



THE PRESIDENT HAS SEEN....

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THE SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY

WASHINGTON 20220

AUG 9 1976

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Debates as a Campaign Strategy

Conventional wisdom has it that an incumbent President should never debate with a challenger:

- the challenger gets more exposure and an aura of presidentiality than he would otherwise obtain.
- the President runs the risk of losing the debates.

Conventional wisdom, however, has never dealt with today's situation: an incumbent President not selected by the national electorate and who trails the challenger nearly two to one in the polls.

Accordingly, the arguments for such a debate should be carefully weighed in light of the political realities of 1976:

1. Governor Carter's unprecedented lead, though it will doubtless diminish after the Republican Convention, is proof that he is already regarded as being "presidential" by a majority of the people. Therefore, he has more at stake in a debate than you, a painful fact of life that has to be faced up to. Indeed, for precisely this reason it would be to his disadvantage to accept your challenge.
2. The risk of "losing" the debates (which will be discussed below) would be counter-balanced by the dramatic uplift of seizing the campaign initiative and can be minimized by structuring the debates to highlight your strengths and Governor Carter's weaknesses.

During his primary campaigns, Carter was at his conciliatory best in being all things to all people with vague philosophic themes. The "love 'em all" piety has



abruptly ended. In his several forays since the Democrat Convention, Carter has lashed out with uncommonly partisan chops, portending a vicious fight this fall by linking the Nixon and Ford Administrations together with references to Watergate, the Pardon, et al. Mondale is following this script, so that unless checked, the Democrats will revive the successful strategy they employed for 30 years running against Herbert Hoover.

By maneuvering Carter into a series of debates, you will force him to expose his most vulnerable side -- his inability or reluctance to discuss issues. According to the Republican National Committee's Research Bureau, Carter has never in his 23 years of political life engaged in a debate nor challenged an opponent to debate. He reportedly feels uncomfortable in a debate situation. Further, in selecting the debate subjects and issues to be discussed (through polling techniques) you can lead from your strongest suits.

The very invitation to debate will upset Carter's campaign strategy and put you out in front with the public. When issuing the debate invitation, you as the President can define the times, terms, format and all other conditions. The press would converge on him within minutes and force him to react: either to accept, reject, or quibble over the conditions. In any case, he would be perceived as responding to your initiative, which would be all the more bold because you would break precedent.

The most compelling reason, however, for your confronting Carter in a debate context is that it would most quickly and dramatically enable the public to assess your two personalities. The net impression that would emerge for the bulk of the public would be favorable from the Ford point of view. It would not be the glibness of retort nor snake oil charm that would determine the "winner", but rather the total kind of person that came through: steady-as-you-go vs the superficial.

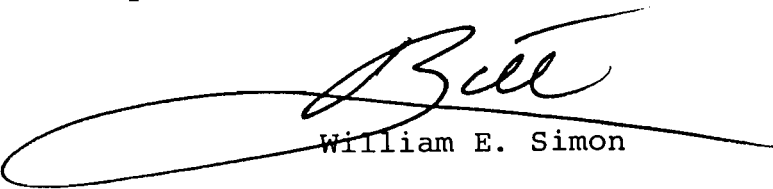
In a debate context, the listener/viewer need not agree with every position taken by the speaker -- though this would be an obvious plus and should be striven for -- the important thing is that the speaker emerge as knowledgeable, forthright, sincere, and able to defend his points intelligibly. You with a credible record over the past two years and a definable program would have the upper hand over Mr. Carter's



broad vagueries and the disaster blueprint of the Democrat platform. In addition, the pressures of debate might provoke Carter into revealing those rigidly suppressed aspects of his character that so many print journalists have observed on the campaign trail: his deep strains of coldness, his temper, and his stubbornness. He simply does not have the background nor detailed knowledge to successfully debate issues that you do.

The precise structuring of the debates is not the subject of this paper. That should be done by media experts with the benefit of polling data not now available. The critical decision is to accept the logic of seizing the initiative in your acceptance speech at Kansas City and invite Governor Carter to a series of debates on the issues facing the country. The immediate effects would be (1) to fire up the Republican delegates and party faithful across the country that you intend to wage an aggressive, hard-hitting campaign, and (2) to dramatically begin the erosion of the challenger/incumbent gap.

In your acceptance speech you could review the record you intend to stand on, summarize the Democrat platform, and then declare the differences so vast that the American people are entitled to have the issues responsibly debated instead of having to choose the character and direction of their government over the next four years in the normal atmosphere of campaign charges/countercharges, TV sloganeering and gauzy rhetoric. The media and public pressures on Carter would be irresistible: he can be forced into a campaign context he has heretofore avoided all his life, or be made to suffer the consequences if he refuses to do so. The advantages accrue to you no matter which he decides.


William E. Simon

