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The Democrats' Delay for Mr. Ford

Behind the delayed approval of Rep. Gerald Ford as vice president is a fantastic but deadly serious effort by fire-eating liberal Democratic congressmen to block him indefinitely, impeach President Nixon and hand the presidency to Democratic Speaker Carl Albert.

That maximum goal is not likely to be achieved. Although they have pushed the House Democratic caucus well leftward, these highly ideological, highly partisan liberals still constitute a distinct minority. Nevertheless, they may well achieve their minimum goal of delaying Ford's approval until the question of Mr. Nixon's surrender of the surreptitious White House tape recordings is resolved.

The new confrontation between the President and Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox over the tapes will probably stiffen the determination of the liberal congressmen not to approve Ford unless the tapes are in hand."

Thus, final action on Ford could be stalled until the next congressional session in January. Neither Speaker Albert nor most House Democrats want this. But the Speaker has proved consistently unwilling to oppose the left-wing fire-eaters in his party's caucus. What makes this personally embarrassing for Albert is his status—a heartbeating from the presidency so long as Ford's approval is delayed. Immediately following Mr. Nixon's



selection of Ford October 12, the House seemed sure to approve their old colleague quickly. Any trouble seemed more likely to come from the Senate, where desultory talk of delay on Ford emerged from the Oct. 13 Democratic caucus — hardly enough to concern the White House.

However, Albert and other House Democratic leaders were peeved by forecasts that the House would rubber-stamp old crony Jerry Ford in contrast to a thorough Senate investigation. Hence, at the closed-door caucus of House Democrats Wednesday, Oct. 17, the Speaker pledged exhaustive consideration of Ford. He was echoed by Rep. Peter Rodino of New Jersey, whose House Judiciary Committee will hold hearings.

Only Rep. Robert Sikes, a conservative Democrat from Florida urging quick approval, broke the facade of unanimous support for the Albert-Rodino procedure at Wednesday's caucus. But beneath the facade was a split of potentially historic significance, not fully perceived by most congressmen and totally missed by the White House.

In pledging careful investigation, Albert and Rodino meant full scrutiny of Ford's moral, ethical and financial background before consenting to the President's selection. In saying the same words, militantly liberal congressmen meant something quite different: full congressional parity with Mr. Nixon in filling the vice presidential vacancy under the 25th amendment.

The latter viewpoint was put forth at the caucus by Rep. John Moss of California, a senior congressman often aligned with the fire-eaters. He argued that Ford's qualifications must be judged. Another veteran liberal, Rep. John Dingell of Michigan, indicated he might oppose Ford on ideological grounds.

Rep. Donald Fraser of Minnesota summarized this viewpoint by asking Dingell: Was there anything in the 25th Amendment requiring a congressman to approve someone he does not want to become president? Of course not, Dingell replied. Indeed, Fraser regards Ford's conservative civil rights record as more relevant than the current FBI investigation of his personal life.

In the cloakroom, this position is illuminated by Rep. Robert Drinan of Massachusetts, the priest turned fire-eating politician. Suppose, he says, George McGovern had been elected President and Sargent Shriver later resigned as Vice President? If McGovern named Angela Davis as Vice President, would Congress not reject her on ideological grounds?

Such logic is rejected by most Democratic congressmen, perhaps two-thirds of Wednesday's caucus, who believe Drinan and friends are improperly trying to repeal last year's presidential election. But the House Judiciary Committee has become a redoubt for the fire-eaters with fully 10 of its 21 Democrats (including the ineffable Father Drinan) considering themselves "Young Turks." By demanding Ford's views on all Nixon stands (including the secret tapes), they intend to prevent final action this year.

By year's end, they believe Mr. Nixon may well be the object of impeachment proceedings as a result of his struggle over the tapes. In that case, Ford's nomination would be frozen.

The permissive Albert ordinarily might not prod the Judiciary Committee, but on this issue he is extremely sensitive to accusations of stalling Ford's approval so he can remain Mr. Nixon's constitutional successor. That ultimately may be what undoes the audacious scheme in the House to seize the presidency.