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CROSS-CUTTING LEADERSHIP THEMES IN THE DEBATES

Introduction



In televised debates the winner is not the one who scores on debating points, but the one who communicates a coherent overall impression of presidential leadership. In 1960, for example, Nixon won the debate hands down on substance -- and in fact radio listeners were swayed in his favor. But on television, his words were not reinforced by his overall bearing, which lacked the confidence and maturity conveyed in his verbal message. By contrast, Kennedy communicated a self-assured style and reinforced it with a theme that ran through all of his substantive responses (let's get America moving again, a new frontier, vigor, courage, etc.). For him every statement in the debates was seen as an opportunity to drive home his message, and in the end, even Nixon was trapped into accepting the terms of the election as who could provide more vigorous, out-front presidential leadership.

Carter has been taking a similar track. He is trying physically to convey the image of a more spiritual JFK and he reinforces this with talk of love, compassion, moral renewal, integrity and the like. He has also instinctively (and now, I believe, with considerable calculation) placed himself physically in situations where he appears to be independent of established interests. Hence he is always a bit removed from the group he is talking to, and indeed, he often makes a point of slightly defying them, which communicates a stance of not being beholden to anyone but the voter. As I suggested in my earlier memo, this is tailored for the soft-core Wallace vote, or the so-called "Nixon Democrats" who like a touch of defiance in their politicians, irrespective of what big interest is being defied. Verbally, all this is reinforced with the theme of Leadership. Carter has attacked Ford incessantly as weak, indecisive, mired in vetoes rather than inspired in vision, overly partisan, having lost the mutual respect essential to dealing with Congress and the openness necessary to dealing with the American people. The thrust of all this is that Ford has been a good-natured caretaker, but now it is time for a real President in the JFK-FDR mold. And of course, weak leadership shows up as Ford's negative in all the polls, of which Carter is an avid reader.

For Ford to use the debates to his advantage he must use them to set forth an alternative to Carter's. theme of the presidential leadership. In fact, his whole election may hinge on presenting himself as embodying an alternative style of leadership.

This conclusion can now be substantiated with the Teeter materials, which have (if my preliminary telephone conversations with him are an adequate indication) also achieved something of a conceptual breakthrough in enabling us to pinpoint the way to maximize what we all feel instinctively to be Ford's strength.



Ford's strategic problem is that Carter is closer to the center of gravity of the American public on two scales which appear crucial this year. Economically, he is perceived as more "liberal" in the sense of favoring the common man over big business. On social issues, he is perceived as more "conservative" in the sense of subscribing to traditionalist rather than modernist values. To make inroads into Carter's lead Ford must be perceived as a bit closer to the interests of the common man on economic questions and a bit more traditionalist on social values. The problem is that there are no readily available salient issues that can accomplish this for him quickly (1976 is not really a big issue year).

On the traditionalist scale Carter's fundamentalist religion makes him hard to outflank, since this is perceived as the deepest possible indication of traditional values. But it may be possible to set the context of the leadership issue so that the advantages of fundamental religion becomes irrelevant. Ford's reliance on teamwork, give-and-take, and a consultative style must be seen as the traditional American style, while crisis acted out in the mind of an inner-directed, single-minded President are perceived as modernist and threatening.

On the economy, a shift in the perception of Ford's existing politics can be accomplished by stressing their human rather than their institutional meaning. None of this involves any misrepresentation. On the contrary, it simply means choosing cross-cutting themes that enable the voter to see the Ford presidency in more politically mature terms.

There is, to begin with a threshold question of assuring that Ford is perceived as presenting an alternative rather than an inferior leadership style. The simple point is to convince people that Ford is intelligent. They already believe that he has positive virtues of decency, honesty, and goodness. But they are not sure, on everybody's polls, whether he is smart enough to be more than a caretaker President. They are not, for example, even aware that he is a lawyer who ranked well in his Yale school class (a scholastic achievement at least as impressive as Carter's performance at Annapolis).

The first debate is an opportunity to settle this threshold question by preparing sharp, pithy language for the President (after the manner of his GOP acceptance speech) rather than the rambling bureaucratese that he must read in the normal course of his duties. And of course, it is also important that he have a mastery of his own program and of salient facts. (NOTE: if he wears reading glasses for fine print, there is no disgrace and may be some advantage in using them for a passage or two from a government document).

