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<u>Box Number</u>	<u>Folder Number</u>	<u>Document Date</u>	<u>No Date</u>	<u>Subject</u>	<u>Document Type</u>	<u>Document Description</u>
46	17	6/14/1971	<input type="checkbox"/>	Campaign	Memo	From Bill Gavin to Shakespeare RE: thoughts on the 1972 presidential campaign. 5 pgs.

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June 14, 1971

MEMORANDUM TO: Mr. Shakespeare

Some Thoughts on 1972

What, ultimately, does any politician have to work with? Three things: reason, passion and imagination. Even if he successfully mixes these three it won't assure him political success because events might go against him. But without these qualities, even events can't save him.

Looking coldbloodedly at 1972, how will the President appear to the voters insofar as these three qualities are concerned? And how will his opponent shape up?

1. Reason. It seems to me that this is our strong point. Nixon is in the public mind an eminently reasonable and reasoning man (two different attributes). There is not a Democrat who can match Nixon's reputation for thinking things through, sorting things out, balancing all things. Muskie comes close but there is nothing in his record that shows he can appeal to the voters as the candidate of pure reason.

Now this is all to the good. Contrary to what the pundits say, there is great comfort to be taken by the electorate from knowing that they can count on a certain kind of familiar--if dull--rational process in decision making. Nixon is perhaps the best example of the "reason-candidate." LBJ had everyone on the point of a nervous breakdown because no one knew what he was going to do next, i. e. , everyone began to doubt his capacity for thinking things through.

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But reason, politically speaking, is dull. It is good, but good only in that way that medicine is good. Reason is appreciated only when things are going wrong (JFK's much publicized discussions with wise men during the missile crisis proved to be as much help to him as the ultimate decision did; people knew things were "being thought through" and had confidence in Kennedy.)

The Nixon Administration has been marked by this: we are reasonable (we set reasonable goals--reorganization--and go about them in reasonable ways) but dull. Yet no one quite knows whether this is good or bad, as far as sizing up our chances for 1972. For the moment let's content ourselves with the facts: we are the first Administration in ten years to be almost universally thought of as one in which "thinking things through" is taken for granted. This quality of course works against us also: we are accused of balancing too many things, of trying to be too rational, of attempting to avoid needed risks, etc. But in any event, we are associated in the public mind with reason.

2. Passion. Passion, in this Administration means Agnew and Agnew means passion. The documentation of his arguments, the precise nature of his claims, the moderate speaking style with which he made them--all of these are as dust compared to the one single fact about the Vice President: he represents passion in this Administration.

Like all passion, the passion represented by Agnew is pure energy, i. e., in the public mind the content of his passion has become almost unimportant (even to his friends); what counts is that he is what he is, breaking the rules of political decorum, saying things, making waves, in short, making a passionate appeal to the passions of the public. Not to put too fine an edge on this thing, it can be said in a very real sense that Agnew's appeal is the appeal of the lover: it is direct, forceful, open, full of energy and rather unfocused.

Does anyone "out-passion" us? I think not. No one running for President can afford to take the chances Agnew has. He is the single most passionately discussed, admired, hated politician alive today, including Old George Corley Wallace.

But passion is too much for most people. Most of us can take it only in bits and pieces and Agnew has in three years made a mini-career out of it. He has, as they say, enflamed the hearts of the faithful.

Many questions arise: does the public distinguish the passionate politics of Agnew from the rational politics of Nixon? Does Agnew's style hurt or help or really have no affect on Nixon's image? It is difficult to say but my guess is that something entirely unexpected has happened: the public has become confused by the Agnew style in contrast with Nixon's style. The public simply doesn't know what to think. I'm not saying the public disagrees with his content; I'm saying it has completely forgotten his content. All they'll remember in 1972 about Agnew is a big cliché in which sound and fury make up the greatest part.

Thus, I think we are going into 1972 (no matter who is on the ticket as Vice President for us) with a paradoxical, but very real problem: the very quality lacked by Nixon in the eyes of most people is precisely that which Agnew has, but in such a way that people are not certain what to make of it all. Is Agnew, Nixon? Is Nixon, Agnew? This uncertainty about the image of the ticket is, in my mind, a danger. In 1968 everyone knew what the Republican ticket was: a bit dull, but solid. But now? Solidity of image (I'm not talking about programs) is gone. A bad sign.

