

The Nixon Strategy

Minimum Campaigning Is Regarded As Curbing Candidacy Evaluation

NYTimes

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Special to The New York Times

SEP 30 1972

WASHINGTON, Sept. 29 —

The frustration bursts from Senator George McGovern quite often; it is a variation of the old schoolboy taunt: "Why won't he come out and fight like a man?" Last week, the South Dakotan made several derisive references to President Nixon's habit of "dropping down from the skies" in his helicopter once in a while to mingle with the people, in Tacoma, Wash., he spoke bitterly about the President's surrogate campaigners — he called them "lackeys" and "second-rate bureaucrats" — getting so much attention from the press and television.

Mr. McGovern is frustrated for a simple reason: The minimum-campaigning strategy of the President is working to perfection, in both obvious and quite subtle fashions. It is a central reason, some political observers believe, for Mr. Nixon's massive lead.

Mr. Nixon has begun to make a few political trips, including brief visits this week to Texas, California and New York. There was even a day or two last week when both Presidential and both Vice-Presidential candidates were on the campaign circuit. But Mr. Nixon has in no way begun a formal, continuing campaign yet, and he will almost certainly not do for at least another three weeks.

Even when he finally does take to the road, Republican planners report, his schedule is likely to be so sparse that he will do less campaigning than any President since Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1944.

Spoke Five Times

In that year, Mr. Roosevelt, having broken the third-term barrier and pleading the press of wartime decision-making, made only about five speeches of consequence outside Washington.

Mr. McGovern has attempted to suggest that Mr. Nixon is violating American political tradition by his pattern of conduct, but in fact the strategies of incumbent Presidents have depended almost entirely upon politics and metabolism, not upon some unwritten compulsion to go before the people.

Harry S. Truman campaigned furiously in 1948, visiting 225 cities and towns, largely because he felt (correctly) that such a projection of vigor would help him to upset the bland and overconfident Thomas E. Dewey. Dwight D. Eisenhower, confident of re-election and unfond of stumping, decided early in 1956, as he recalls in his memoirs, "to avoid a strenuous campaign of interminable motorcades and speeches." Lyndon B. Johnson, equally confident in 1964 but psychologically compelled to mingle with the voters, put in dozens of exhausting days like the one that took him from Providence, R. I., to Hartford to Vermont to Maine to New Hampshire to Boston.

A Split Focus

The result of Mr. Nixon's strategic decision has been a split focus in the media: Mr. McGovern — his programs, his tactics, his campaign organization — have been closely scrutinized, but Mr. Nixon has been weighed only as President, not as candidate. There is no chance

to catch Mr. Nixon in gaffes and slips, no chance to criticize his campaign style.

"In one way," said a prominent Democrat the other day, "it was a heaven-sent opportunity. Had things been going well, it would have given George the chance to build his credibility as a Presidential alternative. But they did not go well — the constant scrutiny has hurt — and Nixon has gotten an almost free ride."

If that appraisal is correct, and interviews with voters in half a dozen states suggest that it is, the rest of the story of this curious election so far falls neatly into place.

While Mr. Nixon has been seen on television and in the press as a steadfastly Presidential figure, Mr. McGovern has been seen as a man whose very capacity to organize, to formulate — ultimately, to govern — is constantly questioned.

Issues Are Secondary

In such a situation, issues are relegated to secondary importance. What does it matter if a voter questions Mr. Nixon's commitment to economic betterment for blue-collar workers if the same voter is unable to picture Mr. McGovern in the White House? As one of Mr. McGovern's advisers put it this week, "Most voters never even get to the question of issues until they have decided, in some mysterious way, that both candidates are basically qualified to handle the Presidency."

Thus, the President's vulnerability as indicated in the latest New York Times/Yankelovich poll, may be more apparent than real. Voters may lack confidence in Mr. Nixon's handling of domestic issues, but for the moment they appear to lack confidence in Mr. McGovern as a man. It was not always thus; Mr. McGovern evoked a contrary impression during the primaries, and lost ground only after the convention. Unfortunately for him, in politics as in life, it takes far more time to regain trust and confidence than to lose it.

Benefits for Nixon

If by lying low Mr. Nixon has thrown into bold relief Mr. McGovern's difficulties in projecting himself as a viable Presidential alternative, he has also benefited in another way. His absence from the campaign, together with the yawning gap between the two men in the polls, appears to have bored the electorate. Football is more on the mind of the voter this fall than politics, it would appear, and in that situation, the historic tendency of the American electorate to identify the Presidency with the occupant is magnified.

"Unless there is some kind of stirring contest," a political scientist said recently, "the public tunes out. And in that situation, with no strong compulsion to the contrary, the incumbent wins."

None of this is lost on the more realistic of the McGovern supporters. One of them remarked wryly this week, after the McGovern campaign took the extraordinary step of publicizing rather than suppressing a poll that showed their man 22 points behind:

"Well, it's a little improvement, and if you tell me we're clutching at straws, I'll tell you that we are, but a straw is a straw."