But if we stop here we have still failed to put significant pressure on Carter. On the other hand, if the President attacks Carter directly in the first debate he loses some of his presidential standing and may even seem desperate. The solution is to make each response a pointed attack not on Carter or his inconsistencies, but on his notion of presidential leadership. Every substantive question should be treated as an opportunity to present a leadership theme to show that Ford has acted on an intelligent view of the presidency and to suggest an obvious implied criticism of Carter. ✓

In this, the President's passing remarks may be more important than his substantive defense of his policies. Indeed, each substantive area should be viewed as an occasion to exemplify a general theme of presidential leadership.

Bear in mind that Carter is perceived as not fully experienced in Presidential leadership, so that Ford's observations on it will carry more authority. Bear in mind also that Carter's single-mindedness coupled with his religiosity causes considerable unease over his style of leadership. We know from poll data that this anxiety is particularly marked among those with backgrounds in liturgical religions (Jews, Catholics, high church Protestants) and among liberal secularists. Note that all



these groups are used to having things acted out in a public ritual way, either through religious ceremony or through political procedures. When they say that they distrust Carter, when even his supporters complain about giving him a blank check, when they accept comparisons of him to Nixon, and worry about him as a compulsive submarine captain, they are saying, in effect, that they want major decisions settled in the open by give-and-take rather than in the mind of a single man. All this makes them, irrespective of whether they agree with Ford on particular issues, a natural target for his themes of an alternative style of leadership. What are these themes? How should they be expressed? How can they be incorporated into the President's briefing strategy?

I. Leadership Themes

Here are six interrelated themes about leadership that articulate some of the unspoken virtues of the Ford presidency and personality, with some sample phrases and illustrations drawn from domestic and economic policy. Each substantive issue presents opportunity to bring home one or more of these themes, and the President's concluding remarks provide a good opportunity to draw them all together into an explicit statement of a philosophy of leadership in the economic and domestic sphere.

1. Stability, steadiness, predictability, reliability, political honesty.

sample lines:

✓ "For a president, words are commitments. He must be willing to stand by them." (note how much better this is than accusing Carter of flip-flops).

"our overall goal in the economy was to bring the country back to an even keel."

"Prosperity depends on each family feeling enough stability so that it is willing to save, and plan, and hope for a better future. The same stability leads business to expand and to produce new jobs."

"A steady economy requires a stable, predictable currency. This is why we have worked so hard to reduce inflation. If you don't know how much a dollar will be worth next year, you can't plan ahead."

"Businesses like families will make new plans, and produce new jobs only when they feel that the overall economic situation is predictable and reliable."

"I have tried to create a climate of reliability and steadiness. Often this has meant disciplining the government not to overstimulate the situation, either with rash action, with overspending, or with overblown rhetoric."

"My economic doctors have been right: when the patient is healing himself, you don't give him strong medicine."

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"The President is not a man on a white horse. He is the steady hand on the tiller."

(Polling note: for the past 9 months running Americans have said that they perceived a stable economic and political situation. This is the longest such streak in more than a decade.) //

Sample programs: economic management, budgetary politics, government employment.

2. Consultation, give-and-take, compromise, mutual adjustment.

Sample lines:

"A president just can't tell people off. He must continually consult with his supporters and opponents alike."

"Many of my vetos have been ways of communicating with Congress and telling them that we wanted a better bill. In many cases they got the message."

"The president is the leader in our government, but he is not always out front. He sometimes leads best by letting others carry the ball. He is responsible not for looking good himself but for making America look good after all the dust has settled."

✓ "A president should be able to go into a meeting with any group in the country and make them understand that he has a steady course for America, but that they, as citizens of America can help him chart that course."

"In a democracy, there is no such thing as a viable policy imposed from on high. It requires a lot of give-and-take and mutual compromise. Our form of government is slower but surer."

"The ship of state is not a submarine that is isolated under water for months at a time. It is more like a space ship in continuous contact with ground control. The control is the voting public and our system of checks and balances."

"A President has to learn to live with a large number of unsatisfactory situations. It often takes many months even years for agreement to emerge on a major program. But this is the way it has to be in a democracy."



"A President is always helped by an electoral mandate in his give-and-take with the Congress. It has nothing to do with party. After an election it is always possible to make real achievements in partnership with the Congress. Before an election, things are always less serious, regardless of which party is in power."

"Chief executives who can't consult can't perform. In Illinois, Governor Dan Walker tried to stand aloof from all politics and pressure groups. This year he wasn't even nominated by his party. The same thing seems to be happening with Governor Dukakis in Massachusetts. Governor Carter was limited by statute to one term in Georgia so the problem never arose there. As Harry Truman said, if you can't take the heat don't go into the kitchen."

"The Founding Fathers set up our form of government so that the moods and psychology of the President would not be important. They wanted a President not a king. They wanted major decisions acted out in the open and modified by give-and-take not settled as a mental crisis in the mind of a single, all-powerful leader."

