

Mr. Ford's Dilemma

By Tom Wicker

That was good advice moderate Republican Senators gave President Ford, but it may prove hard for him to accept. Believing an incumbent can easily be renominated despite a conservative challenge by Ronald Reagan, the Senators urged Mr. Ford to soften his public pronouncements lest he alienate the moderate Democrats and independents needed to elect any Republican Presidential candidate.

Mr. Ford, on the other hand, may not feel all that much like an incumbent, having been appointed Vice President by a discredited President, and then succeeding to the Presidency. A lifelong conservative Republican himself, he no doubt suffers from the conviction of that breed that if only a real conservative presented himself for office, the country would elect him overwhelmingly. He probably is politically uncomfortable with some of the policies—notably détente with the Soviets—to which he has fallen heir.

Mr. Ford may even share the remarkable view that an over-the-hill actor with a poor record as governor of California, a gift for one-line gags, and a taste for talking tough to the poor, can take a party nomination away from a reasonably popular President. In any case, it is his own office that is at stake, the nomination is the first step toward retaining it, and he is not therefore likely to be as confident as the moderate Senators that Mr. Reagan presents him no real problem.

The Senators, on the other hand, have good reason to advise Mr. Ford as they did. Among them, for example, was Senator Charles Mathias of Maryland; in 1974, Mr. Mathias took advantage of his moderate record to win 52 per cent of the vote in twelve solidly black precincts in Baltimore—not a small factor in his re-election over the able Democratic challenger, Barbara Mikulski.

Another of those calling upon Mr. Ford to watch his language was Jacob K. Javits of New York, who was not at all damaged in 1974 by his ability to win as much as 26 per cent of the vote in some Harlem districts, and against Ramsey Clark at that. There are very few states, in fact, and almost none with sizable electoral votes, where Republicans can win state-wide elections without making substantial inroads into Democratic and independent voters.

At this stage of the game, moreover, Mr. Ford almost has to assume, at least for planning purposes, that his Democratic opponent in 1976 will come from among Senators Edward Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey or Edmund Muskie—no one else appearing so far to be making much impression

on the voters. A strongly conservative image for a minority-party nominee hardly seems right for defeating any of those three in a year when unemployment is bound to remain high and food prices may be soaring in the wake of another Soviet grain deal.

Mr. Ford can hardly be blamed, of course, for worrying about Mr. Reagan now and the Democrats later—particularly since the Wallace-plagued Democrats may very well split themselves wide open again in the effort to agree on a presentable candidate. William Safire has reported that the Reagan strategy is to win the Republican primaries in New Hampshire, Florida, Wisconsin and California; and that is a plan plausible enough to give the White House considerable concern.

On balance, however, détente, his nomination of Nelson Rockefeller to be Vice President, and his huge budget deficits probably make it too late already for Mr. Ford to win hard-core conservatives away from Ronald Reagan. For another, in a big state like California, even Mr. Reagan himself had to win independent and moderate-to-conservative Democrats in order to be elected governor; a Ford-Reagan showdown in that state might very well go to the more moderate, not the

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more conservative, of the two. The California Poll already shows Mr. Reagan trailing Mr. Ford by seven percentage points, after having lost a nine-point lead recorded in May.

But in the final analysis, Mr. Ford and his strategists must know that Gerald Ford's major political asset (aside from the formidable powers of his office) is his appearance as a nice guy, an honest and sincere man trying hard in a job perhaps a little too big for him, who has brought a tone of decency back into public life. They know also that the Republican party, as distinct from the general public, is a small and clubbish affair long in the hands of conservative elements who probably would happily nominate Barry Goldwater all over again.

It might therefore make sense in the White House to fight Ronald Reagan on Republican ground, one conservative against another, while planning to fight the Democrats with Mr. Ford's amiable personality, his middle-aged jockery, his all-American family (including a fashionably liberated wife and mother), and his obvious determination to do as little as possible to disturb anyone. That would be like presenting Herbert Hoover in a Harry Truman shirt with an Eisenhower smile and no 5 o'clock shadow at all.