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Baker Tests Climate for Run in 1976

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Sen. Howard H. Baker Jr. of Tennessee is sending out signals to his fellow Republicans that he would like to be considered an alternative candidate for President in 1976.

In interviews and conversations with Senate colleagues, Baker, 49, has said he is seriously exploring the possibility of running as a candidate in the New Hampshire presidential primary.

"He's not ruling out running even if President Ford decides to run," Baker's press secretary, Ronald McMahan, said yesterday.

Baker's exploration comes at a time when President Ford's popularity is sinking in the public opinion polls and when other Republicans have begun to take seriously the notion that Mr. Ford may not run.

Vice President Rockefeller, though trying carefully not to upstage the President, is coming out of his political shell and planning more speeches around the country. Former California Gov. Ronald Reagan already is pursuing an extensive and carefully chosen speaking schedule.

Next week Reagan will be a featured speaker at the American Conservative Union political action conference in Washington, where the notion of a conservative alternative candidacy will be examined.

Baker formally declared his availability yesterday in an interview with the Associated Press. The day before, The New York Times quoted Baker as telling Elliot L. Richardson, the ambassador-designate to Great Britain, "I expect we'll be seeing a lot of each other in New Hampshire next year."

Richardson is another Republican who has been mentioned as a prospective candidate if Mr. Ford chooses not to run.

Officially, the White House view is that Mr. Ford will seek election. When the President, at his press conference in Atlanta yesterday, was asked his views of the possible Baker candidacy, he said it was the senator's right to run but added: "I have indicated it is

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Sen. Baker Sends Candidacy Signals

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my intention to be a candidate in 1976. . . I believe the economic picture will be good enough to justify my seeking re-election."

Many Republicans, including some in the White House, discount the official statements of Mr. Ford's candidacy on the grounds that he could hardly do anything else. Some administration officials point out that the President's already embattled legislative program would be in even deeper trouble in the Congress if he is perceived as a lame-duck President.

In the view of these officials Baker is merely trying to position himself so that he will be considered along with Rockefeller and Reagan if the GOP presidential nomination should become an open contest in 1976.

In the AP interview Baker was quoted as saying that he would accept public financing if he ran even though he voted against public financing provisions of the new campaign reform law.

"The situation has changed," Baker said. "You don't have a giant juggernaut that's chugging along, scooping up money and enlisting foot soldiers. What you've got is easy access to a primary

system that's potentially financed in part by the federal government.

Baker's exploration has not proceeded beyond the talking stage. He has not organized any committees or fund-raising efforts at this date. Nor has he discussed his political future with President Ford.

While Baker was discussing his explorative candidacy, Rockefeller was losing a political opportunity in Miami.

UPI said that Dade County Republicans had decided that Rockefeller was too liberal and had instead chosen former Rep. Charles Sandman (R-N.J.) one of ex-President Nixon's staunchest defenders, as the speaker for a Lincoln Day fund-raising dinner. A Rockefeller aide confirmed that the possibility of speaking Vice President has sounded out the possibility of speaking at the affair.

But Rockefeller will be welcome on the more familiar ground of his homestate, where he is to be the host Feb. 13 at a "Salute to the Vice President" in New York City. Mr. Ford will be the featured speaker.

At the request of the President, Rockefeller also will speak Feb. 26 in Detroit to the Society of Automotive Engineers.