

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

The President's Vacation

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What is seriously wrong with the Ford presidency was revealed two weeks ago when Donald Rumsfeld, White House chief of staff, was asked this question by another senior aide: Is it too late to reconsider whether President Ford really should go on his annual skiing vacation to Colorado?

Cool and courteous, Rumsfeld lacks the arrogance of H. R. Haldeman and the imperiousness of Gen. Alexander Haig, his two immediate predecessors. But he was miffed by the question, replying emphatically that Mr. Ford had fully considered all aspects of the Vail trip, had decided to go, and that was that. In other words: although there was no serious staff discussion of whether the President ought to take his vacation just now, an irreversible decision had been made.

That suggests the President and Rumsfeld are unaware of how deeply the public's perception of Mr. Ford's leadership is undermining him. Even if the President now takes aggressive action on the economy and energy, many Ford supporters inside and outside government say his program cannot take hold unless public confidence in his leadership is nurtured. Indeed, they fear the impact of his economy-energy decisions may be vitiated because they are being made in the Vail winter wonderland during the gloomiest American Christmas since the Great Depression.

According to Ford insiders, Rumsfeld did not advise Mr. Ford to delay

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his vacation. That put him in a distinct minority among high administration officials.

The unsuccessful overture to Rumsfeld two weeks ago was scarcely the first backstage effort to keep Mr. Ford off the slopes and at his desk. When the President returned from Vladivostok Nov. 25, one Cabinet member offered the suggestion to White House staffers. A senior aide broached the idea to Mr. Ford himself, who quietly replied he had thought it over and would go. The same suggestion from one informal adviser brought the same presidential response.

None of these advisers begrudges Mr. Ford a mere week's diversion. What worries them is the reaction to it. One administration official predicted to aides that Christmas week would find syndicated political cartoonist Herblock portraying Jerry Ford's schussing downhill while the world deteriorates. His prophecy was fulfilled the morning of Dec. 26.

But negative reactions came also from sources less prone to criticize Republican Presidents than Herblock. Re-

publican politicians fear resentment by lower-income voters, enjoying a relatively meager Christmas thanks to the economic squeeze, and by higher-income voters, prevented this year from their accustomed December fling in Puerto Rico or Acapulco.

In fact, Republican businessmen, increasingly critical of Mr. Ford's handling of the economy, are growing offstage. One financier, a lavish contributor to the Republican Party, was once a guest in the house in Vail where Mr. Ford stayed. "It's unreal, a fantasy world," he told us. "Believe me, nobody should be making serious decisions here—certainly not the President of the United States."

Whether decision-making would deteriorate greatly in Vail is highly debatable. But the fact important people think it might deteriorate is trouble for a President whose Gallup performance rating is dropping all too rapidly.

That is the aspect of his presidency Mr. Ford seems not to understand, a failure in perception possibly shared by Rumsfeld. Whereas Richard M. Nixon needed to convince Americans

he was a regular fellow who watched football games, Mr. Ford's task is to convince them he is an industrious, serious leader.

No Calvin Coolidge sleeping 12 hours every day, Mr. Ford actually puts in longer hours than Nixon (foregoing the afternoon nap). But what comes over to the public are newspaper photographs of geishas in Japan, calypso in Martinique and skiing in Colorado.

Similarly, Republican politicians complain his timing could not be worse. When Nixon holdovers finally were cleaned out of the White House, it was an anti-climax. The Cabinet shakeup is too slow and too late for dramatic effect. Even though Mr. Ford seems about to change economic direction (imposing taxes on energy, reducing taxes on income), the timing makes it seem he is following the pack rather than leading it.

One old colleague, rejecting the canard that Mr. Ford is too dim to handle the job, says the President can marshal and present arguments with consummate skill. "But he lacks imagination and ingenuity," adds this friend. Besides supplying managerial talent, Rumsfeld was supposed to bring those two commodities to the Oval Office. The President's week on the Colorado slopes is one small sign that this need has not yet been met.