The New South Rises

Competition for the Republican Presidential Nomination in 1968

Rhetoric can be viewed as a continuum: at one end is the verbal effort to persuade one’s audience, and at the other is the attempt to form an issue-based agenda. A campaign in which rhetoric is a prominent feature can lean toward either end of the continuum or combine elements of both. The contest for the 1968 Republican presidential nomination is located at the persuasion end of the continuum. No major policy agenda was set. In fact, none of the competitors presented a major policy program.

The Republican competition for the 1968 presidential nomination was characterized primarily by repeated rhetorical appeals from four prominent politicians—Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Nelson Rockefeller, and George Romney—each of whom attempted to persuade party bosses, the rank and file, or both, that he could prevail in both the primaries and the general contest. However, in the final weeks of the primary season and throughout the Republican convention, Nixon made a carefully crafted set of promises on civil rights, law and order, and social unrest that came closer to heresthetical maneuvering than anything else in the campaign. Although Nixon’s strategy ultimately thwarted the campaigns of the other contenders and satisfied the bloc of southern conservatives who were central to securing his party’s nomi-
ination, it was not heresthetical. Unlike Ronald Reagan in 1980 and Boris Yeltsin in 1990 and 1991, Nixon did not present new or distinct policy alternatives that fundamentally reshaped policy debates.

Even when a rhetorical campaign does not set a political agenda, it may filter ideas; the give-and-take among candidates typically leads to some significant sifting of issues. Candidates adopt and repeat issues and themes that appeal to voters and abandon those that are not persuasive in order to “set the scene for heresthetical manipulation” in a future campaign.1 Riker’s analysis suggests that successful herestheticians often take many years to develop their skills. Even if they do not win, candidates who survive an earlier campaign may be prepared for future campaigning as herestheticians.

Ronald Reagan lost the race for the GOP nomination in 1968, but he gained valuable experience in making rhetorical appeals in a presidential race, and in the process he also witnessed the powerful effect of Nixon’s strategic combination of issues. Although he failed again in 1976 to win his party’s presidential nomination, the 1968 and 1976 races provided him with the opportunity to hone his rhetorical appeals and heresthetical strategies, which in 1980 would play a major role in dramatically improving his performance against Jimmy Carter.

Although Riker was keenly attuned to the importance of the size and nature of the audiences candidates seek to court and the coalitions they hope to create, connecting such institutional factors to heresthetical strategies and rhetoric was not at the forefront of his intellectual project. As discussed in chapter 1, however, embedding our analysis of rhetorical and heresthetical strategies in the given institutional context allows for an extension of Riker’s analysis along this feature of politics; it yields tests of the hypotheses about large and small coalitions associated with selectorate theory. A key hypothesis of selectorate theory is that when a small winning coalition exists, political actors typically use private benefits to keep their support group together.

In the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, party power brokers dominated the process of nominating presidential candidates. As Nelson Polsby and Aaron Wildavsky have reported, the party bosses sought “to gain power, to nominate a man who can win the election, to unify the party, to obtain some claim on the nominee, to protect their central core of policy preferences, and to strengthen their state party organizations.”2 This system had been under assault for at least a decade before 1968 but it remained largely intact during the presidential race for a host of reasons, including, as political scien-
tist Larry Bartels has written, the fact that it “was buffeted by an incredible series of political shocks” in American domestic politics in the first half of 1968. In light of the fact that the old system largely remained in place, it would be virtually impossible to obtain the Republican presidential nomination in 1968 without the support of a small coalition of selectors—the conservative party leaders.

On a related note, primaries were not as central to securing the presidential nomination in 1968 as they would be in the future. In 1968, 17 states held Republican primaries and 34.3 percent of the delegate votes cast in the primaries were binding for the convention. By contrast, 35 states held Republican primaries in 1980 and 74.3 percent of the delegate votes during those primaries were considered binding at the convention. The institutional makeup of the electoral system in 1968 reinforced the power of party leaders and made it more difficult for candidates to seek to broaden their political audience until, for the most part, after their party’s convention because party leaders typically dominated all phases of the nomination process—from primaries through the national convention—through the old politics of decision making in smoke-filled backrooms.

Setting the Stage

In 1964, Senator Barry Goldwater gave prominent attention to the concerns of conservatives below the Mason-Dixon Line by opposing civil rights legislation and federal intervention in state desegregation efforts, but this “southern strategy” did not deliver the national triumph he had hoped for. President Lyndon B. Johnson won the election by 16 million votes, one of the largest margins in any American presidential contest. With 61 percent of the popular vote and 486 electoral votes to Goldwater’s 38 percent of the popular vote and 52 electoral votes, Johnson scored a decisive victory.

The Arizona legislator was not alone in defeat. Republicans lost 38 seats in the House of Representatives, leaving them with 140 members, their smallest delegation since 1936. They also lost two Senate seats, leaving a total of just 32, the weakest GOP representation since 1940. Republicans added one governor to their roster, but that only brought their national total to 17. Democrats also made substantial gains in state legislatures, while, as one observer noted, “more Republican defeats in the state and local contest[s] prompted talk of [the] eventual
disappearance of the party from the American political scene.”

Two months after the election, Ray Bliss, the new GOP national chairman, reported, “All the press wanted to ask me was whether or not I thought the Republican Party could survive as an effective force in our nation.”

Despite these grim predictions, the conservative wing of the party rose phoenixlike from the ashes in 1966, gaining 3 seats in the Senate, 47 in the House, and 8 governorships. Thirteen of the House seats won were from southern districts, 7 of which represented victories over Democratic incumbents. The Democrats lost 24 of the 38 House seats they had won only two years earlier. Ronald Reagan of California and Claude R. Kirk, Jr., the first Republican to be elected governor of Florida since 1872, were among those who defeated Democrats in gubernatorial races.

The Republicans were making impressive inroads in the South. In 1964, Goldwater had won his home state of Arizona and the five Deep South states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. The “Solid South” that had been a Democratic stronghold for almost a century was no longer solid. Power was shifting from the Northeast liberal wing of the Republican Party to conservatives in the South and West, where leaders representing the New Right worked efficiently to ensure that the realignment would lead to victory in the next presidential election.

After a long and acrimonious battle against Goldwater, party liberals and moderates such as Governor William Scranton, Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller, and Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge saw their wing of the party demoralized and disoriented. Though still influential, these Northeast-based liberal Republicans found themselves in the unfamiliar position of struggling to recapture their influence in the party.

The rapidity of the GOP’s recovery was due largely to the intense political and social changes of the time. Between the 1964 and 1968 elections, voter preferences were shaped and sharpened by numerous issues, including civil rights, law and order, school busing, and the Vietnam War. For nearly a week in August 1965, rioters ravaged Watts, California, leaving more than 30 people dead. Between January and September 1967, 164 “disorders,” including the devastating race riots in Detroit, took place in 128 American cities. The Kerner Commission, appointed by President Johnson to investigate the causes of urban unrest and propose solutions, designated eight of the disorders as “major” on the grounds that they involved “many fires, intensive loot-
ing, and reports of sniping; violence lasting more than two days; sizeable crowds; and use of National Guard or federal forces as well as other control forces." The period from 1964 to 1968 saw approximately 329 notable black riots in 257 cities.

While the nonviolent movement spearheaded by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., progressed, other, more confrontational black movements were gathering steam. Stokely Carmichael, the newly installed president of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, helped usher in a distinctive language and attitude when he declared, “We want black power” at a rally in Greenwood, Mississippi, in June 1966. That same fall, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale formed the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California.

As these and other radical forces increased their participation in the political process, traditional Democratic leaders, including black centrists, began to lose control of the left-center coalition that had governed the party for so long. This breakdown exposed the uneasiness with which many whites regarded the civil rights movement. White liberals supported the redress of past injustices and the guarantee of equal rights, but many were frightened by black radical behavior and the more sweeping demands of the new generation of black activists. A groundswell of opposition to the black power movement was also building within the Democratic Party’s working-class base.

In April 1965, a few months before the Watts riots, 71 percent of northern whites polled said that the pace at which Washington was implementing racial integration was either “not fast enough” or “about right.” Polls taken shortly after the riots showed that number dropping to 64 percent, and by the early fall of the following year, it had dwindled to just 48 percent. Victorious in 1964, the Democratic Party was crumbling two years later beneath the weight of the very forces it had helped unleash.

Meanwhile, crime rates soared throughout the 1960s, with a dramatic 83 percent increase between 1966 and 1971. The number of blacks arrested for homicide jumped by more than 130 percent between 1960 and 1970, and the plight of poor blacks in inner cities had become a national crisis.

Race, civil rights, and urban turmoil were not the only sources of dissension. Opposition to the Vietnam War was also growing, especially among college-educated youth. In 1962, Students for a Democratic Society issued a far-ranging statement in defense of civil rights and against Cold War foreign policy. And the New Left, which was...
focusing much of its energy on opposing the Vietnam War, issued a call to arms in its Port Huron Manifesto. Yet a large proportion of working-class Democrats viewed the antiwar movement as an even greater problem for the United States than the conflict in Indochina.  

Law and order cut across the issues of civil rights, societal unrest, and Vietnam, and became an issue in itself. Seventy percent of whites who took a dovish position on Vietnam also rejected the statement that “too much force” had been used by the police against the demonstrators at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. A political science study published in 1969 reported that whites had generally become more liberal on civil rights between 1964 and 1968, but were disturbed by social unrest, accounting for their support of law-and-order campaign policies. For many working-class and southern whites, the phrase law and order was code for issues of the utmost importance to them, such as opposition to government-enforced racial integration of public institutions, and school busing. Concern over law and order was to play a major role in the 1968 election.

The Republican challenge in 1968 was to avoid repeating the defeat of 1964, to exploit the fissures in the Democratic Party represented in part by the challenges from the black power movement and the New Left, and to continue the momentum of the successful 1966 election. In other words, the party would need to reflect the preferences of New Right voters on the presidential ticket without compromising the acceptability of the GOP’s message to a broader set of voters. From the primaries through the convention, this meant gaining the support of the emerging New Right bloc in the South. The main issues these voters opposed were civil rights legislation, court-ordered racial integration, school busing, and social protest movements. These voters supported a continuation of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. The Republicans needed a ticket during the actual presidential race that would appeal to some Democrats and independents, since, according to some analyses, 46 percent of Americans were affiliated with the Democratic Party in 1968, 27 percent with the Republicans, and 27 percent labeled themselves independents.

The Conservative Barons

The heirs to the 1964 conservative revolution—Senators Barry M. Goldwater, Strom Thurmond, and John Tower—became important
gatekeepers on the road to the 1968 GOP nomination. Goldwater’s hard-fought battle in 1964 had earned him a unique position of honor in the emerging conservative wing of the Republican Party.18

Through the highly effective and financially independent operation known as The Thurmond Speaks for Goldwater Committee, the senator from South Carolina helped Goldwater win the four southern states that Thurmond had carried as a segregationist presidential candidate under the Dixiecrat banner in 1948. Then, two months after Goldwater’s victory at the Republican convention, Thurmond changed his party affiliation from Democrat to Republican. His successful run for reelection to the Senate in 1966 made him the first Republican to win statewide office in South Carolina in nearly 100 years.

The third member of the trio, John Tower, was the first Republican elected to the U.S. Senate from Texas since Reconstruction and the first senator to declare his stalwart support for Goldwater’s presidential bid. Although Texas delivered its 25 electoral votes—more than any other southern state—to Johnson, significant Republican inroads were made that would have an important effect on the next round of elections.

A second tier of conservatives, principally composed of Republican Party state chairmen from southern states, rose from the 1964 race into positions of influence. This group included, among many others, Harry Dent of South Carolina, William F. Murfin of Florida, Peter O’Donnell of Texas, and Clarke Reed of Mississippi, who together formed an association that became known as the Greenville Group. The three met regularly at Reed’s home in Greenville, Mississippi, to monitor the party’s commitment to the South in the 1968 national election.19

The 1964 Goldwater campaign also attracted many southerners into the Republican Party’s rank and file. Drawing on the party infrastructure and coffers they had built up during the 1964 campaign, southern Republican loyalists now had the means to influence the GOP’s 1968 nomination and ensure that the new candidate would stand with the South as firmly as Goldwater had in 1964.20

Liberal and Moderate Leaders

Conservatives were gaining influence, but liberals and moderates continued to exert authority during the 1968 race. George Romney and Nelson A. Rockefeller were among the most influential of the GOP lib-
Romney found cover behind his favorite-son banner during the bitter 1964 battle between Goldwater and Rockefeller. In 1966, he won a third term as governor of Michigan by a half-million votes. Even before his widely expected victory, Romney was considered a serious front-runner for the presidential nomination.

Rockefeller had been badly bruised in the 1964 presidential race. He received only 22 percent of the vote during the primaries, was booed at the convention when he accused Goldwater of political extremism, and received only 114 delegate votes to Goldwater’s 883 on the first ballot. In winning his third term as governor of New York in 1966, he attracted an impressive number of votes from Democrats and independents, demonstrating his viability as a political contender within the GOP’s northeastern liberal wing.

Senator Everett M. Dirksen and Vice President Richard Nixon were first among the centrists, having ridden the tide of the Goldwater movement. Dirksen, the Senate minority leader, had been extremely influential in Republican politics long before Goldwater’s presidential campaign. His close ties to President Johnson and his staunch support of the president’s Vietnam policy enabled Dirksen to bridge the widening gap between the parties. His leadership for Senate approval of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a reversal of his initial opposition to the bill, had boosted his credentials as a Republican moderate. But his tireless work on Goldwater’s behalf further elevated his political profile and sent an important signal to a broader constituency.

Nixon also emerged from the 1964 race as a prominent player in Republican politics. In 1964, he visited more than 30 states on behalf of Goldwater and scores of other Republican candidates. After the election he helped move the Republican Party in a more moderate direction by quietly assisting in the replacement of Goldwater’s strategist, Dean Burch, with Ray Bliss. Bliss was an Ohio party leader who, as chairman of the Republican Party, had helped Nixon win the state in his 1960 battle against John F. Kennedy. The support that Nixon was accumulating among the Republican Party elite was decidedly more centrist than the political forces that had elevated Goldwater in 1964.

