

Arizona's Statesman: Congressman John J. Rhodes

Republican Party Conventions

John Rhodes grew up a Republican; his father was a delegate from Kansas to the Republican National Convention in 1916 and was later the State Treasurer of Kansas. His mother recalled that one day when he was three or four, he picked up a newspaper, acted as if he were reading it, and declared: "Those darn Democrats!"

Thus it was inevitable that he would go on to be active in Republican politics. Starting in the late 1940s, he founded Young Republican clubs in Arizona. In addition to his service to Arizona in the House of Representatives, he was a delegate to the 1952, 1964, and 1968 Republican National Conventions, and was permanent chair of the 1976 and 1980 Republican Conventions.

The conventions that Rhodes chaired were particularly rancorous. In 1976, a strong Reagan coalition sought to oust the incumbent, Gerald Ford, from the ticket; in 1980, another group tried to draft Gerald Ford as Ronald Reagan's running mate. In the following essays, Rhodes recounts his experiences at these two critical and fractious national conventions.

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The 1976 Republican National Convention

Excerpt from "I Was There" (Rhodes & Smith), © 1995.

During my seven-year tenure as Minority Leader of the House of Representatives, I was privileged to serve once as chairman of the Platform Committee and twice as permanent chairman of the Republican National Convention. Such honors bring national television exposure and considerable career enhancement, but they also can contribute scores of grey hairs to a politician's head.

Particularly was this the case in 1976, when I was permanent chairman of the Republican convention in Kansas City. Our party was still in considerable shock over Watergate, the Nixon resignation, and the congressional defeats of 1974. Our daunting task in 1976 was to rally the faithful and present to the American public the image of a unified and confident party.



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Gerald Ford was president, and many of us felt that he had done a good enough job to be our convention's choice for a full term in that office. But a rising tide of support was evident for the governor of California, Ronald Reagan.

It did not take a political expert to predict that the two factions were likely to collide in mutually damaging fashion at the national convention.

The Reagan people were intent on doing everything they could to embarrass President Ford. One of their tactics was to contest much of the proposed Republican Platform. A portion of the platform had to do with the foreign policy of the Ford administration. They tried to amend it in the Platform Committee to make it appear that the Republican platform was critical of important elements of the Ford foreign policy. These amendments were not adopted.

The floor debate on the platform waxed hot and heavy. Midnight came and went. At 2 A.M. it appeared that we finally were about to vote, unless there were other amendments offered. Then I was informed that the North Carolina delegation would definitely offer the amendment against the Ford foreign policy which had been voted down in committee and demand a roll call vote. This, despite the late hour and the fact that many of the delegates had left to go to their lodgings.

I felt that this was a ridiculous thing to do. So I sent my son Jay, who was at my side, to try to find [Jesse Helms](#), who was then the national committeeman from North Carolina. I had a good relationship with Jesse from the days of the Goldwater campaign, and I believed he could help me head off this damaging tactic.

When he came to the podium, I told him that it would be very helpful if he could get the North Carolina delegation not to offer the amendment. I pointed out the obvious: that it was very late, and we were going to look silly to the country if we haggled over this point in the wee hours of the morning.

Mr. Helms said, in his familiar southern drawl, "John, how good is your eyesight?"

I told him I believed it was reasonably good for about 100 feet.

"Well" he said, "I believe that the North Carolina delegation is farther away from you than 100 feet."

I got his point.

"I think you are right," I responded with some enthusiasm.



So, when the time came to call for further amendments and then to proceed to adoption of the platform, I asked if there were any amendments. The chairman of the North Carolina delegation, I am told, was standing, yelling, and waving his banner. I will maintain to this day that I did not see him. So I immediately gaveled the platform through and adjourned the convention for the night.

In certain parts of North Carolina I am still known as "Blind John."

