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The Danger of Underestimating

Those who do not learn from the past, like those who do, are doomed to repeat it. So Mr. Ford's friends should note this: One theme of American politics for a decade has been the underestimation of Ronald Reagan as a political force.

Ten years ago California Democrats were delighted with the thought that California Republicans might nominate "that actor" for governor. But the delight, like the governorship, was Reagan's for eight years.

At the 1968 Republican convention, Reagan came nearer than is generally known—seven or eight votes—to taking the Florida and Mississippi delegations (both were unanimous under unofficial unit rules) away from Nixon. That probably would have produced an unraveling of Nixon strength sufficient to block a first-ballot victory, and would have produced a fluid and passionate situation favorable to a rhetorically gifted conservative like Reagan.

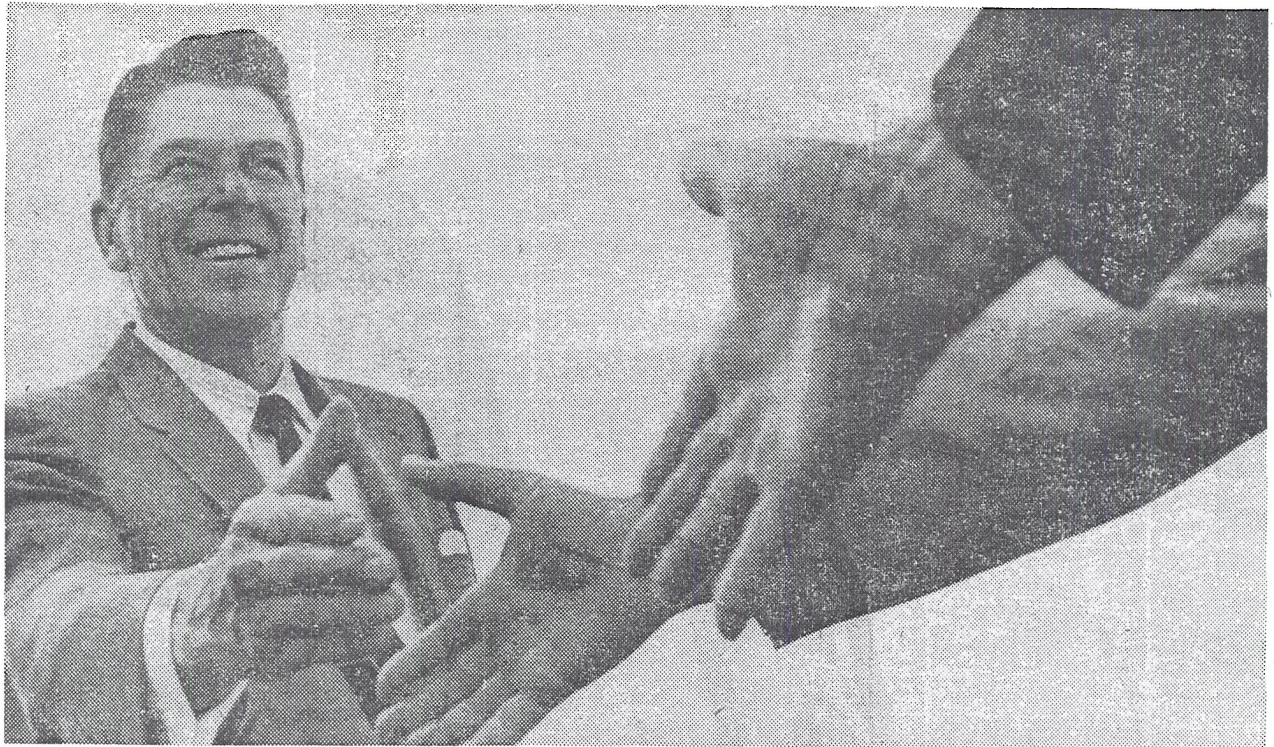
At the 1976 convention, 606 delegates—more than half the total of 1,130 needed to nominate—will be from southern states. Of course Reagan won't have them all, but then, Mr. Ford won't have all the delegates from his home state of Michigan, which distributes delegates proportionally among all candidates who receive at least 5 per cent of the state primary vote.

One of Reagan's assets is a profoundly unconservative streak in his followers: they invest in him far more ardor than any politician deserves. They are true believers with iron in their souls and time on their hands, who show up at precinct caucuses, where Barry Goldwater in 1964 and George McGovern in 1972 won nominations.

Precinct caucuses will have taken crucial—in many cases, decisive—steps toward selecting more than 10 per cent of the national convention delegates before the first (New Hampshire) primary. Conceivably, Howard Callaway, Mr. Ford's campaign manager, understands the significance of this. Certainly John Sears—Nixon's chief delegate hunter in 1968, now

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Reagan



United Press International

director of Citizens for Reagan—understands it.

Regarding primaries, Mr. Ford can hardly afford to lose any, and Reagan can select the ones he wants to make crucial.

Because he is the most accidental President, never having faced a national constituency, Mr. Ford cannot duck primaries. He has never had to show vote-getting ability outside Michigan's Fifth District (1970 population 467,543). Reagan has won two impressive victories in California, where approximately 20 million people — one tenth of all Americans—live.

Only twice in recent years have incumbent Presidents lost primaries, and neither time was the incumbent renominated.

In 1952 Harry Truman lost in New Hampshire to Tennessee Sen. Estes Kefauver, in part because many people suspected that Truman already had decided not to seek re-election, and Kefauver accused Truman of be-

ing a stalking horse for the anti-Kefauver Democratic establishment.

In 1968 Lyndon Johnson lost in Wisconsin to Eugene McCarthy. Johnson had announced his withdrawal from the race two days before the primary, moved by the narrowness of his victory in New Hampshire, and the certainty of defeat in Wisconsin.

Mr. Ford is not apt to lose primaries and win the nomination. And the new \$10 million pre-convention spending limit—which is low, considering the proliferation of primaries—will favor Reagan.

The expenditure limit in each state is 16 cents per voting-age resident. But to stay under the overall \$10 million limit, a candidate must spend an average of only 43 per cent of each state's permitted total.

Because of the \$10 million limit, if a candidate spends up to the legal limit in the first dozen primaries, he will have less than \$500,000 left for the next 18 primaries (including Mich-

igan, California, Ohio) and all the states that select delegates in caucuses. This means no candidate can make the maximum legal effort in all primaries.

Selectivity will be necessary, and will favor Reagan: he can transform the 1976 political landscape just by winning—or even nearly winning—a few early primaries of his choosing.

In New Hampshire Reagan will have the support of the governor and the largest newspaper. Another significant early primary will be in Florida, where the Republican Party is not a lagoon of liberalism.

No President, and least of all an accidental President, can lose primaries without losing his major asset, his aura of command. By mid-March next year Mr. Ford's aura could be a thing of shreds and patches.

Meanwhile, thanks to Reagan, Republicans should not be haunted by the specter of ennui.