

Gerald Ford and Civil Rights

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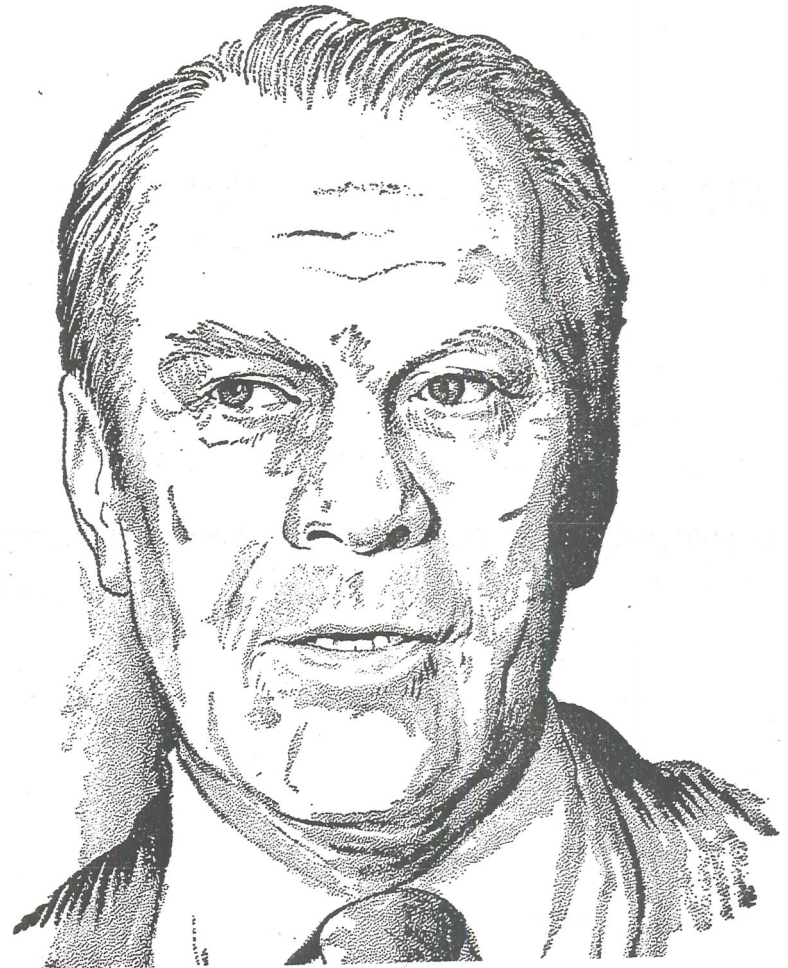
Back in 1948, Grand Rapids, Michigan, was a simple city. It had deliberately abjured the affluence that flows from heavy automobile construction in favor of cleanliness, furniture making and light industry. The white population was heavily laced with strong Christians of Dutch descent. The white people of Grand Rapids were deeply religious, worked hard, kept their promises and were politically conservative and quite square. They said things like, "Real glad to see you," or "I'm going to do my darndest." They usually meant those things. The black population was small and placid.

You could ride a bike the length of the town in about an hour. Without much trouble, the route could pass both Creston High in the north end and South High on the other side of town. The former was virtually all white and the latter had a larger percentage of blacks in the student body than any high school in the city. At Creston, the principal, a man named Howard W. Wicket, called an assembly the day after the 1948 election, to talk about a student he had taught at South when South was largely white. Howard Wicket said that Gerald R. Ford, the city's brand new congressman, had been a fine hard-working student in high school, college and law school, a good sailor in the war and that all that virtue had paid off. As Mr. Wicket glared at his then current crop of charges, his moral was inescapable.

When Vice President Gerald R. Ford was told that story the other day, he responded with neither nostalgia nor amusement. He responded earnestly. He remembered Howard Wicket. "He died a few years back. I had him for session room, for a math class and he was the football equipment manager." Gerald Ford went to high school more than 40 years ago. One feels he has that kind of information tucked away about a lot of his constituents.

