

The Truman Theft

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By Tom Wicker

The pictures of the ceremony at which Gerald Ford announced his formal entry into the Presidential race told a good deal about the kind of campaign he will wage. All the pictures included Howard (Bo) Callaway, a millionaire Georgia segregationist, and David Packard, a millionaire mogul of the military-industrial complex. Mr. Packard and Mr. Callaway both have done their turns in the Pentagon and now they are to be the leading officials of Mr. Ford's election committee.

That committee appears to represent at least one improvement on its late and unadorned predecessor, the Committee for the Re-Election of the President. Mr. Ford's group will be called the President Ford Committee and that title acknowledges that a human being named Ford is involved; whereas the C.R.E.E.P. of 1972 would have had the public believe there really was no Richard Nixon—just a superhuman "President"—to be re-elected.

Mr. Ford struck just the right notes for his political purposes, moreover, with his stress on "duty and decency," and the reporters present did not fail to recognize the bust of Harry Truman at his side. Associating himself visually with such a myth-figure while verbally dissociating himself from the facts associated with Mr. Nixon and the C.R.E.E.P. ought to provide more evidence for the Democrats—if they need it—that they are not going up against a stumblebum.

The coincidental announcement on the same day that a committee was being formed to promote the right-wing candidacy of Ronald Reagan should not cause much nail-biting in the White House. The question never has been whether there are Republicans who want Mr. Reagan to run; the question is whether Mr. Reagan

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has the internal fortitude to try to seize the nomination from a President of his own party. Probably he does not; but if he does, he would have been better off to have started long ago, before so many Republicans committed themselves to Mr. Ford.

The incipient candidacy of John B. Connally Jr. is more problematical. He is not openly campaigning, of course, and knows as well as Mr. Reagan the difficulties of forcing any party to repudiate its own President, even an accidental President. But Mr. Connally—rather like Edward Kennedy among Democrats—is far and away the most dynamic figure in his party, and could conceivably move in swiftly if events caused Mr. Ford to slip.

As for a George Wallace third-party candidacy, the guess here is that it would hurt the Democrats more than it would Mr. Ford. Some analysts believe that in 1968 the Wallace ticket drew more votes away from Richard Nixon than from Hubert Humphrey. But 1976 will be a different race altogether, and many a Wallace voter will be one who—absent Mr. Wallace—surely would vote his pocket against Mr. Ford and for the Democrats in a year that promises continuing high unemployment and high prices.

Nor, at the moment, do the Democrats, for all their majority status, appear to offer a strong challenge. Divided, leaderless, with a dozen candidates vying for the Presidential nomination, unsure of the consequences of their new delegate selection rules, without a unifying program, unable even to override Mr. Ford's vetoes, the Democrats are in a mess.

The conventional hedge, of course, is that "all this could change." Certainly it could; events abroad, particularly in the Middle East, a continuing or worsening economic slump, another gasoline shortage, ineptitude or bad luck—any or all of these could send Mr. Ford sliding down the polls. It is even possible that some unappreciated Democrat will emerge from next year's primaries or convention as a hot-shot contender.

But Democratic leaders would be well-advised not to count on luck or wait for the breaks. Their job is to pull their party together and give it some coherence and the hour already is late. After all, Mr. Ford is doing his part; he has made it plain he thinks unemployment builds character, tax breaks for big business trickle down to the masses, and nothing needs to be done for the disadvantaged and the poor except to veto spending bills. He looks more like Herbert Hoover every day, and he is even doing the Democrats the splendid favor—with the Mayaguez incident and his swollen defense budget—of shouldering the "war party" onus.

Why then should not Democratic leaders, excluding active Presidential candidates, form a kind of "truth squad" to tackle Mr. Ford squarely and repeatedly on those terms—jobs and peace on their side vs. vetoes and bomb-rattling on his; a decent shake for low-to-middle-income Americans vs. privilege and protection for the rich; concern and compassion vs. callous indifference?

Those are not, of course, the only issues but they are issues that favor the Democrats historically, and that Mr. Ford's record invites. At the very least, the Democrats ought to stop him from stealing Harry Truman, who would have known exactly how to pin the likes of Bo Callaway and David Packard on a do-nothing Republican President.