

December 24, 1975

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MEMORANDUM TO: RICHARD CHENEY  
FROM: ROBERT TEETER  
SUBJECT: National Poll

After studying the National data over the weekend, I am more convinced than ever that we must make some changes to change the President's perception. We will have a very difficult time winning a general election unless the voters' perception of the President is changed significantly.

The two most disturbing pieces of data are the 44% disapproval of the President and the fact that over 60% can not name anything he has done that has "particularly impressed them" since he has been President. It is significant that the 44% disapproval comes against a background of a hazy perception of the President rather than any one or group of specific complaints. This high disapproval comes from two sources. First the general perception of the President being indecisive and lacking a clear direction and secondly a more institutional attitude of negativism and pessimism. Almost three-quarters of the voters don't think things are going very well in the country and think it will be some time before they get better.

The most significant change in the data over the last year is that voters appear to be less concerned with issues of principle and structure and more concerned with their own specific problems, particularly economic ones. The general attitude in our current data is that the voter has, and has had for some time, serious problems and wants some help solving them. He is much less concerned than a year ago about whether or not the government is involved in solving them, and what level of government is involved. He wants change and help now and in most cases is looking first to the federal government for that help. It may well be this is the kind of situation that spawned the adage that successful politicians talk conservatively but act liberally. There is ample evidence in this data that many of the President's ideas are popular on an abstract or conceptual basis but are not seen as providing any immediate change or real help for the voters and therefore, not helping him politically.

This further indicates to me that we can't go through next year with the tax budget cut proposal being our only or our leading issue. The President must establish his perception as being a man who understands people's problems, who has a plan to help solve them and is decisively going about making the changes that will solve them. In short, he has got to be an activist, not simply someone who is against whatever programs Congress passes.



More specifically, the State of the Union should meet at least the five following criteria:

1. It should be seen as a plan to solve the problems the voters think are most acute. The President's program for next year must be perceived as a plan that will do something for people not just hold the line and keep their problems from getting worse.
2. Whatever specific programs or areas it addresses, need to be tied together by a common theme. In fact, I think we have reached the point where the President's program needs to have a specific name or slogan. While we may have been unimpressed by them, everybody remembers The New Deal, The Fair Deal, The Great Society, and The New Frontier.
3. Whatever proposals are in the speech, there needs to be a preceding paragraph to each section that promises help for that specific area. While I am not in favor of over-promise, every successful Democrat for forty years has done it. For example, preceding whatever the President says on unemployment, ought to be a short paragraph that says any unemployment is unacceptable and that his administration is going to lower unemployment in 1976. Preceding the crime section, there ought to be a short paragraph that cites the seriousness of the problem and says that his proposal will help solve this problem now.
4. He should announce as many administrative actions as possible to prove to people he is doing something about the problems rather than just perpetuating his 16-month-long fight with Congress over them.
5. While he should acknowledge the seriousness of many of these problems, the speech has got to give people hope and reason to believe that they will be better off in the future because Gerald Ford is President. The speech should also have clear underlying moral tone.

The issues which I think should be specifically addressed are:

1. Inflation and unemployment. Over half of the people mention one of these two issues as their leading issue concern. They are obviously the cause of the strong negativism and pessimism in the data. A large majority of people in the country are or think they are hurting financially and want the government to do something about now. Interestingly, only 7% of them think that the Ford Administration is the leading cause of the inflation but an overwhelming majority think the administration is not doing anything or enough to solve the problem.



2. Crime. One-third of the people mention crime or some crime-related problem as the problem that most seriously concerns them. This is a classic example of an area where the President's proposals are popular conceptually, but nobody has heard anything about them or identifies them with the President.
3. Energy. Energy has increased as an issue concern over the past 6 - 8 months and is an area we ought to take credit for what it does as long as he has signed the bill. The concerns over energy is 40% on high prices, 32% over our dependence on foreign countries, and 27% over the possibility of shortages.
4. Health care. This is another area where people want help but where there has been a significant change in the data from a year ago. There is now a substantial plurality who believe that they receive better health care under a private plan and that most think the expenses should be paid by private insurance plans. There is still, however, substantial support for government help for those who can't afford private health insurance or have catastrophic illnesses.
5. Increased aid to the elderly. While they do not mention it unaided as a serious problem, they put it at the top of the list when you ask which of a number of programs they would be most willing to have their taxes increased for. Under no circumstance can the President be seen as being for anything that would limit or cut back aid to senior citizens.
6. Education. Education is returning as an important national issue after a six or eight year absence. Education is still the leading middle-class value in America and most people see it as the only way their children are going to improve their situation and end up better off than they are. This is undoubtedly connected to the idea that a lot of people are hurting because of it are more determined than ever that their children are going to receive a better education than they did. The education issue is clearly one of providing better and more education as opposed to concern over increased cost.

In the foreign affairs area, the country has become more hard-lined toward our adversaries and more significantly, they see the President to the left of themselves on détente. Any actions or statements that would put the President in the position of taking tough stands with our adversaries, would be helpful. His Cuba-Angola statement made Saturday should be helpful.

As I have indicated before, our most important job is to repair the President's perception so that he is seen as a decisive, forceful leader with a plan for the country. In doing this, it is critical that the President not only have a simple, understandable plan of his own but that he avoid any more situations where he is perceived to be indecisive or he avoid any more situations where he is perceived to be indecisive or change his mind.

One item that comes to mind is the 395 billion dollar budget ceiling. If there is any chance he is going to have to move away from that in the future, we ought to begin to do it now rather than appear to hold tough on it and then compromise or back-off at the last minute.

It is also critical that we do better at getting administration officials, senators and congressmen and other figures out supporting the President. I still have not seen much evidence of people outside the administration out supporting the President. Some one person has got to be put in charge of orchestrating this program and it should include as many people outside the administration as possible. One advantage the Democrats seem to have is that they often get support for their positions from special interest groups such as the unions, the NAACP and so forth. Some support from academics, business and association people would have some third-person credibility and help us get the positive benefit from our position. This could be a two or three week effort following the State of the Union.