I had made a bad mistake in accepting an appointment as a delegate to the convention from Arizona. The Reagan people had been in complete charge of the Arizona Republican Convention, but they were kind enough to make me a delegate, since I was to be chairman of the national convention. This they did, even though I did not need to be a delegate to be chairman, and even though my friendship and support of Jerry Ford were well known.

I should have realized that I would have to vote for the candidate for president. It could be (and was) very embarrassing to me, considering the makeup of my own Arizona delegation, to vote for Ford.

Soon after the Arizona delegation caucused in Kansas City, I was told that they had voted that I must leave the podium and sit with them on the floor of the convention whenever a vote was taken. I told the Arizona chairman, Jim Colter, that I could not leave the podium at such a time. There might be parliamentary problems which could be solved only by the chairman.



Colter replied that I could take my choice, but if I did not come down to vote on the floor with them, they would seat my alternate (who was pledged to vote for Reagan). I said to him, “Jim, you know my son Jay. When the time comes to vote, I will write my choice on a piece of paper and he will give it to you personally.”

He answered that the delegation would not be satisfied with that.

So I told him, “Jim, you understand that I will be holding the gavel in my hand. If you do not count my vote, I will poll the delegation. And I think you know what the result will be.”

Colter was not happy with that answer, but there was not much he could do about it.

“I understand you perfectly, John,” he said.

When the vote came, I cast my vote for President Ford. Some of the delegation never forgave me.

After the voting was completed, President Ford came to the hall to make his acceptance speech. Before he arrived, I kept calling the Ford headquarters, asking them if they had invited Ronald Reagan to speak. I got various answers, most of them in the negative.

Finally, I said to Senator [Bob Griffin](#), one of my oldest and best friends, “Bobby, I just wanted you to know that I will not adjourn this convention until Ronald Reagan has appeared on this platform. I suggest you get with it immediately and make sure that he is invited to be here with President Ford.”

The rest is history. When President Ford came onto the platform, I went to meet him. The first thing he asked was, “Where is Ronald Reagan?” I pointed to the Reagan box and President Ford went over to the side of the platform nearest that box and motioned to Governor Reagan to “come on down.”

I had already sent my sergeant-at-arms and my son Jay to escort Governor Reagan to the platform. He came down, made a great speech for party unity and did everything we had hoped he would do.

Thus ended one of the most tense and unpleasant chapters of my political life. I was extremely relieved when at last my gavel fell for the adjournment sine die.



The 1976 presidential campaign was certainly better than the 1964 Goldwater campaign. The convention which nominated Barry ended in rancor and bitterness. I think the reason the Reagan people supported Gerald Ford in the general election as staunchly as they did was that Reagan made his magnificent unity speech at the close of the convention. It is important to note that practically every state which we had called a "Reagan state" went strongly for Ford in the general election of 1976.

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The 1980 Republican National Convention

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One of the worst times of my life occurred during Chairmanship of the 1980 GOP convention in Kansas City. It was hotly contested, and keeping reasonable order on the convention floor would have been difficult under the best of circumstances. The fact that the Reagan people distributed artificial noisemakers to their delegates, alternates, and adherents made it almost impossible. The human voice wears out eventually, but the noisemaker never does.

So, when I was asked by RNC Chairman, Bill Brock, to be the permanent Chairman of the Detroit Convention, I accepted with the proviso that artificial noisemakers be barred from the hall.

It appeared the Detroit Convention would be a cakewalk, and that Reagan had the nomination sewed up. His people mainly controlled the platform deliberations and kept most intemperate provisions out. It looked like smooth sailing.

Neither my assistants nor I got a glimpse of the convention's program until the day before the convention got underway. It turned out to be a masterpiece of diplomacy and a parliamentary nightmare.

One of the things those of us who run Conventions strive for is to use prime time TV to its best advantage. You want to get the keynote and acceptance speeches in prime time in order to reach the maximum number of viewers. Yet, there are other speeches to be scheduled and egos to be served.

