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BELMONT UNIVERSITY | 2020 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

GEARING UP FOR THE SPOTLIGHT

Presidential politics is returning to Nashville. How Belmont, the city and Tennessee have changed since the 2008 debate.

Natalie Allison Nashville Tennessean
USA TODAY NETWORK - TENNESSEE

There are glaring examples of how the debate Belmont University is scheduled to host next week will be drastically different than the last time around.

There's the deeply fraught political climate in which the 2020 presidential race exists. A president who had his own bout with a pandemic illness. The question of whether speakers and audience members should wear masks. A moratorium on large events.

The Oct. 22 showdown between President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden will unquestionably feel much different

"Not only have we gone from purple to red, our red has become a deeper hue."

Adam Kleinheider
Post Politics blog, part of the Nashville Post

than when, in October 2008, Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John McCain took the stage at Belmont.

But even without a pandemic, the debate this time will take place in a fundamentally different place.

Belmont's enrollment numbers, academic

programs and profile have soared since the private Christian university earned a place in the spotlight in 2008.

Nashville's tourism, hospitality and business growth in the years that followed made the mid-sized Southern city a major contender both for national events and vacations.

And Tennessee — which a decade ago was still a competitive environment for Democrats and Republicans seeking state office — has since that debate become one of the reddest states on the map.

It's been a dozen years, after all.

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Debate host and Belmont President Bob Fisher lost a close election during high school. And he's happy he did.



Inside Nashville

Brad Schmitt
Nashville Tennessean
USA TODAY NETWORK - TENN.

He was a political junkie by age 8.

On Sunday mornings in his youth, Bob Fisher hopped out of bed, ran outside to get the newspaper and read all the editorials and stories. He got caught up in the 1956 race pitting President Dwight D. Eisenhower against Democrat Adlai Stevenson II.

After that, he sat glued to the television for "Face the Nation" in his family's two-bedroom home.

He and his buddy Ricky Carson made campaign signs for both candidates and planted them all over their tiny town of Blytheville in



Belmont University President Bob Fisher is seen on the Belmont University campus in Nashville on Oct. 9.

ANDREW NELLES / THE TENNESSEAN; PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY TAKÉ UDA/USA TODAY NETWORK; AND GETTY IMAGES AND AP

the northeast corner of Arkansas.

"I remember admiring Dwight Eisenhower for his military skills," Fisher said. "But I also admired Adlai Stevenson for his peacemaking and ambassadorship."

"We were just excited," Fisher added, smiling.

The pint-sized political enthusiast grew up to be president of the Nashville university set to host the Oct. 22 debate between President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden.

As a teenager, Fisher, now 72 and president of Belmont University, lost an election in a tie-breaker, which served as a wake-up call, a turning point that launched him onto a successful path.

Fisher lost the race for homeroom rep for

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Fisher

Continued from Page 1A

student government his senior year to a smart, popular classmate named Claudette Thompson. And he's really glad he did.

As a boy, Fisher didn't spend *all* of his time with his nose in a newspaper or a book.

He rode his bike, played with friends, went swimming, raised homing pigeons, went to First Baptist Church and used an earpiece in bed at night to listen to St. Louis Cardinals baseball games on a transistor radio.

The boy, with help from his folks, even built treehouses in the yard.

And he always got straight A's in school – until the family moved across the state his sophomore year of high school.

Fisher said he had a hard time adjusting to his new school and his new town of Arkadelphia. He felt like he didn't fit in because all the kids at his new school already had friends.

His grades slipped a little and he didn't really care. "I had a bad attitude, and I didn't try very hard," Fisher said.

Something changed when he started senior year, though.

In the first days of the semester, his homeroom teacher asked the class whether any of them wanted to be a representative for student council. Fisher's hand shot up. The only other hand in the air belonged to Claudette Thompson, a class leader and, according to Fisher, "an amazing person."

No time to campaign – the teacher handed out slips of paper right away and told students to write down their pick.

After tallying the votes, the teacher called the two candidates into the hallway, where she told them they each got the same number of votes. The teacher said she would break the tie.

"We all know Claudette would make the better representative," the teacher said.

"I don't care," Fisher shot back.

But he did care. Deeply.

Fisher had put himself out there in a school where he didn't feel he belonged, and he got rejected. By a teacher.

And that lit a fire, Fisher said.

"Honestly, it was good for me," he said. "I thought, 'I'll show you!'"

And he did.

When Fisher went to Hendersonville State University the next year, he ran for freshman class president and won.

Fisher also served as president of his sophomore and junior classes, and he got elected student body president his senior year.

