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The Vice Presidency And the GOP's Future

One of the considerations that must be weighing heavily on Gerald Ford's mind, as he contemplates the pick of a Vice President, has to do with the long-term effects his choice will have on the future of the Republican Party.

Overall, the party is in a very precarious state, considerations of Watergate wholly aside. Of this, Mr. Ford must be well aware since before his elevation to the vice presi-

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dency he had assessed as unattainable his ambition ever to lead a Republican majority in Congress, as speaker. In public opinion surveys as well, the claim of the Republican Party on the allegiance of citizens is shrinking, so that fewer than one quarter of those asked consider themselves members of or identified with the party—roughly half the number who call themselves Democrats.

This has ominous implications not only for the Republican Party but for the two-party system in America as well. As V. O. Key pointed out years ago, the decline of two-party competition is as bad, over the long haul, for the majority party as it is for the perpetual minority. And so, as President Ford attempts to revive Republican hopes, the hopes of people who concern themselves with the health of American political parties generally are also riding on the outcome.

Planning for the future is always difficult, even when it is not downright hazardous, but one criterion for a vice presidential choice seems obvious: the future of the Republican Party cannot lie in the hands of leaders older than Mr. Ford himself. This alone should rule out the choice of Governors Rockefeller or Reagan, or Senator Goldwater, despite the various advantages their vice presidencies would bring. If President Ford chooses one of these men, or another party elder, it will mean simply that he has postponed, and in terms of his own opportunities to affect the future, probably given up his best chance to have a long-term effect on the recovery of Republican fortunes.

If he decides to choose among younger possibilities, there is still a sizable field of alternatives, and I



By Robert Salazar

believe it makes especial sense for the President to consider the candidacies of Republicans who, without the substantial boost the vice presidency would bring, would have no ready-made constituencies of their own from which to launch future presidential bids. Into this category fall such ideologically varied candidates as Melvin Laird, Elliot Richardson and George Bush. Not only are they younger than Mr. Ford and public servants of proven capability, but they are also the sort of people upon whom the resuscitation of the party, and the party system will have to depend.

Mr. Ford's position now is much like that of Pope John at the beginning of his renewal of the Catholic church. John saw the intimate, crucial connection between the organizational strength of the institution he led and its capacity to deal creatively with the challenges of the modern era. This is the challenge that also confronts Mr. Ford, to begin to strengthen the Republican Party for the future, so that it can grasp its obligations to take the lead in healing up the wounds of Watergate, and confronting the myriad problems of international stability and economic productivity that are bound to be the stuff of politics in the years ahead.