

Ford vs. Ford

The White House currently appears as a stage on which two plays are being acted side by side, with President Ford the leading character in both. In one scenario, he earns applause for having replaced a devious, solitary, autocratic Richard Nixon with his own gregarious frankness and simplicity. In the other, he disturbs the audience with inexplicable deviations and decisions that shock and confound political friends and opponents alike.

As White House policy decisions increasingly run counter to expectations based on the President's appealing personal qualities, the glaring contradictions between promise and performance call for scrutiny. Examples of Mr. Ford's questionable decision-making abound in the first two months of his Presidency:

- After stating publicly that he would consider extending a Presidential pardon to Mr. Nixon *after* the judicial process had run its course, Mr. Ford suddenly reversed himself by granting a pre-emptive unconditional pardon for any and all crimes Mr. Nixon may have committed during his Presidency.

- Although he knew that the answers to serious questions concerning abuses of executive power in the Nixon Administration remain to be extracted from the former President's tapes and documents, Mr. Ford hastily, and without consulting Congress, the Special Watergate Prosecutor or the courts, signed a highly dubious agreement that would place these materials in Mr. Nixon's sole custody.

- Although he himself has acknowledged that Mr. Nixon was guilty of impeachable offenses, Mr. Ford approved of huge payments and privileges to the former President far beyond the requirements of law. He even authorized the continued transmission of secret intelligence reports to Mr. Nixon by military jet.

- While capitalizing in his early addresses to the nation on the theme of compromise and cooperation with Congress, Mr. Ford has now chosen an extreme partisan role on the hustings. Even allowing for verbal excesses that accompany normal last-minute appeals to the voters, Mr. Ford's extravagant predictions of dire consequences that would flow from Democratic victories raise questions about the sincerity of his appeals to unity.

- Confronted by the desperate mayors of the nation's cities, he pledged strong personal support to enactment of legislation to aid urban mass-transit; but when the bill bogged down in the House Rules Committee, he remained silent, explaining his passivity by declaring that the legislation was already a *fait accompli*. Similarly after telling Congress that it must give highest priority to national health insurance, he let the subject drop with nothing achieved.

Since Mr. Ford obviously is not wanting in Congressional experience, one explanation for these apparent contradictions is lack of personal conviction. Many of the crucial issues requiring his leadership run counter to the parochial conservatism of his pre-Presidential years in the House.

Apart from any specific policy decisions—and even more disconcerting for the long run of his stewardship—President Ford appears generally to have been slow to understand that he is not the routine inheritor of a departed Administration. He is President only because his predecessor and his entourage betrayed the public trust. In many respects, Mr. Ford has been suggesting by his actions that he is perpetuating a discredited regime.

But the American people are looking for something far better than that, for an entirely new chapter in the Presidency. What Mr. Ford needs to do, and do quickly, is to throw off the incubus of the Nixon Administration that still seems to be weighing him down, and to respond fully and freely to the nation's urgent need for wise and independent leadership.