

THE PRESIDENCY/HUGH SIDNEY

So Like the Rest of America

For ten years this nation has suffered from cardiac insufficiency. Now the heart is beginning to pump again under Jerry Ford. One can feel the renewed strength running through the Federal Government. If the old rules of leadership o-s-mosis still apply, the rest of the country should feel the effects in a few months.

This does not mean that the problems of the U.S. will be solved magically. They may even get worse. It does mean that the incredible strength of America is being freed to contend with them. It is not only right but fun.

Jerry Ford, the Omaha adoptee turned President, looked across his desk last week at Nelson Rockefeller, the dynastic heir to countless millions, and nominated him to be his Vice President, then ribbed him. "You know you are going to have to live in the old Admiral's House," he said. "You can visit your lovely home on Foxhall Road on the weekends." Admiral's House is the drafty 81-year-old home recently consigned to Vice Presidents. Rockefeller has long had his own Washington estate on Foxhall Road.

The transformation is doing so well not from mystique but from candor, not from majesty but from humility, not from complexity but from plainness. It is everything in those manuals of authority used by Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon turned upside down. Ford's first days look like genius because they are so ordinary, so like the rest of America.

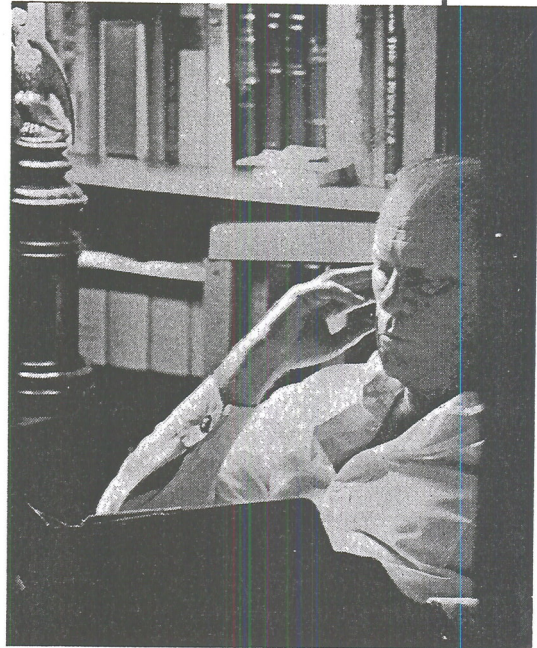
Early on, Ford called in his staff—what there is of it—for a bull session. "I really want to bind up the wounds," he said. "If I'm going to do that, then I've got to reach those kids who dodged the draft or deserted. I'm not for unlimited amnesty. Deserters can't go home scot free when the kid next door might have been killed in Viet Nam. Can't we fashion some way to let them earn their way back?" The effects of this pronouncement, formalized in Ford's speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Chicago, stunned the vets and the nation. But why? Because the absence of simple decency in his predecessor had become an accepted condition of our national life. There is no other logical answer to the amnesty problem for a man who the Sunday before sat in his small church in Alexandria, Va., believing in the words of the old hymn he sang: "Blessings abound where'er he reigns;/ The prisoner leaps to loose his chains;/ The weary find eternal rest,/ And all the sons of want are blest."

Rockefeller said that he believed Ford would probably run for President in 1976.

Press Secretary J.F. terHorst was bombarded with queries. He caught the President and walked with him by the Rose Garden. "It's this way," Ford said. "As I told the Governor, I have changed my mind because conditions have changed. I didn't think I would run. Now I probably will run." TerHorst, who reported the Nixon years for the *Detroit News*, was not quite ready for the new order himself. "Is it all right to put that out?" he asked. "I don't see why not," said Ford. "Why should we pretend?" They may pretend in Texas and California, but out in Chicago and Cleveland they hardly ever go through the reluctant-debutante routine that Americans have witnessed in the White House for a decade.

When somebody talked about "the mansion," the part of the White House where the Fords live and entertain, the President ordered that it be called "the residence." The name *The Spirit of '76* emblazoned on the side of the President's plane will stay for a few months, but Ford plans by Christmas to reduce it again to the functional code, Air Force One. He has banished the royal "we" from statements and speeches. It will be "I." Talking Republican politics last Thursday, he came across the term surrogates used for those Administration speakers who will carry the G.O.P. banner. "I never did like that word when I was one," said Ford. "It sounded like 'sewer-gate.'"

The adjectives for all this have been extravagant: new wine, fresh breeze, clean broom. They are an accurate White House measure. But what the President is doing is what most Americans have been doing all along.



FORD IN QUIET MOMENT