

# President Ford's First 100 Days

The crisis beginning to envelop President Ford following his disappointing first hundred days was symbolized last week when a top White House aide privately confided to another adviser his own "mystification" at the President's failure to make even a start at building a Ford-style administration.

That presidential aide has literally spent hour after hour in conversation with Mr. Ford. But the question of a long overdue housecleaning of what is still essentially the Nixon administration was never mentioned.

It is the President's tragic failure that he has not replaced cabinet members hired by his repudiated predecessor only as administrators, while real power was held in Nixon's White House staff. The aide suffering "mystification" is not the only high-level Ford man who deeply feels this failure. "I can think of no higher political imperative than getting a new cabinet," says one senior White House aide, adding that the process has not begun.

Far from redesigning the cabinet, Mr. Ford has not finished cleansing hardcore Nixonites from the White House staff.

Lawrence Higby, personal henchman of H. R. Haldeman who was privy to the secret of Nixon's oval office taping as early as the summer of 1970, is drawing \$33,000 a year as a "special assistant" in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

The President may not know it, but powerful Republicans are infuriated by retention of hardcore Nixonite Higby, a fury having nothing to do with Higby's performance but everything to do with the President's political sagacity. Mr. Ford's seeming inability to put his own presidency ahead of fanciful obligations to the tarnished Nixon legacy is now casting doubt about his basic political judgment.

His decision to travel to Japan is a case in point. With the lameduck 93rd Congress back in session this week, Mr. Ford's departure for Tokyo, Seoul and Vladivostok one day before the session convened, astonished and angered old cronies on Capitol Hill. There is far more worry in Congress over the President's strategy for handling the economic crisis than in abetting Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's stage-setting for another trip to Peking.

Yet, bowing to the Kissinger timetable, Mr. Ford made his decision "with



By Frank Johnston—The Washington Post

not one word of serious strategy talks about the alternative," according to a White House insider. To one Republican senator, Mr. Ford was mindlessly following the scenario of the Nixon presidency's most successful policy, inappropriate though it might be today.

All this is causing some agonizing reappraisal of Donald Rumsfeld, Mr. Ford's chief of staff. Rumsfeld gets high marks for constructing a staff system that has divided power among half a dozen aides, ending the centralized, dictatorial system established by Haldeman.

But Rumsfeld is bitterly blamed by some experienced Republican politicians for being "too nice" to his boss and failing to push unpleasant alternatives to what he thinks the President wants.

Moreover, Rumsfeld's systematizing of the White House staff has had the inadvertent result of reducing the President's time for informal political strategy talk in his office, particularly with Robert Hartmann, Mr. Ford's closest aide.

As it was told us by an insider: "Bob used to hover over the President, and most of it was damn helpful to Jerry. Now he doesn't get nearly as much time."

Indeed, except for Kissinger, the President is now spending more time with OMB Director Roy Ash than any other single adviser. And that, too, is bad news for his old pals in Congress.

Ash, whose chilly personality and political clumsiness typified the later Nixon years, had been ticketed for quick exit from the administration when the new budget is ready in January. Now, however, to the consternation of Mr. Ford's old congressional friends, Ash may stay on not as budget director but in some wide-ranging White House job, whose duties would control top-level personnel.

The clear indication is that President Ford appears far more content with the established order in his inherited administration than in boldly striking out for new faces and policies essential to give it a uniquely Fordian quality. Some discerning friends of the President view this failing as the syndrome of a longtime leader of a weak Republican House minority who, as President, has not yet come to grips with his vast new powers, or how to use them.

That might help explain Mr. Ford's misguided obeisance to his disgraced predecessor, but it alarms the President's political friends and well-wishers. With recession deepening at home and war threatening again in the Middle East, they are demanding a show of authority and skill in the oval office sadly lacking today.