

By William V. Shannon

WASHINGTON, Aug. 7—A year ago, Richard Nixon made one more maudlin, embarrassing assault on the patience and sensibility of the American people and then flew into exile in California. The old gamester left Gerald Ford behind to fill out the remaining two and one-half years of his term.

Of course, Mr. Nixon tried to do worse and very nearly succeeded. Spiro Agnew, if he had not been unmasked, would have succeeded him. With Agnew gone, Mr. Nixon wanted to foist off John Connally on the public but fortunately, his courage failed. He settled for his faithful agent in the House, Mr. Ford.

From Mr. Ford's selfish viewpoint, he had done very well this past year. He has stressed the simple theme that he is not, repeat not, Richard Nixon. This is an accomplishment well within the powers of any reasonably normal man. But the public, having had a nightmare brush with the political version of Count Dracula, is still shaking with relief to find itself back in the sunlit world of morning. Who can blame Mr. Ford if he tries to benefit from the glare of normality?

From the country's viewpoint however, this year has been time lost. There has been an easing but no resolution of the crisis of confidence created by the Johnson and Nixon Administrations. The atmosphere of the nation's public life is still that of "a moral morning after, fouled with the crumbs and fag-ends of honor." The scene is littered with the wreckage of past crimes, of illusions shattered and promises dishonored. Washington still reeks of old deceit. Why so little improvement?

Mr. Ford has recruited a few able Cabinet members. Thus, in Edward Levi, he has an Attorney General of rectitude and uncommon intellectual quality. But with regard to both men and measures, too much has remained unchanged.

The foreign policy, military, internal security, and intelligence establishments are still headed by Nixon holdovers. Secretary of State Kissinger continues to impart his distinctive cynicism to the making of foreign policy. Despite good intentions, Wil Colby at C.I.A. and Clarence Kelley at the F.B.I. have shown themselves too involved with old viewpoints and incapable of reforming those agencies.

When confronted with evidence of how Secretary Kissinger and Ambassador Richard Helms have deceived committees of Congress in the past, the President blandly expressed his confidence in them. He rewarded Richard Nixon's favorite political general, Alexander M. Haig Jr., with the great honor of the NATO command. Instead of a clean break with the past, the Ford Administration has only given the old mess a new look.

When the Mayaguez episode occurred, Mr. Ford acted in the familiar tradition of the Imperial Presidency. Once again, Congressional leaders were informed of military action but not consulted.

The President has benefited from a gusher of stories about his personal openness and candor, but open government in the true sense has to do with bureaucratic processes.

One of Mr. Ford's first acts was to veto a bill strengthening the Freedom of Information Act. He has dismantled none of the Byzantine system for classifying documents as secrets, has forced no departments to open up their advisory committee meetings to

the press and public, has required no agencies to keep a list of their contacts with lobbyists, and has failed to seek a code of ethics backed by law for the executive departments.

With regard to the substance of domestic policy, nothing has changed. President Ford has retained Mr. Nixon's economic advisers and their grim policies—and achieved predictably grim results.

In foreign affairs, it has been a year of no progress in the Middle East, in nuclear arms control, in improving relations with Western Europe or the underdeveloped countries. In Southeast Asia, this country's power position collapsed. In Southern Europe, from Turkey to Portugal, it slowly declined.

In the course of these twelve months of stalemate at the center and crumbling at the edges, President Ford's handlers have hurried him about from Martinique to Vladivostok to Brussels, from Madrid to Helsinki to Belgrade in an unending round of meaningless travel. These journeys without substance are intended to create the illusion for next year's political campaign that he is knowledgeable and sagacious about foreign affairs.

Having just returned from ten days in Eastern Europe, Mr. Ford is now off for a week's vacation followed by a week of aimless wandering through the Middle and Far West, a week of unnecessary inspecting, dedicating, speechifying. Mr. Ford's big discovery in this year is that if he gets away from his desk often enough, the Presidency is not too hard a job.

Mr. Ford's performance inevitably calls to mind Talleyrand's comment: "Nations would be terrified if they knew by what small men they are ruled."