

The Change in Presidents: Plans Began Months Ago

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 25—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 concluded in early May that onrushing events would inevitably force an untimely end to the 37th Presidency and a hurried beginning of 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 Corporation.

Behind the stunning events of Aug. 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



United Press International

Philip W. Buchen

Vietnam-era draft evaders, his meetings with black and women members of Congress, his journeys 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

Continued on Page 24, Column 1

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 Secret

The questions on May 11 could have been anticipated. Two days earlier the House Judiciary Committee had begun formal hearings on the impeachment of President 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 Mr. 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.

Has 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 Friedland, 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."

Both Were Right

Mr. 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., Mr. Buchen. But Mr. 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 headed by Mr. Ford.

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

A few days before the Dallas news conference, Mr. Buchen walked the short distance down the hall from his suite in the Executive Office Building to the Office of Telecommunications Policy to see Tom Whitehead. Mr. Buchen was troubled.

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

Mr. Buchen—now the White House legal counsel—recalled last week that there were other fears that he had not put into words. President 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]," Mr. Buchen said. "But you could hypothesize illness or some-

thing that might happen. It was just that in the usual situation, 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 be just a case of stepping in and saying, "Well, boys, carry on."

So he turned to Mr. Whitehead, who at 35 years of age was one of the young veterans of the Nixon White House. In 1969, Mr. Buchen remembered, Mr. 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, Mr. Whitehead was one of the few Nixon aides Mr. Buchen knew well—and thought he could trust with a large secret.

"I really didn't want to do it," Mr. Whitehead said 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, Mr. 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.

Mr. Buchen insisted. "Somebody has to do it," he told Mr. Whitehead. Reluctantly, Mr. 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 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 indicate any lack of confidence that President Nixon would weather Watergate.

"It wasn't because we felt we were subversive," Mr. 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, Mr. Buchen and Mr. Whitehead reaffirmed their intentions.

"We decided the statement was an implicit one," said Mr. Whitehead: The Vice President "hoped somebody was doing it, but he didn't want to know about it."

'The Ford Foundation'

The first problem was to devise a way to keep the venture confidential. Mr. Whitehead decided that any meetings should be held away from the White House. The handiest spot would be his home, an old town house 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 and increase the risk of disclosure. Mr. Whitehead sought the advice of three acquaintances, all in their thirties, who were versed in the Government although they were not currently a part of it.

To this day, Mr. Whitehead will not identify the three. He acknowledges, with a rueful grin, 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—Mr. Buchen, Mr. Whitehead and the three others—met four times, usually in late afternoon, at the town house. They sat around a circular dining table, coats off, sipping soft drinks in a vain attempt to combat the heat in the unair-conditioned 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," Mr. Whitehead said wryly.

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

Range of Discussions

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 regime).

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

"We were not so much planning that Mr. Ford become President," Mr. 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."

The Material

Eventually, not long before President Nixon came to the ineluctable conclusion that he would be impeached by the

House and perhaps convicted in a Senate trial if he did not resign, Mr. Whitehead reduced the rough plans for a transition

program to a single typed page of notes. He called it the "index." It looked like this:

1. First principles, themes and objectives.
2. The transition team.
3. The "first week":
 - Assumption of office.
 - Transition team.
 - Message to the American people.
 - Cabinet and White House staff resignations.
 - Congressional leadership meetings.
 - Cabinet, N.S.C. [National Security Council] and economic policy meetings.
 - Meetings with national and foreign leaders.
4. Vice-presidential search process.
 - Personnel decision process.
5. Address to the American People.
6. Assessment of the executive branch.
7. Press and Congress: Philosophy and tactics.
8. Background papers: policy and machinery.
 - Foreign policy and national security.
 - The economy.
 - Budget.
 - Domestic Council.
 - White House mechanics.

8. Organization of the Presidency:

- Background.
 - White House staff and re-organization.
 - Role of the Cabinet.
9. Key personnel actions:
 - Recruitment process.
 - Transition of agency heads.
 - Handling of old White House staff.

The items were not so much recommendations as a checklist of issues that should be considered, quickly, in the event Mr. Ford became President overnight. What, if any, "first principles" should he pronounce? Whom should he call upon immediately to help in the transition? What should he do in the early days of his Administration — called, after Genesis, the "first week" — about retaining or dismissing President Nixon's advisers and aides — or about nominating a new Vice President? Should there be a different, and thus more open, attitude toward Congress and the press?

It would be, Mr. Whitehead said, something that Mr. Buchen could take to Mr. Ford and say, "Here, this will get you started."

It was all very informal, Mr. Buchen remembered. "We had no notion the thing would come up as soon as it did."

sign after all. Mr. Ford gave Mr. Buchen the names of the five friends whose views he wanted on transition plans. Mr. Buchen asked one of the five, Mr. Whyte, of United States Steel, to volunteer his home on Rockwood Parkway, in a wealthy and thus relatively secluded section of the capital, for a 5 P.M. meeting. Mr. 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 W. 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 would soon 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 the Procter & Gamble Company, who had been an aide to Presidents Eisenhower and Nixon.

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

We were all close friends of Jerry's," Mr. 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. Mr. 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 Whytes' son, Roger, would pop in from time to time to relay telephone messages, deliver the grilled steaks and provide bulletins from the newscasts.

'How Long?'

"We didn't know what the next news bulletin would be," Mr. 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," Mr. Harlow said.

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

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

The Crash Program

The "thing," as Mr. Buchen called it, came up on Tuesday, Aug. 6, eight months from the day Mr. Ford became Vice President.

The previous day, Mr. Nixon had released transcripts of his White House conversations about Watergate on June 23, 1972, and they showed him to be an early active participant in a cover-up attempt. His defense against impeachment lay shattered in the outraged reaction on Capitol Hill.

Mr. Nixon told his Cabinet, and Mr. Ford, on Tuesday that he would not resign. The words sounded hollow.

At 10:30 that night, Mr. Buchen tracked down Mr. Whitehead in a hurry. Mr. 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 camping trip to Aspen, Colo. The vacation trip was aborted by the telephone call from Mr. Buchen. He told Mr. Whitehead that Vice President Ford had just been alerted, presumably by White House aides, that "the word is: within 72 hours he could be President."

That meant, Mr. Buchen quipped, that they would have to do the detail work that

Theodore H. White, the author who had chronicled 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 Aug. 9 to recite the Presidential oath of office specified by the Constitution.

The making of the President began in earnest on Wednesday, Aug. 7, by which time Mr. Ford had become aware of the transition planning.

Mr. 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 "index" and pared it down to the immediate essentials, items 2 and 3, as an agenda for the high-powered private meeting that Mr. Buchen was organizing.

The transition planning had gone big time. As Mr. Whitehead would later describe it to the three friends who had helped him in the town house, what they had done was "penny ante" and now transition had become "a gigantic poker game."

Confidentiality was still crucial; Mr. Nixon might not re-