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THE 1976 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES :

A REPUBLICAN PERSPECTIVE



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## THE 1976 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

The concept of debates between President Ford and Governor Carter was an integral part of the Ford general election campaign strategy in 1976. The decision to issue the debate challenge to Governor Carter was based on the unique set of circumstances the Ford campaign faced in the summer of 1976, and our experiences in the contest for the Republican presidential nomination.

## THE CAMPAIGN FOR THE GOP NOMINATION

At the beginning of 1976, President Ford began his campaign for re-election in an unusual environment for an incumbent. As a result of having come to power under the 25th Amendment, his name had never appeared on a ballot outside the 5th Congressional District of Michigan. There was no national Ford organization in place from a prior campaign. One had to be built, especially in key primary states.

Though the economy was improving, the nation was still experiencing a residue of high unemployment and high inflation, after having weathered the worst recession in decades. The economic situation, the legacy of Watergate, and the Nixon pardon had served to erode the President's

standing with the public. His approval rating, as measured by Gallup, had fallen sharply from August of 1974, to below 40% in the spring of 1975. It rose above 50% briefly at the time of the Mayaguez incident in the summer of that year, but had remained well under 50% throughout the remainder of 1975.



In November, one year before the election, Governor Ronald Reagan had announced that he would be a candidate for the Republican nomination for President; as events would later demonstrate, he was a formidable opponent. A nationwide poll conducted by NBC news in early December, had shown that Governor Reagan held a four percentage point lead over President Ford among Republicans. Our own private polls were producing similar results.

Thus, as the election year opened, we felt we had no choice but to campaign very aggressively in each of the major, early primaries.. We simply did not have the option of staying in the White House through the primary season as previous Presidents had done when seeking re-election. The necessity of campaigning actively in the spring was to have a direct bearing on the later decision to issue the debate challenge in the fall contest with Governor Carter.





## THE PRIMARIES

In spite of the narrow victory in New Hampshire, the Ford campaign went on to win by comfortable margins in Massachusetts, Florida, and Illinois. By the time of the North Carolina primary in late March, there was considerable speculation that Governor Reagan would be forced to drop out before long, and that the Republican contest would be wrapped up within a matter of weeks.

North Carolina, however, proved to be a major stumbling block for the Ford campaign. Governor Reagan's surprising victory there gave new life to his efforts and insured that the second wave of primaries, beginning with Texas on May 1st, would be hotly contested. After winning all 100 delegates in Texas, the Governor went on to impressive wins in Alabama, Georgia, Indiana and Nebraska in the next ten days. By the middle of May, it was clear that the struggle for the Republican nomination would not be finally resolved until August at the Kansas City Convention.

After the final primaries in California and Ohio on June 8th, the remainder of the summer was devoted to wooing small groups of delegates, either in Washington or during visits to key convention states such as Missouri, Connecticut



and Mississippi. The bulk of our resources had to be devoted to the continuing nomination contest because of our inability to lay to rest the Reagan challenge.

One of the products of having a campaign from January through August, was that the President came to be publicly perceived as more of a candidate than as President. Although his active campaigning was instrumental in winning important primaries in New Hampshire, Florida, Michigan, and Ohio, and in carrying important convention states such as Mississippi, the nationwide impact, outside the particular state involved at any given time, was negative from the standpoint of his national standing. Instead of "presidential" travel to Peking and Moscow, we found it essential to arrange "candidate" appearances in Peoria and Miami. Instead of spending the summer as a secure incumbent watching the Democrats struggle, we found it necessary to do battle for the Republican nomination while Governor Carter sat in Plains planning his fall campaign.

In presenting this review, I do not want to imply any criticism of Governor Reagan or his campaign. While the GOP contest was obviously an important factor in setting the stage for the fall contest, the problems we encountered



were due to the fact that we failed to win decisively early on. I believe it can be persuasively argued, that without a contest of some kind in our own party, the Ford campaign organization would have been in much worse shape than it was by Labor Day. We learned a great deal about our operations and capabilities as a result of having to surmount the Governor's nearly successful drive for the nomination.

#### THE DEMOCRATS

In late April and early May, President Ford was still winning head-to-head trial heats with potential Democratic opponents. By early June, when it became obvious that Governor Carter would be the Democratic nominee, things changed rapidly. With the collapse of all Democratic opposition to the Governor immediately after the final round of primaries, we suddenly found ourselves in the position of the underdog. By the time of the Democratic Convention in July, polls by both Gallup and Harris showed Governor Carter with a lead exceeding 30 percentage points.

The Governor looked like a winner. He had designed and carried out a masterful campaign. Beginning as a relative unknown, he had defeated all of his competitors for the Democratic nomination by mid-June, some two months before

there would be a definitive answer to the question of who would run on the Republican ticket. By mid-summer, neither Ford nor Reagan appeared to have any serious prospect of overtaking the Governor by November.

#### PLANNING THE FALL CAMPAIGN

Some planning activities which included the general election contest as well as the pre-convention period had been undertaken by the Ford organization in late 1975, but focused efforts to design the fall campaign plan did not really begin until June, at the conclusion of the California and Ohio primaries. In addition to the delay caused by the need to devote time and energy to the hunt for Ford delegates, the legal requirement that money raised for the primaries could not be spent for general election purposes and our efforts to ensure that White House personnel were not misused for campaign purposes, hampered our planning efforts. When planning did begin in June and July, most of the work was done by a small group of campaign and White House officials working evenings and weekends.

The draft plan was presented to the President some two weeks before the Kansas City Convention. Changes were made at







his discretion over the next few weeks, but many decisions were postponed until the President met with his aides and advisors in Vail, during the week immediately following the convention.

