



Albert's Chance

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SOURCES close to Speaker Carl Albert say he could have been President today if he had been willing to manipulate the congressional machinery.

In discussions so secret that staff members were excluded, some Democratic colleagues urged Albert in 1973 to hold up the confirmation of Gerald Ford to be Vice President. This would have left the Speaker next in line for the presidency.

The Democratic schemers predicted that the embattled Richard Nixon, then in the last ditches of his presidency, would be impeached. He was unworthy, they argued, to select his own successor.

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ALL ALBERT had to do, they suggested, was to delay Mr. Ford's confirmation and wait for Nixon to be impeached. Then under the Constitution, Albert could take over the White House and bring the Democrats to power.

This possibility stirred deep controversy at the secret strategy discussions. Some argued that it would amount to a Democratic coup and, therefore, would alienate the voters. Others contended that the Republicans had been so badly discredited by Watergate that a Democratic takeover would be best for the country.

Our sources disagree over how serious the Democrats were about blocking Nixon's vice presidential selec-

tion. One top Democrat, privy to the backstage discussions, told us that Albert could have become President merely by remaining neutral. It took Albert's active opposition, said our source, to thwart the scheme.

All our sources agree that the Speaker refused to hold up Mr. Ford's confirmation. During one discussion, he cited the second section of the 25th amendment to the Constitution. It states simply: "Whenever there is a vacancy in the office of the Vice President, the President shall nominate a Vice President who shall take office upon confirmation by a majority vote of both houses of Congress."

Albert declared firmly that he did not intend to tamper with the constitutional processes.

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NIXON nominated Mr. Ford for Vice President on Oct. 12, 1973. Ten days later the House Judiciary Committee began an inquiry into possible impeachment charges against Nixon. By late November, it appeared to leading Democrats that there were grounds to impeach him.

Our sources recall that the matter finally was brought up at a secret caucus of House Democrats. House Judiciary Chairman Peter Rodino, (Dem-N.J.), warned that any delay in the confirmation process would violate the spirit of the 25th amendment. Speaker Albert strongly agreed. So on Dec. 6, 1973, Gerald Ford was confirmed.