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By Tom Wicker

The confirmation of Gerald Ford as Vice President of the United States was the last necessary step to make possible the removal of Richard Nixon from the Presidency. Whether or not that removal now takes place, it has become at least a live and "thinkable" possibility.

Gerald Ford, above all, is a conservative Republican, whose accession to the Presidency could not do violence to the voters' overwhelming mandate of 1972. He is, moreover, generally considered—and investigation has confirmed that he is—an honest, reputable, decent man renowned for precisely the kind of political civility and institutional deference most needed to redeem the Nixonian depredations on government legitimacy. For both reasons, Mr. Ford, as President, would be considerably more of an asset to his party and to its 1974 candidates—particularly its incumbents—than a tarnished Richard Nixon ever again can be.

With Mr. Ford officially designated as the constitutional successor, Republican pressures on Mr. Nixon to clear himself and his Presidency surely will become more severe. It is not hard to imagine a committee of, say, Barry Goldwater, Hugh Scott, John J. Rhodes, John Tower and other impeccable Republicans calling on Mr. Nixon after Christmas to tell him that it is time he either cleared himself or stood aside for Mr. Ford—in the interests of nation as well as party.

The fact may well be, however, that if Mr. Nixon could clear himself by any voluntary action or out of his own resources, he probably would have done so long ago. And there is nothing in his record, or what is known of his temperament, or what has been seen of his recent demeanor, to suggest that he is in a mood to sacrifice himself for country and party—Ford or no Ford.

But as an election year wears on, as Republican candidates perceive themselves to be endangered by Mr. Nixon's presence at the head of their party, as the trials of Messrs. Mitchell, Ehrlichman, Stans, Krogh and others presumably keep the whole complex of Watergate matters in the headlines, Republican pressures on Mr. Nixon are likely to increase rather than diminish—especially with good old Jerry Ford there as an attractive alternative.

Whether or not those Republican pressures would lead to an impeachment no doubt depends a great deal on events; but it seems clear that the presence of Mr. Ford as an acceptable Republican alternative is vitally necessary to any conceivable impeachment. As a practical political matter, in a Democratic Congress there probably

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could not be an impeachment of a Republican landslide winner unless the impeachment movement were spearheaded by Republicans. That is why Mr. Ford's confirmation is a political event of historic dimensions.

Another possibility flowing from it is that Mr. Nixon might now seek to arrange something like an "Agnew deal" with the new Vice President. He could arrange to step down, that is, in return for certain assurances from President-to-be Ford that indictments or other legal actions would not be pursued in the case of a private citizen named Richard Nixon.

More likely, the confirmation of Mr. Ford will provide only one more reason why Republicans themselves may move forcefully to oust Mr. Nixon from the White House by resignation or impeachment. If that proves to be the case, what might be the political consequences of a Ford Presidency?

It is reasonable to suppose that for the remainder of the Nixon term, President Gerald Ford would not be an activist, dynamic or innovative figure, but would act instead as a caretaker of most Nixonian programs, while keeping most of the Nixon team—notably Mr. Kissinger—in place. Restoring relations with Congress and re-establishing some public confidence in government would be quite enough to expect of him; for the rest, a couple of Eisenhowerish years of government repose probably would find considerable public acceptance.

The trouble with that is that it might not be just a couple of years. Whatever Mr. Ford may say now, his accession to the Presidency, together with the likely prospect—absent a Ford candidacy—of a bruising Rockefeller-Reagan struggle for the Republican nomination in 1976, would be enough to result in Mr. Ford's being nominated that year and running as an incumbent President. If he had had even modest success in restoring confidence in government integrity after the Vietnam and Watergate years, and if the Democrats proved to be as divided in 1976 as they were in 1972, President Ford might well be a formidable contender for another four years.

But that is speculation. What is certain is that with one of their own confirmed as the legitimate constitutional successor to Richard Nixon, Republicans in the House and Senate are more likely than they were to take strong action against Mr. Nixon. With Mr. Ford in place, the final unfolding of the drama—while it may yet be delayed, debated, denounced—can be sensed at last.