

MEMORANDUM

TO: Governor George W. Bush

FROM: Rasmus Tenbergen

DATE: 11-23-00

SUBJECT: Post-Election 2000 Strategy and Communication

Introduction

The closest election in American history causes several challenges to your strategic decision and the related communication efforts. Questions about the legitimacy of the election concerning different counting results and voter difficulties to understand the ballots and the urgency to prepare the transition to a new administration create a trade off between fairness and speed. The earlier a decision is taken, the more likely you seem to win the election. However, this memo recommends to **resist the temptation of a quick and possibly unfair victory** and to look for a more appropriate solution for the current crisis. Three options and their communication implications shall be investigated through the discussion of pros and cons: 1. the continuation of the current strategy of a quick resolve, 2. the acceptance of the offer of the Vice President and 3. a possible counter offer. The criteria to evaluate these options are a) do they improve the chance of winning? b) are they fair and acceptable to the public? and c) do they allow a successful presidency in case of winning?

1. The current strategy

The current strategy is to consider the election to be decided and to declare a winner as soon as possible.

Supporting arguments

The earlier the election is decided , the more likely you are to win it (criterion a).

Counter arguments

A solution with no or few recounts by hand is perceived by many voters as unfair (criterion b). Such a solution may provoke protests and make it difficult to be a successful and accepted President (criterion c).

2. The offer of the Vice President

The Vice President offered to "complete the hand counts already begun" and to add the results to the certified vote total or to "recount all the counties in the entire state of Florida" and "to abide by that result and agree not to take any legal action to challenge that result" (cited according to Washington Post, 11-16-00, A 28). Furthermore, he suggested a personal meeting of the two candidates to improve the tone of the discussion.

Supporting arguments

The offer of the Vice President sounds fair and is hard to reject (criterion b). In particular, not to meet the Vice President could be considered to be uncooperative. The offer improves the conditions for the upcoming presidency independent of the winner (criterion c)

Counter arguments

The Vice President offered this deal, because he thinks it helps him to win the election and he is right: you won by such a narrow margin that you must expect to lose if many votes are recounted (criterion a). The reality seems to be that you lost the election if all the votes which were intended to be for the Vice President are counted. It could be risky to ignore this (as Gloria Berger mentioned in her US News & World Report column on 11-20-00). A second disadvantage of accepting is that you give up the public impression of you as more likely to win because the networks already declared you as the winner and you lead after the first two rounds of counting (compare Wall Street Journal/NBC poll in WSJ 11-16-00, A 28). An acceptance would decrease the pressure to concede early for the Vice President. In addition, the proposal is no longer an option because you already rejected it. However, your argument that a third vote cannot be fair because it cannot be accurate (compare Washington Post 11-16-00, A 28) did neither convince the public nor the Florida Supreme Court and should therefore be over thought.

3. A counter offer

You could make a counter offer including the following aspects: i) you accept the meeting ii) you accept a state wide recount iii) you insist on strict standards for the recount (no "dimpled" ballots, bipartisan approval of every questioned ballot etc.) iv) no further legal challenge after the recount is conducted.

Supporting arguments

This option includes the advantages and excludes the disadvantages of option 2. Winning is more likely because fewer votes are counted (criterion a). You look better in the public opinion because you are not the bad guy who refuses to talk to his opponent (compare "A Welcome Offer Rebuffed" in Washington Post 11-16-00, A 42). It can be regarded even by Gore supporters as a fair solution (criterion b) and helps you to unite the country behind you in case of your victory (criterion c). Even if you lose (which could be seen as the more attractive outcome because of the circumstances of this election and potentially upcoming economic problems) such a strategy would increase your chance to win the presidency in 2004.

Counter arguments

Winning is less likely than in option 1 (criterion a). Options 2 and 3 may be over sophisticated, because the Americans will support the winner anyway (see USA TODAY 11-13-00, 7A). This could be a media and elite discussion with almost no effect on the somewhat ignorant majority of the people (compare Isaacs Harvard lectures 10-12-00 and 10-31-00, Wayne p. 253 and Garber pp.13-18 are more optimistic about the impact

of the media). You must make sure that the delivered message is actually received by the majority of the voters (ibid.). In addition, timing is very important (compare Wayne, pp. 215-216). An offer shortly before a decision is taken could spoil the effect of it.

Summary

Your strategy must decide to follow one of two competing American bedrock values (compare Isaacs Harvard lecture 10-31-00): either "speed" (quick resolve, acceptance of the result and support of the winner) or "fairness" (count all the votes, let the people decide). Public opinion data clearly shows that the voters (not only the elites, but the crucial 75%, see Isaacs Harvard lecture 10-31-00) prefer the latter (55%:42% in a CNN/USA TODAY/GALLUP poll 11-13-00 and even 20% of your supporters in favor). Therefore, you should go with option 3 and make a counter proposal including recounts. Otherwise, you may win the election, but you will possibly wish you would have lost it.