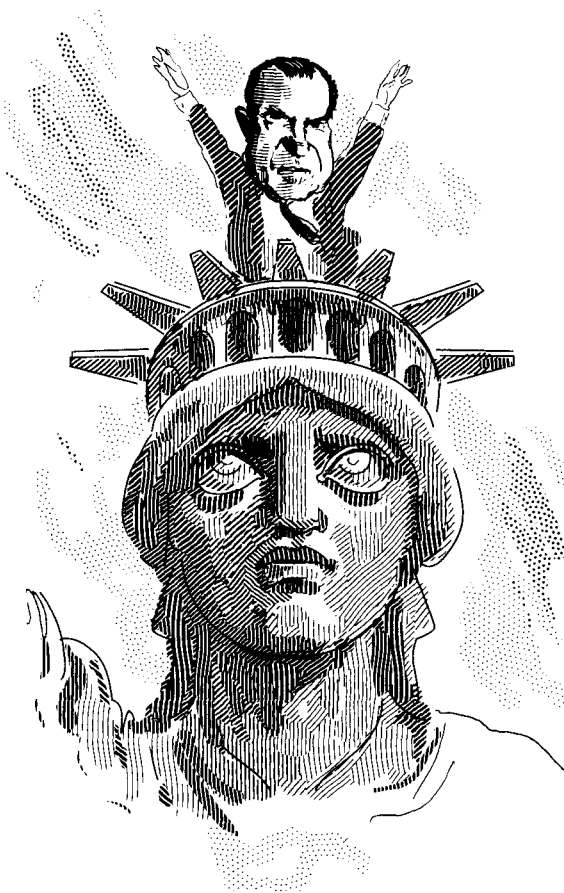


THE LONG DETOUR

Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority, by Robert Mason.
University of North Carolina Press, 304 pages, \$39.95



IN 1964 THE AMERICAN CONSERVATIVE movement made its first bid for national political power, by seizing control of the Republican Party and nominating Senator Barry Goldwater as its candidate for president. The attempt failed disastrously: Goldwater carried only six states and won just 38% of the popular vote.

But far from disappearing, the conservative movement actually seemed strengthened by its defeat. It continued to grow, organizing the supporters who had cut their teeth in the Goldwater campaign, developing the issues that would make it more relevant in the years ahead, and grooming candidates and spokesmen who could carry its banner. Just four years later in 1968, it had a new national champion in the governor of the nation's largest state, who had been elected in 1966 by a margin of one million votes over the incumbent Democrat. If ever a new political movement seemed poised to take over the governance of America, it was conservatism in 1968.

Yet at just that moment, history paused in what seemed its inevitable course. The conservative movement would be compelled to spend 16 years, from 1964 to 1980, waiting in the wings

for its victory. The Republican Party would win (albeit narrowly) in 1968 to be sure, then overwhelmingly in 1972, only to witness in 1974 the first presidential resignation in American history, and then spend six years in the wilderness licking its wounds. The Democrats, despite the growing unpopularity of liberalism, managed to duck the bullets and continue to control both Houses of Congress and even, from 1976 to 1980, the White House. The whole political history of the United States seemed to hiccup and stall, while the country contended, for 16 precious years, with the phenomenon and consequences of one strange, stubborn, and ambiguous man: Richard Nixon.

Having served as Dwight Eisenhower's vice president for eight years, Nixon had a strong claim on his party's presidential nomination in 1960. Some early Goldwater supporters put their tiger's name before the convention, but the senator wisely withdrew it and urged conservatives to await a better day. New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, on behalf of the fading liberal wing of the party, made the first of what was to become a series of failed bids for the nomination. But the delegates were adamant: 1960 was Nixon's year.

Or would have been, had the American people not preferred John Kennedy by a narrow margin. What then was left for Richard Nixon? He ran for the governorship of California in 1962, but was defeated by Democrat Pat Brown. At that point he seems to have concluded that his political career was over. Snarling to the press that "You won't have Nixon to kick around any more," he abandoned California for New York, accepted a lucrative partnership in a posh Wall Street law firm, and told a friend as they strolled up Park Avenue, "This is where the action is—not back in California with those peasants." (Nixon had always harbored a conviction that the real power in America resided in certain key corporate boardrooms and the locker rooms of the "right" golf clubs—perhaps a vestige of the inferiority he had felt as a minor California political figure when Tom Dewey, Henry Luce, and other New Yorkers ran the Republican show.)

