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In Search of a Vice President

One of the Senate's most powerful Southern grandees uncharacteristically picked up his telephone early Friday and passed this word directly to President Ford: Pick a strong, national leader as your Vice President and the sooner you do it, sir, the better.

The odd political fact about that call was the Southern senator's personal preference: Nelson Rockefeller. Rockefeller, he believes, would be invaluable in helping the President deal with the nation's worst problem: the economy. This influential Southerner views Rockefeller not through ideological eyes but as "a man of proven political substance" with solid standing both with labor and business.

The reason this conservative Democratic senator felt impelled to pass unsought advice to the new Republican President was the word spreading through Washington last Friday that Rockefeller was slipping far down on Ford's secret list. As the new President was sworn in, Rockefeller had become a considerably less likely prospect than either Sen. Howard Baker of Tennessee or George Bush, the greengrass patrician and transplanted Texan who heads the Republican National Committee.

The President had quietly passed word to close friends in Congress that he has an open mind and will take his time in naming his Vice President. But on his personal staff, opposition to Rockefeller has been privately and for-

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cibly expressed. That opposition boils down to two considerations:

First the absurd fear among Mr. Ford's non-political staffers—particularly his one-time Grand Rapids law partner, Philip Buchen—that Rockefeller might dominate a Ford administration and overshadow the President; second, that Mr. Ford should choose a Republican closer to his own conservative ideology and much younger than Rockefeller.

This staff opposition to Rockefeller (not fully shared by Mr. Ford's closest political aide, Robert Hartmann) is only one element in the anti-Rockefeller opposition.

In Congress, Stone Age conservative Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina is putting together a loose, anti-Rockefeller ideologically-based coalition centered in the South and Midwest. Helms's choices: the wholly unacceptable Gov. Ronald Reagan of California, Sen. Barry Goldwater (who would like the job) or Baker.

Another phalanx is forming around Rep. John Rhodes of Arizona, the House Republican leader. This pressure group is influenced less by opposition to Rockefeller than by a desire for Mr. Ford to come to Congress for his Vice President.

Other Republicans under potentially serious consideration are familiar Sen. William Brock of Tennessee and Elliot Richardson, the victim of the "Saturday Night Massacre" whose national prestige far exceeds his popularity inside the party.

In addition, serious talk from insiders is now being heard about one other dark horse: Melvin R. Laird, the backroom Republican super-power who arranged Mr. Ford's own selection as Vice President by Nixon and who is in the forefront of those pushing Rockefeller. His handicap: incestuous proximity to Mr. Ford.

What makes Mr. Ford's first great political decision so important is not only the decision itself, but the man-

ner in which he arrives at it. "Indebted to no man," as he gracefully put it in his highly effective swearing-in speech Friday, the President has virtually carte blanche to pick anyone he wants as soon as he wants.

Thus, powerful congressional Republicans—themselves not remotely interested in being Vice President—have been praying that Mr. Ford would not go through the ritual of "touching bases" unless he has already privately made up his mind. Then, he could contrive to bring about the result he wanted. But if, as seems to be the case, he has not made up his mind, the base-touching ritual becomes dangerous and potentially disruptive.

Worse yet, delay based on genuine procrastination over the new President's momentous first political choice risks a quick national judgment on Mr. Ford that could hurt him in the takeoff of his presidency. His first full day in office was celebrated everywhere as triumphant, almost joyous following the misery of the Watergate years.

But the vice presidential decision overshadows all else. Some of the President's closest collaborators believe the country expects and wants fast, bold decisions from the new chief executive. They fear that in the choice of a No. 2 man, they may be getting politics as usual, the very thing the country does not need.