The 1976 Republican Nomination: 
An Examination of the Organizational Dynamic

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"Actually, I seriously doubt that the President will have much trouble gaining the nomination unless he seriously stubs his toe in the coming months. In the first place, it is difficult to conceive of the Republican party failing to name an incumbent President. Secondly, Ford is way out in front, ahead of Reagan as the choice of Republicans generally: 45% to 19% in a recent Gallup poll. The President also has an invaluable asset: A 'nice guy' image somewhat along the lines of that enjoyed by Eisenhower, plus a conservative orientation which Republicans generally are bound to find congenial."

—Lloyd Free in a memo to the vice president, October 8, 1975

Even the experts can get it wrong. Six days earlier, Lee Nunn, the political director of President Ford’s election campaign committee, had resigned his position because of organizational differences with Bo Callaway, the campaign’s manager. In his resignation letter, Nunn described an organization inadequately prepared and committed to run a nationwide campaign. Nunn provided a very different assessment from that of Lloyd Free as to the amount of “trouble” President Ford could reasonably expect in his quest for the nomination.

Most experts expected Gerald Ford to secure the 1976 Republican nomination without contest. Drawing on the strength of incumbency, his advisers designed a Rose Garden Strategy, a plan that kept the president close to Washington and looking presidential. This would be appropriate for a sitting president seeking reelection, but the public at large, the right-wing of the Republican party, and Ronald Reagan saw Ford as a temporary officeholder who had never won a national election. The subsequent struggle for the nomination reflects the simplistic and politically naive assumptions made by the Ford campaign. This chapter examines those assumptions, the organizational dynamic of the Ford campaign, and the consequences of campaign reform which combined to threaten Ford’s presumed nomination.
Two problems inherent in President Ford's campaign helped Ronald Reagan mount a strong challenge for the Republican nomination. Although as Lloyd Free wrote, it is hard to deny a sitting president the nomination of his own party, this does not allow for the fact that Ford was not a traditional incumbent. He was a sitting president who had never faced a national electorate. However, the Ford campaign held fast to the traditional wisdom about incumbents and advocated a Rose Garden Strategy, a strategy more appropriate to a second-term reelection than a first-time-ever nomination. As a result, they too easily dismissed the potential of an intraparty challenge.

The second problem was the inexperienced and ineffectual organization that ran the original Ford campaign. Even if the tenuous nature of Ford's incumbency had been understood, it probably would not have compensated for the disorganization of the campaign effort. No serious efforts were made to organize the campaign in a highly professional manner. Only after the president appeared to be in trouble in the early primaries was a serious effort made to professionalize the campaign's operations. This lack of early planning meant that the president was unable to avoid several significant primary losses which made the final delegate count, and thus the nomination itself, dangerously close.

FORD AS PRESIDENT AND CANDIDATE

House Minority Leader Gerald Ford met all President Richard Nixon's requirements for a vice presidential nominee during the fall of 1973. Nixon needed to invoke the Twenty-fifth Amendment for the first time in our history to replace the indicted Vice President Spiro Agnew. He needed an honest, above-board, nonthreatening individual who would receive congressional confirmation easily. The consensus in the Nixon White House was that Ford would be the best choice and would put to rest some of the turmoil of Watergate. Bob Hartmann, one of Ford's top aides, described the attitude on the day Ford was nominated to be vice president: "[He was] someone who didn't think he was God, or God's vicar, or the victim of unnamed evildoers among the citizenry. It was, in a curious way, reminiscent of Harry Truman's assumption of the Presidency in 1945. The moon and the stars had fallen on him, but he would do his best." Ford was willing to accept the position because he had no intention of seeking the presidency for himself in 1976. He thought that by becoming vice president he could aid his ailing party. Conveniently, the end of the vice presidential term would coincide with the target date he had set with his wife for his retirement from politics, making the offer more attractive.

As predicted, Ford was easily confirmed by the House and Senate and became vice president on November 27, 1973. Ford's tenure as vice president was relatively uneventful, but he claims to have enjoyed the job. He did not have frequent or close access to Nixon, and in retrospect, this distance worked to Ford's advantage. Ford's political loyalty was unwavering, however, and he defended the president up to the final weeks of Nixon's presidency. In his
memoirs, Ford claims that he was not aware of Nixon's thoughts of resignation until the last few days of July 1974. Although Ford was not psychologically prepared to become president, he understood what the Watergate scandal was doing to the country, and when he became president on August 9, 1974, he moved quickly to present a strong image.

