

Strategists Talk About Campaign

Washington

Jimmy Carter was told by his campaign strategists in mid-October that the Nixon-pardon issue could "blow the election wide-open" and guarantee his victory over President Ford, Carter's pollster Patrick Caddell said yesterday.

But he declined to use the issue himself because "he thought he would be elected president and he didn't want blood all over the floor."

Caddell told that story yesterday in confirming the view of the Ford campaign pollster, Robert Teeter, that Carter's failure to develop a strong answer to the Ford campaign's attack on his credibility as governor of Georgia almost turned the election to the Republicans.

Teeter said that the effectiveness of the anti-Carter ads was heightened by the fact that voters who saw them still believed that it was Carter, not Ford, who was running "a negative campaign."

The rival pollsters conducted their first public post-mortem on the election yesterday at a joint appearance before the Public Affairs Council and the American Association of Political Consultants at the Mayflower Hotel. Later, they expanded on their comments in separate interviews.

They agreed that Carter's 33-point lead at the time of his nomination was artificially inflated.

Teeter said the second debate — the one on which Ford made his mistake on Soviet domination of Eastern Europe — "left us dead in the water for about ten days."

"We had been ahead of schedule in overtaking Carter," Teeter said, "and we thought that there would be the kind of pressure on them that might cause them to abandon their strategy and start making mistakes. We looked for Carter to start throwing some 80-yard passes, and we knew we could intercept if he did. But then the pressure went off him."

Ironically, Caddell tabbed Carter's response to the second debate as "a terrible mistake" on the part of his candidate.

"The governor has a mild instinct for the jugular," Caddell said, "and for three days we couldn't stop him" from attacking Ford in very strong terms.

"He was terribly abrasive," Caddell said, "and he cost us what we had gained by Ford's mistake in the debate."

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