

'Scenario' for the Change

Secret Planning of Ford's Succession

Advisers Met Early On Details

Washington

Planning for the orderly elevation of Gerald R. Ford to the presidency began months before President Nixon decided to resign.

The preparations were kept secret from Mr. Nixon. And, at first, from Mr. Ford.

The transition plans were initiated by Mr. Ford's closest friend, Philip W. Buchen, who became convinced in early May that events would force an untimely end to the term of the 37th president and a hurried beginning for the 38th.

A "scenario" for the first days of the Ford administration was drafted with reluctance in June at a dining room table in Georgetown by Mr. Nixon's adviser on telecommunications policy, Clay T. Whitehead, and three other young men, one of them an avid Democrat.

And the details of the change in government were settled 36 hours before the event, by an assortment of political and corporate friends of Mr. Ford who met in the paneled family room at the home of William G. Whyte, a Washington-based vice president of the United States Steel Corp.

Behind the stunning events of August 9 — the terse letter of resignation of President Nixon, the succinct swearing in of President Ford — was an intriguing effort to use the traumatic occasion to offer reassurance and calm to the nation.

Much of what has taken place in the 16 days of the Ford administration was a direct consequence of the unusual planning for his unorthodox accession: The tone of his first address, his pledge to consider conditional amnesty for Vietnam-era draft resisters, his meetings with black and women members of Congress, his jour-



NIXON ADVISER CLAY T. WHITEHEAD
He and three others drafted the 'scenario'

From Page 1

neys to Capitol Hill and to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare — all were recommended by transition advisers to capitalize on Mr. Ford's instinctive goals of uniting the country and leading it in partnership with Congress and the cabinet.

Even the disclosure of the clandestine planning for the Ford presidency, in interviews with key figures over the last few days, was in marked, and perhaps deliberate, contrast with the secretiveness of the previous administration.

★ ★ ★

Here is how it happened:

The questions on May 11 could have been anticipated.

Two days earlier the House Judiciary Committee had begun formal hearings on the impeachment of Mr. Nixon. A day earlier, Mr. Nixon had called in Vice President Ford and encouraged him to slow down the pace of his travel and, by inference, the number of occasions around the country for Ford to discuss the Watergate scandals.

Even so, when Mr. Ford

met with reporters on May 11 in Dallas he was confident of his answers.

Had there been any conversation with Mr. Nixon at any time about transfer of power if that should occur?

"None whatsoever," Mr. Ford replied firmly.

Or on the part of your staff? Is anyone working on that?

"None whatsoever," Mr. Ford repeated. "I understand that there was a story in the Knight newspapers, by Saul Friedman, that somebody on my staff was working on something like that. If they are, they are doing it without my knowledge and without my consent."

Friedman, it turned out, had been right.

So, in a way, had Mr. Ford. The planning had begun, all right, and it had been prompted by Mr. Ford's close friend, his old law partner from Grand Rapids, Mich., Buchen.

But Buchen was not, technically, on the vice president's staff. He was the director of a Nixon administration study on the right of citizens to privacy, working for an interagency committee chaired by Mr. Ford.

More important, although Buchen was the closest thing to a confidant of the vice president, Buchen had decided not to tell Mr. Ford what he was up to.

★ ★ ★

A few days before the Dallas news conference, Buchen walked the short distance down the hall from his suite in the executive office building to the Office of Telecommunications Policy to see Clay T. (Tom) Whitehead. Buchen was troubled.

"Tom," he said, "Jerry needs some kind of planning under way. The President may resign before or after he's impeached. We've got to do some kind of contingency planning."

There were other fears which Buchen—now the White House legal counsel—recalled last week, he had not put into words.

Mr. Nixon was preparing a somewhat perilous diplomatic journey to the Middle East. There had been speculation about the President's health.

"I wasn't trying to judge the President (on Watergate), Buchen said. "But you could hypothesize illness or something might happen. It was just that, in the usual sense, the vice president is expected — like Lyndon Johnson — to carry on the traditions of the man he succeeded. But this was probably a unique situation. If

(Mr. Nixon) went to the Middle East and something happened, it wouldn't just be a case of stepping in and saying, "Well, boys, carry on."

