

“Gerald Ford will be examined by a disenchanted electorate for his openness, his integrity, his ability to make Americans a nation of believers again.”

Gerald R. Ford: In the Role of Conciliator

By Jules Witcover

IN A SPEECH at Eastern Illinois University on May 9, Gerald Rudolph Ford Jr., then the 40th Vice President of the United States, warned of a national “crisis in confidence” bred largely by the Watergate affair.

Today, as a direct result of that tangle of deceit, and of the corruption that led to the resignation of Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, Mr. Ford becomes the 38th President of the United States and must cope with that crisis.

No one can foresee how any individual will function in the presidency. Its predictable stresses and the unpredictable events that trigger them make the White House a fearsome place for testing the mettle of men.

But it is in that very area of confidence that Jerry Ford as congressman, House minority leader and Vice President has built his support in Congress and the electorate. Himself untainted by Watergate, he is about as well positioned as any Republican to pick up the pieces of Richard Nixon’s shattered administration.

In other times, the prospect of a President Ford might have given rise to the bleakest pessimism. His service in Congress generated a reputation for integrity, but not notably for intellect or wisdom.

The tired gags attributed to the late President Lyndon B. Johnson that Mr. Ford—a one-time star lineman at Michigan—“played too much football without a helmet” and could not “walk and chew gum at the same time,” have become ready clichés about him.

It is true that his brief tenure as Vice President, during which he walked the tightrope of political diplomacy, supporting Mr. Nixon without being mindlessly loyal to the point of destroying his own credibility, served to soften the impact of such gibes.

But as he embarks on the presidency in this time of political crisis, it is Mr. Ford’s integrity to which the American people will be looking, rather than any intellectual leadership or inspiration.

It has been traditional in the United States for an ascendant Vice President to have the good will of the public when he takes over the White House in crisis. For all the recent damage done to the presidency, it still occupies a unique place in the minds of most Americans. They look to the White House for a firm hand to steer the nation past the shoals.

The last time a Vice President moved up, in November, 1963, Lyndon



Johnson, never especially popular as a national political figure, asked the people to help him in his trial, and they responded gratefully to his strong presence in the White House. When he rallied them and Congress by saying, “Let us continue,” he won overwhelming backing. He claimed the country after the trauma of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination and then compiled an unprecedented record of legislative achievement.

JOHNSON AS Vice President had conducted himself with prudence and restraint, and when his time came to lead he was able to maximize the opportunity that made him successor to a very popular President.

Mr. Ford, 61 on July 14, has likewise acquitted himself as Vice President with prudence and restraint. But he succeeds a President departing amid a storm of disfavor. Mr. Ford, unlike Johnson, cannot say “Let us continue” what went before. He must chart a new course that can rebuild public and congressional confidence, and the task cannot be overestimated.

From the Oval Office in which until now he has been only an occasional visitor, Mr. Ford will look out on a country that the national polls say is thoroughly disenchanted not only with Nixon, but with practitioners of politics generally—and with government’s ability or even willingness to serve the public interest.

He will look out on a country that, as a result of Watergate, has had its trust in the presidency severely shaken.

He will look out on a party that, engulfed in the tidal wave of revulsion against Watergate, faces severe setbacks this fall in congressional elections and a fight for survival thereafter.

He will look out on an opposition

party supremely optimistic about electing a veto-proof Congress in November, and all too aware that in Mr. Ford it now will be dealing not with a lame duck President but with the man against whom the Democrats probably will have to run in 1976.

For all of Mr. Ford’s protestations of disinterest in the White House in the months preceding Nixon’s departure, he will be the President now; barring a total collapse in performance or in image, he will be the odds-on choice for the Republican nomination two years hence.

Finally, the new President will look out on a world that does not fully comprehend the political disaster that has struck this country and a world about whose problems he has had little practical experience.

What sort of man is Gerald R. Ford Jr. as he confronts these circumstances? How will he function in the political, foreign and domestic policy fields in the presidency? And who will he select to serve at his side in the critical period ahead?

