

The Making of a Republican Leader

DETROIT—Well before Vice President Ford was publicly rebuked by White House Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler last weekend for being the source of a magazine article discussing a possible Ford cabinet, the outlines of a major speech denouncing arrogance of power by a President's White House staff were beginning to take shape in Ford's mind.

Ford is being pressed by political intimates and party leaders to make such an encore to his assault last month on the "arrogant, elite guard of political adolescents" controlling the Committee for the Re-election of the President (CREEP). The CREEP speech, Ford's coming of age as the single most influential Republican politician, attempted to put him on the right side of the Watergate issue without bringing him into direct conflict with President Nixon. As such, it produced only private complaints from the White House staff.

But Ford, newly aware of his unique position at the pinnacle of Republican influence, would cut much closer to the bone by attacking the old Berlin wall of H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. Not once since his two trusted aides left last April 30 has the President permitted himself even a suggestion of criticism. Rather, he has integrated his own defense with theirs.

Moreover, even before Ford's contemplated speech, the White House mood changed. Whereas resentment had previously been directed strictly against Ford's staff for insufficient loyalty to Mr. Nixon, it is now being aimed at the Vice President himself.

But an amplifier was needed to hear the scattered applause when Ford praised Mr. Nixon and declared him "innocent of any of these charges that have been made against him."

The new Ford formula—defend Mr. Nixon himself, while blaming the party's crisis on his old praetorian guard—avoids the major political blunder Ford made in his Atlantic City speech early this year. Ford attempted them to debunk Watergate. He has not repeated that mistake.

The future holds some risks. He will be the party's spearpoint in this year's midterm election, and could be contaminated to the extent his party loses seats in a possible Democratic landslide. But a confident Ford, now wearing elegant suits with slant coat pockets and shirts with detachable soft collars and French cuffs, seems totally unconcerned.

"Ford's CREEP speech marked his coming of age as the single most influential Republican."

The White House was outraged by The New Republic magazine article last week that left no doubt Ford was the source. Ziegler's criticism fully reflected the President's own position.

The Vice President is well aware of all this in planning a new speech. As Republican leader in the House, he was systematically excluded by the Berlin wall. Hence, a warning by him against any future President permitting his inner staff to monopolize power in the Haldeman-Ehrlichman manner is regarded by him as a public duty. But it would also be a political 10-strike.

Thus, Ford has come far since that day in December when he took the oath of office under President Nixon's gaze. No political figure has shot from obscurity to acknowledged presidential heir-apparent so fast, and none with so few inherent political problems ahead.

A symbol of Ford's power position in the Republican Party is the way he can speak out even on such forbidden subjects as changes he would make in the Nixon cabinet if he became President tomorrow. Only the

White House has reprimanded Ford for The New Republic article.

Republican leaders have said nothing. One Southern party leader who consistently defends Mr. Nixon told us that no matter how embarrassing Ford's speculation might be to the President, it "probably helps Ford." Ford has so clearly become the depository of the party's future hopes that even Nixonite stalwarts (outside the White House) hesitate to rebuke him.

This was apparent when Ford stopped off in the Detroit area last week to campaign for two Republican congressmen running for re-election, including an address to one of the largest dinner meetings ever held by the suburban Oakland County Young Republicans.

The applause was deafening when a letter from Sen. Robert Griffin was read stating that "Jerry Ford's service to the nation has just begun." It was thunderous when Rep. William Broomfield of Michigan talked about Ford's "unique ability to bring people together, and that's what we need in this country today."

"That would be a problem," he told us . . . if I were a candidate for President, but I'm not."

Ford's closest political friends don't believe that disclaimer. Moreover, the feud between his staff and Mr. Nixon's adds to the disbelief. Ford's lieutenants correctly perceive him not as the president's right-hand man but as what he has become in just five months; the single most influential Republican in the country.

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Editor's note: In the Monday Evans-Novak column the word "nearly" was inadvertently dropped from a sentence which should have said "not only did nearly all Republicans vote for the subpoena" of the White House tapes by the House Judiciary committee. We regret the error.