"The Romans began their decline when they started worshipping their Emperor as a god."

Sample programs: any which have required consultation and give-and-take. (and are still perhaps not satisfactory e.g. energy, busing, SST.)

3. Ability to make hard decisions.

Sample lines:

"Sometimes a president must make unpopular decisions by instinct. The test is whether they hold up under analysis later on. The pardon of former President Nixon might have been handled two other ways. I might have done nothing, or I might have waited until court proceedings went their full course before making my decision, as Mr. Carter has said he would have done. Congressman Andrew Young of Georgia, however, had the same gut instinct I had at the time. He saw that any delay would have led to a long drawn out court battle like the Patty Hearst or Angela Davis trials, with \$100 a plate fund-raising dinners for legal funds. As a lawyer I know that such actions can be drawn out for years, with appeals, technical objections



and changes of venue. Without the pardon, instead of debating the issues facing the country, Mr. Carter and I would now be debating the latest constitutional issue involved in the pending litigation on the case of a former President. And that, as I have said many times, is why I know my decision put Watergate behind us."

✓ Or before a rebuttal time, describe a concrete decision (e.g. the Railroad Retirement Fund veto, or the considerations leading to the decision to seek a payroll tax increase for Social Security) and then turn to Mr. Carter and ask how he would have handled the decision.

"Sometimes a Presidential decision is unpopular not because it is wrong but because political opponents seize on only an aspect of it for criticism."

"One is often accused of lacking compassion when one improves services for the poor. This is because improving services for the poor often means making sure that the money goes to those who are really in need. Some politicians fail to see the distinction between compassion and corruption in medical and welfare services."

✓ "The hardest and most essential discipline for all of us, is to learn to be able to say no."

Sample programs: the list is endless, but Mr. Ford would do well to seek out an opportunity to state the _____ reasons why is pardon was the right decision.

4. The non-interventionist theme -- deregulation, decentralization, state and local revenue sharing, control of bureaucracy, encouragement of small business and private enterprise.

A background note: This is the most distinctive of Ford's themes and also the toughest to handle rhetorically. without being overly negative and sounding too much like a country club lawyer who turns off blue collar support, or alternatively, without sounding weak and passive. Here are some rhetorical rules of thumb:

1. Every issue on the structure of government should be put in human not institutional terms. Or, if we put things institutionally, we must immediately state what this means to the individual family. The perspective of the individual family is the test of all policies in an election.

2. Note the term "individual family" not "individual". Rich protestant Republicans talk about individualism; to blue collar workers it has a harsh ring. "Individual family" appeals to both constituencies.

3. Similarly, use the term "community" instead of "state and local government." State and local government sounds mechanical and corrupt. "Communities" are warm and human, and they con't sound quite as racially exclusive as "neighborhoods."

4. Deregulation needs to be portrayed as a consumer issue, saving money for the individual family. So does limitation on the size of bureaucracy. Telling how much the individual family pays in interest each year on the Federal debt is much better than hollering about large deficits, since they are so large that nobody can get their concrete meaning.

5. Non-interventionism needs to be described as a positive, innovative policy rather than a negative attack on government. It needs to be seen as opening up opportunities rather than punishing inefficient bureaucrats. There are few families in America who have not had a member on a government or medical roll or social security roll in some way or another.

Sample lines:

✓ "Prosperity does not trickle down from Washington. It comes from the energies of the American people. We in Washington can assure that these energies are not stifled by too much interference."

"Regulation is costing the American consumer ___% of the price of an airlines ticket, ___% of the price of a railroad ticket, _____ etc."

"The interest payments on the national debt cost the average American family \$ _____ a year."

✓ "If we were an undeveloped country with only a few qualified people, it might make sense to concentrate them all in the capital. But when we have as talented and energetic country as America, it is a great waste to direct things from Washington. When we move slowly in Washington we encourage opportunities to open up elsewhere in the country."

"We have increased by 24% the portion of the federal budget returned to our state and local communities. We have reduced paperwork by 12%. We have increased Small Business loans by 33%. We have reduced the number of jobs on the federal payroll to the 1973 level -- how many state governors can make that claim? The effect of all this is to put our faith in the creativity of America rather than in the directives of Washington." ✓

"America has the most educated, resourceful and widely dispersed talent of any major country. It is an enormous waste of human resources to concentrate initiative in Washington when the whole fabric of American society is bursting with intelligence and creativity."