American history would have been spared a great many tragic missteps if Richard Nixon had adhered to his resolve to turn his back on politics and live the good life in New York. It seems likely that Ronald Reagan would have won the 1968 nomination (at the age of 57) and



the presidency that fall. With the conservative movement in full and early blossom, there would have been a far different, and far better, outcome in Vietnam. There would have been no Watergate, and no presidential resignation under threat of impeachment. In all likelihood, the elder Bush or someone like him, serving as Reagan's vice president and heir, would have succeeded to the presidency in 1976.

But once the presidential bug has bitten a man, he is infected for life. (Thus John Kerry gazes admiringly in a mirror and dreams of 2008.) Richard Nixon was fascinated by Barry Goldwater's capture of the nomination, and by his subsequent overwhelming defeat. He was sure that he could do better—and he meant to try.

THIS IS THE POINT AT WHICH ROBERT Mason, a lecturer in history at the University of Edinburgh, picks up the story. *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority* is a detailed and workmanlike study of how Nixon approached the problem of winning the presidency in 1968 and again in 1972. It also spells out the plans he had for subsequent victories by his surrogates (notably John Connally), had not Watergate and its sequelae ruined them.

One might suppose that Nixon, surveying the field about 1966, would have realized that the conservative movement, which had lost with Goldwater and not yet attached itself to Reagan, lay ready to hand. One might imagine that the Nixon of 1966 would have heard and thought enough about the conservative movement to recognize, and perhaps even admire and identify himself with, the sheer power of its ideas.

But apparently Goldwater's massive defeat blinded Nixon to the important strengths of the conservative movement. He recognized the attraction it held for many people, but regarded it as a problem for the Republican Party, rather than a solution.

In an early and revealing comment that Mason curiously omits to quote, Nixon told a group of reporters in early October 1965 that "the Buckleyites" were "a threat to the Republican Party even more menacing than the Birchers." That was the report of columnists Evans and Novak in an October 14th column, and it was confirmed a few days later by Scripps-Howard by-liner Bruce Bioassat, who stated that Nixon had been "emphatic...in chats with newsmen" that Buckleyites were "the worst threat to the Party's difficult rebuilding efforts."

Presumably it was Pat Buchanan (whom Nixon had already hired full-time as his contact with the right wing) who explained to Nixon that his statement had been a blunder. But it

took repeated demands for an explanation from various "Buckleyites" (including myself), and an editorial in *National Review* itself, to elicit almost six months later the following convoluted climb-down from Buchanan to *National Review*: What Nixon had "invariably" asserted was only that, in Buckley's 1965 race for the mayoralty of New York City, "Mr. Buckley, by his repudiation of the [John] Birch Society in his magazine and syndicated column, had thereby made himself a much stronger candidate and a greater threat to the Republican candidate, Representative [John] Lindsay."

The episode seems to have taught Nixon the danger of antagonizing the conservative movement. But it does not seem to have occurred to him to make common cause with it, let alone harness his presidential ambitions to it. Instead, in the run-up to the Republican convention of 1968, Mason describes Nixon as formulating his own recipe for a political realignment that would return the GOP to power: To the "base of traditional Republicans, who emphasized the importance of free enterprise," he would add "sections of the population whose needs and expectations differed superficially from the Republican core of support, such as 'new liberals,' who emphasized participatory democracy; the 'new South,' interested in 'interpreting the old doctrine of states' rights in new ways'; most surprisingly, black militants, rejecting welfarism in favor of self-help; plus the 'silent center.'"

The result was that Nixon came within a whisker of losing the 1968 nomination to Reagan, who having encountered no serious competition from Nixon, emerged as the conservative movement's champion.

Reagan's bid for the 1968 nomination is widely forgotten these days—not least, because like most politicians, Reagan didn't enjoy recalling his defeats and in later years minimized the whole affair. But the fact is that he allowed his agents to test the waters thoroughly as early as the fall of 1967, formally declared his candidacy when his plane landed in Miami for the convention, and worked hard for the nomination. Three British reporters who covered the contest and wrote a book about it afterward (*An American Melodrama: The Presidential Campaign of 1968*) rightly observed that Nixon's margin over Reagan was "almost insultingly small." Nixon prevailed only because conservatives, who controlled the convention as thoroughly as they had controlled its predecessor in 1964, were split. Many, including some who had prematurely committed themselves to Nixon, were in their hearts for Reagan. But a decisive minority of conservatives, led by Senator Strom Thurmond (who in turn had been heavily influenced by his former colleague Barry Goldwater) argued that Reagan, who had only served two years as gov-

ernor, was too green politically, and that Nixon was conservative "enough." To this misguided belief were owed 12 years of misery for the conservative movement—and for the nation.