First of all, the man and his adminis-

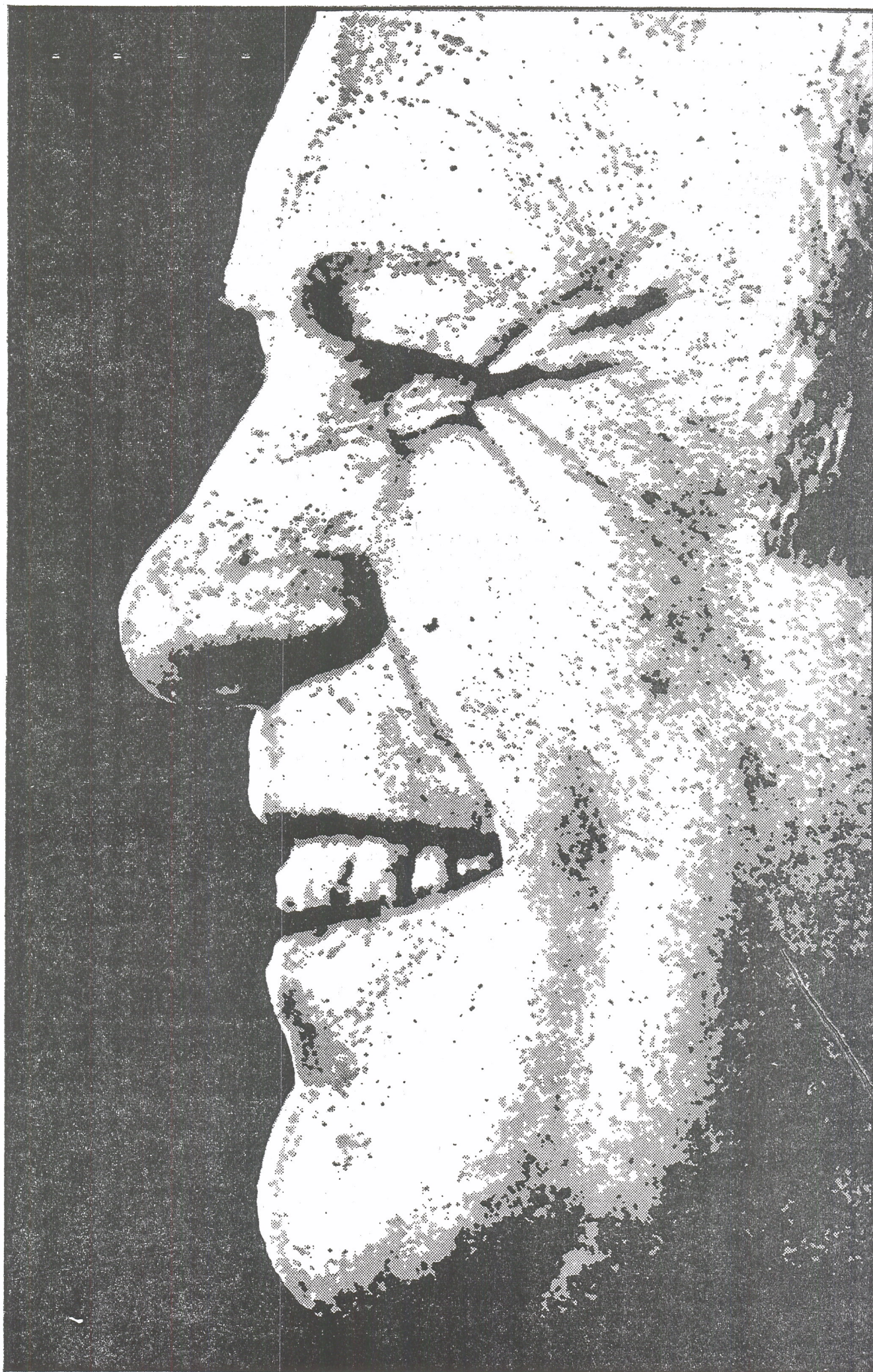
tration almost certainly will be more open than the man and the administration they succeed. By nature and practice, Mr. Ford is a more candid and direct individual than Mr. Nixon ever was in his long and controversial public career.

The new President, like the man he replaces, came to Washington as a young congressman and has been on the political scene ever since. But whereas Mr. Nixon as President practiced the politics of isolation and insulation, often looking upon Congress as an adversary, Mr. Ford has been a thoroughly congressional man and gregarious politician.

Within the GOP, his forte has been conciliation, and his popularity was attested to in the bipartisan support his nomination for Vice President received last winter. The chances are good that he will go to Congress and the country in the manner of the fence-mending politician he has always been.

