

Signs of Presidential Aura Are Seen in Ford's Travels

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SAN DIEGO, July 30 — A deepening sense of inevitability has settled over Vice President Ford's hard-traveling entourage as the impeachment storm gathers in Washington.

Mostly it is unspoken. But the signs are unmistakably there. And occasionally someone voices the conviction that has taken root.

"He is going to be President," a senior staffer said last night of Mr. Ford. "It is inevitable. And he knows it."

Not that the stolid, affable Vice President would acknowledge it as he stumped doggedly from one end of the country to the other, proclaiming his belief in the President's innocence at a high school gymnasium in Muncie, Ind., or at a gilded ballroom in Las Vegas, bestowing his blessing on Republican candidates and quietly enjoying the warm reception of Republicans everywhere who seem starved for something to cheer about.

Impeccable Loyalty

Mr. Ford's demonstration of loyalty has been impeccable. Asked with increasing frequency in the news conferences he holds at almost every stop along his route how he feels about the prospect of being President, he grins sheepishly, as if the thought had never crossed his mind, and says that his only aim is "to do a good job as Vice President."

Whatever his intentions or beliefs, however, Mr. Ford is maintaining a pace much more in tune with a tough personal campaign for national office than with the usual courtesy appearances for party candidates in an off-year election.

In the last six days, for example, he has appeared in Muncie, Chicago, Canton, Ohio, San Francisco, Las Vegas and this Southern California city. Tomorrow, after arriving back in Washington at dawn, he will fly before noon to Worcester, Mass., to play in a pro-amateur golf tournament.

Traveling Man

Next month Mr. Ford is scheduled to spend 23 days on the road, 16 of them in a row at what could be the height of the debate on impeachment before the full House of Representatives.

In the last seven months, as he likes to remind his audiences (with a constant updating of facts and figures), he has visited 38 states and traveled more than 110,000 miles.

In those travels he has spoken out repeatedly for President Nixon. And he also has won the gratitude of vast numbers of Republicans in this troubled year by campaigning for many and by reassuring more that their party will survive the Watergate affair.

In doing so, the Vice President has widened his lead in the latest Harris poll among Republicans and independents to 8 points over Gov. Ronald Reagan of California as their choice for President in 1975. Twenty-three per cent of them chose Mr. Ford in the most recent survey, compared with only 15 per cent who selected Mr. Reagan.

His Own Choices

The Vice President's travels are his own doings, his staff insists, and are not instigated or directed by the White House.

And Mr. Ford said today that, despite the critical actions being voted by the House Judiciary Committee, he had talked with the President only once, "four or five days ago,"

since visiting him at San Clemente about two weeks ago.

Mr. Ford's aides only smile when it is suggested that, since the Vice President is making his own choice on his schedule, he apparently chooses to be far away from Washington while his former colleagues in the House are deciding whether to impeach the President.

Mr. Ford himself reiterates, as he did today at a news conference in a casino near Reno, that he does not intend to "engage in any arm-twisting" in an attempt to influence members of the House on the impeachment question.

"I am not going out affirmatively and aggressively," he added, "and tell them that they ought to vote this way or that way."

However, Mr. Ford noted today that both here and in Nevada, as on most of his other stops across the country, he had the opportunity to talk with Republican Congressmen running for re-election and explained to them why he was convinced the President was not guilty.

Party Obligation

Besides defending the President, Mr. Ford continued, he feels "a very definite obligation to the Republican party and its candidate."

"I'm concerned about the President's impeachment," he said, "but I'm also concerned about the Republican party."

Asked whether he was also using the opportunity to speak throughout the country, as Mr. Nixon did in 1964 and 1966, as a stepping stone to the Republican Presidential nomination in 1976, the Vice President said, as he has before, "I have no intention of being a candidate for any political office in 1976."

Pressed as to whether that meant that he would not run, he said:

"I have no intention of being a candidate. I guess you can translate that into saying I won't run."

In the days before the House Judiciary Committee approved the first article of impeachment by a 27-to-11 vote, Mr. Ford's defense of the President took on a harder note than observers had heard before.

'Partisan Politics'

"Where are the specific charges?" he would ask, echoing a White House argument. The whole affair is "Democratic partisan politics," he contended, sounding little like the man who repeatedly recalls that, during his 25 years in the House he had "adversaries but never enemies."

And in Muncie he brought cheers from a Republican crowd by declaring fervently, "I can say from the bottom of my heart, the President of the United States is innocent and he is right."

"What else can he do?" a staff member asked, explaining that the closer the President came to impeachment, the more loyal the Vice President's stance must be.

But since the first two articles have been approved, Mr. Ford's tone has softened. Lately, he has been saying only that he still believes "the President is innocent of any impeachable offense." And even his most partisan audiences have responded with no more than polite applause.

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