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"I'm counting on being around for the campaign next year."

"[There is] no reason whatsoever to trade in your reliable Ford for a flashier model."

Jerry Ford

Chapter IX

The Reagan Challenge: Winning the 1976 GOP Presidential Nomination

Jerry Ford did not know that his fortuitous occupancy of the White House preempted the well-laid plans of the former governor of California, Ronald Reagan. The Californian, then dividing his time between his home in Pacific Palisades and his 688-acre spread, Rancho del Cielo (Ranch in the Sky), already had planned to seek the Republican nomination for the presidency after Richard Nixon completed his second term. Reagan, after Nixon's premature exit, was dubious for a time about the wisdom of challenging an incumbent Republican until convinced otherwise by John Sears, a Washington lawyer who later became his campaign manager. Sears argued, "Jerry Ford can't cut the mustard, he's not perceived as a leader, he can't lead the Congress or the country." Sears cajoled Reagan very persuasively, insisting



that Ford would "be vulnerable and we can beat him."¹

Reagan's generally adverse feelings about Ford's presidency were based upon a number of factors. First, Ford was an accidental interloper in the oval office; second, Ford chose a liberal nemesis, Nelson Rockefeller, as his vice president; third, Henry Kissinger's policy of détente was anathema to this spokesman for the GOP right wing; and, finally, Reagan's own strong desire for the presidency and his age (63 years) did not predispose him to postpone his own ambition for the White House another four years merely because it was occupied by a fellow Republican. Although Jerry Ford was not oblivious of the need to court Reagan's favor as a power factor in the GOP, he really did not expect a frontal challenge to his nomination. The chief executive had been alerted at the start of his presidency by William Timmons, through Alexander Haig, that he should "solicit" Reagan's views "as Chief Executive of the largest state and as a GOP leader."² Subsequently, when Ford began to organize his cabinet, he did offer Reagan (on two separate occasions) the cabinet post of Commerce and then Transportation. The Commerce secretaryship ultimately went to Elliot Richardson and the Transportation Department post to William T. Coleman, Jr. (a black lawyer who had served with Ford on the Warren Commission) ^{as a top staff lawyer} ₁.

To placate the Reaganite right wing of the party President Ford also proposed, in 1975, a permanent tax reduction of \$28 billion, to be matched by spending cuts, and he took a



tough stand against a federal bail-out of New York City (which he of necessity modified). Ultimately the Reagan challenge forced Ford to acquiesce in Rockefeller's withdrawal as a VP candidate and to soft-pedal his détente policy with the Soviet Union by ceasing even to use the word.

Using the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. as his forum, Ronald Reagan formally announced his candidacy for the GOP presidential nomination on November 25, 1975. That same day, from his Wilshire Boulevard headquarters in Los Angeles, fund-raising letters went out under Reagan's signature stating his reasons for running for president. "I have concluded that if we are to maintain our free society we must change the role which government plays in our lives," he declared. "The sad fact today is that most of our problems originate in Washington," it was asserted. Posing as the outsider ready to reform the mess in Washington, Reagan reasoned, "Too many of those chosen to lead are unable to do so because they have been in Washington so long they have become a part of the problem instead of being a part of the solution." He then pledged to "return the power of government to the states," eliminate government regulations hampering the free enterprise system, trim the "entrenched bureaucracy," fight inflation, balance the budget, curb crime, reduce taxes, and reform the welfare system. Relative to foreign policy Reagan's letter to potential supporters stated, "Frankly, I'm skeptical of some of the things we've been doing or seem close to doing." With a doubting



Thomas attitude, he queried, "Has the free world anything to gain by our recognition of the repressive dictatorships of Cuba or Communist China? Can we afford to give control of the Panama Canal to an antagonistic and unstable Panamanian dictatorship? What does détente really mean? What are we getting in return when we make 'deals' with the Soviet Union? Have the Communists changed? Can they be trusted?" His own terse reply was, "I don't like the answers I come up with."³

In contesting Ford, Reagan crystallized a divisive polarization within Republican ranks. The GOP ultraconservative right wing rallied around Reagan's candidacy while moderates and liberals backed Ford. Richard Vigier, later a founder of the New Right and a fund-raiser for the Moral Majority, worked to cement an alliance between Reaganite Republicans and former followers of Alabama Governor George Wallace's Independent party. Not since William Howard Taft in 1912 had a GOP incumbent faced a threat to his renomination. Considering what happened to Taft in the final election itself, it was an ill omen for Jerry Ford.

