

RONALD W. REAGAN'S CAMPAIGN FOR THE REPUBLICAN PARTY'S 1968 PRESIDENTIAL NOMINATION

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Seldom has a serious presidential candidate run with less than two years experience as governor, and who held no other public office, as Ronald W. Reagan did in 1968. Yet, Reagan made a strong challenge for the 1968 Republican Party's nomination, despite his limited political experience. This paper will trace Reagan's first presidential campaign.

Although Reagan had been an actor for most of his life, he did have some background in politics. This experience included six terms as president of the Screen Actors Guild, and giving many speeches for Republican presidential candidates, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Richard M. Nixon, and Barry M. Goldwater. In 1954 Reagan became host of General Electric Theater, which he also sometimes acted in. Another part of Reagan's duties for G. E. involved touring their 135 plants. In these tours he met about 250,000 employees and made many speeches, mostly on politics, at the plants and cities he visited.¹

On October 27, 1964 Reagan's stirring speech, "A Time for Choosing," supporting Republican presidential nominee, Senator Goldwater of Arizona, was shown on national television. The talk impressed several influential and wealthy businessmen including Holmes P. Tuttle and Henry Salvatori, who helped convince Reagan to run for governor of California in 1966.² In the 1966 Republican gubernatorial primary Reagan easily defeated his only serious opposition, former San Francisco mayor, George Christopher.³ Reagan's opponent in the general election was the Democratic Governor Edmund G. "Pat" Brown, who said that after serving eight years as governor he was "tired of his job," and had little left to accomplish in office. Brown also admitted underestimating Reagan, who defeated him by almost one million votes.⁴ This impressive victory in a state with California's great size and national influence made Governor-elect Reagan immediately a possible presidential candidate. On election night, 6 November 1966, "Reagan for President" banners abounded. At a news conference after winning Reagan said he had no plans to run for president, but that he might be a favorite son candidate to prevent a divisive presidential primary in California.⁵

Less than ten days after his victory over Brown, Reagan met with two key aides, Thomas C. Reed and F.

Clifton White, to discuss a possible presidential campaign for 1968.⁶ White organized and led a committee to draft Senator Goldwater for president in 1964. He also directed Goldwater's delegate campaign, and was his floor manager at the 1964 Republican Convention.⁷ During the 1968 presidential election White performed these same functions for Reagan. Reed served Reagan in a variety of positions, including appointments and traveling secretary.⁸ Governor Reagan said he opposed Reed and White campaigning for him, but there is no evidence of him actually trying to curtail their activities.

The 1962 gubernatorial and the 1964 presidential Republican primaries in California created some serious divisions between the party's moderates and conservatives. Because of the conflict, Reagan was selected as a compromise candidate in the state's 1968 presidential primary. Running as a favorite son allowed Reagan to be nominated for president without announcing his candidacy.⁹

Before a scandal surfaced in his Administration in the fall, 1967 had been an encouraging year for a possible Reagan presidential bid. In that year Ronald Reagan appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* on May 22nd and *Time* on October 20th, with New York Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller. While Reagan's popularity rose, Michigan Governor George M. Romney, the early GOP favorite, saw his support decline greatly. Governor Romney was hurt most by his statement in a 31 August 1967 television interview that he had been "brainwashed" into supporting the Vietnam War by American military leaders and diplomats, and now opposed the war. This statement damaged Romney's credibility, and his campaign never recovered.¹⁰

While Romney faded, Richard Nixon emerged as the leading candidate, although many Republicans had reservations about his ability to win. The former Vice-President had been defeated in the 1960 presidential election and in California's 1962 gubernatorial race. Nixon himself believed he had to enter and win most of the GOP presidential primaries in order to dispel his loser's image.¹¹ Rockefeller was a possible candidate, but his liberal views and failure to support Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election made his chances of winning the Republican nomination very slim. Because of Nixon's liabilities, and the absence of other strong candidates, Reagan's candidacy appeared more plausible.¹² As a result, Reagan seemed more amenable to running, saying in June of 1967, "If the Republican Party comes beating at my door I won't say, 'Get lost, fellows.'" The California Governor noted, however, that he did not expect to be

drafted.¹³

A Gallup Poll in the summer of 1967 showed Ronald Reagan's growing popularity. In a poll on the major Republican contenders, Reagan finished third with 11 percent of the vote, behind Romney's 25 percent, and Nixon's 39 percent. Rockefeller finished fourth, one point behind Reagan. Considering Reagan had been governor of California less than a year, his showing in the poll was very respectable.¹⁴

