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California GOP: Reversing the Rightward Trend

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Political fallout from Watergate is pushing the California Republican Party leftward from Gov. Ronald Reagan's conservatism back toward a reincarnation of Earl Warren progressivism, a wholly unexpected event with potentially profound national consequences.

The central development of Republican politics here amounts to a stunning reversal of the party's long rightward trend. The Republican establishment, including Reagan's inner circle, has agreed upon a candidate for governor: state controller Houston I. Flounroy, a 44-year-old former college professor and longtime liberal critic of Reaganism. Thanks to that consensus, Flounroy is the favorite in the June 4 primary and could lead California's most liberal Republican ticket since the early 1950s.

What's more, some shrewd Democratic operatives long have seen Flounroy — independent, progressive and scandal-free—as the one Republican who could buck the 1974 Democratic tide. If Flounroy could score an upset, he would instantly become an important new factor in national politics.

The immediate cause of these remarkable developments is not ideological conversion but, oddly, preoccupation by Reagan's financial backers with his last-ditch attempt for Presi-

dent. It was clear long ago that Reagan's ambitions conflicted with front-running Lt. Gov. Ed Reinecke's becoming the nominee for governor.

Reinecke, Reagan's hand-picked lieutenant governor, is idolized by right-wing Reaganite precinct workers. But Reagan fatcats, headed by millionaire auto dealer Holmes Tuttle of Los Angeles, became convinced Reinecke could not win in November when he became tangentially involved in the ITR affair. What makes electing a Republican governor so important to the Tuttle group is their fear that a Democratic successor in Sacramento—particularly Secretary of State Edmund G. Brown Jr.—might hurt Reagan nationally by slashing away at his record as governor.

The Tuttle group's long, unavailing search for an alternative nearly settled on State Attorney General Evelle Younger but turned away, partly because of unsubstantiated rumors about Younger's financial background. Younger withdrew his name last month. So did Robert Finch, deciding his close association with Richard Nixon ruled him out.

That left only conservative Reinecke, Flounroy, with 4 per cent in last autumn's polls. San Francisco industrialist David Packard (former Deputy Sec-

retary of Defense) sold Flounroy to the Tuttle group. In return, Flounroy gave this watery concession: As governor, he would retain Reagan's "good" programs.

Flounroy did not promise to support Reagan for President. On the contrary, he had to promise anti-Reagan money men, headed by industrialist Leonard Pilestone, that he had *not* made any presidential commitment to Reagan.

There are additional costs for Flounroy in his rise from 4 per cent obscurity. He was intellectually opposed to Reagan's proposed state taxing limit but endorsed it anyway. Although Flounroy has been privately, often scathingly, critical of Reagan's governorship, he told a recent Lincoln Day dinner in San Jose: "He's been a damn good governor."

While Flounroy is publicly neutral, friends whisper he would prefer right-wing State Sen. John Harmer for lieutenant governor (over former HEW Under Secretary John G. Veneman, a longtime Flounroy comrade) to appease the right.

Such concessions have tarnished Flounroy's independence, essential for him to buck the Democratic tide. Indeed, Democratic leaders have started accusing him of selling out to Reagan.

The real wonderment, however, is how Reagan and friends can stomach

Flounroy. He remains indicted forever in their memories as a member of the Nelson Rockefeller delegation, defeated by Barry Goldwater in the bloody 1964 California primary.

Moreover, Reagan and Flounroy have not seen each other in many months. "The governor still hates Flounroy's guts," a Reagan adviser told us, "but he's a realist."

Beyond realism, the conservative fervor of the 1964 Goldwater and 1966 Reagan campaigns has diluted. Grass roots zealots have not recovered from the fall of Spiro T. Agnew after his professions of innocence in Los Angeles last summer.

Even so, surviving diehards are keeping Reinecke in the race against Flounroy despite his bizarre behavior (travelling to Washington to unsuccessfully plead for a clean bill of health from the special prosecutor) and loss of financial backing. If the scholarly Flounroy remains threatened by the more flamboyant Reinecke, Flounroy's aides might seek Reagan's personal endorsement. That this is remotely conceivable testifies to the havoc wrought by Watergate on pristine Republican conservatism.