

Feb. 19 / Administration of George Bush, 1992

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GEORGE BUSH

[Filed with the Office of the Federal Register, 2:43 p.m., February 28, 1992]

Note: This memorandum was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on February 19.

Exchange With Reporters in Knoxville, Tennessee February 19, 1992

The President. Well, I'm sure people would like to ask questions about the election, so fire away.

New Hampshire Primary Results

Q. Mr. President, did you feel that the voters in New Hampshire, with the message of dissatisfaction, were expressing dissatisfaction with you? And what are you going to change?

The President. Well, I'm not sure of that. I think there was a lot of pounding on me, five Democrats, one Republican, and a certain editorial policy up there that for 9 weeks did nothing but hit me, with no defense on my part. Some of these Congressmen with me today said, "Hey, since when has an 18-point victory been considered anything other than a landslide?"

Now, I'm not saying that I wouldn't have liked to do better. But I'm satisfied with the results. And now we're down here, and we're going to take this guy on in every single State. I'd have to do a little definition of who it is because all I did was lay back and get hammered by these Democrats and to some degree by Pat. And so, it's a new ball game, and we're coming out strong.

I must say that I feel good today. I thought I might be a little down because of the earliest reports that some of you all put on the air and some of your interpretations. Now, with an 18-point win, most people say, "Hey, that's not bad." Try to sell some guy over here that an 18-point victory in a political race isn't anything other than a good victory.

So, we're going to go forward now. The other thing I've got to do, though, I do

think I have to do better, is get this message to the country and particularly these southern States, if you want an election contest, about what we're trying to do to help people that are hurting, what we're trying to do in the Congress to enlist support to get our sound proposals through and beat back the Democratic proposals.

And the last point is, it's a little ironic that the Democratic frontrunner, and could well be the party standard bearer, opposes what the Democrats in the House of Representatives are doing. I mean, they're out of step with their own leader at this point. So, there are mixed signals. But look, I've been in tough fights before, Rita [Rita Beamish, Associated Press], and I'm looking forward to this one.

Q. Do you admire Tsongas, Mr. President?

The President. I'm not admiring him. He's knocking my socks off, and so are the other four, and so is the other candidate. But we're in a new territory now. If you don't believe me, ask these guys.

Q. Was this the result, in part, of waiting for the State of the Union Address to outline what you wanted to do to help the economy? Do you think you might have done better in New Hampshire if you had started fighting with the Democrats on these issues last year, as some urged you to do?

The President. Well, I don't know. That's a good question, Brit [Brit Hume, ABC News]. But it didn't lighten up after I did have the State of the Union Message, and so I didn't notice a change there. I noticed them trying to be very critical of that. I

can't say no to that, but I don't know enough about it, how it would have worked the other way.

The Economy

Q. Is this a sign that having a plan, however plausible, is simply not going to be enough this year, that you're going to have to have not a plan for a recovery but an actual recovery?

The President. Well, I think there's good signs about recovery. I mean, I kept pointing out the interest rates are down; inflation is down. Today, housing starts—I don't know if you've seen it—took a rather dramatic kick up. I think people feel that the economy is poised for recovery.

And let's remember, New Hampshire people were hurting. New Hampshire was disproportionately affected by recession. Now, you talk to the people in Tennessee and yes, some people here have problems, but generally the State is upbeat. They feel we can whip these problems.

And so, I've got to get this—what I really want to do is get something done in terms of stimulating the economy. That first-time homebuyers credit is very important, and the whole rest of our incentives, capital gains. It's interesting, again, to note that the Democratic frontrunner is talking about capital gains also.

So, we've got to do better getting it through Congress. And I'm going to just keep fighting. I'll tell you another thing I'm going to do. I'm not taking anything for granted. I'm going to stay out here across this country—I've been in tough fights before—roll up my sleeves and go after them.

Presidential Primaries

Q. Are you going to emphasize your conservative credentials now?

The President. I think I've got them, and I think, yes, they're clearly there. And I think most people understand that. But we might have to define the opponent. I've been very kind and gentle. I'll still be kind, and I'm now debating how gentle to be—

Q. What do you think the people should know about Buchanan?

The President. —because I'm a little bit tired—well, I'll give you an example. I'll give you an example. This State of Ten-

nessee had 6,700 reservists and guardsmen volunteer. One community of 1,000 had 18 people. This is the Volunteer State. People are still very proud of the fact that this—of Desert Storm. And there's a national pride there; there's a pride in having a strong America. That's my position: a strong America and having led a very triumphant and very important war over there. So, I'll be taking that message, along with the message of economic change, economic hope. Mine's not going to be a pessimistic message, and it's for certain things.

