

Ford, in Talk With Nixon, Links Watergate to Defeat in Michigan

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CINCINNATI, Feb. 20—Vice President Ford told President Nixon in a private meeting today that the Watergate scandal was at least in part responsible for the Republican loss of a crucial special Congressional election in Michigan on Monday.

"He recognized it," the Vice President said. "Obviously, it [Watergate] had an influence."

Mr. Ford told of his White House meeting with the President during an interview while coming here to campaign for Willis D. Gradison Jr., Republican candidate in a special Congressional election to be held here March 5.

With the unexpected loss of Mr. Ford's former House seat on Monday to a Democrat, Republicans are expected to redouble their efforts in the remaining four special House elections to be held this spring. Democrats have already captured the first two special elections.

The Vice President said he discussed the loss of the Michigan seat with the President when Mr. Nixon asked him to stay after a weekly White House meeting of Republican Congressional leaders this morning.

"I told him that the basic underlying problem in that district was the deteriorating economic situation," Mr. Ford said. "I also indicated to him that there was skepticism about the political environment of Washington, including Watergate."

Asked if he had again urged the President to release key Watergate tape recordings—including material that the White House contends would clear Mr. Nixon of involvement in the Watergate cover-up—Mr. Ford replied, "He knows my views on that. I have been urging him all

along to release that information."

Mr. Ford said he urged the President to use his contingency funds in his budget to help ease the "temporary economic problems" encountered today. He said that he and the President also had agreed that because of the cooperation of the American people in conserving fuel, "there is little or no possibility of gasoline rationing."

The Vice President said that during their discussion of the part the Watergate issue played in the Democratic victory in Mr. Ford's old district, the President had expressed disappointment over loss of the seat.

"He recognized, as I did, that it could be the way that Democrats skillfully used the issue," Mr. Ford said.

The winner in the Michigan election, Richard F. VanderVeen, had campaigned on the theme that President Nixon should step down and that Mr. Ford should become President.

This is the third Congressional District in which Mr. Ford has campaigned on behalf of Republican candidates in this spring's special House elections.

This is the heart of Taft country, a traditionally Republican stronghold that President Nixon easily carried in both 1968 and 1972. It is the home of the late Senator Robert A. Taft, who was known as Mr. Republican, and of his son, Robert Taft Jr., now in the United States Senate.

The seat has been held by William J. Keating, a Republican who has resigned from the House to become president of The Cincinnati Inquirer.

Mr. Gradison, a moderate Republican, is opposed in the March 5 election by Thomas A. Luken, a former Democratic Mayor of the city.