Yet Nixon also maintained close ties with the conservatives. In January 1965—the same month that Bliss took over the party’s top post—Goldwater publicly endorsed Nixon’s candidacy for the 1968 presidential race. The most vigorous campaigner for Republican candidates in the 1966 race, the vice president was widely acknowledged for his role in the party’s turnaround that year.
Other moderates, such as Congressman Gerald R. Ford, were important bellwethers, but Romney, Rockefeller, Dirksen, and Nixon represented the core group of GOP moderates.\textsuperscript{27}

The Presidential Contenders

Nixon, Reagan, Rockefeller, and Romney were the Republican Party’s most serious contenders for the presidential nomination in 1968. Of the four, Ronald Reagan was the only major GOP hopeful who was not a longtime party leader. Although he had been famous for decades, he had won his first major political office only two years before the 1968 national election. He was also the only truly conservative candidate in the field.

On October 27, 1964, the former actor and spokesman for the General Electric Company gave a 30-minute televised address supporting Goldwater’s presidential bid. In “A Time for Choosing,” Reagan warned against big government, a runaway bureaucracy, the welfare state, and the United Nations. He described the worldwide Communist movement as “the most evil enemy mankind has known in the long climb from the swamp to the stars.”\textsuperscript{28} This address was one performance of “The Speech,” a concise statement of the general political philosophy that Reagan had been delivering to audiences for more than a decade. But this time was different.

Now, instead of addressing workers at a GE plant in the middle of the country, Reagan was speaking to millions of Americans from coast to coast, and they listened. The Speech raised more than a half-million dollars for the Republican Party, and when he finished delivering it Ronald Reagan was a national political figure. A group of conservative California businessmen quickly identified him as a future presidential candidate, but first they would have to persuade Reagan to run for statewide office.\textsuperscript{29} They prevailed.

On November 8, 1966, Ronald Reagan won the governorship of California by almost a million votes. As the \textit{New York Times} reported two days later, “Without a day in public office [Reagan became] the favorite Presidential candidate of Republican conservatives.”\textsuperscript{30}

“As governor,” Reagan wrote in a letter, “I was asked to be a favorite son for president [in 1968] to hold our California party together. I agreed on the condition that that was as far as it would go. I would not be a real candidate.”\textsuperscript{31} Yet, secondary and primary sources,
including the archival files of the main Republican challengers and many of their advisers, show that Reagan was an important force in the contest for the Republican presidential nomination in 1968 and courted the type of national exposure that would make him a politically viable candidate if the opportunity presented itself at the Republican convention in Miami Beach in August 1968.

The Wallace Insurgency

Another presidential contender in 1968 played a more important role in Republican deliberations about their nominee than in his own party’s choice of a challenger. In the Democratic primaries of 1964, Alabama Governor George C. Wallace won 33.8 percent of the vote in Wisconsin, 29.8 percent in Indiana, and 42.7 percent in Maryland. Emboldened by his respectable showing and determined to stop federally mandated integration from changing southern political institutions, Wallace considered competing as a third-party candidate in the general election. But Strom Thurmond persuaded the governor to abandon his plans; a Wallace candidacy would have doomed Goldwater in the South, the only region in which he would win a bloc of electoral votes. So instead of running in 1964, Wallace campaigned energetically for Goldwater.

But there was no stopping the Wallace candidacy in 1968. He formed the American Independent Party early that year, and his supporters successfully placed his name on the ballot in all 50 states. While he never expected to win, he hoped his electoral vote total would throw the election into the House of Representatives, which would enable him to influence the choice of the next president.

Both Democrats and Republicans knew that Wallace’s candidacy posed a threat to their electoral designs. In fact, Wallace carried five southern states in 1968, won a larger proportion of the popular vote (approximately 13.5 percent) than any third-party presidential candidate since 1924, and garnered a greater proportion of electoral votes than any third-party candidate since the election of 1860.

If his campaign could not be stopped, then conservative Republicans would need to prevent southern whites from stampeding toward the American Independent Party. In order to do this, they needed a presidential candidate who could convincingly tell southerners what they wanted to hear on the issues and desegregation in particular.
Barry Goldwater, Strom Thurmond, John Tower, the GOP state chairmen, and other party leaders absorbed three key lessons from Goldwater’s 1964 presidential bid that would influence their efforts in 1968:

1. Avoid the kind of divisive primary contests that had split GOP support between Goldwater on the one side and Scranton and Rockefeller on the other.

2. Secure delegates for the favored candidate well in advance of the party’s convention, as had been done for Goldwater (who received 883 of his 1,308 delegate votes on the first ballot).

3. Select a candidate who could garner the support of both the growing conservative movement in the South and the wider electorate.

These lessons led conservative Republican leaders to search for a candidate who was, in essence, a pragmatist. And while rank-and-file conservatives shared the barons’ political preferences—for a candidate who advocated continued engagement in Vietnam, states’ rights, a desegregation policy sensitive to southern culture, and law-and-order measures that would address crime in American cities—they drew a different lesson from 1964 about the importance of nominating a true soldier. Unlike the barons, the rank and file did not want a candidate who would appease both conservatives and moderates. This bloc of voters could not be ignored because it would be particularly influential at the party’s convention. Whoever was going to win the Republican nomination would have to reconcile these two very different, indeed conflicting, electoral strategies.

According to the Republican Party’s accounting rules, a state that delivered its electoral votes to the presidential nominee in 1964 would receive six additional delegates. One additional delegate would be granted to a congressional district that cast more than 10,000 votes for Goldwater. Under the new configuration, the southern states could unite to nominate or block a candidate at the convention. Southern states controlled 356 of the 1,333 delegates to the 1968 convention, and a candidate required 667 delegate votes to win the party’s nomination.36 In short, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to forge a winning coalition without the support of the southern delegates, who had been
organized by the barons into a cohesive voting bloc. The barons thus ensured their control over the nomination process and their likely future control over how the Republican Party distributed resources and selected candidates.

Faced with the challenge of keeping the rank and file under control, numerous liberal and conservative party elites designated themselves as favorite sons in their respective states. As a favorite son, a candidate would not necessarily expect to win the nomination, but he would, in principle, be able to deliver his entire delegation’s vote to the candidate of his choice.\textsuperscript{37} Party leaders also invoked the unit rule, which required that an entire delegation vote in concert with the majority of its delegates at the convention. This ensured that the effective size of a winning coalition within the Republican Party was actually smaller than the 667 delegates nominally required; it could, in fact, be won with support from as few as half that number if delegate votes were strategically mobilized under the unit rule.

For Reagan and Nixon, the challenge was to identify a set of issues and a political strategy that would enable the party elites and the rank and file to build a coalition that would deliver the necessary delegate votes. Both Reagan and Nixon had essentially written off the industrial Northeast to Romney and Rockefeller. Instead, the first step in their campaigns depended upon the undecided South. Reagan’s strategy was to circumvent the barons and take his conservative message directly to the rank-and-file cadre. But the more he did so, the harder the barons worked to keep the cadre in line, and the less inclined they were to support him. Furthermore, Reagan never presented a policy message that the barons could embrace.

As the presidential candidates competed for the nomination, the barons prepared for the general election. And the more that Reagan’s message resonated with the delegates, the tighter the barons banded together against him. So long as they remained unified and could deliver blocs of votes under the unit rule, they could still determine the Republican nominee. Thus, by trying to skirt this small coalition of elites, Reagan diminished his chances of gaining the nomination.

Nixon’s strategy, in comparison, was to use code words that satisfied southern conservatives and at the same time enabled him to hold onto the political center. The barons liked his strategy, but many rank-and-file Republicans distrusted him.

Liberal and moderate Republicans supported Romney and Rockefeller, but neither enjoyed much, if any, support from conservatives and
southerners. Both needed to find a way to bring the conservatives into their respective camps without jeopardizing the support of their natural political constituencies. The challenge was daunting. Each needed to court and gain the support of the conservative barons as well as the rank and file. Rockefeller described the situation at a campaign rally in San Francisco on July 8, 1968: “The key political issue of 1968 is whether the people or the bosses will make the final decisions at the Republican and Democratic national conventions.”

Rockefeller’s presidential drive was further complicated by the fact that his entry into the contest depended on Romney’s failure. The New York governor was gun-shy after the 1964 Goldwater upset. He and his advisers believed that he should initially support Romney and then enter the race himself only if Romney’s presidential drive failed to gain momentum, something they hoped would happen late in the primary season.

Phase 1: November 9, 1966, to April 3, 1968

After the 1966 election, Reagan, Nixon, and Rockefeller were all showing well in opinion polls on possible Republican presidential candidates. Romney was generally considered the front-runner in 1966 and 1967, and on November 18, 1967, he made his candidacy official. On February 1, 1968, six weeks before the New Hampshire primary, Nixon entered the contest. Rockefeller, once Romney’s most influential backer, had quietly begun his own preparations to enter the competition if circumstances became favorable. Romney’s February 28, 1968, withdrawal from the race provided the New York governor with an opening. On April 30, 1968, Rockefeller announced that he would campaign for the Republican Party’s presidential nomination. Reagan threw his hat in the ring on August 5, 1968, the first day of the Republican convention, but, as mentioned earlier, he and the other candidates had been developing campaign strategies and reaching out to potential supporters throughout 1966 and 1967.

Romney did not emerge from his 1966 reelection campaign with the support of the new power barons or the conservative rank and file within the Republican Party. During the summer of 1966, for example, Goldwater publicly predicted that Romney would not win the 1968 nomination, saying, “I don’t believe the party will forget the fact that he took a walkout in 1964.”
A lengthy memo dated September 1, 1966—two months before Romney was reelected governor—outlined his campaign strategy. Written by Glen Bachelder, a Romney adviser, and titled “Timing, Issues & Strategy,” the memo essentially urged the governor to adopt a southern strategy different from the one used by Goldwater in 1964:

[T]he basic strategy must be directed at seeking Negro participation and support. This means a rejection of the Southern strategy of 1964. . . . Strategy must recognize that there is a new South—urban, industrial, suburban and technical. . . . The appeal must be to the racial moderates on the one big issue of that region—civil rights. There are community leaders, such as in Atlanta, who recognize reason and progress on this issue. They and their kind must be appealed to, not the outright segregationists of the old order. A final note on this: the number of registered Negro voters in the South will be very significant by November, 1968.

In other words, the memo called upon the governor to play to his natural political base but provided no framework by which he could expand his political reach. In fact, the memo surmised that the governor could not win in the Deep South: “There is a good possibility of winning Florida, Tennessee, and Virginia,” and North Carolina and Arkansas were “within striking distance,” but “the longest shots are the Goldwater-Wallace states—Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina.”

Bachelder’s memo also suggested that Romney situate himself between his two likely competitors for the Republican presidential nomination: Reagan, who had not yet been elected governor of California, and Nixon. Bachelder wrote that Romney would be politically strongest in the East, Midwest, and Mountain West; that Nixon would dominate the South; and that Reagan would command the Far West, with the possible exceptions of Oregon and Washington. The memo foreshadowed Romney’s actual campaign strategy from the fall of 1966 until he withdrew his candidacy in February 1968.

Bachelder also declared the obvious: “Any national campaign must be based on issues.” Yet the difficulty of finding issues with which the governor could be distinctly identified plagued Romney’s campaign, which was generally characterized by vague statements about foreign and domestic policy, and policy recommendations that clearly reflected the candidate’s moderate positions. The speeches he gave on several
1967 tours, for example, failed to produce a distinct understanding of his overall policy agenda. At no point did he give a comprehensive statement about any policy issue, although he presented a plan to end the Vietnam War toward the end of his campaign. In February, he traveled to Alaska, Utah, Idaho, New Mexico, and Arizona, where he espoused conservative themes, telling audiences, “In state after state, we proved that progressive state governments could meet problems with greater understanding, closer attention, better follow-through and wider citizen involvement and control.”

Some listeners may have been impressed, but the Michigan governor did not inspire a noticeable broadening of his political base. Alaska Governor Walter J. Hickel gave Romney “an excellent chance” of receiving Alaska’s 12 delegate votes, but added that they were “not for sale.” In fact, by the end of Romney’s western tour, he began to lose ground among likely voters. For instance, in a Gallup Poll conducted on January 26–31, Romney beat President Lyndon Johnson with 50 percent of the vote to Johnson’s 42 percent in a presidential trial heat and when pitted against Nixon in a Gallup survey on February 16–21, the Michigan governor was endorsed by 45 percent of those surveyed and Nixon received 41 percent. In a presidential heat against Senator Robert Kennedy on February 16–21, Romney was ahead with 48 percent to the senator’s 46 percent. Yet, a March 9–14 survey of the likely Republican field placed Romney behind Nixon with 30 percent of voter support to the vice president’s 39 percent. In a March 30–April 5 Gallup presidential trial heat where Johnson was the Democratic candidate, Romney the Republican candidate, and George Wallace was the third-party contender, Johnson received 43 percent of voter support, Romney 35 percent, Wallace 13 percent, and 9 percent of those questioned were undecided.

Two months after concluding his tour, Romney gave what was planned as a major speech on the Vietnam War. Speaking to an audience in Hartford, Connecticut, he said, “[I]t is unthinkable that the United States withdraw from Vietnam. . . . Our military effort must succeed. I believe that we must use military force as necessary to reduce or cut off the flow of men and supplies from North Vietnam to knock out enemy main force units, and to provide a military shield for the South. We must give our gallant fighting men our full support. . . . We must stand immovably against all pressures which would preclude a just peace.” President Johnson immediately declared that the gover-
nor’s speech reflected his own views. As authors Michael Kramer and Sam Roberts contend, LBJ’s statement effectively denied Romney the opportunity to offer an independent voice on Vietnam.\textsuperscript{47}

Romney was attracting the notice of at least one of the barons. Senator John Tower, favorite son of the Texas delegation, endorsed the Hartford speech in a letter to the governor: “Your remarks on Southeast Asia were thoughtful, constructive and well done. I have been in several places across the country in the interim and the comments I have heard are favorable. . . . None of the commanders I have talked with feel it wise or necessary for us to destroy North Vietnam. They advocate continued, controlled military pressure toward negotiations or an ultimate ‘fading away’ of communist efforts.”\textsuperscript{48}

Despite this expression of support from an influential colleague, Romney was not gaining in national approval. His ratings began to climb again in July following the Detroit race riots, but the improvement was short-lived.

