

California Conflict

By Tom Wicker

SAN FRANCISCO, Sept. 30—Senator Robert Dole, the Republican Vice-Presidential nominee, told a group of Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles on Sept. 24 that "I have not taken a public stand" on Proposition 14. That's the controversial ballot initiative to insure fair labor practices in California's strife-riddled agricultural areas.

Immediately after his speech, Mr. Dole was confronted by reporters who reminded him that on Sept. 14, addressing the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, he had flatly opposed Proposition 14—and chided Jimmy Carter, the Democratic Presidential nominee, for reversing his stand and endorsing it. A reporter told Mr. Dole that he had a tape recording of the San Francisco speech.

"Good," Mr. Dole snapped. "Keep it."

But this bravado could not rescue the Kansas Senator, who has spent virtually his whole campaign accusing Mr. Carter of saying different things to different audiences on the same issue. Larry Speakes, the Dole press secretary, later conceded that Mr. Dole not only had opposed Proposition 14 before an audience of San Francisco businessmen, then said he had "not taken a public stand" on it before the Los Angeles Mexican-Americans, but that he also had been stating his opposition to the proposal in Midwest farm areas.

Proposition 14 is unquestionably a tough issue for a political candidate to deal with. Mr. Carter—a grower himself—hesitated before throwing his full weight behind it during his last California tour. By opposing it, the Republicans may have damaged whatever chance they had at a share of the Mexican-American vote—to which President Ford made a powerful overture recently when he appointed Edward Aguirre of California as the Commissioner of Education in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

Aside from its impact on national politics, particularly the California and Texas campaigns, Proposition 14 poses a profound issue in itself—one that Grey Davis, Gov. Jerry Brown's administrative assistant, says "rises almost to the level of a cause." Some of its proponents believe it could change the very nature of California's politics, economy and society, by greatly increasing the power of the state's minorities and farm workers.

Proposition 14 grew out of the long, dark history of conflict on California farms between growers, Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers of America and the teamsters' union, which also has

organized some farm workers and has much support among growers. When Governor Brown took office in 1975, his first major achievement was to get these three forces to agree to his Agricultural Labor Relations Act, and to "live with it" for two years without changes.

The act gave farm workers the right to vote to form or join unions of their own choice, much as the National Labor Relations Act gave such rights to non-farm unions decades ago. Growers agreed to it, apparently, because it promised relief from the United Farm Workers' national grape boycott, and because they expected the teamsters to win most organizing elections.

It didn't work that way. In 400 elections involving 40,000 workers—about 10 percent of the total—more than 30,000 voted for the United Farm Workers. In December of 1975 and January of 1976, after Mr. Brown named a special task force to enforce the law over grower resistance, the

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United Farm Workers won 23 of 26 elections in the Imperial Valley. But by Feb. 1, because more elections than expected had been held, and because of the many unfair labor practices investigations that had been required, the Agricultural Labor Relations Board's funds had run out.

Under California law, emergency appropriations require a two-thirds vote of each legislative House—which growers, with mostly Republican support, succeeded in blocking. About 200 A.L.R.B. workers had to be let go, as Mr. Brown and the United Farm Workers resisted the changes in the law demanded by growers before they would agree to new funding.

With the Governor's support, the United Farm Workers gathered 729,000 signatures in 29 days to put Proposition 14 on the November ballot. If it passes, it would replace the legislative act of 1975 with its virtual duplicate, which could then be changed only by another popular initiative. That would not guarantee adequate funding but proponents believe that popular statewide endorsement would give the measure too much public standing for it to be thwarted by the legislature again.

But growers have raised more than \$1 million for an opposition campaign. Proposition 14's permission for union organizers to campaign on employers' property is being made into a powerful emotional issue. And the fight over the initiative could have major impact on the Presidential campaign here and in other farm states.