



## The 1968 Nebraska Republican Primary

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Article Summary: In the spring of 1968 the campaigns of Michigan Governor George Romney, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, and former Vice President Richard Nixon all set their sights on Nebraska's "all-star primary" as an important early test of strength.

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# THE 1968 NEBRASKA REPUBLICAN PRIMARY

BY GENE KOPELSON





Most political headlines in late 1967 and early 1968 centered on the Democrats: Senator Eugene McCarthy's surprise showing in the New Hampshire primary, President Lyndon Johnson's decision not to seek re-election, the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, and the emergence of Vice President Hubert Humphrey as the Democrat standard bearer. Yet on the Republican side, Richard Nixon faced opponents too.

As the nation's thoughts turned in 1967 towards the campaign year of 1968, the three obvious Republican candidates were Michigan Governor

George Romney (father of 2012 Republican nominee Mitt Romney), New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, and former Vice President Richard Nixon. All set their sights on Nebraska as an important primary state to win. Governor Ronald Reagan of California was also on the ballot in Nebraska, but he did not visit the state and his grassroots campaign comprised three small offices, each run by solo supporters.<sup>1</sup>

#### New Law

Nebraska had pioneered the method of giving voters full expression of their preference for

**Above: Crowds and balloons greet the Nixons at the Omaha City Auditorium. Richard Nixon spoke on May 4, 1968, while campaigning in Nebraska.** Reprinted with permission from the *Omaha World-Herald*



president when it had passed its “all star” primary system in 1948.<sup>2</sup> Candidates had been listed with or without their consent, but by 1951 the state legislature prevented the listing of candidates without their consent.

Nebraska readopted its “all star” primary in 1965 after Oregon and Wisconsin passed similar laws. Secretary of State Frank Marsh said he would be “more liberal than restrictive” in deciding which candidates to list.<sup>3</sup> Marsh had “sole discretion” to choose those “generally advocated or recognized as candidates in national news media throughout the United States.” Marsh would then send telegrams to his chosen candidates, and those wishing to withdraw their names had to sign an affidavit stating, “I am not now nor do I intend to be a candidate for the office of President of the United States.”<sup>4</sup> The second method to get on the primary ballot was via petitions from three separate congressional districts.

Nebraska voters began hearing of the importance of their primary beginning in late 1966, a year and a half before the voting. Nebraska would be the first agricultural or rural primary, and the efforts of candidates, as well as the results, would be noted by surrounding states.<sup>5</sup> Party pros believed that “Nebraska could have one of only a handful of meaningful Republican Presidential preference primaries” due to the expected large number of favorite son candidacies, including Governor-elect Reagan of California, Senator-elect

Percy or Senator Dirksen of Illinois, and Governors Rhodes of Ohio and Love of Colorado.<sup>6</sup> In Nebraska, Senator Hruska and Governor Tiemann would be two obvious Republican favorite sons.

A “favorite son” was the head of a state delegation to a convention, who himself was not a viable candidate for national office, but who could negotiate with the national candidates in exchange for the support of their state’s delegates. By the summer of 1967, local Republican leaders urged Nebraska Senator Roman Hruska to run as a favorite son in 1968.

Hruska had been chairman of the state delegation in 1960 but was not a delegate in 1964 because he was running for re-election. He told the press that he would accept favorite son status to provide the Nebraska delegates maximum flexibility at Miami Beach but cautioned that “he will not allow his name to be placed on the Presidential ballot itself.” The Hruska plan “came as a surprise” to local Republicans but was thought to provide a solution to potential conflict between the senator and Governor Tiemann over the 1968 delegation. Ultimately Tiemann did not challenge Hruska.<sup>7</sup>

Republicans in 1968 would elect ten statewide delegates and six more from congressional districts, with each district getting two delegates. The delegates would each sign a pledge to support their candidate until he received less than 35 percent of the votes for nomination, or until the candidate released the delegate from the pledge, or until two nominating ballots had been taken. At the time, Governor Tiemann and “most GOP party leaders” predicted a Nixon win.<sup>8</sup>

