

Reubin Askew

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Florida's Reluctant Favorite Son

By ALAN L. OTTEN

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Gov. Reubin Askew keeps saying he won't seek the Democratic presidential nomination, he won't let others seek it for him, he won't accept a convention draft.

"I firmly intend not to get involved," he tells a press conference. "No, and that's final," he tells a visitor. His closest associates insist he says the same thing in private, and most of them believe he won't change his mind.

Yet Mr. Askew's name keeps appearing on the lists that politicians and reporters compile of dark-horse presidential possibilities—a man to whom a deadlocked Democratic Convention might well turn. And that reflects two interesting facts.

One is that Democrats are generally unhappy with the men currently seeking the nomination. The other is that when candidate-pickers look around for someone else, they see some very appealing qualities in Reubin Askew.

Obviously, he has his flaws and drawbacks. He lacks broad experience in foreign affairs. His administration hasn't been boldly innovative and experimental. He tends to be a loner, a little on the stiff side.



But his assets are considerable. He's pleasant-looking without being movie-idol handsome. He projects an aura of complete sincerity, honesty, and integrity—a "Mr. Clean" image that appeals to independents and Republicans as well as Democrats.

He's a down-to-earth, poor-boy-makes-good Southerner who can attract the Wall Street vote, but he's also one of the more sophisticated "New South" governors with broad national appeal. He is respected by top Democratic politicians (he keynoted the 1972 Democratic Convention, and George McGovern twice asked him to take the vice presidential nomination), but for most people he would be a new, non-Washington face—just what a disillusioned public might be desperately seeking.

His determined, though unsuccessful, fight in early 1972 to defeat an anti-busing referendum, and his concern for poor people and minorities, have made him a hero to many Democratic liberals. Yet he's no far-out crusader likely to scare off less liberal voters; the "populist" tag often tied to him is a bit too strong.

And to cap it all, the 46-year-old Mr. Askew has put together in his first four years as governor a record that won him easy reelection last November and has gained him almost universal praise throughout Florida.

Consider a few items:

Environment—Strong new laws seek to safeguard Florida's environment, providing tough standards to be met in major development projects and putting certain beaches, parks and other areas out of private reach. "What happened in his first four years has been quite astounding."

Audubon Society: "He's the best we've ever had by a long shot."

Reform—The governor pushed through a major overhaul of the state's court system, a tougher elections law, a start on financial disclosure by public officials. When scandal charges were raised against state supreme court justices and other top elected officials, he moved quickly to investigate and act against the offenders. Now he's fighting for further judicial reform, and tougher disclosure and conflict of interests laws.

Finances—Over heavy opposition, he delivered on a 1970 campaign pledge to establish a corporate income tax. He also instituted the state's first mineral severance

"It's just something I don't desire," says Reubin Askew of the presidency.

tax and has taken other steps to raise revenue for new and expanded state services. Despite this, he enjoys wide support in the business community. "He's sincere, he's honest, he's always accessible and willing to listen," says Scott Linder, president of the state Chamber of Commerce. "He's been a good governor for the state."

Florida does remain, however, near the bottom of the states in per-capita spending on most major services, and now, with the recession cutting state revenues, the governor has committed himself to hold down spending and avoid new taxes. He also opposes any move to relax the constitutional ban on a personal income tax.

Education—Public education made his own climb possible, he believes, and so he's deeply committed to its support. His advocacy of busing, he says, wasn't because he liked it, but was because he wanted to preserve the school system and help "break the cycle of black poverty."

His administration pushed through a school equalization law giving greater state aid to poorer school districts so that all districts would have approximately equal per-pupil spending. Until the current year, state outlays per student have risen steadily and substantially.

Yet Florida still spends comparatively little on education, and one group expressing "growing disenchantment" with Mr. Askew is the teachers. They feel he should have fought to raise taxes this year to finance higher outlays for education, rather than holding them steady or in some cases trimming. "His record has been good," says Yvonne Burkholz, lobbyist for the Florida Education Association, "but for the past year and a half his commitment has been lacking."

Equal Opportunity—The governor has appointed large numbers of women and blacks to top jobs, has pressured state agencies and private employers to do the same, and has fought hard for the Equal Rights Amendment. He obviously despises the racial stands of Alabama Gov. George Wallace, and practically every major Askew speech includes an exhortation to resist appeals to prejudice and hate. "He has been a damn good governor for the black community and for the state of Florida," declares T. Willard Fair, head of the Miami Urban League.

The impressive record goes on—in

labor, mental health, housing, adult and juvenile corrections. "When it comes to concern with the human condition, I've never found him wanting," says Buck Bell, volunteer lobbyist for the National Association of Social Workers.

"He's a queer mixture of idealism and pragmatism," observes State Sen. Kenneth MacKay. "On issues of honesty, integrity, morality, human rights—he's a tiger. On social and economic issues, he's highly pragmatic."

Mr. Askew can indeed be tough when he needs to be, and his willingness to speak his mind seems to appeal to people, even if they don't agree with him; Floridians overwhelmingly disagreed with his busing position, but his personal popularity rose at the same time.

