

# Why Is Reagan Mum on Watergate?

By Dennis J. Opatry

Examiner Capitol Bureau

SACRAMENTO — After two months of defending President Nixon against Watergate scandal innuendo, Gov. Reagan has suddenly silenced himself on the subject.

Several Republicans privately (and Democrats publicly) suggest the governor is looking toward 1976, the year of the next presidential elections.

Reagan, as in 1968, is playing it cool and coy on his future political plans, but the masquerade fails to stifle talk about his desire to live in the White House.

His route there must touch the conservative byways of the nation, while retaining a reputation untarnished at

home and on the national scene.

## Conservative Credentials

In California, the governor has established conservative credentials beyond doubt. But his continued verbal support of the President could taint him nationally with Watergate.

Vice President Agnew is the top challenger at this time to Reagan for the national conservative mantle of leadership.

However, if the national administration is discredited

any more over the scandal, Agnew's presidential aspirations may well be scuttled.

Political sources say Reagan recognizes this and may want to back-pedal to avoid close association with the Nixon Administration. Silence will help him dissociate himself from the spreading scandal.

So, last week the governor issued a two paragraph statement announcing his intention to keep quiet.

"Now that the Watergate controversy is under federal investigation, and is before a grand jury, the courts and the Senate, I will make no further statement regarding any of the allegations or any of the individuals involved," he said.

In the second paragraph, the governor said he would no longer discuss subjects "not related to California and about which I have no personal knowledge."

In the six years he has been in office, Reagan has seldom declined comment on anything.

He consistently supported the President's Vietnam war policies.

And, when the flood from Watergate flushed over the nation, Reagan was ready with quips and quotes.

On March 31, he said, "Everybody wants to talk

about Watergate. (Democrats) should have been happy that someone wanted to listen to them."

On April 11, he called the break-in of Democratic National Headquarters "a foolish bit of monkey business," and on April 24 said the whole matter had been "blown out of proportion in view of past practices in election history."

Few Republican legislative leaders are willing to talk about the governor's sudden silence. But of course most demur on Watergate, too.

## GOP Leaders Quiet

Two lawmaking GOP leaders this past week declined comment. One said he hasn't talked to the governor recently about it. The other said the political mileage gained from such a comment, at best, measures zero.

But Assembly Republican leader Robert Beverly of Manhattan Beach opined that it would not be "significant" if the governor were tied to the national administration. He said Reagan is simply "tired of the issue being raised."

Senate GOP Caucus Chairman John L. Harmer of Glendale has been the only Republican to consistently issue statements on the topic. "I sharply disa-

gree with those who claim California Republicans will be hurt by this, he said.

Republican State Vice Chairman Paul Haerle said he believes the governor decided to stop talking about Watergate "for exactly the reasons he gave. One is that he'd rather spend his time talking about the problems of California."

Haerle pointed out that national speculation by some political pundits indicates the governor may become the "principal beneficiary" of the Watergate scandal primarily because of his geographic location away from Washington.

## Demo Opinions

Democratic State Chairman John L. Burton of San Francisco said "Reagan is running for President and to the extent Watergate is going to tar someone, he doesn't want to be tarred."

Assembly Speaker Bob Moretti, who has worked more closely with the governor than other Democratic Legislators agrees and adds the Nixon Administration's "hypocritical moralist standards now look bad. He (the governor) wants to pretend it's (Watergate) not there."