So he turned to Whitehead, at 35 one of the young veterans of the Nixon White House.

In 1969, Buchen remembered, Whitehead had served on the staff that

guided the more normal transition from the Johnson administration to the Nixon administration.

Their adjacent offices would make it easy for the two men to confer without raising eyebrows. Besides, Whitehead was one of the few Nixon aides Buchen knew well — and thought he could trust with a large secret.

"I really didn't want to do it," Whitehead said of the overture the other day. "I felt it would be fundamentally wrong for the President to be hounded out of office." Later, after Mr. Nixon made public edited White House transcripts that showed he had sought to block the Watergate investigation in June, 1972, Whitehead would reflect that resignation was appropriate. But last May, like others who wanted desperately to believe in Mr. Nixon, he flinched at the suggestion that the end of what Mr. Nixon had grandiloquently called "the new American revolution" was a possibility.

Buchen insisted. "Somebody has to do it," he told Whitehead. Reluctantly, Whitehead agreed.

The need for secrecy was evident.

Mr. Nixon kept insisting that he would never resign.

It would not do to have preparations for his resignation linked, even in the White House gossip, to Mr. Ford. And Mr. Ford had been as adamant in private as he was in public about insisting that he would do nothing to display lack of confidence that Mr. Nixon would weather Watergate.

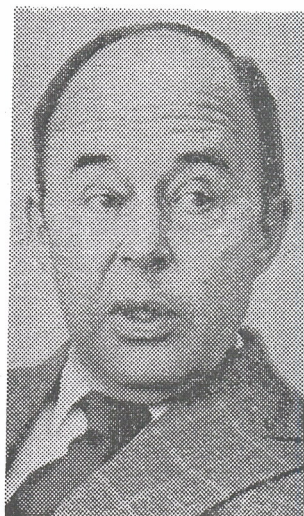
"It wasn't because we felt we were subversive," Buchen said in an interview. "Why put him" — Mr. Ford — "on the spot? If he'd asked me, I would have told him. He never asked me."

Indeed, when Mr. Ford declared on May 11 that any transition planning would be without his knowledge and without his consent, Buchen and Whitehead reaffirmed their intentions.

"We decided the statement was an implicit one,"



WILLIAM SCRANTON
Ex-governor



BRYCE HARLOW
Presidential aide



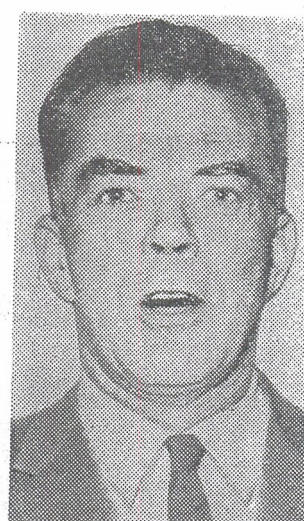
WILLIAM WHYTE
His home was used



JERALD TERHORST
Press secretary



ROBERT GRIFFIN
He was invited



JOHN BYRNES
Ex-representative

said Whitehead: The vice president "hoped somebody was doing it, but he didn't want to know about it."

★ ★ ★

The first problem was to devise a way to keep the venture confidential.

Whitehead decided that any meetings should be held away from the White House. The handiest spot would be his home, an old townhouse in nearby Georgetown, on a corner of 28th and N Streets N.W., across from a synagogue.

It would not do to involve other administration figures, increasing the risk of disclosure. Whitehead sought the advice of three acquaint-

ances, all in their 30's, who were versed in, but not currently a part of, the government.

To this day, Whitehead will not identify the three.

He acknowledges, with a rueful grin, however, that one was a staunch democrat, who "had a rough time when we would sit around and discuss things that Ford could do to strengthen the party" — the Republican party.

During the early summer,

the transition cadre — Buchen, Whitehead and the other three — met four times, usually in late afternoon, at the townhouse. They sat around a circular dining table, coats off, sipping soft drinks in a vain attempt to combat the heat in the un-airconditioned dining room. The room was below grade; through a high window they could see the ankles of passers-by. One member smoked cigars, two had pipes. "It was not a smoke-filled room," Whitehead said wryly.

