

# Let's Test-Run the Veep

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Dec. 20—Vice President Gerald Ford has conducted himself since his nomination and confirmation with dignity and amiable good sense, but he is not being given the sort of assignments that would prepare him for the Presidency.

He is being carefully briefed. He is seeing the President more than Spiro Agnew did, and he is attending meetings of the National Security Council when they are held, which is not often. But mainly he is being used as a Presidential ambassador to the Congress, a cheerleader for a dispirited Republican party and a public defender of Mr. Nixon.

These are natural roles for a popular and believable man, but they are limited and they serve the President better than they serve the nation. For in these uncertain times, when even the President cannot know whether he will retain his office through the next three years, the first task is to give him some on-the-job training in the executive branch of the Government and experience in decision-making in case he has to take over.

There are plenty of places to be filled. For a while, former Gov. John Connally of Texas was brought in to help with the crisis in the White House but that experiment soon came to an end, and not because the crisis had ended.

Then Mel Laird and Bryce Harlow,

two popular men on Capitol Hill, were added to the President's staff, but both are now on their way out, so the President is relying again mainly on General Haig, Ron Ziegler and Henry Kissinger.

The Cabinet is strong at the center, with Mr. Kissinger, George Shultz at Treasury and James Schlesinger at Defense working well together, and getting more independence; but most of the Cabinet is comparatively inexperienced if not invisible, and a whole new team is managing the energy crisis, or vice versa.

For some reason or other, Presidents usually promise to give their Vice Presidents large executive responsibilities and then either forget them or turn them into ministers of propaganda. That is what President Eisenhower did to Richard Nixon, President Kennedy did to Lyndon Johnson, John son did to Hubert Humphrey and Mr. Nixon did to Mr. Agnew.

After his first term as Vice President, Mr. Nixon bridled at this assignment and wanted to be taken off the political circuit and given responsibility for seeing that all major decisions taken by the President were faithfully and expeditiously carried out by the appropriate departments and agencies. Ike never agreed to the switch.

There are special reasons for finally putting this original Nixon idea to work now. The new Vice President has spent most of his mature life on Cap-

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itol Hill as a party leader. He is an open, friendly and intelligent man, who is trusted because he trusts his colleagues and does his homework.

But he has little experience in foreign affairs or economic and financial affairs, which are increasingly dominating the relations between the nations, and partisan work and legislative work, in the small and chummy atmosphere of Capitol Hill, are not the same as managing vast staffs and presiding over the great departments and agencies of the Executive.

In some ways the partisan work hampers a man in the leadership of a nation. For as Mr. Nixon himself discovered when he was Vice President, the more he concentrated on being the spokesman of his party, the more he alienated the opposition and divided the people he eventually had to try to lead as President.

In fact, it is one of the misfortunes of Mr. Nixon's career that President Eisenhower did not give him the experience he wanted in the White House from 1956 to 1960, for had he worked closely with the departments in those days, he might have acquired more experience and respect for the professional civil service and the Cabinet, rather than relying on the closed and suspicious gang he finally brought into the White House.

His problem is more difficult now.

Talented men are not so eager to leave their jobs, put aside their investments and join a lame-duck Administration that has lost the trust of so many people. Even before the latest shake-up, he was turning to a smaller and smaller group of men, and shifting them from one Cabinet post to another.

Elliot Richardson from H.E.W. to Defense, to Justice within a few short months; Mr. Schlesinger from Atomic Energy to C.I.A. to Defense, and Messrs Connally, Laird and Harlow for substitute service in the White House.

The energy crisis is only the latest evidence of what happens to a Government that is unstable and preoccupied with politics and scandals. It had warning over a year ago that the oil shortage was coming. It was told by both the Soviet and the Saudis that the Middle East war was coming if new and serious efforts were not made to get a negotiated settlement of the Middle East tangle; but it was caught up in its own troubles and did not act in time.

The result is that it is going into the New Year with a host of complicated and intractable problems, a crippled team and a doubting electorate. But Mr. Ford at least gives it the hope of continuity.

In fairness to him and the country, he deserves more serious work than he's getting. He cannot help much by telling us Mr. Nixon is innocent, but by getting ready for any emergency, he might help a lot.