March 18, 1968
Monday - 2:30 p.m.

FOR THE PRESIDENT

I don't pretend to political sagacity. So I offer these views on the political situation with genuine modesty, though also with conviction.

1. I think the course we seem to be taking now will lead either to Kennedy's nomination or Nixon's election, or both.

There may be six major candidates within the next week. In an abstract sense you occupy the down-the-line, just-left-of-center position among them. From right to left, the spectrum reads Wallace, Nixon, Rockefeller, Johnson, McCarthy and Kennedy. This would suggest that you can drive down the middle of the road and run everybody else off into the ditches.

But the situation is real, not abstract. As the incumbent President, you are (to some degree, at least) the natural defender of the status quo. You represent things as they are -- the course we are following, the policies and programs we have chosen. Therefore, you are the most conservative of the six -- the man who is not calling for change, but resisting it. That is a tough position today.

When you say, "stick with it in Vietnam", i.e., stick with the policy of the past three years (since we made our troop commitment), you are saying, stick with a rough situation that shows signs of growing worse.

When you say, "persevere at home", you are saying keep the HEW appropriations growing and the new programs proliferating, although the Negroes, for whom we adopted these programs, rioted last summer and will probably riot again.

(Politics)
When you say, "prepare for austerity," you are saying to the businessman and taxpayer, "get set for a shock; meanwhile, I'm going to continue the programs -- particularly Vietnam -- that caused the shock."

In other words, you ask people to support the continuation of an Administration that was in office while

--- the Vietnam war grew to take American lives at the rate of 25,000 a year and American resources at the rate of $30 billion a year -- and still the enemy seemed at least as strong in 1968 as he did in 1964; whatever political gains there were in Saigon, were offset by vast destruction and killing in the countryside; the South Vietnamese performed poorly at most levels;

--- the Negro, for whom the past fourteen years represented a unique era of progress, showed himself to be, not only ungrateful, but sullen, full of hate and the potential for violence;

--- America's power was diminished, in that our balance of payments/gold flow problems began to impose severe restrictions on our freedom of action abroad;

--- anti-Americanism in Europe grew to unparalleled dimensions, largely because of Vietnam;

--- the alienation of youth from their elders, from the government, from the American system, became extreme and widespread; narcotics widened that gulf in hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of families;

--- the crime rate continued to rise; the number one "public" problem for millions of people became physical fear; the Administration seemed unable to do anything about this; or in the eyes of some whites, it was unwilling to offend the Negroes upon whom it depended for votes.

Your culpability, or lack of it, for any of these things is beside the point.

2. This is all "bad news." To the voter, it is like going deeper and deeper into debt. What a man wants when this happens to him is not
someone who will say,

"You should be proud of your situation. It's the price of responsibility, and there's nothing so good as responsibility. I recommend that you go deeper into debt."

He wants someone to show him how to get out of debt, even if that will take time. He needs "good news": a word of encouragement that says, "Sure, you can get out of debt. You just have to change the way you're doing things right now."

3. Wallace offers a violently different way of doing things, and it appears that 12 - 15 percent of the people may choose his way. That was bedrock Goldwater support in 1964, and it is unreachable by us -- nothing you could do would be likely to increase or decrease that 12 - 15 percent by more than a point or two.

Nixon offers a modified version of the Wallace change: just as tough on crime, but more "progressive" on urban problems -- enough to pick up some of the more advanced business leaders. I think he will end up more "flexible" on Vietnam than we expect him to be today -- not more hawkish. And he will blame Vietnam for everything -- budget troubles, gold, "a sense of unhappiness", etc.

Rockefeller is the Republican Kennedy; his change will be, or seem, more dramatic. I think he will go dove on Vietnam -- de-escalate, prepare for a political settlement, etc. He will call for bold new approaches to our problems here at home; conceivably for far-out programs such as a guaranteed income scheme that "does away with wasteful welfare spending". He, and Kennedy, will have enough Negro support to make many white people think that under either one of them, the Negroes might be less likely to riot.

McCarthy offers the change to an all-out dove policy in Vietnam. He would provide a genteel, witty, and distinguished front for a pull-out. Though I think more people are disenchanted with Vietnam than ever before, I believe they also fear that McCarthy is not tough enough to look after our interests -- that a withdrawal under him would become a rout in Southeast Asia.
Kennedy offers the change to a dove policy, together with the reputation of a tough guy who could somehow prevent us from being hurt by following a softer line. He suggests radical changes at home: he will try to "bridge the gap" between young and old, he will be photographed with Negroes who have criminal records but want to go straight -- the tough guys with hearts of gold who can "stop riots". He will try to occupy the same relation to you that his brother Jack occupied to the Eisenhower-Nixon Administration: imagination and vitality vs. staleness and weariness, movement vs. entrenchment, hope of change vs. more of the status quo. We will be defending our programs; he will be attacking the tired bureaucrats who run them. We will point out the good we've done; he will, more than any other candidate, point to the people who have been left out -- the Mississippi and Harlem Negroes, the Indians, the Appalachian farmers, etc. He will speak before college groups whom no member of the Administration could address without embarrassment. Many young liberals are bitter about his opportunistic entry into the race after McCarthy's strong showing, but Kennedy is cynical enough to believe that they will forget, given time, razz-ma-tazz, and the development of momentum behind his candidacy. He is right about that.

4. Change for change's sake: On the simple basis of who seems most new and different, I would rate Rockefeller first, then Kennedy, McCarthy, Nixon, Wallace, and Johnson. There is still a little mystery about the first three; their views are not exhaustively known.

5. The press: I would guess that a poll of the media people, as to their personal favorites, would show McCarthy first, then Kennedy, Rockefeller, Johnson and Nixon tied, then Wallace.

6. Our Response: I believe that if you present a stationary target, standing so firmly by the status quo that you seem to eliminate the possibility of change, you will be in grave trouble both at the Convention and in November.