At a news conference on December 30, 1974, at the Los Angeles Press Club, Governor Ronald Reagan announced the impending launch of his nationally syndicated column and radio program in early 1975. His second term as governor officially ended in early January, and by the end of the month, he was recording his first batch of radio commentaries in a Hollywood studio. For nearly five years (from January 1975 to October 1979, except for a hiatus between November 1975 and September 1976), Reagan enjoyed access to an unparalleled rhetorical testing-ground through his nationally syndicated radio program and newspaper column. He also took on an almost endless series of engagements across the country in support of Republican candidates and causes.¹

Although many of the columns were drafted by former Reagan aide Peter Hannaford, co-owner with Michael Deaver of the Los Angeles–based public relations firm that managed Reagan’s activities throughout the late 1970s, the Reagan Presidential Library holds approximately 700 draft radio commentaries in Reagan’s own handwriting. He recorded and broadcast more than 1,000 commentaries in all. The radio commentaries, as Reagan wrote in a January 1980 letter, addressed “virtually every subject mentionable and stated my views on those subjects.”²
It is estimated that Ronald Reagan’s commentaries were broadcast on 200 to 400 or so radio stations and reached between 20–30 million Americans a week. The radio and newspaper commentaries proved to be an ideal vehicle for rhetorical campaigning, securing his conservative base while simultaneously extending his reach to new constituencies.

No other contender was appealing to voters on such a grand scale. In March 1975, the conservative journal *Human Events* reported: “Supporters of the ‘don’t declare now’ philosophy contend that the governor, by plunging into the presidential contest immediately, would have to relinquish his nationally syndicated column and his widely heard radio program, two forums some strategists see as essential.” A similar assessment was made in the *Washington Post* three years later: “It would be grossly unfair to say that his nationwide public forum is devoted to advancing his personal cause. But it is an unprecedented opportunity to promote the conservative causes that are at the basis of his candidacy.”

Reagan’s original handwritten drafts, full as they are of edited sentences and rephrased paragraphs, depict a man completely focused on improving his rhetorical performance. Some of the commentaries echo what came to be known as “The Speech”—an adaptable set of remarks about the social, economic, and political ills of big government—while others revealed the more mature rhetorical style of later stages in the campaign.

As Riker observed, the heresthetician has to convince voters that the conventional wisdom on a policy issue (such as containment as a means of managing U.S.-Soviet relations) is fundamentally wrong, and that a “new alternative” (peace through strength, for example) will produce better outcomes. Reagan’s essays from this period are an important step toward a heresthetical candidacy. The tax revolt that Reagan championed in so many of his radio commentaries from this era was slowly drawing together diverse interests and blocs of voters. Reagan argued in his commentaries that leading economists such as Milton Friedman, Arthur Laffer, Paul McCracken, and Allan Meltzer advocated an economic philosophy that could radically improve the economy: “Each [theorist] made it clear that government can increase its tax revenues and create the jobs we need without inflation by lowering tax rates for businesses and individuals.” In his 1980 presidential campaign, Reagan would refashion this statement to bolster his promise of tax cuts accompanied by economic growth and general prosperity. One of Reagan’s first radio commentaries, taped in January 1975, also presented...
the broad outline of a 1980 campaign theme. In this radio commentary titled “Inflation,” Reagan bluntly declared, “If we had less regulation we could have lower prices.”

Reagan’s economic philosophy—stated in a radio commentary in early 1979—typified the economic policy ideas that he refined during his five years on the air: “My own belief is that cutting taxes will have the effect of cutting spending if government can no longer run a deficit and that will bring the end of inflation. . . . I think we need both a limit on spending and a ban on unbalanced budgets. One will reduce the inordinate amount of private earnings the government is taking and which is a drag on the economy, the other will make sure government doesn’t evade the limit by running up a debt.”

In his radio commentaries and newspaper columns (as well as in other speeches and writings), Reagan presented alternative ways of thinking about the Cold War. In an April 1975 radio commentary titled “Peace” he articulated his idea that a robust military policy was part of a strategy to help create the conditions for better and more stable U.S.-Soviet cooperation. A month later, in “Communism, the Disease,” he committed what was essentially intellectual heresy at the height of U.S.-Soviet détente. Détente signified a kind of stable status quo between the superpowers, yet Reagan declared that the Soviet system was “a temporary aberration which will one day disappear from the earth because it is contrary to human nature.”

As a prolific correspondent, Reagan was always in close contact with detractors and supporters. His letters were a source of information about what worked rhetorically; they enabled Reagan to fine-tune his radio messages, communicate with his listening audience, and sharpen his ideas. Taken together, his writings offer a Rosetta stone for understanding Reagan’s presidential strategy.

The Republican contest in 1968 had been a small selectorate process in which the party barons and their associated cadre played the role of selectors. By 1976, however, this system had become largely obsolete. This evolution was the result of a variety of forces, including greater access to television, which allowed candidates to appeal directly to the electorate over the heads of state party organizations; and reforms growing out of the Democratic Party’s 1968 convention in Chicago (including the findings of the McGovern-Fraser Commission), which sought to make the process of selecting delegates more democratic.

These and other factors led to a proliferation of primaries and an increase in the number of delegates bound by the popular vote in the
primaries. Austin Ranney has reported that there were 16 “states using a primary for selecting or binding national convention [Republican] delegates” in 1968. Also in that election year, 458 (or 34.3 percent) of “votes [were] cast by delegates chosen or bound by primaries.” By contrast, 28 states used primaries in 1976 for deciding or binding delegates, and 1,533 (or 67.9 percent) was the number of delegate votes chosen or bound to decisions in the primaries.12

In contrast to 1968, when a number of candidates had avoided entering the primaries or even announcing their candidacies during the early months of primary season, the main Republican challengers in 1976 announced their intentions well in advance of the Iowa caucuses, and competed in all of the primaries. The primaries were a source of major competition among the challengers, and delegates were open to persuasion. Reagan’s improved performance in 1976 was primarily due to his skillful use of rhetoric in this new context.

The party bosses that had been so central to clinching the Republican Party’s presidential nomination in 1968 remained influential, but they could not easily undo the many points of candidate-voter contact that were now available. The weakening of the system of party bosses in control of election-year politics was evident in the fact that Reagan came close to winning the Republican Party’s presidential nomination despite his having limited support among Republican leaders. Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) and Senator Paul Laxalt (R-NV) were his biggest supporters in the U.S. Senate. Other leaders such as Senator Barry Goldwater threw their support to President Ford largely on the grounds that it was safer to support the Republican occupant of the White House than to change course in the wake of the Watergate scandal.13

The Contenders

One has to know Ronald Reagan’s challengers and the other relevant political actors in the 1976 presidential race in order to understand the campaign strategies of the two main contenders.14 House Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford, a 25-year veteran of Congress and Reagan’s most serious rival, had taken an unusual path to national prominence. He had become Nixon’s new vice president after Spiro Agnew was indicted on tax-evasion charges in October 1973. Then, in late July 1974, the House Judiciary Committee adopted three articles of impeachment against the president himself. Nixon resigned on August
9, and according to the rules laid out in the Twenty-fifth Amendment, Gerald Ford was sworn in as the first unelected president in American history.