That last year, the school appointed him to the search committee for a new

"I loved college. It transformed me, showed me so much about myself, what I can do and how I can serve others."

Belmont President Bob Fisher

leader after the university president died.

And that's when Fisher discovered what he wanted to do with his life. He wanted to lead a college.

"I had been interacting with the university president, and I remember how much I respected him. He was a remarkable man, stern, but I know he loved and cared about the students," Fisher said.

He also liked the idea of running what seemed to be a small town, which he thought would be challenging but a lot of fun.

"You get to be in college your whole life. And I loved college. It transformed me, showed me so much about myself, what I can do and how I can serve others," Fisher said.

"It's like flipping a switch. I was that kid in grade school again."

Fisher earned advanced degrees, taught some classes, became an administrator and was named Belmont University president in 2000.

In twenty years, Fisher has more than doubled the student body, created a renowned law school, grown the size of the campus and landed a U.S. presidential debate there in 2008.

On Thursday, the university announced plans to launch a college of medicine in partnership with HCA Healthcare, one of the largest hospital chains in the country. Tri Star hospitals Centennial, Skyline and Southern Hills are part of the chain.

In the larger community off campus, Fisher has served as chairman of the Greater Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, co-chair of the Mayor's Task Force on Public Education and sat on boards for United Way, the Country Music Hall of Fame and several other non-profits.

And later this month Belmont will host its second presidential debate.

It all started with an election he lost in his senior year of high school, a stinging disappointment that inspired him to be a better student and a leader.

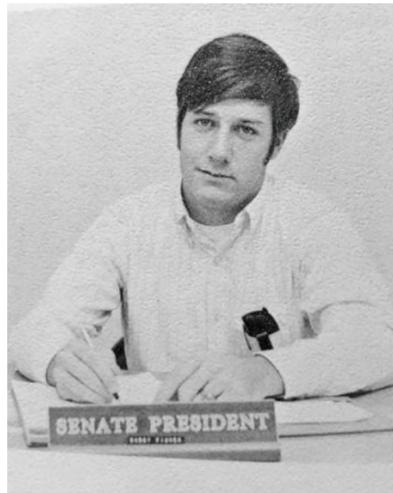
Funny thing is, Fisher would've won that election if he hadn't voted for Claudette Thompson.

"Back in those days I was taught to be humble, so you didn't vote for yourself," he said. "I voted for her."

Reach Brad Schmitt at brad@tennessean.com or 615-259-8384 or on Twitter @bradschmitt.



Gov. Phil Bredesen, left, and Belmont University President Dr. Bob Fisher high-five each other after the Town Hall opening press conference with Mayor Karl Dean in the Media Filing Center tent Oct. 6, 2008. Belmont University makes last-day preparations to the stage and the campus for the Town Hall Presidential Debate. BILLY KINGSLEY / THE TENNESSEAN



ABOVE: Fisher as student senate president at Henderson State University in Arkadelphia, Ark. Fisher was the student representative on a university search committee for a new president that year. SUBMITTED



RIGHT: Fisher works on hives on the green roof of Wedgewood Academic Center on the Belmont University campus. JAE S. LEE/THE TENNESSEAN



Belmont President Dr. Bob Fisher presents DiAngelo Groves, brother of Waffle House shooting victim DeEbony Groves, with his degree during Belmont University graduation in the Curb Event Center in Nashville on May 5, 2018. SAM SIMPKINS/BELMONT UNIVERSITY

How to watch the presidential debate

What: Second and final debate between President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden

When: 8-9:30 p.m. Thursday

To watch: Tennessean.com, most major television networks, many major cable TV news outlets

Where: Belmont University Curb Event Center

Audience: "Extremely limited"; invitation only

Belmont community involvement: About 150 university staffers and 250 volunteers will put in "thousands of hours" and participate in hundreds of virtual meetings to put on the debate

COVID-19 safety protocols: All debate guests will be required to wear masks inside and outside the venue, to social distance and to wash hands and/or use sanitizer. The safety protocols will be executed by Metro Public Health Department, HCA Healthcare and Cleveland Clinic.

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Spotlight

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Belmont's debate event center put it on the map

It was 2001. Belmont University president Bob Fisher was still new on the job, taking over the reins of the small, private Christian school while making plans for how he would raise its profile.

He invited over for lunch music label executive Mike Curb, the former lieutenant governor of California who had also served as Ronald Reagan's national campaign co-chairman. The two men had never met.

