

Watergate Discounted As Election Factor

Post 6/1/74

From News Dispatches

COLUMBUS, June 6—Vice President Gerald R. Ford said Watergate will have nothing to do with the 1974 elections.

"There is no Republican candidate I know of on the ballot who has anything whatsoever to do with Watergate," the Vice President said at a \$125-a-plate Central Ohio Republican dinner Wednesday night.

As the estimated 1,000 GOP members from 40 counties applauded, Ford also said, "It is my judgment that the President of the United States is innocent of any involvement in the break-in of Democratic headquarters.

He said, "It is my personal judgment . . . the preponderance of the evidence is that he is innocent of any involvement in any cover-up."

His remarks came before it became known that the original Watergate grand jury voted to name President Nixon as an unindicted co-conspirator in the Watergate cover-up. Today, after learning of the action, he declined to comment.

The former Michigan congressman said Wednesday that Republicans should concentrate on this year's elections and not worry about 1976. "If the Republican Party takes a disastrous defeat in 1974, 1976 may be irrelevant," he said.

"If the Republican Party stands up and can be strong in 1974 it can prevail in 1976. 1974 is the crucial test," he said.

About 100 demonstrators carrying signs reading "Throw the bum out" marched across the street from the hotel where Ford spoke.

Ford was already in the hotel when they arrived. Ford,

also said that Democratic congressmen calling for defense budget cuts are seriously hindering President Nixon's position in his upcoming arms limitation talks in Moscow.

"The President has recommended a defense budget to keep our armed forces at 2,200,000, which is 1,300,000 less than when he took office," Ford said.

"There are those forces in Congress that want to gut it, cut it, reduce it," Ford continued. "The President is going to Moscow to negotiate with Mr. (Leonid) Brezhnev for a reduction in manpower. If he goes while Congress is tying his hands with a unilateral reduction, then Congress is doing him a great disservice.

"But if Congress is strong now, and stands by the President, then we can look forward to an honest reduction," Ford said. "Through strength, not weakness, we will be able to achieve a lasting peace."