Hruska hoped the 1968 delegates “should go to the convention uncommitted” so that they could “be guided first by the outcome of the preferential balloting in Nebraska.”<sup>9</sup> A few days later, Hruska issued a statement to the press because he felt he had been accused unjustly that his favorite son status violated Nebraska’s new primary law. He explained that he felt the favorite son method, wherein each delegate was pledged initially to him, was better than having each delegate unpledged. He felt that his office “would be a focal point at which information could be obtained” so that delegates could “counsel and advise each other” to “arrive at a sound conclusion as to what Nebraskans would prefer.” Hruska reiterated that there would be no forced uniform voting, “no unit rule.” He emphasized that he himself would not be running for president and indeed was going to release his delegates “at a reasonable time before the convention.”<sup>10</sup>



On New Year's Day 1968, Secretary of State Frank Marsh revealed the final details of the primary ballot process. He told the press that he would announce on February 14 his choice of names to appear on Nebraska's presidential preference ballot. Any candidate wishing to remove his name had to sign an affidavit of withdrawal by March 15.<sup>11</sup>

When the potential third-party candidacy of George Wallace of Alabama was announced, Secretary Marsh announced that Wallace would be placed "in limbo" because the law only recognized Democratic and Republican candidates "unless a third party is formally organized in the state."<sup>12</sup> (Among the third parties and fringe candidates was a Nebraska cowboy named Americus Liberator—see side article on page 174.)

### Romney in Nebraska

Although Barry Goldwater was the only candidate listed on the Nebraska Republican primary ballot in 1964, George Romney received some 132 write-in votes despite not campaigning in the state.<sup>13</sup> By mid-1967, Romney and Nixon were the GOP front-runners until Romney committed a fatal political error. He told a reporter that he felt he had been "brainwashed" by the administration and the military about Vietnam. Romney's poll numbers declined, but he did not give up.

In mid-November Romney announced his candidacy and said he would enter the May 1968 Nebraska primary. He would go into the Nebraska primary having already faced Nixon head-to-head in New Hampshire and Wisconsin, assuming both were still in the race. Romney's deteriorating poll numbers told analysts that he "badly needs primary victories," and thus Nebraska assumed major importance. Indeed, if Romney ended up losing both New Hampshire and Wisconsin, Nebraska "probably would offer him his last hope." But if Nixon and Romney were to split the first two, Nebraska would be the "'rubber' contest (and) would have considerable importance."<sup>14</sup>

In late January, *Newsweek* reported that "Romney's own advisors in Nebraska have advised him to waste as little time as possible campaigning there. Nixon is so strong."<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Romney and his state chairman, Omaha City Councilman Arthur D. Bradley Jr., planned a one-day campaign visit to Nebraska in early February 1968. This would be Romney's only campaign trip to Nebraska. Romney was greeted by the public upon his arrival at Eppley Airfield. He held a press conference and toured Boys Town, where he was designated an honorary citizen. In the afternoon Romney opened his first



Nebraska "home headquarters" at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Dean Baxter. Bradley said the goal was to establish "two thousand home units in Nebraska" and said the same technique was being used in New Hampshire. In the late afternoon Romney met with key supporters in Omaha. In the evening he left for Fremont where he addressed the winter convention of the Nebraska Junior Chamber of Commerce at the city auditorium. Although the dinner itself was for the Jaycees, Bradley arranged that no tickets were required for the approximate 1,300 balcony seats. Romney then flew back to Detroit.<sup>16</sup>

By late February, the national media reported that workers for Romney were "relatively inactive." In commenting on his recent visit to Nebraska, Romney told reporters that he was "not writing Nebraska off" but the reporter felt the evidence "is otherwise." Romney's campaign chairman had

**California Governor Ronald Reagan and Nebraska U.S. Senator Roman Hruska, May 20, 1968.** NSHS RG3762AM



**Above: George Romney campaigns at Boys Town on February 10, 1968.**

Photo by Richard Anderson, reprinted with permission from the *Omaha World-Herald*.

