

Gerald Ford: Planning for the Future

When a powerful Republican politician stopped in to see Vice President Gerald R. Ford several weeks ago, the conversation flitted briefly over a new Harris poll showing Ford ahead of both Sens. Edward M. Kennedy and Henry M. Jackson but then turned to more important business.

However, when the politician was about to leave Ford's office, the Vice President stopped him and moved back to his desk. Opening a drawer, Ford drew out the regional standings in the Harris poll, pointing with sureness to the regional breakdown in the poll showing that Ford's maximum strength was in the critically important South and Midwest.

"The fact that Ford was fascinated by that poll," the politician said later, "meant one thing to me. No matter what he says publicly, he's running for President."

That conclusion may seem far-fetched, based on such slender evidence. Since then, however, almost everything Ford has done strongly supports the conclusion that his total presidential disclaimer when Richard Nixon picked him to succeed Spiro T.

Agnew last October is now inoperative. Telltale signs are everywhere.

During his skiing vacation in Vail, Colo., for example, Ford took the trouble to telephone retired Gen. William C. Westmoreland in South Carolina to urge that he accept the Republican nomination for governor this year. Westmoreland is still pondering. But if he does run and win, Ford will be enhanced politically in South Carolina.

Similarly, the rejection by Ford's staff of an urgent appeal for help from the beleaguered Republican candidate in Tuesday's special election to replace the late Rep. John Saylor of Pennsylvania was quickly overturned by Ford himself.

But the most significant indication of how Ford now views his future came in the aftermath of his blooper speech in Atlantic City last month, when even his closest political friends were aghast. The speech (written by White House speechwriters) charged that the impeachment campaign against Mr. Nixon was the result of "a few extreme partisans." It exploded in his face.

The private reaction of Ford and his

chief of staff, Robert Hartmann, was instantaneous: instead of trying to operate with a small staff as a White House appendage, face the hard truth that Ford is fast becoming the operating political head of the Republican Party whose nominal chief is not welcome across the country.

Pressing Ford hard toward a similar conclusion was George Bush, Republican national chairman, who forcefully urged Ford to hire an experienced politician as a go-between with the National Committee, the House and Senate campaign committees and the state party organizations. That led to the hiring of national committeewoman Gwen Anderson of Washington state as Ford's fulltime political adviser.

Other Vice Presidents have also had political advisers, but Ford's fulltime political plans for Mrs. Anderson set her above any of her predecessors.

In the aftermath of the Atlantic City fiasco, Ford also wrung approval from the White House for two fulltime speechwriters, also unprecedented. One is Milton Friedman (no relation

to the economist), hired last week from the House Republican campaign committee. Friedman, a former reporter for the Zionist Jewish Telegraphic Agency who worked for liberal Sen. Jacob K. Javits of New York in 1971, has good ties to the Jewish community, but is also regarded by Republican pros as a moderate conservative.

No one on Ford's staff will admit it, but old political friends say the Vice President has been restive over the President's failure to give him clear authority in any policy or operating field. All the well-publicized conversations he is supposed to be having every day with the President have not added up to a meaningful role.

So, having abandoned his party's highest political post in the House to rescue the administration at a disastrous hour, Ford is described by old friends as moving toward a far more independent position than he originally planned. The steady growth of his staff, independent of the crippled Nixon presidency, is one more signal he is looking toward a larger future.