

# 'An Unconvincing President'

Perhaps today the presidency is like a kazoo. Perhaps it is impossible to say when it is being played well, or just being played with. Perhaps in relation to its responsibilities, it is the weakest office that we, the demanding people, have at our disposal. Obviously, the Republic's problems are becoming more complex and the Republic's politicians are not, and perhaps this is just more conspicuous with regard to the presidency. For whatever reason, Gerald Ford, after 100 days in office, is not yet a convincing President.

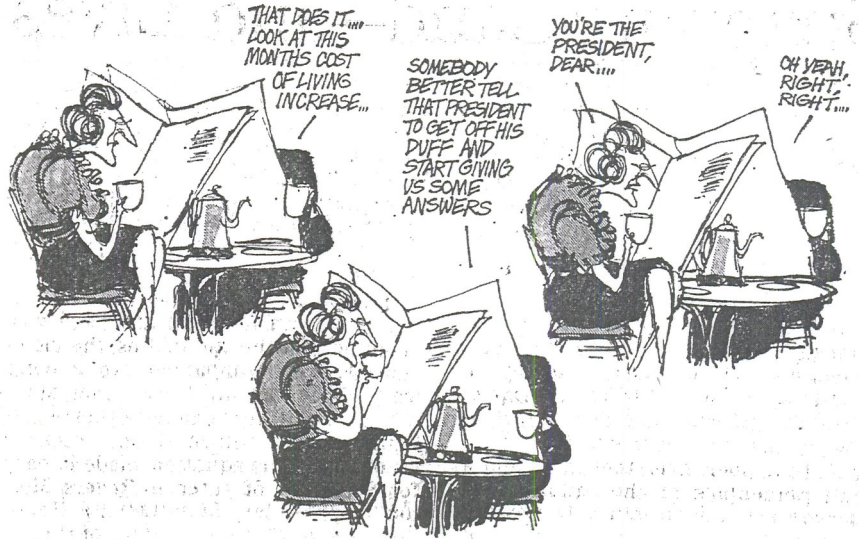
This conclusion is not compelled by or reflected in the election results, which reflected 18 months of economic anxiety and disgust with scandal. Mr. Ford, the campaigner, was like Herbert Hoover, who also became President at an inauspicious moment—less than eight months before Wall Street laid an egg. Will Rogers' description of Hoover and the Crash applies to Mr. Ford and the elections: "He arrived at the picnic when the last hard-boiled egg had been consumed. Somebody slipped some limburger cheese into his pocket and he got credit for breaking up the dance."

That Mr. Ford was not a convincing campaigner this fall is not important, except to the extent that it reflects the fact that he is not yet a convincing President. The reason Mr. Ford is an unconvincing President is the astonishing incongruity between Mr. Ford's words and deeds.

He has unambiguously identified what he considers the nation's two most pressing problems, inflation and energy. He has described these problems with words that should leave no doubt about the seriousness with which he regards them. But his subsequent actions raise doubts about the seriousness with which he takes his own words.

Mr. Ford's words treat inflation as a threat comparable to "an armed enemy" attacking our liberty. But his actions treat inflation as a homecoming football game, an occasion for buttons and banners. And the asymmetry between Mr. Ford's words and deeds is even more astonishing regarding the separate but related subject of energy.

Mr. Ford has said that we cannot go on like this. By "this" he means consuming oil at current rates and prices.



By Mike Peters for the Dayton Daily News

We are shifting U.S. wealth to oil exporting nations at the rate of about \$30 billion a year. We are, in effect, exporting a \$30 billion claim on future U.S. goods and services, and this, Mr. Ford says, is intolerable.

But Mr. Ford is tolerating it. Neither he nor anyone else has devised a plausible strategy for forcing down the price of oil, and he will not take steps to force down consumption.

Mr. Ford has taken only one tough, decisive action regarding energy; he has cashiered John Sawhill, the former head of the Federal Energy Administration. He did this because Sawhill suggested a steep (at least 10 cents a gallon) gasoline tax to reduce consumption, and suggested it before the elections.

I do not know, and for the purposes of making my point I do not need to know, if a steep gasoline tax is a sound idea. The interesting thing is that the Sawhill idea is the first and so far the only (and, if Sawhill's liquidation serves as a deterrent, it may be the last) proposal for strong action commensurate with Mr. Ford's strong words about the energy crisis.

If the nation does not need strong

measures, then it should not have to endure the strong words Mr. Ford has used about energy and inflation during his first 100 days. If strong rhetoric about an allegedly intolerable energy situation is not followed, promptly, by action at least as strong as the Sawhill tax proposal, the rhetoric and the rhetorician soon seem empty.

In recent years the most conspicuous feature of our political terrain has been a gap—no, a yawning chasm—between political words and deeds. If Mr. Ford does not close the gap it will swallow him, as it has swallowed other recent kazoo players.

No one—at least, no one not hopelessly sunk in sentimentality—expects Mr. Ford to possess extraordinary insights about the world. It is the unpleasant first fact of political life that power never confers and often impedes insight.

But unless Mr. Ford soon brings his words and actions into some kind of congruence—by making the former less strong, or the latter more strong—his constituents, most of whom wish him well, are going to conclude that 100 days ago they gave him the unwarranted benefit of warranted doubts.