To compound President Ford's woes he was greatly concerned about the status of his wife's health. On September 28, 1974 Betty had undergone a radical mastectomy. Although the malignant breast cancer had not spread and seemed to be checked by chemotherapy, there was always the chance that a relapse might occur. "The White House will be radiant with joy once more when the First Lady returns home to you and the family.



God bless,"⁴ wrote Jerry terHorst of the Detroit News to his former boss in the oval office while Betty Ford was convalescing in the hospital. Her sudden operation was a profound traumatic experience for the president. His zeal to win the presidency on his own was dampened until his wife's rapid recovery once again raised his spirits.⁵

Always the trooper, Betty Ford overcame this illness and endured her painful arthritis (which the public did not know about) with the ~~secretive use of tranquilizers and alcohol.~~ *use of prescription pain medication* The First Lady did, however, attract publicity by her candid and outspoken views. Her advocacy of ERA and support for liberalization of abortion laws alienated reactionary Republicans and religious fundamentalists alike. The greatest furor created by Mrs. Ford resulted from her appearance on the CBS television program, 60 Minutes. Morley Safer, without indicating ahead of time he would ask such a personal and provocative question, posed the query as to how Betty would react to the hypothetical supposition that her daughter was having an affair. The First Lady responded spontaneously and in her accustomed open manner by indicating she certainly would not throw Susan out of the house even though premarital sex was not to be condoned. "Well, I wouldn't be surprised," Betty explained. "I think she's a perfectly normal human being, like all young girls. If she wanted to continue it, I would certainly counsel and advise her on the subject. And I'd want to know pretty much about the young man."⁶



The tempest created by Betty's honest and unreserved statement of her views, which was erroneously interpreted as advocating permissiveness, brought forth severe condemnation from both the GOP right wing and religious moralists. The Manchester Union Leader, New Hampshire's leading newspaper (where Ford would first meet Reagan in a head-to-head primary) featured a front-page editorial titled, "A Disgrace to the White House." It lambasted Ford for his inability to muzzle the First Lady. Other no-holds-barred editorials by the pugnacious William Loeb, a zealous Reaganite, were equally venomous in their attacks. With many derogatory and abusive epithets, he labeled Ford among other terms of abuse as "Rockefeller's errand boy," "inarticulate, slow-witted, shifty," "a jerk and stupid," and a public figure who has "as much charisma as a football tackling dummy."⁷

Jerry Ford never tried to silence Betty or to prevent his children from speaking their minds. After watching the 60 Minutes program the president did jest to her, "You just lost me ten million votes. . . . No, you just lost me twenty million votes."⁸ Betty Ford, in turn, manifested her sense of humor by sending her autographed photo to Morley Safer with the inscription, "If there are any questions you forgot to ask--I'm grateful."⁹ Despite being dogged by anti-abortionists and anti-ERA women's groups, Betty was a plus on the campaign trail as were the clean-cut, all-American-looking Ford children. While Mrs. Ford campaigned for her husband in the Republican primaries in



the South, one reporter observed, "well-wishers found the First Lady charming, wonderful, outspoken, prettier-in-person-than-on-TV, a nice lady, gracious, so-well-dressed, and sweet."¹⁰ Press Secretary Ron Nessen, in sending a batch of favorable media reports to the president, added the facetious comment, "With clippings like these in Florida, Mrs. Ford may win the write-in vote!"¹¹

If Betty Ford possessed an image of an outspoken, independent-minded feminist, despite being a self-sacrificing wife and devoted mother (whose children were highly moral and whose social decorum was rather straight-laced compared to the California life-style in which Reagan's children were raised), her husband had even worse public relations problems. "Gerald Ford's biggest continuing problem in the White House . . . ," attested Ron Nessen, "was the portrayal of him in the media as a bumbler."¹² True, the president did fall on the slippery steps while disembarking from Air Force One at Salzburg, Austria on June 1, 1975. His unsteady knees also let him down while skiing in full view of television cameras. And he once bumped his head while getting out of a cramped helicopter. Televising these trivial incidents on the six o'clock news as prime time stuff was not so bad. It was the incessant jokes by comedians and caricatures by cartoonists that indelibly embedded in the public mind the mental effigy of him as a dull-witted klutz. For example, one cartoon depicted Ford falling while walking with Kissinger with a derisive caption having the latter say,



