

Presidential Words and Deeds

The chemistry of political leadership is so volatile in this age of television that a well-intentioned man, universally acclaimed for his forthright manner, can instantly transform himself into a suspicious character.

It happened to George McGovern as a presidential candidate in 1972. It has now happened to Gerald Ford in the first month of his accidental presidency. In McGovern's case, the dam-

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age was fatal to his candidacy. For Ford, it is too early to judge whether the mistrust generated by his sudden pardon for Richard Nixon will permanently stain his public personality.

If you set aside the particular decisions which both men faced and look instead at the way they handled the two situations, the similarities are uncanny and depressing. Both men were caught in the zoom lens which focuses so relentlessly on national leaders and measures the distortion between their words and their actions. Neither McGovern nor Ford seemed to appreciate fully how their actions on center stage might appear to contradict their words and sentiments.

Both politicians began by proclaiming, with evident sincerity, that they would be different from so many of their brethren—they would tell the truth, their leadership would be honest and open. People took that promise seriously and came to expect something better than the usual evasion and deceit which permeate political dialogue. In each case, it turned out to be a dangerous commitment.

For McGovern, the crisis of character came when he was confronted with the sudden revelation that his vice presidential running mate, Sen. Thomas Eagleton, had a history of mental illness.

McGovern's immediate response was to assert his faith in Eagleton and brush aside the issue as irrelevant to the campaign. He even impulsively declared that he was "1,000 per cent" behind Eagleton, a phrase which later was used to mock McGovern's claim of truthfulness. Immediately after this initial posture, McGovern began maneuvering privately to get Eagleton off the ticket, a drama which ended a week later with the Missouri senator's resignation.

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Govern's principal motivation in the whole clumsy affair had been his human compassion for Eagleton, trying to resolve the impossible conflict between personal feelings and public responsibility as decently as possible. Almost nobody believed that. To the general public, McGovern suddenly seemed weak and indecisive—or, even worse, he seemed like an old-fashioned shifty, lying politician.

President Ford and his close advisers have, likewise, claimed that his principal motivation for pardoning the ex-President was human compassion. Yet Ford's action is now smothered in skeptical questions and cynical suspicions about his true motives. The President, of course, will continue to proclaim his devotion to candor, but it is no longer his asset. The claim has become a liability.

Why? Apart from whether the pardon was right or wrong, Ford did practically everything to convince the public that he was not telling the whole truth. Like McGovern, he prepared people to believe one thing, then abruptly fooled them with his action.

The public is usually smarter than politicians (and the press) assume. Ordinary people do not like to be tricked. A politician can do it once maybe, but the second time around, they will be looking for the card hidden up his sleeve.

Thus, President Ford at the outset of his administration reminded the public, via his press secretary, that he was opposed to a Nixon pardon. At his first press conference on Aug. 28, Mr. Ford spoke more positively about the idea, but asserted that it would be wrong for him to consider a pardon until the judicial process was complete.

Immediately afterward, he began planning the pardon. Suddenly last Sunday, he came forward and did it—without any effort to explain what had changed his mind so abruptly. A variety of explanations are now floating around in the thin air between rumor and fact, some sympathetic and some malign. But, in an era when monumental political lies have become routine, the public has come to believe that a

President's actions often speak more truthfully than his rhetoric.

Did Mr. Ford always intend to pardon his predecessor? Was he offering conditional amnesty as a way to soften up opposition to the Nixon pardon? Did Gen. Alexander Haig, the man who counseled both Presidents, broker a deal between the two? Is Nixon near the brink of mental collapse and did that compel Mr. Ford to act so swiftly?

The White House, with varying degrees of intensity, has denied all of those speculations, but it is safe to assume that it will not put any of them to rest until it provides a full and convincing account of how the decision was reached.

McGovern never did that after he bumped Eagleton, perhaps for reasons which only he knows. Ford, likewise, may harbor the notion that there are some things best not said. In both cases, the price is their own credibility.

The benefit of the doubt, extended to every fresh personality in politics, has been erased by events. Whatever action Ford takes on other issues, particularly amnesty for Vietnam draft evaders, will now be appraised with a new skepticism.

The hard lesson for Ford is the one which McGovern learned so painfully. If a political leader boldly promises to be honest and forthright, the truth will follow him around everywhere he goes, sometimes brutally close on his heels.