

Aides Planned Ford Takeover 3 Months Ago

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Washington — Planning for the orderly elevation of Gerald R. Ford to the presidency began months before President Nixon decided to resign. The preparations were kept secret from Mr. Nixon, and, at first, from Mr. Ford.

The transition plans were initiated by Mr. Ford's closest friend, Philip W. Buchen, who became convinced in early May that onrushing events would force an untimely end to the term of the 37th President and a hurried beginning for the 38th.

A "scenario" for the first days of the Ford administration was drafted with reluctance in June at a dining room table in Georgetown by Mr. Nixon's adviser on telecommunications policy, Clay T. Whitehead, and three other young men, one of them an avid democrat.

Details Settled

And the details of the change in government were settled, 36 hours before the event, by an assortment of political and corporate friends of Mr. Ford's who met in the paneled family room at the home of William G. Whyte, a Washington-based vice president of the United States Steel Corporation.

Much of what has taken place in the 16 days of the Ford Administration was a direct consequence of the unusual planning for his unorthodox accession: The tone of his first address, his pledge to consider conditional amnesty for Vietnam-era draft evaders, his meetings with black and women members of Congress all were recommended by transition advisers to capitalize on Mr. Ford's instinctive goals of

uniting the country and leading it in partnership with Congress.

On May 9, the House Judiciary Committee had begun formal hearings on the impeachment of Mr. Nixon. A day earlier, Mr. Nixon had called in Vice President Ford and encouraged him to slow down the pace of his travel and, by inference, the number of occasions around the country for Mr. Ford to discuss the Watergate scandals.

Even so, when Mr. Ford met with reporters on May 11 in Dallas, he was confident of his answers.

Had there been any conversation with Mr. Nixon at any time about transfer of power.

"None whatsoever," Mr. Ford replied firmly.

Or on the part of your staff? Is anyone working on that?

"None whatsoever," Mr. Ford repeated. "I understand that there was a story in the Knight newspapers, by Saul Friedman, that somebody on my staff was working on something like that. If they are, they are doing it without my knowledge and without my consent."

Reporter Was Right

Friedman, it turned out, had been right. So, in a way, had Mr. Ford. The planning had begun, all right, and it had been prompted by Buchen, Mr. Ford's old law partner from Grand Rapids, Mich. Buchen was the director of a Nixon administration study on the right of citizens to privacy, working for an interagency committee chaired by Mr. Ford.

More important, Buchen had decided not to tell Mr. Ford what he was up to.

A few days before the Dallas news conference, Buchen walked the short dis-

tance down the hall from his suite in the executive office building to the Office of Telecommunications Policy to see Clay T. (Tom) Whitehead. Buchen was troubled.

'Jerry Needs Plans'

"Tom," he said, "Jerry needs some kind of planning under way. The President may resign before or after he's impeached. We've got to do some kind of contingency planning."

Buchen remembered that Whitehead had served on the staff that guided the more normal transition from the Johnson administration to the Nixon administration. Their adjacent offices would make it easy for the two men to confer without raising eyebrows.

Whitehead decided that any meetings should be held away from the White House. The handiest spot would be his home, an old townhouse in nearby Georgetown. It would not do to involve other administration figures, increasing the risk of disclosure. Whitehead sought the advice of three acquaintances, all in their thirties, who were not in the government.

Won't Name Advisers

Whitehead will not identify the three. He acknowledges, with a rueful grin, however, that one was a staunch Democrat, who "had a rough time when we would sit around and discuss things that Mr. Ford could do to strengthen the party" — the Republican Party.

During the early summer, the transition cadre — Buchen, Whitehead and the other three — met four times, usually in late afternoon, at the townhouse.

Their discussions ranged widely from the obvious (a ceremony for the assumption of office) to the mechanical (the need for a small transition team to orient Mr. Ford to the White House and vice versa) to the sublime (themes and principles that might be enunciated at the outset of a new administration.)

Whitehead reduced the rough plans for a transition program to a single typed page. He called it the "index." It looked like this:

1. First principles, themes

PR?

and objectives.

2. The transition team.
3. The "first week":
 - Assumption of office.
 - Transition team.
 - Message to the American people.
 - Cabinet and White House resignations.
 - Congressional leadership meetings.
 - Cabinet, NSC (National Security Council) and economic policy meetings.
 - Meetings with national and foreign leaders.
 - Vice presidential search process.
 - Personnel decision process.

4. Address to the American people.

5. Assessment of the executive branch.

The items were not so much recommendations as a checklist of matters that should be considered, quickly, in the event Mr. Ford became President overnight.

It would be something that Buchen could take to Mr. Ford and say, "This will get you started."

The "thing," as Buchen called it, came up on Tuesday, Aug. 6, the day after Mr. Nixon made public transcripts of his White House conversations that showed him to be an early active participant in a cover-up attempt.

That night, Buchen tracked down Whitehead, who coincidentally, had given notice that he soon would resign to resume a private career. He was preparing to leave Washington to join Mrs. Whitehead on a vacation trip to Aspen, Colo.

The making of the President began in earnest on Wednesday, Aug. 7. Whitehead, clad in jeans and boots because his wife had most of his clothes in their car in Kansas City, located the transition "index" and pared it down to the immediate essentials. Items 2 and 3, as an agenda for a meeting that Buchen was organizing.

Mr. Ford gave Buchen the names of the five friends whose views he wanted to solicit on transition plans. Buchen asked one of the five, William G. Whyte of United States Steel, to volunteer his home for a 5 P.M. meeting.

Scranton Called

One of the five friends didn't need to be invited. Former Governor William Scranton of Pennsylvania, who had been a law school classmate of Mr. Ford's at Yale, knew enough about Washington to realize by Wednesday that Mr. Ford soon would be President. He called to volunteer his assistance.

The others invited to the meeting were Sen. Robert P. Griffin of Michigan, the Senate Republican Whip; Former Rep. John W. Byrnes, of Wisconsin, and Bryce N. Harlow, an executive of Proctor & Gamble, who had been an

aide to Presidents Eisenhower and Nixon.

From 5 P.M. until nearly midnight, the seven men sat in the upholstered chairs and on the two sofas in the family room of the Whyte home.

Speech Drafted

For hours they discussed essential elements of the transition, working from Whitehead's checklist:

The Chief Justice of the United States, Warren E. Burger, should officiate at an inauguration but he was in

The Netherlands. Griffin agreed to contact him.

Mr. Ford would need the draft of a brief speech to the American people for use soon after the took office; it was written by Robert T. Hartmann, Mr. Ford's vice presidential chief of staff.

An ongoing transition team would be needed to guide Mr. Ford through the first days of his administration and map plans for longer-range changes; Scranton would wind up directing it along

with Donald Rumsfeld, the U.S. ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and Whitehead would serve temporarily as staff secretary.

'The Word' Comes

The next morning, Thursday, Aug. 8, Mr. Nixon summoned Mr. Ford to say that he was going to resign.

Thursday afternoon, the transition planners, no longer as concerned about secrecy, met in Whitehead's office. The plans were put on paper.