"I told you not to talk and chew gum at the same time."¹³

Johnny Carson constantly regaled huge Tonight Show television audiences with his frequent quips about Ford's mishaps, but they were at least good-humored in tone. Comic Chevy Chase, on Saturday Night Live, in contrast, ridiculed Ford repeatedly with a brand of juvenile, slapstick satire that was tactless, irreverent, and at times downright cruel. The persistence of this pernicious type of cutting farce was amazing. While hosting a Tonight Show on July 8, 1983, comedienne Joan Rivers told this one-line gag about Jerry and Betty Ford, "She drank, he tripped."¹⁴

President Ford more or less resigned himself to this treatment by the world of entertainment, but never quite fathomed the degree of bad press he received after his pardon of Richard Nixon. Many in the news media who previously praised him now became carping critics. But in defense of the newspaper and television reporters, it might be noted they simply played their adversarial roles then as they did subsequently to Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Clark R. Mollenhoff, a former deputy counsel in the Nixon administration, while Washington Bureau chief for the Des Moines Register and Tribune, did not help President Ford by writing a breezy but unflattering book titled, The Man Who Pardoned Nixon (1976). The pardoning of Nixon did not hurt Ford politically in his contest with Reagan, since the Californian did not make an issue of it. But Jimmy Carter did do so and it definitely contributed to Ford's narrow defeat in



the general election.

In the familiar manner in which he had campaigned all his life, the president was in his best form when he mingled with the public. Voters in his old congressional district were accustomed to seeing him in person, shaking his hand, and talking personally to him. His common touch, plain folksy manner, and Midwestern mode of speech (although usually delivered in a wooden and monotone manner) possessed a wholesome small-town appeal. He was the very embodiment of mid-America. Ford planned to campaign in the primaries and national election by getting out frequently to meet the people face to face and let them reach out and touch him. This plan was severely jolted when, within a 17-day period in the month of September, 1975, the president twice came perilously close to what the Secret Service most fears--attempts at assassination. On the fifth day of that fateful month, while shaking hands in a friendly looking crowd at Sacramento, California, a woman named Lynette Alice "Squeaky" Fromme attempted to shoot President Ford. While at point-blank range, she aimed a .45-caliber pistol directly at the president. This would-be assassin turned out to be a fanatical follower of mass murderer Charles Manson. Though her attempt was thwarted by an alert Secret Service agent, Ford's advisors suggested that in the future he not come into such close contact with throngs of people gathered to see him.

Ford's response was predictable. He vowed, "I'm going to continue to have that personal contact with the American



people. In my judgment it's vital for an American President to see the American people and I intend to carry it on."¹⁵ The president headed immediately for New Hampshire to render campaign assistance to Republican Louis C. Wyman, who was engaged in a special Senate race against Democrat John A. Durkin (the eventual winner). The president was hampered by having to wear a bulky bulletproof vest that was both hot and not exactly invisible to the discerning eye. Nevertheless, he jumped repeatedly from his limousine along the motorcade route to shake hands with enthusiastic crowds of spectators. Nothing that had transpired in California seemed to alter his desire to mingle with the people.

But his return to the Golden State threw a damper into Ford's plans for continuing this open, accessible campaign approach to the multitudes waiting to touch hands with the president. On September 22, while in San Francisco, another attempt was made on Ford's life. This time a middle-aged woman named Sara Jane Moore fired a shot at the President with a .38-caliber revolver. This intended assassin, a member of a militant prisoners' rights group, luckily missed her target and was instantly subdued. This incident, while not resulting in physical injury to Ford, did serve to put the quietus on any future plans for a freewheeling campaign with the president making frequent personal contact at close quarters with crowds of people. While the redesign of a more formfitting, lightweight bulletproof jacket, which resembled an undergarment, made this protective device less



noticeable and more comfortable, security precautions were so tightened it permanently restricted the handshaking activities of the president.

