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Reagan Brings Up Watergate

By Joel D. Weisman
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MARION, Ill., March 9— Ronald Reagan linked President Ford to Watergate for the first time today, saying Republicans should have a presidential nominee who "would not have to defend a part of the past which Republicans want to leave to history."

Campaigning here for next Tuesday's Illinois Republican presidential primary, which Mr. Ford is favored to win, the former California governor warned that Mr. Ford's nomination would "keep Watergate alive" as an issue.

Previously, Reagan has obliquely attacked Mr. Ford for pardoning former President Nixon, though Reagan

originally defended the pardon for humane reasons. But Reagan, who has pledged he would not divide the Republican Party during his campaign, has never before injected Watergate into his contest with Mr. Ford.

Reagan has said in the past that history would decide where the full blame for Watergate should be placed.

He has maintained contact with Nixon, telephoning him the day before he announced his candidacy last November.

Asked by reporters if he felt Mr. Ford should defend Watergate, Reagan paused and said: "No . . . but I think he [his nomination] will keep it alive as an issue with Democrats. It would surely be brought up."

Reagan made his remarks at a breakfast attended by 700 persons in this Southern Illinois community where the President was greeted by 7,500 persons in an appearance last week.

Reagan told an airport rally Monday night that, regardless of the early primary results, "We're in this thing to stay. We're going all the way to Kansas City," site of the Republican National Convention in August.

Reagan's injection of Watergate into the campaign came while reciting a list of positions he said the Republican nominee should "not have to defend." They included:

"The one-way street of
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detente;" a record national debt; the Helsinki agreement on Eastern Europe; and what he called "the giveaway of the Panama Canal." The last was a reference to negotiations now under way on the Canal Zone.

Again stressing the theme that a Washington "outsider" is best equipped to become President, Reagan labeled Mr. Ford a part of "the Washington

buddy system." And then he said of the next GOP nominee:

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

But later, when he gave a similar speech in Beltsville, he omitted any reference to Watergate.

One Reagan aide speculated that the governor "got confused with his note cards

he uses for his speech," but his press secretary, Lyn Nofsinger, said the governor intentionally omitted a second reference because "it didn't go over as well as we thought it would this morning."

The line drew no applause in the morning speech.

[United Press International reported that Reagan said he dropped the mention because reporters were interpreting it as making "an inference about Mr. Ford that I had not intended."]

Reagan appeared to be stepping up his assault on the President when he arrived in Illinois Monday night. Then he charged that Mr. Ford broke his pledge to chart a "steady, balanced course" by doing a series of flip-flops on positions Reagan characterized as "expedient at best."

Among the failures of Mr. Ford to chart a steady course cited by Reagan were his opposing then favoring aid to New York; a 1974 proposal to increase taxes followed by advocating a tax cut; a pledge to have a \$70 billion federal deficit limit, while ultimately accepting an \$80 billion deficit; his favoring then vetoing the common site picketing bill, and his administration's urging of farmers to plant for maximum grain sales only to embargo foreign shipments after the crops were grown.

After each example, Reagan drew applause from audiences by asking: "Is that a steady, balanced course?"

See also NYTimes 19 Mar 76, "Reagan Suggests Ford Quit the Race," by James M. Naughton.

See also column by George F. Will, SFC 16 Mar 76.