

Ford: Neglecting Mr. Nixon's Role in CRP

Vice President Gerald R. Ford's thunderously applauded Chicago speech denouncing the moribund Committee to Reelect the President (Creep) may have sounded new, but it merely repeated a favorite Republican play to cloud over true responsibility for Watergate.

Ford not only absolved the Republican Party of complicity in Watergate but, by implication, also immunized the White House and President Nixon. Moreover, Ford's reasoning was fuzzy enough to bear a delphic quality. Republicans were divided over whether he did or did not intend to criticize the President who elevated him to national office. Thus, Ford at least temporarily solved the problem of separating himself from the President without alienating him.

But to do that Ford had to misrepresent the vital role of the White House in the 1972 campaign and buttress the President's absurd claim of noninvolvement in his reelection.

Ford's speech to last weekend's Midwestern Republican conference was the outgrowth of his political dilemma, a subject of endless private conversation between him and his political advisers. As he has traveled the country defending the President, his soaring popularity of last November has drop-

ped (a net loss of 8 percentage points in a trial heat against Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, according to the Harris poll). How to halt that decline without alienating the Nixon hard core?

The answer, arrived at by Ford himself several days before the Chicago meeting, was scarcely an innovation: Blame it on Creep. That's precisely what Republicans of all stripes, enthusiastically led by national Chairman George Bush, have been doing for months without causing any great stir.

Ford's reiteration of that theme had this predictable result: A roaring response from a thousand Midwestern Republicans (partly, no doubt, because of its Agnewesque rhetoric attacking "an arrogant, elite guard of political adolescents like Creep"). This heaps the blame for Watergate on a defunct organization supposedly manned by youthful nonpoliticians, some of whom may be headed for federal prison.

Thus, Ford joined the horde of Republican politicians who choose to ignore the fact that Creep was no distant relative but an offspring of the White House itself. Anybody close to the 1972 reelection campaign knows that it was totally and tightly controlled by the White House with Charles Colson, one of several senior Nixon aides indicted

in the Watergate conspiracy, emerging as the dominant figure.

At 9:15 each morning, Colson presided over the daily meeting of the "attack group"—a campaign strategy board consisting of both White House and Creep officials—held in Colson's office next door to the President's own retreat. The only challenge to Colson's authority came not from the figureheads across Pennsylvania Avenue at Creep but from White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman.

Ford's attack also implicitly buttresses Mr. Nixon's repeated claim most recently stated in his March 18 Houston appearance, of having had no true part in running his 1972 campaign.

In fact, on Jan. 4, 1971, Mr. Nixon disclaimed responsibility for poor White House staff decisions in the blighted 1970 congressional campaign and, by contrast, bragged things would be different in 1972: "When I am the candidate, I run the campaign."

Sen. Lowell Weicker's compilation of White House logs for the period immediately following the Watergate burglary, late June and all of July in 1972, suggests that Mr. Nixon was true to that 1971 promise. Although the President now claims he was preoccupied with foreign affairs, the logs show

him in frequent and protracted conferences with Colson that summer, compared with infrequent, brief meetings with Dr. Henry Kissinger.

What the logs suggest is fully backed up by veterans of the 1972 campaign. In handing down campaign marching orders, Colson and Haldeman habitually represented themselves as under the direction of the President himself. Nor was there the slightest doubt among either White House or Creep underlings that Mr. Nixon was paying close attention to campaign tactics and strategy.

Furthermore, by declaring that all future Republican presidential campaigns must be run by the regular party organization, Ford is ignoring the political facts of life. An incumbent president always runs his reelection campaign, with or without the party's national committee.

To assert that some exotic disembodied committee of "arrogant, elite" amateurs perpetrated all those evils is an ongoing Republican campaign to separate the party from Watergate without overtly condemning the President and his aides. In publicly joining this effort, the Vice President has further enhanced his stature in the party at least temporarily at the price of endorsing political fantasy.