3. Imagination. Here we have an Administration that has called for a revolution, that has called for revolutionary new systems of welfare, revenue sharing, etc. But in the public's mind it is an Administration wholly without imagination. I don't know why this should be so but I'm positive it is so. And here is where the danger lies. In order to win in 1972 a candidate is going to have to be reasonable, have mini-passion but also appeal to the imagination of the voters. We simply don't do that and we never have. Voters voted for us in 1968 not because they imagined what we were going to do but because they knew what we are going to do. After five years of LBJ, intellectual certainty became almost politically sexy. But now after four years of dull reason with eruptions of (Agnevian) passion ~~and~~ few if any appeals to the imagination (the Peace Corps was such an appeal, so in it's way was the Great Society) have been made. Even the six great goals have been sold as well-thought-out goals that can be reached through reason and prudence.

We are going into 1972 with absolutely no appeal to the imagination and there is, as far as I can see, no way out of it. No gimmick will suffice. Either you have it or you don't and we don't as far as imaginative appeal goes.

Now what does all this add up to? It means that we are in very big trouble as far as image is concerned. We will be the party of peace--but people expect peace.

The great strength we have, however, is that there is only one possible candidate who could appeal to the imagination of the voters, sweep through the words, add the logic and the record and hit them in the gut: Teddy. And he ain't running. If he does run, we are in a fight for our political future. No other Democrat has even the slightest chance of appealing to the fancies and fantasies of the public as does Teddy. We will win if he doesn't run. * Not because we are going to overwhelm the voters with our record or our charm (they are not really interested in either) but because we can out-reason all of them and none of them has that much more going for him as far as imagination is concerned. Passion could well be our undoing. But if this is so, it is already a political fact simply waiting to be recorded in November 1972. Thus, any attempt to remove Agnew in order to "clean-up" the ticket is fruitless. His pluses and minuses have already been engraved on the public's mind and have been associated with the entire "Administration-image." Replacing Agnew would, I think, solve nothing and probably harm our chances on the right.

What does this all add up to?

1. We should not attempt to build some kind of image that appeals to the imagination for the simple reason that no one will believe it. Any energy used during the campaign to make us look "exciting" is, to me, a waste. Thus television and other media should be used in a different way from 1968. Instead of the fast-moving, exciting "cinema-verite" technique in spots, we should make stark, statistical appeals based on documented facts. At first glance this seems to be disastrous, but I think our hope lies in sticking to what we do best (reason) and what we are identified with in the public mind. We can't turn our back on four years of reasoned, prudent progress and try to excite people with dreams of grandeur or majestic sweeping visions. An explanation of what I mean: the numbers of Americans that were in Vietnam when we came

*We can, of course, win if he does run, providing two things occur: (1) Chappaquiddick is engraved in the hearts of the voters and (2) the voters don't want fantasies. Both seem unlikely to occur.

in and numbers of how many there are when the campaign takes place: stark, unadorned, repeated over and over and over--this kind of thing will do more than a thousand arty camera angles.

2. Quite literally everything depends on the public mood. If the public is looking for excitement after four years of reasoned progress, than it is my feeling we are in big trouble and that there is little if anything we can do about it as far as a media campaign is concerned. They voted for us because they thought we were solid; we have been solid; we must run once more as the solid party.

3. Gimmicky media appeals to the youth vote simply are a waste of time. Our appeal to youth must be an appeal to their concerns as Americans, not as young Americans and I think the President should say this. The Democrats are starting out with a wide spread in youth registrâtion and we can't get them by appealing to the "youth issues" that the Democrats already have tied up. Let the Democrats cozy up to "youth"; we will treat the new voters as Americans first, i. e. , we will take them as seriously as they take themselves.

A final--and to me, frightening--point. History has been known to deal in ironies before. Wouldn't it be ironic if the Nixon Administration was defted because the Democrats were able to state that while they were for sane defense spending, they never meant we should be in second place as far as missile defense is concerned? And wouldn't it be ironic if the Democrats said that they could do better than we could in our own programs vis-a-vis China?

Ghastly thoughts.



Bill Gavin