These were unpropitious circumstances in which to run for a full term, and Ford was never able to overcome them. His initial approval rating of 71 percent plummeted to 50 percent after he pardoned Nixon on September 9. By early 1975, only 37 percent of the public approved of his job performance. His rating surged periodically but never exceeded 50 percent during Ford’s last full year in office.\textsuperscript{15}

By late 1975 Ford was not even considered the Republican front-runner. When the Gallup Poll gave respondents a list of prominent Republicans and asked who they would like to see as the Republican presidential candidate, only 32 percent chose Ford compared to 40 percent for Reagan.\textsuperscript{16}

Ford’s choice of Nelson Rockefeller for vice president weakened the incumbent’s already shaky standing among conservatives. Rockefeller’s December 1973 resignation from the governorship of New York—supposedly to devote more time to the national commissions on which he served—had been perceived by many conservatives as his unofficial declaration of a fourth bid for the GOP nomination and an effort to build a national base that would undermine a Reagan candidacy. They were dismayed by Ford’s choice, and many began to advocate for a Reagan bid instead.\textsuperscript{17}

The president was walking a fine line: on June 16, 1975, he endorsed Rockefeller as his running mate, but he also proposed that the convention delegates should choose his partner on the ticket. This dual move did little to assuage conservatives. By late summer, Gallup was reporting that Republicans favored Reagan, not Rockefeller, as Ford’s running mate. Pressure continued to mount from the right. Ford, already suffering from lukewarm approval ratings, met with Rockefeller on October 28. A few days later, Rockefeller announced that he would not be the president’s running mate.\textsuperscript{18} But he also let it be known that he might toss his own hat in the ring if the opportunity presented itself. A June \textit{New York Times} article had the following headline: “Rockefeller Acting as If He’s Running.” It was not to be. Ultimately Rockefeller endorsed Ford. The president had the support of one of the most influential political figures in the Northeast, a region rich in delegates. On July 8, 1975, Gerald Ford formally announced his intention to campaign for the presidency.\textsuperscript{19}

History was on Ford’s side: since 1884, every president who had
sought a second term had been renominated. But Ford’s vulnerability quickly became apparent after he and Reagan emerged from the primaries in a virtual tie. His failure to appease conservatives improved Reagan’s chances of winning the nomination. John Sears, Reagan’s campaign director, thought that strategic choice of the number two spot on his candidate’s ticket could diminish support for Ford among the delegates. In Sears’s scheme, if Reagan announced his running mate before the convention, Ford would be forced to do the same. Ford’s selection would most likely be less acceptable to the conservative wing of the party than any selection Reagan would make, thus eroding the incumbent’s slim lead in delegate count.

Reagan approved. On July 26, he informed the public that he was “departing from tradition and announcing my selection,” Senator Robert Schweiker of Pennsylvania, not coincidentally the state with the third-largest number of delegates. In addition to forcing the president’s hand, the selection of a moderate Republican as Reagan’s running mate was supposed to unite the Republican Party.20

That strategy failed. The widespread appeal of the Reagan-Schweiker ticket that Sears hoped for never materialized, and some prominent conservatives actually withdrew their support from Reagan. Nor did Ford respond by announcing his running mate before the convention. It was not until the last day of the convention that the president announced his partnership with Senator Robert Dole, a politician with acceptable conservative credentials.21

On the Democratic side, it was Jimmy Carter, the governor of Georgia, who showed a number of surprising similarities to Reagan. Carter was 14 years younger than Reagan, but had been preparing to run for president almost as long as the Californian had. In 1966, when aides met with Reagan to discuss a presidential bid just two weeks after he won the California gubernatorial race, Carter was tasting defeat in the race for the governorship of Georgia, becoming a born-again Christian, and beginning to form close ties with men like Stuart Eizenstat, Hamilton Jordan, Jody Powell, and Gerald Rafshoon, who, along with Peter Bourne, Patrick Caddell, and a few others, would become key advisers to Carter’s 1976 and 1980 presidential campaigns.

Carter won the Georgia governor’s race the second time around, in 1970, and at some point in the next two years decided to run for president.22 A lengthy and detailed memo sent by Hamilton Jordan to Carter in November 1972 offered some projections about the Democratic outlook for 1976. It included sections on potential contenders George Wal-
lace and Edward Kennedy, and discussed subjects such as establishing Carter’s national image, campaign tactics for a governor seeking the presidency, and the need for staff and advisers.23

On December 12, 1974, Carter announced his campaign for the Democratic nomination. It was an ambitious gambit inasmuch as the Georgian was not a nationally recognized political figure. In fact, some analysts labeled him a dark horse.24 If elected, he would be the first southern president since Zachary Taylor had carried the Whig ticket in 1848. Nor did Carter have a national platform to raise his national profile as Reagan did with his radio program, newspaper column, and many speaking engagements. Instead, he embarked on a grueling campaign schedule, traveling half a million miles in 22 months.25

In 1976, both Carter and Reagan were campaigning as Washington outsiders. In the wake of Watergate and the debacle in Vietnam, the two rivals portrayed themselves as leaders who, free of Beltway ties, could steer the country in a new direction. But beyond these commonalities of form, Carter’s platform contrasted starkly with Reagan’s small-government and anti-Communist ideas. In his campaign, the Georgia governor endorsed traditional Democratic social policies based on large amounts of funding from the federal government, deep cuts in defense spending, and a de-emphasis on U.S.-Soviet competition and conflict.26

Carter insisted that his running mate share his views. He also wanted his partner to be a member of Congress, thus offsetting his own lack of Washington experience. His choice of Walter Mondale, the senior senator from Minnesota, did not create an ideologically balanced ticket, but it certainly gave the Democrats broad geographic appeal.27

Among Carter’s Democratic rivals in the early stages of the race, George Wallace was perhaps the most prominent. Wallace had a long history in presidential politics. Having repressed his national ambitions in favor of Goldwater in 1964, Wallace had won 13.5 percent of the popular vote in 1968 under the American Independent Party banner. He had run as a Democrat in 1972, winning primaries in Florida, Tennessee, North Carolina, Maryland, and Michigan, before an assassin’s bullet struck his spinal cord during a Maryland campaign stop, paralyzing him from the waist down and ending his candidacy in that race. On November 12, 1975, Wallace announced that he would again compete for the Democratic nomination. His platform would be devoted to “the survival and salvation of the average, middle class,” which he
argued was under attack from ultraliberal policies. He promised to compete in most of the primaries, and cannily refused to reject the idea of a third-party candidacy.28 But Wallace’s campaign was hurt by Alabama’s history of burgeoning government expenditures under his leadership as well as by the fact that, as he himself recognized, “it’s impossible for a wheelchair man to get out into the crowd.”29 Wallace failed to carry even a single primary, and he ultimately endorsed Jimmy Carter’s nomination.

Analysts have debated whether Wallace’s 1976 bid had a major impact on the Carter, Ford, and Reagan candidacies.30 There is general agreement, however, that his truncated campaign did not have the same effect as his full-blown 1968 campaign.

Seizing the Conservative Mantle: November 1968 to early 1975

In winning the 1968 and 1972 presidential races, Richard Nixon had carefully crafted a campaign strategy rooted in centrism and political pragmatism. Ronald Reagan, too, would need to command the center, but it is doubtful that Reagan could have simply adopted Nixon’s strategy without compromising his credibility. In the years following his 1968 bid, Reagan had become convinced that the Republican Party could permanently capture the political center without compromising its traditional principles. His national activities after 1968 suggest that he believed himself to be the rightful defender and promoter of the conservative doctrine. His party, meanwhile, was increasingly looking to him for political leadership, electing him president of the Republican Governors’ Association in 1968 and 1970.

Governor Reagan was often asked during the early 1970s if he would again seek his party’s presidential nomination. His usual response, typified in a 1973 interview, was, “I don’t think an individual makes that decision. I think the people make that determination.”31 But behind the rhetoric Reagan was leaving nothing to chance. Immediately after the 1968 presidential election he undertook a strenuous schedule of national political activity that continued almost unabated until 1980. It was a run unmatched by any GOP contender, with the possible exception of Rockefeller, who seemed determined to make a fourth presidential run.
While simultaneously governing California and stumping to keep up his national profile, Reagan was also solidifying his reputation as heir of the conservative movement, identifying the type of coalition needed to elevate the GOP out of its minority-party status, and crafting a message that would hold that coalition together in the face of Democratic challenges. Everything that Reagan did on the national level during these years contributed to the agenda he had set for himself. It was in the context of fulfilling this agenda that Reagan evolved from a great orator and rhetorician to a heresthetician.

