

Gerald Ford: A Political Threat to the President

The remorseless, crumbling erosion of President Nixon's standing, where it counts most—in the bosom of his own party—has now moved to a point of maximum danger with the accession, expected late today, of Gerald R. Ford as the nation's 40th Vice President.

The fact that Mr. Nixon now has an heir-apparent, in the view of highly-placed party leaders, will lead to two inescapable actions:

First, louder, more insistent public demands from his own party that he tell the truth about all aspects of Watergate, a demand Sen. Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, the Senate Republican leader, clearly presaged last week when he said: "Promise of candor is fine but actual complete candor is essential."

Second (and potentially far more damaging to Mr. Nixon), demands by Republicans running for office in the 1974 general election that he either resign or face impeachment.

To many rank-and-file party men in Congress and their leaders, the ringing announcement by Melvin R. Laird that he would be resigning his White House job soon after Ford's vice presidential swearing-in was a clear signal.

"Mel was saying," one party elder told us that once Gerry is confirmed, obligations inside the party to defend and protect Richard M. Nixon will end."

Whether Laird intended such interpretation, his old congressional colleagues are convinced he was saying, in effect, that he has found the Nixon presidency quite incapable of the top-to-bottom reform so clearly demanded by the Watergate disasters.

Scott's warning that Mr. Nixon "isn't going to get out of this mess unless we have an answer to all of the charges" was no sudden outburst. To the contrary, Scott has been having hour-long conversations with many of his Republican colleagues in the Senate, including many natural Nixon allies, such as Sens. John Tower of Texas and William Brock of Tennessee.

His concern is genuine, and it springs from this: that as the 1974 campaign comes closer, every Republican candidate is going to worry about the Nixon drag on his own race. Scott and his Senate intimates are warning the President that not much time is left for him to make good on his recurring promises to come clean.

Moreover, the menacing instinct of the pack is clearly perceived in party

reaction to several White House ploys having only indirect connection to the searing issue of the Watergate tapes and overall presidential disclosure. One of these was the seeming attempt on Nov. 29 by Ronald Ziegler, the President's press secretary and handholder, to destroy the reputation of J. Fred Buzhardt, the top White House Watergate lawyer.

An ideologically conservative South Carolinian of impeccable integrity, Buzhardt was shattered when Ziegler implied he had lost control of his mountainous Watergate workload, but his powerful political friends were furious. Such White House aides as Bryce Harlow, Laird and even chief of staff Alexander Haig actually interceded against Ziegler. Why, then, did Ziegler make his snide remarks?

"Because," one knowing official said, "Nixon felt Buzhardt wasn't enthusiastic enough about the official explanation of the lost 18 minutes (on the June 20, 1972, White House tape) and he told Ron to let him have it."

Again, no proof exists. But the universal Republican reaction was that Mr. Nixon was selling out a loyal aide, as he had so many others in his desperate attempts to pin the blame elsewhere.

Finally, a speech made by a middle-level White House aide, Bryce Hershensohn, last Friday (Nov. 30) has infuriated Republican loyalists. Hershensohn, a deputy special assistant to Mr. Nixon, ridiculed the U.S. Watergate grand jury indictment of Dwight Chapin, Mr. Nixon's former appointments secretary, on four counts of perjury.

"The nation owes him (Chapin) thanks, not scorn, for the work he did on the President's trip to China and the Soviet Union," Hershensohn told the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce. This attack on a federal grand jury by a White House aide traveling the country on taxpayer money has not helped the President with the rank-and-file of his own party now demanding radical change in the Nixon White House.

The accession of Vice President Ford will loosen Republican tongues from earlier inhibitions against public criticism. Although presidential intimates count only around half a dozen Republicans in the House as willing to vote for impeachment today, that minuscule number may now swell with an heir-apparent ready to take over and a President still tied to coverup.