

GOP meeting to plan face-lift for party's battered image

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WASHINGTON — Faced with an alarming slide in party allegiance and open talk of conservative secession, Republican leaders will rally here this week and try to restore at least the appearance of strength and unity to the GOP.

Republican National Committee Chairman Mary Louise Smith, handed the reins of a party demoralized by Watergate when it was heading for an election beating last fall, summoned more than 1,500 local and state GOP leaders and activists to a national strategy conference March 6-8.

"I think this conference will mark a turning point for our party, a turning away from defeat and toward rebuilding and victory," Mrs. Smith said.

The schedule includes speeches by Vice President

Rockefeller and Sens. Jacob Javits of New York and Charles Percy of Illinois from the liberal wing of the GOP, and former Gov. Ronald Reagan and Reps. John Roussetot of California and Jack Kemp of New York from the conservative faction.

President Ford may speak at a Friday night banquet.

The GOP conference will be smaller and less divisive than the Democratic mini-convention last December, but Mrs. Smith must still preside over some difficult policy problems.

Wednesday and Thursday she will ask the GOP's ruling council, the national committee, to reverse its indignant rejection last year of federal subsidies for its 1976 national convention.

Mrs. Smith has a somewhat distasteful task at the conference as well. She will

report on a GOP-financed public opinion survey that found only 18 per cent of Americans identified themselves as Republicans. Forty-two per cent lined up as Democrats and 40 per cent as independents in the poll by Robert Teeter.

To try to stem the trend away from major party identification, Mrs. Smith will outline an ambitious GOP image-repair and recruitment program.

This will include, in addition to a step-up in party-building activities, a series of half-hour television programs designed, in her words, "to present a Republican view of the news, including good news about Republican state administrations, action of the Ford administration, activities in Congress and . . . a segment for use by the state parties if they so desire."