Reagan made several speaking tours in the fall and winter of 1967, including stops in South Carolina, Wisconsin, Oregon, Washington, Illinois, Iowa, Texas, Kentucky, Kansas, Florida, and Connecticut.¹⁵ He received his most enthusiastic response at a dinner in Columbia, South Carolina, where he helped the state Republican party pay off a \$40,000 debt.¹⁶ Reagan's communications director, Franklyn "Lyn" Nofziger, predicted that Reagan's speeches would "light a prairie fire," which would win him the 1968 Republican presidential nomination.¹⁷

Just as the Reagan campaign gained momentum it was slowed by a homosexual scandal. Aides of Reagan found that two members of his Administration were homosexuals, who were apparently trying to recruit other gays to the Governor's staff. In September 1967 Reagan was told about the problem and given a detailed report on it. Reagan publicly denied these events at a 31 October 1967 press conference, and at later conferences. These denials hurt Reagan's credibility, because unknown to him, Lyn Nofziger had earlier told the press about the homosexual ring.¹⁸

Reagan's other main problems involved the budget. For his first budget he overestimated California's debt at \$750 million. In reality, the deficit was only \$194 million, and Reagan's massive tax increase proved unnecessary.¹⁹ The Governor tried to make a large cut in funding for Medi-Cal, California's medical program for the poor, which he claimed was \$210 million in debt. Later, Reagan admitted he was wrong, and that Medi-Cal was in the black.²⁰ His early difficulties in office caused one writer to predict Reagan might find it easier to run for president in 1968 than to seek re-election as governor of California in 1970.²¹

The leaders of the Reagan presidential campaign, Reed, White, and Nofziger, faced a serious obstacle in the Governor's unwillingness to declare his candidacy officially for the Republican nomination. Nonetheless, his backers developed a credible plan for winning the GOP nomination. Film, television, radio, and newspaper advertising was used to compensate for their candidate's decision not to solicit voters

directly in the primary states. Reagan did not enter any of the presidential primaries, except California, where he was a favorite son, and ran unopposed. However, three states, Wisconsin, Nebraska, and Oregon, automatically listed all major possible candidates on their ballots, which allowed Reagan to run in these primaries without announcing his candidacy. If Reagan had really been uninterested in the GOP nomination he could have simply sent an affidavit stating he was not a candidate to each of the states, and his name would not have been put on their ballots.²²

The Reagan strategy had several advantages. First, since Reagan was not formally campaigning he was not expected to win in any of the primaries except in California. He only had to make a significant showing in a few states. Nixon, however, entered most of the primaries, and would have been in trouble if he had lost in any of these contests. Second, in 1968 only about 150 out of the 1,333 Republican delegates were chosen in presidential primaries.²³ This meant that, unlike subsequent presidential elections, Reagan's decision against formally entering many primaries did not preclude him from winning a significant number of delegates. Furthermore, Reagan's great potential base of support, the South, had only one primary (Florida's where only unpledged delegates ran), which left all of the region's 356 delegates open to him.²⁴ Third, at the outset of the 1968 election there were a large number of favorite sons (about 15) who controlled enough GOP delegates to make it difficult for a candidate to win on the first ballot. Reagan stood a good chance of winning a deadlocked convention.²⁵

Reagan drew poorly in the first two Republican primaries. In the New Hampshire primary he got only 326 write-in votes, and 11 percent of the vote in the Wisconsin primary. Reagan's supporters ran a limited campaign in Wisconsin. Richard Nixon won landslide victories with almost 80 percent of the vote in each.²⁶ An organized Reagan effort for the May 14th Nebraska primary, including television and mail advertising, won him about 22 percent of the vote, and gave his campaign a boost. Nixon won the primary with about 70 percent of the vote.²⁷

Just after the New Hampshire primary it appeared that Rockefeller would declare his candidacy for the Republican party's nomination, but on March 21st he announced he was not running. Six weeks later Rockefeller reversed himself, "acting as if the starting gate were a revolving door," and declared his candidacy.²⁸ Rockefeller's late entry kept him off

all the primary ballots, and outside of the Northeast, the liberal Governor had little delegate support.