Knowing full well the temper of the country—as he demonstrated in zeroing in on the crisis of confidence in his May 9 speech—he can be expected to put the restoration of faith in the presidency and government in general at the top of his list.

The men he chooses for the key jobs in his administration will tell much



about his intent. When Lyndon Johnson became President in 1963, he sustained public confidence by retaining the complete Kennedy team for a time, accommodating himself to the evident public desire for continuity.

THIS TIME, Mr. Ford obviously must make some changes, if only to demonstrate his own clear mark on the presidency as a primary step in restoring public confidence.

There is at least one man in the Nixon administration, however, who the new President desperately needs—Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger. Mr. Nixon's conduct of foreign policy is the one area of his administration that has survived Watergate—and Kissinger has been the main architect. Here, Mr. Ford can indeed say, like Johnson in 1963, "Let us continue," and reinforce public confidence by so doing.

Earlier this year, Kissinger was reported to have told several congressmen he would resign if Mr. Nixon were impeached. But in an interview with John Osborne in the New Republic in April, Mr. Ford said Kissinger had come to him after that report, denied it and said that he hoped Mr. Ford would keep him on if he became President. Mr. Ford told Osborne he would definitely do so.

In the same interview in April, Mr. Ford was represented as having reservations about the incumbent Secretary of Defense, James R. Schlesinger. They stemmed, the article said, not from policy differences with Schlesinger but with Mr. Ford's view that the secretary was ineffective in dealing with Congress.

The story cited what Ford considered Schlesinger's inability to settle a jurisdictional dispute between two influential House committee chairmen. From that, one can surmise that Vice President Ford prefers a man running the Pentagon with congressional experience, without necessarily ruling out Schlesinger, for whom he has since said he has a high regard.

One of Ford's closest and most trusted friends is his old House colleague and former Secretary of Defense, Melvin R. Laird. Laird would fit the defense requirement perfectly, but Mr. Ford has indicated he would want Laird back on the White House staff, where he served under Mr. Nixon last year.

In any event, Laird likely will be one of the strong men in the Ford administration, if he can be persuaded to return to government from a lucrative job with Reader's Digest. Like Mr. Ford, he is an old political pro with years of Hill experience, and his presence in the White House would raise the confidence level, especially among Republicans.

A Republican veteran of the Eisenhower and Nixon administrations, Bryce Harlow, also will be asked back, Mr. Ford has said. Harlow's forte has always been congressional relations. Presumably he would be occupied in that as well as the political field for Mr. Ford.

OTHERS FROM the Nixon administration Mr. Ford has said he would want are George P. Shultz, who resigned earlier this year as Treasury Secretary; Labor Secretary Peter J. Brennan; Interior Secretary Rogers C. B. Morton, and probably HUD Secretary James T. Lynn.

The White House staff is almost certain to undergo a major overhaul, however. Mr. Ford has said he would ask Mr. Nixon's chief of staff, Alexander M. Haig Jr., to stay, but many others identified primarily with the departed President will go.

Among them without doubt is Ronald L. Ziegler, Mr. Nixon's press secretary. Ziegler's credibility was destroyed by Watergate and by the release of the White House transcripts of

Watergate conversations. As a congressman, as Republican leader in the House, or as Vice President, Mr. Ford has been a frequent and comfortable user of the press conference. He has shown no reluctance to meet the press formally or informally. That alone distinguishes him from the practice in the Nixon administration.

In his Senate vice presidential confirmation hearings last December, Mr. Ford was asked directly by Sen. Claiborne Pell (R-R.I.) whether he would feel a "responsibility" to have regular press conferences if he were President.

He replied: "I certainly do. I think my friends in the House radio, television and writing press galleries will attest to the fact that I do it regularly and have done it, and it would be my intention to do it in the future."

For all his 25 years in Washington, Ford has had virtually no administrative experience, so a great deal will be at stake in his choice of a White House staff. His vice presidential chief of staff, Robert T. Hartman, 57, probably will continue in that role, at least at the start.

Hartman is a former Washington bureau chief for the Los Angeles Times. He later worked for the House Republican conference, was minority sergeant at arms of the House and then Mr. Ford's legislative assistant on Capitol Hill.

The man who may be the administrative manager of the White House staff is L. William Seidman, 53, a lawyer and accountant from Mr. Ford's home town of Grand Rapids, Mich., who was brought to Washington on a temporary basis shortly after Mr. Ford became Vice President.

