

Sowing A Bad Seed

NYTimes

By Tom Wicker

After months of cautiously correct political behavior, Gerald R. Ford assumed the offensive for Richard Nixon's team the other day, and promptly found himself in need of a helmet. There are a couple of useful lessons to be learned from his experience.

Mr. Ford chose a convention of the American Farm Bureau Federation to declare that "a few extreme partisans" who were trying to drive Richard Nixon from office were really attacking Mr. Nixon's philosophy and policies, including "individual independence." But Mr. Ford also chose to deliver this speech only an hour or so before the disclosure in Federal court that eighteen minutes of a crucial Watergate tape had been destroyed by five separate erasures.

Mr. Ford's thesis is silly on its face. If anyone has been attacking "individual independence" it has been Mr. Nixon's plumbers with their burglaries and forgeries, and Mr. Nixon himself with his illicit wiretapping and his explicit approval of a so-called national security plan that would have shattered the Fourth Amendment.

It was ludicrous, moreover, for the Vice President to assert that the supposed persecution of Mr. Nixon was led by "super-welfare staters" who would produce "fresh government intervention in our economy, massive new government spending, higher taxes and a more rampant inflation." Does this include Senators Sam Ervin, Herman Talmadge, Howard Baker, Daniel Inouye and Lowell Weicker? Will the real "super-welfare staters" please stand up?

Aside from its inherent faults, however, the Ford thesis, when paired in the headlines with the latest tape disclosure, flopped like Operation Candor. If it was an "extreme partisan" who made five separate erasures on a tape of a Nixon-H. R. Haldeman

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conversation that took place three days after the Watergate break-in, it was obviously an "extreme partisan" of Richard Nixon, not of "super-welfare staters."

Mr. Ford's speech was written by White House writers, and his experience was reminiscent of that of the Republican Governors who met in Memphis last November. Mr. Nixon sped in and out of their conferences,

lingering just long enough to assure the Governors that there were no more "bombshells" forthcoming in the Watergate matter. The Governors glibly rushed to the television cameras to pass along this information — just one day before White House lawyers acknowledged existence of the eighteen-minute gap in the Nixon-Haldeman tape.

The lesson to be drawn from both episodes is that no point is in sight at which the Watergate matter will be "over with" or when Mr. Nixon can "get it behind him." Indictments, pleas, trials, possible convictions, the Senate committee's action and report, the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment inquiry, the Internal Revenue Taxation Committee's study of Mr. Nixon's income tax, the Jaworski investigation, press reports, not to mention self-detonating "bombshells" like the eighteen-minute tape gap and the five erasures — all of these are going to provide a constant boom-boom of headlines and political reverberations as far ahead as anyone can foresee, and certainly through the rest of the Presidential term to which Mr. Nixon was elected last year.

Therefore, people like Mr. Ford and the Republican Governors would be well-advised to adopt what is known in Nixonian jargon as a "low profile." Everytime they open a counteroffensive, or just put in a loyal word for the head man, they are almost sure to find themselves bowled over by another blare of shocking news.

The other and more important lesson is to be drawn from the text of Mr. Ford's Farm Bureau speech; that it may have been rendered temporarily inoperative by fortuitous court testimony about the tape erasures should not obscure its real significance. Coming immediately after Mr. Nixon's decision not to make public any more tapes and documents, it clearly signaled the beginning of what was to have been a major political counter-attack.

The substance of this campaign would have been much as Mr. Ford stated it—that Mr. Nixon was not really being attacked for wrongdoing, but for his political policies and philosophy of government; and that the attack was being led by liberals, radicals, Nixon-haters, the press, "super-welfare staters" and others who were trying to drive him from office for their own selfish political purposes.

The Ford speech backfired due to circumstance, but if Mr. Nixon is forced to resign, there is little doubt that he will himself bequeath precisely its divisive message to the American people, picturing himself on national television as a martyr, the innocent victim of left-wing persecution, a President hounded from office by power-mad elitist liberals.

There already is fertile political ground on which to spread this pernicious seed; if sown by a President who has just renounced his office, and cultivated by those who lost their power with him, its growth could taint American politics for years to come.