On May 19 Reagan began a campaign swing that covered 7,000 miles in five days. He delivered speeches in New Orleans, Charlotte, Fort Lauderdale, Miami Beach, Chicago, Columbus, and Cleveland.²⁹ When Reagan spoke at Tulane University he attacked welfare and lawbreakers, and threatened to "kick the devil out of the Viet Cong" if the peace talks failed. Reporters noted Reagan sounded like the candidate he claimed not to be.³⁰

While in New Orleans Reagan had a very important meeting with the Southern Republican state chairmen. Since no Southern delegates were tied up in presidential primaries, the chairmen had great influence with their state delegations. The conference was arranged by three leading chairmen, Clarke Reed of Mississippi, William Murfin of Florida, and Harry S. Dent of South Carolina. Reed, Murfin, and Dent all supported Nixon, but wanted the Southern delegations to delay committing to a candidate in order to have more influence at the convention.³¹ Governor Nelson Rockefeller also attended the meeting, but was invited only as a courtesy since he had almost no support in the South. There appeared to be no coordination between Reagan and Rockefeller for the meeting. Reagan stated his unequivocal disinterest in the vice-presidency to quell thoughts of a Rockefeller-Reagan ticket.³² Throughout 1968 Reagan was adamant about not wanting to hold the office and rigidly denied being a presidential candidate. The latter particularly hurt him with the Southern delegates, who were reluctant to endorse a politician not officially running, or even hinting that he would later announce candidacy. Harry Dent believes that if Reagan had asked the chairmen for their support in the charged atmosphere of the meeting many of them would have given it.³³ Reagan never again had as good an opportunity to win delegate support in the South.

Reagan supporters made a serious campaign effort for the May 28th Oregon primary spending about \$200,000. Extensive statewide newspaper, radio, and television advertising (a thirty minute color documentary film on Reagan was shown) was used.³⁴ The Oregon "Citizens for Reagan"'s theme, "the winning candidate," referred to Nixon losing two elections, including the 1962 gubernatorial election to Governor Brown, whom Reagan trounced in 1966.³⁵ Reagan himself did not go into Oregon to campaign. He did appear on the "Meet the Press" television program two days before the primary, and gave his views on many national issues. Reagan suffered a memory lapse when

he was asked to describe some specific issues on which he and the extremely conservative 1964 presidential nominee Barry Goldwater differed. He responded, "There are a lot of specific issues--I was trying to recall--frankly, my memory is failing me."³⁶

Nixon won the Oregon primary with about 73 percent of the vote to Reagan's 23 percent. Rockefeller, whose write-in campaign did very poorly, received the remaining votes. Reagan tried to seem pleased with the election results, saying that a showing of 15 percent would have made his supporters "ecstatic."³⁷ These comments were completely unrealistic because Reagan barely bettered his Nebraska showing despite his supporters spending ten times as much. Most political observers believed Reagan needed to win at least 30 percent of the vote to remain viable.³⁸ One week after the Oregon primary Reagan won the California primary where he was opposed by a poorly funded slate of unpledged delegates.³⁹

After Nixon's impressive Oregon victory his chances of winning the GOP nomination were further strengthened by his May 31st and June 1st meeting with twelve Republican Southern state chairmen in Atlanta, Georgia. At the meeting Nixon expressed views virtually as conservative as Reagan's, and won endorsements from South Carolina Senator J. Strom Thurmond, and some of the state chairmen. Nixon now appeared to have nearly 300 delegates in the South.⁴⁰

After the primaries Reagan made a late blitz for the GOP nomination. Contrary to his coy public remarks about his candidacy, in early July Reagan informed a major Rockefeller advisor, Emmet John Hughes, that he would remain in the race to the end. The Reagan and Rockefeller campaigns made an agreement that neither candidate would withdraw from the race in order to try to prevent a first ballot Nixon victory.⁴¹ If the convention went beyond one ballot, Reagan or Rockefeller had a fairly good chance of winning the nomination.

