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[G.I. Bill Op-ed, 7/21/91]

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July 21, 1991

MEMORANDUM FOR LAMAR ALEXANDER
ETTA FIELEK
JOHN YAHNER

FROM TONY SNOW
SUBJECT G.I. BILL OP-ED

I will apologize in advance for the length and number of suggestions here: I hope they're useful and not just an overwhelming nuisance. I think the piece still needs lots of work -- not because of the writing, but because it reads too much like a speech, and lacks the sharper focus that op-ed pieces need.

I'll begin with a few general comments, then move to specific recommendations, including a suggested outline.

I) General Comments:

A) The missing lede: Readers have to read halfway through the piece before finally discovering what news editors call the lede (and spell incorrectly for reasons known only to the gods of the newsroom). This piece argues 1) That we want to do for elementary and secondary schools what the GI bill did for colleges and universities: Give everyone choice; give every student a chance to attend the best school; 2) that our proposal will help public and private schools and that much of the money likely will go to public schools, since the vast majority of children attend such schools; 3) the Educrats, and especially teacher union presidents, make wild and inaccurate claims against us; and 4) the times demand these reforms, and the American people will get them, with or without our help.

I'd suggest making the points in roughly that order, so the argument flows more logically.

B) The missing explanation: We don't fully explain what the GI bill does and is and how people might gain access to its wonders. The second paragraph seems jargony. Those who don't stop reading right there will scratch their heads and hope for enlightenment in paragraphs to come.

Remember that op-ed readers aren't captives: They will jump away from a piece that does not seize their imaginations. You

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must keep the piece moving with clear and compelling examples, and with language that leaves a reader thinking: Tell me more.

C) The Family Feud Effect: Our insistence on giving prominence to Shanker and Geiger turns a broad explanation piece into a rather narrow airing of grievances against two old foes. I think we should mention them and take on their arguments -- but they should not appear until the second or third page: They do not deserve the spotlight. If we make them prominent, we limit our audience to our supporters and theirs -- people who already have made up their minds -- and we sweep past the undecided or confused Americans whom we hope to persuade.

D) What's in it for me?: When we boast about spending levels, we talk to bureaucrats. We should personalize the benefits of this program, as we tried in the Maria-David/Jose piece. This bill makes it possible for a few students to shop for the best schools. It also will help illustrate the real benefits of school competition. It's the greatest thing since McGuffey's reader -- and it will mean that parents tired of having to send kids to mediocre schools will have the choice of sending them elsewhere. It also means that mediocre schools will feel compelled to improve right away. This bill declares an end to the status quo and helps ring in an era of innovation and excitement in education -- something we've dared dream before, but never thought would come to pass.

II) Specific stuff:

A) The Ann Richards lede: Cute, but too cute. If we wish to mention Democrats, we also must challenge them to make good on their rhetoric -- and challenge them by name. Otherwise, it looks as if we're trying to co-opt a Democratic quote.

B) I'm not sure public school support represents a "gargantuan point," as we allege in the second graph. We have no idea where the money will go, and therefore should not make firm predictions. We can note that most kids attend public schools -- and many would try simply to switch to better public schools. We also should note, as I mentioned above, the fact that competition will force bad schools to improve.

C) On page two, we mention 37 states with choice legislation and 12 with choice initiatives or proposals under consideration. Do any of these overlap. If not, why not say that 49 of the 50 states is considering choice, and that our proposal merely enables people to explore this exciting option? When you note that 49 states have or soon will hop on the bandwagon, you can ask the obvious question: If 49 states feel this way, isn't the educational bureaucracy out of touch?

D) This sentence worries me: "It is the Republican conservative President who is pushing the revolution and fighting to spend the money." I would suggest ending the sentence with "revolution." The goal is not to spend money. We want a revolution -- by whatever means available.

Similarly, the reminiscence on page 3 -- the one about securing merit pay in exchange for tax hikes -- might not send the right message. We should find better ways of explaining union resistance to reform.

E) Conclusion: I'd look for a snappier, more visionary conclusion. This piece at times reads too defensively; it is as if we're saying: "Don't believe all the nasty things they say about us. Please?!!" We offer kids a chance to get the best, and for American education to achieve its historic dream of good educations for all, so that all might enjoy a fair opportunity to explore their personal genius and build a better future.

I know my style tends toward confrontation, but I'd suggest something more direct, like: "George Bush has proposed the most sweeping revolution in education this century. His education strategy doesn't just threaten the status quo -- it replaces one-size-fits-all, take-it-or-leave-it education with a system that gives parents the power to demand and create better schools -- and build a better future for our entire nation.

"It doesn't much matter what the education establishment thinks. The American people want these reforms. The only question is whether the educational establishment will join the revolution -- or be overtaken by it."

I'm not happy with that rendering, but you get the idea...

III) Outline

I) Change/Choice

- A) American education's problems -- everyone knows
- B) What works: choice/GI bills

II) GI Bill

- A) Explain
- B) Pilot program -- 500,000 students nationwide
 - i) eligibility
 - ii) duration of pilot
 - iii) expected results
 - iv) the importance of opportunity
- C) Power to the people: How this program lets parents play a more direct role in building better schools
- D) This program should enable Americans to explore the possibilities of choice -- something increasing numbers of Americans want to do -- and could inspire other innovations in education.

III) The Educational establishment

A) Opposes the GI Bill because it threatens to change a system that makes life cozy for teachers -- and the future bleak for too many students

B) How Shanker and Geiger distort the program

C) The reforms aren't intended to weaken any schools; they're intended to improve all of them

D) Gives power to parents -- not to school authorities.

IV) An Educational system for the 21st Century

A) Many people give lipservice to change: This program will provide the only kind of change that's worthwhile, change for the better. (You might have someone dig up a nice quote on this)

B) Reviving public interest and participation in education -
- the great American ideal

C) George Bush's revolution -- the revolution Americans want, need and deserve.