

10/17/75

George F. Will

The Tradition of Mediocrity

As is usual in a year before a year divisible by four, there is much brooding about why this Republic produces so many mediocre Presidents. This perennial question may be increasingly pertinent as, increasingly, Congress becomes the spawning ground for presidential candidates.

In "The American Commonwealth" (1888), James Bryce said this about the many undistinguished 19th Century Presidents: "The only thing remarkable about them is that being so commonplace they should have climbed so high." Richard Reeves argues that there is nothing remarkable about the ascendancy of commonplace politicians, especially in—and from—Congress, which has produced five of the last six Presidents and most of the current Democratic candidates.

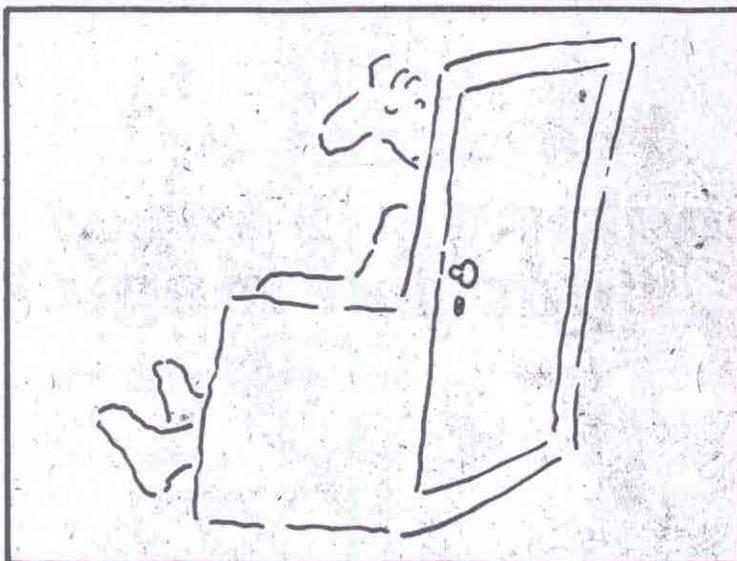
Reeves, an enthrallingly unenthralled student of politics, has written a book, "A Ford, Not a Lincoln," that is a hilarious and at times dismaying account of President Ford's first 100 days. But it is much more than that.

Woven through Reeves' assessment of "a rather ordinary man in extraordinary circumstances" is this theme: service in Congress develops character traits other than those desirable in Presidents. They are not the traits of leaders.

Reeves argues:

"Ford may have become President by accident, but it was no accident that a Ford became President.... His success was a triumph of lowest-common-denominator politics, the survival of the man without enemies, the least objectionable alternative."

Mr. Ford's rise began in 1963 when some young Republican congressmen drafted him as a challenger to the incumbent Republican leader, Indiana's Charlie Halleck. Some of Mr. Ford's supporters



By Zarko Karabatic for The Washington Post

remember that he was chosen to challenge Halleck because "he didn't have enemies" and "there were few people mad at Ford." As Mr. Ford remembers, "I did it because I had nothing to lose. I could have kept my House seat, and I was careful not to get anyone mad at me."

"The remarkable thing about Ford and others like him," Reeves believes, "is that they have won leadership by carefully avoiding it." Real leadership "inevitably offends and alienates some of the people some of the time...."

Reeves argues that congressmen are gifted at "maximizing comment and minimizing responsibility." As Rep. Sam Steiger (R-Ariz.) explained in an unguarded moment: "Being a

congressman is 90 percent form—you get attention, you view with alarm, you offer no solutions.”

“Congressmen, because they run for office every two years, are our distilled politicians,” according to Reeves, who must know that senators are not different. “Running for office, not making laws or debating the issues of the day, is what they do for a living.” Some, like Congressman Ford, seem to confuse running with governing: in one year he made 238 speeches out of Washington and out of Grand Rapids. He flew over 100,000 miles to make almost 500 appearances in 40 states in less than a year as Vice President.

Since Reeves' book went to press, Mr. Ford's wanderlust has worsened, but he has come closer to exercising leadership than he did in his first 100 days, when he went on national television to urge Americans to whip inflation by cleaning their plates. Mr. Ford's leadership is in his vetoes, and in the proposed programs that

involve numbers—\$100 billion for energy, \$28 billion in tax and spending cuts—that are, and are designed to be, startling.

Reeves correctly believes that leadership involves trying to get people to do what they would prefer not to do, at least right now. And it involves getting people mad. Mr. Ford is doing that as he struggles to transcend his congressional nature. But that does not refute Reeves' analysis of the congressional traits.

Indeed, Mr. Ford's startling new proposals may mean that he sensed, as Reeves did, the mood of the nation during the summer, when Reeves was finishing his book:

“It was true that nobody seemed particularly angry with Jerry Ford, which was the idea of his whole life. The mood of the country...seemed to be a kind of dull hostility to government, politics and authority in general. It was possible that by diligently seeking to offend no one, American leaders had vaguely offended everyone....”