THE DEBATE OPTION

The possibility of challenging Governor Carter to a series of debates was first raised in mid-June in a memo prepared by Foster Channock and Mike Duval of the White House staff. The memo urged consideration of the debate option as part of a "no campaign" campaign strategy. The basic idea was that continuing to pursue the aggressive style of traditional campaigning that had been necessary in the spring would guarantee our defeat in November. As part of a package of proposals prepared after discussions with our pollster, Bob Teeter of Market Opinion Research, debates were suggested as a means of de-emphasizing traditional campaigning, maximizing the advantages of incumbency and forcing Governor Carter to deal substantively with issues. Specifically, they recommended <sup>that</sup> / Carter be challenged to a series of four debates on domestic affairs, the economy, national defense, and foreign policy. Although some of the recommendations in this memo were not adopted, they were based on an underlying set of considerations that shaped our overall strategy.

The debate option was to become an integral part of our campaign. It was discussed with the President and included in the final draft of the campaign plan. The President gave instructions that he wanted a very tight hold on the possibility of debates to preserve the element of surprise. He indicated that he wanted to consider the possibility of including the challenge to debate in his acceptance speech in Kansas City in August. In order to avoid any leaks, it was not included in any of the drafts of the Kansas City speech. A few hours before the speech was to be delivered, the President wrote out an insert for the speech, issuing the challenge to Jimmy Carter to debate him in the fall campaign.

#### THE FORD STRATEGY

As serious planning efforts began in July, the outlook for the fall was fairly bleak. Our campaign strategy had to begin with a realistic appraisal of the situation. Even allowing for the likelihood that the very large gap of July would close somewhat once the Republican contest was resolved, we still were faced with a unique situation for an incumbent president.

No President had ever overcome the obstacles to re-election which we expected to face following the convention.





President Truman's great come-from-behind victory over Dewey in 1948 was often suggested as a historical precedent for the task we faced. But on close analysis, the 1948 experience offered little solace. President Truman had been only eleven points behind Dewey in the summer of 1948. We expected to be some 20 points behind at the close of our convention, and the lateness of the convention meant we would only have seventy-three days to overtake our opponent.

Furthermore, there were several constraints which could not be altered no matter which strategy we pursued, and they would make our task even more difficult.

1. We were the minority party. Among voters, the Democrats outnumbered us by better than two to one (43% to 21%). Truman's success in 1948, had been possible in part because he was building on the base of the majority party.

2. Under the new campaign laws and given the necessity of accepting federal funding, our campaign expenditures would be matched dollar for dollar by the Carter campaign. We would not be able to spend more than our opponent.

3. The GOP convention was late. The party would be divided after the struggle for the nomination, and we would have little time to devote to binding up the wounds.



4. Unlike previous incumbents, we could not campaign on the basis of wooing various voter blocs through promises of massive new government programs. Budget dollars simply were not available to fund extensive new spending programs. Broken promises of previous candidates had undermined the utility of such an approach, and most importantly, the President's philosophy and record of asking the public to make short-term sacrifices in return for long-term gains (energy proposals, legislative vetoes and economic policies) ruled out such a strategy. Changing our philosophy in mid-stream would have been bad policy and would have led to widespread criticism.

Our goal had to be to win enough popular votes to carry enough states to obtain the required 270 electoral votes. To reach that objective, we would have to close a 20 point gap in seventy-three days, while working from the base of a minority party and spending the same amount of money as our opponent.

#### THE CARTER LEAD

While the Carter lead appeared formidable in July, we were convinced that it would decrease significantly as we drew

closer to Labor Day. We believed that much of his support was very soft and based primarily on his "media" image as a "winner." Governor Carter had risen from relative obscurity almost overnight and was suddenly a major national figure by virtue of his victories in the primaries. After the Democratic convention, we believed his popularity would decline, simply because there would be no more "victories" to sustain it. His image as a winner would fade as his primary successes receded into the past and other aspects of his candidacy came to the fore.

Also, a careful analysis of the results of the Democratic primaries indicated that he had not been as formidable as his presence at the top of the Democratic ticket implied. Governor Carter had never received more than 54% of the vote in a contested primary. He never won in a two-man, head-to-head race. Finally, he had been defeated in eight out of the last eleven contested primaries.

Thus, we anticipated that his rapid rise in the polls might well be followed by a fairly rapid decline. That as the "newness" wore off and without a consistent string of weekly victories to sustain him, he would prove to be more vulnerable than most people expected in a head-to-head contest

with President Ford. We believed that the Governor's support was susceptible of erosion once the public came to know him better. So the outlook was not totally pessimistic. We believed that with the right strategy and a few breaks, we could win on November 2nd.

#### CAMPAIGN STYLE

In spite of our optimism that the Carter lead would diminish substantially by Labor Day, we were obviously still faced with a very difficult problem. The fact that we were so far behind meant we had to conduct a very aggressive "come-from-behind" campaign to have any prospect of winning. We simply were not in a position to spend September and October in the White House ignoring our opponent, as had some of the President's predecessors.

At the same time, we had ample evidence that aggressive campaigning in the past had harmed the President's standing in the eyes of the public. Survey research undertaken in the summer of 1976, had picked up disturbing, but not surprising, evidence that a portion of the public increasingly perceived the President as too political. He was criticized by some for spending too much time on politics and not enough time





on the people's business. We also believed that declines in the President's popularity during his two years in office had coincided with, and to some extent been caused by periods of active partisan campaigning.

This perception was due in part to the unique set of circumstances of the Ford Presidency. We had enjoyed a very brief "honeymoon" during August of 1974, which came to an end with the issuance of the Nixon pardon in early September. During October and early November, after having been in office only two months, the President had undertaken a heavy schedule of campaign appearances on behalf of Republican House and Senate candidates in the 1974 elections. In July of 1975, after having been in office less than a year, we announced formally that the President would be a candidate for re-election. The early announcement was a result of the need to get started on organizational and fund-raising efforts and our desire to comply fully with the requirements of the campaign spending and reporting laws.

