

The case against

ANALYSIS

By Robert S. Boyd
Knight News Service

WASHINGTON — Barely nine weeks before his first encounter with the voters in New Hampshire, Gerald Ford faces the gravest challenge of his brief presidency.

His sudden drop in the public opinion polls comes at a time when the quality of his leadership is being questioned as never before.

Basically, the complaints fall into three categories.

- He acts more like a political candidate than a president, and has thereby lost the advantage the man in the White House normally enjoys.

- He takes strong stands one day and later changes them, confusing the public and leaving supporters out on a limb.

- He is said to be an indecisive and ineffectual chief executive, presiding over an Administration, a White House staff and a campaign headquarters that are in turmoil and disarray.

Even Ford's defenders, while disputing the

Jerry Ford

validity of these complaints, agree that his public image has deteriorated.

Former Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, one of Ford's closest advisers, says the President is suffering from "a major problem in communications."

Opinion polls showing Ford losing to Ronald Reagan among fellow Republicans and Democrat Hubert Humphrey among all voters are "a signal

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- He's always 'running'
- He's not a 'President'
- He changes day-to-day
- He's indecisive, ineffectual
- Doesn't know what he wants
- He's inconsistent with aides

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that should be taken to heart by the President, his cabinet and his supporters," Laird says.

The list of complaints is getting longer. Some examples:

- Ignoring the pleas of some advisers, Ford persisted, until very recently, in stumping the country, making harsh, partisan speeches, instead of staying in Washington and tending to presidential duties.

Even on his way to Paris and China for international conferences, Ford subtracted from their dignity by stopping off for purely political affairs en route.

Observers note that Ford's poll ratings have fallen when he has been acting most like a politician, and have risen when he appeared to be performing as a president, such as immediately after he took office and after the Mayaguez incident.

- Ford's frequent changes in position — or apparent changes — gave baffled outsiders and left an impression that he doesn't know what he really wants. New York City is a prime example.

The President kept insisting that the federal government should not lend money to help New York City avoid defaulting on its debts. Then suddenly, on Nov. 26, he agreed to a \$2.3 billion emergency loan program.

And again Friday, in the face of searing political heat, President Ford backed down a mile and Congress retreated a few feet to all but guarantee that income taxes won't go up for most Americans next month.

After a night of considering the political meaning of their votes for a tax increase, Republicans joined the Democrats in working out a compromise, which Ford accepted under the urging of his congressional troops.

The upshot was the passage of a six month tax-cut extension identical to the one the President opposed so long and vetoed the day before.

- Ford's other economic policies also seem to zig one way and then zag another.

In October, 1974, he was warring on inflation and calling for a general tax increase. In January, 1975, he switched to fighting recession, and asked Congress to cut taxes.

In March, Ford drew the line at a \$60 billion deficit for the federal budget. In October, he sent up a tax cut plan that implicitly accepted a deficit of \$70 billion.

In May, the President proposed a program of tax relief for electric companies to help them expand their capacity. In September, he dropped that idea and proposed, instead, a \$100 billion federal loan program for the energy industry.

In July, he called for special tax cuts for businesses to help them accumulate capital in order to create jobs. In October, this proposal was forgotten in favor of Ford's \$28 billion tax and spending cut plan.

- Ford's handling of personnel matters has sometimes seemed hasty and inconsistent.

He first denied, then later acknowledged, that personal and policy disagreements led to the firing of Defense Secretary James Schlesinger in November.

He insisted that Ambassador George Bush should not be ruled out as vice presidential material in order to get the CIA job, but finally yielded to congressional pressure and said he won't pick Bush for his runningmate.

Ford asserts that the two big issues on which most elections turn—the economy and peace — are in pretty good shape.