The New Hampshire primary was crucial to Jerry Ford. A loss there would have seriously jeopardized his entire campaign for the nomination. Because the state's Republicans were deeply divided, with Governor Meldrin Thompson aligned with Reagan against the moderates and liberals, the president had to walk a narrow line between the warring factions in order not to alienate unduly either one of them. During his appearance for Louis Wyman, in the latter's unsuccessful bid for a U.S. Senate seat, Ford stressed party unity and even commended his primary rival, Governor Reagan (who had appeared the day before). The president accented good, sound GOP principles in championing "fiscal responsibility," "free enterprise," "control of your local community," "freedom of the individual," and a national defense "second to none."¹⁶

Ex-President Richard Nixon, whose pardon was a political albatross which Ford could never get off his neck, was invited by Chinese leaders at this most inopportune time to visit the People's Republic of China. By going to mainland China just before the New Hampshire primary the ensuing press coverage needlessly revived not-so-dim memories of the Nixon pardon. The Ford camp feared that this untimely publicity surrounding Nixon's pending visit would have an adverse effect on voters. In an attempt to reduce the notoriety Nixon might gain as some sort of



ex officio diplomat, Jerry Ford announced simply that "President Nixon is going there as a private citizen. I am certainly delighted that his health is such that he could go and I asked him to extend my best wishes to Chairman Mao and others."¹⁷

The New Hampshire primary on February 24, the nation's first, was of far more significance than the mere 21 convention delegates at stake. The importance and prestige attached to this initial contest between the president and Reagan made victory a must for Ford. Spending limitations imposed by the new election finance law, which limited state-by-state expenditures on each primary, hurt Ford's ability to campaign because of the enormous costs involved in transporting his presidential entourage. Ford's basic strategy was to emphasize his experience as an incumbent president; be the chief spokesman for the GOP; enunciate his moderately conservative position; and absolutely refrain from alienating ultraconservatives by leveling hard-hitting attacks at Reagan. When Ford began to run behind in straw polls, Stuart Spencer, his chief campaign strategist (who interestingly enough had helped mastermind Reagan's 1966 gubernatorial victory in California), alerted the president about an opportunity to take the initiative. What Spencer had in mind was to exploit a statement Reagan had recently made while speaking to the Executive Club of Chicago in which he claimed federal expenditures could be cut immediately by \$90 billion. This quick remedy, vowed Reagan, would make for a balanced budget, allow for payment on the national debt, and



permit income taxes to be reduced by an average of 23 percent.

Ford thus jumped on this huge \$90 billion figure to point out that such a sudden and drastic reduction in federal outlays would entail a disastrously quick dismantling of federally funded programs. The net result would force the New Hampshire legislature, for instance, to impose more state taxes to make up the shortfall in financial support from the federal government for basic welfare programs, aid to education, low-cost housing, food stamps, and regional development projects. With the president on the attack Reagan ceased his criticism of Ford administration programs and, in turn, justified the transfer of them to the states and local communities. For the first time Reagan was put on the defensive. When the primary vote tally was counted, Ford beat Reagan 55,156 (49.4 percent) to 53,569 (47 percent). In doing so the president picked up 17 of the 21 delegates at stake. The former governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter, also won handily in the Democratic primary.

A virtual state of euphoria existed in the Ford camp after the president triumphed over Reagan in the next four primaries. On March 2 Ford scored two conquests by taking 84 percent of the vote in Vermont and 62 percent in Massachusetts. On March 9 the president again mastered Reagan by pulling 53 percent of the primary vote in Florida (where Betty Ford had campaigned extensively), and on March 16 he conquered his rival once more in Illinois by a convincing margin of 60 percent.



About the time the president thought he had the nomination sewed up and Reagan would withdraw, the Californian made a spectacular comeback by beating Ford in the North Carolina primary by garnering 52 percent of the vote. Reagan turned the tide by utilizing television. He bought a prime-time 30-minute slot on 15 of the state's 17 television stations. Hitting at the so-called Panama Canal giveaway, the evils of détente, and the mess in Washington, Reagan's skill in using the electronic media carried the day. He took 28 of the state's 54 delegates, not a big victory in and of itself, but his appeal for money netted him \$1.4 million. This performance and influx of funds saved his campaign after losing five straight primaries to Ford.¹⁸