But what could a man from a square and largely white town know about civil rights? All but one of his black colleagues in the House must have thought that he didn't know much because all but one of them voted against his confirmation. The Vice President leaned forward. He seems eager to answer these questions. "Grand Rapids is 18 per cent black now. We have a lot of problems — they're not massive like Detroit or Cleveland, but they're similar problems and very real, just on a smaller scale. I think the black leaders would agree that I know about those problems and that I did the maximum to help solve them." He then ticked off a list of Grand Rapids agencies—a number of them creatures of Great Society programs—with which he had worked to keep federal money flowing toward the problems of his black constituents.

There is little small talk and virtually no humor as the Vice President talks. His words are not facile. "I gave them practical down-to-earth help," Ford said. "It's executing programs



By Bill Perkins—The Washington Post

that counts and I was able to get results." As he talked about practicality and down-to-earth efforts, his interviewer, a one time resident of Grand Rapids, began finally to understand the elusive praise Ford's colleagues heaped on him when he was nominated. "Jerry Ford keeps his word," they said. "Jerry Ford is a nice guy. He doesn't pressure you for a vote, and if you don't give it to him this time, you know you'll give it to him the next time he asks."

The thing is, Jerry Ford is quintessentially Grand Rapids. There are no frills and there is no glamor. He is as plain as Campau Square and the Pantlind Hotel. He is square and he has believability.

But, if he has all those assets that made him so popular in the House, why did all but one of his black colleagues vote against his confirmation? "I don't know," he mused. "I don't know whether they all got together or whether they did it individually. I was pleased and proud of Andy Young's speech and vote. All the rest are still good friends and we enjoy excellent personal relations."

Rep. Andrew J. Young (D-Ga.) was the only black to vote for Ford's confirmation. In doing so, he said, "I have

seen so many men, about whom I had questions and about whose past I had grave doubts, rise to the occasion . . . So I guess my vote for Gerald Ford is coming out of that Southern experience. It is an experience that says that people, given an opportunity to serve in time of crisis, can grow to meet the challenge of that crisis."

If Ford denies explicit knowledge of the reasons for that black bloc vote against him, he at least has his guesses and he has understood its message. "Forget the voting record," he says. "The voting record reflects Grand Rapids. You know Grand Rapids. It doesn't want the heavy hand of the federal government in there—they want to work things out for themselves. I had to represent my constituency. On final passage, I did vote for all those bills. I think that's a better indication of my personal feelings."

Well, if there is movement from a local to a national vision, what is he doing now and how does he see the future? Without claiming that he is embarking on an effort to revive the long moribund dialogue between blacks and the administration, Ford described a series of meetings he is now planning with the help of a black White House aide, to be held just after the first of the year with a wide range

of black leaders both in and out of government.

Looking down the road, the Vice President said, "I don't think we need major new legislation." He then ticked off all the major legislative initiatives in social policy achieved in the 60s and said, "We have to see that those laws are properly enforced and that they work properly." That is standard Nixon administration doctrine, but then Ford shifted into a more urgent mode and continued, "We now have to concentrate on improving the economic well-being of minorities. People need jobs to make the rights meaningful. We really need to concentrate on that."

"I worked darn hard," Ford said, "to get Congress to agree to the Philadelphia Plan." The Philadelphia Plan, a program to increase the number of blacks in the trade union movement in Philadelphia, received a mixed reaction from blacks, but was a major civil rights initiative of the first Nixon administration. "I got it through with my leadership," the Vice President said. "That is indicative of the things we've got to do outside." Then reflecting about the possibility of cutbacks in federal employment, the Vice President said, "We've got to make sure that if there are layoffs, the minorities are protected. Just because they were the last in doesn't mean that they should be the first fired."

As his visitor shifted to leave near the end of the interview, the Vice President stopped him and said, "I want to tell you something you'll understand, because you know South High School. I went there from the 7th through the 12th grade. It was about 15 per cent black when I went there and it was about 80 per cent black when they turned it into a middle school a few years ago. It is still mostly black. The local people are planning a Jerry Ford Day celebration back in Grand Rapids and when I go back for it, the first thing I'm going to do is to go back to South to give a talk. You can understand how I feel about it. I'll be trying to do what Howard Wicket was trying to do."

Moving to the door, the Vice President repeated an earlier statement, "Remember, all those people who voted against me are still good friends. The personal relationships are excellent."

Then he said, "It was real good to see you. Stop in again." It was pure Grand Rapids. He had said nothing flashy or innovative, but he was solid and earnest and he knew his subject. More important, he had been believable.

That's refreshing in this town these days.