ONCE ELECTED, NIXON PUT HIS DREAM of fashioning a new political majority in the hands of three close aides: H. R. Haldeman, John Ehrlichman, and Charles Colson. There were other, more conservative advisers—notably speechwriter Pat Buchanan—but these three were dominant, and they shared Nixon's disdain for the burgeoning conservative movement, preferring to put together a coalition that would be anti-liberal, but more ambiguous and (they hoped) more attractive than out-and-out conservatism.

In doing so, they noted but rejected the counsel of Kevin Phillips, a brilliant political analyst who was a special assistant to Attorney General Mitchell. Phillips's book, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, was published in 1969. Nixon's thoroughly "moderate" speechwriter William Safire warned Ehrlichman that it was "most dangerous." On the contrary, it was the most profound and accurate analysis of American politics to appear in decades, and correctly predicted, and explained, the upsurge in Republican fortunes that began in 1968 and has continued almost uninterruptedly ever since. In subsequent years Phillips has published a series of progressively less perceptive books, denouncing what he considers the direction of the Republican Party and laying special blame at the door of the Bush "dynasty." But in *The Emerging Republican Majority*, he made a major and permanent contribution to the field of political science.

Unfortunately its significance was lost on the Nixon high command. Too many people denounced its message that the Republican Party could and should capture the South and the Southwest, wrongly believing that Phillips favored wooing racists, when in fact he merely recognized the enormous change being brought about by young couples from the North flooding into the growing cities of the Sunbelt. Phillips's book was read (though they denied it) by everybody from Nixon down; but it was treated as just another piece of debatable advice.

Instead, "[a]t the start of 1970, Nixon fully believed," asserts Mason, "in his ability to use the silent majority as the foundation of a new majority coalition." That ambiguous phrase—"a new majority"—was capable of being used, and revised, and re-revised, to represent any cocktail of issues and interests that seemed transiently attractive. Mason diligently reports them all.

In the spring of 1970, for example, a crowd of construction workers marching on Wall Street to protest the antics of anti-war activ-

ists signaled to the White House the possibility of winning previously unheard-of support from blue-collar workers. Nixon "soon thereafter invited a group of construction workers to the White House," and toyed with the idea of changing the name of the Republican Party to "the Conservative Party."

By September, with the Congressional elections less than two months away, Nixon was ordering his staff to "emphasize anti-crime, anti-demonstrations, anti-drugs, anti-obscenity." But the 1970 election returns were disappointing. There was a gain of just two Republican senators, whereas Nixon had hoped for "at least several more." In the House, the Republicans suffered a net loss of nine. Worst of all, in 45 states holding gubernatorial elections, Republicans lost control in 11, giving them 21 to the Democrats' 29.

So then it was on to the presidential election of 1972. Even now, Nixon kept his distance from the conservative movement. Mason explains why:

Despite the birth of a modern movement of conservative thought in the 1950s and its growth in the 1960s, conservative ideas remained relatively marginal to intellectual and wider public debate. Moreover, many members of this conservative movement were not unequivocally pledged to the cause of the new majority. Their approach to politics often emphasized an anticommunist foreign policy and a laissez-faire domestic policy. Nixon shared neither guiding principle, so his relationship with movement conservatives was at best uneasy.

One wonders what the conservatives who preferred Nixon in the late 1960s and early 1970s, reading that passage today, will think of their indulgence toward him.