Romney remained in contact with the barons, but a strategy document written on July 5, 1967, suggested that he should seek the political center of the Republican Party:

The dynamics of the situation leave Romney without a major competition for the middle position. It is obvious that Nixon or Reagan will have little chance of uniting the [Senator Charles H.] Percy or Rockefeller factions behind them. Percy’s Vietnam position has permanently ruled out support of conservative Republican opinion which has been in complete support of a “hard” line in Vietnam and on the world Communist tension front. Rockefeller has no chance at all of winning right conservative support because of his New York State domestic program, his anti-Goldwater campaign in ’64, and his general symbolism of liberalism.

But even more important, the more Reagan appears as a formidable threat with a real chance to win, the more moderate middle-of-the-road Republican leadership will turn to Romney to head off an extreme conservative takeover with a probable repeat of the ’64 debacle.

And the more Rockefeller appears as the true main candidate of the moderate-liberal Eastern Wing, the more moderate-conservative opinion will be alarmed and see Romney as the lesser of two evils.
In this situation Romney’s strategy should be to let the left and right wings quarrel among themselves and to let them volley across the extremes on the opposite side. The fact that the memo pays no attention to issues or policy positions may account for Romney’s inability to impart a distinct perspective on domestic and foreign policy, and for the “impression of confusion” detected by his audiences.

In fact, the governor fell victim to his own misstatements. On August 31, 1967, during the taping of a Michigan television program, he said that in 1965 he had received “the greatest brainwashing that anyone can get when you go over to Vietnam, not only by the generals, but also by the diplomatic corps over there, and they do a very thorough job.” Upon further consideration, he explained, he could no longer support U.S. policy, and now believed it had been a mistake for the United States to become involved in the conflict at all. He blamed the United States for the war, saying, “[W]e have created the conflict that now exists between Communism and freedom there,” and warning the South Vietnamese government against “count[ing] on continuing supplies of men and material without limit.” Romney’s electoral prospects, which had been waning even before his national tour, were greatly diminished by his “brainwashing” pronouncement, which made national headlines. But he soldiered on.

The next day, Romney Associates, the governor’s own campaign and polling organization, took the position that “only he, can defeat the incumbent Democratic President.” Soon thereafter, Romney commenced a more ambitious tour. He traveled to 13 states over 19 days in September 1967, investigating and discussing the social and economic conditions of inner cities. But instead of unveiling a plan to cure urban ills, he simply called for improved race relations. A devout Mormon, Romney advocated a “restoration of faith in America and the Constitution.” On the issue of Medicaid, he adopted a middle position between Reagan and Rockefeller, limiting his criticism to the lack of flexibility in the program and its encroachment on private sources of health care for the indigent.

In light of the race riots and rising crime rates plaguing American cities in the late 1960s, the issue of law and order was a major concern for the American public. Conservative Republicans wanted a presidential candidate who would advocate tough measures. Romney attempted to tackle the issue on September 30 during his final statement on his
urban tour: “While we must maintain law and order, we must either achieve orderly progress or change will be inflicted with mortal wounds. Either we shall join hands, hearts, and minds and march together on paths of fulfillment for all, or we shall find ourselves torn asunder.”

Muted and inconclusive, the statement, like the tour, failed to persuade the public that the governor of Michigan should be president.

In the fall, it was Reagan and Rockefeller, not Romney, who were featured in a Time magazine cover article about the presidential race. Rockefeller would continue to support his fellow governor, but it was becoming clear to Romney that he would not recapture his earlier standing as the front-runner, even among moderates who had hoped to be persuaded by him. In fact, fellow Republican politicians told the Romney team that they were hearing a rumor “that Governor Romney was being used by Governor Rockefeller” to pave the political ground for the New Yorker’s entry into the race.

At the end of October 1967, the Michigan governor began yet another tour, this time to New England. While in New Hampshire he described himself as the underdog for the nomination. He reviewed familiar themes, including the excesses of the federal government and the need for racial tolerance. He charged that the Johnson administration’s foreign policy had damaged the United States’ international standing, and declared himself “a dissenter on our government’s policy in Vietnam.” His visit to the home of the first primary failed to ignite deep interest in his candidacy.

Romney made another series of attempts to bolster his national standing later that fall. On November 18 he officially announced his intention to seek the nomination. In early December, he declared that underdevelopment, not Communism, posed the greatest threat to U.S. interests. Later in December he traveled to Europe and Asia, where he looked into the idea of declaring Indochina a neutral, alliance-free zone, as a means of ending the conflict on the peninsula. On January 15, 1968, after more than a year on the campaign circuit, Romney unveiled his plan of “guaranteed neutralization” at Keene State College in New Hampshire:

There would be a removal of foreign military troops or bases in the area and there would be no alliances by nations in the area with outside blocs, either Eastern or Western. The principle of self-determination would hold sway internally. The nations con-
cerned would be free to pursue and should be assisted in achieving economic development cooperatively on a regional basis.61

A month later, after more than a year of touring the country to discuss social issues such as crime, discrimination, health care, and unemployment, Romney elaborated on his Vietnam policy, telling an audience in Manchester, New Hampshire, that until the Vietnam War ended, “there can’t be adequate progress” on social policy. He called Nixon “a me-too candidate on Vietnam” because the former vice president had not taken a strong stance against the Johnson administration’s execution of the war. Romney also issued a foreign policy paper in which he said that Americans must “apply the enormous wealth and technology of our society in helping poverty-stricken peoples.”62

The Michigan governor’s speeches, tours, and position refinements failed to reverse the slippage in his political standing. Gallup surveys at the end of the year showed a clear reversal in Romney’s political fortunes. In an October 27–November 1, 1967, survey about who would be the best Republican presidential nominee, Nixon was supported by 42 percent of those questioned, Rockefeller was endorsed by 15 percent, Romney took 14 percent of the vote, and Reagan received 13 percent of voter support. In a December survey of Republican county chairmen, Gallup reported that 52 percent of the Republican officials endorsed Nixon, 24 percent were for Reagan, 14 percent supported Rockefeller, and Romney trailed with 5 percent of support among the officials.63

On February 25, 1968, William Johnson, Romney’s New Hampshire campaign director, and Leonard Hall, his national campaign chairman, met in Washington to review the results of a poll by Market Opinion Research, the governor’s Detroit-based firm. The results showed that in the upcoming New Hampshire primary Nixon would receive 70 percent of the vote to Romney’s 10.64 Three days later, Romney withdrew from the race.

The governor had disregarded the lessons that his party’s leaders had drawn from the 1964 campaign. By attacking Nixon on Vietnam, he showed a propensity to instigate the same type of internecine conflict that had plagued the GOP primaries of 1964. Southern and conservative leaders would not support his policy stances, and even Romney’s natural base in the North and Midwest remained unconvinced by his pronouncements on important issues. His negative campaigning against Nixon was not of the persuasive sort discussed in chapter 1, and it failed to persuade voters that his opponent’s stance on Vietnam would
lead to policies as disastrous as some of Johnson’s had been. By Romney’s own admission, he failed to win “wide acceptance with rank-and-file Republicans.”65 The governor of Michigan never hit his rhetorical stride, and had gained the support of few delegates.

Ronald Reagan began seeking the Republican nomination for president shortly after the 1966 midterm election. On November 17, just nine days later, the governor-elect held what was in effect his first planning session. He and his advisers concluded that the real contest for the Republican nomination would take place at the convention, not in the primaries. Tom Reed has recorded in his notes that Reagan authorized him, as the governor-elect’s director of national political operations, to retain F. Clifton White, the strategist who had delivered 883 delegates to Goldwater in 1964, to deal with “the delegate-hunting business.”66

The Californian’s political views resonated with the barons, with other conservative Republican leaders, and with the Republican rank and file. Indeed, Reagan was the only conservative candidate, as defined by the New Right. His challenge was to find a combination of issues and policy stances that would appeal to a wider constituency. It was a goal he would have to achieve in order to enlist actual support from the barons, who wanted a candidate capable of winning the general election.

Reagan’s first year as governor in 1967 was devoted in part to testing the national political waters. It was also a year in which the barons sought to decide which of the contenders, Reagan or Nixon, would make the best nominee. Tom Reed, who chronicled Reagan’s political activities in his diary of the campaign, understood at the time that “with the support of these four men [Dirksen, Goldwater, Thurmond, and Tower] Reagan might win the nomination. With their opposition—no chance.”67

Reed retained Stuart Spencer, of Spencer-Roberts—the political consultant who had helped Reagan during his gubernatorial campaign—for the first six months of 1967. Early in 1967, Reed and Spencer agreed that Reagan would hold the delegates in California by announcing as a favorite-son candidate for president. They also concurred that Reagan should compete in three “must opt-out” primaries. As opt-out states, Wisconsin, Nebraska, and Oregon held primaries in which a state official would select individuals who were prominent in the press as possible presidential contenders and place their names on the ballot. The only way to remove one’s name from the ballot was to file an affidavit disavowing candidacy. Although his advisers did not expect him to win in Wisconsin or Nebraska, they hoped the governor would
make a respectable showing and then build enough momentum to win the Oregon primary in May. Their main objective was to coast unmar-
nished through the primary season while gunning for victory at the
convention.

A few weeks after Reagan’s gubernatorial inauguration, White pre-
sented Reed and Spencer with a preliminary delegate count. With 667
deleagues required to win the Republican nomination, White’s analysis
showed Romney as the leader with 320 delegates, Nixon following with
approximately 310, and Reagan holding between 200 and 300.68

Reagan began touring the country six weeks after White presented
his count. In March he traveled to Washington and New York, where
he participated in several social events. But it was his participation on
May 15, in an internationally televised dialogue with Senator Robert F.
Kennedy before an audience of students in London that gave Reagan
his greatest exposure to date as a potential presidential candidate.
Kennedy struggled to make convincing arguments about the Vietnam
War and other international issues, and he seemed uncomfortable with
the television format. In contrast, Reagan made commanding assess-
ments of domestic and foreign policies and even corrected the statistics
cited by one of his questioners. He played to his conservative base by
calling for the six-year-old Berlin Wall to be torn down and by advo-
cating the exclusion of the Vietcong, as a “rebellious force,” from nego-
tiations between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. Reagan seemed to
have won a debate against a prominent Democrat and potential presi-
dential candidate.69

In June Reagan visited Nebraska. His speech to a convention of
Young Republicans in Omaha included his standard warnings against
big government and the Soviet Union’s lack of reciprocity in its rela-
tions with the United States. He also employed the law-and-order code
words when he declared, “We will not tolerate those who use civil
rights or the right of dissent as an excuse to take to the streets for riot
and mob violence—even when it is called civil disobedience,” and again
when he said, “Let us reaffirm that the national purpose is the ultimate
freedom for the individual, consistent with law and order.”70 As Reed
observed, “Reagan did a great job, and the core of a future Draft Rea-
gan headquarters was assembled.”71 Yet Reagan never veered from the
conservative heart of his message; he was not broadening his political
base.

Reagan looked like a presidential candidate whenever he spoke, but
he was unwilling to clarify his intentions even to the party elite who
were interested in supporting him. On September 17, for instance, a “Texas Summit” was held at the governor’s residence in Sacramento. The meeting included John Tower; Peter O’Donnell; Anne Armstrong, a member of the Republican National Committee; Tobin Armstrong, Anne’s husband and a major rancher; the Reagans; William P. Clark, Reagan’s executive assistant in the California governor’s office; Lyn Nofziger, Reagan’s communications director in Sacramento; Tom Reed; and Gordon Luce, a recent addition to Reagan’s presidential advisory team. When asked if he planned to run, “Reagan never answered the question,” said Reed. Two weeks later Tower returned to San Francisco, but Reed was still unable to give him an answer.72

The governor may have wanted to keep his options open, galvanizing support among the rank and file in case he decided to run while remaining cautious in conversations with the party leaders who would actually control the outcome. Reagan was at his best when he took his message directly to the people, but his plebiscite-type approach to capturing the nomination in 1968 did not reflect the modus operandi of the party leadership.

On September 29, Reagan spoke at a meeting of the South Carolina Republican State Central Committee, preaching his anti-big-government message to a chorus of southern elites and rank and file. But again the speech did not reveal much about his ability to craft a message with more national appeal. Perhaps of even greater concern was his continued indecisiveness when Thurmond asked him about his presidential plans during a private meeting that also included Dent (of the Greenville Group), Nofziger, and Reed.73

On October 2, Reed met with John Tower, who by this time had abandoned his own presidential aspirations. Instead, Tower was working to secure the South’s interests in the Republican contest, and he had been offered a position on Nixon’s campaign team. Reed, who was still unable to offer Tower a definitive answer about Reagan’s candidacy, said, “Reagan left the impression with these high priests of conservatism that his campaign was a vague and headless monster, that he was going to wing it.”74

Reagan was also taking a much harder line on certain policy issues than any other potential nominee. On November 11 in Albany, Oregon, for instance, he insisted, “The war in Vietnam must be fought through to victory. We have been patient too long. . . . Stop the bombing [of North Vietnam] and we will only encourage the enemy to do his worst.”75
Southern and conservative leaders agreed with Reagan but they were determined to back a candidate who could actually win the election. Percy, Rockefeller, Romney, and Nixon had also spoken out on the Vietnam War, but Nixon was the only one of the group to advocate the continued use of American military power against the North Vietnamese. A *New York Times* article reviewing the candidates’ positions found that “Governor Reagan waxes even more hawkish” than Nixon.\(^\text{76}\)

Public sentiment, however, was moving in the opposite direction. The Citizens for Peace with Freedom in Vietnam, a nonpartisan commission, was formed on October 25. The group, which included former presidents Harry Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower, stated that it believed the United States had a “vital national interest” in Vietnam but warned against an escalation of U.S. military activities in Indochina that might lead to “a general war in Asia or a nuclear war in the world.”\(^\text{77}\)

Unlike Rockefeller, Romney, and Nixon, Reagan was serving his first year in a major political office. A solid record of leadership would bolster his image as a politician, but it was threatened by a homosexuality scandal in his inner office that undoubtedly diverted some of the governor’s attention from the campaign.\(^\text{78}\) A conflict was also brewing between, on the one hand, Reed and White, who were working on Reagan’s 1968 presidential bid, and, on the other, Reagan’s older Los Angeles trust, which included Holmes Tuttle and Taft Schreiber. The latter had become distrustful of Reed and White’s youthful arrogance and sought to wrest control of Reagan’s national activities.\(^\text{79}\) Reagan’s failure to find a decisive resolution to the conflict cost him valuable time.

