



Shrewd Strategy of Vice President Ford

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SO FAR, the overwhelming majority of people have got Gerald Ford all wrong. In the unending private talk and public comment within the political community, discussion of the vice president centers upon two points. First, what will he be like if he becomes President as the result of Mr. Nixon's impeachment by the House of Representatives and conviction by the Senate? And second, what are his real relations with his beleaguered chief, the President, while both wait for the answer to Question Number One?

Both questions may well be wide of the mark, since the President's impeachment and conviction are by no means so likely as is now widely supposed. But the questions must at least be got out of the way. In brief, the vice president is doing everything in his power to avert the President's impeachment and conviction, and he now believes that the President will neither be impeached nor convicted.

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ONE must wait to see whether the main obstacles to openness have really been the President's bitter reluctance to show anyone at all the fairly startling Nixon-in-undress that the tapes reveal plus the President's high sense of prerogative, plus his strong tendency to feel the whole world is his enemy. If these have been the only obstacles, rather than something grave the President must hide at all costs, Richard M. Nixon's impeachment is still less than an even bet.

That is the way the vice president is known from many sources to assess the current odds, at any rate. Furthermore, even if the House produces a bare majori-

ty for a bill of impeachment, it will still be an odds-on bet against the Senate producing the required two-thirds majority to remove the President from office. Being the kind of man he is, therefore, Gerald Ford both hopes and expects to serve out his term as vice president under Richard Nixon, and any sensible person can see that the vice president is governing his behavior accordingly. But on his own quite opposite assumption that the President will serve out his term, what is Gerald Ford now doing about 1976?

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FIRST, anyone who thinks that he is not planning to be a candidate for the Republican nomination is too innocent to be allowed out after dark. Second, the vice president has already showed himself a national politician of far greater stature, with a better sense of strategy and atmosphere, than anyone would have thought a year ago. He has kept apart from Watergate, yet he has been loyal. Third, and finally, it is rather clear that Vice President Ford is already thinking about a quite unexpected kind of pre-convention campaign in 1976. By his position, he is dispensed from the primaries. But simply from the legal inquiries being made by his staff, it can be deduced with certainty that he is already planning to enter the compulsive primaries, like that in Oregon.

These few primaries alone should be enough to prove that with Republican voters, Gerald Ford stands head and shoulders higher — at least at present — than any of his rivals for the Republican nomination. So either way, it may be "President Ford" in the future.