Just before he began stumping in the South on July 19, Reagan uncritically evaluated the American Independent Party candidate, George Wallace, saying: "He's dwelling mainly on law and order, patriotism, and so forth, and these are very attractive subjects, and I'm sure that there are very few people in disagreement."⁴² Later, in Birmingham, Alabama, Reagan did not directly criticize Wallace, and only said that a vote for him in November would be wasted.⁴³

On his campaign swing in the South Reagan met with delegates from fifteen Southern and border states, as well as some from the District of Columbia,

Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. On 25 July 1968 Reagan spoke with almost one hundred delegates and alternates in Birmingham, the largest number he met at one time. In his speeches Governor Reagan attacked the Great Society and gun control legislation, and denounced the failure of the Johnson Administration to win the Vietnam War.⁴⁴ After the campaign tour Reagan had delegates flown to California to talk with him.⁴⁵ Reagan's efforts earned him about fifteen to twenty additional delegates, with his main gains in North Carolina, Texas, and Alabama.⁴⁶

Reagan was the first candidate to arrive in Miami. He appeared before the Republican platform committee, where he made strong appeals to conservatives on Vietnam and law and order. Nixon countered Reagan by issuing almost equally conservative views on these issues.⁴⁷ Nixon was pushed to the right as a result of Reagan's candidacy.

As the GOP Convention neared Nixon was far ahead of Rockefeller and Reagan and about twenty to fifty delegates short of a first ballot majority, which he seemed likely to win.⁴⁸ Nixon had limited support in the industrial Northeast, where he won a majority of the delegates only in Illinois, and therefore, holding the South was crucial for him. Nixon understood that it was Reagan and not himself, "who set the hearts of many Southern Republicans aflutter," and "that there was always a possibility that Southern delegates could be lured at the last minute by his ideological siren song."⁴⁹ Reagan's delay in declaring candidacy resulted in some key conservative leaders, including Senators John G. Tower of Texas, Goldwater, and Thurmond endorsing Nixon instead of the California governor. These leaders' views were more conservative than Nixon with the Southern delegates and Nixon won a majority in all states in the South, except North Carolina.⁵⁰

When the GOP convention opened on August 5th Reagan finally announced he was officially a candidate. Reagan said, "In keeping with and in response to the delegation's resolution, as of this moment, I am a candidate before this convention."⁵¹ Shortly before Reagan announced his candidacy, former California Senator William F. Knowland stated that their Governor was "a bona fide candidate."⁵² Reagan has written that when Knowland told him this beforehand, he replied that it was "not true," and he would have to "repudiate" their resolution.⁵³ But only a short time later Reagan declared his candidacy.

Reagan's comments about his actions and motivations in the 1968 presidential election have been ambiguous. At a news conference shortly after

the 1968 GOP Convention Reagan exclaimed that he never had "a presidential bug."⁵⁴ Yet at Miami Beach when a delegate asked him if he would really like to be president, Reagan emphatically said, "You bet I'd like it."⁵⁵ Shortly after the 1968 convention and later Reagan claimed that he was surprised that a number of delegates at Miami Beach supported him.⁵⁶ Yet on numerous occasions Reagan met with many delegations, and was often in contact with his delegate-hunter, F. Clifton White. Therefore, Reagan's purported ignorance of his delegate strength is not believable. Reagan later told an interviewer he declared candidacy to avoid becoming a joke like Harold Stassen,⁵⁷ the perennial presidential candidate from Minnesota. The comparison was invalid. Stassen's problem was that he ran for president too many times, while 1968 was Reagan's first such campaign. Also, Reagan's official announcement that he sought the Republican nomination did not give him credibility, but it contradicted his previous statements.