**Below:** NSHS 13120-151

made “so little stir that neither Governor Norbert T. Tiemann nor the Nixon agent, George Cook, could even remember his name.”<sup>17</sup>

Due to his continuing falling poll numbers, Romney soon dropped out of the entire presidential race. Secretary of State Marsh removed Romney’s name from the ballot. Bradley said he was “extremely disappointed” but would support the Republican nominee. He then added he was stuck with a “large pile of Romney campaign posters and campaign buttons” and asked woefully, “What can you do? Cry a little?”<sup>18</sup>

#### Rockefeller in Nebraska

Though his name did not appear on the Nebraska Republican primary ballot in 1964, Nelson Rockefeller received 2,333 write-in votes.<sup>19</sup> Deeply upset about the way Goldwater supporters treated him at the Republican convention, Rockefeller later refused to support Goldwater and remained

ambivalent about ever running again. In 1968 his press secretary Leslie Slote told the *Omaha World-Herald* that Rockefeller would “not be a candidate.” When informed that the Nebraska secretary of state would probably list Rockefeller, Slote answered that “the Governor will ask that his name be taken off. If it requires the affidavit, he will do that.” Secretary of State Marsh was interviewed in Lincoln and said that Nixon and Romney would be listed but others being excluded were Generals William Westmoreland and Curtis LeMay.<sup>20</sup> Colorado Governor John Love had considered asking to be listed on the Nebraska ballot as a substitute for Rockefeller and spoke to Nebraska Deputy Secretary of State Allen Beermann about it.<sup>21</sup>

Thus on February 14 Marsh sent a telegram to Rockefeller that he had entered Rockefeller’s name on the Republican primary ballot.<sup>22</sup> On February 20, Rockefeller submitted the affidavit to Marsh which removed himself from the ballot.<sup>23</sup>



Up to this point, Rockefeller and Romney had an alliance, although many felt that Rockefeller had been using Romney as a stalking horse; if there was good support for a liberal Republican, then Rockefeller might jump in himself. After Romney withdrew, however, Rockefeller reconsidered his own withdrawal decision and said he might be open to a draft. When learning of this, Secretary of State Marsh said, "It's a new ball game," adding, "Mr. Rockefeller can't play the reluctant dragon much longer." Marsh said he would wait a few days, but if Rockefeller did not ask officially to have his name placed back on the ballot, Marsh threatened to do so himself, claiming this was his prerogative by law. However, whether the secretary of state indeed had the power to restore a name to the ballot after it had been removed was not clear and was "under study," said Beermann.<sup>24</sup>

Two weeks passed without resolution. Rockefeller's original affidavit of withdrawal was still on file. Marsh notified Rockefeller's forces that his name still might be restored but that he had requested an opinion from the Nebraska attorney general's office on the matter. Marsh said he was using the dictionary definition that a candidate was one "who made himself available" for election and felt that Rockefeller fit this definition when he said he would accept a draft.<sup>25</sup>

As the March 15 deadline for ballot listings drew near, Marsh told the press he was "sitting tight" and felt that Rockefeller should make the next move. Marsh noted that Rockefeller could now go the petition route if he wanted his name re-entered.<sup>26</sup>

Marsh made what he thought would be his final decision shortly thereafter, saying that Rockefeller's name would not be restored. Marsh said he had spoken to Rockefeller's legal team, who had reiterated that Rockefeller did not want to be a candidate in the Nebraska primary and wanted to discourage any write-in voting. Marsh revealed that he had withdrawn his request for a decision from the attorney general's office. He did so, he said, after discussing the matter with a number of people, including several prominent Republican attorneys.

Former Governor Val Peterson, who was running as an at-large delegate for Nixon, had put pressure on Marsh when he had said, "Mr. Rockefeller should participate in the election." He had worked with Rockefeller years before in Washington, D.C., and thought Nebraska voters should be given the opportunity to choose between them.<sup>27</sup> But there was an ulterior motive. Nixon's team had been pressuring Marsh to restore Rockefeller's name so that Nixon, who was far ahead, could defeat him



**Nebraska Governor  
Norbert Tiemann.**  
NSHS RG2738-1

easily. A victory with Rockefeller's name on the ballot would avoid the charge that a Nixon win was meaningless because he faced no competition, as occurred after he won New Hampshire.<sup>28</sup>

But matters were far from over. Events in the Pacific Northwest were about to impact the Republican primary race in Nebraska. Rockefeller had won the primary in liberal Oregon against Goldwater in 1964; this had been Goldwater's only defeat. Rockefeller may have hoped to repeat his good fortune there in 1968, yet he did not want to enter the Nebraska primary because he felt it was too conservative a state for him. Rockefeller and Marsh were about to learn that Nebraska and Oregon were intertwined in 1968.

