

**David S. Broder**

## A Hunch That's Irresistible

**I**N DEFIANCE OF common sense and experience, I have an irresistible urge to confess to a hunch that has been nagging me for months. I think that if Ronald Reagan gets up the nerve to challenge Gerald Ford for the Republican presidential nomination, he may be a lot tougher than anybody supposes.

The case against Reagan's succeeding is ridiculously easy to construct. The public opinion polls put Mr. Ford ahead of the former California governor by a 2-to-1 margin. And the gap has been widening.



Mr. Ford is a declared candidate, with the leverage of the White House backing his campaign committee, while Reagan hangs back, reluctant to run. The "fire in his political gut" that Senator Paul Laxalt (Rep-Nev.) said he discerned in Reagan seems to many others to be but a flickering flame of ambition.

Laxalt and other conservatives have launched a "Citizens for Reagan" committee, as a holding action for the undecided challenger. But the old adage holds: You can't beat someone (especially an incumbent President) with no one. It is especially true in the Republican party, which gets intensely nervous even at the prospect of a public fight.

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**A**ND YET . . . AND YET . . . there is that nagging doubt that Mr. Ford has this nomination quite as safely locked as all the evidence would seem to suggest. The doubt began growing during spring travels through 14 states.

From Westchester county, N.Y., to Snohomish county, Wash., the refrain that one heard repeatedly from Republican county chairmen, fund-raisers and precinct workers was the plea that their party "stand for something." Republican activists now crave someone whose philosophy they know and trust.

They also sense the country is moving in the conservative direction, which it surely is, and they want their doctrine preached in its purest possible form. Reagan does that better than any other politician in the country, and has for years.

While Mr. Ford gains points with Mayaguez and the vetoes, there is no way, given his political circumstances, that he can act as conservative as Reagan sounds. Not while he's got to defend a \$60 billion deficit and detente with the Russians.

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**R**EMEMBER, TOO, that if a Reagan-Ford contest develops, it will not be settled by the wishes of the practical-minded senior party pros and officeholders, most of whom are already in Mr. Ford's corner. It will be settled in the 30-plus presidential primaries.

My hunch is that if Ronald Reagan announced tomorrow that he was running, not in opposition to Gerald Ford, but in support of the conservative principles he's been talking about all these years, it just might be one heck of a horse race.