

Ford No Threat to President

That's the Way Nixon Has Said He Wanted It

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President Nixon, free of the traditional pressure of ticket-balancing for voter supper in the selection of a Vice President, was perhaps uniquely positioned last night to act on the old political cliché that the Vice President ought to be the man best qualified to take over from the President if necessary.

Instead, in House Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford of Michigan, he picked a man nobody had mentioned as presidential timber before last night, and whose greatest strength was regarded by many as his party devotion. It was "loyalty rewarded," by many as Rep. Barber Conable (R-N.Y.) observed.

Faced with grave troubles in Congress, ranging from a bogged-down legislative program to the spectre of possible impeachment proceedings growing out of the Watergate scandal and withholding of the White House tapes, Mr. Nixon chose a man who could do him some good on Capitol Hill.

Though the President spoke of the need for a man strong in the areas of foreign policy and national defense, Ford in 25 years in the House has had little real foreign-policy experience.

Though well liked on the Hill, he has never been rated a man with a national political future, and as Vice President he is not likely to threaten the President's primacy in his last three years, even as a lame duck.

Five years ago, in advance of the Republican National Convention that nominated him, Nixon told close campaign aides he wanted no "superstar" who might outshine him, as candidate or later as President. The man he picked, Gov. Spiro T. Agnew of Maryland, filled the bill then, and Ford, by all odds, fills it now.

Mr. Nixon already faces the problem of diminishing influence between now and 1976, with the toll of Watergate and the political hourglass running out on his last term.

Selection of men widely regarded to be of presidential sature, like Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller of New York or former Gov. John B. Connally of Texas, would have shaken the President's influence.

This would have been particularly true as the two of them, one of them as Vice President and the other outside trying to keep him from sewing up the 1976 nomination, jockeyed for position.

According to White House sources, the fact that Ford was not considered to be a 1976 prospect at the time he was chosen—though some say he may be new—was in his favor in the President's view.

The President's interest was in the preservation of Republican unity, these sources said. The naming of either Connally or Rockefeller would have sent the forces of the scrambling, dividing the party long before 1976. Ford, however, will not unduly unsettle either Connally or Rockefeller, they said.

Though no ticket-balancing was required here, in a sense the choice of Ford is like routine selections of running mates in the past—a personal choice within the prerogative of the party head that satisfies his needs, as he perceives them, more than the country's.

Presidential candidates, while paying lip service to the idea that the vice presidential nomination should go to the man best-qualified to take over if necessary, seldom have acted on it.

Rather, they have resorted nearly always to ticket-balancing by geography, ethnic background, religion and the like. Sen. George McGovern, who made a point in 1972 of saying he would not be bound by such conditions, in the end picked a Catholic from a border state.

But President Nixon was not confronted in this instance with the need to balance any ticket, or to bring voting strength to his party for an approaching election. More than any previous President, perhaps, he was faced with the opportunity to pick, in fact, a man with demonstrated presidential qualities.

Instead he settled, as most

presidential candidates have, for a man with whom he can be comfortable and who will not overshadow him.

In 1968, after jolting the GOP convention by naming Agnew, Mr. Nixon held a press party at his Key Biscayne hideaway, and he said of him:

"There is a mysticism about men. There is a quiet confidence. You look a man in the eye and you know he's got it—brains. This guy has got it. If he doesn't, Nixon has made a bum choice."

came on Wednesday, when Mr. Nixon's first vice presidential choice pleaded on contest to one count of income tax evasion and resigned rather than face indictment on much broader criminal charges.

The judgment on his second choice lies ahead, with an opportunity for Gerald Ford, as Agnew before him, to become a national figure of stature and achievement. How Ford fares in turn will determine whether this time Mr. Nixon has his confidence repaid and his ability as an assessor of men vindicated.

Looming over the whole matter is Mr. Nixon's own future in the presidency, clouded by the impending constitutional crisis over release of the Watergate tapes. If a Supreme Court order to turn them over were followed by a presidential refusal, impeachment proceedings would become a somber possibility, if not a probability.

Then the matter of Mr. Nixon's choice would come into even sharper focus.