

The G.O.P.'s Duty . . .

The accession of Gerald Ford to the Vice Presidency underscores the need for the next step to restore to the White House the credibility and public confidence that is indispensable for the nation. This next step is the departure of Richard M. Nixon from the Presidency, and it is evident that the initiative for this next step must now be taken by the Republican leadership.

None of the Watergate issues has been resolved. No plausible explanations have been offered for the unprecedented abuse of Presidential power.

The matter of the White House tapes has become enmeshed in a web of incredible tales of errors and mysteries. Claims of non-existing recordings and inexplicable gaps in the existing ones have all but eliminated the tapes' usefulness as evidence that the President is innocent of the Watergate cover-up. The President's most recent explanation of his finances and tax returns only raises new doubts about the propriety of his financial arrangements.

More immediately pertinent, however, than even the most serious charges of past wrongdoing is the fact that the crippled Presidency has saddled the nation with a crippled Government. The energy crisis and the host of industrial and environmental dislocations that spring from it have been met by an uncertain and often contradictory response that bespeaks a much deeper governmental crisis. Inflation continues and there is fear of recession.

Less visible but equally disconcerting is the fact that important posts at all levels of government remain unfilled. Able men and women leave the public service, and replacements of comparable quality can be persuaded only with difficulty to take their place.

At the summit of this weakened structure remains a President who still operates in precisely the same isolation that led him to his original disastrous course.

This is the situation to which the leaders of Mr. Nixon's own party, in and out of Congress, have the duty to respond. Much has been made of the fact that Mr. Nixon's continued tenure will endanger many Republicans' chances for re-election in the 1974 Congressional contests. While this may be an accurate assessment, it is a minor matter compared to the danger that a discredited and distrusted White House poses to the nation's economic and political health.

The Republican party won the rights and responsibilities that come with victory in a Presidential election. Mr. Ford's elevation reaffirms those rights and responsibilities. The Republican establishment, by abdicating too many of its prerogatives to Mr. Nixon's entourage, bears much blame for the events that have led to the present impasse. It is therefore now the special task of that same Republican establishment to persuade the President to save the nation the traumatic experience of impeachment proceedings by resigning his office.

. . .and the Prosecutor Bill

The Republican performance with regard to the bill to safeguard the tenure and authority of the Watergate special prosecutor scarcely provides hope that partisan rivalries can be put aside for the sake of the larger national interest. Immediately after the "Saturday night massacre" in which Archibald Cox was fired and Elliot Richardson resigned as Attorney General, there was wide bipartisan support for bills to authorize a new prosecutor to be appointed by a three-judge panel of the U.S. District Court of the District of Columbia.

Old Guard Republicans in the Senate Judiciary Committee led by Senator Hruska of Nebraska and aided as always by their Southern Democratic allies insisted, however, on lengthy hearings and resorted to procedural maneuvers to stall for time. Several moderate Republicans united behind an alternative bill offered by Senator Percy of Illinois that would have left the appointment with the executive branch but required Senate confirmation and set limits on the President's power of removal. Support developed among House Republicans for a somewhat similar substitute.

Meanwhile, as the shock of the Cox firing wore off and Leon Jaworski, the new prosecutor, began to settle into his job, support for a court-appointed prosecutor ebbed. Chief Judge John J. Sirica of the U.S. District Court and Judge Gerhard A. Gesell helped this trend along by making unfavorable comments about the bill for a court-appointed prosecutor, comments that were, to say the least, gratuitous and most unusual. It is not the function of judges to make comments about pending legislation. The upshot, however, has been that the Democratic leadership in both houses, no longer confident that it had a majority of the vote, has decided to shelve all bills on the subject.

This impasse leaves Mr. Jaworski in much the same exposed and vulnerable position as Mr. Cox. It is hard to conceive that President Nixon at some future point may dismiss Mr. Jaworski. But when the Senate last May originally forced the appointment of Mr. Cox as the precondition for confirming Mr. Richardson as Attorney General, no one would conceive that five months later the President would abruptly get rid of both of them. The country has not been well served by the Congress' shortsighted policy on this touchy issue.