Richard Nixon and his team, on the other hand, were highly organized, focused, and efficient. With his Congress ’66 group, Nixon campaigned in approximately 35 states and 165 congressional districts on behalf of Republican candidates. As the most vigorous GOP campaigner of that year, the former vice president established himself as a major player in the party’s rebound from its 1964 losses.\(^\text{80}\) “With those wins came promissory notes,” one observer of the 1968 presidential campaign remarked, “notes that could be cashed at the Republican convention in Miami Beach in 1968.”\(^\text{81}\) On November 13, five days after the 1966 election, Nixon met one last time with Congress ’66 in New York and then announced that he would consider running for president.\(^\text{82}\)
The Republican bosses were quickly lining up behind Nixon. As Congress ’66 was being transformed into a de facto presidential campaign, Goldwater wrote that he “support[ed] Nixon because . . . I consider him to be the best qualified man in the country today, including the incumbent, to be President.” The other barons eventually followed suit.

The first planning sessions for Nixon’s expected presidential run were held in New York on January 7 and 8, 1967. A Washington campaign office was opened in May, and members of Nixon’s team quickly went to work in New Hampshire. George Romney was Nixon’s main concern at the time. The Nixon camp believed that Romney would prevail in the Northeast, so their own candidate’s pathway to the presidency would have to be secured with the support of southern delegates. He would need the Northeast in the general contest, but Nixon wrote off those industrial states in the primary. His advisers believed that a heavy expenditure of campaign funds in the region would be unlikely to yield more delegate votes, since Nixon had never developed a strong constituency among the eastern Establishment.

The campaign required campaign issues and themes that would allow him to simultaneously hold the center and court the South. On the domestic side, Nixon chose law and order and states’ rights as his main talking points. As noted earlier, a strong stand on the crossover issue of law and order appealed to white conservatives in the North and South alike, providing common ground for southern voters and many from the center.

Although there was some national support for states’ rights, the issue was especially popular among southerners who opposed federal desegregation laws and court decisions. There was little overlap between these voters and the political center on the issue, but having learned from Goldwater’s defeat, Nixon planned to broach the subject in a southern strategy that would “have its overtly racist form subtly modified.” His invocation of emotion-laden issues related to social order reassured conservative southerners who would not otherwise support him to join his camp.

Dent, a key strategist on the South, convinced Nixon of the necessity of a southern operation in 1965 and 1966. The operational dimension of their strategy was to give “high priority to nailing down early commitments from Dixie’s most prominent conservatives.” Nixon clearly understood how to operate in an institutional context in which the coalition of essential supporters was very small.
As noted earlier, the Vietnam War was the most salient foreign policy issue for voters in the 1960s. The southern barons supported a continuation of U.S. military involvement and wanted victory—defined as the soonest possible establishment of a non-Communist government in Saigon. Nixon had long been known as a staunch anti-Communist, but his campaign rhetoric on Vietnam lacked the vitriol characteristic of earlier phases in his career. His message was now tailored to address centrists who were concerned about escalation into a wider Indochinese conflict and alarmed by the lack of military and political results in the face of growing American military commitment.

In keeping with his electoral strategy, Nixon steered a middle course in a 1967 Foreign Affairs essay entitled “Asia after Vietnam.” He advocated an end to the war that preserved the honor of the United States; a peace settlement that disallowed a coalition government in the North (which he felt would pave the way for Communist victory); and continued military involvement, to avoid seeming weak in the eyes of the Soviets or Chinese. He defended U.S. involvement on the grounds that it had prevented an ambitious People’s Republic of China from interfering in other parts of Asia. But Nixon’s essay and his other campaign statements on the war still lacked specificity. In fact, sometimes Nixon was so muted on the issue that voters thought “he sounded like Johnson.”

Yet, in his memoir, Nixon boasted about his Vietnam posture during the 1968 campaign:

As a candidate it would have been foolhardy, and as a prospective President, improper, for me to outline specific plans in detail. . . . And even if I had been able to formulate specific “plans,” it would have been absurd to make them public. In the field of diplomacy, premature disclosure can often doom even the best-laid plans. To some extent, I was asking the voters to take on faith my ability to end the war. A regular part of my campaign speech was the pledge: “New leadership will end the war and win the peace in the Pacific.”

Nixon took cover under the rules of diplomacy, but he was actually holding the political center. Romney criticized Nixon for his measured response, calling it “the Johnson-Nixon Vietnam policy.” That was precisely the message the Nixon team sought to convey. As Lou Cannon, Reagan’s biographer, has observed, “Nixon followed a shrewder strategy [than Reagan] of playing the middle and saying as little as pos-
sible about Vietnam. It made him seem more moderate and would help him win the election.” Nixon did not always say what the conservative bloc wanted to hear on the war, but, as will be discussed later, he offset his moderate stance on Vietnam by promising conservatives that he would have a robust national defense policy.

As plans progressed for his 1967 campaign, Nixon took a six-month hiatus from publicly discussing the presidency. During this period, he traveled to South Vietnam, among other foreign countries, and reported on his experiences in Reader’s Digest. The former vice president was waiting for the right time to officially enter the fray.

In the fall of 1967, Romney was still holding his place as a possible candidate; Rockefeller was still backing Romney; and Reagan was touring the country, giving speeches that resonated with rank-and-file conservatives but delivered no delegates.

As 1968 began, the Reagan camp was riven with arguments about who was in charge, but all involved agreed that Reagan should continue to deliver distinctly conservative messages on his speaking tours. His name would not be removed from the ballots in the opt-out states of Wisconsin, Nebraska, and Oregon, and, as the favorite-son candidate, he would more or less automatically control the 86 California delegates who were pledged to the unit rule of voting for the favorite son unless he released them. Reagan also let it be known that he thought the Republican gathering in Miami Beach would be a real contest. Thus, the first half of 1968 would be devoted to harvesting delegates. For the Reagan camp, that meant focusing on the Republican rank and file.

Reagan’s challenge was heightened when Nixon officially entered the race on February 1. The California governor offered Republican voters an ideological alternative to Romney, or, to a lesser degree, Nixon. But Nixon had been campaigning for the southern barons’ vote for at least two years. Even though Reagan had stronger support among rank-and-file southern Republicans, the barons held the key to the delegates. And Goldwater, one of these barons, publicly endorsed Nixon on March 7.

Four weeks after Nixon entered the race, Romney withdrew, thereby making Nixon the only official Republican presidential contender. Maryland governor Spiro Agnew immediately formed a “Draft Rockefeller” movement, but Rockefeller was reluctant. He had been accused of dividing the party by battling with Goldwater in the 1964 primaries and then refusing to campaign on the Arizonan’s behalf.
Rockefeller did not want a repeat of that episode. He also knew that it would be nearly impossible for him to build a coalition that would include the New Right, that he would not be a big winner in the primaries, and that his main hope for snatching the nomination would come at the party’s Miami Beach convention in August.

Romney’s withdrawal from the race complicated Rockefeller’s plan to avoid the primaries until the Oregon vote in May. He had won the Oregon primary in 1964 and hoped to be victorious there again in 1968. With Romney out, Rockefeller would most likely be a write-in candidate in more primaries than he desired and would need to enter the race well before the convention. Once he became an official candidate, he would face a conservative attack that would gather strength as soon as he began explaining his position on contentious policy issues.98

Strategists from the Reagan, Rockefeller, and Nixon camps projected that Nixon would have difficulty winning the nomination on the first convention ballot, and that he would lose if the voting went beyond the first ballot; whereas successive rounds of balloting would improve Rockefeller’s chances. More popular nationally than within his own party, Rockefeller would be stronger in the general contest than Reagan. If Reagan split the conservative vote on the first ballot, the door would be open to a Rockefeller victory in later balloting. In such a scenario, Rockefeller could appeal to the delegates’ desire for a Republican win in the general election. Reagan was Rockefeller’s main hope.

On the other hand, Rockefeller’s imminent entry into the race was potentially advantageous for Reagan.99 Voting beyond the first ballot could result in a victory for the California governor because the rank and file would be released from the barons’ control and delegates would be free to vote their preferences. So Rockefeller in turn was Reagan’s main hope.

George Wallace’s candidacy, however, loomed over the Reagan camp like a dark cloud. On January 2, Wallace’s American Independent Party qualified for the ballot in California’s primary, having registered 34,000 more voters than required. On February 8, Wallace announced that he would seek the presidency on a law-and-order platform. His party would qualify to be on the ballot in all 50 states, and his ratings in the polls revealed an ever-increasing political viability. A Harris survey showed that if the election were held in January 1968, Wallace would receive 14 percent of the vote and place second behind Johnson.
in the South. Reagan counted southern conservatives as part of his political base, but Wallace had the capacity to frustrate his plans.

As the lineup of Republican and conservative candidates took shape, the California governor fought to maintain his public stance as a noncandidate. During one of his weekly news conferences in Sacramento, he promised to “support the nominee of the Party” even if Rockefeller were chosen, and added, “I reiterate, I’m not a candidate.” But events were about to take a dramatic turn.

On March 12, Nixon won approximately 78 percent of the vote in the New Hampshire primary. But the big news was on the Democratic side. Senator Eugene J. McCarthy had been campaigning on a peace platform in the wake of the Vietcong’s Tet Offensive, which Americans had watched with horror. President Johnson won the primary with almost 50 percent of the vote, but the Minnesota legislator received nearly 42 percent and took 20 of the state’s 24 delegates. It now appeared that Johnson could be beaten.

On March 13, Senator Robert F. Kennedy announced that he was reconsidering his bid for office. Three days later he officially joined the Democratic field. All of the Republican hopefuls immediately reassessed their positions. Nixon, according to his aide, Richard Whalen, “showed no hesitancy about taking on the brother of the man who had beaten—and awed—him in 1960.” Whalen reports that, following Kennedy’s announcement, Nixon asked his advisers how his campaign “might ‘pre-empt’ positions [on Vietnam] and thereby narrow Rockefeller’s room for maneuver.” The former vice president felt that Kennedy would take the steam out of the Rockefeller candidacy because the two men had similar positions on issues such as the Vietnam War.

In early 1968, Nixon started to assert himself more decisively on the conflict in Indochina: “Let’s help them [the South Vietnamese] fight the war and not fight the war for them,” he remarked. Shortly thereafter he criticized the Johnson administration for “failing to train the South Vietnamese to take over the major share” of the combat operations, and called for “a diplomatic offensive with the Soviet Union and others who might influence the North Vietnamese to come to the conference table.” Nixon declared his commitment to “keeping the pressure on militarily” and asserted his opposition to either a coalition government in Saigon or unilateral withdrawal by the United States. At a rally in early March he promised, “I pledge to you that new leadership will end the war and win the peace in the Pacific.” The pledge persuaded the
media that a more complete statement about the war was forthcoming. In actuality, however, “nothing had been decided [by the Nixon forces] on the Vietnam statement, not even whether there would definitely be one,” according to Whalen.106

Meetings in late March found Nixon and his advisers pondering a definitive statement on Vietnam. His earlier public pledge to end the war had raised expectations that he would enter the fray with a comprehensive proposal. Now he told his aides that his commitment to “end the war and win the peace” should not be expressed “in the form of a promise.”107 The candidate known as an old Cold Warrior wanted to disarm his critics by staking out the political center. Whalen, who was enlisted to draft Nixon’s major speech on the subject, felt that his candidate had clarified his position to his advisers.

I soon discovered that he [Nixon] did not wish to be persuaded of the validity of our ideas. Rather, he sought guidance in the procedure that was the sum of his “centrism”—the pragmatic splitting of differences along a line drawn through the middle of the electorate. The line could go left or right, depending on the persuasiveness of claims made for the popularity of competing views. Nixon’s aim was to find the least assailable middle ground. The grand theme interested him less than the small adjustment, which might provide an avenue of escape.108

Nixon, in keeping with the dominance principle, chose arguments based on the “popularity of competing views.” In the context of the Vietnam debate, this translated into a decision not to speak about victory in Vietnam, but to encourage the Soviet Union to use its influence with the North Vietnamese to help bring an end to the war. The final draft of the speech was ready on March 30, and Nixon was to deliver it as a radio address the next day.109

The collapse of Romney’s campaign on February 28 and Kennedy’s entry into the race a little more than two weeks later reverberated throughout the Rockefeller camp. On March 10, the governor met with more than 30 Republican leaders and members of his staff at his New York apartment. Governors Agnew of Maryland, Rockefeller of Arkansas, Shafer of Pennsylvania, LeVander of Minnesota, Chafee of Rhode Island, Love of Colorado, and McCall of Oregon pledged to support Rockefeller, as did William E. Miller, Goldwater’s running mate in 1964, among others. Some campaign analysts observed that
these endorsements were “inconclusive,” because “no one from the big Midwestern states or the South, or from the party leadership in Congress” signed on to the Rockefeller movement.110

It was nonetheless widely believed that Rockefeller would soon become an official candidate. But during a March 21 press conference at which he was expected to declare his candidacy, the New Yorker shocked his audience by saying, “I am not a candidate campaigning, directly or indirectly, for the Presidency of the United States.” Instead, he accepted the fact “that a considerable majority of the party’s leaders want the candidacy of former Vice President Richard Nixon, and it appears equally clear that they are keenly concerned and anxious to avoid any such divisive challenge within the party as marked the 1964 campaign.” He revealed that he had filed an affidavit affirming that he was not a candidate so that his name could be withdrawn from the Oregon ballot, the contest he had hoped to win. But he added a proviso that he would enter the race if there were a “true and meaningful call” from the Republican Party.111 Rockefeller was obviously still waiting for the right moment to throw his hat into the ring.

