

Ford Indicates He'd Consider '76 GOP Draft

By Jules Witcover

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Vice President Gerald R. Ford, while reiterating that he does not intend to be a candidate for President in 1976, said yesterday he'd have to face the prospect if he were nominated by the next Republican National Convention.

Asked at a luncheon meeting with reporters in the Capitol what he would do if the convention so acted, Ford said:

"That's a hard question to answer . . . If those circumstances develop, which I don't think will happen, then I've got a hard decision to make."

The Vice President repeated that he had no intention of asking any delegate or potential delegate to support his nomination or to talk to any member of the Republican National Committee about the subject, lest "I lose my credibility" as an effective Vice President.

Nevertheless, the statement indicated clearly that Ford has not slammed the door completely on running for President in 1976, if that should be the will of his party, expressed by its official nominating body.

Ford's remarks yesterday came against the backdrop of his speech before Republican Midwestern leaders in Chicago last Saturday in which, in his boldest show of independence from the White House to date, he sharply attacked President Nixon's 1972 re-election campaign committee.

"The political lesson of Watergate," Ford said then to applauding party officials, "is this: Never again must Americans allow an arrogant, elite guard of political adolescents like CREEP [Committee for the Re-election of the President] to bypass the regular party organizations and dictate the terms of a national election."

Yesterday, reminded that President Nixon himself had selected former Attorney Gen-

eral John N. Mitchell to head CREEP, Ford was asked whether he accordingly considered Mr. Nixon responsible.

"I think you have to concede he had the major decision in the appointment of John Mitchell," Ford said.

The Vice President said he had discussed CREEP with Mr. Nixon in "a recent conversation," and told him he assumed the President, busy with foreign policy considerations, had called Mitchell in the spring of 1972 "and said, 'You run the campaign.' He (the President) said, 'That's exactly right.'"

Ford acknowledged that Mitchell was no novice, having also run Mr. Nixon's successful 1968 campaign. But, he said, "he had some other people in 1972 who were not with him in 1968."

Ford also implied that Mitchell had not been any political miracle-worker in 1968, either, when Mr. Nixon barely edged out Democrat Hubert H. Humphrey. "In retrospect the 1968 campaign peaked too early and had some troubles that last week in '68," he said.

Concerning his Chicago speech, Ford said he saw Mr. Nixon at a Republican leadership meeting at the White House yesterday morning and "the President didn't make an adverse comment" about it. He said he didn't think he was in trouble at the White House over the speech, though some people there may not have liked it.

The speech, in which Ford also asked future Republican presidential candidates to "sign in advance on the dotted line that they will not set up outside committees without the party's consent," has already generated "a mountain of mail," he said, requiring a form reply.

Ford made clear that his blast at CREEP was no off-the-cuff remark. "Some people get the mistaken impression that it was a thought that came to us on the plane and we wrote it on the plane," he said. Actu-

ally, he had similarly criticized CREEP in an interview with Henry Brandon of the London Sunday Times published on March 17, he said.

"These were my feelings long before" the Chicago trip, he said. "Frankly, I was looking for a forum where it would do the most good."

While he has been attempting to "show some independence," he said, he also has been trying to demonstrate his continuing support of Mr. Nixon. He cited a later Saturday speech in Clearwater, Fla., in which he said the President is "in excellent health, mentally and physically," has been possible "the best President in history" on foreign policy, has "more pluses than minuses in domestic policy and isn't going to resign."

Asked why he didn't defend Mr. Nixon before his Chicago audience, Ford grinned and said: "I saw where Reagan and Rockefeller took care of that, so I didn't have to."

Ford said he did not clear the Chicago speech with the White House.