

Watergate and 1976

Rockefeller and Reagan Emerging As Serious Candidates in the G.O.P.

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WASHINGTON, May 20—Inevitably, careers will be both enhanced and destroyed by the Watergate affair. And not only on the most obvious, immediate level—for example, the disappearance of H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman from the White House inner circle, and the consequent promotion into influential roles of Leonard Garment and Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr. The whole cast of political principals for 1976 has already been affected, and will be further affected with every day's fresh revelations.

It is conceivable, of course, that Watergate will have faded from the public consciousness by the time, 34 months from now, when the next Presidential sweepstakes begins; but, to the politicians most intimately concerned, it appears far more likely that the great events through which the nation is now living will go far toward deciding who the 1976 candidates will be.

Presuming that President Nixon remains in office through his present term, how does the line-up look today? It is a subject of animated conversation in political Washington these days, much more so than the 1974 Congressional elections, because few politicians believe that the average Senator or Representative will be much associated in the voters' minds with skulduggery by White House officials.

Both parties, unless the Watergate case proves to be as transitory as Silly Putty, will be searching for a demonstrably "clean" candidate. Such a search might lead toward a nonpolitical or even apolitical figure, such as John W. Gardner or Ralph Nader, both of whom have been among the picadors tormenting the White House in recent weeks. But the parties may well feel that to reach out for a nonpolitician would admit bankruptcy and they therefore are more likely to search for someone within and yet somewhat apart from the political mainstream.

Among the Republicans, the conventional wisdom has suddenly been turned upside down: Close association with the White House is now seen as a burden rather than as a precious advantage.

Governors Rockefeller of New York and Ronald Reagan of California, the ancient symbols of irreconcilable left and right, suddenly find Albany and Sacramento valuable havens from the recrimination and vindictiveness of Washington. Both are now taken within the party, despite their ages, as extremely serious candidates.

Feel Vindicated

Mr. Rockefeller appears, at the moment, the most likely standard-bearer for those Republican moderates, such as Senator Charles McC. Mathias of Maryland and Edward W. Brooke of Massachusetts, who feel so vindicated by the downfall of their adversaries on the White House staff.

The only other possibility in that wing of the party, Senator Charles H. Percy of Illinois, does not appear to have convinced his peers that he should be seriously considered, despite his early and outspoken suggestions that the whole Watergate episode should be more rigorously examined. Mr. Rockefeller, if the activities of his agents are any indication, is already running flat-out.

Mr. Reagan's chances would seem to depend on whether he can recapture the allegiance of the Republican right, which he surrendered to Vice President Agnew in 1969. Should Mr. Agnew somehow succeed to the Presidency before 1976, Mr.

Reagan would be shut out; Mr. Agnew would be as invulnerable to challenge for nomination as was Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964.

But if Mr. Nixon continues in office, Mr. Reagan's remoteness from Washington and his white-hat, nonpolitical image might enable him to steal key Agnew supporters in the South and elsewhere.

Some state party chairmen who have always craved a Reagan candidacy are already talking of abandoning the Vice President, although he is not known to have any Watergate involvement. (The anti-Nixon comments of Mr. Agnew's former press secretary, Victor Gold, appear calculated to put the maximum possible distance between the Vice President and the scandal.)

Connally's Influence

The return of John B. Connally to the White House — Tom Mix riding to the rescue of the outgunned sheriff — confirms his candidacy. In the judgment of most Republicans, he will attempt to follow next year the course followed by Mr. Nixon in 1966, by helping Republican candidates win in state and local races.

His influence in the South will be closely watched, and his performance in his home state of Texas will be crucial. The ability to deliver his home state has symbolic importance, but also practical significance: If he is to make a real run in 1976, he needs the big Texas bloc of convention votes. To get them, he must take control of the state party; to do that, he must elect a Governor; and to do that, he needs a horse. The pressure on George Bush, the Republican National Chairman, is already enormous.

Finally, a longshot: Senator Howard H. Baker Jr. of Tennessee, like Harry S. Truman in 1944 and Estes Kefauver in 1956, may benefit from his role as a Senate investigator. Attractive, effective on television, the son-in-law of the late Everett McKinley Dirksen, neither far right nor far left, he is well situated for a rapid emergence in the next six months.

Among the Democrats, the question is simple: Does Watergate help Teddy or hurt him? Senator Edward M. Kennedy's retainers argue that whatever questions of personal morality may have been raised on Chappaquiddick Island in 1969 have been obscured by the larger questions of public morality of Watergate.

Too subtle, others argue; Teddy will never be able to masquerade as Mr. Clean, and that is what will be required post-Watergate. That dispute notwithstanding, Mr. Kennedy has given his close friends the impression in recent days, as he never did in 1972, that he believes that his moment to strike for the summit has come.

The rest of the pack will probably lie back until the Kennedy question has been resolved. But the others will be ready — Senator Edmund S. Muskie of Maine, whose campaign might be based on the notion that his 1972 effort to sell the country on sincerity was derailed by dirty tricks; Gov. Reubin Askew of Florida, a devout Baptist who has convinced many national leaders of his probity and ability; Senator Walter F. Mondale of Minnesota, still a fresh face after many years in Washington; Senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington, a power in the Senate respected even by those who consider his policy views anachronistic; perhaps Gov. John J. Gilligan of Ohio, although his own reelection is imperiled by a local scandal; and perhaps Gov. Daniel Walker of Illinois, although he strikes many professionals as too much of a zealot.