Reagan, meanwhile, had decided that he had to reconstitute his national effort. He had recently reemphasized his noncandidacy to the press, but Kennedy’s entry into the race had changed the political equation, inasmuch as the Reagan camp did not believe that Nixon could defeat a member of the Kennedy family. On March 25 the Reagans and some of their advisers laid out the strategy that they would use throughout the spring. Reed described their plan in his diary: “Our opportunities to recruit the Republican barons were gone, but the prospect of another Kennedy-Nixon fiasco gave us access to the grass roots. Ron and Nancy Reagan agreed. They authorized an escalated travel schedule and a serious television campaign in our target primary states.” Reagan had invoked solidly conservative themes during his speaking tours in 1967 and early 1968, but Reed reported that in the upcoming phase of his candidacy the governor would more pointedly address “Vietnam, inflation, civil disturbances, national priorities and defense. The case would have to be made that these crises were the product of Kennedy-Johnson policies. RFK must not be allowed to run as an outsider.”112 A sweeping analysis of domestic and foreign policy issues was to become the central feature of the revised campaign.

Reagan would in effect undertake negative campaigning against the Johnson administration. Yet, Reagan’s negative campaigning, like Romney’s, lacked the persuasive qualities that such campaigning gener-
ally requires. It did not raise fear among voters and encourage them to support Reagan. Despite being a powerful orator, Reagan was not a major rhetorician in the 1968 Republican presidential race. His message did not reach out beyond his core constituency.

Nixon was scheduled to deliver his radio address on Vietnam on March 31, six days after Reagan’s strategy meeting. But upon learning that President Johnson had requested television network airtime for March 31, Nixon informed the press that he would refrain from making a “comprehensive statement on Vietnam.”

Johnson’s March 31 call for peace talks with the North Vietnamese and his declaration of a bombing halt north of the 20th parallel were not wholly unexpected. The nation was stunned, however, by his announcement on his political future: “I shall not seek and I will not accept the nomination of my party as your President.” The statement was a war-weary president’s admission that his authority had been eroded by the unending conflict in Indochina and the disparity between White House pronouncements about the war and the televised battles in Saigon and Hue during the Tet Offensive of early 1968. New Hampshire voters spoke for the larger electorate. Republicans were now even more firmly convinced that Kennedy would be the Democratic nominee.

On April 1, Nixon again postponed his comprehensive statement on Vietnam, but he offered a few uncontroversial remarks: “I believe that the key to peace in Vietnam probably lies in Moscow.” He modestly endorsed Johnson’s partial bombing halt: “I hope the President’s initiative succeeds. In my judgment, a bombing halt by itself would not be a step toward peace. But if the United States has finally gotten assurances that it would be reciprocated, then further steps toward peace may become possible.” He reemphasized his commitment to a peace settlement consistent with the long-standing objectives of the United States: “The [war] has been a war not for the freedom and independence of South Vietnam alone, but to make possible the conditions of a wider and durable peace. A settlement in Vietnam that would encourage further aggression by its weakness would betray these larger purposes, and would thus render futile the terrible costs already sustained.”

As one writer explains, “The president’s announcement offered him [Nixon] a fortuitous way to keep his Vietnam policy vague and general. Until March 31, pressure had been building on the Republican front-runner to be more specific about his program for Southeast Asia.” Nixon had not bowed to the pressure, and his political centrism was working. On April 2, he won the state of Wisconsin with nearly 80 per-
cent of the vote. McCarthy was the Democratic winner, receiving 56 percent of the vote.

Phase 2: April 4 to June 11, 1968

There was barely time for Nixon to savor his Wisconsin victory. Just two days later Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot in Memphis. His assassination posed a dilemma for Nixon, who was anxious about his image among southern Republicans. Some of Nixon’s advisers were concerned that a significant number of delegates from Dixie would defect if the former vice president attended King’s funeral. Nixon split the difference of opinion among his advisers: he attended the service and called Mrs. Coretta Scott King to express his condolences, but did not take part in the funeral procession.

This dual strategy of careful centrism and genuflection to the Right was bearing fruit. A nationwide Gallup Poll showed that, as of early April, Nixon was the consistent winner when pitted against Vice President Hubert Humphrey and Robert Kennedy, the Democratic hopefuls, and George Wallace, the third-party candidate.

Nixon put as much effort into retaining the centrist vote as he did into reassuring the Right. In what Whalen describes as the “high point of the campaign,” Nixon used his April 25 radio address, “Bridges to Humanity,” to take up the cause of black Americans, declaring that “programs of welfare, of public housing, of payments to the poor” merely served to buy off black Americans instead of solving problems. “Much of the black-militant talk these days,” he went on, “is actually in terms far closer to the doctrines of free enterprise than those of the welfarists of the ’30s. What most of the militants are asking is . . . to have a share in the wealth and a piece of the action. It ought to be oriented toward more black ownership, for from this can flow the rest—black pride, black jobs, black opportunity, and, yes, black power.”

As a result of this address and others, Nixon was labeled a supporter of “Negro capitalism.”

Despite such grandiloquent declarations, the former vice president was mindful of the small coalition of barons who governed the environment in which he was operating. According to Whalen, Nixon later “rebuked those of us who had urged him to go to Atlanta [to King’s funeral], calling it ‘a serious mistake that almost cost us the South.’”

Reagan, the only Republican contender with deep support among
the party’s southern rank-and-file members, did not attend the funeral, but he did speak publicly about King’s death and its implications, proclaiming, “The murder of Martin Luther King was a shocking act of violence that solves none of our nation’s problems. It is more evidence of a moral sickness that seems to be inflicting our nation. I want to extend my deepest sympathy to the family of Reverend King. I urge all Californians to remain calm in the face of one single act of violence.”

In a speech in Phoenix, Arizona, a few days later, Reagan spoke about King and civil rights in terms on which all could agree: “Whatever you may think of Martin Luther King, whether you approved or disapproved, something of America was buried today. It began with the first acceptance of compromise of the law—acceptance of those who would apply the law unequally because of race or religion, and acceptance of those who advocate breaking those laws with which we are in disagreement.” The California governor also reassured his conservative political base on the Vietnam War issue by disagreeing with Johnson’s decision to commence peace talks with the North Vietnamese. And he used a series of speeches throughout April to rail against excessive government spending, the budget deficit, rising inflation, and other issues of concern to conservatives.

As much as the barons agreed with Reagan’s message, they and other Nixon supporters were disquieted by his activities. The threat the California governor posed to Nixon became apparent during a visit to Idaho on April 26–27. Speaking to a large gathering in Boise, Reagan invoked a variety of Goldwater-like themes, including opposition to Great Society government programs. Nixon visited the Idaho capital on the day of Reagan’s speech and publicly described the California governor as a “more active non-candidate.” Nixon had good reason to be concerned. Idaho governor Don Samuelson, a conservative Republican for whom Nixon had campaigned two years earlier, was calling Reagan “a new dynamic voice in the Republican party.” And Clif White, Reagan’s key delegate-hunter, had close lieutenants in the state. It was expected that Idaho’s delegates would be pledged to Nixon, but as political analyst Tom Wicker reported at the time, “Most of the 14 delegates will be Republicans who supported Goldwater in 1964 and who will swing comfortably into the Reagan camp if and when the time comes—maybe on the second or third ballot at Miami Beach.” Reagan was in Boise to rally the rank and file to his side; Nixon was there to hold the line.
Two days after Reagan’s tour of the Mountain West, Rockefeller finally announced his much-anticipated decision before a national television audience, promising that he would ensure his party “a choice of candidates and programs.” As planned, Rockefeller had missed most of the primaries. Instead, his strategy was to persuade as many uncommitted delegates as possible to cast their votes for him in Miami Beach. He also hoped to convince committed delegates that it was in their best interest to release themselves from their pledges to the other candidates in order to hold an open convention in which ideas and candidates could be debated and tested. In attracting support from Democrats and independents, he also wanted to demonstrate to the party that he was the candidate who could prevail in November. It was a tall order with the convention looming only three months away.

As expected, the high priests of Republican conservatism were skeptical about Rockefeller’s entry into the race. Goldwater remarked, “It is quite important that his philosophies be made clear now since he has not run in any of the primaries where people traditionally get a chance to take a good hard look at the candidate.”

The New York governor was prepared for this reaction. After all, he had actually been planning his campaign for some time. In fact, the Romney camp, along with many others throughout the country, suspected that Rockefeller had long been waiting for Romney to withdraw from the race. Their conjecture that he had planned to enter the fray once the moderate Romney had smoothed the way for him is consistent with confidential campaign documents from the Rockefeller archives. Rockefeller felt that he had found the right moment to enter the contest. By the end of July, he would have traveled to 45 states, delivered 120 speeches, and campaigned actively for 68 days.

The New Yorker’s campaign got off to a propitious start. On the same day that he announced his candidacy, he won the Massachusetts primary, defeating Governor John A. Volpe, the state’s favorite-son candidate, by less than 1 percent. Rockefeller’s campaign strategy was designed to rally the support of his natural base of liberal and centrist Republicans and Democrats. He claimed that there was no “purely military solution” in Vietnam and suggested that the United States should increase its “contact and communication” with the People’s Republic of China in order to “significantly affect the whole future of our relations with the Communist world.” Political analysts believed that Rockefeller was “attempting to stake out a position less ‘hawkish’ [on
Vietnam] than that of his chief rival, Mr. Nixon, but less ‘dovish’ than those of Senators Robert F. Kennedy and Senator Eugene J. McCarthy.”

This analysis is borne out by the way in which the governor began his first month as an avowed presidential candidate. Before a cheering crowd of students at the University of Iowa, Rockefeller proposed replacing the existing draft laws with a national lottery system that would subject individuals to the draft for no longer than one year. He also advocated lowering the voting age from 21 to 18. He continued to drum out his liberal message during campaign stops in Minnesota, Kansas, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania, but changed his approach when he began his southern tour on May 19.

On May 20, Rockefeller attended a breakfast meeting with the southern Republican state chairmen in New Orleans. While in Gainesville, Florida, later that day, he declared that he did not see a significant ideological difference between himself and Governor Reagan. The tour, which also included visits to Georgia and South Carolina, failed to cut into Nixon’s Dixie support. During the trip, Harry Dent, the South Carolina Republican chairman, told the press that he did not expect many delegates to swing to Rockefeller. But Rockefeller persisted, issuing thinly disguised critiques of Nixon’s recent overtures to black Americans: “It is not straight talk to propagate notions of unity in terms of a ‘new alignment’—particularly in incongruously pretending to merge new Southern leadership and the new black militants.” These negative statements did not score many points; Nixon’s fusing of political constituencies was exactly what the southern leaders wanted to see from their candidate. Rockefeller lacked the capacity to undermine Nixon in the South, and he left the region without having won the support of the former vice president’s delegates.

The governor ended the first month of his campaign with a major loss in a primary. On May 28, Rockefeller, a write-in candidate, received approximately 11 percent of the vote in Oregon to Nixon’s 70 percent. He had undertaken a vigorous and expensive campaign, but by entering the ring late in the primary season he had deprived himself of the time required to fine-tune a political message that would appeal to voters across the political spectrum. Instead, Rockefeller was racing to catch up with Nixon’s highly organized political machine.

As discussed earlier, Ronald Reagan had decided to renew his pursuit of the Republican nomination after a meeting with his advisers in

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late March. By May, the plan to revive his national activities was in full swing in the form of a series of talks criticizing the Kennedy-Johnson policies. On May 11, Reagan presented a speech titled “The History and Significance of the US Role in the Pacific” at the Western Governors’ Conference in Honolulu, attacking the Kennedy-Johnson record on Vietnam.130

The clearest example of Reagan’s national political message came the next day when he commenced what was described in his daily schedule as an “Eastern Tour.”131 His first stop was New Orleans, where on May 19 he gave a rousing speech titled “National Priorities and the Negotiations in Paris” at Tulane University. “Civilization,” he said, “cannot afford politicians who demand that Social Security be tripled; that the national duty in Vietnam be discarded to provide huge make-work programs in the city slums with money diverted from Vietnam; that no youth need honor the draft; that Negroes need not obey the law; that there will be pie in the sky once the country gets moving again.” As he had done in Honolulu, Reagan again condemned the Johnson administration’s policies toward Hanoi. He then recited a laundry list of general positions that both Nixon and Wallace could embrace, though he sounded closer to Wallace in his Tulane address and other speeches down South. As some campaign observers noted, “Reagan was building himself a limited, but emotional, national constituency.”132

Hosting a dinner for the Southern Association of Republican State Chairmen later that evening, Reagan further narrowed the possibility that he would be the Republican Party’s presidential nominee. The party chairmen were in agreement with his pronouncements at Tulane, but they wanted to know if he planned to become an official contender. Reagan replied that he would remain a favorite-son candidate for the time being, but would accept a grassroots-based draft. “The trouble was it was too late for that kind of draft,” Clif White lamented. The convention was only two months away and the Reagan shop was miniscule in comparison with the operation that had delivered Goldwater’s resounding first-ballot victory in San Francisco four years earlier.133 Furthermore, the grassroots strategy was in complete defiance of the party’s elite-governed institutional structure.

But Reagan continued his national activities. On May 20, he delivered a speech entitled “Atlantic and Caribbean Foreign Policy” before a Tampa audience in which he charged that, despite the availability of intelligence data confirming the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba,
President Kennedy had responded to the Cuban threat only after U-2 photos provided indisputable proof and the midterm elections were a few weeks away. Reagan repeated this charge in Miami the following day. Discussing “Defense Preparedness” in Cleveland on May 22, he argued that there was no “missile gap” as Senator Kennedy had claimed during the 1960 presidential race; that the Johnson administration had mishandled the seizure of the Pueblo; and that its management of the Vietnam War was dangerously off course. Reagan further warned of the implications that Soviet nuclear parity held for the United States and Western Europe, and suggested that a real missile gap was in the offing.134

But such grand foreign policy speeches were nevertheless no match for Nixon’s aggressive moves to sew up delegate support. Instead of campaigning in person in Oregon, where he would compete in his third primary, Reagan authorized the showing of a documentary film on his life. His hopes for the state were dashed when he received only 20 percent of the vote on May 28. He and his supporters took little solace in their anticipated June 4 victory in California. Nixon went on to win primaries in New Jersey and South Dakota that same day, along with the final contest in Illinois on June 11. Tom Reed, one of Reagan’s campaign advisers, recalled this period in his diary: “When the smoke had cleared, on May 29 and again during the first week of June, I met with Reagan to tell him it was all over. . . . To this day, I am not sure if he heard me or if the message sank in.”135 Whether it did or not, Reagan decided to quicken the pace of his national appearances in June and July.136

Like Reagan, Nixon prepared a series of policy pronouncements for conservative audiences. His May 8 statement on law and order, “Toward Freedom From Fear,”137 endorsed an omnibus crime bill that would reassess the Miranda rule. The bill would allow court-ordered wiretapping in investigations of major crimes or national security threats, increase pay for policemen, and launch a “major overhaul” of the prison system. The 25-page document also blamed the Supreme Court for the increase in crime during the Kennedy-Johnson years. Nixon sounded like Reagan during his May 15 appearance in Pendleton, Oregon, when he characterized the April 23 student uprising at Columbia University as “the first major skirmish in a revolutionary struggle to seize the universities of this country and transform them into sanctuaries for radicals and vehicles for revolutionary political and
social goals.” He urged university administrators to swiftly punish the student organizers.

