

David S. Broder

Ford's Three Pitches

Post
6/23/74

NEWBURGH, N.Y.—The regulars on Vice President Ford's plane—both staff members and press—have two sets of statistics that they're keeping.

One is the mileage he's traveled since becoming what he invariably refers to as "the nation's first instant Vice President" last Dec. 6. That is approaching the 100,000-mile mark.

The other is the count of the number of times he's told "the telephone story"—a homely, amusing and mildly self-assertive account of how he came to tell the President who was about to offer him his place in history to "call me back on the other line."

The telephone story has been told, by most estimates, about 200 times—or once in almost every speech Ford has made in the past six months.

Taken together, the two sets of statistics tell you almost everything you need to know about Jerry Ford's public life these days: He's traveling like the wind, and not saying much of anything.

There are those who say that if Ford just stays active, elusive and vague, he'll move himself right into the White House in 2½ years—or less.

But a reporter who joined the Ford caravan briefly—for a 10-hour jaunt last weekend through three upstate New York Republican congressional districts—found the regulars oddly divided on the wisdom of this course. Aching with boredom, some of the Ford entourage think their man is starting to sound like a broken record—a Jerry One-Note who is eroding his own stock of good will with his platitudinous peregrinations.

The opposite view is that Ford is demonstrating to these audiences the same kind of open, accessible manner and personality which made him so popular in Washington; that the good will of the public and the political gratitude of those for whom he's appearing will stand him in good stead.

No definitive answers to this debate appeared during a single short trip, but there's reason to think the "Jerry stay home" contingent may not have the best of the argument.

There's no question that Ford's basic political speech—the one that he will inflict on hundreds of Republican audiences this fall—is excruciatingly

small-bore.

As rendered on the stump in New York, the Ford spiel has three ill-fitting parts. You should vote Republican, he says, to avoid a "veto-proof" Congress that would give the Democrats a "legislative dictatorship."

That's a fair rhetorical ploy, but the way Ford renders it, you somehow sense that he has trouble himself conjuring up a picture of little Carl Albert tyrannizing the bureaucracy or mild-mannered Mike Mansfield riding roughshod over the separation of powers.

His second pitch is to vote Republican to save New Federalism, but as Bill Safire pointed out in his White House days, New Federalism is a slogan that makes the eyes glaze over.

His third and final plea is to vote Republican to support Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon—"the greatest Secretary of State and greatest President for peace in our history"—against those trying to destroy them by "innuendo and leaks."

It was this pitch that got the loudest cheers last weekend, but it is one that some of his friends consider most dangerous to Ford in the long run—for it ties him to the fate of the Nixon administration, rather than emphasizing his independence from the scandals.

But all this argument about his speeches may really miss the point. What sticks in people's minds, I would guess, are not Ford's short, wooden talks, but his long, leisurely visits.

Ford is unlike Spiro Agnew, who liked to make his speech and get out. With Ford, the speech seems a necessary preliminary to mingling, and he mingles well. When I asked the three congressmen for whom he appeared last Saturday what kind of comments they heard after he left, each of them emphasized the personal touch: "He did an extremely good job of getting around." "People were thrilled to meet him." "They told me he was such a warm, friendly guy."

The publicity in the local papers—and it was heavy—emphasized the accessibility of the Vice President overcoming the security precautions. Ford himself tells audiences he has rejected the advice to slow down his travels, because he does not want to hear only "the strident voices on the banks of the Potomac."

There are, of course, strident voices everywhere. At Stewart Airport here, the crowd seemed almost evenly split between those carrying "Stand Up for Nixon" banners and those whose message was, "Ford, Front Man for the Nixon Mob."

A radio reporter who jammed his microphone in to pick up Ford's comments as he walked the fence was amused to hear the Vice President saying, with perfect blandness, to both friend and foe, "Hi, how are you? Nice to see you!"

"I don't think he even hears what they're shouting at him," the reporter said.

What struck others at Newburgh was that the Middletown High School band was playing "Hail to the Chief."

Maybe that's what he hears.