

Republicans Unable to Avoid

By JAMES M. NAUGHTON

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KANSAS CITY, Mo., Aug. 15—They've gone about as far as they could go. San Clemente is 1,589 miles west. Washington is 1,043 miles east. Still the Republicans cannot elude the symbols, at opposite ends of the continent, of the memory they came to the heartland hoping to erase.

Former President Richard M. Nixon's exile on the Pacific Coast and the Watergate office complex on the edge of the Potomac River constitute not so much geographic as spiritual bounds around a Republican Party struggling to break free.

"Most delegates have closed their eyes and hoped Watergate is behind them," said a strategist for one of the rivals for

If the scandal is not really behind them, says a strategist for one contender, the delegates will simply act as though it is

the party's Presidential nomination. "If not, we'll act as though it is," he added.

The desire to be myopic is strong. One senior White House official said the other day that he did not expect the Nixon pardon to figure significantly in either the convention or the election campaign. "It's one thing to disagree with President Ford for pardoning Nixon, which a lot of people do," said the wistful aide. "But I don't think the Democrats can get away with questioning his motives."

Mr. Nixon was deliberately excluded from the guest list at the Kansas City convention, the first of his party that he will have missed in three decades. Nor is anyone apt to mention from the rostrum of Kemper Arena here the burglary that took place four years ago last month at Watergate.

But the scandal that since has plagued the Republicans may not be easily blinked away. The Democratic ticket of Jimmy Carter and Walter F. Mondale stands prepared to remind anyone who may have been cloistered for the last few years what happened during the Watergate era. Mr. Carter has already begun referring to the "Nixon-Ford Administration" and Senator Mondale has called Watergate "one of the most important of all issues this election year."

The Democrats' reminders seem, especially amid the Kansas City convention

proceedings, to be superfluous. Try as they might, the Republicans can hardly help but bring on pangs of self-inflicted rue.

The campaign provides a succession of unpleasant Republican anniversaries. The opening convention ceremonies tomorrow will take place one week after the second anniversary of Mr. Nixon's unprecedented resignation from the Presidency. Friday, the day the Republicans begin leaving Kansas City, will mark the second anniversary of Mr. Ford's nomination of Nelson A. Rockefeller to be the third Republican Vice President in 13 months. Sept. 8 will mark the second anniversary of Mr. Ford's grant of "a full, free and absolute pardon unto Richard Nixon." Oct. 10 will be the third anniversary of the resignation in disgrace of former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew. And scarcely two weeks before the national elections, on Oct. 20, will occur the third anniversary of Mr. Nixon's so-called "Saturday Night Massacre."

John Dean, Reporter

As if all that were not enough to impose on the Republicans, Rolling Stone magazine has assigned as its chronicler of the convention John W. Dean 3d, the former White House legal counsel whose testimony to Congress and the courts began the unraveling of the Nixon Presidency.

Seated in the ABC News television booth above the convention floor will be another guest commentator, Senator George McGovern, the Democrat who lost the Watergate election to Mr. Nixon.

Mr. Dean and Senator McGovern will exhibit remarkable restraint if either fails to call attention to the backgrounds of the convention's leading personalities.

President Ford is not alone in the effort to dissipate the Watergate cloud. Ronald Reagan, his challenger for the Presidential nomination, defended Mr. Nixon to the end.

Senator Howard H. Baker Jr., the convention keynoter, was the member of the Senate Watergate committee who kept asking through the summer of 1973 what Mr. Nixon knew and when he learned it.

Baker on Ford's List

Mr. Baker is one of those on President Ford's list of prospective running mates. So is Commerce Secretary Elliot L. Richardson, who was the Attorney General until Mr. Nixon dismissed him for refusing to dismiss the original special prosecutor. So is John B. Connally, the former Texas Governor and Treasury Secretary, who still is trying to explain why he recommended that Mr. Nixon burn the Watergate tape recordings.

Three of the convention delegates, Representatives Paul Findley and Thomas F. Railsback of Illinois and William S. Cohen of Maine, are spearheading efforts to dissuade Mr. Ford, if he wins the nomination, from selecting Mr. Connally as a ticket mate.

"Our long national nightmare is over,"

Mr. Ford said when he assumed office precipitately on Aug. 9, 1974. A month later he explained his pardon proclamation by saying in part that the tragedy of Watergate "can go on and on, or someone must write 'the end' to it."

Yet for the Republican Party, at least, the bad dream seems a recurring one, and if a final chapter has been written it does not seem to have been convincingly circulated.

In their efforts to date to keep Watergate at the forefront of public consciousness, Mr. Carter and Mr. Mondale appear to have developed a sort of good guy-bad guy style.

Mr. Carter said in an interview earlier this month that it was fair to saddle Mr. Ford with Mr. Nixon's image, "not the dishonesty and the disgrace of Nixon but the continuation of Nixon's policies."

the Symbols of Watergate

Mr. Mondale said he felt it incumbent to keep raising the "worst political scandal in our history" because that might help keep pressure on the Government to produce political reforms.

Should Mr. Reagan win the nomination here he can be expected to mount a counteroffensive against the Democratic ticket.

Mr. Reagan merely "defended Nixon until Nixon resigned," said Lyn Nofziger, the former California Governor's convention director. "If you presume a man is innocent until otherwise indicated, we don't think that's a drawback," he added.

Moreover, Mr. Nofziger said, "if Carter can stick us with the Nixon-Ford Administration we'll stick him with the Democratic Congress."

President Ford's candidacy, if

endorsed by the Republican convention, will face more complex Watergate problems. He is the direct and chosen heir to Mr. Nixon. Some of Mr. Ford's strategists have counseled him to select a running mate—such as Mr. Richardson or Senator Baker—whose image as a Watergate investigator would help to blunt any Watergate attacks.

Strategic Error Seen

One Republican strategist expresses private hope that, by focusing on Watergate, "Jimmy Carter may outsmart himself."

"He goes around preaching 'compassion' while Mondale kicks a fallen President," the party official said. "I'm not sure the American people want to kick Nixon around any more. His wife just recently got out of the hospital."

Mr. Ford's tactic, his advisers said,

would be to continue stressing in a campaign that he had managed to restore public trust in the White House. If that approach should not suffice, the President would meet the issue head-on with a campaign address.

"He's got to defuse it to some extent," said a Ford campaign aide. "The President can make a good case that the pardon was correct, that he was able to attack economic and diplomatic problems because we were no longer so preoccupied with Nixon."

At least for the next several days in Kansas City, however, the party is likely to spend considerable time trying to disregard the disgraced former President.

The convention is the first the Republicans have held in Kansas City since they nominated a President in 1928 that they also would just as soon forget. He was Herbert Hoover.