"When Washington moves cautiously, it encourages America to renew itself all the faster." ✓

"We don't want a society that is apoplectic in the head and anemic in the extremities." (The phrase is from Lammenais, the French Catholic philosopher.) "That is why we want to dispense power throughout American society."

Sample Programs:

Revenue Sharing, the Funding Simplification Act, Deregulatory Proposals, Basic Educational Opportunity Grants, etc.

IV. Briefing Strategy

Having a few cross-cutting themes makes preparation for the debates much easier. It gives the President a concept to attach to every topic. We might, for example, make up a chart with the leadership themes, Steadiness, Give-and Take, Hard Decisions, Opening Up the System.

Under each of these, we can group different topics and policies with a reminder of salient details that bring home the theme and to Carter quotes that show him at a disadvantage on this same theme. Many programs can be used under more than one heading. But in general, the economy is a good area for illustrating stability and steadiness in leadership; the pardon for hard decisions; the structure of government issues for opening up the system; and anything that is unsatisfactory or still being wrangled out with the Congress for give and take.

There are only a dozen or so topics that will be covered in debate and rebuttal and each theme has its different emphases, so that this approach will communicate a clear leadership message without palling or insulting the viewer's intelligence. (Note that each of these themes has a pointed edge for Carter: Steadiness calls attention to the uncertainties raised by his meteoric rise. Give-and take to the anxieties about his perfectionism and his inner light styles of deliberation. Hard decisions his continual shaving of verbal statements. And Opening up the system puts the policies of limited government and traditional Republican philosophy in terms most attractive to the individual family, and thus makes Carter's criticisms of Ford's weakness seem obtuse: Ford has not been weak, he has been cannily acting on an intelligent strategy of limited government.

III A Wrap-Up Statement

The President gets a three minute wrap-up in the debates which can be used profitably to state his leadership theme directly in terms that will occasion secondary commentary. He can, in effect, pose the question for the election as a choice between two styles of leadership. The phrasing needs to be worked out carefully, but here is a rough hour's worth of scribbling on the kind of thing that might be used:

During the campaign Governor Carter stated his philosophy of presidential leadership in terms that he has since repeated: "There's only one person in this country," he said, "that can speak with a clear voice to the American people or set a standard of ethics or morality and excellence and greatness--- That person," Governor Carter said, "is the President."

I have a different view of the Presidency. There isn't one person in the country who can do these things. We can all do them. We can all speak to each other forthrightly. We can all set standards of integrity and accomplishment in our everyday lives.

What the President can do is to make sure that we are all acting in a way that moves us forward and that brings us together.

Two years ago this was not the case. We in America were not at peace with ourselves. We did not feel that our institutions were reliable. We did not feel that the economy was steady. We felt unpredictable change all around us, change that made it hard for us to plan ahead, to save and invest, to hope for a better world for our children.

There were two main causes for this unease. At home, we had the aftermath of Watergate. Abroad we had the aftermath of the Middle East war and an oil price increase that dramatically increased inflation and created economic uncertainty all over the world. These two causes I dealt with quickly and directly with all the power of my office. I put Watergate behind us and acted to remove the threat of all-engulfing war from the Middle East.



Two years later American families are again starting to plan and to save. Businesses are beginning to invest in new plants and in new jobs. We all begin to feel more confident in the future. We turn again to moral and religious concerns, to education, recreation and the arts. The country is moving back on an even keel. This condition of confidence is not something that a President creates. It is generated at the level of the individual American family. But he can remove obstacles to a renewal of confidence. And once these obstacles are removed he can have the wisdom to leave well enough alone.

A President, then, must look to the future not in terms of how he will appear but as a whole will prosper. In some cases, the wealth of America requires him to take by himself. More often, he will have to consult, coordinate, and find others to carry the ball. Sometimes he will use his powers to concede action, at others he will delay action until a really healthy national consensus emerges.

In all this the President must remember that he serves in a limited government. He has a moral role, but the real moral energies of America have always been outside politics. He has an economic role, but the real economic energies of America do not trickle down from Washington. He has a political role, but he only destroys the integrity of his office if he tries to exercise it outside the checks and balances of the Constitution.

A President can never ask the people to put unlimited trust in himself for this is contrary to the spirit of criticism and give-and-take in our system. His motto, instead, must be to trust in America, to trust in the creativity and good judgement of the American people and to take those measures in Washington that will enable America to have confidence in itself. When Washington moves

slowly America renews itself all the faster. A President cannot hope in his person to embody all that is best in America--for he is only a human being. Yet he can aspire, with the help of his fellow citizens, to create conditions in which what is best for the country will be achieved. A limited presidency goes hand in hand with peaceful, creative and energetic vision of America.