Almost immediately upon becoming president, Ford decided to run for the 1976 nomination. He made this decision on August 21, 1974, twelve days into his presidency. At first, Ford thought that an early declaration of self-exclusion from the presidential race would establish his credibility with both Congress and the public. But Secretary of State Henry Kissinger convinced Ford that such a strategy would create a two and a half year "lame-duck" presidency with disastrous consequences, especially for foreign policy. On further reflection, Ford decided that an early announcement of his candidacy would show the seriousness of his attitude toward the job and the ability of the Republican party to regain its vigor after Nixon. Above all, he thought it would engender badly needed stability: "The moment I said I wasn't going to run, the succession struggle would start. That would be divisive in and of itself, and what the country needed was a period of stability." Although Ford decided in August that he would enter the race, he made no mention of this decision until a November 15, 1974, press conference, and he put off his formal announcement until July 8, 1975. Some aides close to Ford thought that, although the president made an early private decision to run, his hesitancy to make a definitive public statement hurt his chances for an easy nomination. Two and a half months before the president's announcement, two of Bob Hartmann's aides wrote a thirty-page memo for their boss and the president concerning the impending campaign. In it, they expressed their concerns about the need for a firm announcement:

Because of the President's caution in taking definite steps toward organizing the 1976 campaign, many party people, voters and media people are not convinced that he will stand for election next year. This makes the President appear weak, disorganized and/or unknowledgeable concerning national Presidential politics. Worse, it allows other potential Presidential candidates to obtain supporters (including convention delegates) and it creates an atmosphere in which the conservatives will make bolder and stronger moves against the President and/or his positions on issues.

As this memo indicates, problems with a potential challenge were suggested early on, but were not seriously entertained by the president and those close to him who were more immediately concerned with establishing a creditable administration.

Once Ford became president and declared himself a candidate for election, a serious challenge to his nomination seemed remote. However, despite the mystique of incumbency, Ford was still highly vulnerable to a challenge (any challenge—not just Reagan's). Certainly the most serious problem was the way in which he had come to office. As Gerald Pomper notes: "With lessened demo-
cric, moral, and political authority, Gerald Ford could no longer count on the power of the incumbency to assure his nomination to a full term in the White House.17 Essentially, Ford lacked the deep psychological commitment from a mass of supporters that comes as a matter of course to those who have fought a hard battle to win the office. Ford was never able to get people "excited" or "defensive" about his campaign. David Keene, Ronald Reagan's Southern coordinator, acknowledged that "one of the advantages of incumbency in any office is that once you've run and people have supported you, they perceive an attack on you as an attack on them, on their judgement."18 The absence of this kind of commitment provided an opportunity for someone new to capture the imaginations of Republican supporters and moderates who had once believed in Richard Nixon and were now embarrassed that they had done so. Another view of incumbency is that of William Keech and Donald Matthews: "a party that fails to renominate a willing president is placed in the awkward position of admitting a mistake while asking for the nation's confidence. This, more than presidential use of concrete rewards and sanctions, explains the dominant position of sitting presidents who seek renomination."19 In 1976 the Republicans would not have to admit a mistake in refusing to nominate Ford; they could claim to be the victims of circumstance.

Adding to Ford's difficulties was his pardon of Nixon before any indictment was handed down. This did not win him any support among moderates. As Arthur Hadley says: "The Nixon pardon flowed from Ford's deepest emotions, not from any reasoned analysis of the political situation."20 This action made Ford undesirable in the eyes of many Republicans. In addition, a few incidents specific to the Ford administration have been credited with inviting a challenge. Ford himself cites four reasons in his memoirs: Betty Ford on "60 Minutes," the Solzhenitsyn incident, the Helsinki visit, and election law changes.21

Mrs. Ford had been interviewed on "60 Minutes" and spoke honestly about her views on childrearing, premarital sex, and drug use in a way that appeared amazingly liberal. "True-believer" conservatives were horrified, claiming that the first family should serve as a moral example for the country. Holding these views clearly meant that the Fords could not set such an example. The Solzhenitsyn incident and Helsinki visit also infuriated the conservatives. In July 1975 the right wing of the party had wanted the president to meet with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian dissident author who had just come to the United States. Ford was not averse to such a meeting; the problem was one of scheduling. The president was preparing to make a trip to Helsinki where he would meet with Soviet leaders. He felt they would most likely be offended by the symbolic gesture of his meeting with the dissident author immediately before his meeting with them. Conservatives were upset with this "dodging" of Solzhenitsyn and accused Ford of being soft on the Soviets.22 These charges were fed by Ford's visit to Helsinki. There he worked on human rights issues with the Soviets during the European Security Conference and attempted to encourage talks on SALT II. However, since Ford was not able to produce tangible agreements in either
respect, there was negative public reaction. Ford also mentions the changed nature of campaigning in 1976 owing to the new campaign laws and the infighting and confusion these laws caused among his staff. These problems were reflected in Campaign Manager Bo Callaway’s belligerence toward Finance Director David Packard and Vice President Nelson Rockefeller.

