



THE ELECTION OF PRESIDENT FORD

BASIC STRATEGY PAPER NO. 11 - SEPTEMBER, 1976

David W. Belin

The Ford-Carter Debates: Key Strategy Considerations

The debates between President Ford and Jimmy Carter will be the single most important events of the 1976 campaign.

What is the best basic strategy to follow?

Six elements will be discussed: (1) Basic advantages of the President; (2) basic disadvantages of the President; (3) physical preparation; (4) capitalizing on Democratic control of Congress; (5) capitalizing on other Jimmy Carter weaknesses; (6) capitalizing on psychological factors.

1. Basic Advantages of the President.

The advantage of incumbency, coupled with the record of the President, is the single most important advantage that President Ford has.



As I wrote in my August strategy paper, "The Five Keys to Victory in November", the President in any debate with Jimmy Carter can refer to the basic elements of his record in restoring trust and confidence in government, maintaining peace, cutting inflation in half, and leading the country into an era of ever-increasing prosperity.

What I wrote in my first strategy paper in November, 1975, with reference to the primary campaign is equally applicable to the fall campaign:

"The major strength of Gerald Ford is that he is a full-time President. The major weakness arises if he spends too much time in campaigning, which in turn undermines that basic strength."

I continued:

"Instead of being seen on television screens waving at crowds, President Ford should be seen with leaders of this country and international leaders in Washington--conducting the business of this country...."

"At all times, the President must remember that he is the President and Ronald Reagan (Jimmy Carter) is not. He must stick more to his case--a candid, thoughtful hard-working, capable President...."

Combined with this advantage of incumbency is an additional basic advantage: The President has a far better grasp of the facts than Jimmy Carter. Yet, although this is a basic advantage, if improperly used, it could turn out to be a terrible disadvantage.



The President must be quick to recognize that although he will debate Jimmy Carter, the winner is not the person who can score the most points if the debate were to be judged by normal standards. Rather, this debate is really a jury argument in front of tens of millions of Americans, and the ultimate victor will be the person who best communicates with this jury. Thus, the President must reinforce his delivery of the concrete facts with the seasoning of an emotional appeal to the hopes and aspirations of the American people.

It would be a terrible mistake to drown Jimmy Carter in a mass of facts without offsetting Carter's emotional appeals with some equally visionary language. I previously discussed in earlier strategy papers the general failure of the Republican Party to address itself to the hopes and aspirations of the American people and also to understand how to capitalize on the emotional factors involved in the campaign. President Ford must at all times be aware that the weight of the evidence is not necessarily the sole criteria on how these debates will be judged by the American jury.

In the concluding portion of my January paper, "Winning Independent Votes - Major Organizational Considerations", I wrote:

"There is a story to be told to the Republican voters and to the general electorate: Our country today is in far better shape than it was 18 months ago when President

Ford took office. Inflation has been brought under control, and no American soldiers are fighting abroad.

"'Peace and prosperity' must form a major part of the appeal toward the Independent voter, just as it must form a major part of President Ford's campaign for the Republican nomination."

The theme of peace and ever-increasing prosperity must underlie the position and arguments of President Ford in the presidential debates. This must be combined with facts, the seasoning of ^{or} visionary outlook to the future as we enter America's third century, and recognition of the basic disadvantage that the President faces, which will be discussed in the next section of this paper.

2. Basic Disadvantages of the President.

The basic disadvantage of the President, as I wrote in my December, 1975, strategy paper, is one of the greatest Republican weaknesses: Perception as the Party without compassion.

What I said last December is even more applicable for the November general election campaign:

"In discussing the failure of the Republican Party to be identified in the minds of the average citizen as a Party that cares for people, the issue is not whether a particular Republican candidate--such as President Ford--actually has compassion for his fellow citizens. Rather, the issue is how that candidate, and the Republican Party as a whole, is perceived.

"I believe that relatively few Americans perceive the Republican Party as a political organization that has compassion and concern for the lives of the average citizen--particularly people of below-average economic status.

I believe this perception extends to how President Ford is viewed by a great many Americans. To be sure, they do not know him as an individual. Nevertheless, I believe he is perceived by far too many people as someone who is far more concerned with balancing the budget than he is concerned about caring for the needs and problems of the average American."

