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Gerald Ford:

Playing ^{Fast} _{4/29/74} The Odds...

So far, the overwhelming majority of people have got Gerald Ford all wrong.

In the unending private talk and public comment within the political community, discussion of the Vice President centers upon two points. First, what will he be like if he becomes President as the first result of President Nixon's impeachment by the House of Representatives and conviction by the Senate? And second, what are his real relations with his beleaguered chief, the President, while both wait for the answer to Question No. 1?

Both questions may well be wide of the mark, since the President's impeachment and conviction are by no means so likely as is now widely supposed. But the questions must at least be got out of the way. In brief, the Vice President is doing everything in his power to avert the President's impeachment and conviction; and he now believes that the President will neither be impeached nor convicted.

To be sure, Vice President Ford has wisely avoided any access (which has not been offered to him, any way) to the tapes and other unknown White House documents that are now likely to determine President Nixon's fate. In this respect, he bases his outspoken



judgment that the tapes and documents offer no grounds for impeachment on the repeated assurances of those in the White House who have had the access that he has not had.

Within the White House, accordingly, the Vice President has been a leading advocate—in fact *the* leading advocate—of a presidential policy of openness with the House Judiciary Committee. His main allies have been the President's lawyer, James D. St. Clair,

and White House Chief of Staff Gen. Alexander Haig.

One must wait to see whether the main obstacles to openness have really been the President's bitter reluctance to show anyone at all the fairly startling Nixon-in-undress that the tapes reveal; plus the President's high sense of prerogative; plus his strong tendency to feel the whole world is his enemy. If these have been the only obstacles, rather than something **grave** **the**

President must hide at all costs, Richard M. Nixon's impeachment is still less than an even bet.

That is the way the Vice President is known from many sources to access the current odds, at any rate. Furthermore, even if the House produces a bare majority for a bill of impeachment, it will still be an odds-on bet against the Senate producing the required two-thirds majority to remove

the President from office. Being the kind of man he is, therefore, Gerald Ford both hopes and expects to serve out his term as Vice President under Richard M. Nixon.

Any sensible person can see that the Vice President is governing his behavior accordingly. If the President is not impeached and convicted, any sensible person can also see that Richard M. Nixon will owe a considerable debt to Gerald Ford. This is because of the Vice President's tireless use of his many connections in the House and Senate to help the President in all ways that the President will permit.

If the Vice President nonetheless becomes the occupant of the White House before Mr. Nixon's term ends, of course, all bets will be off. He will then become the certain Republican nominee for the presidency in 1976. But on his own quite opposite assumption that the President will serve out his term, what is Gerald Ford now doing about 1976?

The answer comes in three parts. First, anyone who thinks that he is not planning to be a candidate for the Republican nomination is too innocent to be allowed out after dark. Second, the Vice President has already showed himself a national politician of far greater stature, more long-headed, with a better sense of strategy and atmospheric, than anyone would have thought a year ago. He has kept apart from Watergate, yet he has been loyal. He has made himself strikingly popular, without taking a single step the remaining admirers of an unpopular President could possibly resent. Third, it is rather clear that Vice President Ford is already thinking about a quite unexpected kind of pre-convention campaign in 1976. By his position, he is dispensed from the primaries. But simply from the legal inquiries being made by his staff, it can be deduced with certainty that he is already planning to enter the compulsive primaries, like that in Oregon.

These few primaries alone should be enough to prove that with Republican voters, Gerald Ford stands head and shoulders higher — at least at present — than any of his rivals for the Republican nomination. So either way, it may be "President Ford" in the future.