During the fall of that same year, we undertook a heavy schedule of appearances at state GOP fundraisers. The party was in considerable disarray after the 1974 elections. Many state organizations had extensive debts and the President's activities were instrumental in paying off those debts and

raising party funds for the upcoming 1976 elections. We also knew that there would be little time to devote to such activities during the Presidential election itself. Finally, as mentioned above, from January to August of 1976, the President had been a very active campaigner in his quest for the Republican nomination. While those appearances were the key to winning individual primaries, the impact nationwide of extensive media coverage of sustained campaign activities was negative. All of the campaign activity had lessened the value of our number one asset - incumbency.

Our problem was starkly portrayed on the cover of one of the weekly newsmagazines prior to the Republican convention. The cover gave equal billing to pictures of three candidates for the presidency -- Governor Carter, Governor Reagan and President Ford. In part, because of extensive campaigning, the President had come to be perceived by many voters as just another candidate, rather than as President.

These conclusions played an important role in shaping our strategy for the fall campaign. One of our objectives was to re-emphasize the fact that our candidate was the incumbent. At the same time, we had to devise an approach that met the twin requirements of an aggressive campaign,





while avoiding the kind of campaigning that had contributed to the image that the President was just another candidate. Part of the answer was provided by the debates.

#### PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE CANDIDATES

As part of the planning process, the campaign staff spent a good deal of time analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of Governor Carter as perceived by the public. In terms of positive personal traits, the Governor was cited by those interviewed as a winner, a man with strong spiritual and moral values, an honest man of character, truly concerned about government efficiency and dedicated to making government work better. On the negative side, he was perceived as somewhat arrogant, lacking in humility; a man who tried to be all things to all men; a man about whom we knew very little; a man who was fuzzy on the issues and lacked the experience to be President.

With respect to his philosophy or general position on the issues, Governor Carter had indeed succeeded in being all things to all men. When asked to locate themselves and Governor Carter on a seven point scale ranging from "extremely liberal" to "extremely conservative," respondents tended to place the Governor very close to the point they

chose for themselves. Thus, Republicans tended to identify the Governor as somewhat conservative, very close to their own position. Ticket-splitters moved him closer to the middle of the spectrum and closer to their own position. And Democrats perceived him as slightly liberal, also relatively close to how they perceived themselves. Republicans, Democrats, and ticket-splitters all saw significant similarities between their own views and their perceptions of Governor Carter's views.

A separate analysis, done by Market Opinion Research, reinforced our view that a large number of voters perceived Jimmy Carter's views much as they perceived their own. Bob Teeter and his staff developed a perceptual map that graphically demonstrated our problem. The methodology used permitted voters to locate their own philosophical attitudes on two dimensions based on responses to questions about a variety of domestic and foreign policy issues, and to also indicate where the candidates were located on the same dimensions based on the voters' perception of the views of the candidates. The results indicated clearly that Governor Carter occupied a position somewhat unique among major national political figures in the summer of 1976. The voters perceived

him as having views much closer to their own than had President Ford or any other national political leader.

The Governor had successfully avoided getting pinned down on many issues during the primaries. To the extent that he had taken positions on issues, we believed he had done so with a certain amount of regional selectivity. Furthermore, we believed that the public's perception that they agreed with the Governor more than they did with other major political figures was based in part on the fact that he was very new to the national scene and that when he had taken a position, it had not been fully communicated to those who could be expected to disagree with him.

By contrast, we believed that the President's positions on major issues were better known. After two years in office, over 50 vetoes of legislation and numerous proposals on everything from abortion and bussing to taxes, we felt any negative impact from the President taking a firm position had already occurred; that the public had already "discounted" any significant differences they felt on specific concerns. This is not to say that all potential voters already had a solid understanding of what the administration's policies were in every area. As in all campaigns, there was a large portion

of the electorate that either did not know what the President had done on a particular problem, or incorrectly identified his position. But, we did believe that where an issue had direct relevance for a voter, as a member of a particular group, the President's views were much better known in most cases than were Governor Carter's views. We did not expect any significant decline in our standing in the polls as a result of restating positions already articulated in the past.

We did not over-estimate the role issues had played or would play in the campaign. It was clear that they had been relatively insignificant, with few exceptions, during the primaries. The Ford campaign plan clearly indicated that issues, in and of themselves, were unlikely to have a significant impact on the outcome of the election; but would be significant in terms of how the candidates dealt with them. That is, they were looked on as tools useful for displaying those personal characteristics, or lack thereof, that might qualify a man to be President. At the same time, it was hoped that trying to force the campaign into a greater focus on issues during the fall would benefit the Ford candidacy. As long as the public perceived Governor Carter as holding views very close to their own, our prospects of winning in November were slim indeed. If on the other hand





we were successful in forcing greater specificity in his positions and communicating those views to those who disagreed with them, we would have a chance to peel off key voter groups in important states. One of our key objectives came to be changing the public's perceptions of Jimmy Carter.

These considerations supported the argument that we should challenge the Governor to a series of debates. Debates offered the opportunity to encourage greater specificity on issues and provided maximum potential impact through instantaneous communication to large numbers of voters via television. If Governor Carter failed to be more specific, he would run the risk of increasing the number of people who perceived him as fuzzy and indecisive. We did not believe his "trust me" approach would be very effective in a debate setting when he was asked for specific views on major national issues.

#### TELEVISION

Throughout our deliberations, we were well aware of the enormous importance of television. Given the size of Governor Carter's lead, we would have to change the voting intentions of literally millions of Americans by election day.

No matter how extensively the President campaigned, it would have been impossible to reach enough people in person to achieve the desired result. Therefore, we operated on the assumption that personal appearances were useful only to the extent that they received extensive favorable coverage on the evening news. Whatever strategy we adopted had to take into account the reality that any activity which did not receive extensive television coverage was likely to be wasted activity.

