

# Ford: A Time for Independence?

Vice President Gerald Ford has launched his trenchant new defense of President Nixon to avoid political reprisal from the pro-Nixon Republican hardcore, undercutting him with Republican moderates—including staunch friends in the House.

Ford's thesis, spelled out to aides repeatedly, is that he must not risk a trace of a fingerprint on the impeachment dagger to insure that the Republican right wing will not turn on him.

As Republicans and voters of all persuasions join the pro-impeachment ranks, intimates say Ford is convinced their resentment will disappear if, in the end, he is catapulted into the White House. That is in the future. For the present at least, even old Republican friends are expressing doubts about the Vice President's political judgment in handling a delicate and unprecedented situation.

In fact, the Vice President has been subjected to quiet pressure from his own staff not to tie himself to Mr. Nixon.

Just as the House Judiciary Committee began its formal impeachment investigation, a Ford aide drafted a speech for the Vice President to get him off the hook. The thrust of that never-delivered speech: now that the House is considering the evidence, it would be injudicious for Ford to express an opinion since such evidence is not available to him; he had faith in the President but would refuse *ex parte* judgments.

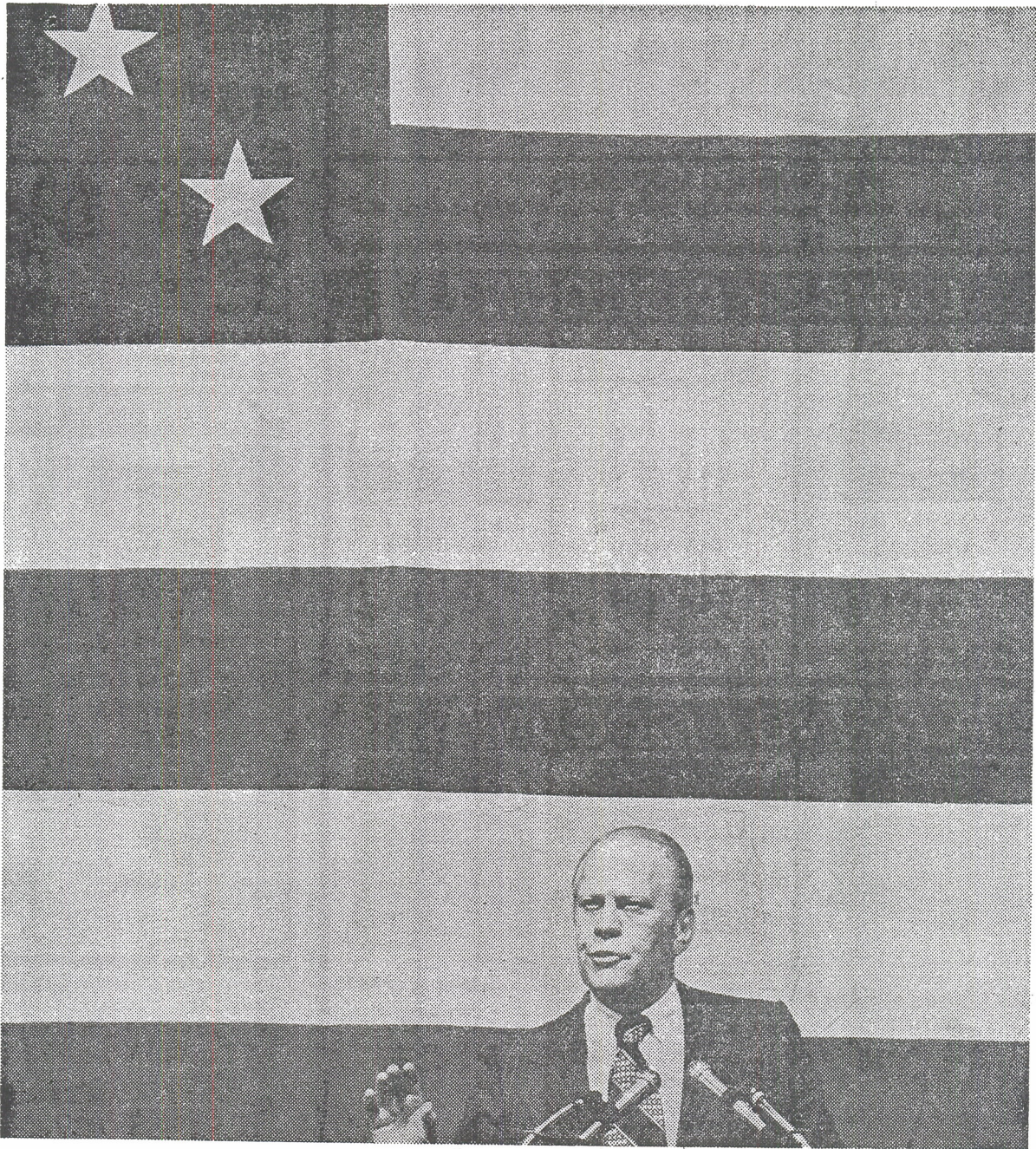
Ford threw the speech away, to the dismay of staff aides anxious to preserve Ford's credibility and popularity.

