

# Who Will Be on First in 1976?

## IN THE NATION

By Tom Wicker

When Gerald R. Ford became President of the United States by appointment and succession last August, he also became the all-but-certain nominee of the Republican party for 1976 and the automatic favorite for election that year to a Presidential term of his own. Or so it seemed, particularly after Mr. Ford let it be known rather casually that he probably would be a candidate.

But let us return to the computer with a new set of inputs. Crank in first that Mr. Ford said in 1973, during his confirmation hearings, that he had promised his wife that he would serve only one more term in Congress, then return to Grand Rapids and the peaceful life of a small-city lawyer. Remember also that it later developed that Betty Ford had become in recent years so dissatisfied with the life of a traveling politician's wife that she had sought help with the problems it caused her.

Now Mrs. Ford is recovering from surgery for cancer. Even if, as is devoutly to be hoped, her recovery is complete, it seems entirely likely that Mr. Ford will feel even more strongly the concern that once caused him to promise his wife a return to private life. He does not seem to be one of those men so obsessed with his own career as to be willing to sacrifice everything else to it. It may even be—as some who know him well are now suggesting—that he intended, even before Mrs. Ford's surgery, to honor his

pledge to her and go back to Grand Rapids in 1976. In one sense, that notion is supported by his casual suggestion—through his former press secretary, Jerry TerHorst—that he probably would be a candidate in 1976. TerHorst's statement committed Mr. Ford to nothing. Yet, if he indeed had it in mind to retire after 1976, it still would have been necessary politically for him to raise at least the possibility that he might run, so that he would not be regarded as a "lame duck" by political friends and foes throughout the brief term he would serve.

If to these inputs are added the great probabilities that neither Mr. Ford nor any other President could deal effectively by 1976 with the parallel crises of the American economy and the international oil situation, so that Mr. Ford's political popularity is more likely to sink than to rise, a most interesting new readout comes from the computer. It suggests that Gerald Ford may not, after all, be even a candidate in 1976, let alone the Republican nominee.

This is a possibility that ought to be of considerable interest to the Democrats who dominate a Congress confronted with the necessity to confirm, or not to confirm, former Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller of New York as Vice President of the United States. Having three times openly sought the Presidency, and having resigned the governorship of New York last year in a transparent gambit toward a fourth pursuit of the Grail, Mr. Rockefeller can hardly be considered disinterested in the Republican nomination for 1976.

If Mr. Rockefeller is confirmed as Vice President by a Democratic Con-

gress, and if Mr. Ford announces—say, in early 1976—his intention to return to Grand Rapids, Mr. Rockefeller will be in the catbird seat. As an incumbent Vice President, he would have a powerful position from which to seek his party's nomination, as well as election to the office that has always eluded him.

His prospects would be enhanced by his own long record of public service at both state and Federal levels, and by the obvious disarray of the Democratic party following Edward Kennedy's decision not to be a candidate in 1976. Those prospects could be strongly reinforced if, sometime in 1976, Mr. Ford chose to resign the Presidency in Mr. Rockefeller's favor—precisely duplicating Mr. Rockefeller's own strategy of conferring the governorship of New York upon his Lieutenant Governor, Malcolm Wilson, last December (precluding a Republican primary fight and handing Mr. Wilson whatever advantages still reside in incumbency).

Even in that case, Mr. Rockefeller would not be a sure thing. As Vice President, he would be an appointee once removed, since Mr. Ford is an appointee, too. As an appointed President, Mr. Rockefeller would be twice removed, and none the better for so much obvious manipulation. Besides, old wounds do not heal easily in the Republican party; and the artificial accession of Nelson Rockefeller to the leadership of that party in 1976 would be bound to set off a zealous campaign for Ronald Reagan or Barry Goldwater or James Buckley or almost any conservative without a jail record.