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Gerald Ford: Abandoning His Conciliatory Role?

Within hours after Vice President Gerald Ford's self-destructive speech in Atlantic City last week, one of his key staffers was vainly trying to justify to his own family and neighbors Ford's attack on "a few, extreme partisans."

The staffer, back against the wall, found a rational defense impossible; he agreed with much of the criticism against his boss. Unlike Ford, he agreed that President Nixon had rightly lost the confidence of vast numbers of Americans, Democrats and Republicans alike.

Yet Ford himself, who stood on the pinnacle of popular political acceptability as of Jan. 15, to this day has not been convinced by his closest political friends, aides and well-wishers that the Atlantic City speech was all that destructive.

To the contrary, Ford is risking even further sleighing away of his unique, national support by continuing to play a role that critics see as Public Defender No. 1 of a man who may rapidly be slipping beyond rational defense.

For politics-wise Jerry Ford, long the leader of his party in the House, to the leader of his party in the House, to

pursue such a role is incomprehensible to old cronies in Congress. It is raising disturbing questions about how politics-wise Ford really is.

Just before the Christmas recess, a small group of Republican conservatives quietly discussed Ford's problem in the cloakroom. They unanimously agreed that Ford must not get sucked into "the White House game," as predecessor Spiro T. Agnew was, or he would end up a political wreck. Ford, they agreed, must be preserved as the party's major asset if Richard Nixon goes down.

When they read Ford's ridiculous charge that "a political grudge fight" is sparking the anti-Nixon movement, they were dismayed. Was Ford already ensnared in the White House toils?

In fact, however, the original speech idea was Ford's own, picked up by his personal reading of anti-Nixon handouts from labor and liberal organizations. Struck by the common anti-Nixon impeachment theme, he asked the "special" speechwriting office in the White House (operating under chief of staff Alexander Haig) to prepare a fitting draft. Ford has been seeking two speech-

writers for weeks but in the interim uses the White House team, headed by David Gergen. The draft that went to Ford fitted both his own request and, naturally, the currently hardening Nixon line.

Ford and top aides say they deleted several provocative phrases, including a stirring reference to congressional left-wingers playing dirty pool against the President. But that original draft, intentionally hard-line to ease the new crisis over the 18-minute tape gap and the experts' finding announced the same day as the speech, was by no means torn up by Ford.

To the contrary, the Vice President still defends the self-destructive theme of the heart of the speech. More disheartening to Ford allies, he questions press treatment of the speech, asking why so much time and space were expended on a single speech.

Perhaps part of the torrent of abuse that fell on Ford after Atlantic City can be blamed on this unbelievably confused way of preparing a speech. The text shuffled back and forth between the White House speechwriters and Ford's office so many times that, finally, one of Ford's closest and cannily

est aides had no opportunity to give the text more than a rapid once-over before Ford boarded his plane for Atlantic City.

That, again, is a fault which must be laid to Ford, not the White House. Ford needs his own wordsmiths, not those whose first loyalty is to Richard Nixon.

Speechwriters, however, can never compensate for Ford's own political judgment and instincts. Starting from glorious prospects during his first few weeks in office, he was badly served by those instincts in the Atlantic City fiasco. Instead of viewing himself as conciliator of dangerous political passions in an historically unique situation, Ford has been acting as a conventional politician in conventional times.

Even his closest aides concede the mail was not good after Atlantic City, but that is beside the real point: whether Ford himself understands why the mail was not good. The problem is not so much the Atlantic City blunder, which could be soon forgotten, but the prospect of similar mistakes again and again.