

Always the 'President's Agent,'

By David Broder

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This is the second time—not the first—that Gerald R. Ford, President Nixon's choice for Vice President, has been called on by his party in a time of crisis.

The first occasion was almost nine years ago, when the disastrous election defeat of 1964 caused some Republicans to wonder about the survival of their party. In that crisis, Ford emerged

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as the new leader of the embattled remnant of House Republicans.

The way in which he handled his job as Minority Leader, particularly in those years between 1965 and 1968 when he was calling the signals for congressional Republicans without guidance from a Republican President, was being re-examined yesterday as a guide to the qualities Ford brings to his new post, a heartbeat from the Oval Office.

On the positive side, Ford proved flexible enough in his own tactics to achieve a high degree of voting unity in a party shattered by the quarrels of the previous presidential year. He launched a sustained public relations drive that won praise for openness from a previously critical press.

His leadership efforts and personal campaigning were credited with being an important ingredient in bringing the GOP back from a crisis nearly as great as today's Watergate-Agnew scandals to a sweeping mid-term victory in 1966 and a presidential win in 1968.

On the other hand, when Ford took on a public role as a spokesman for his party, he displayed a penchant for foot-in-mouth disease that disconcerted some

Ford Now to Get

the Title

of his colleagues. Within his first year as Minority Leader, he had embroiled himself in several public quarrels, not only with President Johnson but with his Senate counterpart, Everett McKinley Dirksen, and several other House Republicans.

He also displayed a readiness to back off from programmatic conflicts with the entrenched conservative wing of the congressional

party that discouraged some of his original backers in the fight for Minority Leader. The "constructive Republican alternatives" he promised proved to be more rhetorical than substantive in many instances.

And, finally, when President Nixon took office, Ford reverted to being a presidential agent, rather than an independent leader, with an alacrity that made some wonder how comfortable he was in any other role.

Ford himself on Friday night analogized his political record to that of his college football days. "I was a lineman," he said, "I liked to do the blocking and tackling." J. F. Ter Horst, chief of The Detroit News Washington bureau, who has covered Ford for a quarter-century, noted in a profile yesterday that Ford was still viewed as "more of a center than a quarterback—the kind of man who would plug the line as often as asked."

A. Robert Kleiner, Democratic chairman of Ford's home district, the Fifth District in Michigan, put it more bluntly yesterday when he said that "people here generally consider Jerry kind of stupid—a plodder, a nice guy, but no great brain."

Mr. Nixon, in his speech nominating Ford Friday

night, set forth three criteria he had used in selecting Spiro T. Agnew's replacement. The new Vice President, he said, "must be qualified to be President . . . must be one who shares the views of the President on the critical issues of foreign policy and national defense . . . and must be an individual who can work with members of both parties in the Congress."

In an interview yesterday, Stephen H. Hess, a former Nixon staff member, Nixon biographer and author of a forthcoming Brookings Institution study of presidential qualifications, said Ford appears to satisfy two of Mr. Nixon's explicit criteria—and some that the President did not state publicly.

Hess said that Ford's "presidential qualifications are still unproven after 25 years," but that he met both of the President's other standards.

"He has gone right down the line with Nixon on all the issues," Hess said, "and he is a very popular fellow on Capitol Hill."

The Nixon biographer said Ford was an "absolutely logical choice" for the post, because he shores up Mr. Nixon in his "two areas of weakness—in Congress and in the Republican Party."

"It was nonsense to think Nixon was going to name his 1976 successor now,"

Hess said. "He doesn't want anyone on the scene who is going to upstage him. He was in the reverse position in the second Eisenhower administration, and saw how attention shifted from Eisenhower to him, as Ike came to the end of his term and Nixon became the new party leader. He was not about to encourage that happening to him."

Hess also expressed skepticism that Ford would provide the "new beginning" that Mr. Nixon proclaimed in his Friday night speech, and members of Congress in both parties who discussed Ford's role as Minority Leader from 1965 to 1968 said that history made them skeptical, too.

Fore was elected in January, 1965, over Charles A. Halleck of Indiana, who had held the post for six years. The secret-ballot 73-to-67 victory was analyzed by political scientist Robert L. Peabody as being less of an ideological struggle (both Ford and Halleck were moderate conservatives) than a revolt of junior Republicans against the elders whose ranks had been thinned by the 1964 landslide.

The impetus for the Ford campaign came from an activist group of younger House members, somewhat to the liberal side of their party. They included Reps. Albert H. Quie of Minnesota, John B. Anderson of Il-

linois, Donald Rumsfeld of Illinois (now ambassador to NATO), and Thomas B. Curtis of Missouri (who recently served briefly as head of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting).

The ringleaders of the movement were Robert P. Griffin of Michigan, now the Senate Minority Whip, Melvin R. Laird of Wisconsin, now the president's domestic adviser, and Charles E. Goodell of New York, who went on to the Senate and fell victim to a 1970 conservative "purge" effort in which Agnew served as the administration's executioner.

Ford's platform and promise was greater involvement for rank-and-file members, and end to the traditional alliance of Republicans and conservative Southern Democrats, and development of a "constructive" Republican alternative to the Johnson Great Society legislation.

Almost from the moment of election, Ford encountered resistance from the House Old Guard and gave ground.

Rep. Peter H. B. Frelinghuysen of New Jersey, Ford's candidate, failed to defeat veteran Rep. Leslie C. Arends of Illinois for Whip, and Ford's ally, Goodell, then backed away from challenging Rep. John J. Rhodes of Arizona for the Policy Committee chairmanship, and instead took a face-saving job which Ford created

for him as head of a "planning and research" committee.

