

# Ford's Folly

Two hours before the country got fresh evidence of gross misconduct in the White House—the systematic erasure of Watergate tapes—Vice President Ford chose to describe President Nixon as the victim of “a few extreme partisans” bent on using Watergate to crush him and his policies.

In taking this upside-down view of a crisis that is bleeding the country, Mr. Ford has disappointed many who felt that, while he was a man of neither depth nor imagination, he was at least one of marked goodwill, capable of uniting the nation and restoring its pride and confidence if he himself became President. In this, his first test, he has displayed only the qualities of a pliable politician.

While Mr. Ford was attempting to turn a responsible case for impeachment into a conspiracy by “powerful pressure organizations,” a court-appointed panel of experts was preparing a report indicating that someone in Mr. Nixon’s innermost circle had destroyed legal evidence, a serious crime in itself, without regard to the scandals that may have inspired it. The timing of the attack, apart from its crassness, was singularly maladroit. Had the Ford observations been held off until Judge Sirica’s experts could report on the tapes, they might not have been so glaringly juxtaposed to those of his former Republican colleagues on Capitol Hill—newly aroused by so strong an indication that justice has in fact been wilfully obstructed.

To Representative Anderson of Illinois, that charge “is no longer a theory.” For Representative Railsback of the same state, the newest revelation “shifts the burden back to the President” to prove his innocence. Other Republicans have reacted similarly, with Mr. Ford himself reduced to the inanity that “this is a technical and confusing matter” on which he could offer no opinion.

No less disappointing than Mr. Ford’s failure to measure up to the hopes for him is the ambivalence of Senator Goldwater of Arizona. His own criticisms of the President’s handling of the panoply of scandals opened up by Watergate once led to widespread expectation that Mr. Goldwater would take the lead in urging resignation; yet now the Senator is all for Mr. Nixon’s critics getting “off his back.” He knows of no “direct charges” against the President, and concludes that the whole series of sordid episodes uncovered since Watergate represents no more than the clamor of an “impeachment lobby.”

If the Vice President and the Senator from Arizona are sincere in wanting Congress to speed its consideration of impeachment instead of dragging it out, as they allege, for political advantage, they should not be addressing themselves to fancied pressure blocs outside the Government. The one agency that can speed things up is the White House, which from the start has fought the production of essential evidence on every front and every inch of the way.

The President has only to cooperate fully and candidly with Judge Sirica’s court, with the office of the Special Prosecutor, with the Senate investigating committee and, above all, with the House Judiciary Committee considering his impeachment. His critics will happily get off his back when he lifts the burden of Watergate from the backs of his countrymen.