

NY Times

Is There a Spiro in Ford's Future?

JAN 19 1974

By Russell Baker

WASHINGTON, Jan. 19—Vice President Ford made a news splash the other day by stepping out of character. He has always been good stolid old Jerry, regular guy, who makes a virtue of having neither bark nor bite, and when he suddenly appeared in Atlantic City Tuesday sounding faintly like the Spiro Agnew of old the press naturally took notice.

His speech to a farmers' lobbying group differed from the usual bland pudding that has made him an instant success in the popularity polls. It was a spirited, provocative challenge to organized labor, to people who believe Watergate is serious business and to that toothless old dragon left behind by the New Deal, the Americans for Democratic Action.

It was, in fact, a fairly entertaining speech. Those ubiquitous faceless villains, "extreme partisans," were seen to be "bent on stretching out the ordeal of Watergate" (good imagery here: extreme partisans in torturers' masks giving victim another twist of the rack) "for their own purposes." We all know what "their own purposes" are, do we not? "Their own purposes" are evil—that's what.

It was an entertaining speech and made some lively points, and may even have had a grain of truth in it, as in its suggestion that the President's opponents will benefit if "the ordeal of Watergate" is prolonged rather than cut short. But what made it big news was that Mr. Ford does not make entertaining speeches. This is one of his political strengths. President Eisenhower made the least entertaining speeches in the history of rhetoric and became the most popular figure of his age. Mr. Agnew made the most entertaining speeches since Father Coughlin and almost wound up

OBSERVER

in jail. Had Ford made a fatal mistake?

And then, of course, it turned out not to have been Mr. Ford speaking at all. Next day's papers said the speech had been drafted at the White House by President Nixon's ghost writers.

The mouth was the mouth of Ford, but the entertainment was the entertainment of a mere writer of entertaining speeches, and the press has danced a circular minuet. It plays the story heavily because Mr. Ford speaks in an unusual diction suggesting he is turning into a tough guy. But it isn't Ford who is using this diction. It is an anonymous party on the White House payroll. Therefore, since Ford hasn't changed diction at all, the speech turns out to be news not because it means that Ford has become a tough guy but because it suggests Ford has quit being his own man, which is just the opposite.

The deception of ghostwriting is a tired old story. Everybody knows politicians don't or can't write most of the stuff they utter, but we tend to forget this in the daily flow of news so that when we see that Senator Prolix has called for new initiatives in the war on smut we cheer or get angry at Prolix, unaware that this is not the Senator's idea or call at all but that the whole business was worked up by Tom Drudge, spook, who knew it would catch the Senator some attention.

A successful politician is like a movie or play. He is a production. He needs a director, writers, lighting experts, voice coaches, costume designers, music, ad men, angels and a stage or screen.

We acknowledge this when we speak of "the Kennedy people." Nobody ever knows precisely just who "the Kennedy people" are at any given time, but we all instinctively realize that a Kennedy is not a single politician. A Kennedy is a major production like "Ben Hur."

It will not do in times like these for the politicians to continue being less than honest about who they are. People nowadays are apt to feel swindled once again when they discover that good stolid old Jerry's speech, the one that got them all fired up, wasn't altogether Jerry's speech after all.

They are likely to become curious about Jerry's eminent colleagues. That latest speech of Ted Kennedy's, for example—was that Teddy speaking, or was it his conservative script writer, or was it maybe his entertaining scriptwriter, or . . . ?

A little Naderism is in order here. Honesty in politics—that is the goal. And for solving the ghostwriter problem, what would be more logical than the politician's supplying a list of credits such as most people ignore at the start of a movie or in their theater program.

When Vice President Ford goes to Atlantic City to do "Jerry Talks Tough," everyone with a hand in the production would be openly listed. "Based on an idea by Richard Nixon," the credits might begin. "Original speech by Patrick Buchanan, with special phrases by Ronald Ziegler, Peter Flanagan and Rose Mary Woods. An original quip by Henry Kissinger used with permission of the U.S. Department of State. Mr. Ford has been lent to the White House for this speech only; there is no guarantee that he can be seen again in this role during the next three years."