CERTAINLY SOME CONSERVATIVES, EVEN at the time, felt acutely uneasy. In July 1971 Nixon announced his intention to visit Beijing in 1972, a move clearly designed to pave the way to formal diplomatic recognition. And on August 15th he imposed wage and price controls, a policy anathema to every economic conservative. As a result, in the summer of 1971 a group of conservatives that became known as the Manhattan Twelve announced their tentative decision to support a more conservative candidate against Nixon in 1972. This group (of which I was a member) was broadly representative of the major organizations in the conservative movement—*National Review*, *Human Events*, the American Conservative Union, Young Americans for Freedom, and so

on—but did not represent a serious political threat to Nixon, in part because their own determination to oppose him was, in several cases, distinctly half-hearted. Nevertheless, most of them endorsed Congressman John Ashbrook of Ohio for the nomination against Nixon, and supported him doggedly through the New Hampshire primary. When Nixon returned from his visit to Beijing in February 1972, Bill Buckley (one of 80 journalists who had accompanied him) wrote bluntly: "We have lost—irretrievably—any sense of moral mission in the world." But it hardly mattered; Nixon won the Republican primaries overwhelmingly.

Meanwhile, he kept adding ingredients to his New Majority cocktail. Sensing broad public sympathy for Lt. William Calley, who had been convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison for his role in the massacre of 300 Vietnamese civilians at My Lai, Nixon identified himself with the cause of reducing the sentence. Ultimately Calley spent less than four years under house arrest before obtaining parole. Union leaders, in particular, were delighted.

Desegregation, too, attracted Nixon's attention and his cautious opposition. He openly declared his opposition to forced busing and "residential desegregation" (building public housing in ethnic neighborhoods). Nor were Catholic voters overlooked: Despite the reservations of his staff, Nixon supported public financial aid to private (and therefore to parochial) schools.

Mason is rightly unimpressed with these efforts. "Against a strong opponent, [they] might not even have been enough to win reelection for Nixon." But the Democrats, incredibly, nominated George McGovern, a candidate on the far left of American opinion.

Mason's description of Nixon's campaign is almost chilling. "[Nixon's] strategy depended on the rejection of concern for the Republican Party at large." His vehicle was not the party but the Committee for the Reelection of the President (CRP, forgivably bastardized as CREEP). He calculated that after the election would be the moment to launch, as the vehicle for his New Majority, a new conservative party, with Texas Democrat John Connally at its head.

As the campaign of 1972 began, Nixon spoke of "character," and praised the "moral and spiritual strength" of the American people. They were, he declared, "united in their continued belief in honest hard work, love of country, spiritual faith." Slowly the voters began to develop deep reservations about McGovern. Nor did it hurt that there seemed to be fresh progress in peace negotiations with North Vietnam. The "one overriding issue," Nixon told voters, was "the issue of peace—peace in Vietnam, and peace in the world at large for a generation to come."

When the smoke cleared on election night, Richard Nixon had received the greatest presidential plurality in American history, and carried every state but Massachusetts. The Republican Party had much less to brag about: Ticket-splitters had actually caused it to suffer a net loss of two senators and one governor, and a gain of only 13 seats in the House. But to Nixon the victory confirmed his strategy. He claimed in his memoirs that it was "truly a New Majority landslide of the kind I had called for in my acceptance speech in August."

WHAT RICHARD NIXON MIGHT have done with his vaunted New Majority if all had gone well is fodder for endless speculation. Would it have absorbed and superseded the growing conservative movement, or swiftly evanesced? We will never know, because all did not go well. Within three months of Nixon's second inauguration, the Watergate scandal overwhelmed the White House. In August 1974, facing certain impeachment, Nixon became the first and only president to resign from office. Ironically, in the nearly two decades of life that remained to him, he devoted himself to rehabilitating his own image without the slightest reference to, or any further support for, his concept of a New Majority. Instead, he carefully cultivated his reputation as a master of foreign policy among the very liberals he had once so cordially detested.

Meanwhile, what of the conservative movement he had contemptuously disdained? It had supported him for election in 1968, despite the disappointment many conservatives felt at Reagan's narrow defeat for the nomination. It supported him again for reelection in 1972, with a few exceptions and a good many reservations. But the very fact that Nixon so zealously excluded leaders of the conservative movement from major appointments in his administration (Bill Buckley, for example, was named merely a member of the U.S. delegation to the United Nations) meant that they were virtually immune to collateral injury when the administration's collapse finally came.

