

House Democrats, Justice Clash

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The House Judiciary Committee plans to begin confirmation hearings on Vice President-designate Gerald R. Ford on Nov. 15, but committee Democrats are embroiled in a dispute with the Justice Department over the availability of the FBI file on Ford.

Justice decided and the Senate Rules Committee agreed that only the chairman and senior Republican could read the 1,700 pages of unevaluated data the FBI has collected on Ford, the House minority

leader. This was explained as a compromise to meet the needs of Congress for information and the need to protect the confidentiality of the raw files.

But Democratic members of the House Judiciary Committee rebelled against this last week, saying each member needs to read the files to make an informed judgment on Ford's nomination. Acting Attorney General Robert H. Bork rejected their request that the files be made available to all committee members.

Though Ford has been a colleague for 25 years, the lib-

eral-dominated Democratic side of the House Judiciary Committee does not plan to rush through his nomination with only a perfunctory glance. Several members have drafted long lists of questions about his views on the presidency.

After a nearly two-hour meeting of committee Democrats yesterday, Chairman Peter W. Rodino (D-N.J.) said he will discuss the FBI files with Bork today and press for making the files available to the entire committee. Rodino said he has refused to read the files himself until the issue is resolved. The committee has received other investigative reports on Ford, including one by the General Accounting Office, which is the investigating arm of Congress.

Rodino said he would not delay the hearings if the FBI files remain restricted, but said that "whether we could conduct the thorough investigation needed under those conditions is another matter."

Pressed both by Republicans and Democratic leaders for expeditious action on Ford, Rodino said the committee will hold hearings Thursday and Friday of next week and on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday before Thanksgiving, even though the House plans to be in recess that week.

Rodino said he expected the hearings would take "at least" a week. Ford will be the lead-off witness as he was before

the Senate Rules Committee last Thursday. In response to criticism of slow action, Rodino replied that while the Senate committee had only Ford's nomination before it, House Judiciary must also simultaneously gear up for an impeachment inquiry of President Nixon and consider a bill to create an independent Watergate special prosecutor.

Speaker Carl Albert has been pushing Rodino, because until Ford is confirmed Albert would become President if the

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office became vacant, and he does not want to appear to be going slow for possible personal gain. House Majority Leader Thomas P. O'Neill (D-Mass.) wrote committee members a letter urging fast action. He said he was getting word that Ford's nomination wouldn't reach the House floor until Dec. 15.

Rep. Trent Lott (R-Miss.), a freshman on the Judiciary Committee, accused Rodino of "dragging his feet" on the Ford nomination.

Rep. Jerome Waldie (Calif.), a leading advocate of Mr. Nixon's impeachment, proposed that the President withdraw Ford's nomination, nominate Elliot L. Richardson and then resign so Richardson could become President. Richardson resigned as Attorney General last month rather than carry out Mr. Nixon's order to fire Watergate Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox.