

# The Integrity of Gerald Ford

Someone named Howard Saft has created a "League of Friends of Thomas Jefferson" as a device to run splashy advertisements in The Washington Post, The New York Times and perhaps elsewhere calling on the citizenry to "please block Gerald Rudolph Ford's nomination" to be the new Vice President. The contention is that President Nixon equals Gerald Ford and vice versa, which is a way of saying that Mr. Saft and his "League" don't like the Ford voting record any more than they like the Nixon record.

More seriously, Clarence Mitchell of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Joseph L. Rauh of Americans for Democratic Action have testified before the committees hearing the Ford nomination against him on the grounds of his voting record in the areas of their prime interests.

None of this is likely to have any impact on the congressional approval of Mr. Ford. The Senate already has voted 92-3 in favor of his nomination and the House is expected to give him its blessing next week. But the outpouring of statements pro and con on Mr. Ford are no less important on that account, for he could become the next President of the United States.

There isn't any doubt about the Ford voting record—it's all there in public. Nor is there any doubt that Mr. Ford raises a lot of hackles when he says, as he did to the House committee, that he favors constitutional amendments to permit school prayers, to forbid school busing for racial integration and to let states decide whether abortions should be permitted. Nor did Mr. Ford's effort to cause the impeachment of Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas endear him to a good number of Americans.

But all of this, I think, misses the point. The fundamental issue which Congress faces is not Mr. Ford's voting record, his political stance or his current views on domestic and foreign affairs problems and issues. The fundamental issue is whether Mr. Ford would be a better President than Mr. Nixon has turned out to be. Almost all comments from members of Congress have indicated that they believe they may be voting on the man who quite possibly, even quite likely, will be the next President—through either Mr. Nixon's resignation or his impeachment by the House and trial by the

Senate. Since it is a distinct possibility the decision comes down to a single factor: Does Gerald Ford have what Richard Nixon, day by day, has been demonstrating he does not have—decency and integrity?

The United States is not about to fall apart. It has survived a good many traumas in its history. But the past year or more, since the Watergate case began to unravel, the strain has been great. It has not been a question of whether Mr. Nixon was conducting our foreign affairs, in relation to Russia, China, the Mideast and so on, in a competent way; or whether he has handled well or mishandled our domestic problems, inflation, the energy crisis, race issues, social matters and so on. The crucial question is whether he has provided that kind of leadership Americans instinctively expect from their President.

And he has not done so. Whether one agrees or disagrees with any one or more policies is not the point; there always is room for argument on such matters. What Watergate has demonstrated to all but his most true believers is that he lacks a sense of honor about his job. It is the months of ducking and weaving, the months of falsehoods and distortions, of play acting and fake "Operations Candor," of acting like a guilty man while proclaiming his innocence that has run him down in the Gallup and Harris polls to the point where he simply is not believable—or believed. In short, President Nixon has lost the single most important ingredient in the conduct of his office—rapport with the American public. He stands before us today as a man who has abused the office he holds—and abused the confidence of the millions of voters who put him in that office.

Thus the question of Gerald Ford's qualifications to succeed to the presidency, if it comes to that, must rest not on his voting record or slant on matters both foreign and domestic but on his integrity—on what Mr. Nixon has demonstrated to us that he lacks.

The two committees handling the Ford nomination have thoroughly investigated Mr. Ford's career to see, among other things, whether another type of Watergate might later turn up in his record. As a story in The Washington Post put it recently: "One staff member (of the House Judiciary

Committee) who isn't particularly friendly to Ford and doesn't think he's make a good President, conceded in an interview, 'This was no half . . . investigation. Ford is clean. I'm convinced of it.'" If that is so, and every indication is that it is so, then we come down to the key point: What kind of man is he?

Maryland Republican Sen. Charles McC. Mathias said on Sunday that Ford, whose voting record is largely at odds with that of Mathias, is "a decent man and a good man." Words like "decent" and "good" may seem archaic in the Washington political jungle. But when spoken by a Mathias in the context of Mr. Nixon and Watergate they provide a contrast, even if Mathias didn't say so, to Mr. Nixon. The Mathias judgment is widely shared at the Capitol and among newsmen who long have known Mr. Ford.

No one is saying that Gerald Ford is an intellectual genius or that he has the ability to delve into and search out the answers to our current problems. To some concerned with foreign affairs, for example, his most comforting statement was that if he were to become President he would keep Henry Kissinger as Secretary of State. No one would expect him to alter basically the Nixon course in domestic matters. But most everyone expects that he would end the Oval Office isolation, that there would be no going to Camp David alone with the yellow pad. In short, there would be a change in the conduct of the office. But, above all, there would be a restored sense of integrity about the chief executive himself, as a person. And that is why, all other reasons aside, he should be confirmed as Vice President.

## The Washington Post

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Published by The Washington Post Company;  
1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20005

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