John Rhodes makes a similar observation in his new book,

"The Futile System". Here is what he writes:

"We Republicans have experienced a rather rude awakening. We have discovered that the image we have of ourselves does not accord with the image other people have of us. The realization was not a complete surprise because, after all, we have heard for some time that we are party comprised mainly of fat cats who curry favor with big business. We have heard others charge that special interests are more important to us than the needs of the average citizen. But we really never believed in our heart of hearts that most people think of us that way. I never did.

"They do think of us that way, however, at least a great many do. And, frankly, for those of us who thought all along that our battles on behalf of fiscal responsibility and smaller government would eventually be rewarded, the realization that many Americans regard Republicans as the bad guys has come as quite a shock.

"We now know, thanks to a survey conducted by the Republican National Committee, that Republicans are regarded by many people as hard, callous, cruel and insensitive. We give the impression of not caring-- and that is the worst possible image a political party can have.

"Republicans, of course, do not believe that this negative image is deserved. But in politics, it's not what you are that counts; it's what people think you are."

To all of this can be added the hurdles which are an outgrowth of the wreckage of Watergate.

I do not think that the President should be defensive about these problems. However, I think that there are ways in which these problems can be very successfully overcome--and they must be overcome if we are to maximize the opportunities offered by these debates.

Furthermore, I think that the solution of this major Republican problem can be combined in looking at another basic problem which permeates American society today: An overall lack of optimism for the future. Twenty or thirty years ago, an overall frame of optimism permeated our entire country. In contrast, today we have almost a fatalistic sense of resignation--in large part caused by a multitude of problems ranging from Vietnam and Watergate to the energy crisis, inflation and unemployment.

Are there issues which would afford the President an opportunity to meet both of these problems head on--to kill the proverbial two birds with one stone? I think there are very important issues which should be taken into consideration in

preparation for the Jimmy Carter debates. I would be happy to give some specific suggestions in this area. However, the key element is for the President to recognize a tremendous disadvantage he has because he is a member of the Republican Party and because there is a great national perception of that Party as the Party without compassion.

3. Physical Preparation.

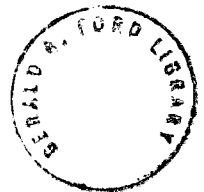
One of the worst things President Ford can do in preparing for these debates is to spread himself too thin along the campaign trail. For instance, in Senator Dole's first visit into Iowa after the Republican National Convention, eleven specific meetings were originally scheduled within a four or five hour period. Two or three at the most would have done a far better job and would have also left Senator Dole in a far better position to project himself well on those occasions when he spoke.

The President showed top form in his speech before the Republican National Convention when he had adequate time for preparation. Similarly, he should give himself ^{at least} two or three days of adequate preparation, without distractions, to get prepared for ^{each of} the televised debates.

One of the worst mistakes of Richard Nixon was to try and campaign in all fifty states, leaving himself physically weary, which in turn materially adversely affected his television appearances. President Ford should not fall into this same trap.

In addition, President Ford should undertake as a part of his preparation a practice "debate" with a stand-in for Jimmy Carter, the same way a football team scrimmages in advance of the big game and the same way a first-rate trial lawyer will prepare a key witness by going through a practice cross-examination that can be anticipated from the other side.

Finally, President Ford should have some "home run balls" that he can hit out of the park that are adaptable to anticipated questioning in the debates and anticipated responses by Jimmy Carter. For instance, we already know that Jimmy Carter is fuzzy on issues and that the Democratic Party Platform is calling for as much as \$200 billion of additional government spending, which must come from taxes or inflation or a combination of both. It can be anticipated that Jimmy Carter in the first debate on domestic issues may be asked where the money is coming from and may respond with his patented answers on cutting defense



expenditures. This can open the door for a major opportunity for the President to inject a succinct statement on defense and foreign policy even though the debate itself theoretically is on domestic issues. Such a response by the President would have to be carefully phrased to make sure that it is shown as a response to Jimmy Carter and then the President can openly state that he will look forward to discussing this in greater detail in the next debate. Other "home run balls" include such elements as the Democratic control of Congress, which will be discussed in the next section of this paper and which can be a tremendous counter-punch whenever Jimmy Carter talks about "leadership".

