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For Carl Albert: A Time of Uncertainty

A small man, he sits rather slumped down in the big chair behind his big desk. Speaker Carl Albert, in this interval of uncertainty, will be the next President of the United States should the office for any reason be vacated.

It is a prospect that dismays him since he knows, with the modesty of a man who understands his own limitations, what an ordeal it would be for a Democrat to assume the presidency following the Nixon landslide of a year ago. His goal is to complete the confirmation of Rep. Gerald R. Ford as Vice President as soon as possible. He believes this will be accomplished with the House acting after the Senate by Dec. 4 or 5.

He has achieved, he says, all the honors he had aspired to. As Speaker of the House of Representatives he steers with a gentler rein than some of his predecessors. Persuasion rather than coercion is his chief resource in presiding over an often unruly body of 435 members with a Democratic majority of 52.

Yet there is good reason to believe that his reading of the current trends in this unwieldy body is close to the mark. What he says on crucial matters

concerning the future of the presidency and, therefore, the future of the nation must be given particular weight.

- He does not believe that the House will vote the impeachment of President Nixon.

- The proof essential to vote a resolution of impeachment for high crimes and misdemeanors is not now in sight; evidence, yes, in plenty, but not proof.

- The President will not in the foreseeable future resign his office.

Having served in the House for more than a quarter of a century, Albert accepts the rather cumbersome machinery now turning over to resolve the impasse. The House Judiciary Committee, chaired by Rep. W. Rodino Jr. (D-N.J.), was charged by the Speaker with conducting an inquiry following a half dozen resolutions calling for impeachment of the President. The alternative would have been a select committee named by the Speaker after consultation with Democratic and Republican leaders in the House.

The Rodino committee is also charged with passing on the confirmation of Ford and on the issue of a Special Watergate Prosecutor to be chosen by the district court and responsible to the court and the grand jury. With an unwieldy committee of 38 lawyers, it is a difficult assignment to avoid a narrowly partisan approach to what should in some aspects transcend partisanship.

The vote on the question of the right of the committee to issue subpoenas in pursuing the impeachment inquiry was on straight party lines. The Republicans were demanding the right to pass on individual subpoenas that the staff, with the approval of the chairman, would want to issue.

This is a forecast of the future. Strictly on party lines, impeachment would divide not only the Congress but the nation. This is one reason Albert believes, that, short of some new and even more startling disclosure, the House will not vote an impeachment resolution and it is unlikely the committee will recommend such a resolution.

On one position the mild mannered Speaker is adamant. There will, he says, the line of his jaw hardening, be no adjournment of the House until Mr. Ford is confirmed. About the pace which has always been leisurely there is apparently little that can be done. The Thanksgiving recess of the House runs until Nov. 26.

Albert was given the American Heart Association award for the heart recovery man of the year following a massive heart attack. That is an award he would not like to receive, Nixon said in officiating at the ceremony. Albert says he has had no recurrence of heart trouble since the attack. After all Lyndon Johnson had a massive heart attack in 1955 and came back to be a strenuous President. But this is not in the Albert purview. He is counting the days until the threat of the highest office no longer hangs over him.