

Alienating the GOP Governors

ST. LOUIS — Unfairly or not, the thimbleful of Republican governors and governors-elect who survived the Democratic landslide of Nov. 5 were outraged that President Ford could not make a brief appearance at their midwinter conference here this week after his long journey to the Far East two weeks ago.

Indeed, intensive negotiations had started in mid-November with low-level White House aides to arrange a visit by Mr. Ford that would lend presidential endorsement to party-rebuilding efforts. Yet, despite repeated telephone calls to the White House by host Gov. Christopher Bond of Missouri, presidential aides insisted Mr. Ford could not spare a couple of hours. Contact was never made with Dean Burch, Mr. Ford's political adviser until his resignation this week, who took no interest in the governors' appeal.

This non-appearance by a President who was sharply criticized for traveling to real estate conventions in Las Vegas added to the funereal gloom at the governor's conference. Even before they learned he would not appear, the governors were grumbling over Mr. Ford's performance as both party chief and national leader.

Their aggravation did not peak until the close of the morning session on Monday when word spread that even William Seidman, the highest White House aide scheduled to meet the governors, was going to back out on his appearance Tuesday morning. With tempers rising among the governors, White House aide James Falk, Mr. Ford's chief liaison with the governors,

rushed to a pay phone here with an SOS to the White House. That firmed up Seidman's appearance and also brought Falk's boss, Domestic Council chief Ken Cole, to the Tuesday session.

But it scarcely mitigated disappointment with Mr. Ford. One governor, re-elected last month by a huge majority while other Republican candidates in his state were losing, told us: "This would have been the perfect place for Jerry Ford to come and show his interest, with the few of us who won, in trying to revive his party."

The governors' unhappiness with Mr. Ford goes beyond reviving the Republican Party. They believe he is spending far too much time on foreign travel at a time of deepening recession and general economic crisis at home. The President's WIN — Whip Inflation Now — public relations campaign is ridiculed as outdated in the face of national unemployment expected to approach 8 per cent next summer.

Gov. William Milliken of Michigan, arguing that "mere rhetoric cannot save our free enterprise system," came here handing out lapel buttons of his own contradicting the White House WIN pins. His pins say BAC — Buy A Car.

Milliken's reelection by 114,000 votes against multiple adversity in the depression-threatened automobile state was a stunning offset to his party's national disaster, but not a single White House political aide has bothered to call him for a post-election analysis.

Worse yet, Milliken's carefully considered economic program sent to Mr. Ford in a letter one week before the

election has never been answered. He proposed a blend of tax reform, much more public service employment, extended unemployment compensation and public works. But Milliken's proposals were not considered important enough to warrant a reply.

Most criticism of Mr. Ford and what one governor called his "Nixon hold-over" administration was private. But New Hampshire's Gov. Meldrim Thomson, the anti-tax crusader who is indisputably the most conservative of all Republican governors, felt no such scruples. He delivered an angry statement to what he called the "closetful" of Republican survivors (sitting around the huge horseshoe conference table with embarrassingly wide spaces between them) attacking Mr. Ford for "not caring enough" about the future of the Republican Party "to help us set the course for the long climb back."

An hour spent with the governors by Jerry Ford would scarcely make a dent on the staggering political problems of his defeated party. There was no such false hope here. "The GOP has a pinhead for a base and we're kidding ourselves if we think it can be turned around in anything like two or three years," Michigan State Chairman William McLaughlin told us.

But that handful of Republican governors who survived last month would have been a good place to start. The fact that the President and his political staff didn't see it that way made a bad situation worse, alienating the governors at a time Mr. Ford needs every possible ally.