

WELCOME HOME MR. VICE PRESIDENT



Ford at Grand Rapids homecoming: The townsfolk didn't think Jerry 'ought to get drawn into that mess'

AP

'Ford's Folly'

In the three months since his nomination as Vice President, Gerald Ford has successfully walked the fine line between loyalty to Richard Nixon and his own independence. Last week, however, Ford moved deep into Nixon territory. In a speech to the American Farm Bureau Federation in Atlantic City, the Vice President lashed out against "a few extreme partisans" who "seem bent on stretching out the ordeal of Watergate for their own purposes." Zeroing in on the AFL-CIO and the Americans for Democratic Action, both of which are lobbying hard for impeachment, Ford accused "powerful pressure organizations" of seeking "total defeat not only of President Nixon, but of the policies for which he stands." And in a curious indictment of himself as heir apparent, Ford warned that impeachment would allow the "super-welfare staters" to wreak havoc through "massive new government spending, higher taxes and a more rampant inflation."

The invective sounded less like Ford

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than like his predecessor, Spiro Agnew—and in fact, the muse was familiar. The White House at first disclaimed responsibility. But next day spokesman Gerald L. Warren admitted that White House speechwriters did assist the Vice President "in formulating ideas he wanted to put across"—and it was later learned that Nixon aides Bryce Harlow and Kenneth Clawson had collaborated on the product. In his own justification, Ford said that he hadn't got around to hiring his own wordsmiths and that he and his staff rewrote one-third of the White House version. "The final result was mine," he insisted. "It was my theme and it was my language."

His reason for going on the attack, Ford maintained, was righteous anger: he had become incensed at the impeachment "propaganda" in a recent ADA treatise. Some Republican politicians, however, attributed the speech to far shrewder motives. In their view, the GOP leadership had an obligation to defend the President, and Ford—as one Republican not facing re-election this fall—was the logical candidate for the job. Furthermore, they argue, Ford's choice of the AFL-CIO and the ADA as targets is calculated to please his constituency. "He's not spending his own political capital and he's actually building some equity," said a California Republican. "He's hanging in there now with the President. Later on, he can express his disappointment at . . . the way it turned out."

Fodder? Even in Washington's current climate, that explanation seemed overly cynical—and it was likelier that Ford had answered the White House call to arms out of misguided political judgment and devotion to his party. But some old Agnew hands and a few Democrats stretched this explanation to a Machiavellian conclusion: the White House, they theorized, was sending Ford on a suicide mission in an effort to make Mr. Nixon more attractive. "Ford has been put on a limb so the White House can cut it off," said a former Agnew aide. "They want to make sure Jerry isn't a viable alternative." Another aide said, "Ford may look good in the polls now, but wait until the White House finishes using him as political cannon fodder."

Whatever the reason for his new position, Ford quickly learned its pitfalls. The experts' report on the eighteen-and-a-half-minute buzz followed his speech within two hours, leaving Ford to remark lamely that "this is a technical and confusing matter." The speech itself was assailed in editorials—"Ford's Folly," jeered *The New York Times*—and by congressmen on both sides of the aisle.

The message was louder still when Ford went home to Grand Rapids, Mich., for the first visit since he became Vice President. The townsfolk turned out to welcome their favorite son—"The GOP's Mr. Clean," boasted one placard—and to warn him against being dragged down by the President. "I don't think Jerry ought to get drawn into that mess," wor-

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ried Clifford Gettings, his high-school football coach. Robert VanderLaan, the GOP nominee for Ford's House seat, said, "I think most of the people around here are secretly hoping he'll be President soon." And later, Ford was reminded by Michigan reporters of his peacemaker vow and asked flatly whether he was becoming a second Agnew.

Ford insisted that he wasn't deterred by the unexpected backlash in this Republican stronghold. "The point I was making in Atlantic City, I would make again today," he declared. But he steered clear of Watergate for the rest of his visit, and the betting was that his unwontedly raised voice had already been lowered. "I think," said a local politician, "that Jerry got the message."