

Star - Wags.  
7/29/68 104

# A 'Rock' That Is Made of Sponge Rubber

Richard Nixon is bearing up nobly these days under the constraints of his party's Eleventh Commandment: Thou shalt not speak ill of another Republican. He has steadfastly refused to be drawn into a blood-letting brawl with his principal, opponent. In the process, he is demonstrating the commendable restraint he is so often accused of not possessing.

Well and good. But some of the rest of us, not inhibited by party affiliation, are not so constrained. It seems an appropriate moment, a week before his party convention opens, to lower a boom upon that party stalwart, Nelson Rockefeller of New York.

Party stalwart? This is the fellow who effectively took a powder in the 1964 election. He has been the titular head of his party in New York for the past 10 years. If he were the "winner" he professes himself to be, he ought to be carrying other Republicans on his coat-tail. The record demonstrates no such thing.

When the occasion suits him, as it has suited him from time to time in the past, Rockefeller can be full of the old party spirit. Split the party? Not he. Not for anything. "For me to get in this race in any way would be divisive, destructive, and defeating." That was what he said in October. "I am not a candidate," he said. "I do not intend to be a candidate. I do not want to be President. You've heard me loud and clear." That was back in October, too.

In January, he still believed "in the unity of the party and in winning." If Nixon were his party's nominee, "I'll support the candidate in the form of Nixon." This was in the period when he was supporting George Romney. When Romney tossed in the sponge, plenty of time remained for Rocky to enter the Oregon primary and to debate the issues head-on with Nixon. Would he, won't he, would he, won't he, would he join the dance?

Not the Rock. It is edifying to go back to Rockefeller's

March 21 statement of disavowal. He wanted to reiterate unequivocally that he was not a candidate. He had pondered that decision gravely and thoughtfully. He had considered the times of crisis and confusion, and he had asked himself a good question: "How should a responsible Republican act in a period of such crisis?"

His answer was that partisan division must be avoided. It was apparent that a considerable majority of his party's leaders wanted Nixon; they also wanted to avoid divisive challenge. It would therefore be "illogical and unreasonable" for him to seek the nomination. He was bowing out; and he did not want to be misunderstood:

"We live in an age when the word of a political leader seems to invite instant and general suspicion. I asked to be spared any measure of such distrust. I mean I shall abide precisely by what I say." So he signed the Oregon affidavit: "I am not, and will

not be, a candidate for the President."

Having thus avoided a direct test, on favorable ground, of his own pulling capacity against Nixon's, Rockefeller spent 40 days in a wilderness of indecision. By April 30, behold, he had discovered "new circumstances."

The man who would not debate Nixon for six months now craved debate. "This is no time for coy evasion," he said. A sign caught his eye: Nixon's the One. "Nixon's the one who lost in 1960." Mark Hatfield came out for Nixon. Rockefeller's savage reaction was that Hatfield "had betrayed his own integrity as far as his position on Vietnam is concerned." Eisenhower endorsed Nixon. Ike couldn't have done otherwise, in the Rocky view, with Ike's grandson engaged to Nixon's daughter.

This is only a fragment of Rockefeller's record of consistency, high purpose, and party spirit over the past eight months.