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Mr. Ford's Chance for Greatness

By Russell Baker

WASHINGTON, Nov. 8—If President Ford were a cruel man he could spoil the Democrats' triumphal hour by announcing his resignation at once. There is every sensible reason for him to do so. It would be good for Gerald Ford and good for the Republican party. In fact, it might very well be the salvation of the Republican party.

The political case for immediate resignation is so powerful that one wonders why delegations of the Republican faithful are not already at the White House urging Mr. Ford to pack and clear out.

The idea does not seem to have occurred to Mr. Ford, for his press secretary insists that he intends to persevere these next two years in pursuing the policies to which he is already committed. A sad decision, if true. It is as if the British Army, hunkered down at Dunkirk, had decided to fight it out with the *Wehrmacht* instead of taking the boat to Dover.

One can explain this suicidal inflexibility only through Mr. Ford's famous good fellowship. The Democrats want him there on the beach for the next two years, and he is not spoilsport enough to deny them such a vulnerable target.

Well, surely his mind does not work this way, but there is the fact. The worst fate that could befall the Democrats in their moment of victory would be total victory, the awful discovery that they had won not only the infamous veto-proof Congress but also the horror of the White House.

Under the rules, Mr. Ford's resignation would automatically place the Democratic Speaker of the House, Carl

OBSERVER

Albert, in the Presidency, thus placing responsibility for the Government on the Democrats where the voters apparently want it.

It is inconceivable that the Democrats want it there just now. The two years coming do not promise much beyond hard times, heartaches and handouts, and in such times the people who take the blame are the people who occupy the White House, whether they deserve the blame or not.

If you are a Democrat, how much sweeter to watch the public hostility roll up against a Republican President and anticipate the harvest of 1976 than to find your party abruptly made the target of a soured electorate?

In normal situations, it would be unjustifiable for a President to resign because his party had been whipped in off-year elections. The parliamentary system cannot be so easily adapted to the complex American political structure. Fortunately for Mr. Ford, however, he is not presiding in a normal situation and so need have no qualms about early retirement.

His is a government almost entirely without legitimacy. As our first appointed President, he has been elected by no one beyond his old Congressional district in Grand Rapids. And now even this tiny constituency has voted Democratic in the successive elections.

His complete failure to help elect Republican Congressmen, despite intense campaigning, gives him added justification for resigning on ground that voters repudiated the policies for which he argued. Having been elected by nobody, he was unable to persuade the electorate to vote for the candidates he backed.

Contemplating the future, he must find more than ample justifications for stepping out. He must now go back to a Congress swollen with the proof of its own legitimacy and try to persuade it to accept Nelson Rockefeller—whose successor as Governor of New York has just gone down in flames—as Vice President of the United States.

Surely the Democrats will not pass the opportunity to dramatize his weakness by pointing out that if Mr. Ford lacks legitimacy as President, his appointee for the Vice President might quite sensibly be ignored. His Republican brethren may reasonably be expected to indulge in similar insolences, for their thoughts are certain to be soured by the evidence of his uselessness in the campaign just ended and visions of the carnage to which they will be exposed in 1976 if he keeps them pinned down on the beach.

The case for resignation is overwhelming. The Speaker as President would restore a small measure of legitimacy to the Presidency since he is at least the elected champion of the majority party in the House of Representatives. Thus the principle of legitimate government would be partly restored.

The Republican party, moreover, would benefit by escaping from a hopelessly exposed battlefield where it is without guns. The Democrats would be forced to deliver, instead of merely striking heroic postures, and we would all be spared two miserable years of waiting to see whether they amount to anything but bluster.

Seldom in politics do the national welfare and political advantage so happily coincide. Mr. Ford can become a statesman if he will bring himself to treat the Democrats as cruelly as they would treat him if the Presidency were on the other foot.