

Ford's Conflicting Obligations

The time is not very far off when Jerry Ford will have to choose between his obligations as Richard Nixon's Vice President and his responsibilities as the likely next President of the United States.

Last Tuesday evening, at a social gathering, Ford grabbed a Southern Republican congressman reported wavering on impeachment and told him, "You can't vote against the President." Last Thursday, he went to the home district of a House Judiciary Committee member and told that man's constituents, "I can say from the bottom of my heart the President of the United States is innocent. He is right."

On Friday and Saturday, in speeches and interviews, Ford said the President's removal would cause "real harm to the country," and claimed that the Judiciary Committee proceedings were "partisan" and a "travesty." The President, he said, "deserves much better" treatment.

He has, in short, done everything that he can do—and more—for the man who has been his friend for a quarter-century, whose policies at home and abroad he ardently supports, and to whom he is indebted for the honor of his present high office.

But Ford is being told by some of his own friends and well-wishers that he must now think of his obligations to his country and himself, and consider:

- That he has no constitutional role whatsoever in the impeachment process and that his effort to intrude in the deliberations of the House and Senate can only cause unnecessary resentment.

- That his rhetoric on behalf of the President has already led him to make loose charges against men and institutions he really does not wish to defame and whose good will and respect are terribly important to him.

- And that his volunteer activities to rally the President's last-ditch supporters may cripple his ability to unite the country, as its new President, when Mr. Nixon falls.

It is that last argument that weighs most heavily among Ford's friends, for there is little doubt in their minds—or almost anyone else's—that he will be President before this year is out.

The size and composition of the Judiciary Committee vote for impeachment makes it virtually certain that Mr. Nixon will be impeached by the House by a margin that approaches or—more likely—exceeds a two-thirds majority.

His hard-core supporters in the Senate are proportionately scarcer than in the House, and the issue of his refusal of evidence will weigh even larger in their minds, during a Senate trial, than it did with their counterparts in the House. The momentum of impeachment appears irreversible.

Ford himself has acknowledged privately his concern at the "trauma" a presidential removal might cause—and the burden of healing he would inherit with the office. Yet unless he makes himself a divisive figure, which he is not today, the conditions for healing might well be present when he takes office.

Watergate and impeachment would be past. The wounds of the Vietnam controversy have begun to heal. The Supreme Court has eased emotions on the busing controversy. And by year's end, the experts say, inflation may have begun to abate.

In this situation, Ford might now want to invoke the injunction that where you have no duty to speak, you have a duty not to speak.

Having amply put his own feelings on the record, Ford might now be guided by the fact that the Constitution denies him even the ceremonial job of presiding over the Senate trial, by taking the gavel from his hands and giving it to the Chief Justice.

His busiest role this summer and fall will be as a Republican Party campaigner, and it does his party no good for him to focus his appeal for GOP congressmen on the impeachment issue. Quite the contrary.

Moreover, the longer Ford stays in the impeachment debate, the more extreme the arguments he is forced to use. He, of all people, knows better than to claim the Judiciary Committee has been engaged in a "partisan travesty." It is the same committee which confirmed him, with only eight dissenting votes, for Vice President, and Ford knows its members—Democrats and Republicans—well enough to know they were not feigning those grave countenances and tremulous voices with which they voted to send the President of the United States to trial.

Ford has told some of those who have been remonstrating with him that he knows there is a point when he must say, publicly, that the case of Richard Nixon is now before the jury of Congress, and it would not be appropriate for him to comment further.

That time is now. As Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.) said Sunday, "the Vice President ought to be preaching unity instead of division." It will be Ford's task to attempt the reconciliation of America after the most divisive experience since the Civil War. Knowing that, he cannot let any obligation stand higher.