

1976 Outlook: Delegates, Sure of Victory in Fall, Eye Hopes

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MIAMI BEACH, Aug. 21 — Since nearly all of the Republican politicians—and many of the hangers-on as well—have concluded that the re-election of President Nixon this fall is only slightly less certain than his renomination here tomorrow, the natural thing for everyone to gossip about

News Analysis

whom the Republicans might nominate four years hence. Thus, as the convention opens, the corridors, the bars and the newspapers were full of talk about the 1976 ticket. It beats speculating about what John Wayne might have to say in his encomium on Mr. Nixon, and it provides a certain desultory interest, like battling averages in the off season.

The problem, as Charles K. McWhorter, an old friend of the President, was saying yesterday, is that nothing that happens in Miami Beach this week will have very much to do with what happens in 1976. Until we have seen a few years of a second Nixon Administration, said Mr. McWhorter, perhaps until the 1974 elections, "we won't know anything." The combatants in the clos-

est thing to a divisive issue to hit Miami Beach this last week—the allocation of seats for the 1976 convention—would disagree with that judgment, no doubt. But even the most gimlet-eyed among them admit that no more than 150 or possibly 175 seats would be affected, and the outcome is not likely to turn on so small a number.

Due warning having been given about the weightiness of the thoughts overheard by a reporter cruising the lobbies and bars for the last two days: By some mysterious process, a consensus list of Presidential possibilities seems to have emerged. It is headed, of course, by Vice President Agnew, and includes, in no particular order the following: Senators Charles H. Percy of Illinois, James L. Buckley of New York and William E. Brock 3d of Tennessee, Governors Ronald Reagan of California and Nelson A. Rockefeller of New York, Mayor Richard Lugar of Indianapolis and former Treasury Secretary John B. Connally of Texas, a Democrat.

Senator Robert J. Dole, the Republican national chairman, has been telling those who ask that he thinks Mr. Agnew is the front-runner (yes, that word is back in vogue already), followed by Mr. Percy and Mr. Connally, if the Texan switches parties. Random interviews with perhaps 50 or 60 delegates suggest that Mr. Agnew has more of their support than anyone else ("I like him the same way I liked Barry [Goldwater] in [1964]," said a blue-haired matron from the South. But there is an ill-concealed fear among the party operators, the Vice President is just too divisive—that he might prove, to reverse a current cliché, to be a McGovern of the right.

"He's fine for fund-raisers," said a national committeeman from a conservative Middle Western state, "but I think we will be wise to look somewhere else for the Presidency." But where else? A Westerner went down the list: "Reagan and Rocky will be too old, Percy's moved too fast on the delegate allocation thing, Brock and Lugar are only on the list because they're trying so hard, Connally's too much of a Lyndon Johnson man, Buckley's not really very exciting." Mr. Lugar's efforts here have been heroic—a gala reception on Thursday night, a dinner for reporters Saturday night, staff members soliciting statements of praise from delegates, slick brochures scattered through the hotels. It is said that he had hoped to seek the Vice-Presidency this year if Mr. Nixon had not made his preference known so far in advance.

A striking aspect to the list is its conservatism; only Mr. Percy and, to a degree, Mr. Lugar are identified with the party's liberal wing. For the moment, despite Mr. Nixon's efforts to move to the left on some issues and the party's willingness to embrace all his works, it remains conservative at heart.

A few of the more thoughtful Republicans are wondering whether the nomination will be worth very much. One of them said he was convinced that Mr. Nixon had not even approached the problem of making the Republicans a majority party and that his apparent electoral strength resulted mainly from "the foolishness of the Democrats and the short-term currents of foreign policy."

The proof, he said, will be the results of the Congressional races this fall. He predicted that Mr. Nixon would pull in relatively few Republicans, except in the South, where (as in 1964) voters seem less prone to split their ballots than elsewhere.

For Party Building

A member of the Nixon Cabinet agreed. But he argued that a second Nixon Administration could be devoted to party building. He conceded that remove the kind of tensions between state parties and the White House that rose to the surface last week at a meeting between Mr. Dole and state party leaders. (The same tensions plagued the Democrats under President Johnson).

In any event, Mr. Nixon will have to decide, if he is re-elected, whether to try to designate the 1976 nominee. President Eisenhower all but anointed Mr. Nixon himself in 1960, and President Truman, in 1952, succeeded with somewhat greater difficulty in putting over Adlai E. Stevenson.

"At a guess," the Cabinet member said, "I would suspect that Nixon would announce for Agnew only if he thought it was inevitable. Otherwise, I think he'll keep out of it and we'll have a free-for-all."