Many people were watching and writing about Reagan during the late 1960s and 1970s, but few perceived his subtle rhetorical changes or appreciated his increasing political momentum. In a few short years, Reagan both recast his message and redefined the institutional context within which the selectorate would be asked to support him. It is when seen from this perspective that Reagan most closely resembles Boris Yeltsin during his own rise to power in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The American political landscape itself was evolving during the 1970s. In 1968 Richard Nixon had received 43.3 percent of the popular vote to Hubert Humphrey’s 42.7 percent. Many in the Nixon camp argued that had George Wallace not been in the race, Nixon would have taken his 13.5 percent share. The implication was that Nixon’s victory was actually a mandate.

The president may have seen his 1968 victory in these terms, but conservatives and Republicans did not unanimously agree with this interpretation. By 1971, prominent conservatives had begun to complain that Nixon was abandoning the Republican voters who had been so essential to his election. They publicly reminded him that he had won the GOP nomination thanks to the “conservative constituency” of party kingmakers and delegates that had lined up behind him.32

The discontent began to take shape in early 1971, when the conservative Young Americans for Freedom initiated a movement to draft Reagan for president.33 On July 26, William F. Buckley, Jr., led a group of conservatives in a public declaration that they were suspending support for the Nixon administration in objection to continued inflation and unemployment, as well as what they called “excessive taxation and inordinate welfarism.” They also denounced Nixon’s overtures toward the People’s Republic of China and his policies toward Southeast Asia and the Soviet Union as being at odds with America’s national security interests. “We do not plan at the moment to encourage formal political
opposition to President Nixon in the forthcoming primaries,” they wrote, “but we propose to keep all options open in the light of political developments in the next months.”34

Although the conservatives did support Nixon’s reelection bid in the end, some of them broke off to encourage Republican congressman John Ashbrook of Ohio in his protest presidential campaign.35 Meanwhile, various independent conservative organizations—Americans for Constitutional Action, the Free Society Association, the American Conservative Union, and Young Americans for Freedom—were becoming openly disenchanted with Nixon’s policies.

Federal spending and government regulation increased more during the Nixon administration than they had during the Johnson years, and social spending outpaced defense spending. Nixon created new government agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, massive bureaucracies that conservatives disliked and distrusted. And they derided Nixon’s new Cost of Living Council, directed by future defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld, as an effort to control prices and wages, labeling it “America’s most concerted attempt to introduce state control of the economy since the Second World War.”36 Conservative political analyst Frank Meyer’s statement about Nixon in 1961—that “neither Disraeli nor Nixon ever stood firmly upon principle”—now seemed eerily prescient to many conservatives.37 William Rusher, the National Review’s publisher, wrote that “in 1972 . . . Nixon’s departures from conservative principle had become too numerous and too painful to ignore.”38

The conservatives’ claim of a national mandate was reinforced by Nixon’s performance in 1972. The incumbent moved easily through the primaries and trounced his liberal GOP challenger, Congressman Paul N. McCloskey, Jr., leaving him with only one delegate vote on the first ballot. Nixon’s reelection also signaled substantial GOP inroads into the traditional Democratic base. For the first time in its history, the AFL-CIO had refused to back the Democratic presidential nominee. As a result, Nixon took 57 percent of the blue-collar vote, a bloc that had voted solidly Democratic only a few years earlier. He also prevailed in every region of the country, including the South, where he won 71 percent of the vote. This southern defection was yet another blow to the Democrats’ traditional strength. In fact, Democrats everywhere were defecting in record numbers. When it was all over, Nixon claimed 33 percent of the Democratic vote and 69 percent of the independent vote.
The District of Columbia and Massachusetts were the only two electoral units in which Democratic senator George McGovern received more of the popular vote than Nixon. The incumbent easily won the general election with 60.7 percent of the popular vote and 520 electoral votes to McGovern’s 37.5 percent and 17 electoral votes.

Watergate and its associated scandals were already looming on the horizon. A few months after the election, White House staffers G. Gordon Liddy and James W. McCord, Jr., were convicted of crimes related to their break-in to Democratic campaign headquarters the previous year. Nixon staffers H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman resigned, as did others. In the spring of 1973, the Senate began holding nationally televised hearings, during which White House counsel John Dean admitted that he had discussed a cover-up with Nixon on numerous occasions. In the midst of all this, Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned on October 10 under the shadow of an indictment on tax-evasion charges. On November 5, Time magazine’s cover story speculated about Nixon being impeached. Two weeks later, Nixon declared, “I’m not a crook.” He resigned nine months later.

Reagan remained a Nixon loyalist throughout the crisis, proclaiming that the Watergate conspirators were “not criminals at heart.” The California governor also continued to position himself as a key defender of the 1972 mandate, which he defined in terms of the Republican Party’s commitment to creating a coalition based on “a libertarian philosophy, a belief in the individual freedom and the reduction of government.”

Reagan believed that the 1972 mandate was the result of efforts to make the conservative Republican philosophy attractive to a wide range of voters. He built on that idea in his December 1973 speech to the southern GOP convention in Atlanta:

The battle we won in 1972 must be won again. Millions of Democrats must be made to see that philosophically they have more in common with us than with those who would erode our defenses, pawning our weapons to pay for some new experiment in social reform. . . .

You don’t have to sell your Democratic neighbors and friends on the Republican philosophy. Most of them already subscribe to it. What really is needed is to show them that what they believe is what we officially as a party stand for.
But the California governor had not yet figured out how to show conservative Democrats and independents that the GOP was their natural home. Any attempts to do so were being eclipsed by Watergate, which had by then engulfed Washington and put the future of the Republican Party in question.

In speeches and interviews, Reagan implored conservatives to remain focused on the party’s mission, saying: “The ’72 election gave us a new majority, a long-overdue realignment based not on party labels—but on basic philosophy. The tragedy of Watergate and the traumatic experience of these past years since then [have] obscured the meaning of that ’72 election. But the mandate registered by the people still remains. The people have not changed in philosophy.”

Reagan seemed like the right person to be preaching this sermon. Conservatives had been speculating about his potential to become a figurehead for American conservatism ever since he had won the governor’s race in 1966. Russell Kirk’s postprimary 1966 essay on conservatism in the *New York Times* magazine is one important illustration of the conservative consensus:

Mr. Reagan is something of a surprise. Previously he was a man of One Speech—and that chiefly an address to those already converted. But clearly he has been doing much reading and thinking and conferring, so that now he is ready with persuasive answers to nearly all questions.

Whether he can develop into a genuine leader of responsible conservatives will depend upon his performance as Governor—if he is elected. He is more supple than Mr. Goldwater, and willing to work. He will have to go a great way beyond his famous Speech, which was almost wholly a rapid-fire attack on a variety of affictions without alternative courses being presented, if he is to lead the conservative interest out of simple negativism.

Kirk’s essay identified Reagan’s most urgent challenge: could he move beyond a mere critique of existing policies to present voters with a clear set of alternatives? The questions that Kirk had raised in 1966 were still unanswered in the mid-1970s, as Reagan ended his tenure in Sacramento and geared up for his first full-scale presidential campaign. By this time Reagan had successfully staked out the position of defender, if not yet leader, of the conservative movement. But he had yet to build a coalition unified by anything more than conservatives’ opposition to
the failures of current policy. He was not yet anything more than a talented rhetorician.

But that change was already in the works. In late 1972, Governor Reagan had invited a group of domestic policy experts to meet with him at the Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles. There he expressed concern that Nixon’s landslide victory might not lead to restraints on government spending. He asked the experts in attendance about the feasibility of constructing a constitutional amendment to control California’s taxation and spending authority. The group had soon drafted an amendment to the state constitution, which Reagan put before California voters as Proposition 1 on November 6, 1973. Proposition 1 was defeated 54 percent to 46, thanks in large part to a massive opposition campaign launched by the California Teachers Association, the California State Employees Association, and the League of Women Voters, among other groups. But Reagan believed he had found an issue that mattered to voters. In a letter penned soon after the vote, he wrote: “We planted a seed and we won’t stop now. A number of other states have picked up the idea and may implement it before California does. We’ll keep on trying.”

