

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON
September 18, 1976

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MEMORANDUM FOR: DICK CHENEY
MIKE DUVAL

FROM: DAVE GERGEN *DR*

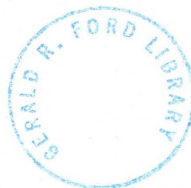
SUBJECT: DEBATE STRATEGIES

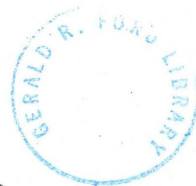
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In our recent discussions, it was suggested that one debate strategy is for the President to be highly Presidential and to practically ignore Mr. Carter and Mr. Carter's arguments. To illustrate: it was said that if one end of the spectrum were represented by a complete brawl and the other end by the President treating Carter as a lighting technician, that we would go 80 percent of the way toward the position of lighting technician.

On that basis, it was further argued, the President would:

- Minimize mention of Mr. Carter by name;
- Not discuss the enormous costs of Mr. Carter's programs;





-- Not discuss the Democratic platform or the record of the Democratic Congresses over the last 40 years;

-- Not discuss precisely where the President diverges from the liberal approach to government and why;

-- And not discuss Mr. Carter's record of raising Georgia spending by 50%, increasing Georgia state employment by 25%, and practically doubling the Georgia state debt.

Instead, it is argued, the President should be above the battle and stick to his achievements and very generalized theories of government.

I want to make it plain that I totally disagree with this approach to the debates.

I do fully support the idea of the President being Presidential and not engaging in a knock down-drag out with Carter. He must deal with him deftly and with neat strokes that keep him out of a verbal wrestling match. But that is a matter of style -- how he acts toward Carter, his general demeanor, his grace and good humor. I am perfectly confident that the President will be exceptionally

good on the stylistic question. As long as no one tries to overprogram him and make him self-conscious, his natural sincerity, honesty and charm will come through to the viewer.

But we must be extremely careful to distinguish between style and substance. If the President avoids dealing intelligently and in a very thoughtful way with the substance -- and personally, I think his instincts ^{run} toward strong, reasoned arguments -- he could create [^] so many problems for himself that he runs a high risk of losing the debate.

Perhaps I am misstating what is being argued; if so, I'll be very relieved. But if not, let me tell you what I find so objectionable about an "above-the-battle" approach, or what could be called the "non-debate" strategy;

-- Substance does matter. It was frequently said yesterday that no one will remember what either man says, only how well they appear. That is a simplification that can be very misleading. Many, many people do care about substance. Issues do matter. And to a great many more people, the intelligence and reason that a man applies to a



question says volumes about his qualifications to be President. Yes, JFK won the first debate because he was more poised and confident than Nixon; but JFK would have lost that debate if his poise had not also been accompanied by very sharp, very well-honed arguments.

-- The non-debate strategy seriously underestimates Carter. Carter has made a number of gaffes by attacking the President so harshly in the last two weeks, so there is a tendency to believe that he will make the same mistake in the debates. We must not fall into the trap of underestimating the man. He is one of the shrewdest politicians in America today, and he has a very precise understanding of the English language. I have read a number of his speeches in the last few days, and I am convinced that Carter has the capacity to put the President's record in the worst possible light -- while being totally respectful -- and also presenting a very positive, very concrete, (and very phoney) program of his own. We cannot give him a free ride.

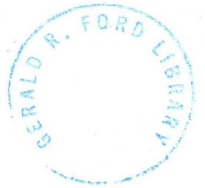
-- The President should not be on the defensive all night. Carter will continually be needling the President about what increases in unemployment,



vetoed, Nixon-Ford, medicaid abuses, etc., etc. For the President to simply stand on his record and not draw the distinction between his own approach to the problems and those represented by Mr. Carter will leave him always on the defensive. He must turn the arguments around on Carter so that Carter is defending what many people have now come to believe is a bankrupt approach to government.

-- A non-debate strategy will reinforce the President's worst attributes: The public questions whether the President is competent enough to run the country. We know better, but many Americans don't. If the President stands there and responds with fluffy platitudes instead of hard, concise arguments, he will come across as a dummy.

-- The non-debate strategy ignores the President's hidden strengths: Two of the most successful events of the last 12 months have been the President's acceptance address and his budget briefing. They were successful for much the same reason: he was forceful, extremely articulate and extremely well prepared. He was commanding because he handled it so well. And people were surprised. If he comes into these debates with



sharp, very precise arguments -- arguments that slice through the Carter fogbank -- he will be an enormous success.

-- The non-debate strategy is also inconsistent with the President's highpoints of the last two weeks: One of the reasons that the President has been so successful in the last two weeks is not just the fact that Carter is hurting himself on the stump and the President is at home being Presidential, but that when the President has spoken up, he has very neatly cut Carter up. Three examples: handling Carter so well in the press conference on Kelley, the comments at B'nai B'rith (which were very tough but were said with enough lightness that he got away with it), and the trust lines at Michigan. All of those lines are consistent with a strong debate strategy; they are inconsistent with a non-debate strategy.

-- The American people, and especially the press, have been led to believe that this will be a true debate. The President challenged Carter to the debate and said afterwards that he couldn't wait to pin Carter down on the issues. In fact,



we all want to smoke Carter out on the issues. The way you do that is to make it very clear why his approach will lead American down the road to more inflation, more unemployment, etc. To avoid doing that is going to leave the public wondering why the devil we issued the challenge, and leave the writing press with very negative feelings.

I fully realize that is is unprecedented for a President of the United States to engage in a debate with his opponent. And in doing so, he must be highly Presidential. But we wouldn't be in Philadelphia at all unless there were a reason for it.



What I am urging is not a 180-degree turn off basic strategy. I repeat: I do not support a slug fest or anything which demeans the President. What I do suggest is this:

-- That the President be very well prepared with sharp, well-honed arguments that keep him strong, forceful, and on the offensive -- on his achievements, on his programs, and on his philosophy.

-- That the President be prepared with very sharp arguments that show how different Mr. Carter's approach is and why it won't work. We have to pin

down Carter for what he is: a Yankee liberal in Confederate uniform.

-- That the President never be afraid to bring up the Georgia record where it serves to buttress his arguments. Carter should not be given a free ride on anything.

-- That the President's staff concentrate very hard on helping him develop, polish and sharpen the arguments. I am less interested in stringing a few eloquent words together than in ensuring that he has the major points in his mind and can hit them cleanly.

-- And finally, that the President have an opportunity to fully understand what the arguments are against the Carter positions. I would regard it as a gross dereliction of the staff's responsibility toward him to allow him to enter this struggle without all the weapons he will need at his command. He must not go in with one hand tied behind his back.

I would not have taken your time with such a lengthy memorandum did I not regard this matter with utmost concern.

