

Jerry Ford: Seeking to Be His Own Man

By Jules Witcover

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Less than two months in office, Vice President Gerald R. Ford is the focus of speculation that has attended most of his predecessors: to what degree is he his own man, and to what degree the President's? . . .

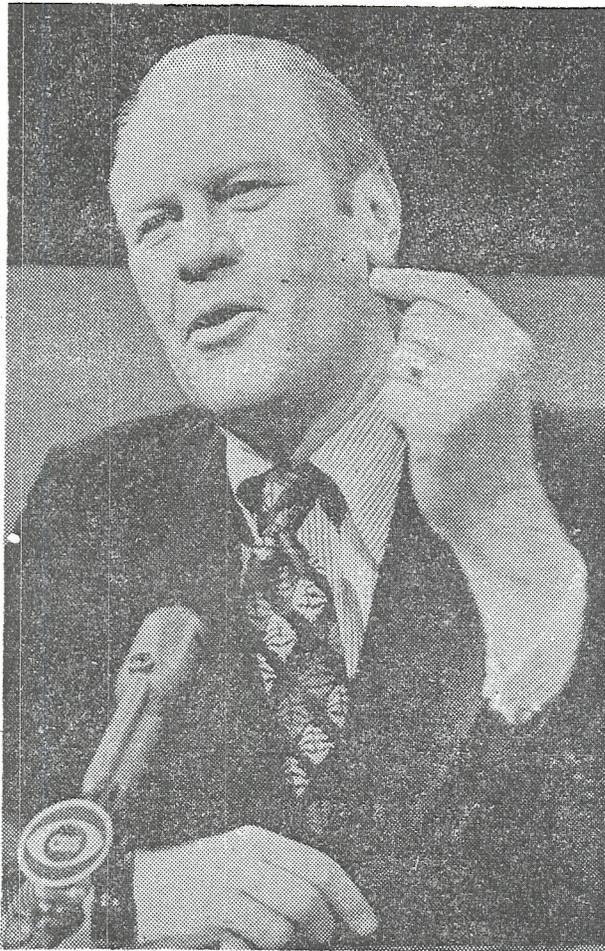
The question is always asked, and it has come relatively early in Ford's tenure in the wake of at least two public statements. In one, he appeared to be going his own way; in the other, to be doing the bidding of Mr. Nixon.

The first came on Jan. 7, when the new Vice President said on NBC's "Meet the Press" that a compromise might be possible between the White House and the Senate Watergate committee over release of about 500 presidential tapes.

The White House immediately disowned the observation by saying Ford was speaking for himself only, and though the disclaimer was softened later, the implication was clear: Ford had climbed out on a limb, and was being left there.

The second statement, this one suggesting White House involvement, was Ford's speech to the American Farm Bureau Federation on Jan. 15 charging President Nixon's critics with "waging a massive propaganda campaign."

He listed the AFL-CIO and Americans for Democratic Action among "powerful pressure organizations" that were out to get Mr. Nixon and accused "activists who are out to impeach the President" with trying to cripple



Associated Press

The Vice President tries to choose his own forums.

him by "dragging out the preliminaries."

The White House at first declined to comment on the speech or any involvement in it, but Ford's office later acknowledged that White House speech writers had worked on it.

An immediate implication was drawn in the press:

Jerry Ford was being "Agnewed"—made into an oratorical blunderbuss by the White House in the manner of his predecessor, Spiro T. Agnew.

Ford's aides said it was not so. The only reason White House speech writers were used, they said, was because Ford had no full time

writers of his own. In most previous speeches he had made as Vice President, they said, White House writers also were used.

Against a backdrop of these incidents, Ford's office is now in the process of hiring two speech writers and a researcher who will work directly for him full time.

One of the new speechwriters is Milton Friedman, who had done some writing for Ford as a member of the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee.

This and other decisions reinforcing the Vice President's own staff have been authorized after conversations between Alexander M. Haig Jr., President Nixon's chief of staff, and Ford's lieutenants.

The upshot, according to administration sources, is that Ford will continue to have a staff that is assigned directly to him, but with budgeting and accounting for its maintenance integrated into the White House system.

The assignment of two speech writers to the Vice President is seen by some as a triumph for his office over attempts by lower-echelon White House bureaucrats to keep the Vice President dependent on the White House pool of writers.

David Gergen, chief of Mr. Nixon's speech-writing team, has confirmed that consideration was given to expanding that team, to meet an increased requirement to write for Ford. But the idea gave way to Ford's decision to hire two of his own writers.

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Gergen said the original idea was simply a matter of accommodating the new workload, and a Ford aide said he saw it as no more than an attempt to save money. "This was a fairly low-level plan within the White House staff," this aide said, "conceived without any nefarious scheme in mind." Integration of speech writers, secretaries and some other personnel with the White House staff "was more for economy," he said, "and this has been a management-oriented administration, as we have learned."

