

Mr. Ford's Woes

By Tom Wicker

Nothing could be more eloquent testimony to the deep political troubles of Gerald Ford than the decision of the Republican National Committee not to make its fund-raising lists available to him in the coming election year.

Instead, the committee, striking a stance of neutrality, is reported to have decided to make no services available to Mr. Ford that it does not also provide for his conservative Republican challenger, Ronald Reagan, and to charge either man for any such services. That may be proper impartiality between two contending Republicans, but it is an astonishing political development.

Can such a thing be imagined happening to Richard Nixon on the eve of 1972? Or to Dwight Eisenhower? Or even to Lyndon Johnson, who was in terrible political difficulties in late 1967 but who was then assumed to be a candidate for re-election?

In either party and far back into antiquity, the national party committee of any President in office has been his slavish supporter. And why not? Any such committee always knew that no matter how weak the President in question might be, as an incumbent he probably had a better chance than any challenger.

That Mr. Ford will not get customary fund-raising assistance from the National Committee is the least of it, despite the fact that his fund-raising operation—like most of the rest of his enterprises—has been floundering. The true meaning of the committee's decision is that those who made it fear Mr. Ford may not be able to win his own renomination against Mr. Reagan's challenge, and that he is so weak within his own party that he does not control or even dominate the Republican National Committee.

These facts could add up to a damaging psychological blow to the Ford campaign. They will not be lost upon Republicans not yet committed to either man, and those more anxious for a winner than for any particular candidate could be strongly influenced toward Mr. Reagan. Much more such "impartiality" and Mr. Ford will be practicing law in Grand Rapids.

Yet, until recently, at least two general assumptions seemed justified:

One was acceptance of the historical truth that an incumbent President is hard to beat, particularly for the nomination of his own party. This is not just because the Presidency makes him the best-known man in the country, although that certainly helps; it is

because the actual powers of the office are so great that even a reasonably scrupulous man can wring great advantage from them.

The second assumption would have been the political perception that in a general election against any conceivable Democrat (save perhaps George Wallace, if he is conceivable), Mr. Ford would be harder to beat than a narrower-base candidate like Ronald Reagan, who risks the fate of Barry Goldwater and George McGovern—capturing a party nomination by factional power, then being unable to unite that party or expand that factional base in the general election.

Those assumptions do not now seem so solid. There seems to be a clear possibility that the Republicans actually might ditch an incumbent President (Mr. Ford has the powers of the office just as much as if he had been elected rather than appointed) in favor

IN THE NATION

of a factional leader (although there are those who do not believe that Mr. Reagan, a fabled campaigner, will turn out to be in the Goldwater-McGovern mold).

What has happened to produce such unusual—almost unprecedented—developments? The main thing seems clearly to be the ineptitude of Mr. Ford's performance in the White House. However unfair it may be to a decent man trying hard in a demanding position, the public perceives Mr. Ford as a bumbler and fumbler on issues ranging all the way from the economy to toasts at White House dinners. Even his trip to China turned out to be the dullest show in town.

A President appointed to office by Richard Nixon needs to do better than that, particularly when a challenger, like Mr. Reagan is being urged to run by powerful forces within his own party. As for the possibility of a successful insurgency ultimately resulting in landslide defeat, as for Mr. Goldwater in 1964, the conservative columnist Pat Buchanan recently observed:

"Like the Goldwaterites of a decade ago, and the McGovernites of '72 [young Republican conservatives] are of the all-or-nothing school. They are conservatives before they are Republicans, counter-reformationist as much as conservative. Their dream is a political party of the future uniting the Wallace Democrats and Goldwater Republicans. . . . If the demise of the G.O.P. is a pre-condition of building such a party, they will entertain few reservations about nudging it into the abyss in November '76."

And they just might do it, too.