

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, April 10—In President Nixon's news summary this morning, the story causing dismay and outrage is a summary of an article in *The New Republic* entitled "Ford's Future," by John Osborne.

Mr. Osborne, a shoelather reporter who has earned his reputation for integrity, prefaces his account with a classic assertion of the "Lindley rule" about nonattribution: "This report is presented solely on my authority, and readers will just have to assume and believe that I haven't made it up out of nothing."

Then Vice President Gerald Ford's innermost thoughts are revealed. As President, he would certainly keep Secretary of State Kissinger and probably fire Secretary of Defense Schlesinger. He would bring back Treasury Secretary George Shultz, hold on to Secretaries Brennan, Morton and Lynn, and perhaps let Secretary of Transportation Brinegar go.

The "new Haldeman" at the White House would either be L. William Seidman, or Philip Buchan, both cronies from Grand Rapids; Counselor Bryce Harlow would be retained and Press Secretary Ziegler dumped. Official gag-writer would be Bob Orbin, who has impressive credentials from Red Skelton.

The crowning touch: "The hours that he's had to spend with the President," writes Mr. Osborne, "mostly listening to Mr. Nixon talk about this and that, have on a few occasions driven the Vice President close to distraction. He's brought himself recently to break off their conversations. . . ."

A few diehards might consider it unseemly for the Vice President to be confiding his plans for the assumption

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of power while the body of the sitting President is still warm.

Reached by telephone today, the Vice President admits to being the source of most of the story but adds that he thought he was talking off the record during a flight from Florida to Washington, D. C. The Cabinet changes are "generally my views," he says, but the crack about the Presidential conversations distresses him:

"I get somewhat embarrassed that I'm taking too much of his time," Mr. Ford explains. "I know he's busy, and I don't want to sit there until he throws me out. That's what I meant, and it was exaggerated considerably."

Evidently the Vice President confused "deep background," which can be used without attribution, with "off the record," which cannot be used at all. Even so, his willingness to play Cabinet scrabble with reporters—he says Mr. Osborne was not the first—is hardly in good taste.

This episode follows Mr. Ford's denunciation of the 1972 Nixon campaign organization as "an arrogant, elite guard of political adolescents." (Familiar phraseology: What happened to "effete"?)

The purpose of that blast was to remove Republicans, and professional politicians as a class, from any Watergate taint: Blame the damned "amateurs."

Let us count the re-election committee amateurs: John Mitchell had previously run a national Presidential campaign; Fred Larue had served as Mississippi's Republican National Committeeman for six years; Maurice Stans was Eisenhower's budget director and the most experienced political fund-raiser extant.

Each of those professional politicians has much to answer for, but not for being wet behind the ears. A "citizen's operation" separate from the party organization was not only traditional but necessary because party rules make it impossible to organize a campaign until after its convention officially designates a candidate.

The blanket condemnation of Mr. Nixon's campaign committee, with its concomitant enshrinement of party wheelhorses as the guardians of virtue, is foolish. Over 500 full-time workers in the Committee to Re-Elect the President, including 100 volunteers who did nothing venal and are accused of nothing, find themselves unfairly stigmatized. Try to keep a job in Government with "CREEP" emblazoned on your record; good people who are being hounded out of jobs think it ill becomes the Vice President to exhort their prosecutors.

In both his finger-pointing and his predictions of how he would reshuffle the Cabinet and White House, Mr. Ford betrays a lack of understanding of the uniqueness of his role: *He is the first Vice President in American history whose own actions could help make him President.*

He must be at once loyal and independent; both his own man and the President's man; a defender uncorrupted by the defense. This duality requires more political skill than we have recently seen in Mr. Ford; he will miss the brass ring if he grabs at it.

To press audiences, the Vice President likes to tell about driving past the White House at night and being reminded that "if you worked here, you'd be home already." Good joke; a little levity is not out of place. But in the larger matters of understanding one's own dual responsibilities as heir and not pretender, seemliness is next to godliness.