

# Ford Convinced Nixon Is Innocent

By Lou Cannon

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Vice President Gerald R. Ford said yesterday that he knows the President is innocent of complicity in the Watergate case because of personal assurances he has received from Mr. Nixon.

White House sources claim that these assurances, conveyed by Mr. Nixon to Ford during an hour and 45-minute meeting Monday, include transcribed portions of a March 21 White House tape. The sources say the partial transcription shows that on that date then-White House counsel John W. Dean III first informed the President of the Watergate coverup.

Ford's proclamation of presidential innocence was the latest attempt by a major Republican figure to counterattack against those who have called for Mr. Nixon's impeachment or resignation. Others who have taken a leading role in the counterattack include Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania and Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona.

Unlike Scott, Ford said at a press conference that he had not actually seen any of the evidence that would supposedly clear Mr. Nixon.

"The President volunteered to show it to me," Ford said. "It was part of our discussion yesterday but I have not had time to see it."

Apparently none of the Republicans who are speaking out in Mr. Nixon's defense have actually heard the tape, which Ford said is now in the hands of the Watergate special prosecutor.

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Bob Hetherington, press secretary for Scott, said yesterday that the senator had not heard the tape but had examined the evidence himself. He said that Scott had looked at the material, apparently a resume and partial transcription, as far back as October and November and since then had seen "additional material."

"Sen Scott, can support the fact that Mr. Dean was advis-

ing the President for the first time on March 21," Hetherington said.

Dean testified before the Senate Watergate committee that he first informed the President of a cover-up involving high White House aides on Sept. 15, 1972. He said he told Mr. Nixon of his (Dean's) personal involvement in the coverup on Feb. 28, 1973.

The President's latest statements to Ford are part of a concerted White House effort to discredit the impeachment

effort pending in the House Judiciary Committee and win the support of wavering Republican loyalists.

Ford last week described the impeachment effort as a "political grudge fight" and the work of "a few extreme partisans." He said yesterday he stood by these statements and that the speech was his own idea, although the draft was prepared by the White House.

One Democratic member of the House Judiciary Committee, Rep. Don Edwards of California, said that contrary to Ford's accusations Democrats had nothing to gain by an impeachment proceeding.

"Politically, it would be far better off for the Democrats if Nixon limped along as President," Edwards said. "Constitutionally and ethically, we can't do that."

Goldwater also said that Republicans will be hurt if Mr. Nixon continues in office. He

said in an interview with Associated Press that he has a private poll showing that Watergate will cause a 10 per cent loss of votes for all Republican candidates this year.

"I want to tell you it's going to be goddamned tough for any Republican to get re-elected, including myself, and I look in pretty good shape," Goldwater said.

The Arizona senator and 1964 GOP presidential nominee said it would not be "good politics" for Republican incumbents to have to run in a Watergate climate with Mr. Nixon still in office.

Even so, said Goldwater, he had seen no evidence indicating that Mr. Nixon should either resign or be impeached. Goldwater said that liberal columnists "are trying to set me up" as President Nixon's political executioner and that he refused to play this role.

A similar description of the role that Goldwater was being asked to play was conveyed to the senator by his old friend and White House counselor Bryce Harlow at a recent meet-

Informed sources said that Harlow discussed the issue with Goldwater shortly before the Arizona senator appeared on a national television program and said he didn't think that Mr. Nixon was "guilty of anything" in connection with Watergate.

Subsequent to that declaration, however, a panel of scientific experts told the U.S.

At his news conference yesterday Ford said that the President was not going to resign and added:

"The President would be very unwise to resign. It would be very wrong of him to do so, particularly since I believe he is not guilty and will be exonerated."

Ford also expressed the opinion that Mr. Nixon was "in good shape, mentally and physically."

The Vice President was asked about the 18½-minute erasure and said he was confident that Mr. Nixon was not involved in it.

"I don't know who was involved," Ford said. "I spent time talking to the President about Watergate yesterday and I know from our conversation that the President had no prior knowledge of the Watergate break-in or had any part of the coverup."