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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

October 4, 1972

MEMORANDUM FOR: MR. HALDEMAN  
FROM: KEN KHACHIGIAN   
SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNING

From the vantage point of having tracked the opposition activities more closely than most observers, I am submitting these thoughts as to what's ahead for us when the President takes to the hustings.

I am convinced that the extent of the victory on November 7 -- or even whether that victory will be of historic landslide proportions -- will be determined almost solely by the Presidential tone in the last three weeks of the campaign. If the returns coming in from the New York/California swing mean anything, it is that the anti-McGovern line, coming from the President, may be counterproductive.

We all know that there exists in the media a great deal more tolerance for the rhetorical excesses coming out of the Democrats. There is nothing approaching a groundswell of editorial comment and subtle television reportage which attaches the labels "divisive" or "polarizing" on the opposition ticket. It comes out more like "hard-hitting" and "spirited."

I regret to say that we must live with this double standard for the remainder of the campaign. I do not think there is anything we can do to prevent it. The question is how to deal with it in terms of Presidential tone.

The wonder of television is that it can belie any editorial comment or criticism. For example, if, on the tube, the President is lofty, spirited, and uplifting, it is difficult for the commentators to make the public think differently. If Dan Rather says RN was "harsh" or "strident" and the television image is objectively not harsh, then Rather has been effectively rebutted. The voters are not damn fools in this respect.

What will hurt is when the President takes to the attack -- say, per the Cassie Mackin report of last week -- and gets a label hung around him by the Rathers and Jarriels. If the image confirms the commentary, I fear we lose points.

Consequently, if the label is effectively pinned on RN that he is divisive and polarizing, we will have handed George McGovern one of his most potent campaign issues. I believe this will be as central an issue as anything else in the campaign. The fact that McGovern has picked up his personal attacks more decisively this week is proof positive that the Democrats think they have the right combination.

The one thing that we cannot afford to do in the last three weeks of the campaign is to allow McGovern to make RN the campaign issue. He is desperately trying to do this and will probe for an opening. One of the basic components of the landslide margin in the current polls is, of course, the overwhelming support from Democrats. About a third of this is "soft" support, and many of these Democrats will be searching for a reason not to vote for RN. McGovern will try to give them as many reasons as possible -- the basic one which will be "you cannot trust him; he is tricky, political," etc. Let's not give them the opening.

It is interesting that we have come full circle from the time of the primaries. McGovern was the white Knight, anti-politician. RN was the quintessential politician. Now, according to all polls, McGovern skidded because he turns out to be just another politician while RN is perceived as statesmanlike and Presidential -- a man you could trust. But it is important to remember that if the public was volatile enough to switch quickly from McGovern to RN on the "politician" issue, it can just as quickly switch back in a pendulum swing.

That will be McGovern's secret weapon -- try to rehabilitate himself as an anti-politician (he began that Monday) and when RN comes out on the stump, put the politician label on him as rapidly as possible. With the media's help, that could be done in a matter of days.

We are not inevitably locked into this scenario. Again, it is my opinion that the public will not buy the politician label for RN if, in fact, there is little in his image and tone which projects "politics." We can frustrate the media on this account. And let us remember, too, that once RN is out campaigning, the press may complain about his lack of discussion of the issues, but that charge is one which won't make a damn bit of difference. If RN is talking about what we perceive to be important to the voting public, then we should not be bound by what the gurus of the press think should be said.

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This brings me to the more crucial part of the analysis. If there are certain things the President should not do, what, in fact, should be the tone and content of his campaign effort?

First, I don't believe that the President should move out any of the attack material, and if so, only by strong, positive RN counter-positions. If we are doing our job right on the staff level, we can get the attack stuff out. So far, I think, without a doubt, we have succeeded in hanging some uncomfortable labels on McGovern. His efforts to wiggle off the fishhook are proof that we have hit a nerve. Moreover, the polls confirm that McGovern is tarred with the radical label. The job from the Vice-Presidential level on down is to keep that record of radicalism out front. I don't doubt our ability to do that.

But the Presidential level should be altogether different. I frankly think the President need not even concern himself with pointing out the radicalism in the opposition camp. I say this, not because I think it is unfair for a President to do this, but because RN gets unfair treatment when he does it. If RN did so, the focus then comes back to RN's tactics" rather than to the record we want to surface to the public.

Instead, there are a number of things the President can do as he campaigns to keep Republican spirits high, prevent too much Democratic party slippage, and, in general, go into election eve with the feeling that a posture has been presented to the American public which maintains its confidence in the stewardship of RN.

(1) In my judgment, one of the central issues of this campaign is the "good" America of RN versus the "corrupt" America of McGovern. I think McGovern has been absolutely stupid in the way he has been seen to side with those who tear America down. The best way to exploit this is from the positive side of RN's belief in a good country. I know this has been a thematic favorite of the President's, but I think it needs to be developed as a more comprehensive slice of the pie we are presenting this year.

You saw the Yankelovich results in TIME which said that McGovern's biggest miscalculation was on the depth of bitterness and dissatisfaction among the voters. And 75% of those sampled said that they were sick and tired of hearing people attack American values. I don't mean here simply a few paragraphs on America being a good country, but a full speech should be developed on this subject, and I would think that it be one of the first delivered.

