

Nixon's California Test

FURTHER ON the subject of conservative dissatisfaction with the administration of President Nixon.

Congressman John Ashbrook, who is the symbol of that dissatisfaction, did not do very well in New Hampshire and Florida, nor did he do ignominiously. He entered the races late, spent a very small handful of dollars, suffered from being relatively unknown, and got more votes than John Lindsay.

JOHN ASHBROOK will not himself be able to keep Mr. Nixon from getting the support of all the men and women who now and in the weeks ahead vote for Ashbrook. Most of them will almost certainly go on to vote for Nixon, however grudgingly.

But there are those who are quite definitely toying with the idea of sitting this election out. A considerable following of the Conservative Party of New York, for instance, are at this point medium-well disappointed, and it would not take much of the same kind of thing Mr. Nixon has been doing to bring their resentment to a boil.

At which point significant numbers of them will either sit it out, vote for George Wallace in protest, or return, embittered, to the Democratic Party from which they took exploratory refuge in the election of 1970.

California Mr. Nixon has got to have, period. And nothing frightens Mr. Nixon's campaign managers more than the prospect of a deep division in California among conservative-minded voters. The reason for this is lapidary: Mr. Nixon will not forget, ever, his terrible miscalculation of 1962. It was then that the followers of Joe Shell, or at least a great many of them, decided to sit it out, and the result was the stunning defeat which all but vaporized Richard Nixon.

What seems to be distinctive about California, a highly ideologized state, is that the people, when they get mad, tend to stay mad.

Now John Ashbrook is entered in California, and the Nixon people will be watching ever so carefully to see what kind of progress he makes. This of course is the principal reason why Mr. Nixon has in recent months maintained so close and cooperative a relationship with Ronald Reagan.

Mr. Reagan, though deeply disturbed by international events such as the expulsion of Taiwan, is preoccupied with the sovereignty of his state, and the careful and galvanizing experiments he wants to make in the field of welfare.

He knows what would happen if the Democratic Party took power: California would become a great welfare reservation, property of Health, Education and Welfare. He is therefore standing fast with Nixon, and although he is a friend and admirer of John Ashbrook, he will not, for the obvious reasons, make any public appearances with him. Quite the contrary, he will almost certainly campaign for Mr. Nixon.

SOMETIME BEFORE JUNE other conservative leaders and backers, from out of state, will have to declare themselves on the Ashbrook/California problem. It isn't as though they are in a position to manipulate Californians by the hundreds of thousands. But their support, or lack of it, of the Ashbrook candidacy would make the difference between igniting that campaign, and containing it within the ideological ghettos.

It isn't to exaggerate it in the least to say that their attitude towards Ashbrook, barring landslides (and at this moment one can conceive of both an anti-Nixon and a pro-Nixon landslide), can mean the reelection of Mr. Nixon or his defeat.