Although television was the only vehicle which offered the potential of reaching sufficient voters to turn the situation around by election day, we were also concerned that the record of the networks in past elections indicated that they had not devoted very much time to communicating the candidates' positions on the issues. The final draft of the campaign plan cited the work of Patterson and McClure in their book, THE UNSEEING EYE, on the 1972 campaign. Even though one might disagree with some of their conclusions, they offered evidence that the networks had been relatively ineffective at focusing on issues.

Based on a content analysis of the network evening news for the seven-week period from September 18th, through November 6, 1972, they demonstrated that all three networks



had devoted considerably more attention to campaign activities such as rallies and motorcades than they had to issues.

	<u>ABC</u>	<u>CBS</u>	<u>NBC</u>
Total Coverage			
For All Issues	35 Min.	46 Min.	26 Min.
Coverage News Minutes			
For Each Issue	80 Sec.	105 Sec.	60 Sec.
Total For Campaign			
Activities, Rallies, etc.	141 Min.	122 Min.	130 Min.

Patterson and McClure also indicated that there was much more issue content in 1972 in the paid political advertising of the two candidates than on the evening news. This does not necessarily mean the networks had chosen to ignore issues. It could simply be a reflection of the way the 1972 campaign was conducted by the candidates. Regardless of the reason, the findings had significance for our planning efforts.

From our perspective, although we had to rely on television to convey our message, we also had to recognize :

that very little would be communicated about the policy views of the two candidates if we pursued a conventional campaign strategy. If we gave them rallies and motorcades, that would be the message conveyed to the public.

This is not to say that we ignored the traditional campaign hoopla. We undertook our fair share of riverboat rides, train trips and balloon drops. But our objective of encouraging a greater focus on Governor Carter's policy views could not be achieved with a conventional approach. These factors too led us to consider the debate option.

A series of televised debates offered an opportunity to reach the maximum number of voters in a setting designed to focus attention on substantive issues. We did not believe that we could change the nature of the campaign in seventy-three days, so that a concentration on issues would replace the importance of the public's perception of the personal attributes and characteristics of the candidates. Indeed, we did want to give heavy emphasis to what we believed were the President's personal strengths and to emphasize what our research told us were Carter's weaknesses. But we also believed that debates showing our opponent and the President responding to specific questions about their views on



substantive issues would play to our strengths and to Governor Carter's weaknesses, and might convince a number of voters that they disagreed with him in certain areas, something they did not believe in July.

THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST DEBATES

As we developed the campaign strategy, we were very much aware that arguments could be mustered against the idea of debates. The traditional wisdom was that an incumbent President did not debate his challenger, but then ours was not a traditional incumbency.

The concern that debates would place President Ford and the Governor on an equal plane in the eyes of the public was of little consequence. Frankly, we would have been delighted in July to have been perceived on "equal" terms.

While it was true that televised debates would give Governor Carter extensive exposure to the public, just as it would President Ford, we believe this would serve to decrease his lead in the campaign. Our analysis of his strength in the polls, the softness of his support, and his ability to seem all things to all people, led to the decision that we

wanted the Governor to have such exposure; that it was necessary if we were to win.

We also gave considerable thought to the experience of Kennedy and Nixon in the 1960 debates. To the extent that physical and stylistic factors were important in public perceptions of who would "win" or "lose" the debates, we believed our candidate would come off very well. The President's physical size and presence presented none of the negatively perceived personal characteristics which had supposedly caused Nixon to lose the first debate to Kennedy in 1960.

Substantively, the President was well-equipped to enter the debates. His service on the Hill and his two years as President meant he possessed a wealth of information about the functions of government. He had spent his entire professional career wrestling with the kinds of issues that were bound to come up in the course of the debates and had traditionally done very well in similar formats. In January of that year, the President had given the annual briefing on the federal budget, thus becoming the first President in nearly thirty years to do so. A format which let him respond to questions had always been more effective for him than a formal set speech.



In addition to the arguments cited above for deciding to debate, there were the President's own strong feelings on the subject. During his congressional career, he had frequently participated in debates in his re-election campaigns. The President had a strong personal desire to take on his opponent, and the whole concept of debates appealed to his competitive instincts.

#### THE STRATEGY

By the time of the Kansas City Convention, the broad outlines of the general election strategy had been determined, although much of the detail was left to be worked out at Vail after the convention.

The central elements in the strategy involved holding active travel to a minimum until late in the campaign. When we did travel, the events would be designed to achieve maximum television impact. The center piece of the last ten days of campaigning, eventually developed by Bob Teeter and John Deardorff, were the half-hour specials broadcast on statewide television hook-ups in the large target states. We produced the shows ourselves, using video tape footage of the President and members of the first family campaigning

in the state, and discussions between the President and Joe Garagiola of the issues in the campaign--the "Joe and Jerry Show."

During those periods when the President was in Washington in the White House, we would conduct what came to be known as the "Rose Garden" campaign. We expected our opponent to travel extensively throughout the fall, and we were confident that the news media, particularly the television networks, would cover all of those events. We also knew that the networks' measure of fairness consisted of giving both candidates "equal" time. Therefore, whatever the President did during the day at the White House would receive coverage on the evening news, letting us convey our message to the electorate while emphasizing the fact that the President was the incumbent, and avoiding the pitfalls of too much campaign travel too soon.

To achieve our objective of changing the public's perception of Governor Carter, we relied heavily on our advertising program designed and produced by Doug Bailey and John Deardorff. The advertising campaign itself made a major contribution to our success in closing the gap during the fall and deserves far more extensive treatment than I can give it here.



