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Into the Homestretch

BY TOM WICKER

IN THE NATION

CHICAGO, Oct. 18—Sargent Shriver, the Democratic Vice-Presidential candidate, is in town for a businessmen's breakfast tomorrow morning and the sponsors say it is already oversubscribed. Even though Mr. Shriver is well known in Chicago business and political circles, that may be one more indication that things are picking up for the McGovern-Shriver ticket.

At the least, with the World Series under way, the season is at hand when the voters traditionally pay more attention to politics than they do in the summer and early fall. Depending on events, that could be a help to the Democrats, who are already somewhat encouraged because:

¶Mr. McGovern's crowds continue to be good everywhere he goes, and political leaders in states like Illinois, Texas and New Jersey say they can sense upward movement in the Democratic campaign. Gov. Ronald Reagan of California, scarcely a McGovern fan, made the same point in a speech here yesterday.

¶The polls tend to reflect the same movement, although not very dramatically; and a curious difference continues to exist between published polls and private polls taken for both parties, with the latter consistently showing the race closer than the former suggests.

¶Democratic money-raisers now report that they are raising sufficient funds—mostly in small gifts—for all the planned McGovern national television appearances, which not only guarantees an important part of the campaign but suggests considerable public receptivity to the McGovern appeals.

¶Mr. Nixon's twin defeats in Congress—on the spending limit and on his water bill veto—shook the image of power and competence he has worked so hard to project.

Some Democrats also think it is a good omen that Richard Nixon is obviously beginning to snort and paw the earth, like an old rodeo bull ready to stampede into the arena; last week, he was in the South and next week, the White House says, he will campaign for a day in the New York suburbs. That may mean that he does not think he can coast to victory but will have to do more campaigning in the closing weeks.

Mr. Nixon campaigning for office, moreover, is obviously a different proposition from "the President" being statesmanlike. Since he has never been an overly impressive performer on the road in any case, the possibility always exists that he will make a costly blunder or commit the kind of overkill of which he was guilty on the law-and-

order issue in the final days of the 1970 Congressional campaign.

George McGovern, for one, says he doesn't look for an old pro like Mr. Nixon to "blow it," but what could happen was well illustrated in the blustery extemporaneous speech the President gave to the P.O.W. families in Washington the other day. After weeks of careful truce in his long war on the press, he lost his cool sufficiently to spout off suddenly that the "opinion-makers" had some kind of duty to support a President no matter what he decided. Even a public that does not much care for the press is not likely to buy that kind of anti-Democratic view — particularly since Mr. Nixon lumped businessmen and others with the "opinion-makers." The excitement of the arena could lead even an old rodeo bull into more such blunders.

On the other hand, just as the most optimistic of McGovern men are beginning to see some daylight, the headlines are filled with portents of what at first glance seems to be genuine progress in the Vietnam peace talks. Almost certainly, if Dr. Kissinger can get a settlement, even a preliminary arrangement, before the election on Nov. 7, the political effect in this country would be a tremendous boost for Mr. Nixon; and that would be the case even if the President only made a convincing announcement that he was on the verge of settlement. Re-creation—such as the realization that any settlement obtainable now probably could have been had in 1969—would come too late.

There are also signs that a new North Vietnamese-Vietcong military effort might break before Nov. 7—and even Saigon itself seems to be threatened. At first glance, a development like that might seem to hold out advantage to Mr. McGovern, the anti-war candidate; but oldtimers will remember that when the Hungarian uprising and a Middle East war erupted on the eve of the 1956 election, the result was a surge of "rally-round-the-President" sentiment that insured the Eisenhower landslide over Adlai Stevenson.

Since it was mostly his opposition to the war that brought George McGovern this far, it would be ironic if in the final week a flareup of fighting or an agreement in Paris guaranteed a victory—in that case, probably a landslide—for the man who invaded Cambodia and mined Haiphong. But then, politics and justice have never had much to do with one another.