

Politics and Carl Albert's Decision

Breaking a precedent of long standing in their cordial relationship, House Speaker Carl Albert consciously failed to inform Rep. Gerald Ford, the Republican leader, of his decision not to accept the torrid case of Vice President Spiro Agnew last Wednesday. 26 SEP

That omission by Albert was no oversight. It was an intentional signal to Ford and the House Republicans that the majority Democrats were ready to assert a new partisanship in the pyramid of bewildering constitutional crises now threatening this country with its harshest challenge since the Civil War.

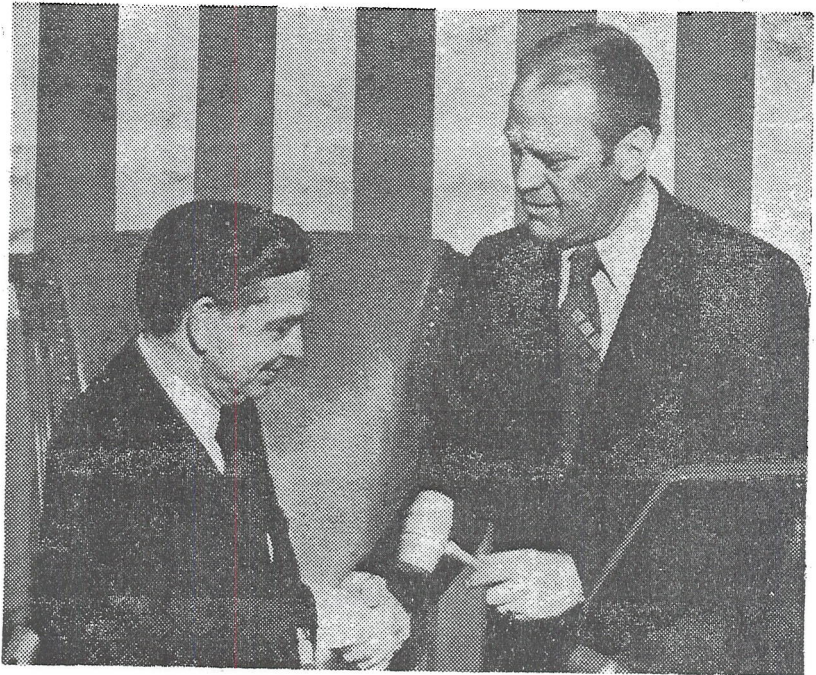
Ford, the Michigan congressman who has led his party in the House for nine years, sat in with Albert, House Democratic leader Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill Jr., of Massachusetts and other House leaders in an indecisive meeting Tuesday evening on Agnew's request for a complete House investigation of conspiracy and bribery charges against him. Claiming that Agnew's unique request to the House must be taken seriously, Ford urged on his colleagues the following course: establish a select committee of distinguished members to receive and study all the evidence.

At that evening session, O'Neill's position was not abruptly stated but seemed clear: don't force the Democratic majority to take Agnew off the hook and out of the courts particularly in view of President Nixon's repeated demands that the Senate Watergate Committee end its hearings and turn the matter over to the courts.

But Albert was obviously torn. Some intimates of the Speaker were convinced he hoped to finesse the whole issue by routinely sending the Agnew investigation to the House Judiciary Committee, headed by Rep. Peter Rodino of New York.

O'Neill had other ideas, partly germinating from his own sense of partisanship and partly springing from an acute undercurrent of partisan feelings among younger, more liberal House Democrats who have felt anesthetized by their leaders' lack of combative spirit.

O'Neill's conclusion, after careful checking with his Democratic whip: accepting the Agnew plea would infuriate the more militant Democrats. He also discovered that even such conserv-



House Speaker Carl Albert with Rep. Gerald Ford.

ative southerner Democrats as Rep. Joe Waggoner of Louisiana, who has good ties with the White House, were loath to get mixed up in the explosive Agnew affair which seemed to be pitting the President against either his Vice President or his Attorney General.

O'Neill, then, quietly informed the Speaker of these conclusions. Albert, who has become the most pressurable speaker in memory, rushed out with his statement refusing to accept the Agnew request without telling Ford.

Actually, many Republicans—quite likely including Ford himself—had no more desire to grab the hot coal of Agnew's request than O'Neill did, regardless of their statements. But Ford was hurt and angered by the degree of partisanship that kept him in the dark.

Ever since Watergate became the only game in town last March, the Democrats have wisely eschewed normal partisanship. Whatever political benefits they have gained from President Nixon's terrible troubles have accumulated on their own. The best Watergate politics, the Democrats correctly decided, was to let Watergate

play itself out and not try to milk it.

Now, however, that mood is beginning to change. For example, senior Democrats in both houses, thinking ahead to Agnew's possible removal or resignation at some future time, are now plotting demands on the President that would severely reduce his freedom to name a successor.

Any successor he may choose will be pressured to give a public commitment not to run for president in 1976. In addition, the Democratic leaders are now planning a most exhaustive investigation and hearings for any nominee Mr. Nixon may send Congress if Agnew does not survive. In private, responsible Democrats in Congress believe they have a serious chance to defeat John B. Connally for vice president if his name is submitted. They fully intend to try.

Partisan politics, muted for so long during the Watergate scandals, will continue to intensify with the start of the 1974 congressional election campaign. That puts additional burdens on a system of government already overloaded with disorder.