

Who'll Be the Ex-Veepee's Veepee?

There was a time when the Vice Presidency was mostly a dead-end job—a place where such luminaries as Elbridge Gerry, Hannibal Hamlin and Garret A. Hobart finally flickered out. No more. Last week, after serving only eight months in the office, Gerald Ford confronted a critical—and politically complex—task in finding his own successor. His personal favorite for the post was Melvin Laird, an old friend, former Secretary of Defense and colleague in the House of Representatives. But his shopping list also included Nelson Rockefeller, GOP National Chairman George Bush and more than a dozen other talented candidates. And as an unelected President, no one knew better than Ford that the person he picks as the 41st Vice President of the United States might well himself become the next man to occupy the Oval Office.

In keeping with his conciliatory vows,

Ford would not rule out other Republicans who had been touted as possible GOP Presidential candidates in 1976—a mixed bag that took in Gov. Ronald Reagan, 63, of California, former Attorney General Elliot Richardson, 54, and Sen. Charles Percy, 54, of Illinois.

Oddly enough, Ford's favorite seemed to be foot-dragging. "I am not going to go back to government after 30 years on the payroll," Laird, 51, declared last week. "I want a little rest and I'm going to stay where I am right now." As senior counselor on international and domestic affairs for Reader's Digest, Laird is currently making a comfortable six-figure income, and he has said that he would prefer to act as a free-lance troubleshooter and adviser to the President rather than join the staff full-time.

Laird still has powerful friends on the GOP right, and his dovish image in the Pentagon earned him good marks

Presidents—was not lost on Ford's advisers. "My own personal view," one of them observed, "is that Ford would get a more enthusiastic response by making David Rockefeller Secretary of the Treasury than by making Nelson Vice President—particularly among members of the right wing."

Ford's clear sympathy for the fallen ex-President—and the reluctance of most Republicans to suffer I-told-you-so Veepees—was one of the strongest points in favor of GOP chief Bush. A lanky Texan transplanted from Connecticut, Bush, 50, has spent the last year trying to protect the GOP from Watergate without dumping Nixon. Bush still suffers from the loser's image he picked up in two unsuccessful bids for the Senate in Texas, but he is admired for his integrity. "Bush," said one of Ford's friends last week, "has character."

So does Elliot Richardson, but it may take more than that to get Ford's nod. Richardson's performance in the days leading up to the Saturday Night Massa-



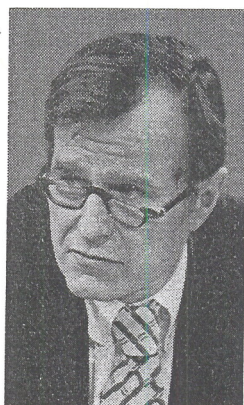
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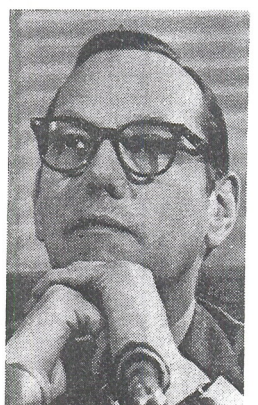
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AP

Veepees-in-waiting Rockefeller, Baker, Brock, Bush, Taft: For the new President, a critical and politically complex choice

Ford said he would take about ten days to consider all serious contenders. He asked the Cabinet, Congressional leaders, Bush and a handful of aides to send him the names of up to three candidates, listed in order of preference and delivered in a sealed envelope. In weighing the letters, Ford hopes to find someone youngish and mediagenic, politically moderate enough to balance his own brand of Midwest conservatism, yet acceptable to the right wing of the GOP and the Southern Democrats who make up his basic constituency in Congress.

Senators Robert Taft, 57, of Ohio and William Brock, 43, and Howard Baker, 48, of Tennessee were all strong contenders last week. But to span the whole GOP spectrum, Ford was planning courtesy calls to men ranging from Arizona Sen. Barry Goldwater, 65, on the right to Massachusetts Sen. Edward Brooke, 54, at the other end. Ford's intimates also noted diplomatically that

with liberal Republicans and Democrats alike. Bipartisan drawing power is precisely what Ford is looking for as he sets up his post-Watergate Administration of national reconciliation, and he now commands the formidable persuasive power of the Presidency. "If Ford wants Melvin Laird to be his Vice President," shrugged one Ford confidant last week, "Melvin Laird is going to be Ford's Vice President."

A BOOMLET FOR ROCKEFELLER

For the moment, however, Laird was pushing his own candidate: Nelson Rockefeller, 66. "He would add a great deal to the Administration in international affairs and in the domestic and economic areas," Laird said. "And he comes from the right part of the country." Over the past few years Rockefeller has tried effectively to mend his fences with the conservatives who booed him at the Cow Palace in San Francisco a decade ago, but his currency is still not high in Congress. And his talent for drawing headlines away from anyone—including

cre has made him as many enemies as friends in Congress. "He deserted the ship after he brought in that damned Kennedy Democrat Archie Cox to tuck it to the President," snorted one House Republican.

Since the House and the Senate must still approve Ford's choice, a controversial nominee is the last thing the new President is looking for. "Whoever Ford wants he will likely get," said one Ford topsider last week. "But he will more likely want a man he can get without a divisive fight." Gov. Robert Ray, 45, of Iowa and Senators Robert Stafford, 61, of Vermont, Charles Mathias, 52, of Maryland and Richard Schweiker, 48, of Pennsylvania all figured as long-odds compromise candidates last week. And in the end a low profile—and modest ambitions—may yet prove to be the most important qualifications for the job. "Whoever it is will be lucky to be asked back on the ticket in 1976," shrugged one Ford brain-truster. "No factor will be stronger than good political behavior between now and then."