

Ford's Strategy For the Presidency



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THE RECENT upswing in the popularity of Vice President Gerald Ford among both Republicans and independents, as reported by George Gallup, is a deserved tribute to Ford's patient labors in recent months in the vineyard of orthodox politics.

With President Nixon facing impeachment charges at home and conducting high-visibility foreign policy excursions abroad, the job of trudging around the country addressing gatherings of the faithful, and symbolizing nonpartisan Americanism at cornerstone-layings and college commencements, has perforce fallen very heavily on the Vice President. It is a task for which he is well-fitted, for he is a genuinely likable man and — precious quality these days — a transparently honest one.

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IN CRUELY political terms it is not Ford's charm, but the realization that he may at any moment, by virtue of Mr. Nixon's removal or resignation, become President of the United States that keeps Republican politicians flowing in and out of the Vice President's office these days. For if Ford does take over the White House at any point between now and the Republican convention of 1976, the odds on his renomination for a full term will become almost prohibitive.

If, on the other hand, Mr. Nixon survives the drive to oust him, Ford's path to the 1976 Presidential nomination becomes distinctly more tortuous. In 1976 there will be presidential primaries in a score of key

states, and Ford will have to decide whether to enter these and run the risk of defeat, or stay aloof and face the charge of cowardice.

For there will be at least two seasoned campaigners, and probably three or more, contending in those primaries: Ronald Reagan and Nelson Rockefeller, as well as Illinois Senator Charles Percy and perhaps others.

Both Rockefeller and Reagan are household names and formidable campaigners, and it takes no great effort of the imagination to picture one or both of them clobbering the relatively colorless Ford in the primaries.

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THAT IS WHY the strategy presently favored by Ford and his advisers is to risk the charge of cowardice and stay out of the primaries altogether, taking the lofty position that the Vice President "isn't a candidate" and longs only for party unity, while (with luck) Rockefeller and Reagan chew each other to bits. Then, at the ensuing convention, the delegates will presumably see — and take — the path of unity.

There are, of course, serious risks inherent in such a strategy. If any other candidate — Reagan, for example — pulls so far ahead in the primaries that he can plausibly claim to be the people's choice, it may be hard to persuade the convention to pick instead Mr. Nixon's demure Vice President, who didn't dare to enter those primaries.