

Richard Nixon Presidential Library
Contested Materials Collection
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Presidential Materials Review Board

Review on Contested Documents

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MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

June 7, 1972

MEMORANDUM FOR: THE PRESIDENT
FROM: RAY PRICE *Ray Price*
SUBJECT: Debates

You asked for my recommendation on how to handle the question of debates.

First, on timing: If you were going to debate, I would recommend letting it be known as soon as possible, so as not to seem later to have been backed into it. Assuming you will not, however (and I see no reason why you should), I would urge not answering the question publicly now; to do so would simply give the opposition a new political horse to ride at your expense, and allow it to build up pressure. For the present, you can simply say that you won't discuss campaign matters until after the convention.

As for rationale, there are three basic arguments that I think have powerful logic behind them -- the first two of which you could make publicly, and the third of which could be made in a background manner on your behalf:

1) It's unwise. A President, in the ultimate sense, cannot and should not engage in free "debate." His comments must always be somewhat limited, according to a President's sense of their potential impact around the world and according to his private knowledges about sensitive, tentative situations in stages of delicate development here and abroad. The national policies of the United States should not be directly risked because

of domestic politics (they are indirectly risked, of course). Even a no-comment or a decline-to-discuss posture by a President could have major ramifications of an undesirable nature.

If it were possible to separate the incumbent as candidate from the office of the Presidency, it would be another kettle of fish; but this is not possible, and the office shouldn't be subjected to it. Even though speaking as a candidate, you would be heard as President not only in the U. S., but around the world -- and people abroad might not be able to draw the distinctions.

2) It's unnecessary. There is no need for a debate to clarify the details of a President's positions. His views, unlike those of a non-incumbent, are already spread out in exact detail on the public record of his actions in the office he seeks. It is the challenger's views, and his differences with the President's record, that the public needs to learn -- and the challenger can educate the public on these points better or just as well by himself.

3) It's silly. A debate is a bit of campaign theatrics that clarifies nothing and does not contribute to public education on the issues; in fact, it can do the opposite according to the trend and emphases of the subject matter covered or not covered by the debate. The only real purpose is to give a good forum to the non-incumbent and any serious challenger should be well-financed enough to purchase that forum himself. There is no requirement or precedent anywhere that a President should help his opponent campaign.

As for your 1964 insistence that LBJ should debate, I'd answer that quite straightforwardly by saying that now that you view it from the perspective of the Presidency, you think LBJ was right.