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Mr. Ford Widens His Lead

By Tom Wicker

Dr. Gallup reports that Vice President Ford has moved into a big lead for the Republican Presidential nomination, which is the most surprising news since Ron Ziegler last declared Richard Nixon not guilty.

For this development, Mr. Ford has no one but himself to blame, although his nomination to be Vice President is basically responsible. Scarcely a day has passed since that nomination, however, that Mr. Ford could not have fallen into any one of several pitfalls; instead, he has avoided most of them and emerged as the choice of 27 per cent of Republican respondents in the latest Gallup poll. That is a rise of three points since January.

More important, Mr. Ford has moved into the lead among independents, too. In January, Gov. Ronald Reagan of California led him, 17 to 16 per cent, in that category; the latest poll puts Mr. Ford ahead of Mr. Reagan 20 to 13 per cent.

Former Gov. Nelson Rockefeller of New York, supported by only 12 per cent of Dr. Gallup's Republican respondents, also had the support of 13 per cent of the independents polled. Support among independents is a necessity for anyone seeking the 1976 Republican nomination, for the good reason that independents outnumber those identifying themselves as Republicans by 34 to 24 per cent of the nation's voters—42 per cent of whom call themselves Democrats.

Mr. Ford's widening lead among Republicans and independents is not surprising for a number of reasons.

IN THE NATION

The Vice President is the nearest thing Republicans have to an official symbol of stability.

More than any other potential candidate, he has been moving about the country, attending Republican functions, speaking for the party, raising money for its candidates. These activities make Mr. Ford better known personally, more influential politically and more visible as party leader. Given Mr. Nixon's difficulties, the Vice President is the nearest thing Republicans

To independents and Republicans, moreover, Mr. Ford must look appealingly "clean as a hound's tooth" by

comparison to the daily headlines from the court and committee rooms of Washington. In Presidential politics he is that rarity, a new face. Most political observers give him good marks for his most difficult task—"walking the tightrope." That is, they think he has managed to uphold his loyalties to Mr. Nixon and the Republican party without getting sucked into the Watergate mess or appearing too blindly partisan.

Besides, of all the potential candidates, Mr. Ford is the only one who might be President in 1976. If Republicans could run an incumbent, it might go far to make up some of the ground lost by Mr. Nixon's difficulties; and the possibility that Mr. Ford might succeed to the Presidency, virtually assuring him the nomination, is bound to be persuasive to a lot of Republicans who are looking for a winner.

The latest Gallup findings suggest that Mr. Ford may be even stronger among Republicans than his apparent lead suggests. Among the eleven possibilities listed was Senator Barry Goldwater, still a sentimental favorite in his party, but not really a serious candidate for President in 1976. Mr. Goldwater polled 16 per cent, as much as Mr. Reagan and four points more than his old antagonist, Nelson Rockefeller.

Not much of Mr. Goldwater's 16 per cent is likely to go finally to Mr. Rockefeller; that it did not go to Mr. Reagan at this stage may mean that he does not yet have a tight hold on Republican conservatives—who still dominate party affairs and look longingly back to Barry. On the other hand, all these early preference polls tend not to have much meaning when it comes down to a hard choice between one or two, or at most three leading candidates.

Clearly, however, Gerald Ford's lead for the Republican nomination is widening; and the worse things look for Richard Nixon, the more that trend will continue. Wise Democrats, therefore, will not pay much attention to those jokes some people like to tell about "good old Gerry" playing football without his helmet. The fact is that for the last six months or so he has handled himself as well as any leading political figure and better than most—and in more difficult circumstances than any.

When Dr. Gallup matched him against Edward Kennedy last May, a sample of 1,543 respondents in 300 locations gave Mr. Kennedy the lead, 50 to 39 per cent. That is not a margin to give any Democrat much comfort, considering that party's still unresolved problem with George Wallace, the imponderable of the Chappaquiddick incident in Mr. Kennedy's past, and the real possibility that if Gerald Ford succeeds Mr. Nixon as President, he would name Elliot Richardson as Vice President—giving the Republicans two incumbents and two Mister Kleens for the 1976 campaign.