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The San Diego Union-Tribune.

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Politics takes the spotlight

Events' illumination can be crucial, local expert says

By Shannon McMahon
STAFF WRITER

October 13, 2004

It's the beginning of the debate, and Jim Tetlow's adrenaline is pumping. He holds his breath and leans forward, scrutinizing the president, the challenger and the audience on his 14-inch monitor.

The topic jumps from taxes and Korea to Iraq and the budget. Not that Tetlow would know.

"I have no idea of what they said or how they sounded," he said of the first presidential debate in Miami. "All I know is how they looked."

Tetlow is an Emmy Award winner from La Jolla and the lighting consultant for the presidential debates. In the past three weeks, he has trekked across the country with the crew from his company, Nautilus Entertainment Design, setting up 150 lighting fixtures at the four debate locations.

Nautilus, which Tetlow founded in 1990 with his wife, Laura, moved with the couple from Los Angeles to San Diego in 1997. Tetlow, 49, has designed the lighting for political events including the 2000 presidential debates as well as the Republican or Democratic conventions in 1996, 1992, 1988 and 1984.

"It's a thrill," Tetlow said of those first nail-biting moments leading into the debate. "It's the excitement that comes when millions of people are about to see your work."

Lighting is crucial, campaign insiders and historians say. Especially in a campaign as close as the 2004 presidential election, when the smallest details assume great importance. The shade of the backdrop and the size of the podium, for example, were hammered out months in advance.



Associated Press
La Jolla-based lighting consultant Jim Tetlow instructed technicians during a lighting check yesterday at Arizona State University in Tempe, Ariz.

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"They call it the debate over the debates," said Lynn Vavreck, a UCLA assistant professor of political science. "For candidates, how they look is almost as important as the actual debate."

Lighting can highlight or minimize a candidate's haggard look. Lights alter an area's atmosphere, transforming an auditorium into a TV studio and making the audience of thousands invisible to speakers.

Tetlow is keenly aware of the role of lighting. Just in case he forgets – which he doesn't – each candidate has hired a personal lighting consultant.

"These people are very, very high-strung," said Bill Klages, a 50-year veteran in the industry who recently lighted the Republican National Convention.

Campaign handlers in both camps know Tetlow's work can spotlight their candidate's good side and hide embarrassing gaffes. Historians say lights enhanced Richard Nixon's sallow pallor and John F. Kennedy's golden-boy glow in the 1960 debate. Urban legend has it that Ronald Reagan's aides adjusted the lights before the second debate in 1984, giving his opponent, Walter Mondale, raccoon eyes.

"Every person has to be lit differently to look their best," said Tetlow, who has worked in the industry for nearly 30 years.

Flesh tones, for instance, look excellent against blue. It's no surprise that this is the color of the backdrop, the same color behind each candidate per orders of a 32-page memorandum of understanding reached by both campaigns last month.

There are other special lighting considerations as well.

Vice President Dick Cheney's baldness, for example, requires careful lighting to avoid a glare.

"You need to be careful of backlight that may reflect off his head," Tetlow said.

Then there's Sen. John Kerry's hair.

"John Kerry has silver hair, which is much lighter than Bush's, so I moderate backlight use more on Kerry as opposed to Bush," Tetlow said of the president's Democratic challenger.

If the backlighting is overdone, candidates look like they're posing for glamour shots.

All these little details are fun for Tetlow, who studied theater and focused on lighting design at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

Tetlow, who is working on relighting the House and Senate chambers, won an Emmy in 1990 for lighting work on "Sesame Street." Along with previous political conventions, Tetlow lighted hand-over ceremonies in Hong Kong and Macau.

"The major powers are running out of colonies to give back, so that's kind of a dead-end job," Tetlow said, laughing.

Not that Nautilus is struggling for work. The company is growing, employing 10 workers, up from seven in 2002. Most projects for Nautilus fall in the \$15,000-\$30,000 price range, with cruise ships being the

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company's largest customers. Nautilus lights theaters and other entertainment venues for major cruise lines including Carnival and Holland America. It also deals with system design, fashioning the audio, video and stage mechanics for entertainment events.

"Most lighting designers get pigeonholed into TV or film or theater," said Klages, a seven-time Emmy winner for lighting design. "Jim has managed to be able to go from one discipline to another and do equally well in each of them."

But can Tetlow be pigeonholed as a Democrat or a Republican?

"One of the parts of the job is discretion," Tetlow said, adding that he happily does the lighting for both political parties. "It's a professional service."

And experts say that if it's done right, it will go unnoticed by the general audience as they curl up to watch the final presidential debate tonight in Tempe, Ariz.

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