Another reason why it was possible to mount a strong challenge to Ford in 1976 is offered by Arthur Hadley, who says that the press had a hand in encouraging the “horse race” aspect of this campaign. The press corps knew that there would be a hot contest on the Democratic side, and they were hoping that one would materialize on the Republican side as well. Such a convenient situation would save them from accusations of liberal bias. In this vein, Hadley says that the press may have given more attention to Ronald Reagan than was his due, thus helping to establish him as a credible candidate. All these factors helped increase the likelihood of a challenge to Ford in 1976.

INSTITUTIONAL EXPLANATIONS

Several institutional innovations also contributed to the possibility of a challenge and the difficulty in suppressing it. The political parties were still (and are still today) changing their formal rules in reaction to the reforms in the presidential nominating process after 1968. In order to comply more easily with the new party delegate selection rules, more states were holding primaries instead of state conventions and caucuses. Primaries diluted the power of the party establishment (mostly moderates and Ford supporters) and placed it in the “open marketplace.” Such an environment was ripe for new-style campaigning, much to Reagan’s advantage. Also to Reagan’s advantage was the Republican party’s use of “superdelegates.” States that had elected Republican officials in a previous election (for president, senator, governor, Congress, etc.) were to be rewarded with additional delegates to the presidential nominating convention. This increased the power of the “Sunbelt,” the western and southern states, where a Reagan candidacy was particularly strong, relative to the eastern and midwestern states, where Ford stood to benefit. The Ripon Society challenged the legality of these new rules, claiming that they violated the principle of “one man, one vote.” The courts, however, upheld the party’s right to make their own rules, and the superdelegates remained, vastly increasing the size of the Republican convention.

The political environment was also altered by finance reforms for federal elections enacted in reaction to the Watergate scandal and the huge amounts of money spent in the 1972 general election campaigns. The 1976 race was the first presidential election campaign run under the campaign finance reforms which set limits on individual contributions and established a system of publicly supported matching funds aimed at encouraging small contributors. Disclosure of both contributions and expenditures by the campaigns was also made more stringent and forced the individual candidate organizations to become directly
accountable to an executive agency (the FEC [Federal Election Commission])
for all their transactions. This created candidate-centered rather than party-cen-
tered campaigns, a major shift in the political balance. According to Pomper:
"by directing funds toward candidates rather than toward party organizations,
the law weakened the established political organizations and their ability to
control the selection of convention delegates." The "old-style" campaigning
and fundraising methods traditionally used by the Republican party would prove
to be ineffective under the new laws, but in early 1976 most political operatives
were uncertain about which aspects of conventional wisdom to retain and which
to reject.

The campaigns were not the only political institutions confused by the new
laws. During primary season, the Supreme Court and the Congress battled over
the Federal Election Commission (FEC), the regulatory agency created to ad-
minister the new law. The court decided that the board of governors of the FEC
was selected in an unconstitutional manner and mandated that Congress rewrite
the guidelines for their selection by the end of February 1976, or have the FEC
disbanded. After granting one extension until March 22, 1976, Congress had
not yet acted, and the FEC was temporarily dissolved until May 17, 1976. This
seven-week period, during which no matching funds were disbursed, shook both
Republican campaigns (and, of course, the Democratic campaigns as well),
although it caused more harm to the Reagan organization than to Ford. Despite
the difficulties that the "superdelegate" and finance reforms presented for the
formulation of campaign strategy, these obstacles could have been countered by
an effective organization. Ronald Reagan, the challenger, was able to use the
changed environment to his advantage, while the president's team anticipated
problems but failed to act swiftly. Although institutional differences clearly
inhibited progress in creating an efficient organization that could deter a chal-
lenge, other decisions caused serious setbacks. Among these were the extreme
independence of the campaign from the White House and hence its candidate,
the undervaluation of the threat of Ronald Reagan, and initial personnel choices
for the Ford campaign organization of individuals not skilled in national electoral
politics.

THE CREATION OF THE PFC

In this uncertain environment, President Ford had to establish an official
campaign organization. This was difficult in several ways. First, his predecessor's
last campaign organization, CREEP (Committee to Re-elect the President), had
been the main focus of the Watergate scandal. Appearances would be critical.
The organization was carefully named the President Ford Committee (PFC). It
was created on June 20, 1975, because the new campaign finance laws prohibited
fundraising until a formal committee was established. Campaign offices were
made accessible to the press, and the doors were kept open during normal working
hours. Unfortunately, Ford could not avoid the most basic similarities to CREEP
in strategic operations because of the new finance laws. Ford wanted to run his campaign through the Republican National Committee, rather than create an organization of foot soldiers, but that was prohibited by the new finance laws. The PFC would have to be independent of the party but, fortunately for Watergate-wary observers, also subject to full public disclosure.