The debates would help by giving Governor Carter's policy views the kind of exposure which had previously been lacking, and would hopefully contribute to our efforts to persuade several million Americans that he disagreed with them on several issues. More importantly, the debate challenge satisfied our need to mount an aggressive, come-from-behind campaign, and provided a justification for staying off the campaign trail as much as possible. Finally, our unconventional circumstances called for an unconventional response. We had few alternatives.

As we departed Kansas City for Vail, we felt we had achieved everything that could reasonably be expected given the circumstances. The Reagan challenge was finally ended. We had maintained an effective, if sometimes tenuous control of the convention, and the intra-party wounds created by the long pre-convention struggle appeared to be healing rapidly. The President's acceptance address to the convention and the nation had clearly been one of the finest of his career. The debate challenge had achieved its desired result. In the opening round of the fall campaign, we had captured the initiative and gone on the offensive. The President had come out swinging and the Carter campaign was forced to react to us in spite of their substantial lead and status as the



challenger. This in turn provided time for a much needed rest and for finalizing detailed arrangements for the general election contest.

#### PREPARATION FOR THE DEBATES

The negotiations establishing the ground rules for the debates were somewhat protracted, but once the challenge had been issued and accepted, there was never any question about going ahead with the debates. Our negotiating posture was based on the assumption that the more exposure provided the candidates, the better. We asked for lengthy sessions on specified subjects with provisions made for follow-up questions from the panel. In return, for agreement on these items, we agreed to specify no subject matter for the final debate and to taking up foreign and defense matters in the second debate rather than in the first as we had originally suggested.

During the weeks preceding the first debate in Philadelphia on September 23rd, the President and part of the staff devoted considerable time to preparing for the event. We obtained film of the Kennedy-Nixon debates of 1960, and reviewed them with a special focus on the supposedly decisive

first debate. We also viewed video tapes of appearances by Governor Carter in debates and on talk shows during the primaries.

Extensive briefing books were prepared, including materials on both the administration's policy positions and the Governor's. Some of the most useful information developed concerned Mr. Carter's record as Governor of Georgia. Much of this material was used during the first debate and later included in our advertising. We also developed questions which we expected would be asked, and reviewed the published works of the panelists selected to ask the questions to ascertain their areas of expertise and interest.

In order to prepare as completely as possible, we conducted several dry runs with the President taking questions from staff people on those subjects which we expected to come up in the first debate. Our preparations were as complete and comprehensive as we could make them. We did not spend as much time preparing for the second and third debates, because there was less time to do so and we did not feel it was necessary to repeat all of those activities undertaken before the first debate.



### MEASURING THE IMPACT OF THE DEBATES

The Ford campaign used two research methods to measure the impact of the debates. During the actual course of the debates, we collected data from an instant response analysis of a panel of registered voters. The panels consisted of approximately 50 voters from the Spokane, Washington area. Each of the respondents had declared themselves to be undecided when asked about their voting intention prior to viewing the debate, although some of them were classified as "leaning" toward Ford or Carter. Our assumption was that the debates would have little effect on voters firmly committed to one or the other of the candidates. The composition of the panels was designed to give us as much information as possible about the reactions of voters who had not yet made up their minds.

Each member of the panel was equipped with a dial mechanism labeled from zero to one hundred. Zero indicated that the respondent was feeling much closer to Governor Carter and one hundred indicated that they were feeling much closer to President Ford. A value of fifty was an indication that the panelist was not leaning towards either man. Members of the panel were instructed before the debate to set their dial



at a value that described their feelings attitudinally as closer to Ford, closer to Carter, or in the middle. The panelists were to move the dial towards zero in response to positive feelings about Governor Carter and towards one hundred for positive feelings about President Ford.

The dial mechanisms were tied in with a computer and continuously, throughout the broadcast, the responses were summed and a means calculated for the entire group as well as two sub-groups: those who at the beginning of the broadcast had been identified as leaning towards the Governor or the President. Finally, these continuous average scores were superimposed on a video tape of the debate for later viewing and analysis.

This system provided useful information on the reaction of a group of uncommitted voters to the arguments and presentations of the two candidates. It was helpful in shaping our approach to later debates and highlighting those issues where we scored most heavily against the Governor, and where he scored against the President.

Our second research effort involved nationwide telephone surveys conducted as part of the ongoing research program for the campaign. These surveys were not limited to measuring

reactions to the debates although questions were included, which produced data on the impact of the debates. (I am indebted to Bob Teeter and Fred Steeper of Market Opinion Research for making available materials used in this section).

Prior to the first debate between September 10th, and September 14th, MOR conducted a nationwide telephone survey of a sample of 1,500 registered voters. Beginning on the evening of September 23rd, as the first debate ended, 758 of these individuals were re-interviewed. In both pre-debate and post-debate interviews, data was collected on the voters' perceptions of the issue positions of the candidates as well as on the candidates' personal attributes and abilities to deal with various kinds of problems such as unemployment, inflation, etc.

Immediately after the second debate, MOR conducted another nationwide telephone survey of approximately 500 registered voters. We did not do a pre-debate study in conjunction with the second debate. By the time of the third debate, we did not conduct any additional national surveys. Such a survey would have had no real value from the standpoint of making decisions about the conduct of the campaign during the few days remaining before the election, and all of our

resources were by then committed to tracking developments in the target states.

Certainly we also followed the results of the post-debate polls conducted by the Associated Press and the Roper organization. But for our purposes, they provided little useful information. Responses to the simple question of who won or lost a particular debate, did not, in my opinion, shed much light on the impact of the debates on the voting intentions of those who had not yet made up their minds. Their greatest significance, perhaps, lay in the convenient tool they gave the press and public to "judge" the debates and draw some conclusions about them. We had to deal with the results of those surveys because they tended to shape press reaction and commentary after a debate. But they had little relevance for assessing the progress of the campaign, especially when the two organizations produced conflicting conclusions about which candidate had "won," as occurred after the final debate.

