

TEACHER GUIDE

1952 DOC. #1: Nixon’s “Checkers” Speech

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Imagine a presidential campaign without television! In 1952 TV was a new and unproven medium. Some candidates saw its potential and used TV to reach a mass audience. We might never have heard of Richard Nixon if he hadn’t made his famous “Checkers” speech on September 23, 1952. The speech is important, not only because it saved Nixon’s political career, but because it was also the first time that a politician used television in a carefully managed way.

On September 18, 1952 the New York Post ran a front-page story with the headline “Secret Nixon Fund: Secret Rich Men’s Trust Fund Keeps Nixon in Style Far Beyond His Salary.” The story said that wealthy Californians had given \$18,235 to a secret campaign fund in return for political favors from Nixon. In fact the fund was for political purposes and was perfectly legal.

Eisenhower suggested that Nixon go on television to respond to the charges. Although national candidates had not used the new medium in this way before, Nixon was in danger of being dropped from the Republican ticket, so he agreed.

The Republicans put up \$75,000 to buy 30 minutes of prime-time television right after the top-rated “Milton Berle Show.” Nixon hired an advertising agency to produce the live broadcast. In it he denied any wrongdoing and said that Stevenson was hypocritical since his campaign had similar funds. Nearly 60 million people watched the broadcast, which was half the total number of potential viewers and the largest TV audience ever until the Kennedy/Nixon debate eight years later.

> **Explain:** The brief clip that you will see is from near the end of Nixon’s half-hour speech.

> **Play** the video clip.

QUESTION | **What message is Nixon trying to give about himself?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | He is honest.

EVIDENCE | “I should say this (about Pat’s cloth coat)...”; “we did get something, a gift...”; “regardless of what they say...we’ll keep [Checkers]”

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Nixon’s “Checkers” Speech

Video Clip
LENGTH: 43 seconds

SUGGESTED ANSWER	He is a family man.
EVIDENCE	Pat Nixon in the studio; references to Pat, Tricia, and Checkers in the speech
SUGGESTED ANSWER	He has a modest income.
EVIDENCE	"we have an Oldsmobile,"; a "Republican cloth coat,"; and " we have no stocks or bonds"
SUGGESTED ANSWER	He seems familiar, as if he is "just one of the folks."
EVIDENCE	he puts his speech down and speaks without notes; he looks straight into the camera and smiles; he tells a family story about the kids and their dog
QUESTION	What role does Nixon's wife, Pat, play in this program?
SUGGESTED ANSWER	She is used like a prop to show support for her husband.
EVIDENCE	she doesn't speak or even move; she sits in a stuffed chair looking admiringly at her husband

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Can you think of other examples of television being used in a defense against charges of unethical behavior?

Why does a candidate's personality and character seem so important to voters? Was this always true in U.S. presidential elections?

ADDITIONAL INFO

The Mutual radio network estimated that nine out of ten radio homes were listening to Nixon's speech. Radio was still an important source for news about the campaigns, with 70% of voters getting their information from radio, according to National Election Studies. The 1952 election was the last modern campaign when more voters got information about the candidates from radio than from television.

The ad agency that directed the "Checkers" speech broadcast flew in soap opera directors from Hollywood and rounded up the best make-up artists and prop men. After the speech Jack Gould of the *New York Times* warned against "television turning politics into a coast-to-coast vaudeville show" (Troy 199).

Nixon flew to Wheeling, WV to see Ike several days after the speech. Upon greeting him Ike said, "You're my boy," assuring his place on the ticket and the continuation of what turned out to be a long political career. Thereafter Nixon went on the attack himself, labeling Stevenson "Adlai the appeaser" and accusing him of "cowardice," "appeasement," and "treason."

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

"Commoner"

"Family Man"

Reaching Voters (comic book)