

Gerald Ford's America

By Anthony Lewis

GRAND FORKS, N.D.—Mr. Ford's troubles in the primaries stem in part from particular issues such as defense and farm policy. But underneath, one senses a deeper reason for his failure. He has disappointed hopes that Americans still put in the Presidency—hopes for reassurance about the system and themselves.

The hopes seem clearer out here somehow. It is a mistaken cliché for Easterners to find the real America in the heartland; struggling cities are just as much a part of this diverse country's character. But in the sparsely populated Great Plains, 600,000 in all of North Dakota, there is a special sense of people being open, direct, optimistic.

When Gerald Ford became President, he seemed to represent those old American values. He was a plain, straight Midwesterner who talked of openness. How welcome the equalities were after the twisting years of Lyndon Johnson and the crimes of Richard Nixon.

Whatever his shortcomings and his political troubles, Mr. Ford remains an immense improvement on his predecessor. Anyone who doubts that should imagine trying to make a commencement speech at this Bicentennial season with Mr. Nixon and his henchmen still in the White House. It would be a little difficult to speak of faith in the Constitution and the American dream.

"The Constitution works," Mr. Ford said when he took the oath. It had worked, and nothing can change that. But the challenge was to make it keep working.

Watergate was not an isolated event. It was the symptoms of a fundamental dislocation in the American system, the accumulation of uncontrolled power in the Presidency. People sensed all that and wanted the balance restored. After years of lawlessness, secrecy and Presidential surprise, they wanted a return to law and the constitutional order. They yearned for a renewed feeling of legitimacy.

No President would have found that an easy challenge to meet. In a bris-

ting world, with a capacity for instant conflict, very great power inevitably had to remain in the White House. The need was to show—to teach, really—that the modern Presidency could function within the old American constraints of law and democratic balance. But it was a great opportunity as well as a difficult one.

There is not much doubt about when Gerald Ford began to miss that opportunity and disappoint public hopes: just a month after he took office, when he pardoned Mr. Nixon.

What made the pardon so damaging to Mr. Ford was not the issue of Nixon the man, which was going out of the political debate anyway. It was the way it was done: suddenly, secretly, with the minimum of consultation or concern for law. The failure to get any admission of wrongdoing in exchange for the pardon left an aching sense of illegitimacy. The haste and incompetence of the affair left a legal muddle that still has the Nixon papers and tapes in litigation twenty months later.

Another significant test of what had been learned from Watergate came over the intelligence agencies. Their massive abuses, when disclosed, cried out for the traditional American remedy: a mixture of idealism, common sense and law. But the situation peculiarly required Presidential leadership, and Mr. Ford did not supply it.

The very first need was to say, simply and clearly, that some things done in the name of American national security had been wrong. It was wrong to plot assassinations or undermine the democratic political systems of other countries or harass American citizens—wrong morally and damaging to this country's interests. But Mr. Ford never found it in him to say that simple thing: Not to this day.

He did take steps to bring foreign intelligence activities under tighter Executive control. But he asked for new secrecy legislation and made a major effort, politically, to resist Congressional investigation and disclosure in the area. The message was plain: These things have to be left to the sole control of the President. It was the exact opposite of the constitutional lesson taught by Watergate.

Similarly, Mr. Ford has obscured the Vietnam's lesson that even the admittedly great Presidential power in foreign affairs must be subject to law and political checks. In the Mayaguez affair he held no meaningful consultation with Congress and ignored a statute prohibiting military action in Indochina. In Angola he tried to use covert means for a major policy initiative.

None of this, to repeat, approaches the worst excesses of the recent past: Mr. Nixon would have bombed much more than the Mayaguez targets, and concealed much more than the Angolan intervention. But Gerald Ford had a chance to be a healing President in the most profound constitutional sense, his failure has left the way open for the appeal of a Ronald Reagan. He has thrown away the enormous advantage of incumbency—the money, the aura—because he still does not seem a President.

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