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Gerald Ford:

The Best Of

Intentions

Vice President Gerald Ford seems to inspire a certain amount of disdain, no matter what he says or does, and he has been the target of considerable scorn of late for his "zigs and zags" on the release of White House tape recordings and other evidence.

Maybe he is vacillating. But from here, Mr. Ford has looked a good deal more like a man trying hard, and unsuccessful, to bring about some sort of compromise and steer the country away from a major constitutional crisis.

As long ago as Feb. 9, the Vice President was urging the release of the tapes, "the quicker the better." That, considering how he came to be Vice President in the first place, was a fairly forthright statement. Nor was it canceled out by his March 15 opinion that the impeachment inquiry was on "a fishing expedition."

If it seemed to Mr. Ford that the Rodino committee was seeking an awful lot of tapes, well it must have seemed that way to many other Americans who, like the Vice President, did not know that what was being sought were recordings of several crucial conversations that took place over a relatively short period of time, and that could go a long way toward showing how much the President was involved in the Watergate cover-up.

It must have struck Mr. Ford as reasonable and good psychology, to urge quick release of evidence while praising Mr. Nixon for his cooperation. It came off as wispy-washiness.



For several weeks after that, Gerald Ford continued his honest broker's role, urging in two early April speeches that the President release all material "relevant to the impeachment process."

Nor was it vacillation when, on April 9, he defended the President's position that he wanted to review the requested documents before turning them over to the House Judiciary Committee. For while he was defending the review, he was also expressing his confidence that Mr. Nixon would "respond affirmatively to all requests for tapes and documents."

That's Gerald Ford being sweetly reasonable and even-handed, trying to avoid the showdown.

In fact a few days later, he openly admitted that he had been trying to work out a compromise. He didn't add what was later to become apparent: that the White House hadn't bought the compromise.

And the time for "review" that seemed so reasonable to Mr. Ford turned out to be a stall for time to get

out the infamous expurgated transcripts.

The Vice President, though clearly not privy to what was going on in the White House inner circles, kept urging the President to produce the evidence.

The only zig-zagging was between a gentle nudge (The White House ought to show "more flexibility") and a firm push (The White House ought to release the tapes and otherwise "be as cooperative as possible, bend over backwards to cooperate with the [House Judiciary] committee).

In fact, he seemed to be getting tougher, as on May 23, when he told ABC's Bill Zimmerman:

"It seems to me that a stonewall attitude isn't necessarily the wisest policy . . . I would hope, if we get down to the final crunch, that the White House would be cooperative if there was relevant information, tapes or transcripts or otherwise, that would be helpful in avoiding a head-to-head confrontation."

What I see in all this is an earnest man in a powerless but highly visible position doing his level best to save his

country (and his party) some horrendous grief.

It hasn't worked, as Mr. Ford himself acknowledged to Washington Post newsmen Jules Witcover last Friday. "I don't think there's any significant change" in the President's unyielding stand, he said, although he said a few days earlier that he had "laid out quite candidly" that he disagreed with Mr. Nixon's "stonewall attitude."

The Witcover interview came just a couple of days after the Vice President said "the President's attitude is proper." That, in fact, is about the only evidence of zig-zagging that shows up in the Ford record on the tapes.

The hang-up is not Mr. Ford's inconsistency; it is that Mr. Nixon is too much caught up in his own priorities to be moved by Gerald Ford.

And since the latter's efforts to bring the President around are having no effect except to make the Vice President look silly and inept, maybe he'd be better off cooling it for a while.

After all, as he also told Witcover, "There's no use saying it every day."