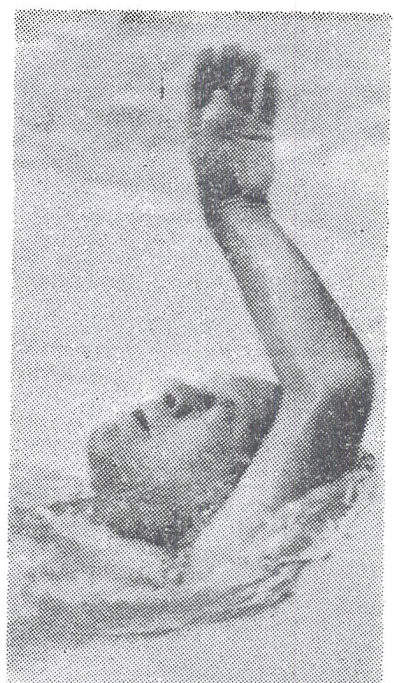
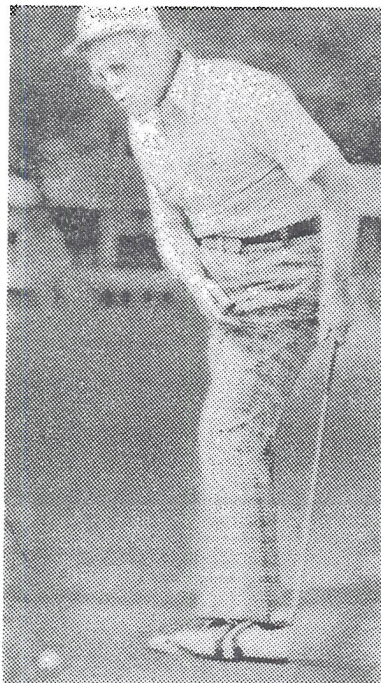
Unfortunately, however, the President himself may end up as the Number One issue of 1976. And right now, his own charts look a lot less hopeful than economic indicators do.

Can Ford prove he's not



Ford slips, he dances, he skis, he swims —

'Bozo the President'?



— but now he must prove he's not a clown.

Ford: Question of competence

COMMENTARY

By Jim Squires
Chicago Tribune

WASHINGTON — Clowns and politicians have always had a lot in common, but Gerald Ford's presidency is in danger of indelibly binding the two forever.

With a little help from the media, the opinion polls and a few of his friends, Ford has gotten himself into a predicament shared by perhaps no other American president — having to prove he is not a buffoon.

The sad but revealing story behind Ronald Reagan's commanding performance in the public-opinion polls is the wholesale lack of respect for Ford, not the overwhelming personality of Reagan.

In this town, which has never distinguished itself as a judge of quality or character, the President is becoming a joke.

The unflattering moniker of Bozo the President, bestowed on him by a New York writer, has become

so common that a standing White House joke has the Secret Service adopting it as Ford's code identification.

The biggest laugh among the traveling press during Ford's recent trip to China was a suggestion that the New York Daily News headline for Ford's meeting with tiny Chinese leader Teng Hsiao-ping would be, "Bozo meets Red dwarf."

As unkind as the press has been, the country's humorists are finding Ford an even more vulnerable target. One comedian opens his act with a suggestion that the President had to attend special classes in order to learn to read his digital watch. Another talks of a "Jerry Ford doll" — which, when wound up, runs into something.

For a short time, antics like centering footballs in public, wearing knee-length formal wear and falling down steps were accepted for what they were — human foibles of an average man not too concerned about the majesty of his office. After two kingly predecessors, it was refreshing.

Because the camera has been on Ford so much

more than on other men, it has caught more of his bad moments. Ford has managed to misstep and misstate with almost suicidal regularity.

And has been photographed ad nauseum — falling down, getting up, yawning, dancing, laughing, and in more sports poses than any athlete in America.

The result is an image of a 62-year-old man who can ski and swim, play football, golf and tennis but can't pronounce judgment, hegemony or the name of the Chinese deputy premier.

At the same time Ford has managed to accompany these little television slipups with a series of political and policy blunders that leaves no doubt they are all being pulled off by the same guy.

The Whip Inflation Now Campaign, Nelson Rockefeller's ill-fated vice presidency, the hiring of Howard "Bo" Callaway as his campaign manager all have served to arouse curiosity about that look of blankness, that half-second delay in reaction time that sometimes is evident on the President's face in television appearances.