4. Capitalizing on Democratic Control of Congress.

Jimmy Carter is going to attack the President alleging that there has been a lack of leadership and also alleging a negative approach through the use of too many vetos. President Ford will offset that saying that he has given leadership to Congress in such matters as energy and other areas, but that Congress has not followed through. He will also say that he has protected the American people from excessive spending of Congress which otherwise would bring about massive inflation.

Who will win the argument? The real crux of the matter could be the issue of leadership, and there are several "aces in the hole" that the President should have ready to be played at the appropriate time.

For instance, on the issue of leadership in Congress, one can look to the whole question of Congressional reform and the inaction of Congress in this vital area. The Democrats have controlled Congress for 39 out of the last 43 years. Congress has an Achilles heel in such areas as the annual automatic pay raise tied to the cost of living. It was tacked on to a bill providing for a job safety program for postal workers. Within the matter of a few days, it cleared the Senate and then the House. Under this automatic formula, a Democratic controlled Congress voted for pay raises of several thousand dollars in 1975, and it is no wonder that they are willing to have excessive spending which will lead to inflation, because they have protected themselves from the consequences of the inflation. That is, so far as their own personal incomes are concerned.

What kind of Congressional leadership is this?



Then there is the question of the chaotic organization of Congress. At the present time, more than 30 committees and more than 60 subcommittees of Congress claim some jurisdiction in the field of energy research and development. Education is involved in more than 70 Congressional subcommittees.

Carter talks about reorganizing and simplifying government. Surely, he cannot be believed when the Democrats cannot even reorganize and simplify the organization of Congress.

The chaos in Congress is symptomatic of the chaos that would result in an unchecked Congress. In the right time, in the right place, in a Ford-Carter debate, the President can use his ace of trumps. And surely no one should know more about how to use such a high card than an individual who himself has gone through the frustrations of living under a Democratic controlled Congressional system.

5. Capitalizing on Other Jimmy Carter Weaknesses.

Perhaps the two biggest weaknesses of Jimmy Carter is the perception of "fuzziness" on issues and the problems Jimmy Carter has so far as the members of the working press are concerned. As I wrote in my April paper, "Key Highlights from a Conversation with David Broder":

"The nuances of the working press can make a tremendous impact through the mass media. There is the question of selectivity--which comments of the President and which comments of the opposition are used; how the lead paragraphs are written; how the headlines are selected; which television clip is used; when one of the candidates stumbles, how and the extent to which that is highlighted.

"In a hundred different ways, the working press can make or break the candidate."

One of these ways will include the questioning that is done of the candidates by the representatives of the working press. At the Republican National Convention, several members of the press commented that there is a basic distrust of Jimmy Carter. This was highlighted as recently as the CBS evening news program on Labor Day where samplings of Carter's comments were brought on the television screen after the CBS commentators stated that the comments underscored Carter's problems with "fuzziness".

Another basic disadvantage of Jimmy Carter is that he is debating the President of the United States--the first time this has ever been done on presidential debates. Jimmy Carter has a very tight rope to walk: If he tries to strike too hard at the office of the Presidency, this can create a very adverse counter-reaction. By the same token, the President has to be very careful that he acts like a President--a big person--and



if Jimmy Carter stumbles in this area, the President should plan in advance the best kind of hard-hitting reply--that would be statesmanlike in approach but yet will drive the point home without in turn creating public sympathy for Jimmy Carter.

I believe that there are effective ways that this can be done and that planning for such contingencies is an essential part of the preparation for the debates.

This leads into the final element that must be included in the televised debates--particularly in the first debate and in the last debate of the series: The recognition of the natural apprehension of the voter about the unknown.

6. Capitalizing on Psychological Factors--the fear of the unknown.

In my August strategy paper, I summarized several elements that must form the backbone of strategy for a successful November campaign. These included the following:

a. The record of President Ford in restoring trust and confidence in government, the maintenance of peace, control of inflation, and ever-increasing prosperity. Together with the

emphasis on the President's performance, there must be an expression of the President's goals, plans, hopes and aspirations for the Nation in his first four-year term.

b. The abysmal performance of the Democratic-controlled 94th Congress.

c. The Democratic Party Platform which promises more taxes, more inflation, and more big government.

d. The tremendous emotional and psychological opportunities in this campaign, which are elements that Republican candidates consistently fail to recognize.

