

Ford: Avoiding the Lame-Duck Label

At the low ebb of his brief presidency and facing a roomful of conservative critics, Gerald R. Ford sought to climb out of a premature political grave by flatly informing Republican Southern state chairmen Monday night that he will definitely run for President in 1976.

Although he passed this information over early evening cocktails in the privacy of the White House map room, President Ford did not intend it to be kept secret. He has announced his candidacy in an exclusive interview in a forthcoming edition of U.S. News and World Report. What's more, if anybody asks, he will scoop that interview during tonight's nationally televised press conference in Phoenix, Ariz.

The President's intention: To demolish the growing notion he will not run in 1976, which is giving him early lame-duck status. Faced with deepening criticism from both wings of his own party in the wake of the midterm election debacle, Mr. Ford is seeking transfusion for his political anemia.

That forces this question: Is this merely a presidential ploy? Is Mr. Ford announcing his candidacy to avoid being a lameduck when in truth he may not run or at least has not yet made up his mind?

"Absolutely not," replies one senior adviser. "That would be the Lairdian (a reference to Melvin Laird, longtime colleague and sometime adviser of the President) thing to do. But it's not in Jerry Ford's nature. He couldn't look you in the eye and say he was running unless he had really decided to."

Such advisers say the President is even more determined now to run than he was after succeeding Richard M. Nixon in August, when he said, "I

will probably be a candidate in 1976." However, his political decline after pardoning Nixon coupled with the illness of Mrs. Ford has created a consensus in informed party circles that he probably will not run.

Gov. Ronald Reagan's closest advisers tell him the President will retire, and many conservatives privately view Mr. Ford as a transitional figure of no permanence. Agreeing, some moderate Republicans are so certain Mr. Ford will not run that they are seeking an alternative to Reagan. One prominent moderate leader in Congress, for instance, is talking up Gov. William Milliken of Michigan, just reelected against formidable odds.

Underlying such speculation is intense backstage criticism from Republicans. Moderates grumble that Mr. Ford has not picked his own cabinet or devised his own program but relies on Nixon men and policies. Conservatives blame his acts as President—nominating Nelson Rockefeller for Vice President, the Vietnam amnesty, the 5 per cent surtax proposal—for contributing to the Nov. 5 holocaust. "He's in worse shape with Congress than any President since Andrew Johnson," contends one influential Republican state chairman.

With this chorus of complaints in the background, Mr. Ford conferred with close advisers last week and told them he still intends to run—now more than ever. He believes the midterm election, disaster though it was, finally closes the book on the Nixon years. He feels he cannot realize his goals in two years and, like all previous Vice Presidents who have succeeded to the presidency, wants to hold the office in his own right.

As for Mrs. Ford's health, he is quoted by aides as asking rhetorically: "What am I supposed to do? Sit around wringing my hands?" If cancer should recur, they say, Mrs. Ford could have no better attention than as the President's wife.

In informing the Southern Republican state chairmen of his resolve, Mr. Ford was addressing hard-nosed conservatives, who while adamantly opposed to a rightist third-party movement today privately prefer Reagan as the 1976 party nominee over Mr. Ford. Indeed, the Southerners greeted him with expressions of concern over published reports that Mr. Ford would use conciliation and compromise with the swollen liberal Democratic majorities in Congress.

Mr. Ford's promises that he would not compromise on principle and would take a tough line against Congress did not move the Southerners. Nor did his announcement of candidacy end speculation among them about the 1976 nomination as Mr. Ford's advisers hoped it would. "We still see 1976 as wide open for any Republican—Ford, Reagan, anybody else," one chairman told us.

Having renounced third-party notions, Reagan will now start working toward the Republican nomination by preaching the conservative gospel on the banquet circuit. If Reagan shows progress nervous moderates will seek a Milliken or some other new face. To prevent all this from making a de facto lameduck of Mr. Ford, he will need not only his early statement of candidacy but hard accomplishments to satisfy at least some critics.