#### THE FIRST DEBATE

The research efforts undertaken in conjunction with the first debate led us to conclude that we had made significant progress in several areas. The instant response




analysis from the Spokane panel indicated the President had scored well on a number of issues. The national pre- and post-debate surveys provided evidence that we had been successful in increasing the public's information about the candidates' positions on the issues and strengthening their perceptions of the personal attributes of the President.

According to the results of the panel study, the President had scored very well whenever he talked about taxes. On four separate occasions during the 90-minute debate, he had raised the issue in some form, each time generating a very positive reaction on the part of the respondents. The President also scored very high when he talked about crime and criticized Carter's record during his term as Governor of Georgia and his spending proposals. Governor Carter had been most successful on the subjects of the bureaucratic mess in Washington, the energy crisis and the need for tax reform.

In addition to showing that the President had done very well overall, the results also indicated the importance of giving full and complete answers to each question. The instant response analysis clearly demonstrated that the President had the greatest impact on those "leaning" to





Carter when he took the time to clearly explain his position on an issue and his reasons for holding that view. When he gave a fairly lengthy answer, he was able to move the "Carter leaners" a significant distance towards a pro-Ford response. Brief answers, without adequate explanations did not provide sufficient time to overcome the bias of the Carter leaners. At the same time, the scores for the subgroup composed of "Ford leaners" did not drop off even during a lengthy response. As a result, we altered our original belief that short, punchy answers were sometimes desirable, and sought to emphasize lengthier answers in later debates.

The data generated in the pre-and post-debate telephone surveys were also encouraging. There was solid support for the proposition that those interviewed had obtained considerable information on the issue positions of the candidates. In the pre-debate interviews, questions had been asked about abortion, bussing, welfare spending, national health insurance, the legalization of marijuana, and defense spending, but these items were not included in the post-debate survey because they were not discussed during the first debate. On three issues, we were able to obtain both pre and post-debate measures of the amount of information the viewers possessed



about the positions of the candidates; amnesty for Viet Nam era draft resisters, the use of public funds to guarantee jobs, and the alternative of stimulating the development of jobs in the private sector. In a paper prepared for delivery to the annual convention of the American Association of Public Opinion Research in May of this year, Andrew Morrison and Frederick Steeper of Market Opinion Research and Susan Greendale from the University of Michigan explored this aspect of the first debate in some detail using the results of the national surveys taken for the Ford campaign. They concluded that on these three issues "significant movement occurred from pre-debate 'don't know' and 'it depends' responses to post-debate identification of Ford or Carter as for or against each issue."

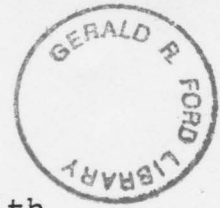
On the question of amnesty, the number of voters correctly identifying President Ford's position (against) increased from 40% to 60% between the pre-debate and post-debate surveys. The "don't know" category declined from 29% to 13%. In the pre-debate survey, 53% had indicated Governor Carter was in favor of an amnesty program. After the debates, this had increased <sup>to</sup> 70%. The "don't know" category declined from 33% to 16%.

On the question of using federal funds to guarantee jobs, there was similar movement. Those citing President Ford as being opposed to such guarantees rose from 35% to 58%. The "don't know" category declined from 43% to 22%. The number citing Governor Carter as being in favor of federal guarantees increased from 44% to 71%. The "don't know" category declined from 45% to 22%.

Changes in the amount of information the public possessed about the candidates' position on the question of stimulating jobs in the private sector were not as pronounced, but still significant. Before the debate, 46% believed President Ford supported this proposition, 8% said he was against it, 43% said they did not know what he thought. After the debate, 63% said the President was "for" the concept, 16% against, and 21% said they did not know.

The percentage citing Governor Carter as being in favor of stimulating jobs in the private sector increased from 39% to 45%, those saying he opposed the idea increased from 12% to 27% and the "don't knows" declined from 46% to 28%.

The post-debate survey also indicated we had made progress in improving the respondents' perceptions of President



Ford's leadership qualities and his ability to deal with specific problems. During the interviews, registered voters had been asked to identify which of the candidates they most trusted to make the right decision, which was most effective at dealing with tough problems, and which demonstrated the most concern for the average citizen. On the question of trust, President Ford had the edge before the debate (45% to 36% for Carter). After the debate, the President had increased his lead somewhat to 48% with only 35% citing Governor Carter as being more trustworthy. Before the debate, both candidates had been viewed as being equally effective at dealing with tough problems - 39% for each. After the debate, President Ford had a slight advantage: 44% viewed him as more effective, compared to 41% for Governor Carter. On concern for the average citizen, Governor Carter clearly had the edge (Carter 46% and Ford 28%), in the pre-debate survey, and maintained it in the post-debate survey (48% to 31%).

The voters were also asked to indicate their perception of the relative capabilities of the two candidates to deal with problems such as inflation, unemployment, holding down taxes, reducing crime, running the federal government, handling foreign affairs, and maintaining a strong national



defense. On all seven items, perceptions of President Ford improved between the pre-debate and post-debate surveys from two to nine percentage points. For Governor Carter, the maximum gain had been two per cent, and in one instance, he suffered a decline of six per cent.

On five of the seven issues, President Ford had the advantage going into the debate. Governor Carter had a clear advantage on the issue of reducing unemployment and there was no significant difference on the seventh issue, combatting crime. The debates did not reverse any of these advantages, but the number of voters citing President Ford as being more capable of handling these problems increased and the percentage taking a "don't know" or middle ground position had declined from 2% to 5% on each item.

