

SFChronicle MAR 10 1976

Reagan Cites Watergate

-- Wishes He Hadn't

Rock Island, Ill.

As he waited to see how he did in Florida's primary election, Ronald Reagan chose this state yesterday to bring up the Watergate scandals in his campaign against President Ford.

Then, hours later, he said he would not do it again because he had been misunderstood.

It began at a breakfast speech in Marion, a downstate farming community. Using a text developed by his speech writers and research people during the previous night, Reagan listed the reasons he believed he would be better able than Mr. Ford to beat the Democrats in November.

He concluded with this one:

"Most of all, you would want him (the Republican nominee) to go into that battle against the Democrats not having to defend a part of the past which Republicans want to leave to history."

There was no doubt that the former California governor was referring to the Watergate affair, former President Nixon and Mr. Ford's pardon of Mr. Nixon.

Asked whether this was what he had in mind, Reagan said it was.

Asked at the next stop why, as a longtime defender of Mr. Nixon,

he raised the issue if he did not think Mr. Nixon did anything wrong, Reagan responded:

"Well, only for that reason — it is a consideration (in the election)."

But by the time he reached his next stop — Belleville, Ill. — for a luncheon speech to his supporters, Reagan had dropped the Watergate reference from his message.

Afterwards, Reagan explained, "It appeared the media read something else into it that I had not intended, something about Mr. Ford, and so I am just not going to take that chance (of misinterpretation). I dropped it."

Reagan said his audience did not appear to him to "interpret" the Watergate reference as had the media, although he did not explain how he reached this conclusion, because there had been no audible reaction of any kind.

As to whether he might be engaging in "hit-and-run" assaults on the President by making a charge and then withdrawing it, Reagan said, "I never dreamed that anyone would read (anything) into it that way.

"That's not what I had in mind and I'm not going to say it any more."

Los Angeles Times