

... And the Foreign Challenges Ahead

The notion is current that, as a result of Richard Nixon's departure from the White House, we will somehow have an easier time of it in the world. But unhappily, this doesn't necessarily track at all.

It is one thing to note that Watergate and the prospect of losing office have distracted Mr. Nixon, undermined his credibility among foreigners as well as Americans, and prevented him from mustering the requisite support in the bureaucracy, the Congress and the country to carry his foreign policy forward. The stalemates in strategic arms talks with the Russians and in trade legislation can fairly be attributed, in considerable part, to the President's political woes. Many other matters large and small have been stacked up at his desk.

Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said Tuesday, "When questions of peace or war are considered, no foreign government should have any doubts about the way in which foreign policy will be conducted." But unless he meant that a few close aides were discreetly conducting an interregnum, it meant little. In a real sense, "questions of peace or war" are the easiest for a beleaguered President; a sense of common peril fills the gap where leadership would be otherwise. Mr. Nixon's effectiveness during the Mideast war last fall demonstrates the point.

It is quite another thing to claim, however, that the departure of the President will take up the international slack. If Gerald Ford has credibility, then he lacks experience, expertise or even a strong interest in foreign affairs. Unlike Richard Nixon, he has never had a defined, if debatable, world view. He does not project a sense of realizing how difficult and painful the choices in foreign policy are. And his honeymoon can't last long.

Mr. Ford has, to be sure, Henry Kissinger, no small asset. But in current international conditions, whether an aide's talent and legend can be an ade-

quate substitute for his chief's own performance is an open question. Such precedents as there are for weak Presidents and strong Secretaries are not very encouraging.

It needs also to be asked whether events or popular pressure or Mr. Ford's own evolving concept of how the presidency should be conducted might not lead him to assert himself personally in foreign affairs in a way that none of us can contemplate at this time. Mr. Nixon's big vote in 1972 and George McGovern's small vote are evidence enough of the American people's craving for a forceful international president. Yet Gerald Ford must know that any initiative of his own will be suspect as the product of his own untutored ambition.

It is conceivable that in not too long a time, the widely remarked weakness of the Nixon presidency in its terminal stages may loom less large than its earlier achievements in international affairs, however incomplete they were.

Mr. Ford's relationship with the other principal national security officer of the Nixon administration, Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, also needs to be weighed. He indicated some months ago that he was so dissatisfied with the way Schlesinger was handling Vietnam aid in Congress that he would let him go. His complaint seemed narrow and prideful, hardly a satisfactory basis in itself for making such an important decision.

Meanwhile, it should be apparent that no change at the White House will reduce the size and complexity of the problems with which the President and the country must deal—for all that Mr. Ford's elevation will doubtless trigger a hail of appeals for bipartisanship and rallying around.

If the Russians toyed with the possibility of exploiting one politically vulnerable President, they will be no less ready to see if another politically weak President—a man presumably eager to build a foreign policy record of his own to run on in 1976—can also be ex-

ploited. I don't say it will happen, but hardball is the name of the game.

To judge by the poor results of Mr. Ford's own vice presidential efforts to coax more Vietnam aid from Congress—supposedly an area of his special prowess—he has no magical way to bend the legislature on the issues on which congressional support is crucial to executive policy.

As for crisis management, one must wait and see. Unlike Mr. Nixon, Mr. Ford has no obsession with the personal qualities needed for passages of high international tension. He strikes me as sane and level-headed. But we as citizens do not have to apologize for wondering how each new Chief Executive will stand up under the intense and unique pressures of nuclear decision-making.

In brief, I do not think that in foreign policy terms, Gerald Ford will necessarily be a welcome deliverance. Two years of coping and coasting, while waiting for the American people to give a newly elected President a mandate of his own, may be about the best one can expect. Any effort by him to do much more could just enhance the general nervousness. No one who has a healthy respect for the pace of events and the heat on the White House can contemplate this prospect with ease.