

Ford: At the Crossroads

Post
9-30-74

When President Ford quietly slipped out of the White House recently for a limousine ride up Pennsylvania Avenue to breakfast with old congressional cronies, his performance showed both why his young presidency is in crisis and why it may yet work itself out of trouble.

Mr. Ford went to the Capitol Hill Club for the weekly meeting of the Chowder & Marching Society, the elitist House Republican group to which the new President belonged for 25 years. Old friends were troubled by his vague, rambling answers to their questions. Although he was one of the party's budget experts in the House, Mr. Ford labored terribly in replying to questions about spending. "It didn't seem like the same old Jerry," a C & M member confided.

But the fact he was there at all is significant. Mr. Ford was treated no differently than other guests at C & M breakfasts — government officials, journalists, academicians; he was given 10 minutes to speak and then was subjected to questions. What's more, such give-and-take sessions are common on the President's schedule.

Thus, the Capitol Hill breakfast pointed to where Mr. Ford stands after seven weeks as President. His unsatisfactory answers showed he simply has not taken hold of the presidency and its problems. But his presence at the breakfast underscored that he is not now and hopefully never will be the isolated President that Richard M. Nixon was from the beginning. Because Mr. Ford talks to many people

and actually listens to what they say, he knows he is in trouble.

Moreover, the arrival from Brussels last Thursday of Ambassador Donald Rumsfeld to replace Gen. Alexander Haig as top White House staffer means Mr. Ford is at a crossroads. How Rumsfeld fares in curing the Ford presidency's present problems may well set its future course.

What both the President and Rumsfeld basically must seek is the spirit lost Sept. 8 when Mr. Ford issued his politically disastrous Nixon pardon. That requires an end to the present chaos on the White House staff and an end to the succession of blunders by Mr. Ford. Since both the chaos and blunders can be traced to Mr. Ford's refusal to cleanly cut the umbilical cord with the Nixon past, Rumsfeld's immediate task is obvious.

Although Mr. Ford privately betrays no illusions about the disgrace of his predecessor, he publicly displays only reverence for Nixon—perhaps out of excessive personal loyalty. The President's mind-set is reflected by those telephone calls to San Clemente and his reference to Nixon as "the President" five times in his Sept. 16 press conference.

The most politically damaging product of that mind-set was the premature Nixon pardon, but it also has produced rubberstamping ill-advised ambassadorial nominations inherited from Nixon and retaining Nixon White House staffers long beyond their time. So many Nixon aides remain as the walking dead, drawing pay but doing no work, that the White House today is a political charnel house.

David Gergen, head of the Nixon speechwriting team, was replaced a month ago by an old Ford associate (Paul Theis, longtime staffer on the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee). Yet Gergen stays on the job doing nothing. So do several of his speechwriters, including the notorious Father John McLaughlin, who supposedly was fired by Mr. Ford in early August.

What may be worse than Nixon holdovers doing nothing, however, is Nixon holdovers doing a great deal—as in the case of the Domestic Council staff. When we wrote that Rep. Albert Quie of Minnesota felt he had convinced the President not to veto continuation of anti-poverty programs, a Domestic Council staffer telephoned us to report that his colleagues had gotten to Mr. Ford immediately after Quie's visit and straightened him out again. This advice to veto the anti-poverty bill came from Nixon holdovers and reflected Nixon political philosophy.

Two encouraging signs late last week raised hope. One was the arrival of Rumsfeld, tough and self-confident. The other was Mr. Ford seeming to back away a little from his predecessor, refusing to totally support the huge Nixon transition budget and raising some doubt about ultimately giving the White House tapes to Nixon.

Backing away from Nixon indicates that the President is by no means isolated from political reality. As long as he keeps moving outside the White House, meeting politicians and listening to what they say, there is hope his presidency can be revived.