In the Belmont president's office, they had "one of those Mike Curb lunches" lasting upwards of three hours, Fisher recalled, a conversation that turned to Fisher's first big project: an event center.

The two men left Fisher's office and walked over to the school's gym and parking lot, the site where the \$55 million facility would ultimately be constructed.

"Imagine it," Fisher said. "The Curb Event Center. Belmont versus Vanderbilt in basketball."

Curb didn't bite. "LeAnn Rimes, live from the Curb Center," Fisher tried again, and Curb perked up at the idea of one of his label's artists performing in a venue bearing his name.

Fisher joked that the space could even be used for a presidential debate.

"Imagine this," Fisher continued. "You turn on your TV just a few years from now, and a guy comes on and says, 'Good evening, this is Jim Lehrer from the Belmont Curb Event Center,'" describing a live broadcast from a 2004 televised debate.

Curb's eyes shifted from looking at Fisher to looking out over the site, entranced by the thought.

"How much would that cost me?" he asked.

"About \$10 million," Fisher replied. The pair agreed that Curb could pay it over the course of a few years. They had a deal — and an expectation that the university would give its all to make the dream of hosting a presidential debate a reality.

"That changed everything for us," Fisher said of the arena, which would go on to host events like the 2006 CMT Music Awards. "That was like the first moment I realized, 'Hey, we can be somebody.'"

Nashville's tourism growth

The 2008 debate was a game-changer for Belmont, an unprecedented event for the university that Fisher describes as "a magical moment."

The next year, the school saw a "double-digit increase" in deposits, Fisher said.

Enrollment since then has grown nearly 65%, from around 5,000 at that time to 8,200 now.

In 2008, a university hosting the debate had to pay \$750,000 to the Commission on Presidential Debates, though that didn't include all the other events and activities Belmont put on that drew attention — bringing Ken Burns and David McCullough to campus or taking national reporters on a tour of the Ryman Auditorium. The price was worth it for the publicity, Fisher said.

This time around, Belmont's baseline fees to the debate commission were much higher, at \$2 million.

Anecdotally, Fisher knows from conversations with new students' parents that the last debate was critical in raising the university's profile.

But in Nashville, the wheels were already in motion for massive growth that would come to fruition not long after the debate.

The city years before had commissioned a study on building a large convention center, a project Mayor Karl Dean championed upon taking office in 2007. By early 2010, the \$600 million Music City Center project had been approved by the Metro Council and would open its doors in 2013.

Visitor spending in Nashville shot up from \$3.9 billion in 2008 to \$7.5 billion last year, while the Nashville Convention and Visitors Corp. reports that the number of tourists nearly doubled during that time, from 8.5 million to 16.1 million.

The city added more than 10,000 new hotel rooms since 2008.

While Nashville had already been home to Bridgestone Arena and Nissan Stadium for roughly a decade, the city wasn't close to being a regular contender for major events.

"We weren't looking at things at the level of an NFL Draft or World Cup," CVC president Butch Spyridon said of the state of the city's capacity to hold major events back in 2008.



Banners hang on the Belmont University campus Oct. 7 in advance of the Oct. 22 presidential debate. SHELLEY MAYS/THE TENNESSEAN



Workers inside the media filing center connect monitors inside a large tent on the Belmont University campus in Nashville on Oct. 7, in preparation for the presidential debate. SHELLEY MAYS/THE TENNESSEAN



Al Gore, left, Fred Thompson and Eddie George share a moment before the 2008 Town Hall Presidential Debate on Belmont University's campus on Oct. 7, 2008. LARRY MCCORMACK/THE TENNESSEAN



Democratic candidate Sen. Barack Obama, left, reaches to shake hands with Republican candidate Sen. John McCain at the start of their Presidential Debate on Belmont University's campus Oct. 7, 2008. BILLY KINGSLEY/THE TENNESSEAN

A Major League Soccer franchise arrived in Nashville this year, and the city is now one of 17 locations FIFA is eyeing for the 2026 World Cup.

Earlier this month, Sports Business Journal named Nashville's NFL Draft the 2019 event of the year.

"We were not as used to receiving national attention as we are now," Dean said of the city in 2008. "Nashville hadn't gone through that moment yet where everybody suddenly woke up and realized it was great place to live and great place to visit. We hadn't made all the lists."

In 2008, Tennessee wasn't yet completely a red state

At the time a few thousand national and international political reporters gathered in Belmont's massive media tent in October 2008, Tennessee was a state where Democrats were still in play.

The election that would take place weeks later sealed the fate for the indefinite future of Tennessee Democrats' waning influence.