His wife, Margaret, dubbed the group "The Ford Foundation."

Their discussions ranged widely from the obvious (a ceremony for the assumption of office) to the mechanical (the need for a small transition team to orient Mr. Ford to the White House and vice versa) to the sublime (themes and principles that might be enunciated at the outset of a new administration).

"It was like having a study group meet to discuss policy with Russia," Buchen said later.

"We were not so much planning that Ford become President," Whitehead recalled. "In fact, I hoped he

wouldn't become President, for obvious reasons, particularly in the beginning. But it was only prudent, since the man might become President on very short notice, it was only prudent to develop some material in case he did."

With that in mind, Whitehead drafted a checklist of plans for an orderly transition of power from Mr. Nixon to Mr. Ford. It was something that could be considered immediately in the event the presidency was passed to Mr. Ford overnight.

★ ★ ★

The "thing," as Buchen called it, came up on Tuesday, August 6, eight months from the day Ford became vice president.

The previous day, Monday, Mr. Nixon had made public transcripts of his White House conversations about Watergate on June 23, 1972, and they showed him to be an early, active participant in a coverup attempt.

His defense against impeachment lay shattered on the outraged reaction on Capitol Hill. Mr. Nixon told

his cabinet, and Mr. Ford, that Tuesday that he would not resign. The words sounded hollow.

At 10:30 that night, Buchen tracked down Whitehead in a hurry. Whitehead, coincidentally, had given notice that he would resign shortly to resume a private career. He was preparing to leave Washington to join Mrs. Whitehead on a campaign trip to Aspen, Colo. The vacation trip was aborted from the telephone call from Buchen. He told Whitehead that Mr. Ford had just been alerted, presumably by White House aides, that "the word is, within 72 hours he could be President."

That meant, Buchen quipped, that they would have to do the detail work that Theodore H. White, the author who had chronicled each of the presidential election campaigns since 1960, might describe in a new book entitled, "The Making of the President in 72 hours."

Actually, as it turned out, they had only a little more than 61 hours before Mr. Ford would raise his right hand on August 9 to recite the presidential oath of office specified by the Constitution.

★ ★ ★

The making of the President began in earnest on Wednesday, August 7. Whitehead, clad in cowboy attire — denim and boots —

because his wife had most of his clothes in their car in Kansas City, located the transition checklist and pared it down to immediate essentials as an agenda for the high-powered private meeting that Buchen was organizing.

The transition planning had gone big-time.

As Whitehead would later describe it to the three friends who had helped him in the Townhouse, what they had done was "penny ante" and now transition had become "a gigantic poker game."

Confidentiality still was crucial.

In the end, Mr. Nixon might not resign.

Mr. Ford gave Buchen the names of the five friends whose views he wanted to solicit on transition plans. Buchen asked one of the five, Whyte, to volunteer his home on Rockwood parkway, in a wealthy and thus relatively secluded section of the capital, for a 5 p.m. meeting.

Whyte readily consented and dispatched his wife, Margaret, to buy seven large steaks.

One of the five friends didn't need to be invited. Former Governor William Scranton of Pennsylvania, who had been a law school classmate of Mr. Ford's at Yale University, knew

enough about Washington to realize by Wednesday that Mr. Ford soon would be president.

He called to volunteer his assistance.

The others invited to the meeting were Senator Robert P. Griffin of Michigan, the Senate Republican whip; former Representative John W. Byrnes of Wisconsin, and Bryce N. Harlow, an executive of Proctor & Gamble Manufacturing Co. He had been an aide to Presidents Eisenhower and Nixon.

"I was just invited for 'an important discussion,'" Harlow recalled the other day. "I wasn't even sure then who Buchen was."

"We were all close friends of Jerry's," Byrnes said. "We knew that at some time, maybe sooner than later, he and his people were going to have a hell of a lot of questions that needed to be answered."