In mid-March, Secretary of State Marsh received a phone call from Robert Kennedy advisor Theodore Sorensen telling him that Kennedy would announce the next day that he was running for president. Marsh placed his name on the Democratic ballot and held a press conference to announce his decision about Kennedy. But reporters "pressured" Marsh about the news that Rockefeller was permitting his name to remain on the Oregon ballot. Would this be a "negation" of the Nebraska affidavit? Marsh said that if Rockefeller would make "an outright announcement of candidacy" indeed it would negate Rockefeller's sworn affidavit that he was not a candidate. Marsh said that although he still was honoring



Rockefeller's affidavit on file, if Rockefeller allowed his name to remain on the Oregon ballot, "it will be restored to the Nebraska ballot." Marsh reiterated that "Rockefeller would either run in both primaries or neither."

The author of the original Nebraska law, Marvin E. Stromer, former state senator and now head of the political science department at Hiram Scott College, was reached for his opinion. He said that if Rockefeller became a candidate in the Oregon primary, Marsh had a "stringent obligation" to place Rockefeller's name on the Nebraska ballot. The original filing deadline announced by Marsh had passed, but the attorney general's office had sent a message to Marsh informing him that the law had no specific deadlines.

Marsh then was badgered with many "what if" questions from the press and lost his temper somewhat. Marsh said he wanted the candidate to have "some control of his own destiny" and did not want some phrase at the news conference to generate a "Camelot situation" where "for one, brief shining moment we have one big blaze of glory where we have something to say" which might impact a presidential candidate in a negative way.<sup>29</sup>

The unfolding situation prompted both proposed new legislation and a threat of legal action. Omaha State Senator Henry Pederson announced that he would file an amendment to the state's primary law which would permit the secretary of state to list a candidate's name even if an affidavit had been filed previously.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, George Hinman, a Rockefeller campaign staff member, said a law firm had prepared a memorandum stating that Rockefeller's withdrawal affidavit must be honored in Nebraska. Marsh said he "took this as

a hint" that Rockefeller's team might seek a court injunction, but he remained "unmoved" and reiterated that if Rockefeller became a candidate in Oregon his name "would go back on the ballot."<sup>31</sup>

But the Rockefeller campaign was sending mixed signals. Nebraska and Oregon were the only remaining primaries in which Rockefeller could run. Nebraska was felt to be Nixon country. Thus reports from New York said that some advisers told Rockefeller to bow out of the race completely. He would certainly lose in Nebraska, and "it would be impossible to untrack Richard Nixon with only an Oregon primary victory."<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, Rockefeller himself told reporters in Washington, D.C., that Nebraska was "Nixon country." But at the same time, reports filtered out that Rockefeller's speech writer Hugh Morhow was drafting a major speech on Vietnam; reacting to Nixon's announcement that he had a secret plan to end the Vietnam war, Rockefeller planned to "pound away" at it in the Oregon primary.<sup>33</sup>

Nebraska Governor Tiemann entered the fray, saying it would be "inconsistent" if Rockefeller ran in Oregon but not in Nebraska. Tiemann conceded that a Nixon victory in Nebraska was likely, but he did not think it would end Rockefeller's chances. He did not think Rockefeller would "be beaten here as badly as he thinks—and a defeat here would not be fatal to his Presidential effort."<sup>34</sup>

Overall, Republican officials thought it would be "political suicide" for Rockefeller to avoid having his name on the Nebraska primary ballot by filing a lawsuit.<sup>35</sup> Rockefeller withdrew from the presidential race shortly thereafter.

In a complete about-face, however, as April ended Rockefeller announced his re-entry into the race. All that could be done in Nebraska at that point was a write-in campaign, which was organized by his 1964 campaign chairman; privately his supporters thought Rockefeller would get ten percent of the vote at most.<sup>36</sup> They continued a "modest TV and newspaper advertisement campaign" until Election Day.<sup>37</sup>

