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Jeremy Ben-Ami, Common Ground / What's Right with America

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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

July 28, 1995

TO: Distribution List*
From: Jeremy Ben-Ami *JB*
Subject: Common Ground/What's Right with America

The attached memos were submitted to Staff Secretary on Friday evening. They will hopefully get to the President for his reaction shortly.

There is an interesting possibility for starting the What's Right with America effort in Charlotte with the President visiting with people involved in the Charlotte Observer's civic journalism project - which has been bringing the community together to solve common problems. Steve Silverman will be circulating material on that program on Monday.

Please feel free to contact Steve or me with questions or comments.

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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

July 28, 1995

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Alexis Herman
Melanne Verveer
Steve Silverman
Jeremy Ben-Ami
Steve Neuwirth

SUBJECT: Common Ground Initiative

You have asked us to develop a plan to take the themes of your July 6th speech at Georgetown -- common ground, responsible citizenship, and community -- and develop a sustained effort to highlight these themes throughout the country and to provide a vehicle for citizens to join your efforts to build *Common Ground*. Specific goals would be threefold:

Substance -- to mobilize in communities action that truly makes a difference.

Constituency -- to generate collaborative efforts with key groups throughout the country.

Leadership -- to demonstrate your capacity to unify Americans around these themes.

This memorandum outlines concrete activities and events for the next 12 months that would enable you to realize these goals. We request that you:

- Review these options, modify where needed, and determine which should be included in a campaign.
- Offer additional options, if any, that have not yet emerged.

We are ready to discuss this with you further.

OPTIONS

The Common Ground Initiative has four main fronts which collectively help meet the goals of substance, constituency and leadership. The fronts are:

- 1) Communicating Your Vision
- 2) Mobilizing Leaders to Action
- 3) Spotlighting Heros: What's Right with America Campaign
- 4) Demonstrating Results

1. *Communicating Your Vision*

A) **Presidential "Challenge"** -- Develop a one-page *Challenge to Responsible Citizenship*, based on the principles set forth in the Georgetown speech, and circulate widely to national and community leaders and organizations who are, or could be, active in working to implement your vision. Use this document (produced as a Presidential Message) as a recognizable organizing tool at the local level to guide discussions, for instance, in classrooms or in congregations.

APPROVE _____

DISAPPROVE _____

B) **Relevant Speeches** -- Develop innovative distribution channels to distribute copies of July 6th and other relevant addresses to groups and individuals who can play an important role in the *Initiative*. The speeches have been mailed to over 700 people invited to the speeches or considered as invitees.

C) **Video** -- Commission a short video that (a) incorporates parts of the July 6th speech (b) highlights some successful local models, and (c) explains the *Challenge* in more detail. The video would be used to help mobilize leaders and communities trying to act on the *Challenge*.

APPROVE _____

DISAPPROVE _____

D) **Opinion Leaders/Editorial Writers** -- Generate further coverage around the heartland by disseminating examples of articles which highlight *Responsible Citizenship* to sympathetic writers, columnists, and opinion leaders. Focus particularly on local/regional opinion leaders.

E) **Regular Inclusion of Themes in Speeches** -- The themes developed in the July 6th speech will be carried through in other speeches -- Religion, Affirmative Action and on an ongoing basis from here on.

2. *Mobilizing Leaders To Action*

A) Sector by Sector Challenges -- We are hard at work developing opportunities for you to carry your *Challenge* to the "sectors of influence." Already on the schedule are the following:

Religious -- The annual Religious Leaders Breakfast on September 8.

Foundations -- The Council on Foundations meets on September 27-29 in Washington.

Business -- A speech to the Business Council is scheduled for October 13.

In addition to these and other sector-focused events that are being considered for your schedule, you could host meetings with groups of leaders from the sectors at the White House to discuss steps they could take to build *Common Ground*.

Several creative ideas have been offered for sector challenges. For example, teachers can develop pledges for parents which commit them to assisting kids with homework and limiting hours they watch TV. Businesses can foot the bill for employees to get involved in classrooms, assisting efforts to enliven school with work. Foundations can review grants with a screen that assesses contribution to active citizenship.

APPROVE _____

DISAPPROVE _____

B) Involving Other Leaders -- You could write to other leaders such as Governors and Mayors, as well as religious leaders, educators, and heads of non-profits who have not been reached through other events and channels, to ask them to join this *Challenge*. We could send the *Challenge* document, or even the video with your letter and ask each of them to hold conferences, give speeches or visit models of *Responsible Citizenship* in their communities.

APPROVE _____

DISAPPROVE _____

3. *Spotlighting Heroes*

What is Right With America -- A separate memo is being sent to you suggesting a campaign to recognize, celebrate, and highlight real people and local initiatives that represent the best of the American community.

