

Gov. Rockefeller Viewed as the Front-Runner

GOLDWATER SAYS HE WOULD ACCEPT

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Richardson, Laird, Baker,
Bush and Scott Mentioned
as Possible Choices

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 7 — Nelson A. Rockefeller figured prominently today in the early jockeying and guesswork about Vice President Ford's choice of a successor, if and when Mr. Ford succeeds President Nixon. Yet descriptions of the former New York Governor as the front-runner were obviously tentative in speculation that Mr. Ford himself said today was "premature."

Others being knowledgeable mentioned as realistic—and, for the most part, eager—possibilities were George Bush of Texas, chairman of the Republican National Committee; Elliot L. Richardson of Massachusetts, who held three Cabinet jobs in the Nixon Administration until he quit last October; Senator Howard H. Baker Jr. of Tennessee, the ranking Republican on the Senate Watergate committee; Melvin R. Laird of Wisconsin, long a friend of Mr. Ford in the House and later Secretary of Defense; Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, the Republican Presidential nominee 10 years ago and the paladin of his party's conservatives, and Senator Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, the Republican leader in the Senate.

Senator Goldwater said this afternoon in a telephone interview from Washington with news reporters in Arizona that he would be willing to accept the Vice-Presidency if Mr. Ford became President and asked him to do so. "No man could say no to that question," he said. "Any way I could serve my country I would do so."

Among those who encouraged the conversational Rockefeller boom today were Representative Charles W. Sandman Jr. of New Jersey, a conservative who abandoned President Nixon's defense this week; Representative John J. Rhodes of Arizona, the House minority leader; and William McLaughlin, the Republican party chairman in Mr. Ford's home state of Michigan.

Laird's Prediction

Mr. Laird predicted flatly yesterday that Mr. Rockefeller would be Mr. Ford's choice for Vice President. "Ford and Rockefeller will form a winning combination for the Republican party," Mr. Laird was quoted as saying today's Washington Post.

to Succeed Ford if Nixon Resigns

Mr. Laird and Mr. Ford were close political allies in the House, and Mr. Laird has said he deserved credit for persuading President Nixon to choose Mr. Ford as Vice President last fall when the President's first choice reportedly was John B. Connally of Texas. Now, as for most of the last 20 years, Mr. Laird is regarded as one of Mr. Ford's chief counselors. Yet his advocacy of Mr. Rockefeller also prompted some skepticism.

'Gone Public'

"Mel's trying too hard and too publicly," said one Republican Senator today. "If he were making headway for Rockefeller, he'd be working in the dead of night. Once you see Mel in print, you know he's made his pitch, been shot down, and gone public."

Still, Mr. Rockefeller, who stepped down last year toward the end of his fourth-year term as Governor of New York, was almost universally described as a man who could bring strength and confidence to a new administration. Among his undisputed assets, knowledge of bureaucracy and administration and personal wealth.

In what many have viewed as an exploratory campaign for the 1976 Presidential nomination, Mr. Rockefeller has issued increasingly conservative statements on such issues as welfare that softened his old opposition in the South and West. But if Mr. Ford and he were elected together to full terms in 1976—as Mr. Laird seemed to consider likely—the ambitions that have long divided the Republican party, sometimes bitterly, would no longer be at issue. Mr. Rockefeller will be 72 years old in 1980.

Mr. Ford retained his membership on Mr. Rockefeller's Commission on Critical Choices for Americans after he became Vice President. The two men are known to have talked by phone about commission business as recently as last Friday.

Yet another friend of Mr. Ford questioned the assumptions of closeness with the former Governor. "I've never heard Ford speak of Rockefeller as a close confidant," said his friend. Several other Republicans predicted that the symbolism of a Rockefeller triumph in the decline of President Nixon's career would deeply offend a wide segment of the party.

'Paranoid' and 'Ridiculous'

Hugh Morrow, a spokesman for Mr. Rockefeller, dismissed those reservations as "paranoid" and "ridiculous." Mr. Morrow said that Mr. Rockefeller was unavailable for comment and on vacation at his

home in Seal Harbor, Me. Mr. Rockefeller has not discussed the Vice-Presidency with Mr. Ford and is not encouraging speculation, Mr. Morrow said. "He's trying to get a little rest, and that's it."

But other sources close to Mr. Rockefeller expressed an informed confidence that he would welcome a Vice-Presidential invitation.

So, apparently, would all of the men being mentioned today. "Why, of course I'd take it," a Republican Senator exclaimed today, adding that he expected little opposition in either the House or Senate to any man selected by Mr. Ford.

The Vice-Presidency in a new administration would be more attractive than it was when Mr. Ford took it, the Senator predicted. "There will be a big rally-round feeling," he said. "Jerry Ford is going to enjoy not only a honeymoon but a national bending-over-backwards to do what he asks."

In the informal handicapping that went on in many offices of the capitol today, the assets and liabilities of more than a dozen potential candidates were being weighed. Mr. Ford's criteria, however, were still largely unknown — whether, for example, he will be looking for an administrative helper or political balance on a ticket for 1976; whether he wants a man with a political base, or a national figure of his own creation.

Mr. Richardson, who quit the Nixon Administration last Oct. 20 when he was ordered to dismiss Archibald Cox, the first special Watergate prosecutor, is viewed by liberal Republicans as a symbol of integrity and courage. Yet others feel that stronger advice to President Nixon from Mr. Richardson when he was Attorney General might have lanced the Watergate boil long ago. Still other Republicans feel that what they consider his "disloyalty" to the President in quitting disqualifies him with the party faithful.

Virtues to some observers are faults to others. Senator Baker, a Southerner and a conservative, helped press the Senate investigation of the Watergate scandal and has taken credit for detaching the Republican party's interest from Mr. Nixon's. Yet one senior Republican in the House felt that mere association with Watergate headlines eliminated Mr. Baker from Vice-Presidential consideration. "Whoever heard of Howard Baker before Watergate?" he asked. "That finishes him."