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Ford: Collecting Political Capital

Vice President Gerald R. Ford has eaten his way in seven months through more miles of creamed chicken and peas in patty shells than any political figure in recent times. The record is heroic—175 formal speeches, a total of 215 if everything including those “few brief remarks” is included.

At times he is above the political battle, as when he spoke at a Foreign Service Association luncheon commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Rogers Act creating the service. But day after day he is out on the hustings rallying the Republican troops who have fallen back in dispirited disarray.

As proof of his courage he is going into the districts likely to be toughest for the Republicans in November. One of his aides remarked that they should surely give him a break now and then by scheduling him to speak for a candidate with a better than even chance to be elected.

Out of recent political history there is a striking parallel that says a lot for the future. When he was out of office following his defeat for governor of California, Richard Nixon beginning in 1966 went into congressional districts all over the country to speak. Practicing law in New York with his partner John N. Mitchell, he drove himself at a furious pace, often setting out on a Friday afternoon for a week-end of barnstorming.

Laying up capital in the political bank, he had a sufficient number of delegates locked up long before the Republican convention of 1968 opened in Miami Beach. This came as a cruel shock to his chief opponent, Gov. Nelson Rockefeller of New York.

With the same cultivation of the men and women who run the party, the Vice President is accumulating a tidy political capital that can be drawn on in 1976. No candidate now on the horizon has anything like this advantage.

Ford insists at every opportunity that he will not be a candidate for the presidency or any other office come '76. That is a proper public posture. In private he is wholly realistic. He knows that a draft is inevitable if circumstances are roughly the same two years from now as they are today.

To even hint at personnel ambition would be to change the perspective. He would no longer be the good guy,



Mr. Stalwart, coming to the aid of the party in its dire strait. While he has sometimes seemed to waver on Watergate and the predicament of the President, he has thus far not put a foot wrong. One reason is that he relies on platitudes good for all seasons.

One thing at this stage looks certain. If he were to inherit the office through the resignation or the impeachment of the President, the Republican convention would nominate Ford by acclamation. And the widely held view today is that he would be elected on his own to a full four-year term.

Enter Mr. Clean untarnished by even a trace of the Watergate scandals and at the same time loyal to his party and his President. The analogy with Calvin Coolidge who took over after the death of Warren Harding and Teapot Dome has some resemblance to the Ford-Nixon scenario. Silent Cal was aided by the fact that the Democrats in 1924 tore themselves to pieces in fratricidal warfare.

Thirsting for the Nixon scalp, as most Democrats are, a few have sec-

ond thoughts about the consequences of putting Ford into the office. He might be there, granted that he inherits the presidency in the near future, not for just six years but perhaps for 10 years. It is a sobering thought to the ambitious in the opposition.

On balance, the Vice President is probably more conservative than the President. In the past he has been decidedly hawkish. At a guess he would be less likely than Mr. Nixon to stand up to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on nuclear arms limitation if only because he is less experienced and less knowledgeable.

With his 26 years in the House of Representatives, 10 as minority leader, he has a canny understanding of political trends. He took due note the other day of a Louis Harris poll that showed how Gov. George Wallace of Alabama had risen in popular esteem as a man of integrity. But the last paragraph in particular caught his eye. In trial heats with Ford, the Alabama governor finished on the down side 55 to 36.