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Giving Mr. Ford A Chance

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Jerry Ford is the most normal, sane, down-to-earth individual to work in the Oval Office since Harry Truman left. The question is whether we can keep from spoiling him.

To paraphrase his predecessor, Mr. Ford's head "is really screwed on right." Every instinct in his bones and in his Midwestern background rebels against the idea of an "imperial presidency." He never liberated Europe, and it probably never entered his mind that he would lead America across a "New Frontier" into a "Great Society" or, God help us, "a New American Revolution."

What's in doubt is how long the President can survive in that heady White House atmosphere without losing his sense of perspective about himself and his job.

The essence of Mr. Ford's leadership, as everyone who knows him understands, is his skill in personal relationships. He likes to deal face-to-face with a wide variety of people, and he draws emotional strength and intellectual sustenance from those contacts.

It's the job of his transition team to develop a White House staff structure that preserves the President's access to individuals and prevents new walls from going up around him. How they do that is their worry.

But the press has a part in this, too, and it's on that sensitive subject that there are a few words I would timorously address to my colleagues. We can play a helpful part in bringing the presidency back to human scale if we back off just enough to let Jerry Ford have room to be himself.

A year ago, Gov. Daniel J. Evans (R) of Washington came to the National Press Club and made a plea that's worth recalling. "In my view," he said, "there is nothing more essential than that the President of the United States be given the opportunity to see and be seen by the people. . . . The modern day tragedy of the presidency is that he is quite literally the Prisoner of Pennsylvania Avenue."

Evans remarked on the inevitable artificiality of the viewpoint developed by one who moves, inside a phalanx of reporters, photographers and security men, from one presidential compound to another, never touching down in Main Street America.

His argument was interesting but somewhat irrelevant as long as we had a President who craved solitude—not

ordinary human contact. But Mr. Ford is neither DeGaulle nor Nixon, and it is in the national interest to encourage him to keep his grip on reality by staying in touch with the people and the political leaders of this country, as he has done for the last 25 years.

There are three specific things the press corps could do to help President Ford stay sane, and to help the American people get the presidency back into sensible perspective:

- We could spare the Ford family the massive publicity that has made their predecessors a version of American royalty. They're fine people, and anything but dull, but the fact that he has become President doesn't entitle us to be told every intimate detail of how they live their lives. And knowing that detail won't help us one bit to evaluate his work as President. So why not let them enjoy that healthy family life in the degree of privacy normal people require?

- We could recognize the distinction between the public and private roles of the President himself. He seems quite willing to grant us access to his work as Chief Executive, and we should push hard for press conferences with him and interviews with his aides—force him to keep his word about running an open administration.

But, also, let the man have his golf game, or his skiing vacation, or a dinner out with friends, with a degree of privacy. As Gov. Evans said in that speech, why not strike a bargain that in return for a weekly press conference, the President be granted "the privilege of going abroad in the land with relative freedom and flexibility."

Sure some reporters must be present in case of a sudden development or untoward incident. But it doesn't require 60 of the best journalists in America to stand on the slopes at Vail when Mr. Ford goes skiing in order to keep the American people informed about the work of the President.

- We could do our part to revive the presidential press conference by keeping it down to manageable size. The wire services, broadcasting networks and the major papers and magazines have perhaps 30 to 40 people assigned fulltime to the White House.

If those three dozen White House regulars are not competent to ask President Ford 95 per cent of the pertinent questions each week, they ought to be replaced. If they are competent—as they surely are—then the other 200 of us ought to stay out of their way, and not go jamming into the East Room for the presidential press conference.

You can't have a sensible dialogue between a President and 200 jumping jacks, eager for television exposure. You can have one between him and the White House regulars.

Preserving a sane President with a sensible, non-exaggerated view of his job requires a certain degree of self-discipline by the press corps. Journalism, which helped topple the last two Presidents, owes this one a reasonable chance to keep his own eminently down-to-earth view of himself and his