

Part 10/14/73

The Choice of Mr. Ford

For a man who spends so much time instructing the American public about what is and is not "appropriate"—Mr. Nixon's favorite word—the President has demonstrated an abysmal failure to comprehend the true nature of the occasion to which he addressed himself Friday night. You would not have known from the festive glitter and spirit of "fun" in the East Room that the President was announcing his choice for the 40th Vice President of the United States because the man he had twice chosen to be the 39th Vice President had two days earlier left the office in disgrace and been convicted of a felony. You would not have known that this was only the latest evidence of corruption in high places and of a cynical breach of public trust to which a benumbed electorate had been treated over many months. Again, you would not have known that the somber duty of the President, confronted with a crisis of confidence in government, was to offer a candidate for consideration of both houses of Congress—not to preside over a ceremony combining the more synthetic elements of a political convention with the trappings of a state occasion at least worthy of the ruling house of Ruritania. And finally, you would not have guessed from the quick and automatic effusions of legislators in both parties that the 25th Amendment to the Constitution, which authorizes the President to fill vice-presidential vacancies, also imposes upon Congress a heavy responsibility for subjecting his choice to serious, sustained scrutiny by way of introducing some measure of public participation in a decision of such enormous potential consequence.

We are not suggesting that the President needed to be lugubrious—only serious. And we are not suggesting that the members of Congress should have been obstructive—only restrained. We are suggesting only that there was an opportunity to embark upon precisely the "new beginning" that the President proclaimed. But for such a "new beginning" to have meant anything, it would have had to mean a marked departure from the cynicism, contrivance, hypocrisy and politics-as-usual which have got us into so much trouble in the recent past and which were so dishearteningly in evidence in Friday night's ceremony, in the so-called selection process, and in the legislators' reflexive response. The President and his congressional clique (on both sides of both aisles) would have us believe that Mr. Nixon seriously solicited suggestions from a broad cross-section of his party; that

he took a crammed suggestion box off to Camp David; that he deliberated long and hard overnight to determine who was the one man in the nation best fit to assume the office of the presidency on a moment's notice; and that all this led ineluctably to the name of—Gerald Ford.

Will no one be straightforward about what has been done? It is true that traditionally our Vice Presidents are selected in a reckless and haphazard manner, under heavy pressure of time and perceived political needs not necessarily related to fitness for the job. And it is equally true that by this tradition, Mr. Ford is no less qualified than many who have been chosen. But that is just the point. Both the process established by constitutional amendment for replacement of a Vice President in mid-term and the dismal circumstances that culminated in Mr. Agnew's resignation conferred upon the President an opportunity—indeed an obligation—to break free of that sorry tradition and to choose a man for no other reason than his genuine fitness and distinction. And if one is to be straightforward, it must be said that Gerald Ford is not such a man. For over 25 years he has pursued a congressional career of modest ambition and modest achievement. At no point has he shown a keen or impressive grasp of the complexities of hard questions. Pedestrian, partisan, dogged—he has been the very model of a second-level party man. It is no accident that over this quarter century of unremarkable service in the House, he has never been put forward seriously as a candidate for the presidency—or laid serious claim to the office on his own behalf.

The interesting thing about this characterization of Mr. Ford is that it is shared privately by many of those legislators who publicly hailed his nomination in the most extravagant terms the other night. Partly this is because the old congressional back-scratching machine works round the clock, and partly it is because the Democrats—and some Republican aspirants to higher office—found enormous comfort in the nomination of a man who, by contrast with some other prospects, represents so minimal a threat to their chances in 1976.

There is nothing laudable or uplifting about this congressional response. What makes it the more dispiriting is the near certainty that it was precisely in anticipation of such a self-serving, conventional and narrowly political response that the President made his choice. So cynicism is compounded. We are back where we began.