

Domestic Policy Council

File Inventory Sheet: Carol Rasco

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JAN 4 RECD

OFFICE OF DOMESTIC POLICY

THE WHITE HOUSE

FROM THE OFFICE OF: **CAROL H. RASCO**
ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT
FOR DOMESTIC POLICY

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Date: January 4, 1994

To: President Bill Clinton (1)
Vice President Al Gore (2)
Hillary Rodham Clinton (3)
Mack McLarty (4)
David Gergen (5)
George Stephanopoulos (6)

From: Stan Greenberg (7)

Re: THE ACADEMIC RETREAT

I used the Christmas break to study the transcript of the day-long meeting on the Clinton Presidency. You clearly enjoyed and benefitted from the dinner with the academics, but I thought you might want a fuller account of their discussions -- particularly as you prepare for the State-of-the-Union.

To remind you, the **academic participants** included William Julius Wilson of the University of Chicago, Alan Brinkley and Charles Hamilton of Columbia University, David Mayhew of Yale University, Samuel Huntington, Theda Skocpol, Michael Sandel and Richard Neustadt of Harvard University, John Mollenkopf of City University of New York, Kristin Luker of Princeton, Samuel Popkin of the University of California, San Diego, Roger Noll of Stanford University, and Robert Kuttner of *American Prospect* magazine. The **administration and DNC participants** included Mack McLarty, George Stephanopoulos, David Gergen, Bob Rubin, Carol Rasco, David Wilhelm, Mandy Grunwald, Paul Begala and myself. Mandy, Paul and I met afterwards to compare notes and to outline this memorandum.

I should tell you that these were refreshing discussions -- not negative, not cynical, just constructive and collegial. Participants were quite frank about our failings, but in a context that enabled us to build something. And to this date, everybody has honored the requirement of confidentiality.



The President as Educator

The group gravitated almost immediately to the president's role as educator -- as a purposeful, moral leader who can give people hope in the country's future. They longed for you to escape the "chief lobbyist" role and to challenge the American people and the establishment as a teacher. They longed for you to use the powers of the office to reframe the public debate -- again, as a teacher -- to create a new moral discourse.

The participants came to the educative role via two routes: first, they saw you as uniquely able to communicate with and educate the American people about the new challenges facing the country; and second, they believed that the voters are looking for a president who will be honest with them about the challenges, who will "explain" what is happening and point the way forward after decades of inexplicable decline and drift.

They came to this understanding before the end of NAFTA and before the Memphis speech. Indeed, many thought the health care speech was a model -- identifying and redefining a problem, creating a moral imperative (security) and pointing the way out if the country was willing to risk change.

In the educative role, the president may take a number of approaches that elevate the importance of the presidency in this era. First, the president can be the **highest of social critics**. In that, the president recalls not just Reagan, but Woodrow Wilson, Teddy Roosevelt, Andrew Jackson and Thomas Jefferson. The president can put the nation's spotlight on the dominant wrongs of the era. He can educate the public about new ways to look at the world and how to worry about them. The president, by pointing the spotlight, creates a moral discourse.

The President must decide where he wants to point the spotlight. What is the wrong that afflicts our age? Where the president points the spotlight must be central to his governing purpose. Most participants were willing to defer to the president here, but some, including the political advisors, talked about the struggles of middle class America -- working hard but facing declining incomes and community breakdown in a changing world. The State-of-the-Union provides an opportunity to point that spotlight and validate and ennoble the daily struggle of ordinary people.

Second, the teacher has an opportunity to set goals for the nation. The drift of recent years has left people feeling powerless. By showing people where you want to take the country, you give people a sense of mastery over events. In this role, the president allows people to wake-up to a new sense of purpose and control.



The President should be clear and explicit about his goals. (The NAFTA debate allowed the president to educate about the new global economy and the need to look forward and compete; the new jobs initiative should allow the president to educate about the need to uplift the skills of every American and provide basic security in this new world.) Whatever the focus, there needs to be a clarity of purpose, no matter how diverse the legislative agenda.

And third, the president must use certain events to educate the American people about what is wrong and right and to point the way to a better country. It may be a racial incident. It may be youth crime. It may be a company that forsakes its workers. The president should take the opportunity to educate the country about itself and to challenge it to seek a better way. These moments can capture the public imagination and elevate the president's role in shaping the consciousness of the age.