Perhaps the most important--at least in the last few days of the campaign--will be the concern of the voter and the fear of the voter about the unknown. President Ford is a known quantity. He came into the Presidency at a time of great national crisis. There were the seeds of inflation. There was the winding down of a war. There was the whole question of trust and credibility in government.

The President can well run on this record of what he has accomplished: Peace, ever-increasing prosperity, inflation being cut in half.

Somewhere in the concluding portion of the first debate, and also in the last debate--and perhaps also in the middle one--the groundwork must be laid for what will be a key part of the media advertising in the last few days of the campaign--an effort to have the voter think twice before he pulls the lever on the voting machine or places his mark on the ballot.

When he closes the curtain of the voting booth, he knows on the one hand that if he votes for President Ford, he is voting for a person who has proven himself under fire. On the other hand, if he votes for the other candidate, he does not know what to expect--particularly when that other candidate has been inconsistent in some of his statements.

And I think that some of the inconsistencies can be mentioned, although care should be taken so that this does not become a personal attack. The key element is that we have to lay the groundwork to prepare the voter for what we hope to bring across to him in the last week of the campaign--he should vote for a known quantity who has performed well rather than voting for what in substance would be "a pig in a poke".

In other words, "a bird in the hand, is worth two in the bush", and performance is worth more than mere promises.



This can be integrated by factors which I discussed in my April paper, including the following:

"The President has an opportunity to go on the attack by undertaking research on the 'gloom and doom' comments that were made by Democratic political leaders and Democratic-oriented economists last year who sought to assure the American public that the program of President Ford would never work.

"The programs of President Ford are working and there is a lot of political hay that can be made on the continuing improvement in the national economy, while we still recognize we have a substantial way to go to reduce unemployment.

"'Don't change horses in the middle of the stream' is sound political advice to the American public--particularly when that stream is a steadily-improving national economy and a steadily-improving confidence on the part of the people in the ability of President Ford to help lead the country to greater prosperity at home.

"'Peace and prosperity' in the past has proven to be a very successful political issue. There is no reason to believe it can't succeed again, particularly if the challenger is someone who is inexperienced in national government and particularly if the President is conscious of the need for the preemption of the middle of the road."

There are two other basic psychological factors which should be considered in the preparation for the debates with Jimmy Carter. The first of these is the natural sympathy of the American people for the underdog. President Ford should recognize the fact that he is the underdog. And I believe

there are ways of stating this so that it is not overplayed and it is especially appealing to the jury of American people.

Another important psychological factor is the sense of fair play that the average American voter has. Is it fair for the American voter to turn his back on a President who has worked hard and has basically accomplished the major tasks that confronted him at the time he took office: Questions of credibility in government, rampant inflation, and leading the country along the paths of peace with ever-increasing prosperity?

There will be opportunities in any debate in response to an attack by Jimmy Carter alleging lack of leadership whereby the President can reply: "I don't think that the American people believe that would be fair in light of where the country was at the time I became President and in light of where the country is today...etc." The precise words are not what is important--rather, it is the concept. And I believe this is an important psychological factor that should be considered in preparing for these debates.

The foregoing highlights of preparation for the Ford-Carter debates are a few of what I believe to be the key elements of a successful campaign. They involve factors of judgment and common sense--two of the real long suits of President Ford.

I believe that Carter can be beaten--I have long believed he can be beaten. But I also believe that the President will have to perform with the same careful planning that he exercised in the preparation of his acceptance speech at the Kansas City convention.

This includes recognition of the basic advantages of incumbency and the record of the President and the fact that he is the President, recognition of the basic disadvantages and in particular the perception of the Republican Party as the Party without compassion. It also includes careful preparation with some "home run balls" that can be hit out of the park when the opportunity arises--some of which relate to the weaknesses of Jimmy Carter, including Democratic control of Congress and his general fuzziness. Finally, it means being prepared to capitalize on psychological factors and in particular the advantage of being the underdog, the traditional concept of the American people for fairness and the most important factor of all--the fear of the unknown.

September 7, 1976

David W. Belin
2000 Financial Center
Des Moines, Iowa 50309

