

Ford's Very Bold Look at Power

By William Safire
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In President Nixon's news summary yesterday morning, the story causing dismay and outrage was a summary of an article in *The New Republic* entitled "Ford's Future," by John Osborne.

Osborne, a shoeleather reporter who has earned his reputation for integrity, prefaces his account with a classic assertion of the "Lindley rule" about nonattribution: "This report is presented solely on my authority, and readers will just have to assume and believe that I haven't made it up out of nothing."

Then Vice President Gerald Ford's innermost thoughts are revealed. As President, he would certainly keep Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and probably fire Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger. He would bring back Treasury Secretary George Shultz, hold on to secretaries Peter Brennan, Rogers Morton, and James Lynn, and perhaps let Secretary of Transportation Claude Brinegar go, Osborne says.

The crowning touch: "The hours that he's had to spend with the President," writes Osborne, "mostly listening to Mr. Nixon talk about this and that, have on a few occasions driven the vice president close to distraction. He's brought himself recently to break off their conversations . . ."

A few diehards might consider it unseemly for the vice president to be confiding his plans for the assumption of power while the body of the sitting President is still warm.

Reached by telephone yesterday the vice president admitted to being the source of most of the story, but added that he thought he was talking off the record. The cabinet changes are "generally my views," he said, but the crack about the presidential conversations distresses him.

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"I get somewhat embarrassed that I'm taking too much of his time," Ford said. "I know he's busy, and I don't want to sit there until he throws me out. That's what I meant, and it was exaggerated considerably."

This episode follows Ford's denunciation of the 1972 Nixon campaign organization as "an arrogant, elite guard of political adolescents."

The purpose of that blast was to remove Republicans, and professional politicians

as a class, from any Watergate taint: Blame the damned "amateurs."

Let us count the reelection committee amateurs: John Mitchell had previously run a national presidential campaign; Fred LaRue had served as Mississippi's Republican national committeeman for six years. Maurice Stans was President Eisenhower's budget director and the most experienced political fundraiser extant.

By trying to tag criminal acts of some individuals to an entire class of political activist Ford called "amateurs," Ford hoped to shore up the self-esteem of elected officials or party leaders. But it will not whitewash.

The blanket condemnation of Mr. Nixon's campaign committee, with its concomitant enshrinement of party wheelhorses as the guardians of virtue, is foolish and dangerous. More than 500 fulltime workers in the Committee to Re-elect the President, including 100 volunteers, who did nothing venal and are accused of nothing, find themselves unfairly stigmatized.

In both his finger-pointing and his predictions of how he would reshuffle the Cabinet and White House, Ford betrays a lack of understanding of the uniqueness of his role: He is the first Vice President in American history whose own actions could help make him President.

He must be at once loyal and independent; both his own man and the President's man; a defender uncorrupted by the defense.

This duality requires more political skill than we have recently seen in Ford; he will miss the brass ring if he grabs at it.

To the press, the Vice President likes to tell about driving past the White House at night and being reminded that "if you worked here, you'd be home already." Good joke; a little levity is not out of place. But in the larger matters of understanding one's own dual responsibilities as heir and not pretender, seemliness is next to godliness.