The next big showdown was in Texas where Reagan vigorously attacked Ford for, among other things, planning to give away the Panama Canal, deliberately permitting U.S. military strength to deteriorate, and allowing Henry Kissinger a free hand ostensibly to knuckle under to Soviet demands in his diplomatic negotiations with the Kremlin. The president countered Reagan's charges that he permitted America's national defense to decay by telling Texans, "Last year, I submitted to the Congress at that time, the highest peacetime military budget in the history of the United States."¹⁹ Without specifically mentioning Reagan's right-wing stance, not wanting to seem overly combative, Ford did remind his fellow Republicans "the Republican candidates must find a way to get more people, certainly from



the Independent side, and to also woo some of the Democrats, who philosophically more nearly agree with us than they do with whoever the Democratic nominee might be."²⁰ The inference was that he, as a moderate, would draw more votes from independents than his opponent. The president's logic went to no avail. Reagan made a clean sweep in the Lone Star State convention by taking all 96 delegates.

In quick succession Reagan pulled ahead in the quest for delegates by winning primaries in Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, and Nebraska. Projecting well on TV, his media blitzes were very successful. He was also helped by crossovers from the followers of George Wallace. Soon Reagan had a delegate lead of more than one hundred. Ford pulled out a win in West Virginia and edged closer to his challenger. The test of survival for Ford boiled down to his home state of Michigan. He had to turn the campaign around by winning big in his home state. Despite shortages in campaign funds the Ford strategists decided the best way to attract voters for the May 18 primary in the Wolverine State was to canvass for votes a la Harry Truman by conducting a whistle-stop campaign by train. Boarding the Presidential Express, an Amtrack special, Ford crisscrossed Michigan to cheering crowds. His pitch to them was an ardent appeal for them to support a home-state presidential candidate regardless of party. Typical of his solicitous rhetoric was his appearance at Flint where he unabashedly made this entreaty, "I ask you to help us on Tuesday. We must win in Michigan."²¹



Ford was still unbeatable on his own turf. His candidacy got a big boost when he swamped Reagan by taking 65 percent of the vote.²² Although still trailing in the delegate count, the president's campaign gained momentum. Ford went on to win the primaries in Oregon and Tennessee, and in the non-primary states of New York and Pennsylvania he secured 119 delegates from the former and 88 from the latter via state conventions.²² Reagan, meanwhile, took Arkansas, Idaho, and Nevada. The four-month preconvention battle all hinged on the last three primary contests on July 8 to be held in California, New Jersey, and Ohio.

Although the President Ford Committee was hard pressed for funds, it was decided that Reagan had to be contested in his home state of California. Many personal appearances were therefore scheduled for the president amid forays to New Jersey and Ohio. In Laguna Hills, California, Ford began to use the jocular refrain, "There is absolutely no reason whatsoever to trade in your reliable Ford for a flashier model." Taking advantage of good economic news, since the Commerce Department had just reported a gain in the Gross National Product of 7.5 percent for the first quarter of 1976 with a corresponding decline in the inflation rate to 3.6 percent, the president boasted:

If you look back at the record of the last 22 months, my policies have brought us from the depths of the recession to a sustained recovery, and will



ensure that runaway inflation never again rob us or our loved ones of the reward of honest work and lifetime savings.²⁴

Similar to Harry Truman's tactic of criticizing the so-called "good-for-nothing" 80th GOP Congress in 1948, Ford modified this ploy by attacking the allegedly "do-everything" 94th Democratic Congress. In taking credit for his role in serving as the taxpayer's watchdog over the Democratic-controlled Congress, the president bragged, "I vetoed 49 spending bills. Forty-two of them have been sustained, saving the American taxpayer \$13 billion." With regard to "more budget busting bills," he promised, in a rhetorical flourish reminiscent of FDR, "I will veto them again and again and again."²⁵

In a quick swing through Ohio, shuttling back and forth from state to state on Air Force One, Ford took advantage of free television time for a multitude of interviews. The president countered Reagan's anti-Washington theme and stressed the point that he had consistently fought to do the same thing as his challenger advocated, namely, cut federal spending. In addition, Ford emphasized experience as an important factor in the implementation of both domestic and foreign policy. Alluding to Reagan's lack of expertise in these matters, he asserted, "I think we know better than some of the outsiders where some of these programs are that can be tightened up or eliminated." Likewise, the president affirmed, "I can be very positive that



a person coming into the White House who has had no experience in national security matters such as negotiations over strategic arms limitation, can't learn the intricacies of that very complicated subject overnight."²⁶