Ford's political lieutenants say he has no intention today of modifying his loyalist defense of the man who made him Vice President. He still lobbies quietly, urging House Republicans to give Mr. Nixon the benefit of every doubt (but avoiding arm twisting).

His top assistants have been dismayed by the escalation of Ford's public defense of the President while other Republicans abandon the sinking presidential ship. That new intensity began July 25 in Muncie, Ind., in his speech for Rep. David Dennis, a Nixon defender on the Judiciary Committee facing re-election troubles—a speech viewed by some Ford intimates as a disaster.

Outside pressure for a change of course is on the rise. There is almost as much gossip in the House Republican cloakroom over Ford's repeated declarations of Mr. Nixon's total "innocence" as over impeachment itself. The criticism comes not only from pro-impeachment Republicans but from fence-sitters and Nixon loyalists deeply worried that Ford is frittering away his gilt-edged asset of national popularity by blatant catering to the dwindling Nixon hardcore.

"We all want Jerry to shut up and stay that way," one of his longtime friends in the House told us. "He is the hope of the party and of the country for 1976."



By Frank Johnston—The Washington Post

What gives that critical comment special force is the fact that it comes from one of the elected House Republican leaders, a Ford-style Republican who himself is uncommitted.

Another member of the House Republican leadership holds similar views. Ford, he says privately, is wasting his unique political assets both within his party and in the country at large by asserting Mr. Nixon's innocence in the face of overwhelming House Judiciary Committee votes declaring him guilty of impeachable acts.

Ford is being strongly advised not to overestimate the pro-Nixon hardcore, particularly with the defections of such conservatives as Maryland's Rep.

Lawrence J. Hogan and Virginia's Caldwell Butler. The Hogans and the Butlers, they believe, are vastly more important than the handful of ultra-Nixonites who have written the Vice President scathing letters for having said that a vote for impeachment will not keep him from campaigning on behalf of a Republican congressman.

But Ford seems oblivious. Concentrating in his cross-country speaking tours on Stone Age Republican audiences who roar their approval of his defense of Mr. Nixon, Ford seems out of touch with the trend among House Republicans now threatening the President with a massive impeachment defeat.

That could leave Ford a hero with

the so-called hardcore but a villain—at least momentarily—with the rest of the country. More uncomfortably for Ford, he would be on the wrong side of the fence from every Republican in Congress who ends up voting not that "the President of the United States is right," as Ford proclaimed in Muncie, but that he is very wrong.

Having spoken out loudly for Mr. Nixon when other Republican leaders were silent, Ford has more than paid his dues. Now, his friends believe, is the time to avoid getting trapped on the wrong side of the fence, not by turning against the President, but by simply deciding to "shut up and stay that way."

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