



VICE PRESIDENT FORD
... good soldier image

5-Minute Gap Acknowledged

White House lawyers acknowledged yesterday that more than five minutes of conversation are missing from one of the subpoenaed Watergate tapes that President Nixon surrendered this week.

Details on Page A7.

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Nixon's Heir Apparent Prefers Sidelines Now

By Jules Witcover

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ABOARD AIR FORCE TWO—The man who many Americans now expect will be the next President of the United States sat placidly in shirtsleeves, puffing on his pipe, in the early hours of yesterday morning. His plane was bringing him from California toward Washington shortly after the House Judiciary Committee had voted a third article of impeachment against President Nixon.

Throughout those historic committee deliberations, Vice President Gerald R. Ford had been out in the country ostensibly campaigning for Republican candidates and holding the Republican Party's limp hand. But it had looked suspiciously as if he was staying out of Washington intentionally, to avoid personal commitment to the anti-impeachment fight on Capitol Hill, where his connections are impeccable.

That suspicion was compounded by Ford's schedule for the month of August, when the full House will debate and decide on impeachment. He will be out of Washington at least 22 days, mostly in the West, and as far away as Hawaii.

"I know it looks that way," he said, with the barest smile. "But these events were scheduled long before we knew what the House timetable would be." Having said that, however, the man who would be the prime political beneficiary of Mr. Nixon's impeachment and conviction did not attempt to veil his preference to be on the sidelines at this critical time.

The Vice President remains reluctant to talk about the growing likelihood—generated by the judgment of his old House colleagues—that national leadership may soon pass to him. But it is no longer pos-

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FORD, From A1

sible for him to say with any candor what he had been saying—that he does not, do much thinking about it.

The truth is that Jerry Ford cannot help thinking about it. He knows that the presidency is moving toward him in a seemingly inexorable flow of events. The trappings already are all about him. The Secret Service seems especially vigilant; an ever-expanding press corps is ever more demanding of answers from him not only on his role in the impeachment drama but beyond; local politicians press to meet him, wish him well, offer their help if—or increasingly—when.

As if to keep the cup from his own lips as long as possible, he is a man on the move, yet t man still in the grip of his loyalty to the individual who personally placed him on the threshold of the presidency, Richard M. Nixon. That loyalty and, he says, his own clinging belief that the President is innocent “of any impeachable offense”—the modifier is pregnant with the limits of that belief—require him to speak out in Mr. Nixon’s defense.

It is a decision that has brought criticism from foes, who doubt his sincerity, and from friends, who doubt his wisdom. The foe say he is ignoring overwhelming evidence, his friends say he is sacrificing his credibility, even his integrity, in an unnecessary gesture toward a doomed man.

Why does he do it? Why does he risk tarnishing the favorable bipartisan attitude toward him not only by siding with the unpopular President but by attacking some of his Democratic accusers, at precisely the time they are being lavdgo for their fairness and decorum? Why doesn’t he just go about his business and keep his mouth shut?

First of all, the Vice President says, the President has told him he is innocent of



United Press International

Ford, right, and House Majority Leader O'Neill chat while playing in the Pro-Am event preceding the Pleasant Valley Golf Tournament in Sutton, Mass.

the charges against him and he, Ford, does sincerely believe that the Judiciary Committee has not made a sufficient case against Mr. Nixon. He does not kid himself about the realities of the House action so far, or the increasingly gloomy prospects for the President. But one senses a personal sympathy, even compassion toward Mr. Nixon that transcends Ford's best political self-interest.

A strong sense of the good soldier courses through Jerry Ford. It is seen in his tireless gallivanting to boring party functions, marked always by his exhortations to the faithful not to lose their faith, in party and country. It is the good soldier in him that leads him to speak out in the President's defense—especially in districts where the local Republican congressman—such as Rep. David Towell in Las Vegas Monday night—may be uncertain on impeachment.

And it is the human being, with a capacity for being hurt while seeming to absorb all blows, that leads Jerry Ford to lash out at certain Democratic accusers of Mr. Nixon on the House Judiciary Committee. He has singled out the eight who voted against his own confirmation as Vice President, a key aide says, "because they really hurt him; because he really believes they opposed him out of pure partisanship, not on the facts."

"Sometimes," this aide says, "politicians don't do the smart thing, even when they know what it is. Sometimes they just do what they want to do, or what they feel they have to do."

The Vice President is not willing to discuss the details of his conversations with the President, except to say that the course of the Vice President is being charted by himself, and he is making the determination about how best to express his support of Mr. Nixon.

