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DECISION AWAITED ON NEW V.A. CHIEF

Ford Press Secretary Says Matter Has High Priority —Johnson Still in Post

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 12 — One of the first policy decisions under consideration by President Ford is the appointment of a new Administrator of Veterans Affairs, who heads the second largest agency in the Government and has the third largest budget.

"The President has the matter of the next administrator very much on his mind," J. F. terHorst, the new White House press secretary, said today. He added that it was a "matter of high priority."

Earlier this year, the Veterans Administration and its administrator, Donald F. Johnson, were criticized by some veterans organizations and Congressional leaders for allegedly ignoring some major problems of veterans and failing to promote adequate health and educational benefits.

Selection Delayed

Last April, Mr. Johnson was asked to resign and the search began for a new administrator. But, like so many Government problems in the last few months, the selection of a new V.A. chief was delayed while an embattled President Nixon sought to avoid impeachment.

In the waning days of the Nixon Administration, Richard L. Roudebush, the deputy administrator, was the unofficial nominee for the administrator's post.

Although Mr. Roudebush's name was never submitted to Congress for confirmation, members of Congress serving on the Veterans Affairs Committee of both houses were privately informed by the White House that Mr. Roudebush would be the candidate and that a pre-appointment investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation was under way.

Mr. Roudebush, who served with Mr. Ford in Congress for 10 years as a Representative from Indiana and is considered

to be a friend of Mr. Ford's, was not mentioned at today's conference by Mr. terHorst during the discussion of a new Administrator of Veterans Affairs.

Johnson Still Stays

Meanwhile, Mr. Johnson, who told the White House last April that he would resign "in the near future," still holds the \$42,500-a-year post.

Although the White House submitted the names of more than a dozen persons as possible candidates for the administrator's post to Congressional committees on veterans affairs for consideration since last April, and despite the fact that several Congressional leaders were informed by the White House that Mr. Johnson had been dismissed, a spokesman for Mr. Johnson said today that he "was not asked for his resignation" and "did not submit a letter of resignation" to the President.

The spokesman, Stratton M. Appleman, said Mr. Johnson planned to remain in office "until the White House appoints a new administrator."

Cooper Holt, executive director of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, whose 1.8 million members makes it the nation's second largest veterans organization after the American Legion, expressed irritation today that Mr. Johnson still headed the V.A. and that no successor had been chosen.

'Agency Is in Limbo'

"If the Secretary of State resigned, there would be a new Secretary of the State the next day," Mr. Holt said. "The agency is in limbo; nothing is going on, no decisions are being made."

Mr. Holt added that "we thought Johnson would be gone long before now," and said he felt "confident" that Mr. Ford would "follow through" on the nomination of Mr. Roudebush, who has the support of the V.F.W.

However, several critics of the V.A.'s policies in recent years who alleged that bureaucratic snarls were slowing the payments of benefits to Vietnam veterans and that the agency was following too closely the dictates of the Office of Management and Budget in trying to cut back veterans programs, particularly education grants, were disturbed by the possible nomination of Mr. Roudebush.

The critics, who asked not to be identified, said they had expected a candidate who would display new independence for the agency.