Five years later, Californians passed Proposition 13, a property tax reduction measure. Voters in many other states passed similar measures. Reagan believed that Proposition 1 had paved the way for Proposition 13, and in the late 1970s he devoted numerous radio commentaries to his “tax revolt,” noting that it had attracted support from unexpected quarters, including the labor rank and file.

The journalist Peter Schrag has written that Proposition 13 “set the stage for the Reagan era and became both fact and symbol of a radical shift in governmental priorities, public attitudes, and social relationships that is as nearly fundamental in American politics as the changes brought by the New Deal.” Reagan biographer Lou Cannon concurs: if Schrag is right, then “Reagan helped set the stage for his own presidency when he put forward Proposition 1.” The tax cuts that Reagan advocated throughout the late 1970s became the core of his first economic agenda as president, and of his Economic Recovery Act of 1981.

The prairie fire that Reagan lit with anti-tax and spend sentiment would powerfully shape his heresthetical appeal in the 1980 presidential campaign. This message had not yet come together in the early 1970s, however. Nor had Reagan yet devised a way to present his prodefense views without seeming hawkish. While in Sacramento—and during subsequent years—he had maintained his national profile, but he had
done so without a grand strategy for how to link his message to a new coalition.

There were various failed attempts throughout this period. For instance, at one point the Reagan camp contemplated creating a new foundation that would support Reagan’s “undeclared campaign for the presidency.” This foundation would allow Reagan to stump the “mashed potato circuit” in support of Republican candidates. The idea, which did not seem to include a set of messages specifically tailored to broadening Reagan’s own political base, was abandoned.

Soon thereafter, however, Reagan and his aides embraced a different and more ambitious plan. In May 1974, Reagan held a gathering at his Pacific Palisades home with longtime aides and advisers Justin Dart, Mike Deaver, Peter Hannaford, Jim Jenkins, Jim Lake, Ed Meese, Holmes Tuttle, and Robert Walker. They discussed Reagan’s political future in light of rapidly unfolding events in Washington.

Three months after the meeting, Nixon resigned and Gerald Ford was immediately sworn in as president, prompting one Los Angeles Times reporter to write, “The last hope of Gov. Reagan ever to become President probably went glimmering.” Reagan didn’t see things in quite the same terms; instead, he declared his candidacy the year after Ford became president. When questioned about his decision, Reagan replied that Ford’s adherence to the conservative mandate of 1972 would determine his course of action.

Ford had known that Reagan was a potentially formidable rival, going back at least as far the wave of telegrams in 1973 urging him to select Reagan, not Rockefeller, as his vice president. Reagan’s prominence among Republicans most likely influenced Ford’s fall 1974 invitation for Reagan to join his administration as secretary of transportation. Reagan declined the offer and instead agreed to a set of activities that would enhance a presidential bid, should he decide to run. His aides prepared two strategy documents in 1974 that described how Reagan’s national activities could be used to best advantage. The first, “Ronald Reagan: Building a National Organization,” suggested “testing the potential strength of a Presidential bid, without RR overtly stepping out of the ‘mashed potato circuit’ role he has described for himself.” The second, “Ronald Reagan: A Program for the Future,” described the radio program, newspaper column, and speaking tours as significant means by which the governor could “maintain influence in the Republican Party; strengthen and consolidate leadership as the
national conservative spokesman; and enhance [his] foreign affairs credibility.”

By this time, Reagan had made a sort of mantra out of the need to build a broad-based coalition around conservative principles. But nothing in the ensuing litany of strategy documents, speeches, press conferences, or letters from this period indicates that he and his team had yet identified which groups they should recruit for their new majority beyond some grand and vague ideas about bringing Democrats, Republicans, and independents together.

As Reagan entered into his postgubernatorial phase, Republicans were busy assessing the disappointing results of the November 5, 1974, midterm elections, which had given the Democrats 43 new seats in the House and three in the Senate. The Democrats had also made a 5 percent gain in governorships and increased their numbers by 14 percent in the lower houses and 12 percent in the upper houses of state legislatures nationwide. While the 1974 results were not a complete negation of the GOP’s 1972 victory, many Republicans worried that they represented the beginning of a trend.

The experts were analyzing polling data for signs of such a trend. In January 1975, pollster Robert Teeter painted a bleak picture of the Republican Party for a meeting in Chicago of the party’s state chairmen. Teeter reported that the GOP could only claim 18 percent of Americans as members, explaining that there were “unbelievable increases in cynicism toward politics and American institutions in general and toward the Republican Party in particular.” Watergate and the Agnew scandal had taken their toll on the reputation of a party that not long before had been considered more honest and upright than the Democrats.

But Teeter’s findings were juxtaposed against more hopeful statistics. William Rusher began his 1975 book *The Making of the New Majority Party* by citing a May 1974 Gallup Poll in which 38 percent of those polled said they would choose a conservative party. Rusher also cited the results of a Harris survey in which 43 percent of Americans described themselves as “middle of the road,” 30 percent as “conservative,” 15 percent as “liberal,” 3 percent as “radical,” and 9 percent as “not sure.” Rusher concluded that, while the Republican Party might be in trouble, conservatism more generally was on the rise. He sought to describe the realignment that would bring conservatives together in one party: “In this book, I am proposing that America’s conservatives
set out to . . . form a new party that will replace the Republican Party
in toto as one of America’s two major parties.”54

Rusher’s new party was to be composed of social and economic con-
servatives. Social conservatives, such as blue-collar workers, had typi-
cally voted Democratic, whereas economically conservative business
elites and upper-income suburbanites were generally Republican. But
Rusher argued that the economic division between the “haves and the
have-nots” was disappearing. Blue-collar workers were finding com-
mon cause with businessmen and manufacturers against what he called
“a new and powerful class of non-producers comprised of a liberal ver-
balist elite (the dominant media, the major foundations and research
institutions, the educational establishment, the federal and state
bureaucracies) and a semi-permanent welfare constituency, all coexist-
ing happily in a state of mutually sustaining symbiosis.” “It is this new
economic and social cleavage,” he added, “that has produced the
imposing (though not yet politically united) conservative majority
detected by Dr. Gallup.”

The Making of the New Majority Party argued that this cleavage
could be exploited if social and economic conservatives joined forces.
“The social conservative,” Rusher wrote, “like the economic conserva-
tive, is at heart a stout individualist. He has an acute sense of individ-
ual as well as group identity, and shares the dream of personal success.
. . . Social conservatism can also serve to moderate the near-Puritan
severity of traditional conservative economics without undermining its
basic structure. And that is a contribution almost beyond price.”55

Rusher readily admitted that this was not a novel idea. He acknowl-
edged that a political movement in this direction had been in the works
for at least 15 years, thanks to the work of conservative thinkers such
as Kevin Phillips.56

Phillips, too, published a treatise on American political realignment
in 1975. Although his argument in Mediacracy: American Parties and
Policies in the Communications Age was not articulated in terms of
economic and social conservatives, his analysis was nonetheless consis-
tent with Rusher’s. Phillips was interested in the inexorable splintering
of the Democratic Party. “Opposition to liberal elitism,” he wrote, “is
strongest among the groups historically in the vanguard of opposition
to conservative elites.” He later observed that “the hostility between
the two wings of the Democratic Party was more pronounced than the
hostility between the two parties. On the one side were the key blocs of
the New Deal coalition: Southerners, ethnics, and blue-collar workers.
Leading the other side were the advocates of the New Politics (suburban liberals, skilled professionals, collegians) and their minority-group allies.” This fracture was prompting a historically unprecedented move to the right in which disaffected Democrats were increasingly open to leadership alternatives.57

These books by Rusher and Phillips, along with other analyses,58 signaled a conservative tour de force—an attempt to remake the American political landscape by shifting the political center of gravity away from the New Deal coalition and toward a revamped Republican Party, augmented by key elements of the Democratic Party’s traditional base.

