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New Possibility
For GOP in '76

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In picking the veteran House Republican leader, Jerry Ford, to be the new Vice President, President Nixon rewarded one of the most popular men in the Republican ranks, offended almost no one—and just possibly added another name to the bulging list of 1976 presidential hopefuls.

After the announcement, Ford told reporters he had informed Mr. Nixon that he had "no intentions of running for President or Vice President," but White House officials and other politicians tended to discount that pledge.

Initial reaction among both Republicans and Democrats in Washington and across the country indicated strong approval of Ford as a man who can easily be confirmed by Congress and who will—at least for now—stir few fears or jealousies among those who fancy themselves as future Presidents.

Sen. Bob Dole of Kansas, the former Republican national chairman, said Ford "will be a great calming influence for our party, which wouldn't hurt for a while."

See POLITICS, A13, Col. 1

POLITICS, From A1

In passing over more obvious presidential possibilities, like New York Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller and former Texas Gov. John B. Connally, Mr. Nixon won the gratitude of the other presidential hopefuls in both parties.

A White House aide indicated this may have been a factor in Ford's choice, saying that if Mr. Nixon had picked an obvious 1976 candidate this far in advance of the next election, "he would have been tearing up his own political base."

Another high official said Ford was so eager for the vice presidency he volunteered to forswear any presidential ambition if the President wished. This official said Ford was discouraged from issuing any such advance disclaimer.

But within an hour of last night's announcement, Ford told reporters he had "no intentions for 1976—no intentions of running for

President or Vice President."

Word of his declaration appeared to disconcert some White House officials, who had proclaimed Mr. Nixon's unwillingness to accede to the demand from some congressional Democrats for a "caretaker" appointment.

Presidential counselor Anne Armstrong said, "I don't see how anybody can certainly think Ford is presidential timber."

Domestic adviser Melvin R. Laird answered a question about the likelihood of a 1976 presidential bid by Ford with a quick: "You bet."

"He's qualified to be President," Laird said, "and I would expect him to run."

Another White House aide, who declined to be quoted by name said, "He wasn't a viable candidate for President before 9 o'clock. If he is now, it's dependent on how he conducts himself."

The main political reaction was one of bipartisan

relief that the President had made a choice which appeared likely to win easy confirmation in the Democratic Congress.

Republicans in all wings of the party applauded the choice, noising that Ford, in his years of stumping for Republican congressional candidates, had shown himself willing to aid any GOP nominee of any philosophy in any part of the country.

Most Democrats appeared ready to accept the nominee. Wisconsin Gov. Patrick J. Lucey said, "Everything considered, it's probably a pretty good choice." Don Fowler, the South Carolina Democratic chairman, called the choice "a pretty good one—it offers an opportunity for the President to improve his relations with Congress." Hall Timanus, a George Wallace leader in Texas, called Ford "a very wise choice."

Despite Ford's stated reluctance on the night of his nomination to plunge into 1976 politics, most other politicians said they assumed he would be there when the time came.

Given the springboard of the vice presidency, and three years to build on his already extensive friendships in party circles, Ford has a chance to make himself the man to beat at the 1976 Republican National Convention.

"There's no better place to run for President than from the vice presidency," said Robert J. Keefe, deputy

chairman of the Democratic National Committee. "So he is, ex officio, a candidate."

The last two retiring Presidents, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Lyndon B. Johnson, saw their vice presidents, Richard Nixon and Hubert H. Humphrey, succeed to the presidential nomination. Neither, however, was elected from the No. 2 job.

On the other hand, Mr. Nixon could honestly tell other potential 1976 Republican contenders in the courtesy calls he made yesterday that Ford's designation did not bar them from running, or preclude their chances of winning.

That field of potential contenders includes Connally, Govs. Rockefeller of New York and Ronald Reagan of California, Sens. Charles H. Percy of Illinois and Howard H. Baker Jr. of Tennessee, Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson and Indianapolis Mayor Richard G. Lugar.

In advance of the President's choice, most political observers said that picking either Rockefeller or Connally—the pre-announcement favorites—would be taken as evidence of Mr. Nixon's intention to designate his own successor.

Because Ford would come to the office as a relative unknown to the general public, the burden will be on him to prove his qualifications to succeed to the presidency—if indeed that is his goal. That means there will be time and opportunity for others to put together their own campaigns.

Some of those who commented last night noted that the invitation to join the Nixon administration would not necessarily be an unmixed blessing for someone who clearly wanted to be the 1976 nominee.

Dr. George Willeford, the Texas Republican chairman, said, "I think if John Connally has presidential aspirations, the President did him a great favor in not asking him to join the administration at this time."

The President picked Ford at a moment when his own popularity with the voters is at its lowest ebb and when he still faces serious problems from the Watergate scandals.

As the new Vice President, Ford would take on the task of defending the administration in the midterm campaign next year. How well he—and his President—fare in that campaign could well determine his own chances for the nomination.

There was considerable

speculation about the reasons for Mr. Nixon passing over Connally, the man most observers have tabbed as his personal favorite to be the next President.

In the first 24 hours after Vice President Agnew resigned, an unexpected degree of resistance to Connally surfaced among both Republicans and Democrats in Congress.

Connally said at his Texas ranch last night that he was "flattered" by the opposition, but White House sources said the ex-Democrat had passed the word that he was not eager for a "dog fight" over his nomination.

Connally himself said, "I did not receive an offer and

I did not turn one down." Like all the others mentioned in the 1976 Republican sweepstakes, he praised Ford's qualifications for the vice presidency.

In contrast to the anti-Connally reaction, Rockefeller turned up broad support among Republican governors in the pre-selection comments. Ody Fish, Wisconsin GOP national committeeman and a veteran party figure, said that showing made Rockefeller "right now, far and away the leader in the presidential sweepstakes."

One rather partisan source—California Democratic Chairman John Burton—saw the Ford nomination as "severely hindering" Reagan's chances for nomination in 1976.

Burton argued that since Ford "is not from the liberal wing of the party and will have three years to build up his base around the country, Reagan will have to go, far to the right to outflank him. It severely damages Reagan's chances, which is fine with me," he said.