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Ford Still Opposes Adamant Nixon Stand

By Jules Witcover
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Vice President Gerald R. Ford said yesterday that he still basically disagrees with President Nixon's adamant decision against turning over any more White House tape recordings to the House Judiciary Committee under any circumstances.

But he said he agrees with the White House position that the committee should call witnesses on the Watergate phase of its impeachment inquiry before pressing demands for more tapes.

Ford, in an interview in his Executive Office Building office, said he was supporting the proposal of House Minority Leader John J. Rhodes (R-Ariz.) — and the White House — that “the committee after it goes through the mass of evidence it has — 19 tapes, the 23 additional transcripts, other evidence — then they ought to call the witnesses, such as Dean, Haldeman, Ehrlichman.”

But at that point, he said,

“if there are some loose ends, if they feel they require additional tapes, they ought to ask for them, and I would hope at that point the White House would sit down and, on the basis or relevancy, would cooperate.”

Ford said he still objects to “that particular position” of the White House that says flatly that no more tapes will be turned over—a position the Vice President last week criticized as a “stonewall attitude.”

Asked whether he has told the President he still feels that way, Ford said: “I haven't indicated any change of my attitude, but there's no use saying it every day.”

The Vice President said he continues to feel that a dogmatic White House refusal to respond to House subpoenas for more tapes will harden attitudes on Capitol Hill against the President—a warning he has

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President had been urging Mr. Nixon publicly and privately not to buck House subpoenas for more Watergate material, lest he harden attitudes toward him.

While Mr. Nixon's lawyers were engaged in various legal maneuvers to delay the impeachment procedure, Ford was warning that whatever the legal justifications, the political fallout against the President in the House could be his undoing.

But on Wednesday in Charlotte, N.C., amid recurrent rumors of a Nixon-Ford rift, the Vice President suddenly sided with Mr. Nixon, saying he should release no more materials until the committee opened its hearings to the public and proceeded with what materials it already had.

After a meeting with the President eight days ago, Ford had said he told Mr. Nixon “that this (refusal to release more tapes) could lead to an emotional institutional confrontation.” While he did not believe denying the committee material sought was an impeachable

offense, he said, “when you have emotions raised, the facts are overlooked.”

During the same meeting, Ford reported later, he “laid out quite candidly” to the President that he disagreed with what the Vice President had called in a television interview the White House's “stonewall attitude.” He said he indicated to Mr. Nixon that “there was no change in the position I had taken before, and I have shown no indication that I'm going to change again.”

That was said on May 26. Three days later, Ford said, “I don't think there ought to be any further delivery (of materials)” at least until the committee had studied everything already turned over.

In an additional observation largely overlooked then, he said: “Once that was done, they could sit down and negotiate with the White House for more tapes. I would hope they could reach some compromise.” In yesterday's interview, he said he hoped the White House at that point would “cooperate.”

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made directly to Mr. Nixon.

“It was set forth in a number of news stories in the last 24 hours,” Ford noted. “Individual members of the committee said that themselves.”

He apparently was referring to Thursday's decision by the House Judiciary Committee not only to subpoena 45 more tapes but to notify the President in a letter that it may recommend his impeachment if he continues to defy subpoenas.

Eight of the 17 Republicans on the committee approved the letter and both Republican and Democratic members warned such defiance could hurt Mr. Nixon.

Ford said it was “premature” for him to make any judgment on what his position will be if the committee declines to call witnesses on the Watergate phase of its inquiry now and presses its demands for tapes—which seems to be exactly the point the committee has already reached.

“The tapes are some evidence,” Ford said. “But there are people who were at those meetings—Dean, Ehrlichman, Haldeman. At least those three were at those meetings. I should think they would be as good or better evidence than the tapes.”

On Thursday, both Ford and Rhodes supported a proposal by James D. St. Clair, the President's special counsel on Watergate and the impeachment defense, that witnesses on the Watergate phase, about which committee members have been briefed by staff, be called before the committee moves on to other possible grounds for impeachment.

Ford said he had discussed with Rhodes but not with St. Clair the idea of urging the committee to call

Watergate witnesses now, and that there had been no strategy meeting then in advance of their similar statements.

While emphasizing that “I don't think there's any significant change” in his position against the White House's adamant stand on the tapes, the Vice President called reports of a rift between him and the President “completely without foundation.” He said he and Mr. Nixon had “an excellent meeting” for 80 minutes Thursday at which foreign policy and legislative proposals were discussed. “We didn't discuss Watergate or the tapes,” he said.

Ford's embracing of the Rhodes-St. Clair position had led to speculation that the President, directly or through an intermediary, had told his Vice President to get on the White House team on this key issue.

On another matter that fueled talk of a rift—a Newsweek report that Mr. Nixon asked former Gov. Nelson Rockefeller of New York derisively whether he could picture Ford in the President's chair—Ford said Rockefeller called him Thursday and denied the remark had been made.

The Vice President's remarks underlined the difficulty of the relatively independent course he has tried to travel since assuming office last December.

Partly at least because Ford was a Capitol Hill man, Mr. Nixon picked him to be his second Vice President. And now, largely because Ford was and still is a Capitol Hill man, he is a man on a tightrope on the matter of the President's strategy for fighting impeachment.

For months, with his ear to the congressional lines he has established over 25 years on the Hill, the Vice

For all the assurances that there is no rift between the President and Vice President, Ford's friends at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue acknowledge that the Vice President today is a man pulled between two loyalties.

On the one hand, they affirm, he remains loyal to the man who selected him for the highest honor he ever hoped to achieve, and whose foreign and domestic policies he generally supports with little reservation.

On the other hand, he is firmly committed to Congress, and particularly to the House of Representatives in which he served for a quarter of a century, and to the many men whose friendship and identity of purpose he shared, and to a large degree still does.

The loyalties clash head-on as the House, carrying out its constitutional responsibility, moves ever closer to a vote on impeachment of the President, and Mr. Nixon maneuvers to blunt and counter that now seemingly inexorable movement.