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'A No-Win Position'

Although Vice President Nelson Rockefeller's stunning withdrawal from the 1976 ticket was a concession to political reality, it also signalled his private conviction of rapid and dangerous deterioration within the Ford administration.

The concession to reality was long overdue. For six months, White House Chief of Staff Donald Rumsfeld had left no particle of doubt he was using his recognized talents for political infighting to remove Rockefeller as Vice Presidential candidate next year. In Washington, Rocky was viewed as having joined the walking dead.

For the Vice President himself, the moment of truth came with the President's hard-line position against a federal bailout of New York City. To Rockefeller, this was political stupidity that capped his growing doubt about Gerald Ford's inherent ability to run the country. As one of Rockefeller's intimates in New York told us: "Nelson was coming reluctantly to an unhappy conclusion that the top man down there (Mr. Ford) just isn't bright." In that frame of mind, the lame duck Vice President may be a loose cannon in the Ford administration.

Rumsfeld's anti-Rockefeller campaign, which infuriated the Vice President but left him no weapons to strike back with, began during the summer. Rumsfeld's hand-picked Ford campaign chairman, Howard (Bo) Callaway, called for Rockefeller's replacement on the 1976 ticket as his first order of business.

That led three months ago to a Dutch-uncle talk to Rockefeller by Dr. William Ronan, his longtime confidant. Ronan strongly urged the Vice President to announce his unavailability for a spot on the 1976 ticket.

But Rockefeller, ebullient and optimistic, refused to admit the wisdom of Ronan's advice. Instead, he set out all over again, as he had so many times before, to woo and win the old Rockefeller nemesis of conservative Republicans, concentrating in the South where anti-Rockefeller sentiment is most shrill. He failed, utterly and flatly, as he had always failed before.

That failure coincided with alarming reports to Rockefeller from political intimates, including New York Republican State Chairman Richard Rosenbaum. They told Rockefeller that Mr. Ford's campaign committee was still semi-moribund, with Callaway seemingly out of his depth. One alarmed pro-Rockefeller Republican told the Vice President last week that he, not Callaway or Rumsfeld, was going to get the blame.

"They'll cut you up and you will be the first one thrown to the dogs after New Hampshire goes for Reagan," Rockefeller was told. That warning typified the advice flooding his office.

Even so, buoyed by an ambition which had survived grievous wounds in 16 years of national politics, Rockefeller almost surely would have given himself another six months of hope had it not been for the harsh rhetoric in Mr. Ford's speech on New York City last week.

To Rockefeller and his inner circle, the speech was an insulting demand for his political scalp. Of all the President's men, only Rockefeller publicly bucked the White House tide and lobbied for federal bond-guarantees for New York. Moreover, privately joined by such impeccable fiscal conservatives as Dr. Arthur Burns, Rockefeller was astonished and angered that Mr. Ford would excoriate New York

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with language that might come back to haunt him in the aftermath of default.

The result: Rockefeller's markedly reduced assessment of President Ford's abilities, as relayed to his intimates.

Sour grapes or not, Rockefeller concluded early last week he was locked into a no-win position. One Southern Republican leader, long a friend, quietly confided he could not support him as Mr. Ford's running mate and begged him not to come into Florida before the March 9 presidential primary election. Rockefeller reacted with unaccustomed mildness. He had already made up his mind.

Now unshackled from the White House, Rockefeller's Vice Presidency may be entering its most interesting period, which is suggested by his conduct last Sunday night after Newsweek's leak of the coming massacre. With his own letter written and ready for submission to the President the next morning, Rockefeller placed telephone calls to senior officers in the administration.

His message: The scalping of Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger was no doing of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger but the apparent brainschild of Don Rumsfeld.

Whether to protect intimate friend Henry or exact sweet revenge from bitter enemy Rumsfeld, this is evidence that Nelson Rockefeller may become a loose cannon in election-year Washington. The prospect is not calming the turbulent waters in the Ford White House.

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