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For a Clean Break

The best face that the White House and the Republicans can put on yesterday's election returns is that the voters were venting their dissatisfaction with two years of Nixonian scandal and economic blundering, not their disapproval of three months of Jerry Ford.

That's a convenient rationalization; it's also probably true. Despite his frenetic campaigning, President Ford never really became a central part of this mid-term election. The voters obviously didn't accept his description of the dangers of a "veto-proof legislative dictatorship" by the Democrats. But it's also doubtful that by election day many of them were cutting the local Republican congressional candidate because of Mr. Ford's act of charity in pardoning the ailing and broken former President.

But if the mid-term election does not constitute, in any real sense, a referendum on the Ford leadership, it certainly provides the occasion for him to put himself back in the center of the political picture, rather than being the sideline character he was in the past campaign.

It is time, in short, for Mr. Ford to make that clean break with that voter-repudiated Republican past by moving to fashion an administration of his own. It is time to clean house in the Cabinet and agencies.

On Sunday, Donald Rumsfeld, the new White House chief of staff, was on television arguing that Mr. Ford has already begun the job—that half the 124 professional positions in the White House and 9 of the 15 top jobs have changed hands in the past three months.

Rumsfeld undoubtedly has his figures right, but he also knows that so long as the public sees the same familiar Cabinet faces defending the same old policies night after night on the television news, the impression will be that little has changed.

In fact, a good deal is changing—including Rumsfeld himself. The former Illinois congressman, tested in tough

assignments from Mr. Nixon as head of the anti-poverty program, wage and price controller and ambassador to NATO, has emerged with some strong notions of his own about how to make government function.

As he sits in his office down the hall from the President, his old-fashioned white shirt and antique high-backed desk nicely balanced by his mod aviator glasses, Rumsfeld argues a convincing case that he is working to make the Ford administration the open, decentralized operation the President has promised.

"The President can't be the action officer on every problem in government," he says, citing examples of issues that have been tossed back to the departments for handling. "We are going to set policies and goals in this building, but we're not going to fire-fight every problem that comes along."

While conceding that "personnel is critical" in this effort at decentralization, Rumsfeld talks of the turnover from the Nixon people to the Ford people as a slow evolutionary process.

Some time next year, he suggests, a "critical mass" of change will have occurred, by voluntary retirements, shifts of assignment and requested resignations, and the country will discover a new team is in charge.

But political reality may dictate something more drastic. The Nixon administration has been repudiated, and it is no favor to the country or the Republican Party to let its legatees linger.

Mr. Ford's greatest strength as a leader has been his willingness to share power with people of talent and ambition. As Republican leader of the House, he brought into the center of the action men like Rumsfeld, Mel Laird, John Rhodes, Bob Griffin, Al Quie and Charley Goodell—men with constituencies and ideas of their own.

Some argued then that Mr. Ford risked being overshadowed, but he has always been notably free of that neurotic fear. He showed that strength and security again when he picked Nelson Rockefeller as his Vice President, despite the warnings that Rockefeller might come to dominate the administration.

The Rockefeller nomination has developed some unanticipated problems, but Mr. Ford showed that he was willing to bid for the best—and take the risks that go with it.

To put it kindly, the quest for excellence was not uppermost in the Nixon administration's Cabinet choices. With one or two exceptions, those appointments were made on the basis of their presumed obedience to a White House now thoroughly repudiated and discredited.

Rumsfeld says that the Rockefeller investigation has not made it impossible to get other people of talent to come into the Ford administration. They will, he says, be coming.

To which, one can only ask: Eventually. Why not now?