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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

October 17, 1976

MEMORANDUM FOR: MIKE DUVAL  
FROM: DAVE GERGEN  
SUBJECT: THE THIRD DEBATE



There appears to be a widespread assumption within the staff that in order to prepare for the third debate, the President does not need to spend much time with briefing materials on practice sessions, but only needs to modify a few stylistic points and work on some one-liners. I disagree with that assumption; to win decisively -- as we must -- far more is needed.

The perceived winners in the first two debates shared several characteristics:

-- In each case, the winner appeared to be more self confident and more relaxed;

-- In each case, the winner went on the offensive at the opening bell and kept his opponent backpedaling most of the time;

-- In each case, the winner had at least two or three major points or themes set in his mind before the debate started and kept pushing on them throughout, adorning the central ideas with a blizzard of facts and statistics. Carter was especially effective at this in the second debate, opening and closing with the same thematic points so that that the viewer came away thinking that he had a clearer concept of than the President of what he wanted to achieve. By contrast, the President was much, much better at responding to the questions asked, but his answers did not fit within a sharply defined framework. His answers were very factual but they weren't hung on any pegs or central ideas.

If these conclusions are correct, then it is clear that we ought to be aiming for a Presidential demeanor that is more confident, relaxed, occasionally humorous, and forceful. Very early in the debate, he needs to set forth the major reasons why he, not Carter, should be President. In order to keep Carter on the defensive, he

must surprise Carter with points not made in the first two debates. And it is essential -- a point I want to emphasize -- that in the opening moments he lay out the themes he will not only pursue for the rest of the debate, but on which he will rely for the next two weeks to win the election.

Personally, I think that to accomplish all of this will require not only a great deal of staff time, but also a large chunk of concentration by him -- matching the first debate. As long as he will be staying off the campaign trail for five days (a mistake, in my view), there is nothing more important for him than to find the best way to knock Carter out of the ring on Friday night. The election may be won or lost by the way in which his time is constructively and imaginatively used between now and Friday.



#### What Must Be Done

1. Thematic Materials. We need to settle now upon 3-4 major themes and then develop the following:

-- An opening and closing statement that builds on these themes.

-- Factual and statistical papers that back up these central ideas.

-- The most devastating possible attack points on Carter within each of these areas.

-- Memorable one-liners that highlight the themes.

What themes should be pursued? Clearly, Teeter, Spencer and others need to be consulted, but let me put forth some ideas. In my view, we must make Carter the issue for the next two weeks. We cannot change the perception of Mr. Ford, but we can change the perception of Mr. Carter. Here are the key issues, in my view:

A. At home, we are at a fork in the road. For the past 15 years, we have gone down the road toward bigger and bigger government, more and more spending, more and more taxes, and the result has been raging inflation, more unemployment and ultimately less freedom. Carter speaks of compassion, but his sort of compassion is precisely what has caused so much distress for people. Ford represents a turning away from that road -- and



his record proves that it will work. But Carter re-  
presents the same old road, a road that leads untimately  
to social choas. Within this general theme, we can work  
the arguments about taxes, inflation, etc. We should also  
run hard against the chaos of the 1960s -- much harder.  
The Democrats ran against Hoover for years, and we should  
do the same about the '60s. Also, we need to have a  
focus for the social frustrations that exist today, and  
that focus should be the excesses that started in the  
1960s, not the policies of GRF.

B. Abroad, the peace that we have today is possible  
only because we are strong and ably represented at the  
bargaining table. We have to demand that Carter tell us  
exactly how he intends to cut the defense budget and  
highlight the contradiction between trying to be tougher  
with the Soviets while also being weaker in our defenses.  
Also, Dole very effectively brought out the peace themes  
in his debate; the President needs to push that point.

C. As to a vision of the future, I think we ought  
to abandon attempts to enunciate some clear sense of the  
future that is sharply different from Carter's. Both  
candidates stand for essentially the same thing: less  
inflation, more jobs, more housing, better transportation,  
etc. The real difference lies in the methods and in the  
underlying commitment to personal freedom represented  
by the President. We ought to sketch out a vision of the  
future, but let's back that up with a hard-hitting argu-  
ment about experience and reliability in the Oval Office.  
One of the best ways that point can be made is to talk  
very precisely about the major decisions that the  
President, whoever he is, must make in the next four  
years: the SALT treaty runs out in 1977, negotiations  
in South Africa and in the Middle East are both in a  
delicate stage, a decision must be made on the B-1, major  
decisions must be made about energy, etc. Do you want  
those decisions made by someone with 25 years of experience  
in domestic and foreign affairs, or by a man that you  
never heard of a year ago?

2. Focus of Preparation: An excessive amount of  
attention has been given in the last two debates to the  
mechanical aspects -- how to look into the camera, taking

notes, etc. This time we should minimize those concerns and concentrate far more on practicing ways to present themes, one-liners, and cross-jabs at Carter.

3. Putting Carter on the Defensive: Each time we have talked about ways of using the days before the debate to put Carter on the defensive during the debate. Each time, in my view, we have failed to do that. We need to succeed this time. An idea that I am pushing is to have Reagan, Connally and Rockefeller here together this week and put them on for half an hour at 7:30 p.m. -- time bought by us -- for either a press conference or a three-way presentation that attacks the opposition and presents the case for the President. Your assistance on such a project would, of course, be very helpful.

4. Immediate Staff Projects: There are several projects which, in my view, should be parceled out to the staff as soon as possible:

-- Each member of the speechwriting staff should be tasked to come up with 2-3 pages apiece of one-liners and short zingers that might be considered for the debate and/or subsequent campaigning.

-- Substantive people should be tasked with reviewing Carter's arguments in the first two debates and the points that the President made in response; then they should figure out ways that our responses can be sharpened up. It is likely that Carter will make many of the same points again and we could be better prepared for him.

-- Someone should be assigned to look through the first two debates, the Dole-Mondale debate, and the news stories since the first debate to see what additional points have arisen since the original debate books were prepared. For instance, Mondale on three occasions now has criticized the fact that Ford Motor Company earned enormous profits but paid no taxes; I'll bet that's a phoney, but I don't the facts nor do most other viewers. We should check it out along with several other fresh issues.

5. Working with the President: In preparing for first debate, many different people had personal access to the President and had an ability to work on improving his answers, both politically and substantively. In the second debate, access was extraordinary restrictive. A wall was placed around the President. We won the first debate; we lost the second. In my view, there is no more convincing evidence of the insanity of preparing for the third debate in the same way we prepared for the second. This time, let's put a team together and stick with it and not get hung up in cloak and dagger games.

cc: Bill Carruthers  
Dick Cheney