

Two Columnists Give Views



Tom Tiede

Ford: By His Record Know Him

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By Tom Tiede

WASHINGTON — (NEA) — Some months back when a writer asked Gerald Ford about his loyalty to Richard Nixon, the vice president replied that he would remain devoted until or unless (paraphrase) "I ever became convinced that I'd not been told the truth."

That's Jerry. Eagle Scout. Honest and righteous. Once when he was a congressman and a reserve Naval officer he turned down a Pentagon promotion because he felt it wasn't deserved. Another time he was quoted as saying, and meaning, "truth is the glue that holds government together." During the Senate hearings on his vice presidential nomination all the forces of law, including 430 investigating FBI agents, failed to turn up a dime's worth of evil-do in the Ford family closet.

Indeed, his apparently commendable ethical conduct has become as well known in the land as the references to his allegedly limited mental capacity (Lyndon Johnson said he doubted if Ford could walk and chew gum at the same time). One White House story has it that Ford was chosen over John Connely for Veep because "the nation couldn't survive another Spiro Agnew and Jerry's too dumb to be dishonest."

It may be, of course, one can not rule it out these days, that events will yet remove Ford from the side of the angels. The way things go in this town, badly as of late, some scrap of paper or a long forgotten aide may smear the man from Michigan. But even if we do presume for the moment he is as straight arrow as Tonto, we must also ask ourselves whether honesty in this case is enough. It is time to insist that Richard Nixon's unelected successor give the people more than just honest rule.

Unfortunately, there is little in Ford's political history to suggest he can promise much more. Politically he has been a mossback, philosophically a Yahoo. One of his biographers, Newsman Bud Vestal of Michigan, says the nation should ex-

pect "no bold innovations or great New Deals" from a President Ford: "I expect he'd be inclined to stick with Nixon's programs, but even some of them, the more liberal ones, would be dropped. The Nixon family assistance idea, for example, is the kind of thing that horrifies Jerry. It's too radical for him."

Actually, the record shows, most bold social programs horrify Ford. In Congress he was opposed to massive federal aid to schools, opposed to Medicare in 1965, opposed to increasing the minimum wage in 1960, '66 and '73. Even civil rights legislation received only tacit Ford approval. Farm lobbyists in 1972 gave him a rock bottom 20 per cent rating for votes he cast on agriculture bills. In that same year organized labor rated him only 11 per cent in favor of laws affecting the nation's labor class. "At least Jerry's consistent," says a colleague, "all his political life he has been anti-working man."

Naturally, there is good reason why Ford has not been able, in two decades, to find time for the problems of commoners. His hours have been too much occupied with the elite. Big business considers him one of its own. The chief lobbyist for U.S. Steel is one of his best friends. Congressional proposals favoring industry (such as federal aid to Lockheed) invariably win his nod. "Bigness is no sin," says Ford. Certainly not. But an anti-people, pro-business attitude in an unelected president may be close to similar mockery.

Despite this prospect there remains in many the hope Ford will green as president. He has said as much by advising reporters that his record "reflects Grand Rapids" and that as a national officer he "can be more flexible." Well, maybe. On the other hand there are nagging doubts beginning to form about Gerald Ford now that he looms so large in our future. How dreadful it would be if, in the rush to get rid of a discredited president, we were in the end stuck with a fellow whose only fitness for leadership was saintliness.

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