

Too Many, Too Soon

By Tom Wicker

IN THE NATION

WASHINGTON—The Watergate testimony of John Dean and other important witnesses to follow could settle the next Republican Presidential nomination three years ahead of time. If the result should be the resignation or removal of President Nixon, Vice President Agnew would succeed him and become the 1976 nominee almost automatically.

But that is unlikely, despite Mr. Dean's remarkable testimony, for three good reasons—the first of which is the question whether charges serious enough to justify such a result can be documented by Mr. Dean or any of the witnesses. And in the absence of truly overwhelming and undeniable Presidential culpability, the majority Democrats in Congress clearly don't want (a) the political onus of having ousted a landslide winner of the other party, and (b) Mr. Agnew as an incumbent President in 1976.

The chances still are, therefore, that in the shadow of the Watergate scandal there will be a rousing contest for the Republican nomination in a year in which there will be no incumbent running. Precisely because of that scandal, speculation has started earlier than it otherwise would have, and inevitably talk is being heard about the Republican star of the Watergate hearings, Howard Baker of Tennessee.

No wonder. Mr. Baker is a middle-road, border-state Republican, young and attractive, who is in the process of making for himself the kind of national reputation, via televised hearing, that catapulted another Tennessean, Estes Kefauver, into Presidential politics two decades ago. Ultimately, however, Estes Kefauver didn't quite make it, as Howard Baker himself is well aware.

The talk may persist, nevertheless, since Watergate has so clouded the Republican picture. Mr. Agnew, once the party's prohibitive favorite for 1976, is the closest of the contenders to the scandal, although so far personally untouched. As the Administration's No. 2 man, however, it is hard for him either to avoid the general taint or to attack the Watergate abuses with the vigor and credibility voters are likely to want.

As for John B. Connally, his second tour in the Nixon Administration has seemed an unhappy one and has not enhanced the old picture of him as Mr. Nixon's strong right arm. In any case, Watergate has dissipated the value of Mr. Connally's best asset—Mr. Nixon's favor—and has not removed his two continuing liabilities. One is that he is an interloper in a party that tends to be clubbish; the other is that the country still tends to see him as an L.B.J.-style wheeler-dealer, bathed in oil and dried with money.

Up in New York, Nelson Rockefeller

has the small matter, for him, of winning re-election to a fifth term next year before taking, in 1976 and at age 68, his fourth shot at the Presidency. To many Republicans, he will always be the Eastern internationalist liberal who opposed Barry Goldwater in 1964; but many others surely must have noted what New York connoisseurs consider his steady rightward drift since 1968, climaxed by this year's hard-line antidrug program. He is, by all odds, the most senior political figure available for 1976, in both foreign and domestic affairs, and he won't hurt for money.

Across the continent, Ronald Reagan of California, who will be 66 in 1976, and who was once the conservatives' white hope, has produced an attractive-sounding tax-limitation plan that is being viewed favorably in the conservative press. He obviously hopes to turn this scheme into a Presidential platform. Still a sure-fire TV performer and, like Mr. Rockefeller, untouched by Watergate, Mr. Reagan is another major contender.

Senator Charles Percy of Illinois is the most liberal entrant in this large field, and on the Republican form sheet ought therefore to be disqualified from the start. Enough backfire from Watergate and against the Administration might make his isolated position an asset—but still, a liberal at a Republican convention most often resembles a scullery maid at a D.A.R. meeting.

Obviously, therefore, if he can continue to build a "Mr. Clean" reputation in the Watergate hearings, Howard Baker could be just the young and appealing new face to whom Republicans might turn in 1976, if the five leading candidates deadlock the convention. The trouble with that is that the "deadlocked convention" is in modern terms a chimera pursued by all sorts of Democratic and Republican hopefuls who never really had a chance.

The truth is that Presidential nominations are won, nowadays, by delegates garnered in local and state conventions, through primary victories, by long political cultivation and astute political organization, and by public reputation — and almost never in smoke-filled rooms at convention time. Only once in the past quarter-century has a convention of either party required more than one ballot, with the preconvention leader always the winner.

In that light, Howard Baker is a dark horse indeed. The most interesting thing about his new political standing is that he would be an almost ideal Vice Presidential running mate for any of the five major contenders (save perhaps Mr. Agnew, another border-state Republican). And the Vice Presidency, these days, often leads on to fortune.