There must have been many prospective speakers to consider, because the method adopted was to give lesser lights some exposure by having them introduce more prominent persons. I protested. I said that the introducers would never hold to their allotted seven minutes, making it impossible to stay on schedule. I was informed (1) it wouldn't happen that way, and (2) the schedule was "in concrete."

My good friend and colleague, Congressman [Guy Vander Jagt](#), was the keynote speaker. He had few equals and certainly no superiors as a speaker. Yet, before Guy's speech, the schedule called for speeches by such prominent persons as Senator [Howard Baker](#), Congressman [Jack Kemp](#), and Senator Hugh Scott, each to be introduced by a prominent Republican state legislator or officeholder.



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So, as the introducers droned on and on, it got later and later. About 11:00 P.M., a person who shall remain nameless rushed to the podium and told me I was to delete the balance of the program and go to the introduction of Guy Vander Jagt.

At that time, neither Senator Baker nor Congressman Kemp had spoken. I told the messenger that we had already lost prime time and to reschedule Vander Jagt for the next evening. He told me in no uncertain terms to obey the orders he had given me.

"It would be an insult to put Guy on this late," I said. "It would be an even worse insult to delete from the program such outstanding Republicans as Scott, Baker and Kemp."

But the messenger wouldn't give up until I said "Do you see this gavel? Do you also see the hand that holds it? Now, you go back and tell our mutual friends that Baker and Kemp will speak tonight, and they had better reschedule Vander Jagt for tomorrow night."

They did it.

From the day we arrived in Detroit, there was much discussion of the identity of the Vice-Presidential candidate. The search was for an individual who could help unify the party and also could attract votes from persons who might not support Reagan. I soon became aware of the existence of a movement to draft Gerald Ford to run for Vice President. In my mind, I dismissed this because (1) I felt Ford would never do it, (2) Reagan would never accept it, and (3) it was a bad idea which could only result in disharmony, acrimony, and paralysis.

The night before the nomination for Vice President was to occur, I was invited to an 8 o'clock meeting the next morning in the suite of Bill Brock, the Republican National Committee Chairman. I assumed the meeting would concern the mechanics of the Convention, so I was naturally surprised when I joined at least 30 of the most prominent Republicans I knew. Among others was Howard Baker, [Bob Michel](#), Alan Greenspan, Henry Kissinger, [John Tower](#), and Bryce Harlow, along with various Governors, Members of Congress and party luminaries.

The meeting, I soon learned, had been called as a prelude to drafting Gerald Ford to run for vice president. We received an outline of a proposed restructuring of the presidency to give the vice presidency absolute control of certain functions — an autonomy of operation no vice president had ever had.

I was aghast. It seemed to me that this plan could not work. First, it would bifurcate the presidency in an unacceptable and probably unconstitutional way. Second, no president, and certainly no president's staff, would put up with such an arrangement for longer than six weeks. Third, asking Gerald Ford to enter into such a cockamamie arrangement would be an insult to him, and a denigration of his many years of loyal service to his country. Fourth, I was convinced that Reagan would win anyway and should pick a veep congenial to him.

I said all of these things, leaving much of my popularity behind me, and walked out. Howard Baker and I had an appointment with Ronald Reagan at 9:00 AM and we naturally kept it. Governor Reagan asked us our choices for veep. I told him I knew of the movement for drafting Ford and suggested he not agree to it. When asked whom I would recommend, I said, "Assuming Howard Baker is not available, I heartily recommend George Bush."

I have no recollection of what Howard Baker said, and I have no way of knowing whether my recommendation to Ronald Reagan was effective. But the result was to my liking.



Later in the day, some of the media gurus began talking about this “deal.” I am told that Reagan first heard of the divisions of power contemplated between the President and Vice President by listening to one of them. I am also told that Reagan hit the roof, and ordered that any such negotiations be stopped immediately. It was shortly thereafter that he announced that George Bush was his choice for Vice President.

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