Obviously, some caution is in order in interpreting these results. A definitive judgement about the impact of the debates would require a far more rigorous analysis than is possible here or can be supported by the data we collected during last year's campaign. Our pre-debate and post-debate surveys did not permit us to separate out the influence of other factors in shaping the results. In addition to the debate itself, there were many other develop-

ments over the ten-day period separating the surveys which could have accounted for some of the changes observed. For example, even though foreign policy and defense were not discussed during the debates, we also observed changes in the voters' perceptions of the candidates' ability to handle these issues. During the period leading up to the debates, the Administration had been actively engaged in diplomatic efforts in Southern Africa, which could have had an impact. Or alternatively, the perceptual changes of the President's ability to deal with domestic issues could have rubbed off on public perceptions of his ability to function in the area of foreign policy.

During the 10 days separating the two surveys, Governor Carter had been actively campaigning around the country, and President Ford had appeared repeatedly in the Rose Garden to comment on issues and developments in the campaign.

Our research effort was not designed to generate a rigorous and definitive judgement about the relative impact of the debates on the public, but rather to measure progress towards our goal of winning on November 2nd, and to provide information which might lead to adjustments in the operation of the campaign and the implementation of our campaign

strategy. To the extent we generated data focusing on the debate, it was useful in highlighting those aspects which we wanted to emphasize in the future and making relatively minor adjustments in our approach. At that point, late September, the strategy was set and could not be changed significantly. The only questions having any relevance then dealt with how we implemented that strategy.

Based on the information available after the first debate, we judged it a success. We believed the President had scored well on a number of key points, that we had enhanced the voters' understanding of the candidates' issue positions, strengthened the President's perception as a leader, and gained ground on the question of his ability to deal with difficult problems. Finally, it was clear we had reached a very large portion of the electorate. According to our surveys, some 89% of all registered voters had seen or heard the first debate.

#### THE SECOND DEBATE

A good deal has been written about the impact or lack of impact of the second Ford-Carter debate on the outcome of the 1976 election. Obviously, most of the attention has



been focused on the President's mis-statement concerning the degree of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe. My own view is that it was not as decisive as some have suggested.

There is no question but what the second debate was less successful from our standpoint than the first had been. In my opinion, however, and given the perspective of the Ford campaign at the time, its impact was more significant on the press than on the public at large. This in turn had an impact on the public after the fact and became a problem which had to be dealt with, but I do not believe the Eastern European statement can be said to have determined the outcome of the election.

I viewed the second debate on a television set in the President's holding room backstage at the theatre in San Francisco. My initial reaction to the debate, before seeing any results from our research efforts, was that the President had done well from a substantive standpoint. I was aware that his response to the question on the Soviet role in Eastern Europe had not been accurate, but I also knew what he meant and hoped that the public would also. I felt Governor Carter had improved over his performance





in the first debate in terms of style and the way he handled himself. But I also believed that substantively he had made a weak showing. Admittedly, I was not then, and may not be now, totally objective about the relative ability of the two men to conduct U.S. foreign policy.

My view at the time was based on a feeling that the President had been very effective in discussing U. S.-Soviet relations, SALT, the defense budget, China and our arms policy in the Middle East. Governor Carter, on the other hand had been vague when asked which elements of U. S. foreign policy he disagreed with. I did not believe his comments had demonstrated any deep understanding of the problems the U. S. faced in the world. When he had scored rhetorically, I felt his comments had focused on the form rather than the substance of national security concerns.

The fact that we were faced with a serious problem was brought home by the press corps shortly after the debate ended. After the first debate in Philadelphia, we had met with the press to take questions on our reactions to the debate. Similar arrangements had been made in San Francisco. Brent Scowcroft, the President's national security advisor, Stu Spencer of the campaign committee, and I were to meet with the press to respond to their questions.

We knew we had a problem when the first question put to us was, "Are there Soviet troops in Poland?"

As mentioned previously, our research efforts undertaken for the second debate were less extensive than for the first. We conducted a second instant response analysis in Spokane and a post-debate nationwide survey of some 500 registered voters. This telephone survey began immediately after the debate on the West Coast and continued through the next evening. We did not do a pre-debate survey for the second debate.

The Spokane panel analysis, when compared to the results of the panel for the first debate showed generally lower (i.e., more pro-Carter) scores for the second debate. Part of this may have been due to the pre-debate inclinations of the respondents. When asked to set their dials at a value reflecting how close they felt to either of the candidates before the debate began, the average score was some five points below that for the first debate.

Nonetheless, it was clear that the Governor had scored better than in the first debate. Reviewing the results showed that the President had scored well at the



outset on the question of Communist involvement in the Italian Government and again toward the close in discussing the Mayaguez incident and the Arab boycott. In the central portion of the debate, the President's remarks on negotiations with the Soviets, his opposition to selling arms to the Chinese and his comments about Korea had generated positive responses. However, Governor Carter had generated more positive responses in his criticisms of secret diplomacy and arms sales to Iran, in his call for fireside chats to discuss foreign policy and on his comments about nuclear proliferation, the Arab boycott and the Panama Canal.

The results of the panel study showed virtually no immediate impact with respect to the President's comments on Eastern Europe. Average scores during the debate swung from a low of 29 (pro-Carter) to a high of 64 (pro-Ford). During the segment when Eastern Europe was discussed, there was very little movement in the average score. The score held fairly stable between 44 and 48 during the exchange between Max Frankel who asked the question and the President. It was clear the comments failed to generate any positive response, but it is also true that there was no immediate negative reaction to the statements about Eastern Europe.

The results of the nationwide post-debate survey also indicated that there was a delayed reaction to this portion of the debates. Frederick Steeper of Market Opinion Research has covered this material in some detail in a paper prepared for delivery at the annual convention of American Association of Public Opinion Research this past May. At the time of the debate, all we had access to immediately was the raw data collected as the interviewing progressed. On the night of the debate, interviewing began on the West Coast because of the lateness of the hour in the East. 101 interviews were conducted the evening of October 6th, and an additional 397 between 9:00 a.m. and midnight (EST) on October 7th, the day after the debate. Care had to be exercised in evaluating the data over time, because we did not have matched national samples. But it was clear that there were substantial shifts in voter perceptions between Wednesday night and Thursday night, even allowing for the built in bias of having all of the interviews from the first night conducted in the West.

