

GOP Hits 'Outsiders' in Elect

By Jules Witcover

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At a large Republican rally in Cincinnati the other night, Gerald R. Ford, Vice President of the United States by way of Grand Rapids, Mich., warned the local faithful about an invasion of "outsiders" attempting to inflict a third straight defeat on a GOP candidate in a special congressional election.

"We are facing a crisis," he said as he spoke in behalf of Republican Bill Gradison, a former Cincinnati city councilman running for a vacant House seat that has failed to go Republican only once since New Deal days, but is now in jeopardy. "Now you've got a bunch of outsiders coming into this congressional district. They overwhelmed and took over Johnstown, Pa. . . . Outsiders moved in, took over, organized, ran a campaign.

"We had a sad experience up in my district, Grand Rapids. They came in with massive out-of-state money. They had out-of-state PR and advertising people. They came in with outside organizers. They skillfully exploited certain economic circumstances in this district."

Then Ford lowered his voice and spoke almost conspiratorially. "They're moving in here," he said. "They're trying to do the same thing in the First District of Ohio." And then he raised his voice again.

"Let me ask you," he shouted. "Do you want a bunch of outsiders telling you who to send to Congress?"

"Hell, no," an exuberant listener in the crowd shouted back.

The exchange was one of the rare times since Jerry Ford has taken to the stump in 1974's special elections that he had put some fire in his normally straight, unemotional delivery, and it seemed to surprise the crowd.

The "outsiders" of whom Ford spoke were more specifically identified by Sen. Robert Taft Jr. (R-Ohio) in a

dinner speech for Gradison earlier that night.

"From Johnstown (Pa.), the busloads of Meany's politicians rolled into Grand Rapids, Mich., where they successfully defeated another Republican candidate in a special congressional election," he intoned.

Organized labor manned 300 phones in Grand Rapids and made more than 90,000 calls from union headquarters and hiring halls and contributed \$34,000 in cash to the Democratic candidate, Richard F. VanderVeen, he said.

"And now the word is that they have come to Cincinnati," Taft warned. Money for Thomas Luken's Democratic campaign, he said, "came not only from labor unions in Cincinnati but from unions throughout the state of Ohio and the nation."

"Meany's politicians" are members of the staff of the AFL-CIO's Committee on Political Education (COPE), which has indeed been working hard for Democrats in these early special House elections.

Their massive effort in Johnstown was part of a very narrow Democratic victory, but that district, like Ford's old district in Michigan and the Ohio district now being contested, had long been in Republican hands.

In Johnstown, the winning Democrat, John P. Martha, had soft-pedaled Watergate and President Nixon as issues and concentrated on local issues, and he barely squeezed through. In Grand Rapids, though, the winning Democrat, VanderVeen went all-out against the President and won decisively.

That result appeared to send a message not only to Mr. Nixon but to other Democratic candidates: campaigning head-on against the beleaguered President is good politics this year.

Before going to Cincinnati last Wednesday Vice President Ford spent two hours with Mr. Nixon, discussing among other things the



VICE PRESIDENT FORD
... warns of crisis

Michigan defeat. The President recognized the impact of Watergate, Ford reported later, but had no advice to pass on to Gradison to deal with it.

But Ford's speech pretty clearly conveyed what the strategy, for now at least, will be: Continue to ignore Watergate and the President's other troubles, and find a whipping boy.

In Johnstown, there were two Republican whipping boys—COPE and the press. The losing candidate, Harry Fox, also railed at big labor's presence in his district but attacked another group of "outsiders"—reporters from the national television networks and major-city newspapers who came in looking for signs of Watergate's impact in the Johnstown race.

That focus, Fox argued later, diverted the voters' attention from local issues.

In Grand Rapids, though, it was the Democratic candidate who drew the voters' focus to Mr. Nixon and Watergate, and especially not labor or the press.

Still, the whipping-boy strategy seems set for the Cincinnati election March 5, Taft, in his speech, spelled it out:

"One thing should be very clear to all of us. Neither Watergate nor Richard Nixon are on the ballot for the First District of Ohio. But it appears that not unlike

the Johnstown and Grand Rapids elections, labor political bossism is.

"Let no one be deceived. The greatest power play our country has ever seen is now being perpetrated behind the mask of Watergate. With all these self-riotous announcements made by the impeachment lobby, it is clear that the real aim is to seize political power in this nation without changing people's minds on the basic issues endorsed in 1972."

A spokesman for National COPE denies that out-of-state COPE officials have been involved in any of the races except for one national staffer working among minorities in Cincinnati. He conceded, though, that some international unions have sent workers in independently.

National COPE gave \$6,500 to Murtha in Johnstown, \$4,000 to VanderVeen in Grand Rapids and \$5,500 to Luken, he says. In the regular congressional elections of 1972, he says, National COPE gave an average of \$3,000 to candidates for the House.

"We don't send traveling teams around," he says. It is possible some COPE workers who were in Grand Rapids also are working in Cincinnati, he said, because the local COPE operation is a two-state organization embracing both Michigan and Ohio.

Though this official says COPE is not making any special effort in congressional races this year, on the state level COPE has extended itself, especially in the Pennsylvania race. Mike Johnson, executive director for Pennsylvania COPE, was so optimistic about his own labor effort in Johnstown that he was predicting a 2-1 sweep for Murtha before the vote.

Cincinnati, where the name Taft has long been synonymous with Republicanism, running against big labor is nothing new. What makes the tactic interesting now is that it apparently has been seized as the antidote to Mr. Nixon's personal

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woes, rather than any attempt to defend him directly.

Ford, in speaking for Gradison the other night, carefully talked of policies at home and abroad that Gradison supported. They were, clearly, the policies of Richard Nixon, but Ford seldom invoked the name of his leader.

With the President's popularity in the polls consistently low, and with the energy crisis and inflation hitting the voters directly, the traditional task of a Vice President — to stump for the party in off-year elections — is no picnic this year.

But if there is word for Jerry Ford, that word is dogged. Some suggest that if he is smart, he will be a conciliatory, nonpartisan Vice President, the better to run the country if destiny should elevate him to the White House, or to attract bipartisan support should he run for President in 1976.

In 25 years in Congress, though, he was a good, partisan soldier in GOP ranks, smiting the opposition, including organized labor, with diligence and zest. For all his new circumstances, he continues to be just that.

In Cincinnati the other night, Ford called on the local Republicans "to turn the tide and to stop this stampede" in the March 5 election. And in a talk with reporters he rated the Republican's chance — in a GOP stronghold — at about 50-50. This is not very optimistic talk, but Ford is not alone among Republicans sounding it.

In the past, in times of Republican adversity, raising the specter of big labor poaching on local elections has had only mixed results for the Republicans. Whether the old device is good enough to overcome what used to be called the Watergate problem, but increasingly is being called the Nixon problem, is the question now being posed in the Ohio special election.