While campaigning in Ohio on June 1st, Ford indicated that he, like Reagan, favored a reduction in federal programs. But the president made it clear that he would not take a meat-axe approach to carry out indiscriminate cuts in government programs. Ford defended revenue sharing and the use of block grants to meet the financial needs of state and local government. Regarding his domestic policy, the president assured voters, "I think mine is the responsible one." Ford took the opportunity to voice his "total opposition to court-ordered busing" and, in doing so, advocated utilizing the various voluntary options for desegregation afforded by the Rural Educational Opportunities Act which he had signed. When asked if he had the nomination locked up, Ford responded optimistically, as a candidate must, "I think we will have enough to get a first ballot."²⁷

On June 8th Ford triumphed in the New Jersey primary, taking all 67 delegates, while at the same time winning 87 of 97 in Ohio. He lost a large bloc of 167 in California. After meeting head-to-head with Reagan in more than 30 primary contests and numerous battles at state conventions, the president led the delegate race 965 to 826. With the magic number for nomination set at 1,130, the competition for delegates was not yet over. President Ford had no choice but to continue running



scared. His campaign efforts hit a hectic schedule. He also had no alternative but to encroach more and more on his presidential duties. If there was one thing Ford resented about the Reagan challenge, in retrospect, it was the fact that it wasted so much of his time.²⁸

To make sure overzealous cabinet members did nothing unethical or illegal in their desire to influence delegates (Ford wanted nothing that even resembled the activities of CREEP), the president imposed strict guidelines. In a memo, "Guidelines in Connection with the 1976 Election Committee," a directive was sent out reminding all members of the cabinet that "no direct or indirect offer or promise shall be made to delegates that an appointment to office or other benefit can be obtained from the Federal government for any particular person, as a consequence of the votes or activities of such delegates to the Convention." Although money for travel was short, they were also admonished "that appropriated funds are not used to conduct or support political activities."²⁹

When the dust had settled in the mad scramble for delegates, Ford counted 1,100 in his corner. This put the president 50 ahead of Reagan but Ford was still shy by 30 of being assured that he would be named the standard bearer of the GOP. On July 26, in a desperate gamble that boomeranged terribly, Reagan tried to pick up delegates in the Pennsylvania delegation by naming that state's U.S. Senator, Richard Schweiker, a liberal Republican (who publicly had announced for Ford) as his



preconvention selection for the vice presidency. Some dyed-in-the wool true believers of the GOP right wing were decidedly turned off by what they perceived to be an act of political expediency that compromised their ideological purity. Reagan compounded his initial miscalculation by proposing a rule change to make it mandatory for Ford also to name his running mate in advance of the presidential balloting. On August 17, in the Kemper Arena at Kansas City, the Reagan forces suffered a stinging rebuke when the convention rejected this proposal, Rule 16-C, by a vote of 1,180 to 1,068.

Not yet willing to concede the formal coronation to his opponent, Reagan gave Ford more problems by proposing a six-paragraph addendum, the so-called "Morality in Foreign Policy" plank, to the party's platform. By inference it was critical of the Ford-Kissinger foreign policy. It called for keeping commitments to Taiwan; maintaining control over the Panama Canal; contained a caveat that the Helsinki Agreement "must not take from those who do not have freedom the hope of one day gaining it"; decried "secret agreements"; praised Soviet exile Alexander Solzshenitzen (whom Ford had not invited to the White House); and sternly admonished "that in pursuing détente we must not grant unilateral favors with only the hope of getting future favors in return."³⁰ The president was furious and wanted to reject this plank, but yielded to the advice of Richard Cheney, Ford's chief of staff and top campaign advisor, and others that a floor fight was to Reagan's advantage--not his.³¹



Ford finally acquiesced, realizing a prolonged debate would only serve to stir up unnecessary rancor and, possibly, imperil his nomination.