The second problem was the candidate’s inexperience. Ford had never run a campaign outside Michigan’s Fifth Congressional District. Neither he nor his aides knew what was involved in organizing a national campaign, much less under a changed environment. No one in the country had any experience with the new laws regarding federal campaigns. Even campaign professionals were at a loss to know precisely how these laws would affect presidential campaigning. Lastly, to avoid any hint of Watergate-related deceptions, the PFC and the White House would be fully independent of one another. Careful avoidance of collusion, while good for public relations, would prove to be devastating to the campaign—and a major roadblock to the nomination.

REAGAN’S DECISION TO RUN

Meanwhile, California Governor Ronald Reagan was contemplating another presidential run in 1976. After his abortive attempt in 1968, a discussion group of Reagan supporters led by John Sears met in May 1974 to discuss the viability of a Reagan candidacy. Reagan was reluctant, especially in light of his defense of President Nixon and the uncertainty of the Watergate situation. Once Gerald Ford became president in August 1974, Reagan wanted to wait and gauge the performance of the new president before making the decision to run. By November 1974 Reagan was talking of becoming a third party candidate, an idea that excited him because of his perception that the Republican party had moved away from conservative causes.

Convinced by his financial backers to remain a Republican, Reagan used his conception of a lackluster Ford, who was perceived by conservatives as becoming more liberal, to justify a challenge for the 1976 nomination. According to Evans and Novak: “What almost certainly decided him [Reagan] to run was ideological conviction, although that was not alone in propelling him to the decision he finally took. There was also a personal factor, the conviction that ideology or not, he was a better man than Ford and deserved the right to prove it.” Nevertheless, his assessment of Ford could simply be classified as an assessment of the strategic environment. In retrospect, John Sears would claim in 1977 that a motivating factor behind the decision to run was the contribution a Reagan campaign would make to the healing process of the Republican party. Reagan’s run would prove that the party could still offer viable candidates and that a Republican nomination was still something to be desired. According to Sears:

Two years ago, the party was in no shape to run a national campaign, and I think that it did as well as it did in 1976 because it had a race. I can’t speak for Governor Reagan,
but I know that I felt that the Republican party, if it was going to be an important party in this country after what happened at Watergate, had a responsibility to demonstrate that it still had the wherewithal as a political institution to search its ranks and have an open discussion about who ought to be nominated for president.21

Reagan’s announcement of his decision was long delayed for purely financial reasons. An early announcement would force him to forfeit the lucrative newspaper column and radio contracts he had at the time, as these would conflict with “equal access” laws. Thus, Reagan delayed his announcement until November 20, 1975, four months after Ford’s announcement.22

The Ford camp’s reaction to the Reagan candidacy demonstrates their electoral naivete. Despite early warnings of a Reagan challenge,23 Ford’s people discounted their significance. Soon after becoming president, Ford’s former House colleague and political adviser, Mel Laird, advised him to disregard Ronald Reagan as a powerful political commodity. Such opinions further convinced Reagan’s conservative advisers that the White House intended to marginalize them, and this made them even more favorable to a challenge.24 Once Reagan announced his intention to run, White House insiders continued to view him as a “straw man” rather than a threat. Witness the thoughts of White House staff member Jim Shuman after the announcement of Reagan’s candidacy on November 20, 1975:

Here are the first day comments on the Regan [sic] announcement. My own observations are that the Reagan candidacy may, as I said at lunch, prove to be a boon for us.

1. He will force us to tighten our own staff work, and produce better quality work.

2. He will be a stalking horse, criticizing the Democrats and the operation of the government more sharply than we are able to, thus weakening the Democrats in the general election.

3. His general ignorance of national affairs—assuming it continues—will make President Ford look better and better everyday.

Of course, this does not mean we don’t have to work hard. If we blunder Reagan could be a serious threat.25

Despite Shuman’s hopes, the Ford campaign did not react to the Reagan challenge by producing better quality work. They continued to treat Reagan as a political lightweight, making the “blunder” (i.e., adopting the casual attitude) that turned Reagan into a serious threat. The Ford organization did not closely monitor Reagan’s early activities, making only occasional references to him in the PFC’s weekly reports to the White House. It was not until January 1976 that a staff member was assigned to conduct research on Reagan’s issue positions and to monitor his activities full time.26

The Ford team’s casual treatment of Reagan aroused resentment with the right wing of the Republican party and intensified its desire to defeat Ford. As Bob Hartmann said of the Ford/Reagan relationship: “Ford thought Reagan was a
phony, and Reagan thought Ford was a lightweight, and neither felt the other was fit to be president."27

THE CAMPAIGN ORGANIZATION

It is difficult to assess precisely how important experienced personnel are to a presidential nominating campaign, but the competence of campaign employees is a critical unmeasured variable. In the wake of Watergate, it is understandable that Ford’s team would want to keep the campaign organization at arm’s length from the president. However, this caution bred complacency regarding the progress of the campaign which continued throughout 1975 and perhaps until the Reagan victory in North Carolina.28 The president’s inexperience with national campaigns, as well as his desire to distance himself from overtly political activity, resulted in several poor initial appointments which seriously hampered the progress of the campaign.