The best contrast of the campaign will be the bitchy George McGovern with his whining, whimpering, crybaby attitude matched against the strong confidence of RN. The people of America are not basically mean-minded and sour, but are, instead, people who respond to lift and optimism. McGovern erred in trying to harvest the bitter fruit when in fact there is, as the polls universally show, an almost serene satisfaction with the way things are. The desire is for change, sure, but, damn-it-all, change which plays on the goodness of America, not that which craps all over its institutions.

(2) The President should develop, or ask to have developed for him, some basic lines which respond with calculated indignation to some of the pure bull that McGovern is throwing around. This is a chance for RN to take the extremely important underdog role -- an effective role I believe. I am referring to such things as the Hitler quotes, the "barbarism" in Vietnam, the charge that he's lied about POWs, etc.

A healthy dose of modulated anger would be good for the electorate and good for RN. For example, he might say: "My friends, I have served as your President for nearly four years, and I am not about to sit back and be compared to Adolph Hitler. It is a tribute to free speech that candidates can make such charges, but it is not a tribute to the political process to have the world watch the President of the United States equated with the most hated dictator of our time." A number of lines roughly like that would be effective, I believe.

Note: if any more anti-war hecklers become a visible problem and can be seen and heard on television, the President might effectively say: "I think the American people are tired of being called murderous and war-mongers. You have the right to question our policy, but don't you for one minute try to impugn the motives or the morality of the citizens of our country." Here, RN defends the public.

(3) One effective point is to rebut the moralism of George McGovern. This should be done by pointing out that no one has a monopoly on morality, and that it doesn't help the political process for the opposition candidate to suggest that only what he thinks is right and what everybody else thinks is wrong. RN might say that he may not agree with someone, but that he doesn't try to act morally superior or hide behind a shield of rectitude.

This point has turned up in a number of columns -- namely, reporters confessing chagrin at McGovern's pious morality. RN needs to make the point as well.

(4) It may sound incongruous, but I believe that RN must address an all-black audience during the campaign. Charles Bartlett had an excellent column pointing out that McGovern has taken the blacks for granted in a subtle attempt to get white working class Democrats back into the fold. RN addressing a black audience will have several effects. It will get excellent play and emphasize he is the President of all the people. If tuned to the black middle class -- rather than the "We Shall Overcome" overblown rhetoric of LBJ -- it can get votes, especially if RN goes right to the heart of the matter of those who denigrate blacks by lumping them together as all poor, ignorant, etc. It would also probably send McGovern scurrying to patch up things with the blacks and cause him, perhaps, to overreact and line himself up with a political posture which won't help him. Finally, it would exploit the frustration in the black leadership at being taken for granted by the Democrats and promote the emphasis that RN has done more for minority advancement than any other President.

(5) One of the things that keeps turning up in voter surveys in terms of dissatisfaction with McGovern is the fact that he is changing his tune on everything and promising something for everybody. It looks like -- and is -- crass expediency. It also confirms that McGovern is not anti-politician, but pure politician. RN can advance his cause by making a virtue of the fact that promises have not been wildly bandied about in his administration, and the reason for the turbulent 60's (a subtle reminder of what we had in those years) was the overblown rhetoric which could not be delivered in programs. This will posture RN as the one who is not the expedient politician who promises all things to all men. "We did not make promises we could not keep." In the Haynes Johnson survey, here is what an ethnic Democrat, who retired early because he was unemployed, and voted for McGovern in the primary, said: "Now I think he's (McG) more two-faced, like trying to tell people he's going to help them get jobs. They all like to do the promises, but he's gone beyond most of them, whereas Nixon knows what we've got to do."

(6) Hold the hands of Democrat defectors by telling audiences that what we have done in foreign policy is the same thing JFK et al. would have done.

(7) Emphasize domestic stability and the sense of pride and respect America now has for itself. McGoo is on the wrong side of the issue if he continues to think Americans hate themselves.

(8) When emphasizing the international turnaround -- cite things like: who would think that not only America, but Japan would be talking to China; East Germany with West Germany; North Korea with South Korea. The great sense of quietude and stability is like calamine lotion on chickenpox. Who was ever ashamed of serenity and goodwill?

(9) Do not underestimate how McGovern so effectively uses attacks on himself. It's not for nothing he gets elected in South Dakota. Here is what one of his close friends says: "There's nothing George likes better than to have them attack him as disloyal. Then he can get out his American Legion cap and dust off his Distinguished Flying Cross and really take them on." George has already done this, and you can be sure he's lusting for RN to even hint at his loyalty. This is why I believe RN must leave the attack to others.

(10) For God sake, let the word go out to all staff that the smallest mistake of judgment could foul everything. In 1968 the media played the innocuous mutual fund letter to a fair-thee-well. Let's not get nervous about things. Our opponents will desperately search for anything by which they can pin all the clichéd labels on us -- for once, let's protect RN from his friends. Let's also maintain our cool about McGovern's crowds. Goldwater had much better crowds than LBJ, and in 1960, JFK was mobbed in Ohio and RN was mobbed in Atlanta -- neither carried the state in which he was mobbed. Crowds are not determinative of momentum.