

The Reluctant Heir-

By Jules Witcover
Washington Post

Aboard Air Force Two

The man who many Americans now expect will be the next President of the United States sat placidly in shirt-sleeves, puffing on his pipe, in the early hours of the 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 this month, 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 barkest smile. "But these events were scheduled long before he knew what the House timetable would be." Having said that, however, the man who would be the prime political beneficiary of 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 that national leadership may

soon pass to him. But it is no longer possible for him to say with any candor what he had been saying — that he does not do much thinking about it.

In fact, 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.

Why does he do it?

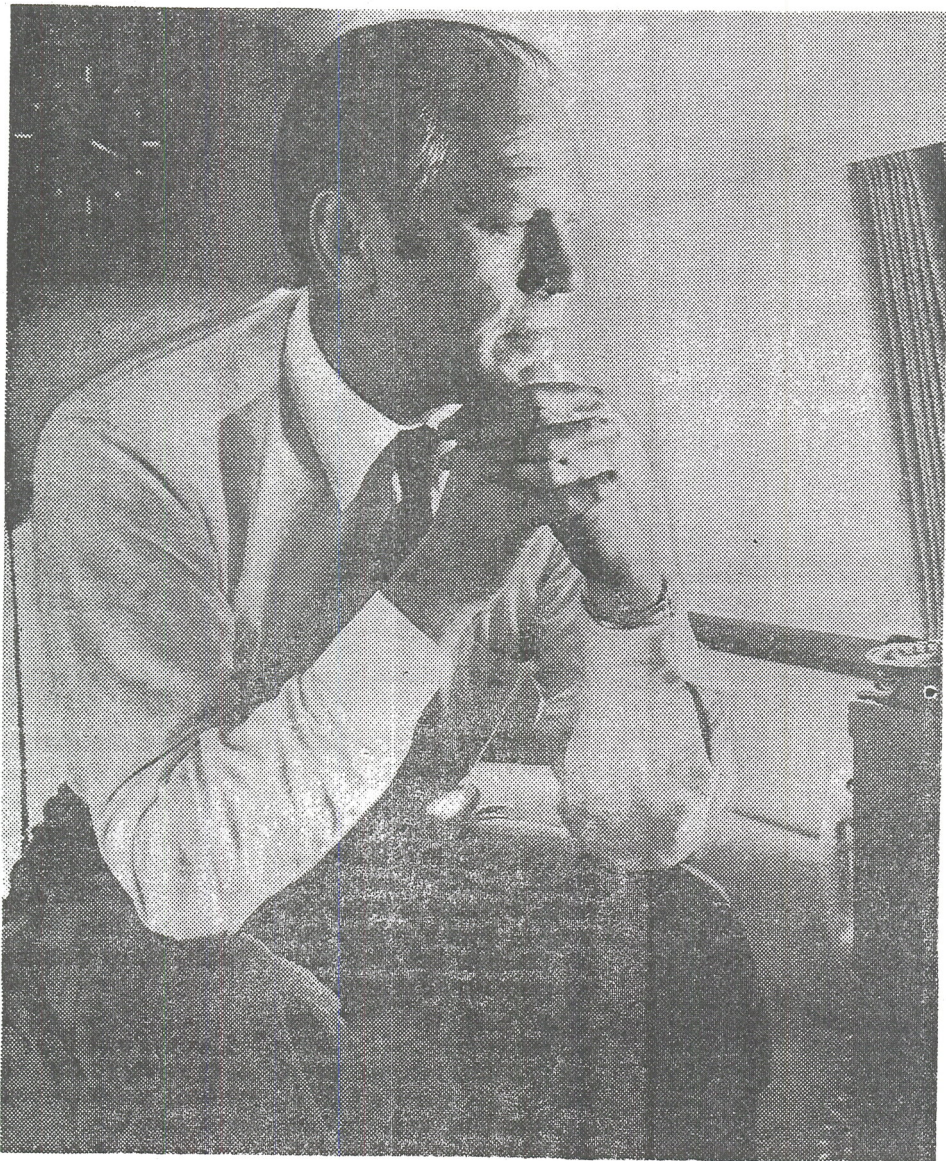
First of all, the vice president says, the President has told him he is innocent of the charges against him and he, Ford, does sincerely believe that the Judiciary Committee has not made a sufficient case against Nixon.

A strong sense of the good soldier courses through Jerry Ford. It is seen in his tireless gallivanting to boring party functions, and it leads him to speak out in the President's defense, especially in districts where the local Republican congressman may be uncertain on impeachment.

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 Senator Barry Goldwater (Rep.-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



N. Y. Times photo

Vice President Ford is spending a good deal of time in planes these days, far from the impeachment proceedings in Washington

Apparent

as the heir-apparent, 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 frenetics that his harried campaign schedule conveys.

First on Ford's agenda, as so often in the past, is the party. In his travels, he is trying to rally Republican forces.

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, 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.

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 a general public perception of him as a loyal man, a fair man, a man with a basic belief in the country and its people.

Thus his missionary work across the land while Washington seethes is altogether self-serving, aside from his defense of the President. Everywhere he extolls the



AP Wirephoto

Ford's sympathy for and loyalty to President Nixon transcend political self-interest

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. In going to Middle America and the west with his pleas for salvaging the Republican Party — and the Nixon Presidency — he may indeed be spending his time more profitably than staying in Washington cornering friends on the Hill who don't want to be cornered.

So, while the House in which he has had 25 years experience and friendship weighs the fate of Richard

Nixon, Jerry Ford will be out among "the people who believe in America."