

David S. Broder

# Bad News For the GOP

SALT LAKE CITY—What is happening to Republican candidates across the country in the closing days of this 1974 campaign was symbolized at this week's luncheon of the Salt Lake City Kiwanis Club.

The Kiwanians and their wives had gathered in the ballroom of the venerable Hotel Utah to hear a debate between the rival Senate candidates, Mayor Jake Garn, Republican, and Rep. Wayne Owens, Democrat.

As is their custom, however, the Kiwanians first heard one of their members, a local broadcaster, give a one-minute summary of the day's news. It went like this:

"The cost-of-living index rose 1.2 per cent last month, making the past year's inflation the worst since 1947. Administration energy chief John Sawhill announced today that he would lobby actively when Congress returns for deregulation of natural gas prices. Sawhill said consumers must be willing to pay higher prices to insure an adequate supply of energy.

"John Dean was back on the stand for the fifth day this morning, detailing his knowledge of the Watergate cover-up conspiracy. Meantime, special prosecutor Leon Jaworski said in an interview that he had believed since last December that former President Nixon was part of the cover-up.

"The stock market, after a brief opening rally, was headed down when I last heard. And, Mayor Garn," the broadcaster added, "if that's not enough, I can also tell you that there was a power failure an hour ago at the City-County Building and the lights are out in your office."

At the guests' table, a member of Owens' staff leaned over to a Garn aide and said, "I don't want you to think that we wrote that script."

They hadn't, but if the Democrats could have written the script for this past week's news, they would have changed very little. Republicans have not carried so heavy a burden of bad news in an off-year election since 1958.

"Everything is so negative," a Republican pollster mourned this week. "There is no reason for anybody to vote for anybody. They want to vote against inflation and corruption and double-standard justice. And all of those things, unfortunately, have a Republican label.

"I think we're just beginning to realize how much the pardon hurt us," he said. "When Ford replaced Nixon and had the honeymoon, for the first time in 18 months Republicans could feel affirmative about someone and something. But the pardon just cut the legs right out from under that, and now it's negative, negative, negative, wherever you look."

Those Republican negatives include not only the economy, the pardon and the Watergate trial, but the Ford proposals of an income tax surcharge and an amnesty for Vietnam war resisters. They also include the continuing controversy over his vice presidential appointee, Nelson Rockefeller.

All this makes it very questionable if the GOP is actually getting any benefit from the extraordinary campaign effort the President is making. Mr. Ford travels with the big black cloud of Washington bad news constantly over his head, and some Republicans have begun to head for the storm cellar when they see him coming.

Indeed, some Republicans are now beginning to think that the only thing that may spare them from the worst consequences of the "negative atmosphere" is the very voter apathy against which Mr. Ford is campaigning.

Low voter turnout was blamed as a major reason for Republicans' losing five out of six special congressional elections last winter and spring. That was because Republicans stayed home in droves, while Democrats came close to their normal turnout.

That could happen again this fall. But several competent Republican opinion analysts have said in interviews this week that polling data now indicates that a low turnout on Nov. 5 would hurt the Democrats, who traditionally have more trouble getting their marginal voters, the young, the poor and the black, out to the polls.

Here in Utah, for example, the latest Salt Lake Tribune poll shows Owens leading Garn, 46-42 per cent, among all voters, but the standing is exactly reversed when only those most likely to vote are counted.

An identical 8-point Republican advantage in a small turnout showed up in the latest Detroit News poll of the tight Michigan gubernatorial race between Republican Gov. William G. Milliken and Democrat Sander M. Levin.

Milliken trails by two points among all voters, but leads by six points when the likely "no-shows" are eliminated, once again pointing to a Republican benefit from a small vote.

The argument should not be exaggerated. As a second Republican pollster said, "All a small turnout can do is make a losing year somewhat more respectable."

But, ironic as it may sound, some Republicans fear that the Ford journeys—by adding to interest in the election and by importing "the Washington negatives" into all the states he visits—may be compounding the damage to the GOP.