The following day, the CBS radio network broadcast Nixon’s conversation with the nation. Titled “A New Alignment For American Unity,” the address was a call to replace the “old power bloc” with a “new alignment” of black militants committed to capitalism, the “new liberal” who desired “more personal freedom and less government domination,” and the “new South,” which was no longer bound to a “racist appeal” or one-party voting. Nixon identified himself as the man to lead this new alignment, which he called the “silent center, the millions of people in the middle of the political spectrum who do not demonstrate, who do not picket or protest loudly.” This bold attempt to amalgamate diverse factions of the electorate into a single centrist majority appealed to voters. Roy Innis, associate director for the Congress of Racial Equality, said that Nixon was the only presidential candidate who understood the national aims of black Americans.

There were other significant indications in mid-May that the Nixon campaign was gaining support and momentum. On May 16, two days after Nixon roundly defeated Reagan in the Nebraska primary, Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee endorsed the former vice president, thus becoming the first Republican to shed his favorite-son status in order to commit his delegation to an official contender. In a statement to the press, Nixon acknowledged that Baker’s “decision provides us with first-ballot delegates we had not counted on before,” and called the decision “tangible proof . . . that our ideas and new programs are winning increasing support.” Six primaries remained, but the Nixon camp already sensed victory.

Indeed, Nixon was only a matter of days away from an even more significant triumph. In late spring, the Republican front-runners traveled to the South to meet with the Republican state chairmen. Rockefeller and Reagan had accepted the southerners’ invitation to meet in New Orleans. Rockefeller made a few nods toward conservative ideas, but Reagan, as noted earlier, turned in an ideologically conservative performance in New Orleans. Neither man succeeded in sharply defining the issues or winning the endorsement of the party chairs. Meanwhile, Nixon met with Republican leaders in Atlanta on May 31. Harry Dent, the South Carolina party chairman, asked most of the questions, focusing on law and order, the Supreme Court, school busing, and national defense, among other issues. Nixon assured the group...
that, as president, he would uphold the 1954 desegregation decision, but would oppose school busing as a means to integrate public schools. While he advocated compliance with Supreme Court decisions, Nixon said that he would allow the states to decide how to abide by those decisions, and said he favored appointing strict constructionists to the courts.

The former vice president also continued his coalition-building efforts during the meeting, informing the group that he would not “balance” the ticket by choosing a liberal running mate, but would instead select someone who shared his philosophy. The southern leaders liked what they heard, and Dent called Thurmond to tell him that they had found their candidate. Dent asked Thurmond to meet with Nixon in Atlanta the following day.142

On June 1, Nixon met with Thurmond and other southern leaders. He emphasized the points he had made the previous day and declared his support for a strong national defense. Nixon was confident that he had outmaneuvered the conservative governor of California: “I emerged from this meeting with Thurmond’s pledge of support, which would become a valuable element in my ability to thwart any moves by Reagan on my right.”143 Ironically, one of Nixon’s defter moves was to express interest in missile defense, an issue that Reagan would identify as the central item of his presidential defense policy 15 years later. According to authoritative accounts, Nixon’s specific promise of support for the development of an antiballistic missile (ABM) system, in addition to his stance on social issues, convinced Thurmond to support his candidacy.144 The senator had been advocating an ABM defense for several years and had called for research and development of its feasibility in his book, The Faith We Have Not Kept, published earlier that year.145 Nixon endorsed the deployment of an ABM system during his campaign, and although his memoirs do not explicitly confirm that he made any specific promises to Thurmond on the subject of ABMs that day, they do acknowledge his commitment to a robust policy of national defense. Nixon also agreed—albeit reluctantly—to support Thurmond’s call for tariffs to protect South Carolina’s textile industry.146

After the Atlanta meeting, White flew to Washington to ask Thurmond if the reports that he was supporting Nixon were correct. The senator expressed great affection for Reagan but confirmed his choice.147 Thurmond was a segregationist but he was also a master politician. He knew that a far-right candidate could not prevail in the
November election and that desegregation could not be stopped. He took no umbrage at Nixon’s apparent centris on issues of concern to conservative southerners.148

Nixon was no heresthetician in 1968, but his commitments to Thurmond, the most influential politician among the southern Republican delegates in 1968, were deal-makers. He had found the precise language and policy positions that would satisfy the center and the right concurrently, making it difficult for Reagan and Rockefeller to gain a hold.

By the close of the primary season, Nixon had secured a public endorsement from Goldwater, one of the barons; Thurmond had committed to making a major public statement of support; and Tower was leaning in his direction. Furthermore, Dirksen, another power broker, had joined party leaders such as House Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford in lending tacit support.149 But the contest was not over. Although Thurmond was leaning toward Nixon, many of the South Carolina delegates favored Reagan and planned to vote their preference if balloting at the convention went beyond the first round. Could the barons really hold the cadre in place? As Nixon mused later, “There was always the possibility that Southern delegates could be lured at the last minute by his [Reagan’s] ideological siren song.”150 The threat of a revolt among the rank and file brewed just beneath the surface.

At the same time, Rockefeller’s campaign was posing an increasing challenge from the left and the center. His three terms as governor and, indeed, his whole political career, had been built on his capacity to attract Democrats and independents as well as Republicans. And he enjoyed a longer history with, and deeper ties to, Republican moderates than did Nixon, the old anti-Communist. In effect, Rockefeller was surrendering the South and the conservative wing of the party to Reagan and Nixon, while hoping to convince them of his ability to beat the Democratic nominee in the fall. With this prospect in mind, Rockefeller made a bid for supporters of Robert Kennedy. On June 11, six days after Kennedy fell to an assassin’s bullet, the New York governor told a National Press Club audience that he considered it his personal responsibility to perpetuate Kennedy’s “unfulfilled dreams” of peace, freedom, and justice for all. He presented the same message in a nationally televised address later that evening.151 On the hustings from the middle of June to the beginning of the Republican convention on August 5, Rockefeller sounded like the dovish heir-apparent to Robert Kennedy.152

His campaign aides encouraged this strategy. A few days after
Kennedy was assassinated, Henry Kissinger wrote a memo to the governor titled “Where Are We Now in the Campaign?” in which he disagreed with the pundits’ contention that Kennedy’s fall secured the nominations for Nixon and Humphrey. Instead Kissinger offered this advice:

The Kennedy supporters in their majority will look for a new focal point. So will much of the youth. . . . Anybody who can appeal to idealism and the desire for commitment may start a groundswell which is bound to express itself in public opinion polls. . . . You can still create the groundswell which will change the situation dramatically. . . . The focus should be less on attempting to sway delegates directly than in gaining such widespread popular support that the delegates have to reconsider their commitments.153

Rockefeller heeded this advice in the weeks that followed.

As the primary season came to a close in Illinois on June 11 with another overwhelming victory for the former vice president, the Republican contenders were faced with a challenge that was more obvious than it had been at any point during the campaign: Nixon, the front-runner, would have to continue to beat back attempted raids from Reagan on the right and Rockefeller on the left and in the center. Wallace, too, was a threat, with conservative white constituents, mostly from the South but increasingly from working-class communities in northern cities. This struggle, waged on three fronts, dominated Republican Party politics during the two months leading up to the convention in Miami Beach.

Phase 3: June 12 to August 4, 1968

During the two months prior to the convention, Nixon and his advisers relentlessly analyzed the three-front challenge and devised operations to thwart it. Wallace’s support among Republicans had risen from 2 to 8 percent following King’s assassination, meaning that the job of swaying Wallace voters could not wait until after the convention. In early June, Pat Buchanan, a Nixon speechwriter and strategist, wrote a memo on how to cut into Wallace’s support, in which he contended that a targeted undertaking might yield one million black votes, while a
similarly scaled effort to reach Wallace supporters would most assuredly deliver a million votes. He then asked, rhetorically, “Which is easier for RN to accomplish?” Another of Buchanan’s campaign memos analyzed California, a state whose seven million voters could determine the whole election. A major undertaking might deliver 100,000 black votes for Nixon. On the other hand, Wallace, a former Democrat, might receive one million votes in California. Again, Buchanan asked, “How many of these [votes from the Wallace camp] can a good tough campaign get?”

The Nixon adviser was not urging his candidate to abandon his support for “Negro capitalism.” Indeed, he and other advisers sought to avoid the racist appeal and fractious nature of the Goldwater effort, but they were urgently searching for a plan to attract Democratic votes.

Alan Greenspan, Nixon’s director of domestic research, also considered Wallace supporters crucial. In June, he wrote: “It is my judgment that we can win five percentage points back from Wallace, at a cost of one, or at the most two points moving from RN to Humphrey. . . . [W]e need a strong gut issue to swing a large bloc of Wallace votes to us. I wouldn’t want to guarantee that such an issue would win us the election, but I am concerned that if a major effort is not made against Wallace, we may not make it past November.” Nixon had already been using his law-and-order theme as a gut issue. He now endorsed Buchanan and Greenspan’s recommendations.

Nixon’s choice of vice presidential running mates was widely viewed by those inside his campaign as a means to undercut Wallace and hold the South. Staffer John Sears suggested Reagan for the number two slot on the grounds that the California governor was “the only officeholder in the country who can outtalk and outcampaign George Wallace.” Richard V. Allen, Nixon’s director of foreign policy research, also supported a Nixon-Reagan ticket: “With him, there is no crude appeal—his ‘old time religion’ is founded on the very elements which are missing today: law, order, patriotism, thrift—and in language which the common man can understand.” Although Nixon was disinclined to call on Reagan, he clearly agreed with the more general point that he needed to move to the right.

In a mid-July strategy meeting, Nixon concluded that Vice President Hubert Humphrey had “bedrock” strength at 40 percent of the electorate to his own 35 percent. He told his staff that “this game will be won or lost by the sixteen percent Wallace vote and the six or eight percent vote of the true independents.” He knew he needed to move to
the right, but he was prepared to do so only on an issue-by-issue basis, as he had done in his June 1 meeting with Strom Thurmond. Law and order and national defense were conservative themes he had already endorsed. The war in Vietnam was another matter.

On the war, Nixon had so far taken cover behind President Johnson’s surprise announcement of March 31 and the RFK assassination; he would refrain from discussing the war during a time of national emergency and mourning, or while the negotiations in Paris were under way. He continued to keep a low profile throughout the summer. In a July 20 press conference in Los Angeles, he informed reporters that his classified briefing from the State Department two days earlier suggested that progress was possible in the Paris Peace Talks, and that he would refrain from making a major assessment until he had firm evidence to the contrary.¹⁵⁸

But as the convention approached, aides such as Whalen urged their candidate to make a comprehensive statement. The need to work on the Republican platform provided the right opportunity for such a statement, yet Nixon decided to continue his moratorium. He authorized his aides to include cautious statements in his speeches and submissions to the Republican Platform Committee, such as the claim that he would not engage in “partisan interference” by remarking on the negotiations in Paris. In one example, he rejected a line written by Whalen—“The B-52 is an extremely costly and irrelevant weapon against the Vietcong terrorist armed with a knife”—because it might offend the U.S. Air Force. “At the end of the session,” Whalen reports, “the language of the statement had been toned down and the challenge to the administration muted, but the central promise remained—to ‘de-Americanize’ the war.” After learning that a recent Gallup Poll found him to be the only Republican who could defeat Humphrey and McCarthy, Nixon called Ray Price, who, like Whalen, was a speechwriter for the campaign, to express concern about including the term de-Americanization in his statements on the war.¹⁵⁹ The front-runner had found safety from the Vietnam firestorm in the political center, and he did not want to move left or right.

The statement that Nixon offered to the GOP platform panel on August 1 reflected his safe position. His criticisms of the Johnson administration were relatively mild. First, he said, “The Administration has done far too little, too late, to train and equip the South Vietnamese.” Second, “The Administration has either not recognized that this is a new and more complex kind of war, or has not seen its
significance.” And, third, “The Administration has failed in candor at home and in leadership abroad.” Nixon declared that the war could no longer be won primarily through military means because “it is primarily a political struggle, with this enemy conducting military operations to achieve political and psychological objectives.” He also called for phasing out American troops as the South Vietnamese took greater responsibility for the war, as well as engaging the Soviet Union in a dialogue about ending the conflict. In sum, the document failed to present any bold or new ideas.

There was little evidence, however, that Nixon’s centrism on Vietnam was damaging his standing with conservatives during the summer of 1968. On June 22, Thurmond announced that South Carolina’s 22 delegates would switch their pledge from him, as his state’s favorite-son candidate, to Nixon on the first ballot. On July 1, Senator John Tower endorsed Nixon for president and said he was releasing his own 56-member delegation as Texas’s favorite son. Throughout 1968, and especially during the two crucial months leading up to the convention, the former vice president had been carefully mobilizing his center-right coalition. Those on the left and in the center were particularly concerned about the Vietnam War, and supporters in these camps were reassured by Nixon’s statements of support for the Johnson administration’s peace negotiations in Paris. Those on the right were attracted by his toughness on law and order, his opposition to busing, his promises to favor strict judicial interpretations of the Constitution, and his readiness to substantially increase defense spending. Nixon the candidate offered something for everyone.

The seasoned politician seemed to move effortlessly from the center to the right and back again. In a June 27 address on the CBS radio network, he again found common cause with black America: “If we listen, we’ll discover that the white man in the Boston suburb shares many of the same frustrations as the black man in the Chicago ghetto. Not all, of course. But he, too, wants to be heard. He too, wants a voice in the decisions that shape his life. He, too, wants dignity—the dignity of being a man, not a number, not a category or a census statistic.” Nixon then proposed a commission on reorganization of government to investigate “new patterns of direct Federal involvement in the cities, and in education; new ventures in regional co-operation; and new layers upon layers of authority for the individual to fight his way through.” Two days later he continued to speak in terms that today might be labeled as compassionate conservatism: “You simply can’t have order without
progress. All the police in the world are not adequate to deal with men and women who have no hope.”\textsuperscript{162} This was the pragmatic and centrist Nixon.