Two objectives would have to be met in order for this transformation to occur. The first was the creation of a unifying appeal that would attract socially conservative Democrats to the Republican Party and convince social and economic conservatives of their common interests. The second was the designation of a leader who could make such an appeal convincing.

These issues formed the basis for the agenda of the Conservative Political Action Committee’s February 1975 meeting in Washington, DC. At the meeting, the CPAC created a Committee on Conservative Alternatives to consider how conservative Democrats, Republicans, and independents could be brought together and represented. The committee’s members included William Rusher (whose book was on the verge of publication) as well as Jesse Helms, who had been elected as the first-ever Republican senator from North Carolina. The group vowed to look at all alternatives, including the creation of a new party—a notion that Helms endorsed in his condemnation of the Ford administration. “The loudest applause from the 500 delegates . . . [went] to those [speakers] urging a third-party option in 1976,” columnist David Broder reported.59 Rusher was interested in jettisoning the Republican Party in favor of a new conservative movement.

Reagan responded to the call for a third party during his speech to the conference: “Is it a third party we need, or is it a new and revitalized second party, raising a banner of no pale pastels, but bold colors which makes it unmistakably clear where we stand on all of the issues troubling the people?”

Reagan’s speech also made use of the Gallup data that would soon appear in Rusher’s book: “I know you are aware of the national polls which show that a greater (and increasing) number of Americans—Republicans, Democrats and Independents—classify themselves as ‘conservatives’ than ever before.” To support this finding, Reagan also
cited a political science study showing that the delegates to the 1972 Republican convention held views similar to the party’s rank and file, while Democratic delegates were far removed from the opinions held by their party’s base. Reagan offered no policy positions that might have brought together a new majority, nor did he even describe the nature of that majority, as Rusher would do in his book. Instead, he quickly slipped back into “The Speech.”

Reagan had long advocated obedience to the eleventh commandment: “Thou shall not speak ill of a fellow Republican.” 60 But his address bluntly attacked the Ford administration’s policies. His litany of grievances included budget deficits, a shrinking commitment to national defense, and a compromise of American interests symbolized by the second Strategic Arms Limitation Agreement (SALT II).

As the country’s leading conservative politician, Reagan was the only plausible leader for a conservative third party, and his decision not to endorse the idea marked the end of the movement. His decision was based in part on an aversion to Wallace, who had been suggested as his running mate, and with whose positions he largely disagreed. 61

The Ford administration took a keen interest in these activities. In early 1975, the president continued his recruitment effort. Ford sent Donald Rumsfeld, his White House chief of staff, to meet with the governor. Peter Hannaford recalls that “this effort to co-opt him—and those that followed—in fact served to inch him a little closer to entertaining the idea of running.” 62

Two Presidential Contenders, Two Rhetorical Campaigns

A White House briefing paper had been commissioned in April 1975 to cover such topics as selecting a campaign chairman and determining how the White House would relate to the Republican National Committee. 63 The President Ford Committee (PFC) was formed that June, with Howard “Bo” Callaway as its chairman. Callaway was not only secretary of the army, but he was also a Georgia conservative who had campaigned in the South for Nixon in 1968. 64

The Ford campaign would rely on the Rose Garden effect throughout the race. A July 1, 1975, memo from Jerry Jones, director of the White House Scheduling and Advance Office, to Chief of Staff Rumsfeld and his deputy Richard Cheney urged Ford to announce his bid
from the White House. Ford had the distinction of being the only unelected president in American history, and he and his advisers wanted to minimize the salience of that distinction by portraying him as an incumbent. And, indeed, when Ford eventually announced his candidacy on July 8, he did so from the Oval Office.65

The president’s aides were concerned about the need for a theme or package of issues, both for Ford’s presidency and his campaign. In a November 12, 1975, memo to Cheney (who would become chief of staff just a few days later), Stuart Spencer, who had worked on Reagan’s 1966 gubernatorial campaign, and the pollster Robert Teeter expressed concern that the president was seen as a tactician without an overall strategy for the country. They suggested a variety of themes including opposing “big government, big unions, big businesses, big school systems and the concentration of power in general” in favor of “helping the individual live his life as independently as possible.” They also advised that the campaign take on a tone of morality and hope.66 These themes would be as central to Ford’s campaign as his incumbent’s advantage.

Ford knew he was vulnerable among conservative Republicans. He had inherited the legacy of Nixon’s détente along with a set of domestic policy decisions that many conservative Republican leaders considered betrayals of party values. Mindful of this charge, Cheney submitted a memo urging the president to “be very firm with Senator Goldwater [in their upcoming meeting]. He has to know that the bottom line is that you need him now, not later, and that you need him publicly, not just privately.”67 A November 5, 1975, New York Times article titled “The Ford Strategy” reported that “the new Ford strategy is based on the conviction that the President can successfully compete with Mr. Reagan for the votes of conservative Republicans in the South and Southwest,” both Reagan strongholds.68 As Craig Shirley has written, “Ford’s drift to the right” greatly displeased some moderate Republicans. The president persisted in his strategy, however.69 He worked to attract conservative support away from Reagan, who was ideologically much more in sync with conservative voters. In this regard at least, Ford’s 1976 campaign somewhat resembled Nixon’s strategy in 1968.

Unfortunately for Ford, the strategy didn’t work. The incumbent began to slip in the polls by late 1975. A national poll placed his disapproval rating at 44 percent and found that 60 percent of respondents could not think of anything that “particularly impressed them” about
the president. To counter the slippage, Teeter suggested to Callaway that they “put the bright light on Reagan.” He advised that the president refrain from taking part in negative campaigning, recommending instead that someone of high standing in the Republican Party should question Reagan’s gubernatorial record and the proposals that he had endorsed in his speeches.

The Reagan camp had expected that their man would compete as the Republican front-runner in an open field. But Nixon’s resignation had changed the game. It would be difficult for Reagan to honor the eleventh commandment while challenging a member of his own party, especially a sitting president. Reagan and his advisers took the position that because Ford had not been elected, he was not a genuine incumbent, nor had he ever won a national office. Furthermore, they questioned Ford’s commitment to the conservative philosophy that they believed truly represented the principles of the Republican Party and much of the nation. Their campaign would be based on the idea that this fellow Republican, although well liked within the party, was ineffective and should be unseated, whereas Reagan, a two-term governor of the most populous state in the nation and the declared representative of Republican conservatism, deserved the party’s nomination.

In “Thoughts on Campaign Strategy,” apparently written by John Sears, Ford’s ability to lead was discussed early in the document:

Among the Republican Party rank and file, it would be fair to say that Mr. Ford has alienated a significant number of conservatives because of his endorsement of deficit spending. He is unloved by the moderate-to-liberal wing of the Party because of his general lack of initiative. By so clearly handing over control of foreign policy to Dr. Kissinger and, at the same time blessing Vice President Rockefeller with major control over domestic policy Mr. Ford has perhaps robbed himself of the ability to demonstrate leadership to either the people or the Republicans.

Sears did not suggest that the Reagan campaign openly call the president an inadequate leader, but that would be the subtext of the campaign. Sears suggested the following diplomatic language be used when a Reagan-for-president committee was announced:

[O]ur perception tells us that the next few years will be as difficult as the preceding three and we feel a moral obligation to
do something constructive in anticipation of this fact. Lest anyone misconstrue our purpose, it is to be both loyal to Mr. Ford’s leadership while he is President and loyal to our obligation to the country in assuring that we consider carefully our responsibility as Republicans to nominate the best available candidate for President in 1976.

Such “a general statement is appropriate for us,” the document continued, “rather than a pointed statement which would be more easily interpreted as divisive. . . . [W]e want to make it as easy as possible for Mr. Ford to withdraw up to the time we are forced to run against him in the primaries.”

