

# The Republicans Will Have to Hide or Fight Their Leader

By JAMES M. NAUGHTON

WASHINGTON—"Ninety days," said a Congressional Republican in a Capitol Hill cloakroom. "Ninety days, Gerry Ford will be President in 90 days." If minds had fingers, the Congressman's would have been crossed.

The troops are in a mutinous mood because the troops are up for election less than a year from now. For some of them, D-Day could come next spring, if they face strong primary opposition. One third of the Senate and all of the House seats will be contested in 1974, and the deep, growing concern among Republican candidates and campaign strategists is that the central issue will be President Nixon.

The question of Mr. Nixon's incumbency is, not unnaturally, of interest to Gerald R. Ford as well. Barely 18 hours after being sworn in as Vice President, Mr. Ford stared at President Nixon and asked if he intended to resign. The answer, Mr. Ford insisted Friday, was no.

The fear in Republican ranks is rooted in presumptions which may be more political than logical. But the fear exists. One presumption is that the President's "Operation Candor" will not succeed in eliminating doubts caused by gaps on White House tapes or allegations of administration impropriety. Another presumption is that there are still more bombshells yet to burst.

Nothing significant is likely to happen unless generated by the Republicans. And they appear to be pressing simultaneously for three different kinds of potential resolutions:

- *Disclosure.* Some Republicans, such as Senate minority leader Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, are pressing Mr. Nixon to make public virtually every scrap of evidence that might convince skeptics of his integrity.

- When a group of Republican legislative leaders was given an advance look last week at the thick set of summaries detailing the President's personal finances, they strongly urged that he make the tax returns themselves available. Mr. Nixon yielded to the pressure.

- *Impeachment.* Conventional wisdom has a short life span in the capital. Eight weeks ago the standard assessment was that Mr. Nixon's nomination of Mr. Ford, a veteran of 25 years in the House, would give him a potent lobbyist against

any impeachment effort. By last Thursday, when Mr. Ford recited the oath of office as Vice President, the House Judiciary Committee was examining 16 impeachment resolutions, the panel's members seemed agreed that impeachable misconduct could be something less than indictable felonies, and Republicans were talking about how much they would prefer to face the 1974 elections with a President Ford.

- *Resignation.* Republicans with their hearts set on the 1976 Presidential nomination were undaunted by the developments in Washington. Senator Charles Percy of Illinois was raising money, Governor Ronald Reagan of California and former Treasury Secretary John B. Connally of Texas were courting nominating convention supporters, and Governor Rockefeller was said to be preparing to resign his job in Albany to devote full time to pursuit of the bicentennial nomination.

For all that, there was a curiously broad assumption here that the next Republican President after Mr. Nixon would be Gerald Ford and that the 1974 election would be instrumental in his accession. Senator Jacob K. Javits of New York, a candidate for re-election next year, said Watergate was no threat to him but a "crisis" for the party. "Suggestions of a call on the President to resign are near," he said.

Anticipation of a Watergate backlash persuaded John Danforth, a Republican comer, not to seek election to the Senate in Missouri. Representative John B. Anderson abandoned plans last month for a Senate bid in Illinois after a poll showed substantial erosion of Republican gains among middle-income, blue-collar voters. And a respected House Republican official offered this private appraisal: "If Nixon is still President next November, I would say—given some good news between now and then—our losses would range from 25 to 55 seats. If there is bad news, add another 25. If Ford is President, and depending on the timing when that takes place, I doubt we would gain much, but our losses might range from a break-even point to 25."

Mr. Ford stumbled briefly over the words when he took the oath of office last week. He smiled. So did many in the audience. And some, Republicans, clearly hoped Mr. Ford's oath-taking before a joint session of Congress was but a rehearsal for another one next year.