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Ford: Moving Away From Mr. Nixon

CHICAGO— Gerald Ford offered organization Republicans an easy way to break with the President, and for a few hours it looked as though they would follow his lead. But Nelson Rockefeller and Ronald Reagan, for reasons connected with their presidential aspirations, sounded the trumpet for Mr. Nixon. The Republican regulars rallied round, making it a certainty that the party would stay divided on the President and Watergate.

That is a quick summary of what happened last weekend at the Republican leadership conference here in Chicago. The conference brought together 1,000 party workers from 13 states in the American heartland where the Republican organization still has clout.

The opening session on Friday was given over to a soft-sell social affair organized by Charles Percy, the Senator from Illinois who asserted his criticism of Mr. Nixon on Watergate in an unusually low key. This was the mood of the crowd as described by a Percy worker:

"These people elected Richard Nixon. They want to believe in him. But they're used to being proud of the country and the President. They know something terrible happened, and they don't know what to do."

The Vice President, an organization Republican from way back, had no need for the soft sell. He placed the blame for Watergate directly on the committee set up by Mr. Nixon to handle the re-election campaign. "Never again," Ford said in a breakfast speech, "must Americans allow an arrogant, elite guard of political adolescents like CREEP to bypass the regular party organization and dictate the terms of a national election."

Good, but not great, applause greeted that statement. Then Senator Percy, who was on the dais, jumped to his feet and the crowd followed, whooping and cheering in a standing ovation.

It seemed as though Ford had taken the crowd in tow. Whatever they may have said later, he and his people knew at the time that he was tracing a line of retreat away from the President. Indeed, one member of the Ford entourage ascribed the writing of the

speech to his boss in a way that took a mordant dig at Mr. Nixon: "The Vice President wrote it himself on a long, yellow pad late at night while working alone in his office."

But the recently-retired governor of New York approached the meeting from a very different perspective. If he is to get the presidential nomination in 1976, Mr. Rockefeller's big need is to convince the Republican regulars that he is one of them—not an eastern liberal. He went about that business in a luncheon address very deftly—jabbing lightly at the press, and dumping hard on welfare cheaters and drug pushers.

He also needs to keep Mr. Nixon in office so that the Vice President doesn't take the job by inheritance, and he went about that equally deftly. "Even the President," he said, was innocent until proven guilty, and the crowd cheered. Then, in what was the first mention of Mr. Nixon by name at the conference, Rockefeller praised his "magnificent record." Without any prompting, the crowd stood and cheered.

Ronald Reagan, who spoke at dinner, not only shared Rockefeller's interest in backing the President as a barrier to the Vice President, he also had to prove to the Republican regulars that he was not just a right-wing California took. Reagan advanced toward that latter goal by being elaborately kind to the press and issuing a speech draft with such serious-sounding subtitles as: "Philosophies"; "The Issues"; "Inflation and Taxes"; "Bureaucracy."

But Reagan's main device for proving his mainstreamism was to come on as the man who stood for the same line of policy as Mr. Nixon. So he praised the President's record extravagantly.

Indeed, he was so carried away that he even invented a wholly new ending to the crisis in the Mideast last October. According to Reagan, the trouble stopped when the President told the Russians, in "a simple phone call: 'I wouldn't do it if I were you.'" Naturally that warming bit of history drew the most enthusiastic cheering and stomping of the whole affair.

When the meeting ended, the Republican Party was obviously hung up.

The Congressional Republicans, led by the Vice President, sense trouble ahead, and are trying to disentangle the party from the President. But regulars are loyal by nature. Interested parties such as Governors Rockefeller and Reagan are supporting the President the better to deny the inside track to Mr. Ford. So it looks as though the Republicans will experience the same troubles in dealing with Nixon and Watergate as the Democrats did in handling Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam war.

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