"He has guts," says R. H. "Bubba" Semon, president of the Florida Building and Construction Trades Council. "He'll stand up and tell us what he's going to do, even if it's not what we want to hear, and then he tells businessmen what he's going to do, even if it's not what they want to hear."

Some Criticism Too

Naturally, Mr. Askew isn't without his critics. Many conservatives find him far too liberal, and many liberals find him too cautious and conservative—both in fiscal affairs and on such issues as divorce or abortion.

The chief criticism now is coming from the liberals, who feel he's veered too far right in the past year or so. Most were inclined to excuse it as a logical, pre-election move, but they're disturbed that he still seems to be continuing on a conservative course, with a very tight budget and a minimal legislative program.

"With the mandate of last November," says State Sen. D. Robert Graham, "he was in an ideal position to give some forceful direction on major issues—to do something more, for instance, about our tax base and so improve the state's ability to respond to a whole range of emerging needs. Instead, he pulled away from that."

"The only possible explanation," Mrs. Burkholz asserts, "is national political ambitions. He seems to feel the national mood is for a person who holds down spending, and so he is pandering to the right."

Mr. Askew's associates concede he's following a slightly more conservative course lately, but they say it's mainly because of the state's revenue bind and the difficulty of getting liberal legislation through the current legislature, dominated by conservatives. They add that Mr. Askew never was as liberal as out-of-state reporters and politicians perceived him. The governor himself argues he's not all that conservative now either.

"If the states attempted to overcome their own revenue shortfalls by increasing their taxes," he says, "then collectively they'd dilute whatever stimulus the federal tax rebate might provide." It's a perfect time, he continues, to step back and examine all the new spending programs of the first term: "This has to be a year of belt-tightening and reassessment."

Americans generally, he adds, "are in an age of rising expectations that we simply can't deliver on. We have a very strong economy, but there still are going to have to be some major adjustments. It's going to be a year of adjustment that will be very difficult."

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But Mr. Askew doesn't see a presidential bid as his contribution to that dialogue. He turns down out-of-state speaking engagements and his staff and friends are under strict orders to do nothing that might encourage speculation. He has a responsibility, he says, to spend more time with his family. State Democratic Chairman Ann Cramer observes that just as he feels he's better off without drinking or smoking, so he feels he's better off not running for President.

Two Scenarios

Mr. Askew also concedes that one of his concerns about a presidential race is a candidate's almost inevitable need to make campaign commitments to win the support of interest groups and powerful individuals. This leads some boosters to believe that a genuine convention draft—no commitments involved—might persuade him to accept the nomination. Florida Republicans foresee another scenario: Sen. Edward Kennedy is drafted by a deadlocked convention and he puts the arm on Gov. Askew to be his running mate.

Mr. Askew maintains, though, that he'll serve out his term through 1978. And what does he chiefly hope to have accomplished by then? "Most of all," he replies, "what I wanted to do was to set a different tone in this office. The most serious problem facing government today is the people's loss of confidence in government. And that problem transcends all others, because until you have that confidence and credibility, you are not going to have the people's support for all the things that need to be done."

So why isn't that a perfectly fine argument for seeking the presidency? "It's just something I don't desire," he says simply—and for Reubin Askew, that seems to end the discussion.

Mr. Otten, a member of the Journal's Washington bureau, covers politics.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

GOVERNOR REUBIN ASKEW

July 6, 1974.

Reubin O'Donovan Askew was elected Governor of Florida in 1970 as essentially a tax reform candidate.

On inauguration day he began to carry out the uphill fight for tax reform which he had promised his voters. He won legislative approval of a referendum on a corporate profits tax and promptly campaigned for the tax from one end of the State to the other. Despite the high-powered opposition of special interests, his tax reform won overwhelming voter approval and changed the tenor of Florida politics, probably for many years to come.

Consumer taxes on household utilities and apartment rentals were repealed. Loopholes were closed, spending reforms were enacted, and additional State revenues are being shared with school districts and other units of local government to ease the burden of local property taxes on homeowners. Upon the Governor's strong urging, the Legislature has also increased the homestead exemption to \$10,000 on all property taxes levied against the elderly or disabled, rolled back local school taxes by two mills, and exempted the first \$20,000 of intangibles from State taxes.

In fact, the Governor's fiscal programs have enabled the State to provide tax relief totaling more than a quarter of a billion dollars a year. The reforms achieved by the Askew administration in the way State funds are raised and spent have placed Florida on as sound a financial footing as any of the 50 states. By shifting some of the burden to large, national corporate interests which were not paying their fair share, the reform measures have helped Florida maintain sufficient reserves for emergencies without any further taxes on the people.

