

By MARY McGRORY

## At Least He's Not Nixon

Last week, Vice President-designate Gerald R. Ford stood before the huge flag made of red, white and blue electric light bulbs that was the backdrop for the national Realtors convention and made the pledge of allegiance—to Richard Nixon.

Ford has exonerated the President in his confirmation hearings and has ringingly declared his belief that Nixon is "completely innocent." But before the applauding Babbitts, he went one step further and tried to generate a counter-torrent to the impeachment-resignation mail that is still flooding Congress.

Whipping up Middle America used to be the work of Ford's predecessor. Ford's staff, ultra-sensitive to any comparison with Spiro T. Agnew, insists that the new vice president will not follow the old in doing what Ford called "a little blocking for the President."

His spokesmen also insist that the Ford initiative was his own idea, undertaken neither at the command nor the suggestion of the White House.

But the rhetoric echoed those desperate statements of the wipeout weekend when Nixon's chief of staff, Alexander Haig, protested that the explosion over the dispatch of Archibald Cox, Elliot Richardson and William D. Ruckelshaus was orchestrated by disgruntled Democrats who were, as Ford said, "trying to use Watergate as a weapon to reverse an election they

didn't agree with and didn't win."

Ford also expressed the prayerful White House wish that Congress "will not be panicked into unwise action or dominated by a few shrill, extreme voices."

The vice president-designate urged the Silent Majority to take to their writing tables and speak up for impeachment or resignation if they felt it is "the only answer." He added the hint, however, that the results would show they are "part of that much larger group that believes in fair play and in the important things that Richard Nixon has done and can do for America."

As his part of "operation candor," that White House propaganda drive that opened with the news that the President had lost another tape and would send over some old dance programs and other notes to Judge John J. Sirica instead, Ford made lavish reference to paralysis, prisoners and cripples.

His climactic paragraph, following praise of the falling unemployment rate and the rising hopes for Middle East peace, was not notable for its good taste.

"If Richard Nixon can achieve all that he has for this country in the last few weeks as a 'cripple', then he is the best argument this nation ever had for hiring the handicapped."

Democrats in Congress who are pushing Ford's confirmation as the last precondition for impeachment were somewhat taken

aback by his reversion to the blind partisanship that is the hallmark of his House career.

"You don't think he really thinks Nixon can survive?" asked one Eastern liberal in disbelief.

What may have happened is that White House alarm over Ford's glowing press notices was conveyed to him. Ford has been coming on strong as a "healer." The idea required a willing suspension of memory of his clumsy effort to impeach Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas and his lamentable civil rights record—two lapses in his newfound "civility" explored by Joseph W. Rauh Jr. in testimony before the Senate Rules Committee. Still, many people who are learning to love Gerald Ford on the simple grounds that he is not Richard Nixon were willing to go along with it.

Ford's performance before the Realtors indicated the realities of his situation. He must play the grateful nominee to his: sinking patron for a while at least. But if he does it too often in the coming weeks, he may dissipate the good will that his humble, open demeanor had created.

But it won't delay his confirmation. Those who care about the public weal think the sooner Ford can stop being Nixon's cheerleader, the further along the country will be towards settling down with a man whose greatest claim to the nation's greatest office is that he is, as he says, "disgustingly normal."