

Connecticut Republican Faces Up to Watergate

By LAWRENCE FELLOWS

In the opinion of one ambitious young Republican politician, the way to begin to make the best of Watergate in an election year is to admit that it is there.

"We're trying to address Watergate head on," said the Republican, United States Representative Robert Hampton Steele, a front-running candidate for the Republican nomination for Governor of Connecticut.

He has made campaign reform his central issue and is setting an example in his own drive for the nomination and election. He has vowed not to accept any contribution of more than \$100.

The Congressman insists that politics is inclined to become nefarious only when there is too much money and too many buyers of influence around.

He speaks with the zeal of an evangelist, not often to crowds at this stage of the campaign, but to Republican town committees and to the men and women who will be on the list of 1,287 delegates at the Republican state convention.

Convention Tomorrow

The convention is set for tomorrow and Saturday in Bushnell Memorial Hall in Hartford, where the Democrats convened last weekend to nominate United States Representative Ella T. Grasso as their candidate for Governor.

Mr. Steele who will be 36 years old on Nov. 3, often campaigns 17 hours a day. He is an aggressive, battling politician, but he looks as fresh and untouched as a shining Tolland County apple, and his boyish smile reinforces the image.

"Look, Watergate is a factor," the candidate said to a group of town committee members after coffee and pastries in Windsor the other day. "Watergate has created the issue of confidence in government, of confidence in politicians."

"The average guy who reads newspapers wants to know

what today's candidates are doing to change the system."

Through volunteers, Representative Steele has tried, in an experiment limited initially to a few towns, raising money door-to-door.

In one block in Simsbury, all nine persons who live there gave between \$5 and \$5 each. Only three of them were enrolled Republicans. The others were independents or Democrats.

At his last report, on July 2, Mr. Steele had raised \$50,391—given by 1,666 persons—and spent \$43,133.

Rival Raises More

His chief rival for the nomination, Mayor Nicholas A. Panuzio of Bridgeport, reported that by June 30 he had raised \$161,313 and spent \$142,211. Mayor Panuzio's money came from 334 contributors.

As Mr. Steele sees it, anyone who gives to a politician's campaign feels he has an investment to protect; he will try to protect his investment with a vote in November and his vote counts as much as any other, whether he gives \$5 or \$5,000.

For a year, the Congressman had been preparing for a campaign against Senator Abraham A. Ribicoff in the Democrat's bid for re-election this year.

By most accounts, because of the Senator's enormous vote-pulling strength, anyone running against him takes on a near-hopeless task.

As long as it was assumed that Gov. Thomas J. Meskill would seek re-election, none of his Republican colleagues went for the gubernatorial nomination.

But when Governor Meskill dropped out in March, Dan Lufkin of Newtown, a multimillionaire backer of the party and the former State Environmental Commissioner, jumped into the breach.

So did Mr. Steele, a fact that did not endear him to the party Establishment, which is inclined to find the Congressman impatient, aggressive and overly independent.

When Mr. Lufkin dropped out 10 days after the Governor,



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Representative Robert Hampton Steele, candidate for the G.O.P. nomination for Governor of Connecticut, talking with a prospective voter during campaign this month.

Mr. Panuzio entered with the backing of Governor Meskill, Mr. Lufkin, J. Brian Gaffney, the state party chairman, and others in the regular fold.

State Controller Nathan G. Agostinelli of Manchester withdrew from the gubernatorial race last month to seek reelection. He gave his support to Mr. Steele.

Francis J. Collins of Brookfield, Speaker of the Connecti-

cut House of Representatives, is still in the race, hoping for a deadlock between the two main contenders.

State Senator George L. Gunther of Startford is in the race, too, but he does not take his chances seriously. He finds a certain pleasure just in rattling some of the more staid Republicans at the convention.

Mr. Steele seems confident of winning on the first ballot, al-

though he may still have to take on Mayor Panuzio in a primary election after the convention. If Mayor Panuzio gets 20 per cent of the delegates' votes at the convention, he will be entitled to appear on the primary ballot in September. Even without the votes he can challenge the convention's candidates, as an independent, by gathering signatures on a petition.