At the convention there were some realistic reactions to Reagan's belated official candidacy. Nixon's office said the declaration "changes nothing," and that "they had always considered him a candidate."⁵⁸ Republican Governor David Cargo of New Mexico had the best response, "It's like a woman who's eight and a half months pregnant announcing she's going to have a baby."⁵⁹

As the balloting neared, Nixon press spokesman Herbert Klein inadvertently helped Reagan's campaign when he announced that the former Vice-President might pick Senator Mark O. Hatfield of Oregon, a liberal, to be his running mate. Some newspapers published stories which said Nixon was mainly considering liberals, for example, Hatfield, Nelson Rockefeller, New York Mayor John V. Lindsay, and Illinois Senator Charles E. Percy, to be on the ticket with him. These articles caused many Southern delegates to consider switching to Reagan.⁶⁰

The uprising against Nixon on his vice-presidential candidate was the possible break F. Clifton White was looking for. White had earlier said that all his candidate's campaign needed was "one state switching to Reagan--and we've got him [Nixon]."⁶¹

Nixon's support was softest in Florida and Mississippi. He was also vulnerable in Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia, and Texas. North Carolina had already broken from Nixon with a majority of its delegates having switched to Reagan. Florida and Mississippi both used the unit rule, so if Reagan could have gotten a majority in either state, he would have won all of their respective thirty-four or twenty

delegates. Only a couple of days before balloting Reagan came within two votes of a majority in Florida, and was perhaps as close in Mississippi.⁶²

The possible loss of Florida and other Southern states was a serious matter for the Nixon campaign. Thurmond and other supporters assured the Southerners that Nixon would not choose a liberal running mate. However, before the balloting it was still necessary for Richard Nixon to meet with most Southern delegations, whom he assuaged in saying, "I am not going to take, I can assure you, anybody that is going to divide this party."⁶³ Most of the delegates believed this promise, and though Reagan and his supporters worked hard to get Dixie delegate votes, they held for Nixon.

Nixon, with strong Southern support, won the GOP nomination on the first ballot with 692 delegates; Rockefeller was second with 277 delegates; and Reagan third with 182. The remaining delegates voted mostly for favorite sons.⁶⁴ Nixon received only twenty-five more delegates than the number required to win a narrow victory margin.

Some writers, Lou Cannon and William F. Buckley included, absolve Reagan from much blame in his 1968 presidential campaign. Buckley believes Reagan was a victim of a plan by his staff which pulled him into the race against his wishes. Cannon writes that the campaign began only because Reagan was too polite to discourage his aides from starting it, and that his declaration of candidacy resulted from Knowland's bad advice.⁶⁵ Reagan himself has more critically said that he had been "governor for less than two years" and that running for president would have looked "ridiculous."⁶⁶

Yet there were more positive than negative results from Reagan's first presidential campaign. He gained valuable experience that helped him strongly challenge President Gerald F. Ford for the GOP nomination in 1976. Although he lost several early primaries and ran short of funds, Reagan came back to give Ford a close race. In 1968 many delegates who had already committed to Nixon were greatly impressed with the California governor. At the 1976 Republican National Convention Reagan swept most of the South against Ford.⁶⁷ In the 1980 presidential election Reagan carried all of the South, with the exception of President Jimmy Carter's home state of Georgia. In hindsight, although Reagan lost in Miami Beach in 1968, it "helped prepare him for the victories which lay ahead."⁶⁸

NOTES

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²Bill Boyarsky, *The Rise of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 105-106; Joseph Lewis, *What Makes Reagan Run? A Political Profile* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968), p. 9.

³Lou Cannon, *Reagan* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1982), pp. 107-112.

⁴Edmund G. "Pat" Brown and Bill Brown, *Reagan: The Political Chameleon* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976), pp. 10-11; Cannon, *Reagan*, pp. 117-18.

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⁷Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1964* (New York: Signet Books, 1965), pp. 116, 161-63, 243, 248.

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¹²"Ronald Reagan: Rising Star in the West," *Newsweek* (22 May 1967): 27-29; "Anchors Away," *Time* (20 October 1967): 17, 19-20.

¹³"The Making of a Candidate: A Look at the Reagan Boom," *US News & World Report* (24 July 1967): 53.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵Boyarsky, *Rise of Ronald Reagan*, pp. 53-54; "Now Reagan Tries a Cross Country Tour," *US News & World Report* (9 October 1967): 20; "Reagan's Road Show," *Time* (13 October 1967): 28.

¹⁶Harry S. Dent, *The Prodigal South Returns to Power* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978), p. 78.

