

The two men who put their images and ideas on the line today in the first presidential debate of 1976 spent the final hours studying their thick briefing books. Behind Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter are weeks of preparation. The stakes are high.

The setting is a Philadelphia theater nearing the end of its second century; the television audience is a nation of voters mindful that a similar first encounter in 1960 was credited with helping elect John F. Kennedy.

There was a coin flip Wednesday to determine who receives the first question.

As the quarter rolled to a halt, Barry Jagoda, Carter's TV aide, correctly called out "'heads,'" giving the first question to Carter and the closing statement to Ford.

While the President met in Washington with evangelist Billy Graham, Carter made public an apology to Lady Bird Johnson for citing her husband, the late President Lyndon B. Johnson, as an example of an American president who has lied.

Carter told Playboy magazine: "i don't think I would ever take on the same frame of mind that (former Presidents) Nixon or Johnson did — lying, cheating and distorting the truth."

A Carter press aide said the Democratic candidate telephoned Mrs. Johnson in Texas on Tuesday night and "expressed regrets that the quote implied that Nixon and Johnson should be treated in the same category."

In recent speeches, Carter has included Johnson in a litany of Democratic presidents worthy of approval.

Carter's aides also proclaimed, on

debate eve, that Carter's own poll shows him leading Ford in states with 440 electoral votes, 170 more than needed for election.

Ford's people, too, read good news in the pre-debate sampling although it was made by Patrick Caddell, Carter's public opinion analyst.

"It would appear that Mr. Caddell's poll verifies that we're closing the gap over the nation, but the only poll that is going to count is the one that will be taken in November," said Ford campaign spokesman William Greener.

Greener referred to Gallup and Harris polls in August showing Ford trailing Carter by 23 and 29 percentage points respectively and noted that the Caddell poll showed Ford trailing by less than five points in states with about 120 electoral votes, five to 10 points in states with 160 electoral votes and by more than 10 points in states with more than 160 electoral votes.

A White House visitor, John B. Connally, also saw improvement in the President's chances and said "how people perceive these two candidates and which they can best entrust with the duties of president will decide the election.

That public perception will be sharpened by the debate. Such was the importance of the event that the training methods of the contestants became a matter of scrutiny.

The White House, after days of denials, acknowledged that the President has rehearsed with aides who peppered him with the kinds of questions he might get in Philadelphia.

Press Secretary Ron Nessen said some of the three or four days of dry runs were in the White House theater with former television comedian Don Penny helping Ford.