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Reagan, Ford And Carter

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, May 2—Remember the condescending talk about Ronald Reagan after New Hampshire and Florida? He had done Gerald Ford a favor by running, the political sages said—had given the President a chance to prove himself an effective national campaigner.

After Texas condescension has to stop. That Mr. Reagan can displace an incumbent as nominee must still be doubted. But he has found his way to the conservative heart of the Republican Party—the people who after all dominated the last few G.O.P. conventions—and he has reasonable hopes for primaries ahead in such large states as Indiana, Ohio, California.

Whatever happens to Mr. Reagan, he will have had a significant impact on the political dialogue of 1976. He has moved Mr. Ford far to the right, and that motion is likely to accelerate.

Hardly a week passes without the President adopting some vast new military spending scheme in an attempt to show himself more defense-minded than Mr. Reagan. One day it is more ships for the Navy. Another it is a decision to build the B-1 bomber without even waiting for the results of flight tests—at a cost of \$1,800 to the average American family.

Diplomacy is also feeling the effects of Mr. Ford's desperate efforts to out-Reagan Reagan. The American position in the delicate Panama Canal negotiations has been turned topsy-turvy. Détente has been stripped from the official vocabulary. Henry Kissinger can hardly feel confident that his new African initiatives will have White House support for long.

If Mr. Ford does survive to be the nominee, he may well choose as his running mate someone to appeal to Mr. Reagan's right-wing, nationalist following. A likely choice would be

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that most dangerous of American political figures, John Connally of Texas, the man who encouraged Richard Nixon to defy the Supreme Court over the Watergate tapes.

Mr. Reagan's success also has much significance for the Democrats. The Texas vote is one more sign that the country is swinging to the conservative end of the pendulum arc. It suggests that many Americans are unhappy about their government and angry at the world.

All this adds to the belief that Jimmy Carter is the strongest candidate the Democrats could pick this year. Some liberals charge him with not having a sufficiently specific program. But the country, in its conservative mood, might not be receptive to a programmatic politician — a Hubert Humphrey, say, who would produce a new six-point program of domestic social activism every afternoon.

The widespread feeling against government and politicians that is detectable among voters is less likely to touch Mr. Carter than others. He is running as an outsider, untainted by Washington and the old policies.

The fact that Mr. Carter comes from Georgia is also an advantage. Public concern about defense is especially strong among Southerners, but they will have a chance to vote for the first Presidential candidate from the Deep South on a major-party ticket in many years. And that leads to a more profound point: the opportunity Jimmy Carter will have to offer the country a unifying theme.

The Carter campaign emphasis on love of America and faith in its essential goodness has met skepticism from the sophisticated. But that kind of appeal, if it touches old American ideals, could be extremely effective — and not just in the immediate partisan sense. It could be effective in turning back the politics of angry reaction.

But to be effective in that way, Mr. Carter will have to offer something deeper than reassuring words. He will have to convince us that he has commitments: not to detailed programs but to a vision of America.

The other day a commentator described President Ford as "slow and steady" and said those qualities would give him the advantage over Mr. Carter. Mr. Ford may be calm in personality, but he seems to me far from steady as a President. The trigger-happy response to the Mayaguez, the hysteria over Angola, the somersaults in reaction to Mr. Reagan: Those are hardly examples of steadiness. On the domestic side there are Mr. Ford's embarrassing flip-flops on antitrust and other legislation, and his panicky haste to give Mr. Nixon a pardon without any admission of wrongdoing.

If a sense of steadiness is important, as I believe it is, the Ford record would give Mr. Carter much opportunity. But his own record is scanty. In terms of knowing the man inside, the one really substantial item is his commitment, in Georgia, to racial justice. Mr. Carter will have to give voters confidence that he will be steady in a particular, American sense: able to guide the foreign policy of a great power with restraint, understanding and humanity.