There was a real sense throughout the document that Reagan’s actions might encourage Ford to abandon his presidential campaign. It was suggested that “an early ‘break’ with Mr. Ford might force him to stay in the race and certainly we would not want to be responsible for that.”

For many years, Reagan had been citing the Washington buddy system as a root cause of many of the nation’s ills. He continued to make this case by campaigning against Ford as the ultimate Washington insider. After all, Ford had first been elected to Congress in 1948. As the chair of Reagan’s presidential committee, Nevada senator Paul Laxalt, put it, “We’re not saying President Ford is not doing a good job. We feel he is. But Governor Reagan could do a better job, because he is totally independent of the federal government scene.”

Reagan’s 1976 bid was characterized by more concrete policies and sharper distinctions between himself and his opponent than his 1968 effort. But the two resembled each other in the sense that the campaigns were still based on rhetoric rather than any more advanced type of strategic maneuvering.

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Ford versus Reagan: 1975

As Reagan made his rapid transition from governor to policy pundit in January 1975, President Ford was putting forth economic plans that were not wholly inconsistent with the governor’s ideas. On January 13, for example, the president proposed to cut income taxes by $16 billion. But he submitted his fiscal year 1976 budget to Congress less than a month later, on February 3, and its proposals for $349.4 billion in
spending and a record peacetime deficit of $51.9 billion irritated many conservatives. Ford was aware of the need to defuse their anger. That spring he signed the Tax Reduction Act of 1975, which promised $23 billion in tax cuts.75 By mid-1975, he had made reasonable headway against inflation and unemployment.76

On aid to South Vietnam, too, Ford adopted a position largely congruent with Reagan’s views. In early 1975, the president asked Congress to approve his financial and military assistance package for Saigon. On February 4, 1975, he said, “I believe that if the Congress funds the additional money that I’ve proposed for this fiscal year and continues the money that I have recommended for next fiscal year the South Vietnamese can and will be able to defend themselves against the aggressors from the North.”77 Although they approved $405 million in aid to Vietnamese refugees, Congress rejected Ford’s request to supply South Vietnam with direct economic and military aid. In April, with a Communist takeover of his country imminent, President Thieu resigned. The Vietcong took over the country on April 30. Both Ford and Reagan could claim that they had warned that this might happen.

On another Cold War issue, however, their positions did not coincide, and Reagan promptly exploited this fact. Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn criticized the Soviet regime in a speech in the United States on June 30. Following the speech, Ford was advised by members of his national security team, including his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, not to receive the dissident at the White House because the encounter would be a violation of the terms and the spirit of U.S.-Soviet détente. Reagan derided this decision in speeches and writings and received national media attention for his stance. He was joined by leading conservative opinion makers in his opposition to the president’s decision.78

Reagan’s political momentum was typically tempered by Ford’s ability to make slight gestures to the right. For instance, on July 25, the president met with leaders of European ethnic organizations to explain his decision to attend the East-West conference in Helsinki, a move that was opposed by leading conservatives, including Reagan, as well as by some European groups. The president told them that having the United States and the Soviet Union sign a document mandating the freer flow of people and ideas was an important step forward for superpower relations, and promised that the United States would continue “to support the aspirations for freedom and national independence of the peoples in Eastern Europe.”79 He left the next day on his ten-day trip to Europe.
Meanwhile, Reagan was speaking out against Ford’s signing of the Helsinki Accords, as the various clusters of East-West agreements were known. In late July, Reagan urged “all Americans” to oppose the Helsinki documents because they abandoned those behind the Iron Curtain. On July 31, Soviet general secretary Leonid Brezhnev gave a speech to the Helsinki conference in which he declared that no nation had the right to interfere in the internal policies of another. For many conservatives, Brezhnev’s statement confirmed Reagan’s suspicions.80

The Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, as the agreements were officially titled, was signed on August 1 by Canada, the United States, the Soviet Union, and a host of European countries. That same day, Ford gave a talk that the New York Times described as “the most forcefully delivered address of his year in the Presidency,” and the Washington Post labeled an “unexpectedly firm speech.” In his comments, the president said the new agreements must not be “empty words and unfulfilled pledges,” and that the signatories “will not be judged by the promises we make but by the promises we keep.”81 Secretary of State Henry Kissinger reportedly tried to convince the president not to give the speech, fearing that it would compromise U.S.-Soviet détente. The president, however, continued to take a tough line on superpower relations, following his August 1 remarks with a similarly stern speech in Minneapolis 18 days later.82 Ford was not adopting the conservative position on Helsinki, but he was certainly co-opting Reagan’s rhetoric.

Reagan, however, was undaunted, and continued to combine his hard rhetorical line with his well-known oratorical strengths. One such effort occurred on September 26, when he gave a speech in Chicago titled “Let the People Rule.” In it, he proposed “nothing less than a systematic transfer of authority and resources to the states—a program of creative federalism for America’s third century.” He argued that the transfer of authority would reduce federal spending by $90 billion.83 The speech was not so much a direct attack on Ford as it was a move beyond him, to call for a radical change in American social policy.

Two days before his “Let the People Rule” speech, Reagan had attacked Ford more directly during a speech in Memphis. Criticizing the president’s support for transferring authority over the Panama Canal to the Panamanians, Reagan cautioned that “the Soviets would like to control the world’s waterways . . . the Panama Canal would be a tempting prize [and] . . . the Canal is an important defense and commercial lifeline” for the United States. He summed up with a line that
would become famous in his stump speeches: “We bought it. We paid for it. We built the Canal.”

In early December, Ford traveled to Asia, where he outlined a carefully framed Pacific Doctrine that reaffirmed his commitment to normalized relations with the People’s Republic of China while simultaneously reassuring our allies in the region: “The preservation of the sovereignty and the independence of our Asian friends and allies remain a paramount objective to American policy.” The speech also described America’s alliance with Japan as a “pillar” of U.S. strategy in the region. By the late 1970s, Reagan would become the leading conservative critic of normalizing relations with the PRC; but Ford was not advocating a move away from existing American commitments throughout Asia. The president was closing the rhetorical gap between him and Reagan through his actions and statements.

Ford versus Reagan: 1976

As primary season got under way in early 1976, Reagan continued to challenge Ford’s policies, and Ford continued to deftly counter by making statements subtly tinged with conservatism. On January 4, the Times was reporting that Ford was responding to Democratic calls for increased government spending with a statement that he wanted to limit the federal budget to $395 billion. Sounding like Reagan, Ford said that inflation, not unemployment, should be the government’s primary economic concern, and advocated reduced government regulation of business.

On January 4, the Times also reported that Ford’s upcoming State of the Union speech was going to endorse a $10 billion tax cut, and that his proposal for holding down federal spending was a preemptive maneuver against Reagan. In his address to the nation on January 19, the president indeed offered policies consistent with the ideas that Reagan had been endorsing in his speeches, radio commentaries, and writings. For instance, he called for an adjustment in federal estate tax laws to help those who inherited farms and small businesses, and demanded a decrease in federal government’s involvement in the lives of Americans.

Throughout the primaries Reagan hammered away on détente and rearmament. In a speech in Jacksonville, Florida, on January 14, Reagan had reviewed his stance on foreign and defense policy: “As a nation we must commit ourselves to spend whatever is necessary to remain
Ford won the Iowa caucus on January 19, garnering 45 percent of the 20,000 votes to Reagan’s 42 percent. Following this victory, the Ford administration had issued defense budget projections that included long-term increases in defense spending. The president was well positioned to co-opt Reagan’s stance on defense and détente.

The next big test was New Hampshire on February 24. In their quest for issues that could be used against Reagan, the president’s strategists returned to the challenger’s “Let the People Rule” speech. In a November 3, 1975, memo to Dick Cheney, the White House advance chief Jerry Jones suggested challenging the figures Reagan used in the speech. By January, the speech was back in the headlines. And in the run-up to the New Hampshire primary, the Ford team pointed to it as proof that Reagan lacked a firm grasp of fiscal issues. Lou Cannon contends that the speech actually lost Reagan the nomination. In any case, Reagan’s rhetoric clearly was not working. Ford left New Hampshire with 49.4 percent of the vote to Reagan’s 48.0 percent.

