

Mr. Ford's Machismo

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Nov. 4—Some Presidents lead the country and some merely give the *appearance* of leading it, and President Ford's slap-dash shuffle of his face cards falls in the latter category. He didn't reorganize his Administration but disorganized it.

Leaving politics aside for a minute, an original idea in this town, there is simply no way for these new men to get confirmed by the Senate and master the devilish intricacies of vast organizations like the Department of Defense, the Department of Commerce, and the Central Intelligence Agency in the short time left before the election.

It will be Thanksgiving at the earliest before this divided and hag-ridden Democratic Congress approves all these switches, with Ronald Reagan tossing the 19th century into the ring in the meanwhile. Then Congress will be off for the Christmas holidays and the President will be off to the ski-slopes of Vail, Colo.; and when they come back, the politics of the Presidential campaign will dominate everything.

In this situation, the President might have left bad enough alone. At least his Cabinet, whatever their differences—and they were honest differences about arms control, budget priorities, and the urban fiscal crisis—knew the cards in the deck and could have held things together during the coming political storms.

But it will be harder for these new appointees to provide the continuity and stability Mr. Ford felt he needed after the fall of Nixon, and will need in the coming months while he's running around the country seeking a new term. It takes at least a year for a new boy to know the cast of characters at the Pentagon, and Donald Rumsfeld and George Bush will be spending most of this time on Capitol Hill trying to give answers before they have had time to master the questions.

There is no doubt about who was responsible for this upheaval. Washington loves conspiracies and is bubbling now with theories that Kissinger or Rumsfeld tossed Schlesinger, Rockefeller and Colby to the photographers. But while Kissinger and Rumsfeld are not above playing these executive-suite games, the fact is that both objected, for different reasons, to Ford's sudden and dramatic decisions.

Rumsfeld was out at R.F.K. Stadium last Sunday afternoon watching the hot war between the Redskins and the Dallas Cowboys when the President called him from Florida and traded him across the Potomac to the Pentagon. Rummy didn't want to go, and would have preferred to stay in the White House as Kissinger's replacement at the head of the National Security Council, but he is young and ambitious, and apparently didn't struggle too hard against being one of the youngest Secretaries of Defense in the history of the country.

Kissinger's objections were more subtle, as usual. He has had his differences with Schlesinger over reaching an accommodation with the Soviet Union on the limitation of strategic arms, and he has not been amused by reading in the papers and hearing from the Hill of proposals by Schlesinger which were not argued out within the National Security Council. But he respects Schlesinger's intelligence, and while nobody around here seems to believe it, my information is that he opposed Secretary Schlesinger's dismissal. After all, this pleases Moscow but displeases Peking, and forces Kissinger to explain the muddle to both.

President Ford, however, had his own reasons for asserting his authority, and while it's treacherous to speculate on personal motives, some facts seem clear and relevant. There has lately been a sense of drift in the country, even an articulate longing for strong leadership.

Sometime in the last few weeks, faced by the fiscal crisis in New York and the conservative challenge of Reagan, he apparently decided that the nice-guy image wasn't good enough. So he hit New York hard, and after he was benched for a week by a bad cold, reading his critical reviews and sliding polls in the press, he came back to the Oval Office and changed the question.

Now the "good guy" is the "take-charge" guy, and in the present absence of leadership, it may work. But you could make a plausible argument that almost everybody has lost in this turmoil. The country has lost by trading an experienced team for an inexperienced team. The resignations of Dave Packard as Republican finance chairman and of Rockefeller as Vice-Presidential candidate next year have given a sense of disruption and even of impending defeat.

The dismissal of Schlesinger at the Pentagon, far from consoling Reagan and the Republican conservatives, has removed the most knowledgeable critic of Kissinger's policy of accommodation with the Soviet Union. "I am not appeased," said Reagan, which is the most presumptuous political comment since Mayor Hague said, "I am the law."

And even Kissinger, who has emerged from these Halloween antics with his position intact, his two major critics, Schlesinger and Rumsfeld, moved from their main centers of influence, will now be blamed for a reorganization he opposed, and become the major target of the right and a personal issue in the Presidential campaign.

He is not happy with this or with the withdrawal of Rockefeller, who made him a world figure in the first place. But the President has proved his machismo and evidently feels liberated and even exhilarated by throwing his bombs. The only trouble is that it was all so sudden, personal and even capricious. Now all he has to do is live with the consequences.