The Campaign Managers

Dean Burch was listed as the chairman of the PFC when the official documents were filed in June 1975, but this was only a temporary arrangement, awaiting the official resignation of Howard “Bo” Callaway from the position he then held.29 Bo Callaway was secretary of the army and the choice of Don Rumsfeld for the job of campaign manager. Both men had served in the House with Ford. Callaway, a native of Georgia, was selected in part because of the belief that he could help deliver the South for Ford.30 Arthur Hadley offers another angle, adding that “Callaway had close ties to Republican conservatives and importantly, was rich enough to pay his own way as campaign manager.”31 In this era of electoral reform, the old practice of retaining campaign managers who still held lucrative positions in private industry was no longer possible. The meager amounts of money available through public financing would not allow for sufficient salaries for top-notch people. This was a significant consideration in Callaway’s selection.

But the idea that Callaway would be able to deliver the South was misguided, since there was never a reasonable possibility of Ford winning there in the general election. In addition, Callaway was dangerously slow in organizing the individual states and did not get along with Finance Director David Packard, Political Director Lee Nunn, or the president’s White House staff. Callaway had no prior experience running a national campaign (he had only run for the House of Representatives himself), and this inexperience showed in his attitude toward organization and coordination. Callaway’s lack of state-by-state contacts and his dismissal of a Reagan challenge by late 1975 is proof of this inexperience. Lee Nunn’s resignation letter to Callaway describes those conditions:

Events are overtaking you. You are now entering the fourth month of the campaign and still working on a campaign plan, knocking down walls in your new Headquarters. One-
half the working time has elapsed between your starting date and the early primaries. Some states are now making decisions that have a bearing on delegate selection, yet, as of yesterday, your third fieldman was employed. Unless you move fast on interviewing, checking out resumes, and hiring, you will be without personnel for some very crucial areas.32

Still, Callaway was perceived as the president's choice, and the campaign co-administrators (i.e., Packard and Nunn), while blaming Callaway for bringing about their resignations, refused to condemn his performance to the president. This further insulated Ford from campaign realities. When a controversy surfaced over Callaway's questionable dealings in the development of the Crested Butte ski resort in Colorado, Callaway left the campaign the night before the Illinois primary (March 16, 1976) and was replaced by Rogers Morton.33

The Finance Directors

David Packard, chairman of the board and chief executive officer of Hewlett-Packard Company, of Palo Alto, California, was the finance director of the PFC until his resignation in November 1975. Packard's problem as finance director was a serious one: he was trying to raise money the old-style way under new-style laws. As Jules Witcover says: "[Packard] tried to run the money arm of the campaign from his home in Palo Alto, taking the old route of extorting the fat cats, despite the new campaign law."34 Packard had very unrealistic expectations about his fundraising ability, thinking he could raise the entire $10 million allowed by the public financing laws for the primary period by the end of calendar year 1975 and that it could be accomplished by large contributions. He showed great reluctance to try any broad-based fundraising plans. In a memo outlining a "General Strategy for Fund Raising" for the PFC in August 1975, Packard made three references to $1,000 donors (the maximum amount allowable by law) and had only this to say about smaller broad-based contributions:

We should broaden the base of contributors to the extent we can do so within the available fundraising allowance. This means we will need to use direct mail, and possibly a volunteer organization directed towards smaller contributors. We will have a trial run on the direct mail approach in California in late September. We will hold off on any other direct mail activity until we are able to evaluate the results of the California mailing.35

By the end of 1975 Packard had only raised $900,000 of the $10 million he had projected, and most of that was in large contributions, unmatchable under the new law.36 Packard resigned on October 20, 1975, citing his inability to get along with Bo Callaway as the primary reason for his departure. However, the fact that fundraising organizations were not established in individual states by the fall of 1975 was a tremendous problem for the president's campaign, and Packard's replacement by Robert Mosbacher ultimately benefited the campaign.

Over a month elapsed before Robert Mosbacher took over fundraising oper-
ations for the PFC on December 3, 1975. He remained at this post throughout
the primary season and successfully established a broad-based effort. Mobsbacher's appointment generated optimism. Jack Calkins, executive assistant to Bob
Hartmann, conveyed this sentiment:

I was extremely pleased to learn last week of your appointment and acceptance of your
new post. I have every confidence that you will meet the great challenge and produce
fine results.