With the momentum of wins in Iowa and New Hampshire behind him, the president rolled on to a string of primary victories in Massachusetts, Vermont, Florida, and Illinois. Prior to these primaries, Ford declared, “I don’t use the word ‘détente’ any more. I think what we ought to say is that the United States will meet with the superpowers, the Soviet Union and with China and others, and seek to relax tensions so that we can continue a policy of peace through strength.” Once again he was adopting Reagan’s rhetoric—even though he disagreed with the governor on the substance of defense policy.

Fighting to protect his rhetorical turf, Reagan told an Orlando audience in early March that the United States “is no longer the first military power on earth. . . . There is little doubt in my mind that the Soviet Union will not stop taking advantage of détente until it sees that the American people have elected a new President and appointed a new Secretary of State.”

It was not until the March 23 North Carolina primary that Reagan was finally able to halt Ford’s progress. Following Riker’s dispersion principle, Reagan shifted his rhetorical focus to the Panama Canal and
détente, both hot-button issues for many conservatives. Jesse Helms, one of Reagan’s few supporters in the Senate, had tipped the challenger that voters in his home state were deeply concerned about maintaining American control over the canal. Indeed, one presidential historian has described Reagan’s heightened attention to the canal issue as “the turning point in the campaign.”95 It was a telling rhetorical blow that Ford could only counter with the relatively weak promise that the United States would never give up operational control of the canal, and would retain the right to defend the waterway. Reagan, having found an effective issue, adopted the dominance principle, declaring that the Ford administration lacked resolve in the face of Soviet and Cuban military involvement in Angola and that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger helped produce a flawed policy of détente.96 Reagan won 52.4 percent of the North Carolina vote to Ford’s 45.9 percent. The Reagan candidacy was revived.

A week after the North Carolina contest, Ford threatened a veto if Congress cut his defense spending bill.97 He was very convincingly taking steps that were consistent with the interests of conservative Republicans. Two days later, on March 31, Reagan continued his critique of Ford’s foreign policy. In a nationally televised address, the governor once again critiqued U.S. participation in the Helsinki Accords on the grounds that it put a “stamp of approval on Russia’s enslavement of the captive nations.”98

Although Ford regained momentum on April 6, winning Wisconsin with 55.2 percent to Reagan’s 44.3 percent, his campaign was on the run. In an April 9 memo from Dave Gergen to Dick Cheney, the latest political assessment of Al Sindlinger, a public opinion analyst, was reported: “Continuing an upward surge that began a few weeks ago, the President moved up to a 56.9% overall approval rating in mid-March. His toughness on détente and foreign policy along with more good news on the economic front were the buoying factors. However, the North Carolina primary and the flap over HAK [Henry A. Kissinger]—fueled by the Reagan attacks—began cutting into the President’s popularity in the last several days of March. It sank to 49%—a 7 point drop—in the final week of March, and Sindlinger thinks it has dropped some more since then. The President’s foreign policy rating is the most interesting: from a high of 61.7 in mid-March to 46.9 by the end of the month.”99 In an April 12 memo to the president’s chief of staff, Gergen continued to review Sindlinger’s reading of the political landscape. The former California governor “[c]ontinues to haunt GRF
[Gerald R. Ford] on foreign policy/détente but has failed to take advantage of economic situation. Apparently doesn’t understand it.100 Reagan’s rhetorical attacks on foreign and defense policy became the chief concern of the Ford campaign.

The president stepped up his counterattack on the Panama question. On April 23, he called Reagan’s position on the canal treaties “irresponsible.” Six days later, he added that ceasing the negotiations could lead to “guerrilla warfare” and “bloodshed” in Panama.101

Ultimately, though, Reagan’s strategy was insufficient to beat Ford decisively. Instead, the two men ran almost neck-and-neck throughout the primaries. On April 27, Ford won a landslide victory in Pennsylvania, 92.1 percent to Reagan’s 5.1. A week later Reagan beat the president in Georgia with 68.3 percent of the vote to Ford’s 31.7 percent. The challenger went on to take the Indiana and Nebraska primaries in quick succession. Ford rallied with victories in West Virginia on May 11 and in Maryland and Michigan on the eighteenth. On May 25, Reagan took Arkansas, Idaho, and Nevada, while Ford prevailed in Kentucky, Oregon, and Tennessee. On June 1, Reagan won Montana and South Dakota, while Ford won Rhode Island.

Soon thereafter, the Ford campaign distributed a radio spot that amplified Reagan’s June 2, 1976, response to a hypothetical question in which he stated that “in the interest of peace and avoiding bloodshed,” the United States might consider sending troops to Rhodesia. When the Ford campaign proceeded to air a radio commercial suggesting that, if elected, Reagan might start a war, the Reagan campaign immediately inveighed against the charge. President Ford acknowledged his role in making the radio commercial and even admitted on television that he thought Reagan would make a good president. Ford’s victory was that his mea culpa did not detract from the message that he, not his opponent, could deliver peace through strength.102 The primary season was nearing its end, and Reagan had not been able to launch a substantive rhetorical challenge to Ford.

Unsurprisingly, California went to Reagan on June 8, with Ford taking New Jersey and Ohio that same day. He also prevailed in New York’s delegate-selection primary, while Reagan was the favorite in the delegate-selection primary in Texas.

To win the Republican presidential nomination, a candidate needed at least 1,136 delegate votes. At the close of primary season, Ford claimed 961 votes, and Reagan 856.103 The convention in Kansas City would be a real contest.
The Reagan team had two tactics that they planned to use to pick off Ford delegates at the convention. The first was a procedural measure, Rule 16c, which would force Ford to announce his running mate before the final balloting. As noted earlier, Reagan had already announced his choice of Richard Schweiker, a moderate Republican from Pennsylvania who lent the ticket both ideological and geographic breadth. The choice had cost Reagan the support of some hard-line conservatives, but his core coalition remained intact. Reagan’s campaign manager, John Sears, who masterminded the Schweiker selection, thought that forcing Ford to select his running mate before the balloting might cause a stampede of delegates to Reagan, especially if the president chose a partner unacceptable to conservatives.104

When the Rule 16c tactic failed, the team turned to its second plan. Martin Anderson and Peter Hannaford (with help from Richard Allen, Reagan’s foreign policy adviser) wrote a statement for the platform titled “Morality and Foreign Policy”—a theme that had helped Reagan win a number of primaries—in which they attacked the Nixon-Ford-Kissinger version of détente. The statement expressed admiration for Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn, whom President Ford had refused to see a year earlier: “We recognize and commend that beacon of human courage and morality . . . for his compelling message that we must face the world with no illusions about the nature of tyranny.” The statement criticized détente, lamenting, “We . . . grant unilateral favors with only the hope of getting future favors in return,” and then turned to lambaste the Helsinki Accords: “Agreements that are negotiated . . . must not take from those who do not have freedom the hope of one day gaining it.” The statement neatly linked morality and foreign policy in a way that discredited the version of détente with which Ford had historically been associated.

Convinced that their statement was a true representation of the party’s position, and confident that the delegates would approve its inclusion as a plank in the GOP platform, many in the Reagan camp hoped for a floor fight. They believed that an open dispute over such a substantive issue would prompt delegates to switch their allegiance in significant enough numbers to give Reagan the nomination.

It was a well-conceived strategy, but one that failed to allow for the possibility of compromise. A few hours before the balloting began Ford approved the new plank, which had already received an affirmative voice vote from the convention floor. His advisers had convinced him that he was too close to clinching the nomination to enter into a fresh
battle with Reagan. But his decision cost him the support of delegates from both ends of the ideological spectrum. Liberal Republicans like John Anderson argued that the statement was an affront to the president’s aspirations for U.S.-Soviet relations, while conservatives like Jesse Helms wanted stronger, more direct language. Kissinger saw the plank as being directed squarely at him and urged the president to fight back.

