

FOR ROCKEFELLER THE OLD QUESTION

On Political Trip to Illinois,
He Says It's Too Early to
Decide About '76 Race

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ROCKFORD, Ill., Feb. 10— Nelson A. Rockefeller had just told a group of reporters what he had been telling others recently: That he will make no decision on whether to seek the Republican nomination for President until the latter part of 1975.

Now he was at a reception surrounded by Rockford Newspapers' editors and executives, all clutching drinks, munching hors d'oeuvres and seeking, as one put it, "the real poop."

The former Governor, gripping a glass of his preferred Dubonnet, told the editors the same thing he had told the reporters.

Finally, a heavy set man said: "Governor, we know you're realistic. You were running the last time you were here more than 10 years ago." Mr. Rockefeller smiled. Somebody changed the subject.

This political roundelay is already old hat to Mr. Rockefeller, and it will become more so in the ensuing months as he whistle stops about the country to support Republicans facing elections this year.

The first of these stops took place yesterday in this heavily Republican 16th Congressional District in the northwest corner of Illinois. Mr. Rockefeller and a retinue of long-time associates flew here in a family jet to laud Representative John B. Anderson, who is seeking an eighth term, at a fund-raising dinner.

The Message

The cluster of traveling companions is smaller than when Mr. Rockefeller was Governor. Accompanying him were Hugh Morrow, his director of communications; Ann Whitman, his personal secretary; Joseph Canzari, who is doing advance work for the trip; a bodyguard, and George Hinman, the Republican national committeeman and long a political mentor and confidant of Mr. Rockefeller.

Yesterday at his news conference, at the reception, on a TV talk show, on receiving lines and at the dinner lectern before 900 supporters of Congressman Anderson, the 65-year-old Mr. Rockefeller's message went as follows:

Watergate is a "national tragedy" and it is imperative that constitutional processes

go forward promptly to punish the guilty and clear the innocent." Those who would "harass and drive a President out of office by resignation would not only circumvent but abrogate the Constitution of the United States."

Mr. Rockefeller continues to avoid any personal attacks on President Nixon and balances his Watergate comments with praise for "the tremendous record of accomplishments" of the Nixon Administration in its foreign policy, for "achievement of stability at home and abroad" and for "inflation rates that have been among the lowest for the major industrial nations."

He closes with praise for the Republican party, leans heavily on the word "optimism" to describe his outlook for America and says, "I cannot imagine a more exciting time to be a citizen of this country than now."

Traveling about Rockford yesterday, Mr. Rockefeller showed that his penchant for arm-grabbing, patting and winks had not flagged.

Questions about his Presidential aspirations were particularly pertinent since Senator Charles H. Percy of Illinois has made clear his own willingness to run for the office and has needed other Republican frontrunners for doing "the non-candidate tango."

'A Little Early'

In a brief interview in a car taking him to his TV appointment, Mr. Rockefeller was asked about the wisdom of announcing one's candidacy so far in advance of the election.

"He's trying an experiment," the former Governor said of Mr. Percy. "We'll just have to watch it with interest and check back in a year and see what he's doing. Sometimes the offbeat approach is a very useful approach."

Then he added: "One's got to be a pretty good clairvoyant to look three years ahead. I think it's a little early myself to make up your mind."

Mr. Rockefeller told the editors that he favored an excess profits tax in the entire energy field because "the public's got to be satisfied they're not being taken to the cleaners."

In the interview he said he had not worked out the details on the proposed tax and that his position was a personal one unrelated to his role as chairman of the Commission on Critical Choices for Americans.

He did say that an excess profits tax should be imposed on all earnings not used for increasing production and should be aimed at those companies "with low-cost production and tremendous profits."

It was after 11 P.M. when the Governor returned to his private plane and Mr. Canzari began to work out the arrangements for other trips this week to South Dakota and Kansas.

As the jet roared off into the night, one observer said to a friend, "The compleat angler is out fishing."