Seidman's job was to organize the vice presidential staff and iron out conflicts among Ford aides from Congress, his old congressional district and newcomers added to the enlarged staff. He did so well that Mr. Ford asked him to stay on.

Mr. Ford's chief legislative aide may be Richard T. Burrell, 52, who did Capitol Hill liaison work in the first Nixon term and the Ford vice presidency, and before that served on Republican congressional staff.

ANOTHER WHITE House fixture is likely to be William E. Casselman II, who was legal counsel to Vice President Ford. Before that he was general counsel for the General Services Administration and a deputy special assistant to President Nixon for congressional relations. Casselman was a legislative aide to a Republican congressman for four years before going to GSA.

A former Democratic congressman, John O. Marsh Jr., has been Vice President Ford's assistant for defense affairs and could become a key man in that field in the Ford administration, either at the White House or the Pentagon. After four terms in the House from Virginia, Marsh was an assistant secretary of defense for legislative affairs under Secretaries Elliot L. Richardson and Schlesinger.

Another Grand Rapids friend, Philip W. Buchen, who was executive director of the Domestic Council Committee on the Right of Privacy that was Mr. Ford's special responsibility as Vice President, is a prime candidate for a key domestic policy post in the Ford White House.

So is Gwen Anderson, a former Republican national committeewoman from Washington state, who has been a public affairs and political consultant for the Vice President.

In the area of public relations and the press, the Vice President's press secretary, Paul A. Miltich, 54, likely will serve in the same capacity at the outset. He is a former Washington cor-

respondent for Michigan newspapers whose experience has been heavily congressional. The new President may want to bring in another man later with broader experience for the demanding job.

Mr. Ford's principal speechwriter, former newspaperman and Hill press aide Milton A. Friedman, 50, also is a probable carryover. Friedman for 21 years was Washington bureau chief for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, a news service, and for nearly a year press secretary to Sen. Jacob K. Javits (R-N.Y.).

On the domestic front, Mr. Ford has been a doctrinaire conservative Republican in the fields of economics and social legislation. During his vice presidential confirmation hearings, civil rights leaders like NAACP legislative chief Clarence Mitchell attacked him on grounds he "consistently tried to gut" civil rights bills and programs to help the poor.

But he has been known principally as a pragmatist. Ralph Nader's Congress Project said of him:

"Ford's vote record reflects his interpretation of his district's mandate, his frugality in domestic spending to solve domestic problems, and, above all, his pragmatic sense of voting for what he sees as the party's interests. Members of Congress who have watched Ford operate behind the scenes say he finds out the majority sentiment and adopts that as his view rather than staking out a position and trying to win the troops over."

A measure of Ford's place on the ideological spectrum is his 78 per cent rating by the conservative Americans for Constitutional Action, compared with a 25 per cent approval rating from the liberal Americans for Democratic Action.

IN AN INTERVIEW with The Washington Post while he was still Vice President, Mr. Ford said he expected that inflation and the energy shortage would be the two major domestic problems in a Ford administration.

"Double-digit inflation is unacceptable and we've got to find an answer," he said. He said he looked upon the Nixon tight-money policy as "one of those painful things that the country will accept on a temporary basis."

In the event of a Ford administration, he said then, "I don't think there would be a revolutionary change in any policy, certainly not on foreign policy; shades of difference on domestic, but nothing drastic or dramatic."

Like Mr. Nixon, Mr. Ford was perceived in his congressional years as a Cold Warrior, but he too has embraced detente with the Soviet Union, strategic arms limitation, increased trade and credits with the Russians and greater communication with the People's Republic of China, which he visited in 1972.

In his interview with *The Washington Post*, Mr. Ford said of the kind of foreign policy he would conduct as President:

"I happen to believe very strongly that detente is strengthened by the United States maintaining a high degree of military capability—strategically, conventionally.

"The fact that I believe in certain strength at this point doesn't mean I'm retreating to a Cold War position at all. I just think strength now is helpful in achieving some of the things that are sought—SALT II, mutual balanced force reduction—which if they are achieved would give us an opportunity for a reduction in our military strength, personnel-wise, limitations on our weapons, and so forth. At this critical moment, I think you have to have the strength to achieve the full benefits of detente."

Mr. Ford said that, accordingly, as President, he would "vigorously oppose" any congressional attempt at a unilateral cutback of U.S. forces in Europe.

