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Schweiker the convert

WASHINGTON (NEA) — That bizarre marriage of convenience between Ronald Reagan and Richard Schweiker which shocked Republican sensibilities last summer has proven surprisingly durable.

Instead of the speedy annulment most political observers expected after Reagan narrowly lost his bid for the GOP presidential nomination, the relationship between the former California governor and the Pennsylvania senator has flourished and deepened.

Just a few weeks ago, Schweiker — once totally identified with the most liberal element of the GOP — agreed to join the steering committee of Reagan's new conservative political action unit, "Citizens for the Republic."

That committee, otherwise comprised of hard-core conservatives, is dedicated to keeping Reagan alive politically and to promoting the election of conservative GOP candidates to the House and Senate in 1978.

"I got an invitation to rejoin forces with the governor and I accepted," Schweiker told us. "We formed an association and friendship back in July that we both decided to continue."

Reagan and his close associates have welcomed Schweiker with open arms, viewing him as enough of a convert to their cause to merit full membership in the conservative club.

And indeed, Schweiker does seem to be moving steadily to the right politically, a shift which has annoyed some of his liberal GOP colleagues in the Senate who suspect it was prompted more by personal political ambition than by any abstract philosophic conversion.

Schweiker doesn't exactly bend over backwards to allay such suspicions. He clearly enjoyed his celebrity as Reagan's designated running mate and would welcome more such attention.

When we asked whether he harbored continuing ambitions for national office, the senator said he would "play that by ear." He acknowledged his participation in "Citizens for the Republic" might not hurt in that regard.

"To some extent this obviously keeps me active in the national arena with some pretty good ties. I did make a conservative link, and I'm going to keep it. I have lots of options in terms of time (his current Senate term does not expire until 1980) and I intend to exercise them," he said.

Whatever the motivation, Schweiker's recent voting record indicates he is retreating from the all-out liberalism

which characterized much of his Senate career and moving closer to mainstream GOP positions.

In 1975, before his romance with Reagan, Schweiker scored an 89 on the liberal litmus test administered annually by Americans for Democratic Action. Last year, his rating dropped to 80. And judging from his votes during the first three months of this year, his 1977 score will be even lower.

On a half-dozen key votes this year ranging from fiscal issues to foreign policy, Schweiker has lined up with the Senate's conservative Republicans rather than with such old liberal allies as Javits of New York, Mathias of Maryland and Percy of Illinois.

Top Reaganites profess no concern about Schweiker's sincerity in joining their camp. "We don't think he's trying to cash in on his relationship or anything," said Lyn Nofziger, key Reagan operative.

Maybe not. Schweiker himself is quick to pledge undying fealty to Reagan. "If he wants to run again, I'll support him," the senator told us.

And even if Schweiker is hoping to further his own political career by continuing his liaison with Reagan, he is apt to be sorely disappointed.

As Nelson Rockefeller can testify, Republican conservatives tend to have long memories and little capacity for forgiveness. Neither Rocky's own drift to the right during the final years of his gubernatorial career nor his selection as vice president by Jerry Ford, a lifelong conservative, did much to alleviate the antagonism of the GOP right.

Schweiker may have Reagan's friendship, but it's doubtful he will ever capture Reagan's constituency, even after the former California governor passes from the national political scene.