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Choosing the New Vice President

President Nixon has begun the process of selecting a new Vice President in a sensible, reassuring way by soliciting recommendations from his fellow Republicans. Mr. Nixon's penchant for deliberating over large decisions has seldom been more appropriate, for the circumstances in which the vacancy must be filled could hardly be more momentous or more mischief-prone. A lame-duck President, with his administration under several clouds, must nominate a new Vice President to be confirmed by a Congress run by the opposition party. It is a situation which will test the maturity and statesmanship of everyone involved—the President, the Congress and the eventual nominee.

Some have suggested that Mr. Nixon should, in one sense, minimize the political consequences of his choice by nominating a caretaker Vice President, someone who is generally acceptable or unobjectionable, and who either has no presidential ambitions or is willing to renounce those ambitions to serve for little more than two years in the second seat. This, in our view is a frivolous and unwise approach. The principal qualification for a new Vice President is fitness to assume the presidency if need be. This means that the nominee should possess, to the greatest possible extent, that blend of ability, experience, energy and public confidence which suits an individual to take command. The human fact is that anyone who even approaches such a capacity will be, pretty much by definition, one who also possesses the ambition, drive and self-esteem which propel people to become presidential aspirants.

Thus to require a Shermanesque renunciation of ambition as the price of confirmation would so narrow the field that the nation would likely be deprived of the best candidates. It would also insure that the new Vice President, if called on to assume the presidency before 1977, would be a lame duck from the start. Indeed, such a person might be able to do little more than keep the government running in the most routine, minimal way—

at precisely the time when new vitality and forcefulness would be most urgently required.

A notion which raises even more objections is that which suggests the nomination not be made, or if made should not be dealt with by the Congress, until the issue of the tapes have been resolved or the uncertainties about the future of the Nixon administration have been removed by some other climactic event. But even the remote possibility of impeachment proceedings against Mr. Nixon at some future date increases the importance of naming a new Vice President now, so that at least that one troublesome question will have been resolved. In the worst of cases, prolonging the vacancy could place the Speaker of the House in the position of arranging, through his influence on impeachment proceedings, his own elevation to the presidency. Yet the whole thrust and purpose of the 25th Amendment was to preclude such byzantine occurrences.

In sum, the nomination should be made by Mr. Nixon and considered by the Congress with dispatch, though not with haste. Toward that end, the congressional leadership should spell out without delay the exact procedures to be employed. In the House, there seems to be general agreement that the nomination will go to the Committee on the Judiciary. In the Senate, however, there is a great potential for confusion in the competing claims of the Rules and Judiciary Committees. While the Rules Committee has exercised jurisdiction over the housekeeping aspects of presidential succession in the past, the Judiciary Committee has a valid claim by virtue of its larger membership and considerable experience in weighing nominations to the Supreme Court. The clash might best be resolved by creating a special committee whose membership would be broadly representative of the Senate at large. By settling such procedural issues now, the Congress can be prepared to start its deliberations in an orderly and serious way as soon as President Nixon reaches his decision and submits the most important nomination he may ever make.