

Ford's Press Conference Accusations

Washington

President Ford called last night for an elevation in the level of the presidential campaign, then quickly turned his fire on Jimmy Carter, accusing the Democratic presidential nominee of "slandering the good name of the United States."

Speaking to a national television audience at his first full-scale, televised press conference since February 17, the President said he hopes the last two weeks of the presidential campaign will be elevated "to a level befitting the American people and the American political tradition."

But at the same time Mr. Ford took a highly partisan stance during the press conference, a showcase before the entire nation in the dwindling days of the campaign.

Declaring that there are "profound differences of opinion," between him and Carter, the President used some of the strongest language of the campaign to denounce Carter for statements Carter made during the second debate

Back Page Col. 2

From Page 1

between the presidential candidates.

Mr. Ford said he feels "very strongly" about Carter's assertions that the United States is losing strength militarily, has lost respect around the world and that the Ford Administration "tried to get us into another Vietnam in Angola."

"I don't approve of any candidate for office slandering the good names of the United States," Mr. Ford said. "It discourages our allies and encourages our adversaries."

The President also renewed his charge that Carter, by endorsing the Democratic party platform, has committed himself to seeking new programs that would cost "\$100 billion a year at a minimum."

In New York City Carter replied to Mr. Ford's "slander" charge last night, saying, "My criticism of this administration can't be translated into criticism of the whole country."

The White House announced the press conference yesterday shortly after Watergate special prosecutor Charles R. Ruff issued a statement saying that an investigation had found no evidence to support an allegation that Mr. Ford

mishandled campaign funds as a congressman.

Clearly hoping to put all such allegations behind him, the President began the press conference with a prepared statement in which he declared, "One thing that means more to me than my desire for public office is my personal reputation for integrity."

Then, calling for an elevation in the level of campaign rhetoric, he said:

"For too many days this campaign has been mired in questions that have little bearing upon the future of this nation. The people of this country deserve better than that. They deserve a campaign that focuses on the most serious issues of our time on the purposes of government, on the heavy burdens of taxation, on the cost of living and on the quality of our lives and on the ways to keep America strong, at peace and free."

Mr. Ford said he hopes that "in the last 20 days remaining in this campaign we can talk seriously and honestly about the differences so that on November 2 the American people can make a clear choice and give us, one of us, a mandate to govern wisely and well during the next four years."

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The President's desire to put behind him the campaign finances allegations and other suggestions linking him with the Watergate coverup was not immediately satisfied.

Six of the first eight questions asked him dealt with his campaign and personal finances, his acceptance of free golf vacations from congressional lobbyists and former White House counsel John Dean's recent assertion that Mr. Ford cooperated with Nixon White House officials' attempts to quash an early Watergate investigation.

The President answered most of the questions by reciting a litany of the federal agencies and congressional committees that have investigated him in connection with his confirmation as vice president and since then.

Mr. Ford appeared relaxed during the press conference, occasionally replying to questions with light touches of humor.

But the President did not waver in denying suggestions that recent administration actions were politically motivated, or in pressing the conservative message he believes will win the election.

He said his decision late last week to make new, highly sophisticated weapons available to Israel was based on advice from "responsible people, the top people."

"I made the decision, and this decision is mine . . . I felt that it was a decision only for the commander-in-chief," Mr. Ford said of the action, which has been criticized by some State Department and Pentagon officials who believe it will tip the balance of power in the Middle East too much to Israel.

Similarly, the President said, the administration decision this week to raise wheat and other grain support prices — certain to have an impact in the politically important farm belt — was based solely on changing farm conditions.

Noting that wheat prices have dropped, he said, "In order for the farmers, wheat farmers, to have adequate financing to proceed with their fall planting of winter wheat, I decided that it was in the best interest of full production for the American farmer that these loan rates be increased."

On the economy, Mr. Ford repeated his assertion that the economic recovery has been in a temporary "pause" that is near its end. He said administration economists expect the rate of growth in the gross national product, which has fallen to about four per cent, will be close to six per cent during the last quarter of this year.

The President also stuck to the conservative thrust of his campaign, rejecting one suggestion that the federal government increase its spending to aid deteriorating cities.

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