Q. Sir, was it a political mistake—

The President. I'll be with you in just one second. You're the next in line. Get this one, and then right there.

Tax Cut

Q. Was it a political mistake to hold back on the \$500 personal exemption increase, to put that in your long-term package? Whether it made economic sense or not, was it a political blunder?

The President. Well, I don't think it's a political blunder. It was grossly misinterpreted. The question was whether—the opposition was saying it wasn't in there at all. And I want that whole package passed, and I'd like it passed now. But what I have said, and said in the State of the Union, here's some short-term things; let's get those passed now. And here's the bigger package; let's pass that this year. But I don't think it's a blunder. I think there was gross misrepresentation.

Charles [Charles Bierbauer, CNN]. Randall [Randall Pinkston, CBS News], you're next in line right after him.

Presidential Primaries

Q. Mr. President, you say you need to define Pat Buchanan. How do you define him?

The President. Well, we're debating that. You just tell the truth. You just tell the truth.

Q. What would that be?

The President. Well, I don't think Social Security ought to be voluntary. That's the Bush position.

Q. How does that define Pat Buchanan?

The President. Well, people go ask him what he thinks about it.

Q. Don't you risk having a divided party in the fall if you attack him hard?

The President. That's a danger, but he doesn't worry about that. I've been attacked hard. I think I've seen that in—but it's much better to stay on the positive plane. I'll point out what I'm for. I was for what Tennessee did in supporting Desert Storm. I am for protecting those on Social Security. And there's a wide array of things that we can point out that are positive. And then you all can make the interpretation.

That's the kind side. It might not be as gentle as just forgetting about it altogether. But I was a little sick and tired of getting pounded by five Democrats day-in and day-out, not responding, and similarly, by the Republican challenger whom I beat by 18 points. And I'm going to stay, you know, taking a positive message across the country.

Mr. Fitzwater. We're running a little bit behind, Mr. President.

The Economy

Q. —yesterday's results, Mr. President, do you believe that it is still possible to meet that March 20th deadline, or are all the bets off now, and Congress is just going to dig in and make sure that you don't get any kind of economic growth package?

The President. When their standard bearer, the guy up front, has the same program in terms of what he thinks needs to be done for the economy, really essentially a Republican program, I would think they'd take a look at that. The voters up there on their side seemed to give some endorsement to that economic plan that called for a capital gains reduction and stood out against this 25-cents-a-day tax cut that's going to raise everybody's taxes over the years.

And so, I'm not going to give up on trying to get the Congress to move. We're going to stay in there and fight to get the Con-

gress to do what they should have done a long time ago. And I think people in this State know that the Democrats that control the Congress are out of step with the American people. So, I've got to get that message across a little more clearly.

One more, and then I've got to go.

Q. It sounds like you're endorsing the Tsongas economic plan.

The President. No, he's endorsed our plan.

Presidential Primaries

Q. Do you think Buchanan will be finished after Super Tuesday?

The President. I'm not making any predictions. That's the kinder side; I'm going to stay out of that. I'm going to just focus on what I think is best for this country and proclaiming, hey, 58–40, a lot different than I heard some of you guys talking about earlier last evening when, I admit, I was a little tense. Little tense, John [John Cochran, NBC News], with a couple of reports I heard there. But now when the results are in, people across the country are saying, "You mean somebody is going to say that 58–40 is not a good victory?" And you've got a lot of talking heads out there that don't agree with that, but let's see how they try that one on in Tennessee. I think they're going to say that's pretty good.

Q. Are the gloves off, Mr. Bush?

The President. No, no, the gloves are still on. Gloves are still on. Gloves are still on.

Q. —running against an incumbent President?

The President. Do you remember the Reagan-Ford race?

Q. And what did Ford do in November?

The President. No, don't worry about November.

Note: The exchange began at 9:50 a.m. on the President's arrival at McGhee-Tyson Airfield.