Transcending Cynicism

To play an educative role, the president must help the American people overcome their cynicism about government and politicians. The problem is not of the president's making, but the "crisis of political legitimacy" undercuts Clinton's governing purpose. People believe political life is dishonorable and morally bankrupt; political leaders are presumed to be lying and self-seeking. The press shares and contributes to the cynicism. This barrier of cynicism blocks the way for an administration that wants to change the direction of the country.

To break through the cynicism, the group suggested, as a start, communicating a clear, governing purpose, as suggested above; further, fighting for Clinton's principal initiatives, particularly health care. Persistence and clarity will help people see through the fog.

The coming years, beginning with the State-of-the-Union, provide an opportunity for three other approaches -- **achieving modest goals, foretelling the future, and demonstrating governmental competence.**

After decades of public dishonesty, the president must describe the achievement of modest goals -- without overstatement. After a year in office, the president has an opportunity to lay out intention, hard work and accomplishment -- from deficit reduction, the wealthy contributing, national service, middle class access to college loans, a car and home. By highlighting promise, effort, and accomplishment, the president helps build public trust.



By foretelling what will happen in the future, the president also builds credibility which is cumulative. The story of deficit reduction, lower interest rates and economic recovery provides such an example. Reagan stuck with his tax cut program during the recession and when recovery came, he assumed a new stature. By foretelling the future, Reagan gained credibility and the country gained confidence. It is important for the president to lay out his vision for the future now so that future events, when confirming, allow the country to feel more confident that their leaders are both truthful and wise.

Finally, it is hard for the president to press his agenda when people are so skeptical about government competence -- and with good reason. People are getting less from government, but paying higher taxes for more intrusive government. Re-inventing government remains a critical vehicle for talking about and reforming government. But ultimately, the president must show that the government can provide some services, competently delivered -- more police on the streets, a real employment service, training and higher school standards, a better health care system, something. The New Deal delivered on a lot of small things, even as it unveiled social security. At some point, the administration must move from intention to tangible improvement in what the government does for ordinary citizens.

It would be easier to transcend this cynicism if the press and the administration had more realistic expectations about the possible and the standards for success. Historically, presidents ride waves that produce a surge of legislative accomplishment. Elected with 43 percent of the vote and weak majorities in the Congress, Clinton faces an extraordinary challenge. Democratic Congresses have helped Democratic presidents only during precious periods and almost never for two years running. The administration should foster more realistic expectations, even as it pursues its small and big agenda.

Restoring Moral Authority: The International Context

The role of commander-in-chief while the United States was engaged in the Cold War elevated the stature of previous presidents -- even young ones. John Kennedy gained a gravitas by associating himself with the moral imperatives of the Cold War. It created a stage where "actors," like Ronald Reagan, could associate themselves with historic forces and show a kind of strength that reassured the ordinary citizen. Perhaps more important, the Cold War was predicated on a coincidence of our national security interests and our values as a nation. The Soviet bloc stood in complete opposition to our political, economic and moral values.



With the end of the Cold War, the presidency has lost some of the moral authority that in the past it assumed almost automatically. The citizenry is still looking for meaning and purpose and still looks to the president to lead and to secure the nation's interests. But the president has less automatic authority to play that role. He can no longer lead or secure the world as presidents have in the past. He can no longer associate himself with other world leaders of historic stature.

Moreover, the world economic context where security is now defined provides a more ambiguous setting for waging moral battle. Rather than winners and losers and friends and foes, all may gain by mutual engagement; the world economy may provide for mutual advantage -- a concept that lacks the same kind of moral component as the Cold War. The public which now sees trade as economically disadvantageous, with winners and losers, must come to view the outside world in different terms.

The president must use his educative role to shape people's understanding of this new world. If he can help people make sense of it and create new goals, new measures of success and security, then the office will regain some of its moral authority. But that requires not just an abstract discussion of the world economy. The president must help people make sense of the insecurities and changes taking place in the work place and what new things will be expected of them. He must show them what they can do to succeed and to be assured of a better future.

Restoring Community and Family

People are experiencing a breakdown of family and community; indeed, of all institutions -- from the Congress, to the big company and union, to the neighborhood. There is little that people can depend on in this changing world. The president will gain moral authority and the citizenry will regain its morale, if the president shows he understands this dissolution. That was evident in the Memphis speech.

This is the context for the alienation of both the middle class and the poor -- which goes beyond the material. The president can show his understanding and associate himself with the longing for a sense of safety, mutuality and individual responsibility, a respect for work and religion, and a commitment to family. The president should not allow the secularism of the Democratic Party to deter him from leading a national discourse on values. The president's religiosity is natural and integral to his role as president.

**CC:**

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Robert Rubin (12)
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