The 1976 GOP platform, to which President Ford subscribed, pledged continuation of revenue sharing, welfare reform, tax cuts, reduction of federal spending, expansion of block grants to help local communities, reduction of federal regulation and bureaucratic red tape, public disclosure of financial interests of members of Congress, implementation of regional primaries, lobby disclosure legislation, protection for victims of crimes, protecting the right of privacy, strengthening the family unit, tax credits for private schooling, support for vocational education, ratification of ERA, self-determination for Puerto Rico, making the Social Security system actuarially sound, abolition of arbitrary retirement laws, improvement of Medicare, opposition to national health insurance, inclusion of Vietnam war veterans in the GI Bill of Rights, revitalization of urban neighborhoods, incentives for development of low and moderate income housing, deregulation of oil and natural gas, safeguards for clean air and water, public-private partnership to foster technology, continued federal assistance to public broadcasting, increasing national defense, preservation of peace and stability in the Middle East, and a revitalization of traditional alliances.³² The press interpreted Ford's acceptance of the platform in various ways. The liberal-left wing Nation called it a sellout to Reagan, Newsweek termed it a



model conservative document, and the pro-Ford Fort Worth Star-Telegram claimed it hewed to the president's line.³³

The formal balloting for the GOP presidential nomination took place on August 18. Ford clinched it on the first ballot, when Governor Arch Moore delivered West Virginia's 20 votes. The final tally gave the president the victory; he defeated Ronald Reagan by a vote of 1,187 to 1,070.

One of the time-worn devices used by political parties to heal the divisive wounds caused by primary and convention struggles is to placate the losing faction by choosing a vice presidential running mate from within its ranks. Selecting one's chief rival is tactically a smart move, since such a choice both unites the party and brings to the ticket a person with considerable name recognition. Jerry Ford did not have this option. He and Ronald Reagan had made a pre-convention agreement via William Timmons (Ford's convention coordinator) that whomever came out the winner would not ask the loser to take second place on the ticket.³⁴ The president honored this arrangement, although great pressure was put on Reagan by a delegation of GOP state chairmen to alter his decision. Reagan had already told his delegates from California, "There is no circumstance whatsoever under which I would accept the nomination for Vice President. That is absolutely final."³⁵ Would Ronald Reagan have changed his mind if asked point-blank by the president? Perhaps, but he was not asked. One repercussion resulting from Reagan's absence from the ticket, in addition to his



proWess as a campaigner, was that it lessened considerably the GOP's chances of attracting votes from the American Independent party (which had nominated Governor Lester Maddox of Georgia), whose platform was replete with right-wing shibboleths.³⁶

Long before the Republican convention President Ford had solicited names for potential running mates. High on the list, aside from Reagan, were those of John Connally; William Simon, Treasury Secretary; Anne Armstrong of Texas, a former White House counselor and U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain; Elliot Richardson, Commerce Secretary; former deputy attorney general William Ruckelshaus; Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee; and Senator Robert Dole of Kansas. Huddled in Ford's suite at the Crown Center Hotel at 3:15 AM on the morning after his nomination, the president listened to the advice of a group of close advisors. Present were his chief of staff, Richard Cheney; Vice President Nelson Rockefeller; campaign strategist Stuart Spencer; Robert Teeter, an expert pollster; White House Counsellor John Marsh; former defense secretary Mel Laird; Bryce Harlow of the Kitchen Cabinet; Senator John Towers of Texas; trusted aide Bob Hartmann; and close friend Senator Robert Griffin of Michigan (who had served as floor manager during the convention). Jerry Ford was strongly inclined to break tradition and name a woman, Anne Armstrong, but others counseled against it. The final consensus was that Senator Dole, whom Reagan personally endorsed but did not push, would hurt Ford least while satisfying the Reaganites.³⁷ It would also give the



ticket a pro-Farm Belt stance and, presumably, add a candidate with a good track record as an effective campaigner. Unfortunately for Ford, it forfeited broader regional appeal by putting two Midwesterners on the ticket.

