

Ford Says He Intends to Bow

By Jules Whitcover
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Vice President Ford announced last night that he intends to bow out of the impeachment debate, and while standing by his statement that he believes Mr. Nixon is innocent, will stop repeating it.

"I have come to the conclusion that the public interest is no longer served," Ford said, "by repetition of my previously expressed belief that on the basis of all the evidence known to me and to the American people the President is not guilty of an impeachable offense under the constitutional definition of 'treason, bribery or other high crimes and misdemeanors.'

"Inasmuch as additional evidence is about to be forthcoming from the President, which he says may be damaging, I intend to respectfully decline to discuss impeachment matters in public or

in response to questions until the facts are more fully available . . ."

The Ford statement apparently was prepared before Mr. Nixon's release of new edited transcripts, although it was released later.

Because the vice presidency was vacant in 1868 when President Andrew Johnson was impeached, Ford noted, "there are no precedents to guide me except my own common sense and my conscience. Both tell me to let my widely known views on the impeachment issue stand until I have reason to change them and to refuse further comment at this time."

Ford had been under increasing criticism from both Republicans and Democrats for repeatedly proclaiming the President's innocence and for his attacks on some Democrats who voted for articles of impeachment in the House Judiciary Committee.

On a weekend swing through Mississippi and into Louisiana from which

he returned yesterday afternoon, the Vice President had stopped volunteering the controversial statement but reaffirmed his belief in Mr. Nixon's innocence on two occasions when asked about it.

He said at a press conference in New Orleans Saturday night that he had not yet made a decision to refrain

Commentary

from continued repetitions of support but was considering a statement on what posture he would take.

The Vice President said last night he decided to release his statement after White House chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr. informed him, shortly after Ford returned to Washington, of the thrust of what the President planned to say.

On his return from New Orleans in Air Force Two, Ford reported, his mili-

Out of Impeachment Debate

tary aide, Col. Jack Walker, had been informed in an airborne call from the White House that the President was going to be issuing "a significant statement." When Ford reached his Executive Office Building office, there was a message to call Haig — shortly before Mr. Nixon's statement was made public.

Until then, the Vice President apparently was kept in the dark about the President's plans, and specifically about the substance of Sunday's Camp David impeachment strategy conference on which his own future as well as the President's appeared to hinge.

Ford, through aides, reported on his way back from New Orleans aboard Air Force Two that he had received no communication from the President, his chief of staff, Alexander M. Haig Jr., or any other White House aide about the Sunday meeting. Nor was any briefing scheduled or requested, they said.

Thus a man intimately involved in the impeachment drama—and a man publicly and outspokenly committed to the President's defense—appeared to have no special line into the inner councils of that defense.

Further, the Vice President said at a New Orleans press conference Saturday that it had been 10 days since he had spoken to the President, during a visit to San Clemente.

The Vice President's new policy of not volunteering expressions of belief in Mr. Nixon's innocence unless asked indicated a more cautious and prudent posture in the wake of the criticism that came his way last week from those who say he should fall silent to preserve his potential role as unifier.

On two occasions Saturday, he did pointedly reaffirm his earlier expressions of belief—once in response to a question from a pro-Nixon Mississippi Republican leader at a party luncheon

in Jackson and later when asked at his New Orleans press conference.

But yesterday in a morning speech to the national convention of the Disabled American Veterans, Ford again volunteered no reference whatever to the President's impeachment troubles.

His only mention of Mr. Nixon was to praise his foreign policy achievements, including successful mediation in the Middle East last fall, as he has been doing at all stops as he crisscrosses the country.

When Ford concluded, the DAV national commander, John Soyve of Detroit, said: "Thank you, Mr. President," and then corrected himself to "Mr Vice President." The audience erupted in cheers and applause, and Soyve added: "I don't have any first-hand information." Ford appeared not to have caught the slip of the tongue, but even when he does acknowledge such references to his possible future role, he simply smiles benignly or deadpans it.