"Before the election in 2008, you could still call Tennessee a purple state," said Adam Kleinheider, who at the time covered the debate for his blog Post Politics, part of the Nashville Post. "Not only have we gone from purple to red, our red has become a deeper hue."

Kleinheider now works as the communications director for Republican Lt. Gov. Randy McNally, R-Oak Ridge.

While the state in a presidential race had not gone to a Democrat since Bill Clinton in 1996 — and Tennessee's own Al Gore, a former vice president, lost the state by four points to George W. Bush in 2000 — Democrats prior to 2008 were still competitive in other races.

At the time of Nashville's first presidential debate, Democratic Gov. Phil Bredesen was in his second term and the Tennessee legislature was still half-controlled by Democrats.

Weeks later, Republicans would take over the state House of Representatives by numerical majority, two years after the Senate elected its first Republican speaker since Reconstruction.

In 2010, Tennessee elected Republican Bill Haslam as governor.

By 2012 — just four years later — both chambers of the state legislature had a GOP supermajority that continues today, taking out Democrats across rural Tennessee and shoring up support for conservative social legislation and opposition to Medicaid expansion.

The process of Tennessee becoming a solidly red state was already under way by 2008, but the GOP used Obama's election as one of its primary weapons to deal a devastating blow to the Democratic Party in the state.

"Obama was an unpopular liberal president, and Republicans were able to seize on that by tying local Democratic candidates to the unpopular president," Kleinheider said.

Nashville politics turned more progressive

As Tennessee became a conservative Republican stronghold, Nashville, like the Democratic Party, naturally became more progressive.

Dean, the city's mayor at the time of the first Belmont debate, pointed to the fight over an English-only referendum held soon after.

Days after Obama was sworn as the country's first Black president in January 2009, Nashville voters went to the polls for a referendum on whether English should be the only permitted language for government business in the city.

The measure was defeated, and the failed referendum in many ways solidified Nashville's trajectory of emerging as a booming progressive city.

But there had been plenty of uncertainty ahead of the vote, Dean recalled. Proponents of English-only thought it could win. Opponents were nervous about the outcome.

Had it passed, "a lot of good things wouldn't have happened" in the city, Dean said.

"The city came together in a great way to beat that," he said. "I think that was just a sign that Nashville was looking forward. We never looked back after that."

But the business growth, and even a city government that became more progressive, has not translated to a better way of life for everyone.

"It's a shame that not everyone benefited from Nashville's growth and prosperity," said Charlane Oliver, co-founder of The Equity Alliance. "It's just not been a prosperous time for a lot of people. As you can see, the city is broke. We can't even pay for basic city services, and our residents are the backbone of these services."

A Metro Council report earlier this year found city employees, including firefighters, police officers, bus drivers and general workers, did not receive cost of living raises in six of the past seven years, despite soaring housing prices.

Since 2008, Nashville teachers haven't received raises seven of those years.

Odessa Kelly, director of Stand Up Nashville, noted the growth downtown and in adjacent areas has been built around the wealthy white demographic. Whereas she and her friends used to enjoy nights out at downtown clubs and entertainment venues in the mid-2000s after college, the culture the city center has built itself around in recent years hasn't factored in people of color.

Popular Black entertainment venues Limelight near downtown and Agenda in the Gulch have shuttered in the last few years as a flood of new businesses geared toward honky-tonking tourists have opened.

Nashville neighborhoods that for decades were occupied by Black homeowners have been taken over by younger, white, wealthier people.

"There's nothing for me to do downtown unless I am going to intentionally insert myself into a culture I'm not comfortable in," Kelly said. "There has been a boom of people moving here. Let's be honest — how many of those individuals are people of color? Especially African Americans?"

"Yet if you were to reverse it and talk about the people who are moving out of the city, I think that becomes a compelling number to look at."

Dean acknowledges that Nashville has become more progressive in recent years. He suspects if Nashville focuses on "quality of life," it will continue to attract new technology and financial companies and remain "appealing to young people all over the country."

"I think what Nashville has going for it is Nashville is perceived as a city of the future," Dean said. "I think we're going to continue to remain successful at attracting good future-oriented businesses."

"No city can compete on the national level, let alone the international level, unless it's diverse and tolerant."

As for what's next for Belmont and how much of a boost hosting the scaled-back debate will provide for the university this time around, Fisher isn't sure. If nothing else, he said he feels strongly it will increase the value of Belmont graduates' degrees.

Mostly, he's grateful Belmont, in the midst of a tumultuous year, is a university playing debate host again rather than "sitting on the sidelines."