On August 19, Gerald Ford just squeaked past Ronald Reagan by a vote of 1,187 to 1,070. After giving his acceptance speech, the president invited Reagan to join him on the podium. In discussing a request he received to write a letter that would be kept in a time capsule for 100 years, the governor expressed concern about “the erosion of freedom taking place under Democratic rule in this country.” He then said:

> [W]e live in a world in which the great powers have aimed and poised at each other horrible missiles of destruction, nuclear weapons that can in minutes arrive at each other’s country and destroy virtually the civilized world we live in.

> And suddenly it dawned on me; those who would read this letter a hundred years from now will know whether those missiles were fired.

> They will know whether we met our challenge.

> Whether they will have the freedom that we have known up until now will depend on what we do here. Will they look back with appreciation and say, “Thank God for those people in 1976 who headed off the loss of freedom? Who kept us now a hundred years later free? Who kept our world from nuclear destruction?”

> And if we fail they probably won’t get to read the letter at all because it spoke of individual freedom and they won’t be allowed to talk of that or read of it.

> This is our challenge and this is why we’re here in this hall tonight.105

As one Reagan aide wrote, “Ronald Reagan left Kansas City not as a defeated candidate but as the leader of a large segment of his party and with the respect of those who had not supported him.”106 He had confirmed his right to the conservative mantle.

Reagan was an orator far superior to Ford, as became evident during his brief remarks at the convention. But oratorical skill does not automatically translate into rhetorical prowess. Reagan was never able
to obtain rhetorical distance from Ford. This was due both to Ford’s ability to co-opt Reagan’s rhetoric and to the fact that Ford and Reagan were not actually that far apart on many policy issues. Both men believed that the Nixon-era decline in defense spending should be reversed. By virtue of his incumbency, Ford had the distinct advantage of being able to actually increase defense spending, while Reagan could only talk about doing so. Nor were they much different in the specifics, with both men advocating the addition of ships to the naval fleet, the modernization of America’s nuclear force, production of the B-1 bomber, and development of a new land-based MX missile.107

Ford and Reagan were similar, too, on important social issues. Both advocated racial integration while opposing mandatory busing. Reagan favored a constitutional amendment against the use of federal funds for abortion, while Ford opposed the amendment but agreed that the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* was not in line with his thinking.

The conservative party leaders were ideologically closer to Reagan, but Ford, like Nixon before him, had satisfied them enough in word and deed to garner their support. Furthermore, although he was not an elected incumbent, Ford was the occupant of the White House. In a letter dated June 29, 1976, Senator Barry Goldwater wrote, “[F]rankly, the philosophy presented by the two candidates is almost identical and the solutions offered to the problems, in most cases coincide.” Not only was Reagan unable to gain rhetorical distance from Ford, but his negative campaign tactic of questioning Ford’s commitment to conservative principles and of questioning his fitness for office was not as appealing as he had hoped. Goldwater continued: “[M]y decision [to support Ford] rests solely on the fact that at this time in our history I do not believe that our government can suffer through months and months of reorganization that would be necessary if we had a change in the office.”108 Although conservative party leaders agreed more with Reagan’s philosophy than Ford’s, the president had run a campaign that convinced them both that he could be elected president and that he would adhere to conservative principles.

Despite their similarities on some key policy issues, and despite Ford’s ability to defuse Reagan’s attacks by moving to the right, the two men differed profoundly on the issue of the Cold War. In his radio commentaries and other speeches and writings, Reagan had been advocating replacing détente and containment with a radically different military strategy, one that would encourage the Soviet Union to quit the
fight. Reagan had not yet found the rhetoric with which to voice his ideas effectively. Not until 1980 would he identify a way to make his differences with his fellow Republicans fully apparent.

The Presidential Campaign: September to November 1976

Following the Republican Convention of 1976, however, Reagan began making his transition from rhetorician to heresthetician. Riker theorizes that herestheticians typically have had substantial prior practice and success as rhetoricians, and Ronald Reagan fit this description. By the fall of 1976, he certainly had substantial practice and success as a rhetorician, having been running for president in one way or another for almost 10 years.

Reagan's activities, after his close loss at the convention despite his having won 50.7 percent of the total vote in the primaries, offer compelling evidence that he was already planning his next presidential bid. Soon after the convention, Reagan restarted his nationally syndicated radio program and newspaper column, which would be distributed twice weekly by the King Features Syndicate. The broadcasts, many of which Reagan wrote, were taped on September 1 and began airing on September 20. The first radio commentaries focused on the convention, and Reagan boasted about his accomplishment in getting his “morality in foreign policy” statement into the GOP platform.

In addition to broadcasting to millions of listeners the imprint of his conservative philosophy on the Republican platform, Reagan also stumped his way across 25 states on behalf of the Ford-Dole ticket and made televised speeches and commercials for them, as well. These activities kept Reagan at the forefront of American politics in the fall of 1976 despite his defeat in the primaries.

As two close Reagan observers have noted, “Reagan started running the day after Jimmy Carter's election, whether he admitted it to himself or not. He stepped up his schedule of speaking engagements and he had two other pretty good pulpits from which to preach his conservative message—his radio program and his newspaper column. . . . In short, it was apparent that Reagan was planning a comeback.”

In letters Reagan wrote to his supporters soon after the Republican convention, the governor revealed that he was already looking beyond the November election and that his radio commentaries, newspaper
columns, and speaking engagements were central to his national plans. In one such letter he declared:

[We] must be ready in November, after the election, to reassess and mobilize the Democrats and Independents we know are looking for a banner around which to rally. To that end, I think I can be something of a voice and intend doing all I can to bring about a new majority coalition. Our cause is not lost and may even be more possible in the days ahead. Don’t lose faith and don’t think the war is over. I’m starting my five-day-a-week radio commentaries, newspaper column and speaking tours immediately.\textsuperscript{113}

In another postconvention letter written around the same time, he stated, “It would have been easier the other way;” that is, having been chosen as the Republican Party’s presidential nominee. But, he said, “we’ll try by remote control,” he assured his supporters, referring to his radio program and newspaper column.\textsuperscript{114}

Even before the \textit{1976} election was held, Reagan had already begun his heresthetic transformation. As Martin Anderson, one of Reagan’s advisers in his \textit{1976} presidential bid, has recalled, “On October 8, \textit{1976}, at the height of the presidential campaign between Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, and almost a year before the Kemp-Roth tax cut legislation was introduced, Reagan authored a national newspaper column entitled ‘Tax Cuts and Increased Revenue.’” In the column, Reagan said: “Warren Harding did it. John Kennedy did it. But Jimmy Carter and President Ford aren’t talking about it. That ‘it’ that Harding and Kennedy had in common was to cut the income tax. In both cases, federal revenues went up instead of down . . . the presidential candidates would do us all a service if they would discuss the pros and cons of the concept. Since the idea worked under both Democratic and Republican administrations before, who’s to say it couldn’t work again?”\textsuperscript{115} Reagan’s newspaper column was prescient.

The idea of tax cuts as a means of unleashing the productivity and creativity of the American people was present in Reagan’s \textit{1976} presidential bid and pre-\textit{1980} speeches and writings. By his \textit{1980} presidential race, however, the governor had woven a plan to cut taxes into an overall economic package that carried the promise of prosperity for all Americans.

On the foreign policy front, Reagan would continue throughout the
late 1970s to write and speak about morality in U.S. diplomacy. In his 1980 presidential bid, though, his primary focus would be on defining what he meant by a strategy of strength, tying the strategy to the goal of securing the United States’ position as the number one military power, and arguing that personal income taxes could be cut and defense spending markedly increased while the rate of inflation came down. The 1976 presidential bid both helped Reagan become a better rhetorician and find his way to heresthetic.