Despite, or perhaps because of, a conversation I had with Dave Packard at the Bohemian
Grove in July, I was not able to convince him of the compelling need for a broad based
direct mail fundraising program. At that point, Dave was very confident that the necessary
funds could be raised by other means and he would not recognize the great political
advantages which can be gleaned from having thousands of small contributors. 27

Clearly, a national perspective had been absent from the fundraising side of the
campaign. Some in the White House understood the changed nature of politics
in the post-Watergate era, but few knew quite how to deal with it.

Fortunately for the president, there was a guardian angel watching over his
campaign, but he was in the cabinet, not on the PFC staff. Secretary of Commerce
Rogers Morton was aware of the problems both within the PFC and between
the PFC and the White House. Morton's interest in the campaign explains his
shift from cabinet secretary to White House counselor to chairman of the PFC.
In December 1975, Morton expressed his concern about the need for a liaison
between the president and his campaign. The desire to avoid "politics" had
gone too far—the president now appeared to be out of touch with the electoral
situation instead of being excessively involved. In a letter to the president, Morton
expressed his belief that the president's nomination was in jeopardy and suggested
a solution:

The time has come to substantially strengthen your campaign for the nomination. The
actions required to accomplish this are of paramount priority. Failure to perfect the
campaign organization and strategy presents a very real risk of defeat. The voter impression
is that the campaign is too far away from you, that it is not representative of your
candidacy and because of it you are losing ground. Whether true or not, this is the
perception.

I believe this impression can be corrected by putting a senior political counselor in the
White House who will be the prime link between you and your campaign and between
the campaign and the Cabinet and senior elements of your staff. 28

At the top of Morton's personnel recommendation list was George Bush. The
White House did not accept Morton's personnel recommendation, but it did
adopt the idea of creating such a position and on February 2, 1976, Rogers
Morton became a counselor to the president with cabinet rank. The first of his
duties was "Principal White House official for liaison with the President Ford
Committee (PFC) and the Republican National Committee (RNC)." 29 Although
his was a controversial appointment, Morton helped campaign coordination
greatly and was the logical choice to run the PFC when Bo Callaway stepped
down. Morton became the chairman of the PFC on April 2, 1976.

THE EARLY CAMPAIGN

The chief difficulty for the Ford campaign in 1976 was confronting the fact
that "the nomination campaign is a national effort that must be waged in fifty
individual states." Failure to digest this basic dictum harmed the incumbent
Ford more than it did the challenger, Ronald Reagan, whose organization's
understanding of campaigns was far more strategic. Stuart Spencer, political
director for the President Ford Committee (PFC) and former campaign manager
for Ronald Reagan, acknowledged these problems:

We didn't have a national plan... I made the assumption that Reagan was going to run
when I came here. I tried to build a base in California to discourage him, and we went
heavily into the first two primary states and organized them, the basic assumption being
Reagan had to win New Hampshire and Florida to get in the ball game. Conversely, if
the President lost New Hampshire, it was over with. We put a national organization
together basically to block Reagan early so he couldn’t get off the ground."

Such a misguided strategy left the PFC unprepared for what became a highly
competitive contest throughout the primary season.

As it evolved, the nomination process went through three major phases: the
Ford Victory Phase, the Reagan Victory Phase, and the Mixed Results Phase.

The Ford Victory Phase began with the president’s victory in the New Hampshire
primary, followed by victories in Massachusetts, Florida, and Illinois. Reagan
made his first (and critical) showing by winning North Carolina, but Ford held
on by winning Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Vermont and by securing a large
block of New York’s uncommitted delegates. The critical importance of Reagan’s
victory in the North Carolina primary that followed cannot be overstated. As Evans and Novak say: "The victory not only kept Reagan in the 1976 race: it
preserved him as a visible national politician for the future." Neither organi-
ization had anticipated a Reagan victory in North Carolina. The Ford camp never
expected Reagan to last that long. As Robert Teeter, Ford’s pollster, admits:
"We just didn’t take North Carolina seriously enough. We should have sent the
President there once or twice more. But the feeling was Reagan was beaten [after
New Hampshire, Florida, and Illinois] and there was no sense in mauling him."

Such sentiments seriously hampered the ability of the Ford campaign to handle
the Reagan challenge appropriately.

