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Something Funny's Going On

By TOM WICKER

MIAMI BEACH, Aug. 21—No American political party has been more confident since the Republicans went forth to elect Tom Dewey in 1948. Not even Lyndon Johnson's Democrats in 1964 were more certain they had it made than is the party of Richard Nixon and Spiro T. Agnew in 1972. Yet, an air of incongruity hangs over this convention; something funny is going on here.

It is not just that Nelson Rockefeller will be putting Mr. Nixon into nomination or that American politics' one-time born loser is now rated the surliest thing since War Admiral or even that peace is the theme here, while bombs fall on Indochina at a rate surpassing that of World War II. Nor is the unreality essentially the product of such farcical matters as the security regulations that require Republicans at their headquarters sanctum, the Doral Beach Hotel, to wear badges while sunning themselves at the swimming pool.

The incongruity is in the situation itself—that this party, led by these men, financed ostentatiously and in part secretly by the American corporate elite, should be so universally favored, even to win a landslide. Every measure, after all, shows the Republicans still the minority party; no magic has transformed Mr. Nixon into the charismatic and lovable figure no one has ever pretended he is; the support of big business is not as yet the same as the love of the masses; and the rug Mr. Nixon promised to pull from under those who thought the war in Vietnam would be an issue is still prominently on the floor.

What's more, in an age when voters everywhere are rebelling against dominant institutions and demanding a voice in decisions that affect their lives, it was the Democrats who went through the spasms of reform and un-

seated the old kings. There will be no duplication among these satisfied Republicans of the earnest, all-night platform debate in which the Democrats more or less came to grips with such matters of genuine concern as abortion and radical tax reform. This convention is even giving clear preference for future years to the likes of Alabama and Louisiana, and the back of its hand to the major population states.

Yet, there are as many reasons why the optimism—even complacency—of this convention may be justified. Mr. Nixon, for one thing, is the incumbent; that means that he has in his hands the single most valuable tool in American politics—the Presidency itself. And as Henry Kissinger flits about the world, it is evident that few Presidents have been more skillful at using their powers in order to campaign without really seeming to campaign.

Beginning with the first California debate against Hubert Humphrey, moreover, George McGovern has capped his nearly flawless Democratic primary campaign with one glaring error after another—most recently, his remarkable statement that he expected South Vietnam to go Communist immediately after his election. If that is candor, Mr. McGovern's supporters ought to bring back the credibility gap; and their only consolation must be that perhaps the Senator is getting all his blunders out of the way early.

Not least because of these troubles, Mr. McGovern does not appear to have made much headway in unifying his divided party, as he had hoped to do in the summer months. Polls show 30 to 40 per cent of Democrats now planning to vote for Mr. Nixon; and with George Wallace not running a third party campaign, the once solidly Democratic South looks solidly Nixon-Agnew for 1972.

Mr. Nixon's foreign policy achievements—primarily his visits to Moscow and China and the nuclear arms limitation—have been of the most spectacular variety; together with his withdrawal of American ground combat troops from Vietnam, they give some substance to his peace theme. And whatever one thinks of either the morality or the long-term utility of the President's busing stance, there seems little doubt that he derives considerable short-term political advantage from it—with more to come if the Democratic Senate kills or buries the hysterical House anti-busing bill.

All of this has combined to make Mr. Nixon a favorite on the order of Dewey and Johnson, but it may be well to remember that it is still August and that, after all, something *did* happen to Dewey on the way to the White House.

For one thing, it is not really likely that all of those defecting Democrats actually will go into the polling booths and vote for Richard Nixon, whatever they say now. For another, Mr. McGovern's current troubles do not change the fact that, at its best, his campaign too rides a demonstrable tide of opinion in contemporary America.

Finally, from Dewey to Muskie, political punditry has shown its persistent tendency to the herd instinct and the conventional view. Whatever you hear from Miami Beach this week, there really will be an election this year.

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