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SFChronicle MAR 16 1976
Reagan Finally
Said the Word

IN ONE OF HIS celebrated letters to his son, Lord Chesterfield said that since attaining the full use of his reason nobody had heard him laugh. I find that curious because since I attained the use of reason I have rarely stopped laughing. But then, I, unlike Chesterfield, am frequently required to think about American politics.

If Lord Chesterfield had been in Marion, Illinois, the other day, he would have laughed until his ribs squeaked. There, Ronald Reagan rediscovered (some would say discovered) the Watergate unpleasantness.



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Mr. Reagan has never been what you would call obsessed with Watergate. Indeed, some people considered him downright reticent on the subject between June 17, 1972, and August 9, 1974. And the good citizens of Marion will be forgiven if they did not know that Mr. Reagan was talking about Watergate when he somewhat obliquely touched upon it.

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“I DON'T THINK we want to go into that battle against the Democrats in November having to defend a part of the past which Republicans would like to be left to history.”

Having brought up Watergate, thereby breathing a bit of life into it as an issue, Mr. Reagan said he was only worried that the nomination of Gerald Ford would keep Watergate “alive as an issue with Democrats. It would surely be brought up.”

It is true that Gerald Ford was elevated to greatness as a result of Watergate, and that en route to his current estate Ford never uttered a syllable that might have caused Mr. Nixon to suspect that the Vice President harbored dark thoughts about him. But during the 22-month Watergate crime wave, Mr. Reagan, the trumpet of law and order, was strangely mute.

Some people suspect that Reagan's principal fear was not that the Constitution might be shredded, but that Mr. Nixon might resign, leaving an incumbent Ford blocking Reagan's path.

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WHEN MR. REAGAN moved up the road to Belleville, Illinois, he omitted from his speech the remark about Watergate. An aide guessed that the remark was dropped because Mr. Reagan “got confused with his note cards he uses for his speech.”

Not so. Enter Lyn Nofziger, an amiable and honorable gentleman shaped like a wax pear that someone left overnight near a hot radiator. Mr. Nofziger would make a keen President, but God as a punishment has made him the candidate's press secretary.

Nofziger has been in politics long enough to have risen beyond cynicism to an occasionally scary honesty. He had noticed that the Watergate remark got no applause in Marion, and he said that the Belleville audience was not offered Mr. Reagan's Watergate thought because “it didn't go over as well as we thought it would this morning.” It is not recorded that a blush mantled the ample Nofziger cheeks when he said that.