

The Search For Legitimacy

By Anthony Lewis

KANSAS CITY, Mo., Aug. 15—The accepted political wisdom is that voters this year are in an anti-Washington mood. I think it is something a little different: a yearning for a restored sense of political legitimacy.

As the American system has developed, for good or ill, the Presidency is a heavily symbolic office. We have just had two Presidents who tore the fabric of legitimacy. Voters do have resentments of government in general, but the particular feeling in the background of this election is a desire for renewed confidence in the Presidency.

To put the question in those terms is to indicate the Republicans' difficulty. For one of their own, a President who had an extraordinary opportunity to restore the failing of political legitimacy in this country, has failed to inspire the confidence of country or party.

The visible recovery of the American spirit in these last two years owes something to President Ford, it should be said. He allowed the natural buoyancy of the country to work. His personality fit the occasion. We used

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to speak of his decency, but that is an inappropriate word for someone so insensitive to human suffering. What did count was that, in comparison with his two historical predecessors, he was sane.

Where Mr. Ford has failed is in understanding. After Vietnam and Watergate, Americans were hungry for reassurance about themselves. The situation cried out for a leadership that reasserted the old American values, moral and legal, at home and abroad. But Mr. Ford did not understand the lessons of Watergate and Vietnam.

His pardon of Richard Nixon did such lasting damage precisely because it showed a failure of understanding. The real issue in the pardon was not the possibility of conspiracy; it was Mr. Ford's utter insensitivity to the need for—the country's longing for—a reaffirmed commitment to law. That is why polls show a majority of people still troubled by the pardon: It offended sensibilities in a way that can never be undone.

On the foreign side, Mr. Ford has been even more damagingly insensitive to the needs of the historical moment.

After Vietnam it took no great insight to realize that the United States above all had to regain confidence in itself. The situation called for calm leadership, for maturity, for reassurance about the power of American ideas. Instead, the President allowed Henry Kissinger to go on whining about American weakness.

At the end in Vietnam, and again in Angola, Mr. Ford endorsed the preposterous Kissinger argument that America would have no credibility in the world unless it got more deeply involved in a losing cause. It was the opposite of a way to rebuild national confidence. Only Congress prevented further United States involvement in those disasters—so that Mr. Ford can now talk about peace—as only Congress saved him from the self-inflicted wound of deflationary economic policy.

The shrill, unconfident tone of the Ford-Kissinger foreign policy has had grave consequences. Talk constantly about American weakness and Soviet might, and you will naturally arouse a public spirit of fear and jingoism. In that mood the compromises necessary to a realistic foreign policy become difficult.

Mr. Ford has trapped himself and the country in just such a vicious circle. His fearful talk about our world position opened the way for Ronald Reagan. The emergence of a strident right-wing force in American politics inhibited essential steps abroad, notably a further strategic arms agreement with the Soviet Union—one that, ironically, would doubtless have helped the President politically.

It is a great mistake to look at a Presidential election in terms of tactics only: to say that someone has failed because of a bumble here or there. Voters base their judgments on deeper perceptions, right or wrong. Gerald Ford is in trouble—amazing trouble for an incumbent President—not so much because people disapprove of his particular decisions as because they do not feel him to be a President.

And there is the dilemma the Republicans face in Kansas City. If the problem were only to fit an anti-Washington feeling, then Ronald Reagan would be a logical alternative. But if the mood underlying this election is a longing for political legitimacy, a cardboard candidate will hardly do.

The odd result of the Republican chaos is that Jimmy Carter, an outsider, now seems by comparison a Presidential figure. Of course his apparent advantage could vanish in the campaign. But so far he has understood very well Americans' desire for reassuring confidence in their President.