

The Ford Nomination as a Way Out

By Donald W. Riegle Jr.

WASHINGTON—The choice of Gerald Ford to be Vice President is, of all Mr. Nixon's personal political decisions, both the worst and the best he has ever made. Worst because Ford as Vice President will prove fatal to Mr. Nixon's efforts to retain the Presidency; best in that the country in the weeks and months ahead will see the end of the nightmare of the Nixon Presidency and a transition of power into a Ford Presidency that is both honest and competent.

This view continues to gain weight here in Washington as political observers watch with grim satisfaction as the Nixon tragedy plays itself out. While it is impossible to foresee the ending—resignation, impeachment or physical disability—the President's portion of the chessboard has been swept clean of defenders, with the exposed king scrambling frantically, and vainly, to save himself. President Nixon cannot survive in office much longer, and Michigan's Gerald Ford will be America's next President.

While he was Vice President, Spiro Agnew's greatest value to Richard Nixon was as an insurance policy. It was impossible to seriously consider removing Mr. Nixon with Mr. Agnew the alternative President. Thus, Mr. Agnew's sudden resignation from the Vice-Presidency placed Mr. Nixon in jeopardy though I doubt this was realized in the White House. By stepping down, Mr. Agnew suddenly made Mr. Nixon's removal from office possible.

As long as the Vice-Presidency remained vacant, however, President Nixon was secure. Congressional Democrats had no desire to maneuver any Democrat into the Presidency and give the impression of "stealing" the 1972

election, and Carl Albert, Speaker of the House, gave every sign of dreading the prospect that the job might fall to him. What Congressional Democrats feared most was a new Vice President who would become an unbeatable Republican Presidential nominee in 1976. Jerry Ford would be an ideal caretaker President—an adequate, politically nonthreatening choice. Despite a conservative voting record, he is considered a decent, competent and thoroughly likable member of the club.

Jerry Ford, then, is clearly not a Spiro Agnew, and as Vice President, he is a viable and attractive alternative to Mr. Nixon. For most of the Republicans in Congress, especially House Republicans, the nomination of Gerald Ford produced genuine elation. For Jerry Ford is their friend and popularly chosen leader—not a flashy, charismatic figure, not a prima donna from the Senate or a state house, not a strident ideologue, but a good Republican soldier who had worked hard in the ranks, expecting and getting small reward for his efforts. For House Republicans, the Ford nomination is a rare moment in the sun.

It's probable that President Nixon thought at the time of the Ford announcement that he had greatly strengthened his own base of Republican support in the Congress.

But that was before the Saturday Night Massacre, the missing and garbled tapes and the disclosure of \$100,000 in cash from Howard Hughes. Several turbulent weeks later, the Ford designation as Vice President has taken on a profoundly different meaning for Republicans. For it is dawning on Congressional Republicans that they now have a choice. And the choice is Richard Nixon or Gerald Ford. If they continue to back Mr. Nixon, they position themselves—and the party—in the tight and shrinking

corner Mr. Nixon now occupies. If the G.O.P. gambles and defends Mr. Nixon to the end—and if he finally exits—(disgraced in the pattern of Spiro Agnew) then the damage to the Republican party and Republican officeholders may well be irreparable.

If he becomes President, Gerald Ford takes the Nixon/Agnew albatross from the neck of every incumbent Republican seeking re-election. Few could ask a bigger favor with the 1974 elections fast approaching. Republicans could count on being heard in a Ford White House and on a generous flow of traditional Administration favors to party members in Congress. Members of Congress prize Presidential contact, however slight, to drop his name, be photographed with him and talk to him occasionally. Jerry Ford is open and honest, a man they can respect and trust. After 25 years in the House, he loves and cares about the Congress and its role in the Federal system. They know Jerry would work for a more equal relationship between the legislative and executive branches. His Presidency would mean an end to veto battles, arbitrary impoundments, and deliberate and unnecessary provocations of Congress.

There is a new and different national tide running now and the Congress is being moved by it. The country wants and needs a breather in an end to the Nixon nightmare of recent months and a fresh start with a new President who is honest and plays it straight.

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