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The Vice Presidency

RICHARD HERMAN, who is the Republican national committeeman from Nebraska and a leader in a campaign to persuade President Ford to make Republican National Chairman George Bush our next Vice President, has some interesting arguments in support of his candidate. Mr. Bush, says Mr. Herman, "may not be the first choice in all cases but he's not lower than second with anyone." What's more, Mr. Herman adds, Mr. Bush "can do more to help the Republican Party than anyone else and is totally acceptable throughout the country." Well, that's good to know, and we wouldn't argue with it. George Bush, from what we have been able to make out, is a politician of exceptional charm and amiability, with a rare ability to make friends and avoid making enemies. He was elected twice to the House of Representatives, defeated once for the Senate in a brave effort, and served a tour as chief of the U.S. mission to the United Nations before becoming party chairman. In short, his background and abilities would appear to qualify him for the vice presidency in just about all respects, except for the one that seems to us to really matter: What is conspicuously lacking is any compelling or demonstrable evidence that he is adequately qualified to be President.

We could be wrong about that—and we remain open to argument. But that is just the point: with the notable exception of Nelson Rockefeller and one or two other prominent and experienced national figures with proven administrative capacities, the arguments we are hearing on behalf of particular candidates are not even faintly worthy of the office in question or of the truly hard choice confronting Mr. Ford. We are being told that this or that nominee would give a nice geographic or ideological balance, or be an effective campaigner in this fall's elections, or offend nobody very much. And finally—and there is more than a little irony here—some candidates for Vice President are being put forward specifically on the grounds that because of one quality or another they would serve especially well as a poultice for the wounds we have suffered at the hands of Watergate and related scandals. Surely, the best antidote to

Watergate and future Watergates is the elevation to high office of people of unquestionable qualifications. We have the recent example of Mr. Agnew to remind us of the pitfalls in the choice of Vice Presidents by the application of irrelevant criteria.

This is not to say that Vice Presidents have not made good Presidents. It is only to say that they have a habit of winding up, one way or another, as Presidents, and that they therefore ought to be picked with that prospect uppermost in mind. One-third of all of our Presidents have been former Vice Presidents, including four of the last six. To ignore the implications of these figures would be grossly irresponsible, even if Mr. Ford were choosing a running mate in the highly charged atmosphere of a political convention and in anticipation of conducting a campaign for the presidency. It would be all the more so under present circumstances, when the President will be operating under the new provisions of the 25th Amendment which brought him to the vice presidency—provisions which authorize vacancies in that office to be filled by nomination from the President and confirmation by both houses of Congress.

Much has been made of the fact that we are now going to have both a President and a Vice President who came to office by this new route and that this will rob them of the legitimacy conferred by a popular vote. But we are inclined to agree with Michael Barone who argues in an article elsewhere on this page that in a very real sense the method by which Mr. Ford became Vice President—and the one he will now employ to appoint his successor—is a considerable improvement over the way such choices are made under ordinary circumstances. There is not the time pressure. The short-term political imperatives are far less pressing. There is, in short, far less reason for the President to yield to the immediate needs of his party for a convivial, non-controversial political campaigner and fund-raiser, and far more reason for him to take as his principal test the qualifications of his nominee to fulfill the Vice President's sole significant constitutional responsibility—that of assuming the presidency, if need be.