

A Most Reluctant Witness

By Russell Baker

WASHINGTON, Jan. 25— Senator Hugh Scott came out of the White House the other day announcing he had seen evidence which, if made public, would clear President Nixon of all suspicions arising from the scandals called Watergate. After him, Vice President Ford went to the White House and came out announcing that the evidence was there, all right, but that he had not read it. Thanks to a highly placed White House leak, we produce below the minutes of the meeting between President Nixon and Mr. Ford:

The President asked Mr. Ford how he was enjoying the Vice-Presidency. Mr. Ford said there was even less to do than he had always heard. He asked if Mr. Nixon, who had once been Vice President himself, would give him some advice.

The President said he did not have time to advise Vice Presidents, as he was extremely busy putting Watergate behind him and taking bold, new initiatives to give the nation more oil, lower prices, world peace and freedom from impeachment.

Mr. Ford said he only wanted to know whether the Senate would be offended if, while presiding over it, he took the occasion to write some letters. The President said, with great emphasis, that Mr. Ford should never put anything in writing, or on tape.

The Vice President thanked the President for inviting him to the White House. He said he supposed the President wanted to show him where the button was kept, how to conduct Cabinet meetings and how to make all three television networks come across with free prime time. Mr. Ford said he realized he needed such basic training against the possibility that he might

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suddenly become President, and he was prepared to learn.

The President asked Mr. Ford if he was out of his skull or something.

Mr. Ford regretted having suggested that he, Mr. Ford, might succeed to the Presidency. He said he merely wanted to note that Vice Presidents occasionally did undergo such succession.

Mr. Nixon said if the Vice President alluded once more to that subject he would be subjected to a one-hour briefing by Ronald Ziegler and then thrown

out of the White House.

The Vice President expressed gratitude for the many kindnesses the President had shown him.

The President said Mr. Ford could return those kindnesses by looking at some evidence which he, the President, had right there.

Was this, asked Mr. Ford, the same evidence that Senator Scott had seen — evidence which, if made public, would clear the President once and for all?

The President said he wished Mr. Ford would stop wasting time by asking questions and simply look at the evidence.

Mr. Ford asked why he, who was nothing but a miserable Vice President, should look at the evidence. The President said Americans liked Vice Presidents these days. If a Vice President said the evidence showed everything was jim-dandy at the White House, Americans would believe it.

Mr. Ford said he always felt uneasy looking at evidence. Evidence was for judges, lawyers and juries, he said, whereas he was merely a civilian and, what was worse, a Vice President.

The President told Mr. Ford to quit stalling and look at the evidence.

Mr. Ford said, by gosh, what did the President know about that! He, Mr. Ford, had forgotten to bring his eyeglasses.

Using an earthy expression of impatience, Mr. Nixon observed that Mr. Ford's eyeglasses were resting in the breast pocket of his suit.

Mr. Ford said that was true but those particular glasses were not reading glasses. He said he hoped the President would excuse him, but he had just remembered that he had an engagement to preside over the Senate.

The President noted that the Senate was not meeting that day and handed his own reading glasses to Mr. Ford while forcefully urging him to read the evidence.

Mr. Ford protested that he was unworthy to wear the President's reading glasses. This was proven, he said, by the fact that he couldn't see a thing through them.

The President retorted that it was not necessary for Mr. Ford to read every word. A quick glance at the evidence, he said, would suffice to give the Vice President a good basis for assuring the country that the evidence cleared him, Mr. Nixon, of any suspicion arising from this Watergate nonsense.

Mr. Ford said he would really love to glance quickly at the evidence but could not at that moment since Mrs. Ford was waiting for him to drive her to the hairdresser and he had to run. Mr. Ford ran.

The President called loudly for Mr. Ford to come back, and as Mr. Ford left the White House he shouted that he was sorry he had to run like that but he had just remembered a vital appointment with his dentist. The meeting ended with a slamming of doors.