

Editing of Tape Transcripts Criticized Obliquely by Ford



VICE PRESIDENT FORD
... "speaking frankly"

By Jules Witcover
Washington Post Staff Writer

Vice President Gerald R. Ford yesterday criticized by implication the editing of the White House transcripts on Watergate, suggesting it contributed to "a crisis of confidence" in the federal government.

In a speech at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Ill., Ford said:

"While it may be easy to delete characterization from the printed page, we cannot delete characterization from people's minds with a wave of the hand. That is why I am speaking frankly on the subject, perhaps more so

than some of my colleagues might wish. But I think the matter is so vital that it must be discussed in public —by public officials. And it must be discussed thoroughly."

The remark appeared to be a clear reference to the phrase "characterization omitted" used in the transcripts to note the deletion of material in which the speaker made personal references to individuals.

At a press conference at the University of Chicago later, however, Ford said he "was not obliquely referring to the transcripts" in his remark.

When Ford arrived at O'Hare Airport in Chicago after the speech and before the press conference, a portable phone was rushed aboard his plane for what an aide described as a very important call. His press secretary, Paul Miltich, denied the call had come from the White House.

Ford, referring to criticism of the transcripts, said it is "unfair to look at just a cold word on a page and extrapolate a meaning from it. You should really be in the room. . . You cannot condemn or condone cold words on paper."

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But when asked if that was not a good reason for releasing the tapes, Ford noted that the House Judiciary Committee and the staff of Watergate Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski have not "concluded consideration of the evidence" they have. He said he favored release of more if necessary after they "digest the voluminous data they already have."

Noting the low standing both of President Nixon and Congress in the public-opinion polls, Ford said in his speech, "It seems clear that the main cause has been a

continuous series of revelations and reports of corruption, malfeasance and wrongdoing in the federal government, not the least of which is the sorry mess which carries the label of Watergate.

"We have seen charge and counter-charge, indictments, confessions, convictions and resignations, involving some of the highest offices. These have been hammer blows to the confidence the American people have placed in their government.

"Much remains untested and unproved. But what has taken place up to now has created a diminished confidence in our public officials;

basic distrust of their motives."

The Vice President's appearance was marked by picketing outside the university's basketball arena by more than 50 students chanting "Impeach Nixon" and carrying signs that said "Nixon is the Most Unwanted Criminal" and "Jail to the Chief."

Some of the chanters got into the arena, where they were cheered by many in the crowd of 6,000. The audience cheered Ford, however, when he said voters "must insist that candidates for office and officeholders speak the truth," and that "one thing every elected office-

holder must do is pay attention to the voter. If he fails to listen, he won't be an officeholder for very long."

Ford said the "legal, judicial and constitutional processes already in operation will settle the guilt or innocence of those involved in the charges of corruption, dishonesty or violations of law." And he contended, "There will be some pluses from the very operation of this cleansing process—a recognition that the law applies to holders of high office as well as to the citizen who elects the officeholder."

The Vice President also indirectly praised the President for releasing the edited

transcripts despite the embarrassment to Mr. Nixon resulting from their publication.

"Where else in this world," he asked, "would the chief executive of a nation decide to make public the most intimate personal conversations with his staff. And do so at the urging of the opposition?"

Ford called their disclosure "essential in the search for truth, and said the documents, "painful as they may be, will help establish the truth." In saying that, the Vice President was being more conservative than the White House, which has said the transcripts "tell the

whole story" of Watergate.

In his press conference, Ford was asked about recent calls for Mr. Nixon's resignation of impeachment from such Republican loyalists as Reps. John B. Anderson of Illinois and the Chicago Tribune. He replied, "Let others speak for themselves. I just speak for myself. I do not believe the President has lost any of his clout" as leader of the country.

The campus speech was one of four on Ford's schedule yesterday, kicking off three weeks of political barnstorming that takes him to Buffalo today, Texas Saturday, Louisiana and Florida Monday and Honolulu next weekend. Aides said the

schedule was planned six weeks ago and is unrelated to the release of the White House transcripts.

As Mr. Nixon's impeachment hearing got under way yesterday, Ford was asked again at his press conference about his interest in and readiness to become President. He reiterated

that he did not expect it to happen, but added:

"I will always be ready for any contingency. . . All through my career I've done what I had to do and everything I had to do turned out to be training for the future. Whatever happens I'm prepared to do, just as I did all the others."