

...And Overlooked Political Realities

The wholly predictable storm over President Ford's nomination of former Republican National Chairman George Bush to head the CIA has forced the White House into a dangerously overdue calculation of political realities, with withdrawal of the nomination now a possibility.

The political realities, apparently never considered by the President or the very few top aides privy to his secret plans to replace Central Intelligence Director William Colby with Bush, boil down to this essential: to avoid possible refusal of the strongly Democratic Senate to confirm Bush, he or President Ford must absolutely rule out any possibility of Bush winding up as Mr. Ford's Vice Presidential running mate.

Such a condition has now reached the stage of gospel inside the Democratic Senate establishment, and particularly with Democrats on the Senate Armed Services Committee. Although Sen. John Stennis, conservative chairman of the Committee, has said nothing at all, intimates of the highly influential Mississippian fully agree that all Vice Presidential doors must be closed to Bush to avoid an inflammatory confirmation battle.

Failure of the President to consider this aspect of his appointment of Bush, a highly regarded and extremely popular politician, was further exacerbated during Mr. Ford's appearance on Meet the Press last Sunday. Instead of seeking to calm the roiled waters when asked if he should eliminate both Bush and Secretary of Defense-designate Donald Rumsfeld from all consideration for second place on the 1976 Republican ticket, Mr. Ford bristled.

"I don't think people with talent...ought to be excluded from any further public service," he replied coolly.

Thus, the President's gravely mistaken reading of the political impact of the Sunday Morning Massacre continues in his failure to perceive that to the controlling Democrats on Capitol Hill (and many Republicans as well), the Director of CIA must be above political suspicion.

But some Presidential aides are more keenly tuned in to Congressional frequencies. It is no accident that even though Bush's nomination has been formally sent to the Senate for confirmation hearings, no hearings are now scheduled for several weeks at best—and possibly not until next year.

That raises the question of a deliberate stall, based on the President's suddenly-expressed desire to keep Bush at his present post in Peking at least until Mr. Ford's China trip. If, as presently assumed, Mr. Ford goes to China within the next month, Bush would not be available for his confirmation hearing until well into December.

With Congress eyeing either December 12 or December 19 for the start of the Christmas recess, it now looks doubtful that Bush could be confirmed before next year. By then, with far deeper understanding of the anti-Bush sentiment, the President could make another mid-course correction, giving Bush a different post that would keep him available for a possible Vice Presidential nomination next summer (the job Mr. Ford came within a whisker of giving Bush instead of Nelson Rockefeller last year) and naming some one else to succeed Colby.

Precisely that probability was instantly perceived by Capitol Hill operatives when Mr. Ford summoned Colby back to the White House last week and asked him to stay at the CIA until a successor had been confirmed by the Senate. Earlier, when Colby left Mr. Ford's oval office on the morning of Sunday, Nov. 2, he was preparing to pack out of the CIA instantly.

Still one of Washington's darker mysteries is why the President chose to put the long-suffering Bush through such a wringer without understanding the political realities. White House aides normally involved with CIA affairs, including the Congressional probes, knew nothing of Colby's sudden sacking or his replacement by Bush until too late.

Indeed, on top of the CIA's long misery is the grip of Congressional investigations and press exposes, the Bush nomination is regarded by some intelligence experts as another grave morale deflator. They reason that any identified politician, no matter how resolved to be politically pure, would aggravate the CIA's credibility gap. Instead of an identified politician like Bush—former Member of the House, twice-defeated Senate nominee from Texas and Vice Presidential aspirant—what is needed they feel, is a respected non-politician, perhaps from business or the academic world.

Not all experts agree. One former CIA official wants the CIA placed under political leadership capable of working closely with Congress. But even that distinctly minority position rebels against any Presidential scenario that looks to the CIA as possible stepping-stone to the Vice Presidential nomination.