

Clayton Fritchey

Post 7-20-74

'The Vice President Has Become Mr. Whitewash'

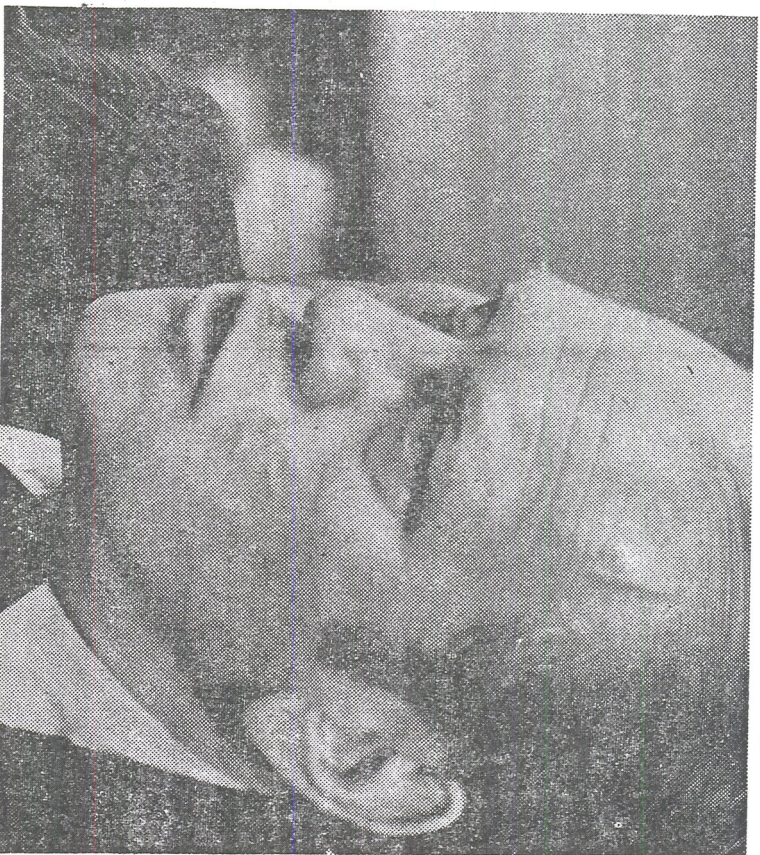
As the House Judiciary Committee nears the end of the impeachment inquiry, Vice President Gerald Ford was still slavishly defending Mr. Nixon's debasement of the government as enthusiastically as he did at the time the hearings began many months ago. Instead of becoming Mr. Clean, the Vice President has become Mr. Whitewash.

One of Ford's proudest boasts is, "I am the first Eagle Scout Vice President of the United States." Loyalty is, and should be, a concern of all scouts, but the scout code does not put personal loyalties ahead of loyalty to country. Not long ago, the Vice President was asked, if he could do just one thing for the American people, what he would choose to do. His answer was restoration of "public credibility and faith in our government." Has he met that test?

Ford is, and probably always will be, Mr. Nice Guy, for that comes naturally to him; but, like many other Vice Presidents, he seldom has stood up to the President. He knuckled under in his first test on Watergate, and then, after several faint intimations of independence, he yielded again just as the impeachment hearings were nearing their climax.

Back in December, when Ford was sworn in as the first Vice President appointed under the 25th Amendment, many Republicans had high hopes that he would do for the party what Republican Calvin Coolidge did in the wake of the Teapot Dome scandal of the Warren Harding administration. When Harding suddenly died, Coolidge became the chief executive and, as the Mr. Clean of 1923, vigorously investigated the malefactors of his own party. As a result, the GOP made a quick comeback, with Coolidge winning big in 1924.

Mr. Ford, however, has shown no inclination to emulate Coolidge. On the



contrary, he has time and again joined Mr. Nixon in trying to shove the Watergate scandal under the rug. It may be that he is sincere in saying he has no ambition to become President.

Certainly his dogged defense of Mr. Nixon's massive subversion of the government would seem to reinforce that claim, for if the GOP hopes to win in 1976 it must have a nominee whom the public can count on to clean house. So far at least, Ford has shown no zeal for that task. In fairness to Ford, it must be conceded that it is not easy for any Vice President to be his own man. Ford's predecessor, Spiro Agnew,

surely wasn't. The White House used him as both a hatchet man and an administration apologist. Moreover, it lost no time casting Ford in the same role.

The President's men quickly sent him out to defend Mr. Nixon on Watergate and even wrote the speech for him. That was his initial Farm Bureau talk when he blamed the continuous "orddeal of Watergate" on "a few extreme partisans," such as the AFL-CIO, ADA and other "powerful pressure groups." He didn't mention that much or most of the agitation for Mr. Nixon's resignation was coming from some

of the nation's leading Republican newspapers and still is.

A friendly press, still honeymooning with the Vice President, has tried to encourage his occasional efforts to show a little independence, but when Mr. Nixon whistles Ford comes running and invariably emerges from the White House echoing his master's voice, especially on Watergate. Compare his voice with that of Sens. Lowell Weicker, James Buckley, Edward Brooke, even Hugh Scott, and other Republicans, who have not hesitated to express their outrage over the corruption in the government.

Ford is a lawyer. He knows the Constitution Before Watergate, nobody more pointedly asserted that impeachment need not be confined to narrow criminal grounds, as Mr. Nixon now insists. Recently, the outpouring of documentary evidence against the President has been like an avalanche, but it still hasn't made a dent on the Vice President.

After being called to San Clemente a week or two ago, Ford emerged from a long seance with Mr. Nixon insisting that the House Judiciary Committee wasn't treating the President fairly and predicted the House as a whole would vindicate him because the "preponderance of the evidence" shows he is innocent of any wrongdoing.

That is the kind of talk that might be expected of James D. St. Clair, the President's defense lawyer, but it is depressing to hear it from the man who, if he succeeds to the presidency, would be expected to restore moral leadership in the White House and enforce the highest standards of conduct on the entire government.

© 1974, Los Angeles Times

Columnist Joseph Alsop is on vacation.