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# Thunder on The Right

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, March 4—President Ford is fighting hard these days to hold the middle ground of American politics but he's getting into serious trouble with the huge Democratic Congressional majorities on the left and with an increasingly critical Republican minority on the right.

His instinct is to compromise with the Democrats in order to get some kind of tax, energy and economic program through the Congress. He explained this in agreeing to suspend part of the controversial oil import fee and give the Democrats time to work out an alternate bill.

"I meant what I said about cooperating with the Congress," he told reporters. "What we don't need is a test of strength between the Congress and the President." But the Republican conservatives don't like his compromises, don't like his deficits, don't like his Cabinet appointments, don't like his Vice President, Nelson Rockefeller, and are beginning to wonder about him.

In fact, they are not only organizing to promote their own conservative

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programs, which is fair enough, but they are beginning to talk about opposing him at the 1976 Presidential nominating convention, if he runs, and to block the nomination of Mr. Rockefeller, if Mr. Ford doesn't run.

After a meeting of about thirty Republican conservatives at an eastern Maryland resort last weekend, Senator James L. Buckley, Conservative Republican of New York, told reporters that both Ford and Rockefeller might be opposed next year if they tried to be nominated. In any event, the conservatives wanted to avoid a *fait accompli*—meaning a Rockefeller nomination if President Ford decided to retire at the end of his present term.

Former Gov. Ronald Reagan of California doesn't come to Washington very often, but he was here this week supporting the new conservative bloc and stepping up his criticism of the President. In an interview with U.P.I., Mr. Reagan was quoted as saying that he had not made up his mind about seeking the Presidency, but that it was "accurate" to describe Mr. Ford as a "caretaker President." He added that he would "not be displeased" if liberal Republicans such as Senators Jacob Javits of New York, Charles Percy of Illinois and Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania left the G.O.P. because they could not accept the views of its conservative members.

"That's up to them," he was quoted as saying. "A party cannot keep changing its philosophy for those who want to keep its name but do not subscribe to its beliefs."

Having invited his ideological opponents to take a walk, Mr. Reagan proceeded to criticize President Ford's latest Cabinet appointments—presumably Attorney General Edward H. Levi of the University of Chicago; John T. Dunlop of Harvard, Secretary of Labor; William T. Coleman Jr. of Philadelphia, Secretary of Transportation, and Carla Anderson Hills, a liberal Californian, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

"I don't believe a President should make appointments on the basis of trying to span a political spectrum," Mr. Reagan observed. "I think the President should make appointments of people who will implement his philosophy."

As a doctrine for an ideologically conservative third party, this might be sound enough, but as a formula for viewing the Republican nomination and the Presidency it is almost as plausible and promising as George McGovern's ideological campaign of 1972.

The last nation-wide Harris poll on party preference gave the Democrats 47 per cent, the Republicans 21 per cent and independents 32 per cent, so it's hard to see how the conservatives could hope to win within their party by splitting their dwindling ranks.

It is possible, of course, that Mr. Reagan could beat Mr. Rockefeller for the nomination, as Barry Goldwater did in 1964, if President Ford decided to withdraw from the 1976 race, but the rising conservative opposition to Mr. Ford is precisely the sort of thing that would make the President want to run, if only to avoid a bitter ideological struggle between Reagan and Rockefeller.

Also, the Republican conservatives have a much better chance of influencing President Ford's policies and decisions by talking to him than by setting up watch-dog committees and denouncing him publicly.

He is not exactly a roaring liberal himself, and he needs all the help from his party he can get, but if he has to choose between following the small bloc of conservatives in Congress or compromising with the vast Democratic majorities in order to get a legislative program through, he is likely to go with the votes and leave the ideology to others.

Mr. Reagan is a puzzle. He says he isn't running but he's running all over the country. He says he wants to work within the G.O.P., but he's helping split it apart. He hasn't any official position except as a member of Rockefeller's C.I.A. investigating committee, but he says he's too busy to attend many of its meetings (he has made only three out of eight). He describes his political position as "fluid" but he's so fluid that he could go down the drain, and take his party with him.