### Nixon in Nebraska

Richard Nixon entered the 1968 campaign with a good track record in Nebraska. In 1952 the Eisenhower-Nixon ticket had received 421,603 votes to only 188,507 for the Stevenson-Sparkman ticket, which was described as the "biggest winning vote for a Presidential ticket ever cast in Nebraska" up to that time. In 1960, Nixon-Lodge defeated Kennedy-Johnson by 380,553 to 232,542. In the 1964 Republican primary, former Eisenhower Secretary



of the Interior and local Hastings publisher Fred A. Seaton “led a last-minute write-in campaign” for Nixon, who was not formally running against Barry Goldwater. Nixon obtained a surprising 43,613 votes against the only name printed on the ballot, Goldwater, who got 68,320; Nebraska voted for Johnson in the general election.<sup>38</sup>

In midsummer 1967, “most GOP leaders” predicted a Nixon win.<sup>39</sup> Nixon forces were active in Nebraska by August. The campaign had a choice on how delegates would be listed. One choice was to enter a slate of delegates pledged to Nixon, but this would pit that slate against the Hruska’s favorite son slate. Former Oklahoma Governor Henry Bellmon, who had just taken over the Nixon campaign’s top post, announced that “I doubt there will be a Nixon slate in opposition to Hruska.” Instead, the Nixon team chose to enter the presidential preference contest. Nixon was known to be the leading candidate, and reports had surfaced that Romney might decide not to face Nixon—and likely lose—in Nebraska by using the Hruska favorite son movement as an excuse. Bellmon then announced that the official Nebraska state Nixon committee “will soon be announced.”<sup>40</sup>

By mid-November, Nixon said that if he entered the race for president, he definitely would enter the Nebraska primary. As noted above, Nixon would have already faced Romney, his main contender at that point, in New Hampshire and Wisconsin, making Nebraska the third contest between the two. If Nixon defeated Romney in both initial primaries, a win in Nebraska would provide his “decisive victory” on the way to nomination in Miami Beach. But if Nixon were to lose both New Hampshire and Wisconsin to Romney, Nebraska would “offer the former Vice-President his last, forlorn hope.”<sup>41</sup>

Secretary of State Marsh entered Nixon’s name on the ballot and telegraphed him on February 14.<sup>42</sup> Nixon’s Nebraska victory seemed so certain that “those working for Govs. George Romney and Ronald Reagan are relatively inactive in preparing for the May 14 primary.” Nixon forces were confident of achieving “sixty percent of the vote.”<sup>43</sup> *Newsweek* said Nixon’s support was “so strong”<sup>44</sup> and Nixon felt so confident that his team “engaged in an eleventh hour attempt to bring about a confrontation with Governor Rockefeller.”<sup>45</sup>

Nixon’s major push into Nebraska was finalized in April. Nixon State Chairman George Cook, a Lincoln insurance executive, told the press that Nixon would visit each of Nebraska’s three congressional districts, including stops in Lincoln and Omaha. Cook met with sixty members of his campaign staff



as well as national director Robert Ellsworth and general counsel Thomas Evans. Ellsworth called the Nebraska vote “crucial” for Nixon. Cook said the Nixon team in Nebraska was “confident of victory” and in fact “had to restrain campaign workers until time for the major push.” Cook said their budget was “very meager . . . about \$50,000,” of which 40 percent had been collected. He said the Nixon campaign planned 119 billboards across Nebraska along with newspaper, radio, and television advertising.<sup>46</sup> On May 6 Nixon, accompanied by his wife Pat, visited Omaha, Lincoln, and Kearney. In Omaha he spoke at the Civic Auditorium, which was sponsored by the Nebraska Nixon for President Committee.<sup>47</sup> Senators Curtis and Hruska flew back from Washington, D.C., to greet Nixon, and the former gave a “glowing introduction.” At Kearney State College Nixon addressed a “packed” auditorium of five thousand students. At Lincoln, Governor Tiemann wore a huge Nixon-for-President button.<sup>48</sup>

**Richard Nixon spoke on May 4, 1968, while campaigning in Nebraska at the Omaha City Auditorium. His wife, Pat, looks on beside him.** Reprinted with permission from the *Omaha World-Herald*



NSHS 8957-25

The finances of Nixon's Nebraska campaign changed as the primary date approached. Less than two weeks before the primary, his Nebraska campaign had received almost \$68,000 (\$51,500 from the national Nixon campaign coffers, \$11,500 from "other national organizations" plus \$4,500 in "local gifts"). At the due date of reports from each campaign, Rockefeller's campaign had only \$1,935. Cook said the original Nixon budget of \$75,000 had undergone a "substantial cutback" because Nixon was "doing real well in Nebraska" and the Nixon team did not "want to spend any more than they had to." Cook commented on the sums then being expended by Democratic Senators Kennedy and McCarthy, saying, "Bobby's campaign will cost four to five times as much as ours and McCarthy's costs will be three to four times as high as ours."<sup>49</sup>

