

Flexing Their Principles

By Russell Baker

Ronald Reagan recently gave Senator Richard Schweiker a whiff of the Vice Presidency, which is powerful gas these days. Under its influence, the Senator announced that the scales had fallen from his eyes and that he was now against everything he had ever stood for.

Powerful gas. John Connally, who was obviously miffed because Reagan hadn't blown some his way, rushed to the White House, notified all humanity that Gerald Ford was the last best hope of the species and inhaled deeply. Until the moment of Schweiker's enlightenment, Connally had been loath to render judgment on the relative qualities of Reagan and Ford, but the gas that made Schweiker see the light also exposed the truth to Connally.

A good bit of hooting and jeering accompanied the Schweiker enlightenment. Reagan's followers were shocked at what they saw as a suspicious flexibility, and with good reason. The Republican Party is made up of a right wing, a righter wing and a rightest wing; Reagan's followers, who belong to the rightest, regard Schweiker as a dangerous leftist, which, in their definition of things, is a man who doesn't wear a vest in the office.

Devotion to inflexibility is the sign of purity on the far right (as on the far left) and Reagan's startling show of flexibility cast fear and doubt among the faithful. Schweiker's sudden emergence as a born-again conservative may have stretched flexibility to comic lengths, but he is by no means the only man in the party with elastic principles.

President Ford, it will be recalled, was interrogated by the Senate before becoming Vice President and closely examined about what he might do if President Nixon were to be removed for crimes and he were to succeed to the office. He said there would be two things he would not do. He would not intervene in any legal proceedings against Richard Nixon, and he would not run for election in his own right in 1976.

Like Schweiker and Reagan, he has discovered that flexibility is the essence of politics, and here he is, having par-

OBSERVER

doned Nixon, running for President in 1976. His position is reminiscent of a story A. J. Liebling tells about Earl Long in "The Earl of Louisiana."

Long had run for governor on a pledge not to raise taxes, and, on being elected, sent the Legislature his first program. It contained a tax increase. His advisers told him he couldn't do it. He had just gotten elected on a promise not to raise taxes. And Earl replied, "I lied."

I think Earl was too harsh on himself. I believe he merely retained his flexibility, very much as Reagan has done in choosing Schweiker, and as Schweiker has done in denouncing his own record, and as Ford has done in changing his mind about wanting to stay on in the White House and to keep Nixon out of the courts.

The flexibility of Vice President Rockefeller is also of a very high order. He has moved from the middle of the political spectrum to a point where he is easily at home with Barry Goldwater, yet it does him no good.

His move to the right seems to have been partially an effort to keep the door open to the Presidency, which, in the Republican Party, is now always in the gift of the right wing. His problem, of course, is that the conservatives do not believe in his flexibility. They see him bend, but they doubt their eyes.

And so, when he finally arrived on the doorstep, in the Vice Presidency, they insisted on having him chucked out as a potentially dangerous imposter. President Ford, that model of flexibility, having chosen him for the job, obligingly unchose him to satisfy the Reagan people.

In the shipwreck which the Republicans are scheduled to hold in Kansas City next week, Rockefeller may still see some dim hope of restoration. President Ford has such flexibility that, despite having unchosen him, he is perfectly capable of rechoosing him, although to do so after a victory over Reagan would seem to be hanging red sheets before the bull.

There is Connally, who is flexible enough to have been a Democrat until just the other year, and flexible enough to leave the Reagan people nevertheless enchanted with him. Should Reagan lose, his choice of Schweiker suggests that he may be flexible enough to join the Ford ticket.

President Ford, in fact, is probably flexible enough, if he wins, to take Schweiker for Vice President, and Schweiker is certainly flexible enough to declare himself opposed to everything he stood for during the two weeks he ran with Reagan.

If Ford loses, Reagan may be flexible enough to chuck Schweiker and take the President as his candidate for Vice President. Don't bet that President Ford isn't flexible enough to accept. These characters have flexibility they haven't even taken out of the attic yet.

For quotations from Ford confirmation hearings, see

SFC 2 Nov 73 [WXP]

NYT 10 Aug 74, p. 1, Lesley Oelsner

*NYT 29 Aug 74 (filed Ford Ad): text, Ford's first press conference as President.

NYT 8 Sep 76, James Reston