"I'm just really happy that we're doing it," Fisher said of the debate. "I wouldn't want it to be anyone else besides us."

Reach Natalie Allison at nallison@tennessean.com. Follow her on Twitter at [@natalie_allison](https://twitter.com/natalie_allison).



Belmont and city officials gave a press conference Friday to discuss the upcoming Oct. 22 presidential debate on Belmont University's campus. Belmont President Dr. Bob Fisher speaks during the press conference, which was held in the media filing center. PHOTOS BY SHELLEY MAYS/THE TENNESSEAN



Nashville Mayor John Cooper and Belmont University President Dr. Bob Fisher speak before a press conference Friday on Belmont University's campus.

The stage is set for final showdown

Prep extensive for final 2020 presidential debate

Sandy Mazza
Nashville Tennessean
USA TODAY NETWORK - TENNESSEE

Extensive safety protocols, sprawling media accommodations, and laboriously detailed event plans are in place for the final globally televised showdown between President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden in Nashville.

In less than a week, the presidential candidates will stand 12 feet apart on a platform in the cavernous Curb Event Center at Belmont University surrounded by lights and cameras.

The final debate, moderated by moderated by Weekend TODAY co-anchor Kristen Welker, will take place 11 days before the election on Oct. 22 from 8 to 9:30 p.m. CST.

Police and security personnel will swarm the campus as an as-yet-unannounced number of guests pass through meticulous safety scans.

Campus will be closed to the public. "Our faculty, staff and students have been working toward and looking forward to this moment for the past year," said Belmont University President Bob Fisher. "There have been countless details - it's got to be a thousand - that have had to be managed. We've been forced to rethink this event from top to bottom. But this community's pulled together."

Nashville's coronavirus cases have risen recently after steady declines. But Metro Public Health Director Michael Caldwell said he is confident the event will be safe.

Proof of negative COVID-19 tests, temperature checks, surgical-grade masks, social distancing and health assessments are required of attendees.

Air in the enclosed 200-person media tent outside the debate hall will be recycled at least a dozen times per hour.

Raised platforms on the campus lawn will host 48 television broadcasters.

"My staff and I have had several meetings and walk-throughs with our partners at Belmont," Caldwell said. "We feel confident that the protocols in place leading up to, during, and after this historic event will ensure that participants will be safe."

This is the second-ever presidential debate in Tennessee. The first was held during similarly challenging economic times in 2008 at Belmont University.

Then, Tom Brokaw directed questions and managed conversation between John McCain and Barack Obama, who were both senators at the time.



Members of the media tour the inside of the debate hall Friday, ahead of the Oct. 22 presidential debate on campus at Belmont University. The debate hall was still being assembled.



MNPD Interim Chief John Drake and Belmont University President Dr. Bob Fisher speak after a press conference Friday.

More than 2,500 media representatives were on site in 2008 - many more than will be allowed at this event.

"Next week, Belmont will once again shine a light on our great state putting the eyes of the world on Tennessee," Gov. Bill Lee said in a recorded statement. Lee is in quarantine due to CO-

VID-19 exposure. "I applaud their embrace of civic duty."

The debate stage is surrounded by a red carpet, black curtains, and red-white-and-blue signs.

Pipes hang just over the podiums where Biden and Trump will stand to pump cool air on them and counteract

the heat from the stage lights.

The U.S. Secret Service is working closely with Metro Nashville police and fire officials, emergency responders, highway patrol, and campus security.

"This has been a unified collaborative effort within the Nashville law enforcement public safety community," said William Hudson, special agent in charge of the Secret Service's Nashville office. "We always develop our security plans to minimize any impact on the local community."

Traffic closures will begin around the campus on Wednesday afternoon to provide for the candidates' motorcades. The roads will be cleared by rush hour on Friday.

The broadcast will be aired in 40 countries and attract needed visitors to mostly-empty hotels and restaurants.

"We're in a trying economic time and this debate will shine a very positive spotlight on our city," said Butch Spyridon, CEO of the Nashville Convention and Visitors Corp. "We need that spotlight."

"I can only hope that FIFA is watching (to encourage choosing Nashville as the 2026 World Cup host city) and Saturday Night Live takes another shot at Nashville (with a skit parody as the show did after the 2008 debate in Nashville.)"

Sandy Mazza can be reached via email at smazza@tennessean.com, by calling 615-726-5962, or on Twitter @SandyMazza.



Belmont University officials give the local media a tour inside the media filing center and debate hall Friday.



Members of the media tour the inside of the debate hall at Belmont University.