Some economy moves have been made, most notably in the area of air transportation. Air Force Two, the vice presidential Jetstar that had its own air and ground crews standing by at Agnew's pleasure, has been repainted and returned to the presidential wing at Andrews Air Force Base.

The vice presidential seal in the cabin and other special appointments have been removed and the plane is available for all VIP missions. The pilots and ground

crews have returned to the Andrews wing for general duty. From now on, if Ford needs a plane, he will do what other VIPs do. He will have an aide call Andrews, state his requirements, and take what is available.

Ford's aides say he wanted speech writers working directly for him not simply to demonstrate his independence, but to have writers who were compatible with him and with his speaking style.

During Ford's tenure as House Minority Leader, two of his chief aides, Robert T. Hartman, his legislative assistant, and Paul Miltich, his press secretary, wrote the drafts of most of his speeches, reviewing them at length with Ford. Now Hartman is the Vice President's chief of staff and Miltich continues as press secretary with an enlarged responsibility, so neither has been free to write much. Both are expected to review and edit drafts produced by the new writers.

At present, Ford has a staff of 48, including eight at the Senate, slightly smaller than the Agnew staff at its peak. At least a few more persons are to be added and Ford has been told by Haig that his staff can be further enlarged if the Vice President requires more help.

All this suggests a compatible working relationship between the White House and the Vice President after some frictions in the period of transition from Agnew to Ford. Most Agnew aides have left, the most prominent being Brig. Gen. John M. (Mike) Dunn, who served briefly with Ford and is now retiring from the Army and taking a job at the Commerce Department.

During President Nixon's last visit to San Clemente, some White House aides privately expressed criticisms of the new Vice President. Their complaints ranged



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Gerald Ford being introduced as President Nixon's choice to succeed Spiro Agnew.

from inadequate staff work on trips to disenchantment with Ford's concept of how a Vice President should function.

Ford's suggestion of a compromise on the White House tapes particularly rankled some of these aides, because it came on the heels of a decision at the Western White House that there would be none. But Ford did not know that at the time, according to aides. Haig and presidential aide Ronald L. Ziegler both talked to Hartman before the matter was smoothed out.

On the Atlantic City speech, both Ford and White House aides say, the strongly pro-Nixon tone was Ford's own idea, transmitted to the White House speech writers and reviewed by Ford before delivery. Since then, Ziegler, Miltich and

Hartman have met to improve internal communications and coordination, but all parties say the Vice President is free to say what he wants, and that his speeches have not and will not be screened by the White House before delivery.

In addition, White House aides say the President issued explicit orders at the time Ford took office that he was to be kept fully informed, including receipt of daily intelligence reports and press summaries, and to sit in on all National Security Council, Domestic Security Council, Cabinet and other White House-level meetings. In the President's absence, he is called on to chair most of them. This includes specifically the Emergency Energy Action Group.

Unlike Agnew, who was placed in charge of a host of separate committees, most

of which met seldom and did little, Ford has occupied himself mostly with sitting in on White House meetings—learning the job—doing the traditional ceremonial tasks as a presidential stand-in, and speaking. Only a few times has Mr. Nixon specifically asked Ford to substitute for him as a speaker, and aides of the Vice President say he is trying to pick his own forums.

On a personal basis, all those privy to the Oval Office say the new Vice President and the President have maintained cordial relations, with Ford talking to the President daily in person or by phone. On Wednesday, the President gave Ford a personal preview of the State of the Union message.

Within Ford's office, not surprisingly, there is nevertheless a certain wariness. One veteran of Washington

observes that historically Vice Presidents have been either ignored or controlled by their Presidents, and that some subordinates always try to bring the Vice President and his staff structure under control of the President.

At the same time, Vice Presidents always strive for a certain amount of self-sufficiency and independence in deciding where they speak and what they say, and the people around Ford want that for their man too.

Both staffs are well aware that Ford has taken office under unprecedented circumstances, and that in light of the House impeachment inquiry is in a more sensitive position than most of his predecessors a heart-beat away from the Presidency.

In the existing climate, any Ford statement or action that even inadvertently might damage the President will be looked upon with suspicion by some Nixon loyalists. And by the same token, any White House suggestion of what Ford should say or do will be examined similarly by some Ford loyalists.

The history of the relationships between Presidents and their Vice Presidents has never been a particularly joyous one, even without the current complications and tensions. But both the White House and Ford's office seem agreed for now that Ford ought to strive for a happy medium not strictly his own man or the President's, but one who has some independence, though always within a clear framework of loyalty to the President.

But as the President comes under increasing pressure from the House inquiry, loyalty is likely to be regarded at the White House as by far the greater virtue in a Vice President. Hence the period of greatest stress in the relationship probably lies ahead, as Ford is called on increasingly to be what most Vice Presidents, willingly or not, have eventually become—the President's man.