

The Last Republican

By William V. Shannon

WASHINGTON, June 20—The prolonged competition between President Ford and former Governor Reagan has the quality of a death struggle.

Since there are hardly any serious philosophical differences between them, it is difficult at first glance to understand why their respective candidacies arouse such destructive antagonisms. Surely it cannot be simply a desire to replace an amiable, rather dull incumbent with a more polished and effective campaigner?

To understand the intensity of this contest, one has to look beyond the candidates to the respective factions for which they are as much figure-heads as leaders.

President Ford has the backing of the experienced, worldly-wise Republicans of the Northeast and the industrial Middle West. The businessmen in these regions have for a long time been coming to terms with the power of big government and big labor and the rise of blacks and other minorities. Their most skillful politicians—Nelson Rockefeller, Clifford Case, Charles Mathias, Charles Percy—have learned to breast the tides of liberalism.

The raw, newly rich Republicanism of the South, the Southwest and the Far West condemns the power of the Federal Government, would smash the labor unions if it could, and remains reluctant to share any real power with the racial minorities. Rather than admiring Rockefeller-Percy Republicanism as a triumph of adaptation and survival, Sunbelt Republicans view it as a species of betrayal.

How can the Republican conventional wisdom of Houston and Phoenix seem like fantasy in Pittsburgh and Detroit?

One reason is that steel, coal, automobiles and other Northern industries are labor-intensive while the oil and petrochemicals of the Southwest are not. Other industries such as textiles moved south precisely to escape unions. Thus, Northern businessmen routinely take account of unionized labor relations and union-backed politicians while their counterparts in the South and Southwest do not.

Another factor is old versus new wealth. Many Reagan backers made their fortunes in the last thirty years out of the fantastic growth of Texas, Arizona and California. They are land speculators, housing contractors, shopping center developers and fast-food franchisers. Although a disinterested observer might think that much of their wealth was merely the social increment produced by any rapidly growing population, the newly rich naturally perceive it as the result of their own hard work and moral virtue.

When a region is so visibly growing

rich, the many who share only modestly in the affluence are nevertheless encouraged to hope that they, too, may do as well. Consequently, when Mr. Reagan invokes the virtues of individualism and self-reliance, he wins many ordinary people in the Sunbelt.

Those values also persist among all classes in the older regions. But they are necessarily somewhat diluted among Eastern Republicans who are the third- or fourth-generation rich. Such people cannot quite fancy themselves as dashing, self-made individualists as do the up-from-the-cotton-farm entrepreneurs of Texas and California. Self-reliance is all very well, but Grandfather's trust fund is a comfort, too.

The Reaganite appeal rings truer in the North among aspiring ethnic Americans such as those who elected Senator James Buckley in New York. But the predominantly Catholic and Jewish cultural ethos of the Northern cities is less conducive to Reaganite conservatism than is Southern Protestantism.

President Ford, who has willingly subscribed to every article in the Reaganites' credo, remains perplexed by his failure to assuage their ideological passion. Aside from the deficiencies of his political style, Mr. Ford suffers from two fundamental errors that he made in his first month in office.

The first was the Nixon pardon, which squandered the good will of many independent voters. His second error was to choose Mr. Rockefeller as his Vice President without adopting a "New York strategy."

Mr. Rockefeller is the object of obsessive hatred among party conservatives. Selecting him made sense only if President Ford was prepared to follow the Rockefeller approach — an expansionist economic policy, an alliance with the construction unions, a courtship of blacks, some help for the aging cities, and a generally innovative style on every big problem from health care to energy.

Such a strategy offered the President a fighting chance that he might carry the Northeast and the Middle West as Mr. Rockefeller four times carried New York. He would then have the one argument that would overpower his opponents: that he can be elected and his opponent cannot.

As it is, Mr. Reagan grows in strength each day because it is increasingly evident that he is the stronger candidate against Mr. Carter in the South and Far West, while the President cannot guarantee victory in the East or the Middle West.

Destroyed by ideological and cultural antagonisms that are ravaging his party and that he barely comprehends, Gerald Ford passes into history as a part-term President, his destiny that of the Whig Millard Fillmore. He is the last of his line.