In Congress and as Vice President, Mr. Ford has had a special interest in defense budget matters, having long served on the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. As President, that focus is likely to continue.

So is his reliance on the National Security Council structure and staff in both the defense and foreign policy fields. As Vice President, he consulted regularly with Kissinger, Schlesinger and the NSC staff, as well as his Hill friends experienced in the national security area.

In his new role as leader of the Republican Party, Mr. Ford already has laid down a clear blueprint for himself. He is an orthodox party man who believes strongly in relying on the

party professionals and the regular party organization to make and carry out political decisions and the waging of election campaigns.

In one of his most notable speeches as Vice President, Mr. Ford in March severely criticized the use of a separate campaign organization in 1972, the Committee for the Re-election of the President, and urged that future GOP presidential candidates pledge to run their campaigns through the Republican National Committee. He called Mr. Nixon's 1972 organization "an arrogant, elite guard of political adolescents" and called on his party colleagues to learn "the political lesson of Watergate" by repudiating them.

FROM THIS, it seems evident that the Republican National Committee is in for a renaissance in the Ford administration—a prospect that should endear the new President with party functionaries across the country.

And as a congressional man, Mr. Ford is likely to lean heavily on colleagues for counsel. Among his closest Hill friends have been Reps. Albert H. Quie (R-Minn.), John J. Rhodes (R-Ariz.), Barber Conable (R-N.Y.), and, somewhat surprisingly, Paul N. (Pete) McCloskey (R-Calif.), who ran against Mr. Nixon in the New Hampshire primary in 1972. A Democratic convert from Michigan, Rep. Donald W. Reigle Jr., also has been a Ford intimate.

As President, he said in *The Washington Post* interview, cooperation with Congress would be a priority matter. "I would certainly make every possible effort to expand it, improve it, build on it," Mr. Ford said.

And in the interest of starting his administration off in a bipartisan and conciliatory climate, he said, "I would probably desire" having a Democrat or Democrats in his Cabinet.

Although Mr. Ford has been on the Washington scene for more than a quarter of a century, and in the national spotlight since last fall, when he was selected to replace Agnew as Vice President, he remains a little-known quantity to most Americans.

Such obscure details as the fact that he was born in Omaha, Neb., not Gerald R. Ford but Leslie King will soon become part of the political folklore. (His mother and father were divorced when he was an infant and she remarried. Her second husband, Gerald R. Ford Sr., a small businessman in Grand Rapids, adopted the boy and gave him his name.)

So will his Hometown, U.S.A., childhood and adolescence—Eagle Scout,

captain of the high school football team, dishwasher and waiter in a local restaurant, center on the University of Michigan's national championship football teams of 1932 and 1933 who turned down a bid from the pros to go to Yale law school.

The service buffs will make much of the fact that after practicing law briefly in Michigan he served on the aircraft carrier USS *Monterrey* in the Pacific, before finally winning his seat in Congress in 1948.

The style that came to be a fixture in the House—the slow-talking, methodical man who seemed to make up in doggedness and party loyalty what he lacked in quick wit and brilliant conversation—will create new caricatures, for such is the nature of American politics.

But above all as he embarks on his tenure as the 38th Chief Executive, Gerald Rudolph Ford Jr. will be examined by a disenchanted, doubting electorate for his openness, his straightforwardness, his integrity, his ability to make Americans a nation of believers again.

The circumstances that led to his ascendancy, first as Vice President, then as President, have put a premium on his reputation as an honest man. He comes into office without great expectations for his leadership, but with widespread hope that the office will bring out the very best in the man.

That hope grows out of the American political faith that says the presidency ennobles a man and helps him rise to the challenge of the office, especially when it is thrust upon him unexpectedly.

For all the public cynicism that has been engendered by the events of the last two years, Mr. Ford can expect at least a degree of the traditional good will that greeted Vice Presidents Harry S. Truman and Lyndon B. Johnson when fate brought them into the White House in times of adversity.

How he spends that good will, and nurtures it, in the first impressionable weeks and months of his presidency will be critical; it can go a long way toward determining how well he will be able to grapple with the crisis in confidence he rightly identified as a core malady in the national psyche today.

Witcover, a veteran political correspondent for The Washington Post, is the author of books about Robert F. Kennedy, Richard M. Nixon and Spiro T. Agnew.