Despite these setbacks, Ford set out to create a more "positive image" for the Republican minority by developing Republican proposals on health insurance, aid to education, voting rights and other issues. Many of those early efforts suffered from insufficient staff work, and most were either buried or co-opted by the swollen Democratic congressional majorities, leaving Ford and his Republican followers frustrated. But in those programs can be found the seeds of many of the Nixon administration's revenue-sharing, manpower and other domestic programs.

Ford's record on the public relations side of his job—to which he attached significance at least equal to that of legislative leadership—was similarly equivocal.

Taking office after the Goldwater campaign, in which the press had displayed unprecedented support for the Democratic nominee, Ford won over many reporters by assiduously promoting the importance of vigorous two-party competition at an endless series of small breakfast, lunch and dinner gatherings.

More publicly, he teamed with Dirksen at weekly news conferences designed

to publicize Republican views on the television network news programs.

In stepping out front, however, Ford suffered many a misstep. He engaged in angry exchanges with Johnson on civil rights and Vietnam policy, with most observers doubtful that the Minority Leader had come off best. More damaging, probably, were the frequent occasions on which Dirksen publicly chided his House colleague for such supposed gaffes as accusing the administration of "shocking mismanagement" of the Vietnam war or calling that struggle "Johnson's war."

Ford's repeated calls, during the period when he was a major Republican spokesman, for intensified American air and sea attacks on North Vietnam brought him criticism not only from the increasing number of doves within his party, but from other tacticians like Laird, who tried unsuccessfully to persuade him that Republicans should not replace the incumbent administration as the "war party" in people's minds.

Nonetheless, Ford won the kind of vindication politicians value most when Republicans scored a 47-seat gain in the 1966 election. Despite the two later victories of his long-time friend, Mr. Nixon, Ford was never able to achieve his personal dream of seeing a Republican

House majority elect him Speaker. Republicans today hold only five more seats than they did in 1966, and before his nomination as Vice President, Ford had talked with friends of retiring in 1976.

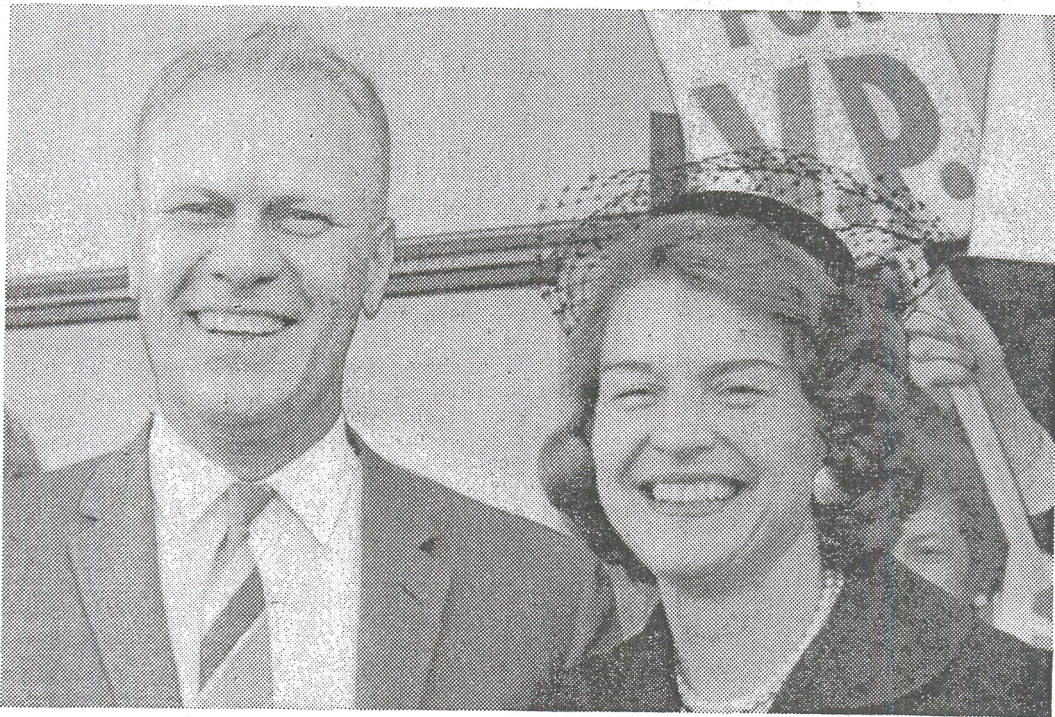
More substantively, Ford has seemed to many colleagues in both parties to be accepting a more limited role for himself with every passing year. He works as hard as any member of Congress lining up votes, but his self-defined goal has seemed to his colleagues to be to serve the President, not set the legislative policy for his party.

As one thoughtful Republican colleague said yesterday: "Initially, he came to power with support of a great many of us in the House who were looking for a change from the old leadership. Progressively, we have come to feel he has not performed as we hoped. That is not to gainsay for one moment his charm and his genuine talent for personal relations. But, increasingly, he has treated his job exclusively as being the President's agent."

He is now moving to a job where his assignment will unmistakably be to be the President's man-in-waiting. Whether that new title qualifies Ford more for the presidency than his old one is a question that only time—or circumstance—can answer.



Points in Rep. Gerald R. Ford's career—reading mail in



his office as freshman congressman, 1949, left; with wife, Elizabeth, at 1960 GOP convention center,



Associated Press

and with the man he would succeed at a 1972 luncheon.