, versus an oily has-been who knows how to weasel out of the tough questions and toss the ball to be carried for him by his media friends.

The peculiar hostility of the media to Dan Quayle is a marvel to behold. It's been many years since a national political leader has been so investigated, so attacked, so insulted, and so ridiculed so unanimously by the media.

Quayle probably had it right, the day after the debate, when he said that his role is to be the whipping boy for George Bush, and that he (Quayle) is more than willing to serve in that capacity. Let him stand there and be the target of the ""feeding frenzy,'' taking the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, while George Bush marches onward to the presidency.