4. *Demonstrating Results*

White House Conference

Organize a White House Conference in one year which celebrates the *Heroes* you have spotlighted and reports to the American people some of the most innovative and creative efforts underway throughout the country that rally to your call to build *Common Ground*. We recommend deferring a decision on whether and when to hold such a conference until later in the year.

The Conference could also be billed as a report to the American people on the progress of *Common Ground Initiative* in communities, sectors, and government agencies. It would provide an excellent opportunity to bring together local initiatives you have spotlighted during the year and others you have met and worked with on these issues.

cc: The First Lady

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

July 28, 1995

MEMORANDUM TO THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Don Baer
Alexis Herman
Melanne Verveer
Jeremy Ben-Ami
Steve Silverman

SUBJECT: What's Right with America Campaign

We are seeking your reaction to and approval of a proposal to begin a campaign to highlight "What's Right with America." This campaign is intended to sustain the momentum generated by the Georgetown Common Ground and subsequent speeches which have successfully developed the themes of common ground and citizen responsibility. We have met with and consulted a wide range of your advisors, inside and outside the White House, to develop this plan. This is only one component of our planned follow-up, and we are sending an accompanying memo sketching more broadly other parts of our thinking.

Purpose

The "What's Right with America" campaign will fulfill your desire, as stated at Georgetown, to "find the best and celebrate it, and then, relentlessly promote it as a model to be followed." The Campaign will allow you to demonstrate, as you said in your Inaugural Address and since, that "there isn't a thing wrong with America that can't be fixed by what's right with America" and that "you can find somewhere in America, somebody who has solved every problem you are worried about."

This campaign allows you to use the power of the Presidency to spotlight people throughout the country who are working together in their communities to solve problems. Examples might include the LEAP program in New Haven, the Ten Point Coalition in the Boston area, or NUCOR in South Carolina. Over time, the effort will bring the themes of your speeches to life in the faces and pictures of the people and communities you highlight. This will help the American people and the media better understand your message. Ultimately, bringing together the people you visit over the course of a year will make for a powerful story.

The Plan: Your Activities

At Georgetown, you said that you intend to "do even more than you have done to celebrate the things that work." Our plan, should you approve, is to build into your travel schedule on a regular basis, opportunities to drop by and visit "the things that work" and to meet with the people that make them work. These events would substitute for some of your "OTR" stops at diners or other local spots. We propose:

- You could meet with individuals, visit programs or places, or even hold roundtables with groups of community residents;
- Some of the visits could be relatively spontaneous, others might be more planned;
- From a press perspective, your stops could occasionally be open to the pool, but many could be closed to the press without losing their value. On their own, individual stops will generate significant local and regional media. Over time, their combined effect will generate national attention.

Even when you do not travel, we will propose occasional visits to people and places in D.C. or the surrounding area. We can also invite people to the White House to honor them, or set up a regular time when you can highlight What's Right with America.

The Plan: Other Components

The campaign should, however, do more than guide your scheduling. It should, as you said, "relentlessly promote" the things that work as models to be followed. We recommend a national effort, including, but not limited to, some of the following ideas:

- Setting up a national clearinghouse to share information across communities about model programs and ideas. The clearinghouse would collect examples of What's Right with America and find innovative and effective ways to share that information, including making full use of new Internet capabilities. We are working with Education, the Corporation for National and Community Service, USIA and NEH to examine how we can build on their ongoing work;
- Recognizing local efforts beyond those you visit. As you have pointed out, you kept the Points of Light Foundation, and through it we recognize people every year. We are looking into building on that process, if appropriate, to support this effort;
- Holding a national conference to bring people together who we recognize as models from around the country to talk with national leaders about the obstacles faced at the local level in replicating these models.

Kicking Off the Campaign

We do not necessarily recommend a formal kick-off for this effort. Instead, we should just start doing what you promised at Georgetown. We are looking at your visit to Charlotte, North Carolina on August 8th as a possible first stop where we could spotlight the civic journalism project started by the Charlotte Observer.

Campaign Identity

We do believe this effort needs an identity. A name for the effort -- we recommend "What's Right With America" -- will help give it shape and meaning. If you approve the name, we will work to ensure that background materials and press briefings, for instance, are put on special letterhead or specially labelled each time so that the strength and consistency of our commitment to the "What's Right with America" effort are readily apparent.

Recommendation

We are seeking your approval to begin the "What's Right With America" effort and to start scheduling such stops into your travel in August and September. With your approval, we will also convene a team from the White House and other agencies to flesh this plan out further to meet the challenge you laid out at Georgetown.

_____ Approve _____ Disapprove _____ Let's Discuss

cc: The First Lady