Besides Cook's financial comparison, the interactions of the Robert F. Kennedy campaign with Nixon's had been minimal. When campaigning in Kimball County, Kennedy leaned over the railing of his train's observation car when he saw a boy wearing a Nixon button. Kennedy asked the boy if he had changed his mind. "Nope!" exclaimed the youngster. Both Nixon and Kennedy won Kimball

County in their respective primaries, with Kennedy winning 68 percent of the vote, fully 17 percent above his statewide average.<sup>50</sup> Lastly, a newly formed "Democrats for Nixon" group formed in Nebraska. The Kennedy chairman in Douglas County, James Green, laughed when he read their names. He said that all the names he saw were Republicans anyway.<sup>51</sup>

Nixon's final campaign swing into Nebraska was highlighted in *Newsweek*. The crowds "held up very well" and he was greeted with "Everything's Coming Up Roses" at every stop. Most of the state Republican figures arrived to "lend support." As his campaign in Nebraska ended, Nixon waited "to see if he would win as impressively in the Nebraska primary as he had in Indiana."<sup>52</sup> But a follow-up article pointed out that Nixon had been "so confident" of the Nebraska outcome "that he spent all but one of the pre-primary days campaigning in Oregon."<sup>53</sup>

#### The Vote

For a few fleeting days in May 1968, Nebraska became the center of the political universe. NBC basically took over the Sheraton-Fontenelle Hotel in Omaha which "rented the ballroom, mezzanine, one hundred sleeping rooms and ten first floor rooms to cover the primary." NBC planned originally to send 110 people to cover the event but scaled back to 75 due to having to cover the upcoming Paris peace talks as well. Heading the NBC team were veteran broadcasters Chet Huntley and David Brinkley, who had "four rooms each" plus "four telephones." The plans for ABC and CBS were described as much less extensive.<sup>54</sup>

But within a week, plans changed. Brinkley and Huntley were sent off to Paris, so NBC brought in Frank McGee and Sander Vanocur instead. NBC stationed one hundred staffers throughout Nebraska precincts to help make projections. CBS and ABC had election night coverage from their New York City studios headed by Mike Wallace and Howard K. Smith, respectively, along with local correspondents in Nebraska including Roger Mudd for CBS and William H. Lawrence for ABC. Fully 150 domestic and foreign correspondents registered for covering the Nebraska primary.<sup>55</sup>

Within hours of the upcoming primary, Nixon national director Robert Ellsworth told the press that the Nebraska Republican primary was "particularly important and significant." Nixon's Nebraska chairman George Cook said their campaign had spent "about \$100,000."<sup>56</sup>





### Election Results

When 1,979 of the 2,133 precincts had reported, Nixon had 125,804 votes and Rockefeller only 9,732. The cowboy candidate, Americus Liberator, received 1,165 votes, and nonactive candidate Reagan did surprisingly well.<sup>57</sup> Appeals for Democrats to vote Republican yielded 2,731 for Nixon and only 509 for Rockefeller.<sup>58</sup>

The 1968 Nebraska Republican primary was over. Romney had begun a small campaign in

Nebraska but then dropped out of the race. Rockefeller and Reagan remained as hidden candidates because they didn't visit Nebraska in 1968. Nixon took the time to appear, campaign, and ask in person for the votes of Nebraskans. He reaped the fruits of his and his team's labors with a great victory. It was Nixon's win in Nebraska that created the "near-inevitability of Nixon's nomination."<sup>59</sup>

**Nebraska U.S. Senator Roman Hruska at the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, August 1968.**  
NSHS RG3762AM

**Gene Kopelson is President of the New England chapter of the Theodore Roosevelt Association and a Holocaust lecturer. He graduated from Princeton University and is now researching Ronald Reagan's forgotten first campaign for the presidency in 1968.**

## NOTES

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- <sup>49</sup> Don Pieper, "Nixon Backers Put \$67,000 In Coffers," *OWH*, May 5, 1968.
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