The first four Askew years have been a time of reform in other areas as well. Under the Governor's leadership:

* Landmark legislation was enacted to manage and protect Florida's unique land and water resources, a \$240-million bond issue was approved for the public acquisition of environmentally-endangered and recreational lands, a State comprehensive planning act was passed to insure the orderly social, economic and physical growth of the State, and a growth policy was adopted to help guide and control such growth;

* Florida's election laws were strengthened and given enforcement teeth for the first time by the creation of a State Elections Commission, an Ethics Commission was also created and a significant beginning was made toward the Governor's continuing goal of requiring full and public financial disclosure by all candidates, elected officials and major appointees;

* In moves designed to remove "politics-as-usual" from government decision-making, judicial nominating commissions were created to screen and recommend judicial appointments, legislation was passed requiring open, competitive negotiations on engineering and architectural contracts, and the State's tire purchases were placed on competitive bidding;

* The judicial article of Florida's Constitution was rewritten, streamlining the State's court system, providing for the nonpartisan election of judges, and writing the nominating process into the Constitution;

* School financing reforms were enacted to insure an equal educational opportunity for every child regardless of where he or she may live, the State assumed a greater share of local school costs, and other steps were taken to improve school operations and enlist the help and advice of parents and other citizens in Florida's school system;

* Recognizing the contributions and talents of Florida's older citizens, the State Division of Aging was given new strength and visibility in Tallahassee and increased financial support for such services as health and home care, education, transportation, money management and recreation in senior citizen centers throughout Florida;

* Consumers were provided a public counsel to represent them in utility rate cases before the Public Service Commission and received further protection in the marketplace under Florida's new law defining and prohibiting deceptive and unfair trade practices ("Little FTC Act");

* A statewide grand jury was created to help combat organized crime, law enforcement salaries and standards were upgraded, the State criminal code was revised and modernized, legislation was passed to strengthen Florida's hand in the struggle against pornography, and, through the Governor's "Help Stop Crime" program, Florida's citizenry was enlisted in the continuing fight against crime;

* In addition to increased financial help, the State fully implemented home rule powers for county and city governments and took other steps to place the responsibility and flexibility for governmental decision-making closer to the people where their interests can be better served;

* Construction of Florida's Interstate Highway System was speeded, and new emphasis was given to the mass transportation needs of today and tomorrow;

* A health maintenance organization (HMO) law was enacted to authorize and regulate prepaid comprehensive health insurance plans for Floridians, and minimum standards were set and State financial aid provided for local emergency medical services;

* New emphasis was given to rehabilitation with community-based programs in such areas as mental health, alcoholic rehabilitation, adult and youth corrections, and programs for the retarded;

* Greater benefits were provided for the unemployed or injured working men and women of Florida, beginning strides were made toward meeting the urban and rural housing needs of Floridians, and needed additional aid was provided for the disadvantaged.

Governor Askew has been a stout defender of equal opportunity and justice and was, as a result, awarded the 1971 John F. Kennedy "Profiles in Courage" award by B'nai B'rith, the 1973 John F. Kennedy Award by the National Council of Jewish Women, and the national William Booth Award of the Salvation Army. He also was awarded the 1973 Herbert H. Lehman Ethics Medal for applying his personal religious and ethical values to his public life.

His fight to protect Florida's environment has been cited in several conservation awards, including the special award of the National Wildlife Federation and the Florida Audubon Society award as the State's "Outstanding Conservationist of the Year" in 1972.

He has received honorary degrees from the University of Notre Dame, Stetson University, Rollins College, Eckerd College, and Florida Southern College.

Among Askew's earlier honors were his selection by the State Jaycees in 1960 as "One of Florida's Five Outstanding Young Men," the State Jaycee Good Government Award in 1971, and a number of citations as an "outstanding" member during his 12 years in Florida's Legislature.

As his reform programs gained national recognition, Governor Askew was selected to deliver the Keynote Address at the 1972 Democratic National Convention in Miami Beach.

He served as chairman of the Education Commission of the States and is Vice Chairman of the Southern Governors' Conference.

Born in Muskogee, Oklahoma, on September 11, 1928, Askew was one of six children.

In 1937 his family moved to Pensacola where he entered the Escambia County Public School System and, beginning at the age of nine, worked in his free time to help his mother support the family.

When he graduated from high school at 17, Askew entered the Army as a Private in the paratroopers and rose to the rank of Sergeant. He then entered Florida State University where he was a member of ROTC and served as student body president. He graduated with a B.S. Degree in Public Administration and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the Air Force. After two additional years of active duty in the Air Force, Captain Askew was admitted to the University of Florida Law School. In 1956 he received his LL.B. Degree.

Almost immediately he began his public service career by accepting an appointment as Assistant County Solicitor of Escambia County. He was elected to the Florida House of Representatives in 1958 and to the State Senate in 1962.

Askew worked vigorously for fair apportionment in both the House and the Senate.

In the Senate, he was Chairman of the Appropriations Committee and the Committee on Constitutional Amendments and Revision. He served as President Pro Tempore of the Senate before resigning to run for Governor in 1970.

His many community services include being a past president of the Western Division of Children's Home Society of Florida, past member of the Board of Directors of the Florida Association for Retarded Children, the Farm Bureau, Escambia County Tuberculosis and Health Association, YMCA, American Legion, Heart Association and United Fund. He is a Mason and Rotarian.

He is married to the former Donna Lou Harper of Sanford, Florida, and the couple has two children, Angela Adair, 13, and Kevin O'Donovan, 11. Governor Askew is an elder in the First Presbyterian Church of Pensacola.