★ ★ ★

From 5 p.m. Wednesday until nearly midnight, the seven men sat in the upholstered chairs and on the two sofas in the paneled family

room of the Whyte home.

Whyte announced at the outset, "the bar is open, but this is a working session." Most of them eschewed hard drink. The steel company executive kept Mrs. Whyte out of the room — "it was very confidential" — but the Whyte's son, Roger, would pop in from time to time to relay telephone messages, deliver the grilled steaks and provide bulletins from the newscasts.

"We didn't know what the next news bulletin would be," Byrnes said. "We constantly had the question in our mind: How long do we have?"

The atmosphere was sober and restrained. Many of the participants had been close to Mr. Nixon. "I don't recall any hilarity," Harlow said.

For hours they discussed a few essential elements of the transition, working from Whitehead's checklist:

The chief justice of the United States, Warren E. Burger, should officiate at an inauguration but he was in the Netherlands.

Griffin agreed to contact him.

Mr. Ford would need the draft of a brief speech to the American people for use soon after he took office; it was written by Robert T. Hartmann, Mr. Ford's vice presidential chief of staff.

The new President would need a replacement for the White House press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler; five names were kicked around at length and the next day Mr. Ford would agree with the consensus choice, Jerald F. terHorst, the Washington correspondent for the Detroit News.

A transition team would be needed to guide Ford through the first days of his administration and map plans for longer-range changes; Scranton would wind up directing it along with Donald Rumsfeld, the U.S. ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and Whitehead would serve temporarily as staff secretary.

And there was general agreement that Mr. Nixon should not be present when Mr. Ford was sworn in; the outgoing President's absence would signify a clean start for his designated successor.

When the meeting was breaking up, and the participants were putting suitcoats back on and tightening their ties, the basic question remained, as Byrnes stated it, "When is the word going to come?"

★ ★ ★

state. Mr. Ford would take office at noon Friday.

Thursday afternoon, the transition planners, no longer as concerned about secrecy, met in Whitehead's office. TerHorst joined them for a while. The plans were put on paper, with alternatives. Decision memorandums that Mr. Ford would have to sign immediately were drafted and typed. Formal notices of Mr. Ford's accession were drafted for the new President's signature and subsequent dispatch to every government department and agency.

There were two breaks in the long transition preparations.

One was for cold roast beef sandwiches and soft drinks. The second was to watch Mr. Nixon, on the television set in the office of the director of telecommunications policy, announcing at 9 p.m. that he would give up the presidency.

Many of those in the transition office cried. It was nearly 11 p.m. before they got back to work. At 3 a.m. Friday, the papers formalizing the change in government were completed.

Whitehead went home, to the townhouse in Georgetown.

Three hours later, at 6 a.m. Friday, Representative Byrnes arose at his home in Arlington, Va., to prepare for the day. At 7:15 he went to the Alexandria, Va., home of Mr. Ford to meet Buchen and brief the vice president on the transition plans.

"I don't get up that early every day of the year," Byrnes told Mr. Ford. "But I'm willing to do it on a day that a good friend is being sworn in as President."

★ ★ ★

There would be much yet to do after August 9 to solidify Mr. Ford's presence in

the White House: There would be policy decisions, such as that on amnesty, to try to demonstrate a generosity of spirit. There would be legislative issues, including an early threat to veto a mass transit bill, to try to show firmness of purpose.

There would be organizational matters, like the transition group's recommendation that the power of the Office of Management and Budget be reduced to strengthen the role of the cabinet.

There would be personnel choices, among them which of the holdover aides to replace and when. There would be the selection of Nelson A. Rockefeller, the former governor of New York, as the vice presidential nominee and the next potential link in a chain of democratic continuity.

At 7:45 a.m. that Friday, as the White House limousine left Mr. Ford's Alexandria home for the short ride across the Potomac river and into the nation's capital, it was more than merely the last symbolic, unpredictable journey of Gerald R. Ford to the presidency.

As the long car moved through the morning rush hour, Mr. Ford, Buchen and Byrnes were huddled over the documents that would effectuate the change.

The transition was occurring.