P.S. to the NEWS
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THE ILLINOIS "HORSE SHOW"

In what became colloquially known as the "Illinois Horse Show," Chicago last month provided a preview of presidential nominating convention enthusiasm. All Republican presidential candidates were invited to the Illinois Presidential Forum to strut their stuff, speak out on chosen issues, show off their personalities, and shake hands with Republican organization regulars from precinct committeemen to the Governor.

The Friday night reception and the dozen well-stocked hospitality suites were full of political optimists despite the failure of air conditioning and elevators. The Saturday morning program, allowing exactly one half hour to each of seven hopeful candidates, was a first-rate show which kept nearly 2,000 Republicans glued to their seats.

Illinois doesn't seem to receive media coverage like New Hampshire. But Illinois has one of the earliest filing deadlines for convention delegates, and with 102 votes, will have the third largest bloc in the 1980 Republican National Convention.

Receiving the most attention from party officials, financial contributors, and the news media, was Governor John B. Connally. When he spoke out flamboyantly in favor of energy growth and military defense, he clearly talked the language the audience liked to hear.

Connally was ready and waiting for a hostile questioner who asked if he is really just a wheeler-dealer. "If that means someone smart enough to deal with international leaders and not get caught in a shell game," Connally confidently replied, "I'm that smart." To an audience fed up with our nation's leaders coming out second-best in every international conference from Yalta to SALT II, that talent might be just what the times demand.

Rank and file Republicans aren't yet ready to give their party's prize honor to

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a johnny-come-lately, even though Connally reminded them that he turned Republican in the Watergate years when the party was at its lowest ebb in history. Congressman Philip Crane's straightforward conservative speech clearly generated the most interruptions for spontaneous applause; it was Crane country.

George Bush, despite offering the greatest variety of top-job experience, failed to demonstrate any charisma in Illinois. Bob Dole's clever wisecracks enabled him to meet the challenge of being last on a long program, but he didn't sign up many supporters.

No Republican presidential sweepstakes would be complete without Harold Stassen, who has been running for President every four years since before many of those present were born. He inspired one spontaneous round of applause when he came out strongly against drafting women.

The only candidate whose speech was unacceptable to that all-Republican audience was Congressman John B. Anderson's. He hurt only himself when he attempted to ridicule those who oppose SALT II.

The surprise candidate who captured the admiration and imagination, if not the allegiance, of many in the crowd was Benjamin Fernandez. He has a unique combination of political attributes.

His Horatio Alger life history began with birth in a railroad car in Kansas City to Mexican parents who never learned to read or write English. He started to work doing stoop labor at the age of five. In the great American private enterprise system, he worked his way through two degrees in economics to become a millionaire businessman.

Fernandez is an eloquent speaker with personality plus, a beautiful wife, the asset of ethnicity, and a campaign promise no other candidate can match. If he is elected, the President of Mexico has promised him to sell us its oil. Fernandez is confident that he will win the first primary -- not New Hampshire, but Spanish-speaking Puerto Rico.

Ronald Reagan sent a wire pleading a "previous engagement," and under the rules of the horse show, substitute speakers were not recognized. It looks as though REagan is again defaulting in Illinois, the state of his birth and where he lived until after his college graduation. That is the same strategy which helped to lose the nomination in 1976.

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