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Conserving the President's Time

A striking feature of the Ford administration is the President's strong appetite for the ceremonial part of his job. Before Mrs. Ford's sad illness, no function in town seemed to go ungraced by Mr. Ford's presence.

Such appearances can be useful, especially for a new President. But there is obviously a limit and many signs suggest that Mr. Ford has been going public to a degree that impairs his ability to dig into important substantive matters.

The extent of Mr. Ford's participation in the ceremonial presidency goes well beyond regular press conferences, frequent meetings with congressional leaders, and the usual parties for visiting foreign dignitaries. Among other things Mr. Ford had a picnic for the White House staff, gave a reception for aides to Republican senators and congressmen; went to a dinner for the Washington Press Club; and flew to North Carolina to open the World Golf Hall of Fame—an event with a strong promotional smell.

There are, to be sure, several good reasons why Mr. Ford would want to emphasize the visible presidency in a big way. He is new in the job, and has

never been elected by the country at large.

Many people do not have a clear idea of who the President is. At political rallies in California the other day I noticed signs on which his first name was misspelled. The dizzying rise in his popularity after he took office, and the sudden plunge after the pardon of former President Nixon, further suggest that he is not a known quantity in the country at large.

By being seen all the time, by mixing with as many people as possible, Mr. Ford accustoms the country to his presence in the White House. He steadies opinion and develops the basis for appeals to sacrifice and good sense.

Visibility further serves to set his administration apart from its predecessors. The characteristic feature of the Nixon regime was its hermetic quality—the President self-sealed against reality. Mr. Ford and everybody else has an interest in unsetting that example, in developing a sense of give-and-take between those who rule and those who are ruled.

Then there is the matter of personal taste. Mr. Ford is a gregarious man, not a loner. He apparently does not

like to pore over the papers in isolation. At the Golf Hall of Fame, he acknowledged that on weekends, he often combined work with watching sports events. I "sit in front of the television," he said, "and take a pile of work, and in between this shot and that shot, I try to concentrate."

But that, of course, is not a good way to do delicate business. As it happens the White House these days has a lot of delicate business—business which requires sorting out complicated interrelated matters, and then taking action to control after-effects, and spin-offs. So far, the evidence suggests that the Ford administration is not handling such matters effectively.

The pardon of President Nixon is, of course, the chief example. The principle was not necessarily wrong. But the timing was atrocious, apparently because the President in the absence of a good reading of what was in the mind of Watergate Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski felt impelled to move hastily. The arrangements made for handling Mr. Nixon's papers and tapes were shipshod. So much so that the White House, which should have settled its part in that business weeks ago, is still hung up between the Watergate spe-

cial prosecutors and Mr. Nixon's lawyers.

Similarly with the story about the CIA involvement in Chile. Mr. Ford did not take the trouble to get a full reading on what happened before speaking to the issue at a press conference. Not surprisingly he misstated both the facts and the rationale for what had happened. A small incident was thus, again not surprisingly, made into a big story.

Some of these problems will no doubt be eased by the mere passage of time. The White House staff work is bound to improve as Mr. Ford's men gain experience, and as the Nixon men, with whom they now share responsibility, are phased out.

But the record suggests that rationing the President's day effectively is not just going to happen. The President's men are going to have to buck Mr. Ford's instincts and the pressure of a glamorous world in order to make time for him to concentrate on the truly difficult problems which face the country. A good moment to begin is now, when Mrs. Ford's illness has wiped out past commitments and cleared the President's schedule.