The Reagan Victory Phase began resoundingly on May 1 when Reagan won
Texas by a two-to-one margin. This was followed by Reagan victories in Al-
abama, Georgia, Indiana, and Nebraska (although Ford did win West Virginia).
Reagan was in command until May 18, the start of the Mixed Results Phase.
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On May 18, Ford won his home state of Michigan comfortably, a highly significant and important victory for him. The remaining primaries were split almost evenly. Reagan won his own home state of California, but Ford generated enough support there to keep Reagan occupied and prevent his campaigning elsewhere. Although Ford emerged from the primaries with a slight edge in delegates, both candidates were in a position to continue the battle in the state conventions and for uncommitted delegates.\textsuperscript{45}

When it came time to scramble for uncommitted and state convention delegates at the end of the primary cycle, the president and his organization finally came through. This is where Ford’s one-on-one political skill and incumbency advantage paid off. Four hundred delegates were still to be selected.\textsuperscript{46} He entertained them at the White House and called them regularly. He was more comfortable and more successful with one-on-one politicking, his manner of operation in the House for a quarter of a century, than with his unaccustomed role as a national candidate. By this time, Ford had come to see that his nomination was in danger, and he began to fear becoming the first incumbent since Chester A. Arthur to be denied his party’s nomination.\textsuperscript{47} Hartmann summarized Ford’s disposition in this way:

Understandably, President Ford’s inner security and innate confidence, which enabled him to take over the Presidency with easy and visible assurance, did not suffice for the unfamiliar role of national candidate. He was thus more vulnerable to challengers and more dependent on advisors as the gnawing to be a duly nominated and elected President grew within him.\textsuperscript{48}

THE CONVENTION

By convention time, Ford had enough votes to win on the first ballot, but, undeterred, the Reaganites attempted a last-ditch battle. Sears decided that Reagan needed to instigate a challenge to Ford, and that it would not be ideological (because of the belief that Ford would give in rather easily) but instead procedural. Since many state election laws bound delegates to vote only for president on the first ballot, “true believers” who were legally bound to vote for Ford would be free to vote their hearts on a procedural vote.\textsuperscript{49} The procedure attacked became known as Rule 16C, which would have required prospective nominees either to reveal their vice presidential choice in advance of the nomination or to risk having their delegates released from their legally mandated pledges.\textsuperscript{50} Reagan had already voluntarily announced that his running mate would be liberal northeasterner Richard Schweiker, a senator from Pennsylvania. This announcement was intended to help Reagan win some tenuously committed delegates in the Northeast, but in the end it only helped him lose Mississippi.\textsuperscript{51} The vote on Rule 16C fell almost exclusively along political lines: Reagan delegates voting in favor, Ford delegates against.\textsuperscript{52}
Ford went on to win the nomination but largely conceded the platform writing to the Reagan team. This was a deliberate tradeoff on Ford's part because he believed with George Reedy that "the true purpose of a party platform is to determine the outer limits under which the coalition can be held together, and the intense fighting which goes on at every party convention is a reflection of this purpose." To avoid too much divisiveness, Ford acquiesced to many of the demands from the right wing of the party, knowing he would not be too tightly bound by their platform planks.

Ford next faced the issue of selecting a vice presidential running mate. This was a task of no small importance. The vice presidency had been a point of contention throughout the campaign and was the position from which Ford himself ascended to the presidency. Ford visited Reagan after his nomination as a conciliatory gesture and suggested a number of names. Reagan signalled his support for Kansas Senator Robert Dole. The decision to pick Dole was essentially Ford's. Ford liked Dole because Dole helped put him over the top in his contest for minority leader in 1965. Ford thought Dole would be a great campaigner, and he thought Dole could help him in the farm states. The conservatives also liked Dole, and that was certainly an important consideration. Ford also knew he needed to acknowledge the conservative faction in view of the strong challenge they had mounted to his nomination.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

What, then, was the ultimate effect of the divisive primary season in 1976? According to the literature on divisive primaries, individual loyalties are stronger than partisan loyalties. Thus, partisan unity after the convention, while an ideal situation from the political parties' standpoint, tends to be artificial at best. The analysis of Patrick Kenney and Tom Rice suggests that the price of a divisive primary season for Ford may have been the loss of the general election: "had Ford been unchallenged for the Republican nomination he would have won five more states in November, which would have provided him with 90 additional Electoral College votes, easily enough to carry the Republican ticket to victory." But is this the case? Both the Reagan and Ford organizations think that the divisive primary season helped make the Republican party more rather than less competitive in the general election.