But Nixon the centrist coexisted with Nixon the conservative. On June 23, the former vice president reassured his more hawkish supporters that his commitment “to restore stability to the economy and strength to the dollar” did not entail sacrificing defense “programs upon which the future security of the American people will depend.” On July 6 he issued “A New Direction for America’s Economy,” a 17-page campaign document charging the Johnson administration with implementing inflationary fiscal and monetary policies, and declaring the administration’s efforts to spur urban renewal a failure. Nixon argued that American cities would be improved more by keeping the wealth they produced within their own municipal boundaries than by accepting “federal handouts.”\textsuperscript{163} The next day he announced that John Tower would chair a new issues committee that he had formed to advise him on domestic and foreign affairs. He was more firmly embedding his conservative constituency into his campaign.

Nelson Rockefeller was running a different type of campaign. Unlike Nixon’s deft moves between the center and the right and his deliberate evasions on Vietnam, Rockefeller’s statements were intended to appeal to the moderate and liberal wings of his party. Like Romney before him, Rockefeller unveiled a detailed plan to end the Vietnam War. And, in a series of statements during June and July, he struck a moderate tone on crime, law and order, the inner city, poverty, and race relations. In a June 11 speech, he rejected Nixon’s positions on law and order: “I don’t believe, as my opponent for the Republican Presidential nomination has stated, that the Supreme Court has given the ‘green light’ to crime. And I do not believe, as he has also stated, that poverty has been ‘grossly exaggerated’ as a source of crime in America.” He expanded on this in subsequent appearances, promising to combat poverty by creating federally funded programs to provide low-interest loans, loan guarantees, and technical assistance to impoverished communities, while also encouraging private investment. He proposed reducing the crime rate through proper rehabilitation and advocated further research on the causes of crime. During this period, he also vetoed a New York state bill that would have instituted a sentence of life in prison for anyone convicted of selling marijuana to minors.\textsuperscript{164}

Rockefeller was clearly courting Kennedy supporters, independents,
and moderate Republicans. Also, the governor tended to de-emphasize issues of law and order when addressing black voters. And his brand of political centrism was reaping political dividends in the form of endorsements from black leaders including Omar Ahmed, James Farmer, Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., and Dr. Benjamin Watkins, as well as from Kennedy Students for a New America, Governor Daniel J. Evans, Mayor John Lindsay of New York City, and Senator Charles Percy, the Illinois Republican who was now on Nixon’s short list of vice presidential running mates.165

Rockefeller had attracted Democrats and independents throughout his political career, a fact that was not lost on Republican leaders, and especially the moderates who sought to stop their party’s move to the right. But, as stated earlier, the influential New Right wanted a candidate who could both prevail in November and satisfy the emerging Republican majority at the convention. Even as Rockefeller demonstrated his electability, he was also revealing his distance from the policy preferences of the New Right. As he succeeded in the larger political arena, his prospects within his own party dimmed.

The governor challenged Nixon’s position—or lack thereof—on Vietnam in a Sioux City, Iowa, speech on June 27: “There is no moratorium on courage—or casualties—in Vietnam. . . . No man seeking the Presidency, whatever political advantage he might imagine to exist in evading discussion of the issues has any right to retreat into silence when his country is in crisis at home and abroad.”166 Nixon was unmoved. But Rockefeller continued to discuss the Vietnam War and, on July 13 he unveiled a detailed plan to end it. His proposal entailed the withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from Cambodia, Laos, and the demilitarized zone, followed by gradual American troop redeployments, ultimately leading to complete removal. The plan also called for free elections, which would be honored by the United States even if a Vietcong government were elected, and an international peacekeeping force that would secure the border between North Vietnam and South Vietnam, and which would be withdrawn following successful negotiations to reunify the country.167 His Vietnam plan did not provoke a stampede of uncommitted and moderate delegates to his camp.

Reagan was now campaigning more aggressively than at any time since his November 1966 meeting with Tom Reed and Clif White to begin preliminary discussions about running for president. In the two months immediately prior to the convention, he undertook to convince
conservatives that he was an alternative to Wallace, arguing, as had the barons, that Wallace could hurt the Republican nominee in the general election.\textsuperscript{168} He also sought to establish himself as the only Republican challenger with a well-defined conservative philosophy. Earlier in the campaign, Reagan had often sidestepped the party leadership by taking his message directly to the rank and file. Now he had no choice but to continue on this path because most of the party leadership was already firmly behind Nixon. A powerful dose of populism was necessary to undo the alliance between Nixon and the barons. Reagan had to take his bottom-up campaign into high gear.

All of the Republican contenders exposed themselves to serious political risks when they confronted the Wallace challenge.\textsuperscript{169} Nixon had nothing to gain by delivering a frontal attack on the third-party candidate because he had already established his credentials with the center: any overture to Wallace supporters would shake the faith of his base and alarm the barons.\textsuperscript{170} Rockefeller sometimes mentioned his differences with the former Alabama governor, but, having entered the race late, he had to reserve most of his energy for challenging the front-runner.

Like the other candidates, Reagan continually repeated the mantra that a vote for the third-party candidate was a wasted vote. His relationship with the Wallace faction, however, was different from that of Nixon or Rockefeller—or the barons, for that matter. Reagan was no Wallace, but as Reagan biographer Lou Cannon has observed, “Wallace posed a special problem for Reagan. Without Wallace, Reagan was the strongest potential nominee of any party in the South. With Wallace, he was a question mark, for their appeal to white conservatives overlapped.”\textsuperscript{171} Throughout the campaign, Reagan and his advisers had calculated that the emerging power bloc of Republicans in the South was their most important constituency, but now more than ever they felt that the southern bloc was essential to the one task before them—stopping Nixon on the first ballot at the convention. In some instances, this meant using stock-in-trade themes that appealed to conservatives across the political spectrum, including Wallace supporters.

Reagan’s strategy was so specifically geared to preventing a Nixon victory on the first ballot that it failed to acknowledge its obvious risks: unless his appeals were broadened he could not expand his political base, but a broader message might weaken his ties with die-hard conservatives. Reagan’s indecisiveness about his candidacy finally came home to roost. In one way or another, the California governor had
been campaigning for the GOP nomination since late 1966. Yet he waited until the summer of 1968, shortly before the convention, to begin his first major tour directed toward a specific audience. He would receive maximum media attention for his efforts, but his message would perforce be narrow—much narrower at times than his own thinking. He was seeking the vote of conservative Republicans, especially, though not exclusively, in the South.

In numerous speeches after primary season, such as those in Indianapolis on June 13 and in Omaha 10 days later, Reagan advocated law-and-order policies and railed against “the growth of government.” These boilerplate speeches reinforced the image of Reagan as a conservative, but they were inconsistent with some of his policies as governor and with the image he was seeking to develop in California. This inconsistency became glaringly evident when Reagan discussed equal opportunity in his July 14 appearance on Report to the People, an occasional policy series carried on statewide television in California. He said that “it is imperative—and it is morally right” to address the grievances of minorities, and that his administration sought to “remove unnatural barriers” and wanted to “guarantee equal rights to all of our citizens regardless of color or creed.” He also repeated the assertion, which he had made on numerous previous occasions, that he had hired more minorities to executive positions in state government than any previous governor.

In the 1966 gubernatorial race, Reagan won all of the districts in the greater Los Angeles area except two composed mainly of blacks and Hispanics and one made up primarily of Jewish residents. Well aware of his need to become involved with minority communities, Reagan held a series of meetings with African-American leaders and activists from other minority groups during the spring and summer of 1968. He enlisted the help of H. C. “Chad” McClellan, an industrialist, to create jobs for black youths in the riot-torn areas of Watts and South Central Los Angeles.

Although some of his initiatives were criticized for failing to produce the expected outcomes, Governor Reagan received high marks and good statewide recognition for his efforts. Undeclared presidential candidate Reagan, however, was running into trouble on his right flank. “When Reagan was meeting with minority groups,” Cannon recalls, “polls showed Wallace receiving 14 percent of the vote nationally and a higher percentage in the South.” This threat could impede Reagan’s attempt to undo Nixon at the convention. Thus, two days
after expounding on equal opportunity, he undertook what might be thought of as a rebalancing act.

Cannon reports that in July, White and Reed were given the “limited goal of trying to avoid alienating southerners with an attack on Wallace.”176 The result was a statement by the governor at a July 16 press conference. To the question, “What views of George Wallace do you disagree with?” Reagan responded:

Well, now, lately on the basis of his speeches this would be kind of hard to pin down because he’s been speaking a lot of things that I think the people of America are in agreement with. But I would have to say on the basis of his past record . . . that I can’t believe that he has the philosophy that I believe in, and the Republican party at heart because on his past record and as a Governor he showed no opposition particularly to great programs of federal aid and spending programs, etc. Right at the moment he’s dwelling mainly on law and order, patriotism, and so forth, and these are attractive subjects. I’m sure that there are very few people in disagreement and I think this perhaps is responsible for some of the gains he’s made.

Another journalist probed further: “You listed things in George Wallace’s past record that you don’t like. You left out his stand at the schoolhouse door and his opposition to school integration. Was that on purpose or would you include that as things that you don’t like?” Reagan responded: “I would have to include a number of those things that I don’t like.” But it was his longer statement, not this caveat, which caught the public’s attention. The result was a series of headlines equating Reagan with Wallace.177

In the context of his announcement that he was launching a speaking tour in southern states, the governor was asked again about the third-party candidate: “Why, Governor, do you think that you are regarded as a man who can head off possible defection of Republican voters in the South to George Wallace? Do you see yourself as an alternative in any way?” He replied that he was invited to help “stimulate a little interest in the Republican Party” in what had historically been Democratic territory.178

On July 19, the Californian began his “southern solicitation,”179 a series of invited talks and fund-raisers for the Republican Party. His
first stop was a rally in Amarillo followed by appearances in Charlotte, Little Rock, and Dallas. On July 21, he headed for Baltimore to woo delegates from Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. A few hours later he moved on to Cincinnati, where he spoke at a large rally before heading for the National Governors’ Conference. The next day he harvested delegate votes in Louisville at the home of Kentucky governor Louie B. Nunn.180

Throughout his southern solicitation, Reagan gave his standard stump speech: Soviet military superiority was a near-term possibility; “no man can have real freedom without law and order”; the courts increasingly safeguard the rights of the accused more than those of society at large; and American citizens want guns because government has failed to protect them.181 During this tour, Reagan was mindful of his speech on equal opportunity and the comparison to Wallace. He spoke directly to these issues in Amarillo: “We have in California programs to provide employment in the minority areas, to help break the deadly stalemate of welfare programs. We try to provide jobs and education. Contrast his [Wallace’s] record in office with mine. Compare my statements on discrimination with his.” While in Little Rock on July 20, he addressed what had been labeled as his two-faced domestic policy:

I realize that when a Republican talks “law and order” there are those who say he is using a code word appealing to the white backlash. The implication is that we cannot be for law and order and at the same time be for improving the lot of our minorities. This is nonsense. Those who demand law and order are not racists and those who want to help the underprivileged should recognize that they can accomplish their goals better within a framework of law and order. No man must be above the law and no man beneath it. All men must stand equal before the law, regardless of race, religion or station in life. The criminal is no bigot and he is color-blind. Members of minority communities are victims out of all proportion to their numbers.182

The Republican rank and file liked what they heard. But meanwhile Nixon had been deriding aspects of the Great Society, declaring the Vietnam War to be in the national interest, and accusing President Johnson of failing to protect the Americans taken hostage in the seizure of the USS Pueblo. Even though he was not the true conservative the rank and
file would have liked to support, Nixon was saying what they needed to hear—enough so that voters were not crossing over to Reagan.

Reagan continued with familiar themes on July 24 in Birmingham, Alabama—Wallace country. He had a private session with delegates from Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina, and gave several public stump speeches that the local press described as “paralleling the Wallace platform point for point.” The Birmingham News declared Reagan’s foray a failure: “California’s Ronald Reagan—having tried to out-Wallace George Wallace in the Alabamian’s own territory—flew home before dawn today, leaving behind in Birmingham a disappointingly small turnout and a thinly disguised effort to line up some 90 Southern Republican convention delegates in a closed door meeting.” Evenly split between Reagan and Nixon, Alabama delegates were polled after Reagan’s visits, and the results “showed no great shifts in their preference.”183 As Reagan headed home on July 25, Nixon’s support among southern delegates remained strong. The barons had taken no chances. While Reagan was meeting with southern delegates in Alabama, Goldwater was sending telegrams to the Alabama delegation urging them to hold fast for Nixon because the former vice president could “best unite our party.”184

Reagan had failed in his mission. After a brief return to California to carry out various gubernatorial duties, he headed back to the South. Before making an appearance in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, the governor traveled to Atlanta, where he sounded more like a presidential candidate than ever before. He stated that his delegation would place his name in nomination at the convention and that “if there are other delegations that want me as a candidate then obviously I will be a candidate.” His near-candidacy had an immediate effect on delegates such as Jack Cox from Texas, who announced that he would switch his convention vote from Nixon to Reagan. The majority of the 56-member delegation, however, remained committed to Nixon.185

The governor made one more major preconvention appearance when he spoke before the Platform Committee on July 31. As in the remarks he had delivered throughout his southern tour, Reagan sprinkled his platform speech with conservative themes: lapses in law and order, the Great Society’s ineffectual federal programs, and the Paris Peace Talks as North Vietnamese propaganda, among others. But he failed to deliver a message more compelling than Nixon’s.186

As the convention drew near, the Nixon team declared victory,
while Reagan and Rockefeller, hoping to create the expectation of a real contest in Miami Beach, continued to call for an open convention. The Reagan camp remained cautiously optimistic even though their candidate’s summer tour had failed to secure the firm support of many new delegates. Their preliminary survey gave Nixon 570 delegates, approximately 100 less than were needed for the nomination, suggesting the possibility of open competition at the convention. As discussed earlier, any need to move beyond the first round was widely expected to result in delegates releasing themselves from the bosses’ control; in many southern and border states, this would likely lead to additional ballots being cast for Reagan.

