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An Unknown Quantity

By Michael J. Harrington

WASHINGTON—The confirmation of Gerald Ford to be Vice President will come to its unsuspenseful conclusion today as the House of Representatives overwhelmingly votes to endorse the nomination. We will be confirming a man whose honesty, integrity and decency are above reproach—a welcome change from our recent history. We will be confirming a man whose political philosophy, consistently expressed over 25 years in the House, seems to be in touch with the mainstream of the electorate as expressed in the 1972 election.

And yet, I testified against the nomination of Representative Ford and intend to vote, along with a handful of my colleagues, against confirmation. While I fully concur with the unanimous assessment of Gerald Ford's probity, and have no quarrel with three more years of Republican leadership, which the party is entitled to, I feel that we could have done better, both with regard to the nominee, and, perhaps more importantly, with regard to the nomination and confirmation process. In the seven weeks since Spiro Agnew appeared in a Baltimore courtroom, the Congress has deliberated in an unextraordinary fashion on the nomination of an unextraordinary man to be Vice President.

Two weeks ago marked the tenth anniversary of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. During that decade, our society has undergone an unparalled succession of convulsive shocks —three political assassinations; a tragic war in Southeast Asia whose measurable costs are not yet fully discernible or understood by the generation that has experienced it; the irreversible shattering of our previous conceptions of America's role in the world, and the traumas of Birmingham, Watts, Newark and Detroit.

The prospects for the immediate future are equally bleak. Now that consideration of the Ford nomination has been completed, the House will turn its attention to the impeachment inquiry.

Given these circumstances, our response to the situation created by the resignation of Vice President Agnew has been inadequate. Scarcely 48 hours after the resignation was tendered, the new nominee was introduced to the nation at a rather incongruous ceremony in the White House East Room. The majority of the American public had little, if any, familiarity with the man who one day may be their President. Gerald Ford, of course, is well-known to his colleagues in the Congress, a fact not overlooked by the President.

It is this kind of response that I find inadequate. Rather than choosing a man who the American people, if given the chance, would ratify, the President and the Congress have substituted their own judgment for the judgment of the people. Of course, the 25th Amendment provides for this substitution, but since this is the first time the 25th Amendment procedures have been used, it would have been appropriate for the Congress to outline the standards to be applied to the nominee.

I would like to have seen a nominee whose abilities and capabilities would be known to the general public—a man who would be viewed by the American people as a genuine Presidential contender. Gerald Ford, despite his many positive qualities, does not fit this bill.

We will shortly have a Vice President whose capacities and qualities are largely unknown to the vast majority of Americans. It is argued that this is irrelevant, since we in Congress know Gerald Ford well. I don't buy this argument, nor do I believe that this kind of outcome was anticipated when the 25th Amendment was drafted.

It was argued by many members of the Congress that Harry Truman's capacities were unknown when he assumed the Presidency and that he lived up to the expectations held for performance of the job. Gerald Ford, if he becomes President, may also develop a capacity for greatness. But based on my reading of his record in the House, I see little evidence to support that conclusion.

There is, however, no need to take that chance. The procedures authorized by the 25th Amendment permit the country to be canvassed for the best available talent. Both the President and the Congress failed to avail themselves of this opportunity.

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