INSTEAD, THE CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT spent the Nixon years building its strength quite independently. The names and addresses of the many thousands of people who had made small financial contributions to the Goldwater campaign were painstakingly copied, computerized, and made available to subsequent conservative campaigns. Paul Weyrich established the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress to facilitate his involvement in Congressional primaries and elections in both parties. John T. ("Terry") Dolan created

the National Conservative Political Action Committee to raise conservative campaign funds and spend them where they would do the most good. Jay Parker founded the Lincoln Institute for Research and Education to work directly on issues affecting his fellow blacks. Phyllis Schlafly launched her war against the Equal Rights Amendment, winning in 1978 a victory that will always be associated with her name. Consumer affairs were the field of Consumer Alert, the brainchild of a remarkable Vietnam War widow named Barbara Keating. Medical topics were the province of a panel of distinguished medical scientists assembled by Dr. Elizabeth Whelan's American Council on Science and Health. Issues related to defense were the focus of John Fisher's American Security Council, and global strategic concerns were the specialty of Frank Barnett's National Strategy Information Center.

On the college front, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute had been founded in the early 1950s, and Young Americans for Freedom had been on the scene since 1960. They were now joined by Irving Kristol's Institute for Educational Affairs, which specialized in encouraging conservative college journals. The early 1970s also saw the founding of the American Legislative Exchange Council, which soon boasted a membership of 2,000 state legislators. In the same period a number of "public service legal foundations" were launched, to litigate conservative causes in the nation's courts.

Perhaps most important of all was the

founding of the Heritage Foundation in 1973 by Paul Weyrich, Joseph Coors, and Edwin Feulner. This provided the conservative movement with an aggressive and competent "think tank" to furnish conservative political leaders and spokesmen with policy guidance and technical backup facilities. Within 10 years it had an annual budget of \$9.5 million.

Thus did the American conservative movement expand and arm itself for battle in the very years when Richard Nixon was concocting his New Majority. As we have seen, he disdained the movement, and gradually those conservatives who had once given him their support came to disdain him. By 1974, when he resigned the presidency, the divorce was complete. Gerald Ford, whom Nixon had appointed vice president when Spiro Agnew resigned, ratified it (if that was necessary) when he assumed the presidency on Nixon's resignation and promptly appointed Nelson Rockefeller as vice president. This move—putting the leader of the rapidly vanishing liberal wing of the Republican Party within a heartbeat of the presidency, thereby mortally affronting the conservatives—is surely in the running for the stupidest blunder ever committed by an American president. There was no way the Republican convention of 1976 could be bludgeoned into nominating Rockefeller for vice president, and Rockefeller himself practically admitted as much when he took himself out of the running.

The conservatives were by now solidly behind Ronald Reagan, and with their support

he won the nomination in 1980 and went on to trounce Jimmy Carter that November. Four years later he was reelected, carrying every state but Minnesota.

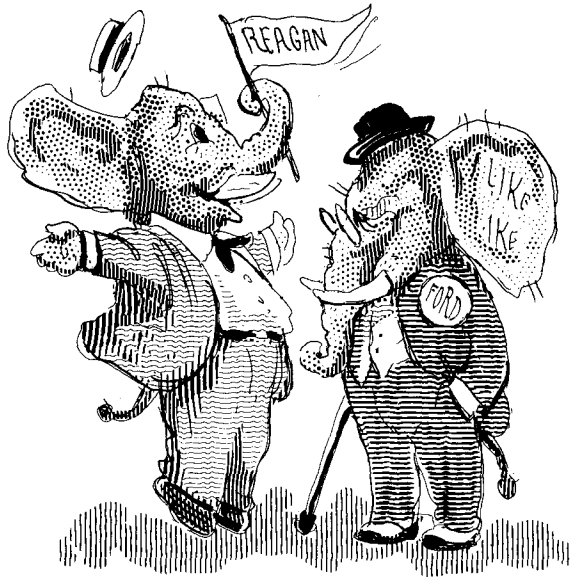
It would be interesting to know Richard Nixon's inmost thoughts as he watched Reagan assume the leadership of the powerful movement he himself had so cavalierly disregarded, win election and reelection, and become one of the greatest presidents of the 20th century. There had been a time when Nixon himself might have seized the leadership of that movement, and in consonance with its principles contributed to American history the high and honorable legacy we now rightly associate with Ronald Reagan.

