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Ford Says He's the Best Candidate on Either Side

Washington

President Ford, declaring himself better qualified than any other candidate in either party, vowed yesterday that he will remain a candidate no matter what happens in the presidential primary elections.

"Any disappointment in early primaries instead of making me less enthusiastic would probably stimulate me to work harder . . ." Mr. Ford said. "Anyone who thinks I'm going to quit in midstream doesn't know Jerry Ford."

The President implicitly conceded that he might finish behind Republican challenger Ronald Reagan in some of the early primary races. But he said he could conceive of "no circumstances" under which he would drop out and predicted he would go on to win nomination and election.

In an interview on Air Force One returning from a nine-day vacation in Vail, Colo., the President suggested that Reagan lacked sufficient federal experience to become president and took issue with the former California governor's contention that long experience in Washington was a handicap rather than an asset.

Mr. Ford said he had surveyed the presidential field in both parties and found that some had a philosophy he could not accept while others "haven't got the necessary experience."

"When I look at the wide choices, I think that my experience, my philosophy, my integrity, my approach to the problems is the best choice the American people have," the President said.

In answer to a subsequent question Mr. Ford indicated he had differences with Reagan on grounds both of philosophy and experience, but most of all on experience.

"I think I'm more middle of the road than he is and I certainly think that at the federal level experience is a very important factor," the President said.

Asked what the Republican convention would do if Reagan did well in a lot of GOP primaries, Mr. Ford said it is "not inconceivable" that Reagan would be chosen as the vice presidential nominee.

Mr. Ford, looking fit and trim after a vacation in which he skied by day and partied by night, was in an optimistic mood as he assessed his administration's performance in 1975, despite what he called "setbacks" in Vietnam and unemployment. This is the way the President viewed his administration at year's end:

- "I think we have restored integrity in the White House without any question whatsoever."

- Domestically, the rate of inflation has decreased from 12 per cent to six or seven per cent. "Unemployment soared but it's now on a downward path and we're convinced it's going to continue to recede," Mr. Ford said.

In discussing foreign policy prospects for 1976, the President said:

"So as you look at the overall, we foresee no serious problems materializing despite the differences we have (with the Soviet Union) in Angola and the failure at the point — and I emphasize this point — to achieve SALT 2 (the second session of strategic arms limitation talks). The prospects are still encouraging . . ."

United Press