The final evening of the Republican National Convention was intended to be a prime-time forum for Jerry Ford to reach a maximum television audience. William Aruthers, the President's TV advisor, sought to orchestrate the proceedings in order to bring this about. He was thwarted by events beyond his control. With frenzied zeal the Reagan delegates demonstrated with plastic horns and repeated applause when the Californian and his wife, Nancy, made their appearance in the VIP gallery. Permanent Chairman John Rhodes repeatedly invited Reagan to make an appearance at the podium to quiet the prolonged demonstration so it would not delay the proceedings. Reagan just as often refused to make such an appearance. As a consequence his last-ditch supporters cheered on and wasted valuable time. Instead of making his acceptance speech at 9:00 PM Ford could not deliver it until 10:40 PM--sans millions of viewers who had tired of watching and listening to Reagan's followers whistle and wave their banners for their defeated champion.

Although irked by this unnecessary delay, the president psyched himself up for a supreme effort.³⁸ Looking relaxed, though he had had little rest for many days, Ford gave one of the best speeches of his entire political career. He projected



total confidence and superb poise when he told the assembled throng, "I am honored by your nomination--and I accept it." Early in the address he made the dramatic announcement, "I'm eager to go before the American people and debate the real issues face to face with Jimmy Carter. The American people have the right to know first-hand where both of us stand."³⁹ To prevent the press from stealing his thunder, this bombshell had been deleted from advance copies. The polls showed the president was some 30 points behind the Democratic presidential nominee and Ford's strategy was to toss down the gauntlet publicly and challenge his opponent before Carter could taunt him about debating on the same platform. It was necessary for him, reasoned Ford, to demonstrate his superior ability in dealing with the complex issues of the day--both domestic and foreign. Therefore he, as a sitting president, broke precedent by taking the initiative to propose such a face-to-face meeting.

Casting himself in the mold of a Harry Truman, Ford, the underdog, attacked the do-everything 94th Congress which, under the control of the Democrats, he insisted, had indulged itself in deficit spending on dubious programs. He postured himself as the defender of the "little taxpayer" who utilized the executive veto to save billions of dollars from needlessly being wasted. The president claimed, "For two years, I have stood for all the people against the vote-hungry, free-spending congressional majority on Capitol Hill." Contrasting his past record with the campaign rhetoric of Jimmy Carter, Ford declared:



My record is one of progress, not platitudes.
My record is one of specifics, not smiles.
My record is one of performance, not promises.
It is a record I am proud to run on.⁴⁰

The tone, content, and quality of delivery were definitely upbeat and attention-getting. Ford's 38-minute speech, which contained enough of the usual political accolades to arouse a partisan audience, was interrupted no less than 65 times by enthusiastic applause. Flanked by Robert Dole and Ronald Reagan, the trio received a thunderous ovation in a public display of apparent unity and harmony. Typical of favorable press reaction was the Newsweek compliment that Ford's acceptance speech "was a performance of rare polish and passion."⁴¹ A Michigan member of the President Ford Committee wrote to the GOP nominee, "What an 'Acceptance Speech!!' Everyone in town is talking about the 'new President Ford!!' Congratulations."⁴²

Following a motorcade the next day, in which a large crowd in Kansas City waved and shouted encouragement to Ford, the president boarded Air Force One to join Senator Dole at his hometown rally in Russell, Kansas. From there Ford journeyed to Vail, Colorado to unwind and hold a series of strategy meetings with leaders of the party. It did not bode well that neither Ronald Reagan nor any of his top advisors were invited to Vail. Because the Californian had given them such a hard time, jubilant staffers erred in not getting Reagan on the Ford



bandwagon immediately. They were, needless to say, exhilarated over their convention victory and pleased with the president's stellar performance. Nevertheless, it was a critical mistake to snub the Reagan camp so deliberately.

Only broad campaign strategy was discussed amid the beautiful Rocky Mountain setting at Vail. It was decided that half of the \$21.8 million allowed by the Federal Election Commission would be allocated right away for television commercials with the rest being saved for the final drive down the homestretch. The consensus was reached that Senator Dole would start crisscrossing the country immediately while the president, who still had his executive chores to attend to, would make only spot appearances. Ford beefed up his campaign by replacing Rogers Morton as chairman of the Ford for President Committee with James Baker, a Texas lawyer who was formerly an undersecretary of commerce. Morton was made head of the Ford Steering Committee, an advisory group.

The wheel of fortune had always turned up lucky for Jerry Ford during his long and unvanquished career in politics. He possessed an unbroken string of 13 election victories in a row. But when it came to the fourteenth, as in roulette, the streak of good luck was broken abruptly just when the stakes were the highest.

