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Defusing the Reagan Challenge

From the viewpoint of securing the Republican nomination, the major risk to the President in meeting the challenge of Governor Reagan is not the risk of loss in a particular Republican primary. Rather, the major risk is the ramifications of such a loss.

From the standpoint of winning the November election, the major risk to the President in meeting the Reagan challenge is the risk of losing the Independent vote that is absolutely essential for victory in November.

From the viewpoint of Governor Reagan, the major risk is the loss in any primary where the President does not heavily campaign. This arises from the fact that Reagan will be a full-time candidate.

When we search for a basic strategy that will best resolve these three problems, there is an obvious starting point: The major strength of Gerald Ford is that he is a full-time President. The major weakness arises if he spends too much time in campaigning, which in turn undermines that basic strength.

(As a matter of fact, I believe that in the past several months the President may have spent too much time on the campaign trail, even though in part this has been on behalf of other Republican candidates or fund-raising events. In some respects, this has weakened his overall standing and undermines the basic posture that he must maintain if he is to win both the nomination and the election: The fact that he is first and foremost, a full-time President.)

The best possible scenario for Reagan would be to defeat Gerald Ford in a series of primary elections in states where Gerald Ford heavily campaigns.

Therefore, it is obvious that it is not to the benefit of the President to heavily campaign in any state in which the Republican leadership is strongly committed to Governor Reagan.

Yet, the President cannot remain completely aloof from the presidential primaries.

In resolving this conflict, I would like to suggest for consideration the following basic strategy program:

At an appropriate time after the Reagan announcement, and in an appropriate forum, President Ford should candidly state that he will enter every primary.

However, in contrast to Governor Reagan, who is a full-time candidate, President Ford should point out that the President must first and foremost discharge the responsibilities of the Presidency. Accordingly, President Ford will state that he will not be able to devote a lot of time to primary campaigning, and there undoubtedly will be some states where he does no campaigning at all.

The President should then further state that because Governor Reagan will be campaigning full time and because the President will be campaigning on a very part-time basis, Governor Reagan might very well win primary elections in some states and that as a practical matter the President should say that he is going to win some primaries, he is going to lose some primaries, but that ultimately he will win a majority of the votes of the delegates to the Republican National Convention.

Furthermore, the President should declare that if he loses primaries because he is a full-time President and is therefore unable to campaign extensively in a particular state, so be it. And if that, in turn, results in Governor Reagan's securing the Republican nomination, so be it. The President will not set aside the duties of the office of the Presidency in order to win primary elections.

In addition, the President should publicly state what most pragmatic political experts believe: Regardless of whether or not Governor Reagan wins any primaries, President Ford will be by far the stronger candidate for the Republican Party in a general election, and to nominate Governor Reagan would be a repetition of 1964.

This strategy has several key advantages:

- a. This strategy emphasizes the major underlying strength of President Ford.
- b. This strategy has a basic appeal to the independent voter. This will be further discussed in the December strategy paper.
- c. This strategy affords a rationale in the event the President loses a primary and at the same time puts the burden on Governor Reagan to win primary elections in states where he heavily campaigns.
- d. This strategy puts Governor Reagan in a position of having not much to gain if he wins a primary election but a lot to lose if he does not win. Thus, if Governor Reagan wins New Hampshire when President Ford campaigns only two or three days in New Hampshire, so what. But if Reagan loses New Hampshire under such circumstances, he has indeed lost a great deal.

The success of McGovern in New Hampshire was not necessarily in winning the election. Rather, it was running stronger than it was anticipated that he would run.

e. This strategy leaves open to the President the option of picking and choosing states in which he can more heavily campaign for the primary elections. Obviously, the states will be in areas where he has a favorable chance to win.

In order to consider adopting the foregoing overall strategy, the President must sharply reduce the number of his political trips. Instead of being seen on television screens waving at crowds, President Ford should be seen with leaders of this country and international leaders in Washington--conducting the business of this country. Furthermore, when he campaigns, it should be in his own behalf and not for others, particularly since President Ford has never run for national office in his own right. The real issue is not how much President Ford campaigns, but rather how he campaigns. And the how must include the candid statement that he does not expect to win the nomination by acclamation, that he expects in some places to run well and in some places not to run well.

At all times, the President must remember that he is the President and Ronald Reagan is not. He must stick more to his case--a candid, thoughtful, hard-working, capable President-- a case which will have several other important elements which I will discuss in the December strategy paper.

The overall strategy I suggest for consideration has an additional benefit to the President of timing. Sooner or later, Governor Reagan is going to put his foot in his mouth. And when he does, the best place to take advantage of this is not Manchester or Tallahassee. Rather, the best place is from the White House in Washington. And when this happens, the President can then adjust his schedule to campaign in the right states at the right time and defeat Governor Reagan in those particular primaries with the added advantages of pouncing on the opportunity of a fumble of the ball by Governor Reagan.

Looking at this strategy from the viewpoint of Governor Reagan, it presents an insurmountable problem: If the Governor wins a particular primary where the President has not heavily campaigned, the President can readily explain that loss, since he did not heavily campaign in that particular state.

On the other hand, if Governor Reagan as a full-time candidate loses a state in which he heavily campaigns, and in which the President did not heavily campaign, how can Governor Reagan explain that loss? The President can seize the opportunity to come forward with one of his basic positions of strength: The Republican Party must nominate a candidate who will have the most appeal to both Republican and Independent voters. If Governor Reagan loses a Republican primary as a full-time candidate, how can he possibly garner the support of the necessary Independent vote that is essential for Republican victory in November?

There is yet an additional overall advantage to the strategy I suggest: It will enable the President to do a better job in office, because he will be devoting more time to that office. As I said at the beginning, the basic strength of Gerald Ford is that he is the President of the United States. Let us never underestimate or undermine that strength in seeking the Republican Presidential nomination in 1976.

Finally, there is one other crucial element in defusing the Reagan challenge: Organization. There is just no substitute for a sound, aggressive, coordinated campaign organization. There are many people who believe that the performance thus far in the

area of campaign organization leaves much to be desired. Time is of the essence.

Initially, the organization must be centered around leading Republicans in each of the fifty states. However, there will have to also be a parallel organization primarily directed for the Independent voter. This will be further developed in the January strategy paper.

In summary, the best way to defuse the Reagan challenge is to combine a sound strategy with first-rate aggressive political organization. The key to the strategy is that Gerald Ford is the President and Ronald Reagan is not the President and that Gerald Ford as President is going to be doing his job and will not be devoting a lot of time to primary campaigning. Therefore, there will be states where he will win and there will be states where he will lose. His goal is not to win the nomination by acclamation, but rather to win a majority of the delegates to the Convention, and that if he wins the nomination he will be far the strongest candidate for the Republican Party in a general election.

The greatest risk to the President is to campaign heavily and fall prey to the so-called Washington political pundits who

would write that a 20% or 30% Reagan showing is a psychological victory for Reagan. This has to be turned so that the burden is placed on Governor Reagan to win primary elections in states where he heavily campaigns, and if he does not win those elections, it is he, the full-time campaigner, who has lost. But even if he wins some, this has to be expected. And if he wins too many, the President can pick and choose his own battleground. It may be Wisconsin, it may be Oregon, it may be in some other state--perhaps even California. But let the President pick his own battleground and not try to campaign on every battleground. And wherever the President picks the battleground, he should be sure that he has a first-rate campaign organization on which he can rely.

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