

'Satisfying the Party Faithful'

Only the selection of Rep. Gerald Ford as Vice President, an unexciting but supremely sensible choice, could have saved President Nixon from the menacing backwash of rebellion building in his own party last week.

In particular, Republican House members were working up a nasty temper last Friday waiting out Mr. Nixon's contrived suspense over a new Vice President. Months of growing resentment toward the President were reaching a climax. Republican congressmen grumbled that the elaborate selection ceremony planned by Mr. Nixon for the White House East Room ill suited the mood of melancholy caused by Spiro Agnew's disgrace. Worst of all, they believed the President had his own mind made up and was sure to ignore their overwhelming recommendation of Minority Leader Ford.

The choice of Ford, then, was a pleasant air-clearing surprise to the congressmen and other key Republicans. By inhibiting his normal impulse for the exotic shock, Mr. Nixon for once satisfied the party faithful. Both on Capitol Hill and in the states, Republican leaders saw Ford as the Vice President who would least hurt the battered party.

The Republican mood prevailing through the rumor-filled hours Friday

was typified by the ruggedly independent Rep. Barber Conable of New York, a member of the House GOP leadership. Like most colleagues, Conable privately viewed the ostentatious selection ceremony that night as shockingly poor taste in a time of national calamity.

So, instead of accepting an invitation to the east room, Conable planned to honor a speaking engagement in his upstate congressional district and duly informed his floor leader, Gerry Ford. But Ford somberly asked him to attend as a personal favor, and Conable—taking heart from that request—agreed to go.

Conable was not the only Republican who either stayed away from the East Room or was bludgeoned into attending. Sen. Barry Goldwater, fearing Mr. Nixon's non-concern for Republican fortunes would produce a party-splitting choice, left Friday morning for a country weekend on Maryland's Eastern shore. He returned only after much pleading by the White House, still apprehensive that Mr. Nixon would rupture the party by selecting John B. Connally.

Goldwater had good reason for apprehension. Among the 1976 presidential possibilities (Connally, Gov. Nelson Rockefeller and Gov. Ronald Reagan), Mr. Nixon long ago picked Connally

as his favorite. Just Thursday afternoon, Connally was still in the picture.

But even before Agnew's resignation, it was clear that Democratic opposition and Republican misgivings regarding Connally had risen sharply. Once Agnew actually resigned, anti-Connally talk reached a fever pitch.

Presidential counselors Melvin R. Laird and Bryce Harlow, battle-seasoned veterans of Capitol Hill, reported to the President Thursday that Connally might well be rejected by the Senate and would not fare much better in the House. They also reported growing congressional sentiment for Ford. Beyond Capitol Hill, conservative state chairmen inclined toward Reagan sent word they would deeply resent Connally but accept Ford as no threat to Reagan.

Political allies advised Connally he should now avoid a bloody confirmation fight. Over the telephone Thursday night, the President and Connally agreed with this. Before he went to bed at Camp David that night, Mr. Nixon finally decided on Ford.

But Mr. Nixon's carefully staged suspense Friday generated unnecessary confusion and dismay. While he was having his only fun since Watergate broke, Mr. Nixon's zealously guarded secret nearly undid the rest of the party. Ford left his meeting with the President Friday morning without be-

ing selected, openly crestfallen. The gloom quickly permeated the Republican cloakroom and set off rumors of more exotic choices.

A strong but inaccurate Rockefeller rumor at midday caused threats by militant conservative young congressmen—such as Reps. Trent Lott of Mississippi and Robert Bauman of Maryland—to vote against him. Far wilder possibilities then surfaced, such as the politically preposterous selection of Chief Justice Warren Burger. "When I heard that," one Nixon aide confides, "I saw the last three years going down the drain." So closely was the secret held that Ford himself was not given the good news until 7 p.m.

After so many false alarms, the revelation of Gerry Ford triggered spontaneous cheers in the East Room. For once, Mr. Nixon had followed party advice and avoided a confrontation with Congress. Whether Ford is a "caretaker" Vice President or instead becomes a 1976 presidential contender, neither the Reagan nor the Rockefeller camps feel threatened today. Connally has not been savaged by a congressional confirmation fight which, win or lose, would have scarred him as a presidential candidate. And for the first time in many long months, Republicans had some genuinely nice things to say about their President.