The first wave of interviews showed that President Ford was perceived as having done the better job in the debate by a margin of 9%. The interviews taken the next night showed a drastic reversal, and Governor Carter had taken a



substantial lead on this item. Throughout the 24-hour period there was a decline in pro-Ford responses and a corresponding increase in pro-Carter responses. Steeper's paper, mentioned above, corrects for the built-in bias of looking only at results taken from sub-groups of the total sample and validates the basic conclusion of serious erosion over time.

Respondents were also asked to specify what they felt each candidate had done well and not done well during the debates. On Wednesday evening, immediately after the debate, not a single respondent mentioned President Ford's comments on Eastern Europe. Yet by the next evening of the 121 interviews conducted after 5:00 p.m., 20% mentioned this statement as one of the things he had not done well. In my mind, the data indicate that for much of the viewing public, the mis-statement about the status of Eastern Europe was not a significant item until it received extensive comment and coverage in the press after the debate. From the standpoint of our campaign, however, we still faced the task of clarifying the situation over the next several days. It was a problem regardless of whether the public perceived it as such immediately, or only after being told it was a



problem by the media.


The second debate obviously was not a plus for the Ford campaign. It did create difficulties in several areas. The debate and the commentary afterwards generated a negative reaction from the public. It cost us time as the issue ran its course and placed us on the defensive for the next several days as we clarified the President's position. Furthermore, the intense focus on Eastern Europe meant that little or no attention was paid to what I felt were substantive weaknesses in the Carter presentation - specifically his denial of ever having advocated a \$15 billion cut in the defense budget, and his charge that the Ford Administration had been responsible for overthrowing a democratically elected government in Chile. The Chilean coup had occurred during the Nixon years. Finally, I did not believe the Governor had demonstrated any broad understanding of U. S. foreign policy. But all of this proved to be of little consequence as we tried to cope with reaction to the statement on Eastern Europe.

In assessing the overall impact of this particular debate, it is important to keep in mind another problem that affected our campaign during the same period. This was the

publicity given the investigation being conducted by the Watergate Special Prosecutor into allegations that President Ford had mis-used campaign funds while he was a member of Congress. We were able to correct the difficulties stemming from the second debate by making clear the President's views on Eastern Europe and meeting with political leaders of the relevant ethnic groups. But there was absolutely nothing we could do to alleviate the impact of extensive coverage of the Special Prosecutor's activities. We were confident that we would ultimately obtain a clean bill of health when the prosecutor found there was no substance to the charges; but we had no way of knowing when that would be. All we could do was to deny the allegations, but such statements are hardly designed to win over voters in the midst of a come-from-behind residential campaign, especially in light of the track record for recent White House denials of allegations being investigated by the Special Prosecutor. For the Ford campaign, the latter problem was more serious and difficult to cope with than was the controversy over the second debate.

#### THE THIRD DEBATE

As we prepared for the final debate October 22nd, in



Williamsburg, circumstances improved considerably for the Ford campaign. The Special Prosecutor had closed his investigation, the flap over Eastern Europe faded and the polls showed continued erosion in Governor Carter's lead. In the major target states, our polls showed us moving to within striking distance.

The third debate took on less significance for us than the first two. We had less time to prepare, and by then, debates between the candidates had become somewhat routine, not only for the public, but also for the campaigners. The debate, itself, turned out to be routine, generating no real surprises for either side. Our own research activities by then were being shifted to tracking developments in the handful of big states which we felt would determine the outcome of the election. We did not collect data related specifically to the final debate, because it would have had no utility in shaping the final ten days of the campaign. As mentioned previously, AP and Roper differed over who "won" the third debate, and we felt it had been relatively close with neither candidate gaining any significant advantage.

Our primary focus during the last ten days of the campaign moved away from the debates and onto our advertising



campaign and a heavy schedule of travel in the large electoral vote states. One of our more successful efforts was the television shows we produced ourselves in six of those states. They permitted us to reach the maximum number of people at a very low cost. To the extent we were able to close in on Carter in those final days, I believe these activities were more significant than the third and final debate.

#### CONCLUSION

A year after the election, with the benefit of hindsight, I still believe the decision to include the debate option in our 1976 campaign strategy was the right one. Given the circumstances we faced in the summer before the convention and the size of our opponent's lead, we had few alternatives. The debate challenge satisfied our need to mount an aggressive campaign without having to spend all of our time on the road throughout the months of September and October.

Beyond the dynamics of the campaign itself, I believe it is very difficult to separate out the debates from other activities and determine exactly what their impact was on the election day result. It seems clear that the debate

challenge gave the Ford campaign the initiative at the close of the Kansas City Convention and that the first debate was a major plus for the President. The second debate clearly went to Carter in the public mind and threw the Ford organization off stride for several days. There appears to be a consensus that the third debate was somewhat anti-climatic and did not have much impact one way or the other.

I believe the evidence supports the contention that the debates did increase public awareness about the positions of the candidates on issues, although some of that would certainly have occurred without the debates. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that this was their only impact. Although we did not collect much information on this point, it seems clear that the voters also judged the candidates in the debates based upon general perceptions of their personal qualities and competence.

While the debates did provide a means by which candidates can communicate directly with the voters via television, the role of the news media is substantial in interpreting the events after the fact. After both the first and second debates, we believed the press commentary

served to magnify the actual outcome and to shape voter sentiment even though the voters had seen the event themselves.

In the end, we were unable to overcome the Carter lead and from that perspective, our strategy was unsuccessful. But viewed in the light of our July deficit of more than 30%, we felt we had run a successful campaign. I believe the debates were an important part of that success and would recommend them again under similar circumstances.