

...and Miscalculating at the White House

While the sacking of Defense Secretary James Schlesinger and retirement of Vice President Nelson Rockefeller were intended to reinvigorate politically a failing President Ford, incompetent execution of an ill-conceived project has further undermined his prospects for the Republican nomination.

Congential bungling at the Ford White House botched up plans to announce Rockefeller's exit from the 1976 ticket several days before Schlesinger was handed his head. Even so, the White House grossly overestimated political benefits from Rockefeller's exit and underestimated Schlesinger's esteem among conservative Republicans.

Moreover, the events of Sunday and Monday gave the nation a picture of Byzantine intrigue and ruthless personal treatment supposedly alien to the friendly, decent presidency of Jerry Ford. Only Richard M. Nixon's Saturday Night Massacre of 1973 has so dismayed high administration officials, senior bureaucrats and Republican politicians. Their reading is nearly unanimous: a disaster for Mr. Ford.

The White House intended to stop the President's accelerating decline with this plan: on Monday, Rockefeller would announce his unavailability for Vice

President—a headline event placating the Republican Party's dominant right wing. At midweek, Mr. Ford would fire Schlesinger—a secondary event that would demonstrate the President's decisive control of foreign affairs.

At Schlesinger's request, the Secretary of Defense met with the President Saturday from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. in a cordial discussion of defense matters. Although Mr. Ford days before had decided to fire him, he did not want to tip his hand before Rockefeller bowed out. So, contrary to his image of openness and candor, Mr. Ford gave Schlesinger no clue to his fate.

Unfortunately for the President's plans, however, Newsweek's reporters found out. With Schlesinger alerted by then, he was summoned to see the President at 8:30 a.m. Sunday (encountering William Colby leaving Mr. Ford's office after having been fired as CIA Director). The President added insult to injury by offering to name Schlesinger head of the Export-Import Bank or Ambassador to London. Dr. Schlesinger declined.

Even at this late hour, the White House hoped to hold back the news until Rockefeller's letter to the President was made public. But Pentagon sources leaked out news of the Sunday morning massacre. What was worse for Mr. Ford, the im-

pression was not decisive presidential leadership but supremacy for Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in his long, bitter feud with Schlesinger. It was believed throughout Washington Kissinger had solidified his mastery over foreign policy by forcing out his one effective rival while only nominally surrendering his National Security Adviser's role to a trusted protege, Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft.

On Monday morning Dr. Kissinger heatedly protested to a colleague that he was being misjudged. "Believe me," said Kissinger, whose word is not always believed, "this was done over my dead body." Kissinger and others in the administration point to a different manipulator of these events: White House Chief of Staff Donald Rumsfeld, arch-enemy of Rockefeller who will succeed Schlesinger at the Pentagon.

Apart from Byzantine palace politics, the White House undervalued Schlesinger's standing with conservatives in and out of Congress, who consider him the one hard-line anti-Communist voice inside the administration. Although Schlesinger may have pressed too hard in recent attempts to restore defense cuts in Congress, he is highly regarded among congressional Republicans—far more highly than either Kissinger or ex-

Congressman Rumsfeld. Mr. Ford never has cared for Schlesinger's professorial style, and their lack of personal rapport was aggravated recently by a budget dispute: Schlesinger's adamant refusal to cut back Pentagon spending in conformity with the President's election year tax cut. Rumsfeld at the Pentagon will offer no such opposition, which deeply worries conservative congressmen.

To such congressmen, Rumsfeld-for-Schlesinger at the Pentagon eclipses Rockefeller's withdrawal. The day when Nelson Rockefeller constituted Mr. Ford's only problem with the Republican right ended weeks ago. "I'm more concerned about Ford than Rocky," one conservative leader told us, "and getting rid of Schlesinger makes me all the more concerned."

President Ford, and his closest advisers, including Rumsfeld, have thereby continued miscalculations that began with their belief Ronald Reagan would never run. In attempting to eliminate two troublesome members of the administration to demonstrate presidential leadership, they have succeeded only in presenting an administration in utter disarray and making the Reagan challenge more viable than ever.