¹⁷*The Washington Post*, 14 January 1968, p. B1; "Rising Star in the West," *Newsweek* (22 May 1967): 36.

¹⁸Boyarsky, *Rise of Ronald Reagan*, pp. 251-56; Cannon, *Reagan*, pp. 131-37; White, *President 1968*, pp. 42-43; Wills, pp. 309-10.

¹⁹Boyarsky, *Rise of Ronald Reagan*, p. 166.

²⁰*The Washington Post*, 14 January 1968, p. B1.

²¹Lewis, *What Makes Reagan Run?*, p. 185.

²²Chester, Hodgson, and Page, *American Melodrama*, p. 224; "Making of a Candidate," *US News & World Report* (24 July 1967): 53; (22 January 1968): 45.

²³"Anchors Away," *Time* (20 October 1967): 17.

²⁴Chester, Hodgson, and Page, *American Melodrama*, p. 207; Robert A. Diamond, ed., *Presidential Elections Since 1789* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1975), p. 150.

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²⁶*The New York Times*, 16 March 1968, p. 14; 14 April 1968, p. 50.

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³⁰*The Florida Times-Union*, 22 May 1968; *The Mobile Register*, 21 May 1968, p. 2; *The New York Times*, 24 May 1968, p. 16.

³¹Chester, Hodgson, and Page, *American Melodrama*, pp. 490-92; Dent, *Prodigal South*, pp. 79-80; *The Mobile Register*, 21 May 1968, p. 2.

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³⁴Cannon, Reagan, p. 160; Chester, Hodgson, and Page, *American Melodrama*, p. 228; *The New York Times*, 7 April 1968, p. 38; 29 May 1968, p. 18; Nixon, RN, p. 303.

³⁵Cannon, Reagan, p. 160; Chester, Hodgson, and Page, *American Melodrama*, pp. 226-27; *The New York Times*, 7 April 1968, p. 38; 14 April 1968, p. 49.

³⁶*The New York Times*, 27 May 1968, p. 30.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 29 May 1968, p. 18.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 26 May 1968, p. 61; 29 May 1968, p. 18; 30 May 1968, p. 14.

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⁴²Cannon, *Reagan*, p. 162.

⁴³*The Birmingham News*, 25 July 1968, p. 3.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 1,3,6.

⁴⁵Dent, *Prodigal South*, p. 84; Nixon, *RN*, p. 309.

⁴⁶*The New York Times*, 1 August 1968, p. 20.

⁴⁷*The Florida Times-Union*, 1 August 1968, p. 1.

⁴⁸White, *President 1968*, p. 297.

⁴⁹Nixon, *RN*, p. 304.

⁵⁰*The New York Times*, 8 August 1968, p. 23;
White, *President 1968*, p. 298.

⁵¹*The New York Times*, 6 August 1968, p. 20.

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³Ronald W. Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), pp. 177-78.

⁵⁴Frank van der Linden, *The Real Reagan* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1981), p. 100.

⁵⁵*The New York Times*, 7 August 1968, pp. 1, 29.

⁵⁶Reagan, *American Life*, p. 177; Van der Linden, *Real Reagan*, p. 100.

⁵⁷Cannon, *Reagan*, p. 163.

⁵⁸*The Washington Post*, 6 August 1968, p. 1.

⁵⁹Chester, Hodgson, and Page, *American Melodrama*, p. 511.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, Dent, *Prodigal South*, pp. 96-101; *The New York Times*, 5 August 1968, pp. 1, 24.

⁶¹Chester, Hodgson, and Page, *American Melodrama*, p. 511.

⁶²Ibid.; *The Florida Times-Union*, 8 August 1968, p. 1; *The Washington Post*, 6 August 1968, p. 7.

⁶³Chester, Hodgson, and Page, *American Melodrama*, p. 516.

⁶⁴*The New York Times*, 8 August 1968, p. 23.

⁶⁵Cannon, *Reagan*, pp. 158, 163, 164.

⁶⁶Reagan, *American Life*, pp. 176, 178.

⁶⁷*The New York Times*, 19 August 1976, p. 26.

⁶⁸Cannon, *Reagan*, p. 165.