Whatever the effect of divisive primaries on the general election, it is clear that a strong challenge itself might have been averted. Some might argue that Reagan's challenge was inevitable. The argument made here is that a more politically sensitive and tighter Ford campaign organization might well have prevented a Reagan campaign from getting off the ground. Moreover, failure to take Ronald Reagan's primary candidacy seriously in North Carolina was inexcusable. The early Ford campaign organization was its own worst enemy. Xandra Kayden describes this situation in her article "The Political Campaign as an Organization".
Winning or losing an election is in the hands of the voters, but the campaign organization is, or people feel it ought to be, manageable, and it is here where the major battles are fought. It is not the opposition that defeats the campaign’s soldiers in battle; it is the campaign itself that knocks out its own supporters in the small daily skirmishes within the campaign organization.55

The early inactivity of the Ford campaign made an outside challenge for the nomination not only possible but also inevitable in 1976. The inexperience and overconfidence of the PFC staff helped exaggerate the strength of the threat and nearly cost a sitting president his own party’s nomination. The lesson to be garnered from these events is that campaign organizations, especially since 1968, are political variables in themselves and not simply mechanical structures for the running of campaigns.

NOTES

1. Memo, Lloyd Free to Vice President, October 8, 1975. "How the President can win both the nomination and the election," James M. Cannon Files, Box 41, Gerald R. Ford Library.
2. Letter, Lee Nunn to Bo Callaway, October 2, 1975, Richard Cheney Files, Box 18, Gerald R. Ford Library.
3. Ibid., p. 27.
4. Gerald R. Ford, A Time to Heal (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 104–106; this passage describes the conversations Ford had when he was being approached for and was considering the vice presidency.
5. Ibid., p. 146.
6. Memo, Jack Calkins and Gwen Anderson via Robert Hartmann to President, April 28, 1975, Dick Cheney Files, Box 18, Gerald R. Ford Library.
17. Ripon Society v. National Republican Party, 525 F.2d 567 (1975). The majority opinion stated: "It is urged that this formula represents nothing more than an effort by
party members from strongly Republican states to perpetuate their control. But it seems to us that the First Amendment protects their power to do precisely that."
19. Ford, *A Time to Heal*, p. 295. The laws said that the National Committees could only run the campaign of its party’s nominee, thereby prohibiting their involvement in primaries. The Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) of 1971 states: "the candidate for the office of President nominated by a political party may designate the national committee of such political party as a principal campaign committee, but only if that national committee maintains separate books of account with respect to its function as a principal campaign committee" [emphasis mine]. *Federal Election Campaign Laws*, Title 2, Section 432(e), January 1984 printing, p. 12.
23. Memo, Paul N. McCloskey (CA-17) to Don Rumsfeld, November 13, 1974, "California Republican Primary," Dick Cheney Files, Box 18, Gerald R. Ford Library. An excerpt from the text reads: "There is every indication that Governor Reagan is preparing for a major 1976 Presidential effort, keeping his options open to run either in the Republican primaries or as a third party candidate."
26. Memo, Terry O’Donnell to Jerry Jones, January 8, 1976, "In House Reagan Tracking," White House Subject Files (PL) Political Affairs, PL/Reagan, Ronald 12/1/75–3/31/76, Gerald R. Ford Library. The second paragraph of this memo reads: "I recommend that Foster Chanock be assigned the duty of analyzing on a day-to-day basis all the press material available on Reagan and compiling a book on positions, weaknesses and contradictions similar to that done in 1972 on McGovern."
28. Letter, Rogers Morton to President, December 17, 1975, Dick Cheney Files, Box 17, Gerald R. Ford Library.
29. Draft statement by the press secretary, June 1975, Robert T. Hartmann Files (WH), Box 26, Gerald R. Ford Library.
32. Letter, Lee Nunn to Bo Callaway, October 2, 1975, Richard Cheney Files, Box 18, Gerald R. Ford Library.
34. Ibid., p. 80.
37. Personal and Confidential Letter, Jack Calkins to Robert Mosbacher, December 8, 1975, Jack Calkins Files, Box 2, Gerald R. Ford Library.
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38. Letter to the President from Rogers Morton, December 17, 1975, Box 17, Dick Cheney Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
39. Letter, Philip W. Buchen to Thomas B. Curtis, Chairman FEC, January 1976, Rogers Morton Files, Box 1, Gerald R. Ford Library.
41. Witcover, Marathon, p. 79.
44. Witcover, Marathon, p. 441.
45. Aldrich, Before the Convention, pp. 92–93.
46. Witcover, Marathon, p. 433.
47. Ibid., p. 440.
48. Hartmann, Palace Politics, p. 381.
49. Witcover, Marathon, p. 476.
50. Moore and Fraser, Campaign for President, p. 55.
51. Evans and Novak, The Reagan Revolution, p. 56. They see Reagan's agreement to the naming of Schweiker to be indicative of his true political nature: "Reagan had shown before and would show again that neither ideological scruples nor personal affection would get in the way of victory, and Sears had convinced him that Schweiker was the only way to achieve it."
52. The vote for Rule 16C was 1180 against, 1068 for. The vote for president was 1187 for Ford, 1070 for Reagan. Congressional Quarterly Weekly Reports 34 (August 21, 1976): 2255–2313.