Rockefeller’s private polling in eight states (California, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Maryland) showed him beating Humphrey, compared to Nixon carrying only California, New Jersey, New York, and Ohio in a similar survey. But the polling was inconsistent with events. A few days before the convention, Romney, who had become the favorite son for Michigan, which had 48 delegates, issued a statement about his position on the convention: “I go to Miami to fight for the principles I know this country must follow to find peace. I wish I could enthusiastically go to fight for a particular candidate. At this point, I cannot.” Rockefeller had targeted the industrial Northeast in his campaign, but he was entering the convention without the support of delegate-rich Michigan.

Nixon’s aides based their victory claim on indicators such as a late July Gallup Poll, which showed Nixon beating the Democratic presidential candidates and Rockefeller tying with them. Other surveys, however, reported quite different results. A Harris Poll in late July found Nixon losing to Humphrey and McCarthy, and Rockefeller defeating Humphrey but losing to McCarthy. According to the vote count by United Press International on the eve of the convention, support for Nixon had eroded enough in the southern and border states to deny him victory on the first ballot.

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Phase 4: August 5 to August 8, 1968

When the Twenty-ninth Republican National Convention opened in Miami Beach on Monday, August 5, Nixon and Rockefeller were widely regarded as the leading candidates. Reagan joined them as an official candidate on the first day of the convention. Building on his July
tour of the South, the California governor arranged a lunch meeting with Harry Dent of South Carolina; Alfred W. Goldwaite, chairman of the Alabama delegation; William F. Murfin, chairman of the Florida delegation; and Clarke Reed, leader of Mississippi’s delegates. He discussed with the group his plans to announce, but Dent sought to dissuade him on the grounds that Nixon was unstoppable; Reed and Murfin concurred that Reagan’s candidacy was unlikely to have a major effect on Nixon’s chances. Despite attempts by the party bosses to hold the South for Nixon, Goldwaite pledged to Reagan.191

Following the lunch, William Knowland, the former U.S. senator from California and publisher of the *Oakland Tribune*, encouraged Reagan to announce himself as a bona fide candidate. The California delegation passed a resolution calling for the governor’s official candidacy, and at around 4:00 p.m., Reagan publicly declared: “As of this moment, I am a candidate.” The announcement was considered part of a southern strategy: “The strategy behind his move was simple: To shake loose enough delegates, especially in the South, who . . . felt they had to stick with Nixon as long as the California governor was playing coy.”192

But Nixon was tightening his grip on the southern delegations. He arrived in Miami soon after Reagan’s announcement, and by 10:00 p.m. was meeting with Dent and Thurmond. The former vice president restated his opposition to busing as a means to achieve school desegregation, which he supported. Thurmond presented Nixon with a *New York Times* article stating that moderates John Lindsay, Charles Percy, and Nelson Rockefeller were his most likely running mates. Nixon immediately restated the promise he had made to southern leaders during his springtime meetings in Atlanta: he would select a running mate who would be acceptable to the South.193 Having already sent a telegram to the delegates urging them to support Nixon because of his stances on law and order, Vietnam, the Supreme Court, military superiority, and what he called “fiscal sanity,” Thurmond was now prepared to launch an all-out campaign on the candidate’s behalf.194 He enlisted the help of Tower and Goldwater and undertook a blitzkrieg of the southern delegations.195 Nixon’s statements on a host of issues besides busing and his selection of a running mate provided the final assurance to southerners who might otherwise have leaned toward Reagan. A delegate from South Carolina noted that Nixon had “take[n] the conservative edge off Reagan’s positions.”196

Rockefeller continued to sound the themes of his campaign. He had
a proven record of electoral support from Democrats and independents, and his support throughout the big industrial states of the Northeast made him the Republican contender who could prevail in the presidential election. Reagan and Nixon also courted delegates from the Northeast, but Nixon was the only contender who came to the convention with the support of party leaders from across the political spectrum. His candidacy was endorsed by Senator Mark Hatfield on one end of it and Thurmond on the other. As mentioned earlier, centrist party leaders including Gerald Ford, House minority leader and chairman of the convention, and Dirksen, chairman of the Platform Committee, were also essentially in the Nixon camp.197

Reagan posed the most important challenge to Nixon at the convention. Like the barons and the rank and file, the California governor opposed Great Society programs. Like the conservatives, he favored strong law-and-order policies, the continued application of military power in Vietnam, states’ voluntary compliance with judicial decrees, and postponing peace talks with the North Vietnamese until they withdrew from South Vietnam. Nixon agreed with the conservatives on many points but differed on several substantial issues, including the value of the Great Society, the legitimacy of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, and the future of military engagement in Vietnam.

The second day of the convention, Tuesday, August 6, was one of southern strategies and solicitations for both the Nixon and Reagan camps. In a morning closed-door session with delegates from seven southern states, Nixon unleashed his full-blown southern strategy. The meeting was secretly taped, and a transcript published in the next day’s Miami Herald revealed Nixon reaffirming the promises he had made to southern Republicans in Atlanta that summer. Although he had made these promises privately in Atlanta, Nixon was now combining the issues more emphatically and, most importantly, expounding his opinions to a larger number of delegates.

Nixon’s combination of centrism and southern-style conservatism not only persuaded delegates, but also enabled him to outmaneuver Reagan with powerful rhetorical appeals. The barons, in particular, were concerned about a repeat of 1964. Nixon demonstrated his ability to take a stance that was conservative enough to satisfy southerners yet sufficiently moderate to carry the center. In other words, the former vice president was able to convince conservatives that although he held some of Goldwater’s beliefs, he was otherwise unlike Goldwater. Reagan had no hope of outmaneuvering Nixon in the center, which the for-
mer vice president had worked assiduously to dominate. Even the Reagan team’s backroom negotiations to select a politically centrist running mate from a big northeastern industrial state (Ohio governor Jim Rhodes, with Pennsylvania governor Raymond P. Shafer as the second choice) did not persuade delegates that he could form a moderate-conservative coalition, as Nixon was doing.  

Of Nixon’s performance at his meeting with southern delegates, Garry Wills writes: “If Nixon gave more, and more flamboyantly, to the South, that was because the whole convention hinged on the South. Others he could soothe or try to placate; those delegates he had to serve.” Thurmond was pleased with the meeting and used Nixon’s vice presidential assurance to shore up support from southern delegates who were still undecided. Nixon’s maneuvers and Thurmond’s efforts produced impressive results. Prior to the meeting, half of the Mississippi delegation was behind Reagan, but by the end of the day the entire delegation had pledged its support to Nixon. The Florida delegation was divided and would remain so through Wednesday. But Nixon was on the move. Tower was holding the line in his delegation in the face of strong support for Reagan. Ultimately, 41 out of the 56 Texas delegates would vote for Nixon.

Despite Thurmond’s well-orchestrated campaign, which included close collaboration with Tower and Goldwater, the Reagan team remained in high gear. Congressman James Gardner, chairman of the North Carolina delegation, endorsed Reagan, but for the most part there was no substantial delegate movement in the Californian’s direction.

Rumors swirled throughout the convention hall that Reagan and Rockefeller had joined forces to stop Nixon on the first ballot. Clif White claims that while the two camps stayed in close contact, there was no collusion. Even if Reagan and Rockefeller had coordinated their strategies, by the end of Tuesday it was clear that Nixon could not be stopped. Neither Reagan nor Rockefeller had a message that would appeal to delegates across the political spectrum. Reagan was too far to the right, and although Rockefeller had been arguing that he was the only GOP contender who could prevail in November, Nixon was actively demonstrating that he could build the center-right coalition needed to win.

The Reagan team continued their efforts to raid the southern delegations on Wednesday, August 7. Many delegates from Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi favored the California governor but...
were being pressured by the Thurmond group to vote for Nixon. As mentioned earlier, Goldwaithe of Alabama supported Reagan. Jim Martin, a delegate from Alabama, was pushing for Nixon. The Alabama delegation delivered a split vote of 14 for Nixon and 12 for Reagan. Clarke Reed held Mississippi for Nixon, and the delegation delivered all of its votes to him. Charlton Lyon, the chairman of the Louisiana group, expressed his preference for Reagan even though he cast his ballot for Nixon, just as 19 of the state’s 26 delegates would do.

There was more uncertainty among Florida’s delegates. Governor Kirk pledged his support to Rockefeller, but 17 of the 34 delegates were women who favored Reagan. Bill Murfin, chair of the delegation and a member of the Greenville Group, was a Nixon man, but he was unable to wield sufficient influence over his delegates. Thurmond’s intervention saved the day for Nixon. When he assured the Florida contingent that he had been given control over the selection of Nixon’s running mate, 32 of the 34 delegates decided to support Nixon.202

Nixon and his strategists believed that they had secured southern support, but they took no chances on the possibility of last-minute defections to Reagan. Turning to the North, they began working to win over the delegations of Ohio, Michigan, and New Jersey, states held by favorite sons in territory that Rockefeller claimed he could command. They were unsuccessful in Ohio and Michigan, where they won over only a few votes on the first ballot. Nixon’s greatest victory came in New Jersey, where his strategists succeeded in breaking Senator Cliff ord Case’s favorite-son stronghold. When New Jersey delivered 18 of its 40 delegates to him, Nixon and his team felt confident that they had clinched the nomination.203

At approximately eight o’clock on the evening of August 7, the Reagan forces circulated a Miami Herald article with the headline “Delegates Talk Nixon-Hatfield; Choice Narrows.”204 Dent, Clarke Reed, Thurmond, and others immediately fanned out to refute this rumor that Nixon might offer the moderate senator from Oregon the second slot on the ticket.

The balloting took place later that night. Despite strenuous efforts by Reagan and Rockefeller to prevent a Nixon victory on the first ballot, the former vice president prevailed, receiving 692 votes on the first ballot, 25 more than were needed for the nomination. Rockefeller took 277 votes, and Reagan received 182. It was close to two o’clock on the morning of August 8 when Reagan strode to the podium and encouraged the delegates to support Nixon. Later that day, Rockefeller issued
a statement in which he declared, “The convention has spoken and I support the decision of the convention, all the way.”

Nixon and his aides quickly turned their attention to selecting a running mate. Earlier in the campaign, Pat Buchanan, a campaign aide, had written a memo on the complexity of naming a vice presidential candidate: “The Nixon campaign is confronted with the old German problem—the two-front war . . . We are going to have to stave off the assaults of Wallace from the right, to keep him from making any further inroads, and we are going to have to defeat the challenge of Humphrey in the center of American politics. It is almost impossible for one candidate to do both at the same time.” Reagan would release Nixon of “the burden of fighting George Wallace, a burden we would otherwise have to assume totally, a burden which would necessarily cost us something in the center.” The match did not make sense for either man for numerous reasons, including the fact that they were both perceived as Californians.

Nixon met with party leaders in the early morning hours between three and five o’clock to discuss the number two spot on the ticket. Maryland Governor Spiro Agnew and Massachusetts Governor John Volpe made the final list. Agnew was ultimately chosen for his ability to fight off Wallace from the right. Southern conservatives like Thurmond admired Agnew’s handling of the riots in his state following the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.; the governor had called out thousands of members of the Maryland National Guard and supported the deployment of federal troops. Meeting with black leaders a few days later, Agnew said, “You were beguiled by the rationalizations of unity; you were intimidated by veiled threats; you were stung by insinuations that you were Mr. Charlie’s boy, by epithets like ‘Uncle Tom.’ God knows I cannot fault you who spoke out for breaking and running in the face of what appeared to be overwhelming opinion in the Negro community. But actually it was only the opinion of those who depend upon chaos and turmoil for leadership.” His deprecating tone provoked civic and religious leaders to walk out of the meeting in protest, and the episode made the national press. Agnew’s actions were considered good enough for Thurmond and the “southern king-makers,” who agreed to place him on the ticket with Nixon.

Throughout the campaign, all of the Republican contenders used rhetoric in an attempt to shore up existing support, but Nixon also
employed it to broaden his political base, becoming more of a strategist as he formulated his campaign promises. His command of the center, combined with significant promises to southern concerns, convinced even those who disliked and distrusted him that they had found a presidential contender who could win in November and bring the South along with him. Nixon completed his strategizing by selecting a running mate who was liked by conservatives and who governed a border state. It was one more in a series of persuasive measures.

For their part, Reagan, Rockefeller, and Romney never found an effective way to challenge Nixon. The former vice president’s consistent straddling the fence on controversial issues such as Vietnam and his stalwart political pragmatism helped him undermine these politicians and prevent them from building their own alternative constituencies.

Romney’s and Rockefeller’s hopes of becoming president ended in 1968. But as Richard Reeves, author of a recent book on Reagan’s political career, writes, the California governor’s attempt to win his party’s nomination in 1968 was not a complete impossibility. His viability was not reflected in the first-ballot votes, but Reagan never expected to be successful immediately. Had balloting gone beyond the first round, the unit rule and favorite-son control of delegations would have disappeared and the durability of Nixon’s strategic manipulation would have been tested, for there were many true believers among the convention-goers, and Reagan was their man.

Although later races would take place in a much more open political system, the 1968 Republican race was tightly controlled by a few party bosses and their supporters. In such a scenario, any serious contender had to buy off his key supporters with benefits. Nixon understood this logic, his promises to the South were political payoffs, and the convention win was his return on the investment.

Reagan had not been a great rhetorician or an architect of the institutional environment in the 1968 race, but he had weathered the contest without political damage, and he most likely regarded his campaign experiences as the beginning of a learning curve. A decade later, when pitted against President Jimmy Carter, he would combine issues into a package convincing to voters and more difficult for his opponent to maneuver around than the strategy Nixon had devised in the 1968 GOP contest. Beyond cleverly combining issues, Reagan would succeed in producing a fundamental redefinition of the policy landscape.

The only major conservative Republican contender in the 1968 race,
Reagan, would go on to command the political center in 1980. He would accomplish this without embracing centrist positions such as those taken by Rockefeller and Romney, and without abandoning the basic philosophy he had professed to voters in his first presidential bid. As the following chapters show, the lessons Reagan learned in 1968 clearly influenced his impressive showing in the 1976 Republican contest and contributed to his successful campaign in 1980.