

What candidate Nixon does not need

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 UTICA, Mich. — With White House aides still struggling to find the right formula in a campaign wholly unique for Richard M. Nixon, the President for the most part steered a bland and cautious course last Thursday in his first day on the stump following the euphoria of Miami Beach.

In contrast to all his previous eight campaigns for office, Mr. Nixon's grand design this fall looks relatively simple: Preserve the huge lead over Sen. George McGovern that, were the election held tomorrow, might conceivably result in a 50-state sweep (with only the District of Columbia's three electoral votes secure for McGovern).

To some of his advisers, the prohibitive odds now riding on the President rule out anything approaching the rock-'em-sock-'em campaign style that Mr. Nixon has made his trademark. That's why Vice President Spiro Agnew has been ordered to sheathe his sword. To these advisers the course is obvious: go slow on the curves, because McGovern is so far behind, and say nothing that would return Nixon-leaning dissident Democrats to the McGovern banner.

But some other advisers, including White House staff chief H. R. "Bob" Haldeman and political aide Charles Colson, worry that a bland Nixon campaign might feed already dangerous over-optimism and lead the President down the fatal 1948 path of Thomas E. Dewey. Dewey's say-nothing campaign snatched defeat from the jaws of victory against Harry S. Truman. Mr. Nixon well remembers Dewey's collapse, but he is still ambivalent about his own campaign

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

this year under somewhat similar circumstances.

Haldeman-Colson theory

Typical of the Haldeman-Colson theory, which calls for only slight moderation of the traditional rock-'em-sock-'em Nixon style, was the way the White House sought to bar Democratic Rep. James O'Hara from the pristinely non-political, non-partisan platform here in the gymnasium of the spanking new Dwight D. Eisenhower High School.

Utica is O'Hara's hometown. Consequently, the school board invited him to share the platform with Republican Sen. Robert Griffin when Mr. Nixon came here to dedicate the school to Gen. Eisenhower.

But the White House staff, long conditioned to press every partisan advantage and ignoring the fact that barring the popular O'Hara could cost Mr. Nixon votes here, pressured the school superintendent. In the end, O'Hara was seated on the platform.

It is doubtful that the President himself knew anything of this altercation or would have countenanced the insult to O'Hara. In his talk to the children and parents of Utica, he generously gave O'Hara several friendly mentions.

Moreover, Mr. Nixon's apparent disposition to keep his campaign bland was clearly evident in what he said here. He rambled on for half an hour about his own school days,* expounding the importance of such old American virtues as patriotism and hard work. The busing issue, by far the most explosive political factor in these parts, he never mentioned once.

But a formidable busing statement demanding that Congress impose an immediate moratorium on all new court-ordered busing was handed to the press as a "statement by the President." Thus Mr. Nixon had it both ways. Inside the gymnasium, he was gentle Uncle Richard sharing school boy experiences. But in hugh headlines across the state on Friday he was portrayed as champion of the anti-busing forces.

Low-blow innuendo

Only once on Thursday did old campaigner Nixon allow himself a low-blow innuendo against McGovern. In a speech at Chicago before the American Legion, without naming McGovern, he praised American Vietnam War veterans.

"America will not make a mockery of their sacrifice and devotion," he said, "by talking of amnesty for deserters while some of their comrades are held captive in brutal North Vietnamese prisons."

McGovern does not favor amnesty for deserters. Although the line drew huge applause, one campaign aide later shook his head. "That is pure demagoguery," he said, "and that is the one thing Nixon does not need this year."

* See "Folksy Nixon Invokes Memories of His 'Old Man,'" SFChronicle 10 Sep 72, filed Nixon.