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A Minority President: Ford, the Left-Hander

By Jim Bell

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Rest easy, folks, your government is in the hands of a man who can be described as gauche, sinister, gawky, weak and awkward.

That's because President Gerald Ford is left-handed, which makes him a member of a minority widely frowned upon through the ages.

And with some reason: Mr. Ford's fellow left-handers include such figures as Jack the Ripper, the Boston Strangler, World War II Japanese war lord Hideki Tojo and, of course, the Devil.

But there have been left-handers of better repute: Benjamin Franklin, Pablo Picasso and Babe Ruth, to name a few. All were members of this minority, estimated to include 8 per cent to 10 per cent of the world's population. (That figure may be low, considering the inclination of parents and teachers in much of the world to insist that left-handed children unlearn their nasty habit.)

In defense of the President, he (like many other southpaws) does a lot of things right-handed. He is a well-known lover of sports and plays hard at them—right-handed. During his high school football days at Grand Rapids, Mich., and later at the University of Michigan, he even centered the ball right-handed. Today, he plays golf from the right.

And at state dinners, Mr. Ford avoids mashing the

guest seated to his left by lifting fork to mouth with his right hand. (A fact that must be reassuring to Moslem White House guests, for in their religion the left hand is regarded as unclean.)

But the President's tendencies are those of a left-hander. Mrs. Ford says that, in those pre-White House days when her husband was fixing his own breakfast, he always set the table left-handed. She regards him as basically a left-handed eater, in fact, although she thinks of him as somewhat ambidextrous.

Mr. Ford's half-brother Tom, legislative audit coordinator for the State of Michigan in Lansing and five years the President's junior, supports this view.

"If you watch him when he smokes his pipe, you'll see that he uses both hands and I guess he's somewhat amidextrous," Tom Ford says.

"But I know that he ate left-handed when we were kids. He always got one side of the table all to himself because he was the oldest and because he was left-handed."

Until relatively recently, history has regarded left-handedness with a dubious eye. The origin of words to describe the condition illustrates the point. The Anglo-Saxon "lyft" was used to describe weakness or paralysis. In contrast, the Anglo-Saxon used "riht" to mean straight, erect or just.

Anti-left-handedness can even be traced to the Bible.

In the book of St. Matthew, Chapter 25, the parable of the sheep and goats goes this way:

"And He (Jesus) shall set the sheep on the right hand but the goats on the left.

"Then shall the king say unto them on his right hand, come, ye blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you . . .

"Then shall the king say unto them on the left hand, depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the Devil and his angels."

In modern times, psychiatrist Abram Blau wrote in his book, "The Master Hand," in 1946:

"The origin (of left-handedness) can be explained as a deviation of the learning process which normally leads to dexterity (right-handedness) and can be divided into three types: due to an inherent deficiency, physical or mental; due to faulty education; due to emotional negativism."

Discrimination against left-handers still manifests itself today in the variety of products made for the convenience of the dextral majority: scissors, can openers, stringed instruments, power tools and many other items.

There is no evidence that Mr. Ford actually was a victim of this kind of discrimination and a spokesman for the family says he naturally picked up his pencil for the first time with his left hand and has been doing it that way ever since.

Like most left-handers, the President writes by

arching his hand around over the top of the paper in a position described as "the hook" by English author Michael Barsley in his 1969 book, "Left-Handed Man in a Right-Handed World."

Dr. Allan Elliott, the quarterback on Mr. Ford's football team at South High School in Grand Rapids, remembers the future President as "writing very badly and with one of those upside-down styles."

Elliott, now a professor of psychology at Clarion State College in Clarion, Pa., says that Mr. Ford was "pretty left-handed," in those days. "We used to say jokingly that he even thought left-handed," Elliott says.

Cliff Gettings, the man who coached that South High team, says that young Ford took a lot of kidding about being left-handed.

"At out team chalk talks, he always had to find a left-handed desk so he could write down the plays we were discussing," Gettings, now 72 and a real estate salesman, says.

Tom Ford believes that his brother learned to swing a golf club right-handed while caddying for his father and uncle as a teenager.

"When they weren't using their clubs, Jerry used to pick them up and try his hand. And, of course, they were right-handed clubs," Ford says.

Today the President is an 18-handicapper and a strong hitter, according to U.S. Steel Corp. Vice President William G. Whyte, a frequent Ford golfing companion.

The President also plays some tennis today—right-handed. Dr. William M. Lukash, Mr. Ford's physician and one of his tennis partners, credits his boss with a strong game that includes "all the shots."

Mr. Ford does not have the distinction, if it is that, of being the nation's first left-handed President. James A. Garfield, the 20th man to sit in the Oval Office, also was left-handed, though little has been recorded about his sinistrality.

Harry S. Truman can be remembered as the first President to start a new baseball season with a portside pitch. He also bowled left-handed but signed his name right-handed, perhaps because he was forced to write that way as a child.

James T. De Kay, author of "The Left-Handed Book," points out that there might have been other left-handed Presidents in the 18th and 19th centuries but that "everyone was forced to become right-handed in those days and that screwed up left-handers so much that they never could have become Presidents."

Mr. Ford must have had a little subconscious help from the right lobe of his brain (which controls the left hand) when he chose Nelson A. Rockefeller to be his Vice President.

The former New York governor was born left-handed. He now writes right-handed after conversion as a child. His father sought to break young Nelson's inclination tethering his left hand at the dinner table. Aides say Rockefeller is somewhat ambidextrous today.