But Richard Nixon was at heart a Machiavellian, which is to say that he believed that the fundamental truths of politics were not about principles, but about power. His "quest for a New Majority" was simply an attempt to assemble a coalition of interests muscular enough to take over the country. When a concept like freedom crossed his mind, it was only as an ideal that he realized some people prized enough to die for. Of politics as he understood it, he was a master. But he never comprehended the richness of its potential as a vehicle for the principles that can alone conduce to the happiness of mankind.

William A. Rusher, a distinguished fellow of the Claremont Institute, was publisher of National Review from 1957 to 1989.

PRELUDE TO GREATNESS

Reagan's Revolution: The Untold Story of the Campaign that Started It All, by Craig Shirley.
Nelson Current, 448 pages, \$25.99



A HANDFUL OF PRESIDENTS FACED tough challenges for renomination in the 20th century. Twice, challengers drove their presidential opponents (Harry S. Truman and Lyndon B. Johnson) from the race altogether. Three times, the race that resulted was an epic struggle that rent the president's party and deeply affected American politics. In one, Theodore Roosevelt stormed out of retirement and took the fight to his erstwhile friend, incumbent William Howard Taft. In another, Senator Edward Kennedy, Camelot's remaining heir, waged a long and bitter struggle against Jimmy Carter.

Conservative political consultant Craig Shirley examines the remaining, and perhaps the most important, case: Ronald Reagan's 1976 challenge to (unelected) incumbent Gerald R. Ford. Shirley argues that the 1976 Reagan campaign, which is often given short shrift even by Reagan enthusiasts, laid the groundwork for 1980. In Shirley's view, "1976 joined 1856, 1860, and 1964 as the most important Republican conventions in the party's history, and one of the most important in American history."

In 1976, Reagan pushed Ford to the limit. He won more caucus state delegates, and more votes in primaries than Ford. He lost the nomination by the barest of margins—1,187 delegates to 1,070—because a number of states had large blocks of uncommitted delegates under the control of pro-Ford party leaders. As Shirley argues, the nationwide Reagan organization, "Citizens for Reagan," served as the foundation

for Reagan's activity for the next four years. His near-win against an incumbent gave him greater stature both within the party and beyond, turning him into the GOP front-runner in 1980. By appealing to conservatives in both parties (and repelling liberal Republicans), Reagan advanced the process of the parties' ideological sorting-out. And Reagan's impromptu but eloquent remarks at the national convention captured the party's heart. As Reagan's close friend, Nevada Senator Paul Laxalt argued, "Though we lost we really won."

All in all, Shirley's work has much to commend it. His book should be read by anyone interested in Reagan, the rise of conservatism in the Republican Party, or American politics in the mid-1970s. And although not his main focus, Shirley also offers many interesting insights into a presidential nomination process that has since faded into history.

His account is filled with meticulous detail grounded in dozens of interviews with participants in the 1976 race. He makes clear, for example, the importance for Reagan's future of Vice President Spiro Agnew's resignation in 1973. Agnew's fall not only propelled Ford into the vice presidency and then the presidency, but removed Agnew himself as the presumptive front-runner for the 1976 GOP nomination. Similarly, Shirley examines Ford's numerous slights to Reagan, the deal hatched between Reagan's campaign manager John Sears and Ford's Rogers Morton that froze Ford's attacks on Reagan in the days leading up to the challenger's crucial North Carolina

primary win, and more generally the effect of human contingency on the course of history. (He even points out that the Watergate scandal was made possible because the uniformed policeman normally on the beat was drunk that night and unable to respond to the burglary call. In his place, three plainclothes officers were sent in an unmarked car, and the burglars' "spotter" was unable to send a warning.)

REAGAN'S REVOLUTION PAINTS COMPLEX portraits of key figures in the contest. Reagan himself is shown to be mostly the same in private as he was in public, full of grace and good humor (though some around Reagan have disputed Shirley's account of a few moments of great anger). On the Ford side, characters like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld loom large, not unlike today. John Sears is presented as both brilliant and flawed, a spendthrift who never fully appreciated Reagan's capacities, who made some important mistakes along the way, but who was also instrumental in persuading Reagan to run and in keeping the campaign alive at crucial moments. Richard Schweiker, the Pennsylvania Senator named by Reagan as his running mate in an unprecedented move weeks before the convention, is portrayed in a generally favorable light. While he was attacked by many conservatives as a liberal, Shirley contends: "he was from a heavily unionized state, and if his pro-union votes were removed from his record, Schweiker was fairly conservative. Schweiker was not a