That determination includes speaking out around the country for as long as he can do so out of personal belief in the President's innocence. At the same time, it is clear that the Vice President is aware that the progression of events—House impeachment and the advent of a Senate trial—

where silence may be prudent. For all his loyalty to Mr. Nixon, he is not without a sharp awareness of the political imperatives of his own unique position as the man who might soon be President at a time requiring a healing hand.

One of the byproducts of his outspoken support of the President is that it is now expected whenever he speaks. If he should suddenly fall silent, or sidestep, an interpretation in the press that he no longer believed the President would be inevitable.

For this reason, a Ford aide says, the Vice President much more than Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.), the voice and heart of the old-line GOP conservatives, holds Richard Nixon's chances of survival in his hands.

The Vice President is well aware of the central role he has now assumed, not only as the heir-apparent at the time the king's crown is toppling, but in the party, and in Congress, and in the country at large. And he is trying to take first things first, calmly for all the frenzy that his harried campaign schedule conveys.

First on Ford's agenda, as so often in the past, is the party. He is traveling now not so much to stay away from the impeachment intrigue as to rally Republican forces against what he sees as a critical off-year election. In private as on the stump, he deplores the Democratic drive for a "veto-proof Congress" and says he is concerned the country will take a turn toward more spending and even more inflation if the Republican don't held the line in November.

His travels also give him an opportunity to do some quiet lobbying for the President on impeachment with Republican congressmen who accompany him on the plane to and from their districts. "I don't have to bring it up," he says. "They ask may bring him to a point me, and it's better that way."

Ford acknowledges that he is extremely sensitive to the feeling among his old House colleagues that their impeachment vote is highly important and individual to them, that they want to vote

their consciences free of pressure, even from an old friend like Jerry Ford. For that reason, he says, cloak-room butter-holing on this issue would be not only uncomfortable for both parties, but of limited effectiveness.

"I am not going out as I used to when I was minority leader and affirmatively and aggressively try to convince them that they ought to vote this way or that way," the Vice President told a press conference in Reno Tuesday. "I think this is a different situation and I intend to, when the proper opportunity arises, discuss with members of Congress, both Republicans and Democrats, my views and why I hold them."

It is difficult to see now, however, as impeachment becomes more a crunch issue for all House members, when that "proper opportunity" will come. So Ford puts his message out on the national airwaves, in print and on network television, and tries to stand clear of the fallout.

The Vice President's public defense of the President around the country is not the only source of criticism of him. The fact alone that he is traveling so much, when history appears to be closing in on him with the most burdensome office the country can bestow, leads inevitably to the question: How is he preparing himself?

Aboard Air Force Two—the official designation for any plane the Vice President uses—Jerry Ford is hardly the picture of the crashing student. He sits casually in his forward cabin, with aides Robert Hartmann, his chief of staff; Paul Miltich, his press secretary, and Bob Blake, his military aide, around him at a table. They chat idly as he autographs pictures, peruses the local papers or reads memos prepared for him on vice presidential activities.

There are on the table no books on the presidency, or on the burning domestic and global problems of the day. No heady theoreticians are aboard to brainstorm him on these and other subjects that may before long become his responsibility.

The Vice President is not a fiction reader, and much of his reading is given over to dry papers of government. He tries to set aside a

few minutes reading time at bedtime and before rising, he says, and often has Republican economists prepare him papers for his study. But he is a man too much on the move to bone up for the Presidency in that fashion.

Nor does he agree that now is the time for him to go off on a mountaintop to contemplate the terrible responsibilities awaiting him just the other side of Mr. Nixon's Senate trial. The party work, aiming toward the November elections, must come first, he says. Beyond that, he is determined to say or do nothing that will contribute to the President's dilemma or anticipate an outcome he insists he does not believe will result from that dilemma.

All is not altruism, of course, in Ford's chartered course for the summer and fall. A surviving Republican Party is much in his personal interest, as is general public perception of him as a loyal man, a fair man, and man with basic belief in the country and its people. He would be the first President not elected to any office by a nationwide constituency, and he is now reaching out to that constituency.

Thus his missionary work across the land while Washington seethes with Watergate and impeachment is altogether self-serving, aside from his defense of the President. Everywhere—Muncie, Chicago, Canton, San Francisco, Las Vegas, Reno, San Diego in the last week—he extolls the virtues of the America beyond the embattled Potomac.

It is a convenient posture, of course, to say in Middle America that Washington has gone mad. The applause Ford gets everywhere to suggestions that the Federal City is another world underlines that political fact.

So, in the coming weeks, while the House in which he has had 25 years of experience and friendships weigh the fate of Richard Nixon, Jerry Ford will be out among "the people who believe in America." It is his selected way of serving the President and his own conscience and interests in this critical period and—in his own Middle American way—of getting ready for what destiny may bring.