

James Kilpatrick

Reagan — The Better Choice

THE DEMOCRATS HAVE FIELDED a strong ticket, and the question is: What is the Republicans' best bet now?

A good case can be made for Gerald Ford. A good case can be made for Ronald Reagan. The race remains much in doubt. To be sure, the polls indicate that the Republicans' decision may have no meaning anyhow. "If the election were held tomorrow," Carter would annihilate Reagan and demolish Ford. Such polls amount to no more than light summer reading. Pay them no never mind.



It is a truism of politics that elections turn more often on a candidate's liabilities than on his assets. We tend to vote against a Goldwater, rather than for a Johnson; we vote against a McGovern, rather than for a Nixon. Looking at the Republican balance sheets, one sees plenty of liabilities to spread around.

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AN APPRAISAL OF REAGAN suggests two areas of political vulnerability. He still has the image of an ogre, and he has yet to project a presidential aura.

The two handicaps are closely related. No "extremist" is going to be elected president, and when Reagan rattles on about \$90 billion budget reductions, or the future of TVA, or the hypothetical use of troops in Rhodesia, or the tinhorn tyrant of Panama, he leaves an impression of ill-considered impulse. Prospective presidents, if they mean to be taken seriously, must learn to guard their tongues. An electable candidate's purpose is not to frighten, but to reassure. Listening to Reagan, many voters — quite wrongly, I believe — hear the pitter-patter of hobnailed boots.

Ford has liabilities of a different sort. He is perceived, inescapably, as an extension of the perfidious Richard Nixon, as an inept campaigner, and as an uninspired leader.

On the first score, let us put aside any hopeful notion that "Watergate" and "the pardon" are dead issues. Ford is stuck with this albatross. He cannot shed it.

The President's ineptitude on the campaign trail remains a cause for disbelief. He has somehow contrived, against every rational prediction, to nullify the advantages of his own incumbency. He keeps bumping his head on his own possibilities. He is perceived as a minor-league Ike.

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LOOKING ONLY AT THE negatives, and leaving the positives for another day, I incline toward the view that Reagan is politically a better choice than Ford. He bears no responsibility for Watergate or for the pardon; no one has ever called him a weak campaigner. If the mood of the country is indeed "anti-Washington" or "pro-change," Reagan is the less vulnerable.

The Democrats' ticket is formidable; it is not necessarily unbeatable. The GOP's task is to field a ticket that Republicans and independents will vote for, but it is equally the party's task to field a ticket they will not instantly vote against.