

International Reaction to Gerald Ford

How does Rep. Gerald R. Ford measure up as a potential counter-weight against Soviet leader Leonid I. Brezhnev in a future world crisis? Or against Chinese Premier Chou En-lai?

To most Americans such questions may sound preposterously irrelevant. But to many foreigners, especially in allied nations, the questions are profoundly serious, very disturbing, and according to some early press reaction, even frightening.

Western Europeans in particular are acutely aware, as few Americans are, that their fate literally may hang on the split-second sagacity and statesmanship of an American President. That realization was thrust upon them as a shock in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis that raised an imminent threat of nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Normally, questions about the international competency of an American Vice President never even arise in time for the outside world to express its views with any chance for impact, as the selection comes too swiftly in political conventions. Ford's confirmation process breaks that pattern.

The Mideast war now under way automatically intensifies the anxieties of other nations about the quality of world leadership for dealing with global emergencies. While Americans are preoccupied with the domestic implications of President Nixon's nomination of Gerald Ford to succeed to the vice presidency, the outside world is looking at what is in it for them.

On Monday, the Guardian, of London, took a quick look at the implications and reached a dismayed conclusion in an editorial acidly entitled, "After a Crook, a Mediocrity."

American political analysts have focused on the advantages for President Nixon in avoiding a battle over replacing Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, by selecting a domestically noncontroversial "caretaker" successor, whose designation simultaneously may help bridge the turbulent gulf between the White House and Capitol Hill.

But the takeoff point for international reaction, as the Guardian editorial and other foreign commentary illustrates, is strikingly different.

"Mr. Ford is totally unsuited to be the leader of the most powerful nation in the world," the Guardian said bluntly; "His record as the leader of the Republicans in the House of Representatives is undistinguished . . ."

The newspaper's appraisal continued:

"Mr. Ford has neither charisma nor executive experience. He lacks flair, imagination, and authority. Unlike the Republican leader in the Senate he has failed to try to stamp his own ideas on the administration's policies but instead has faithfully followed the Nixon line. He would be a bad choice under any circumstances but in the present situation his nomination is inexcusable."

What provoked this unusually harsh outburst from a very pro-American journal was unusual concern that the

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Ford nomination carries a higher than ordinary risk that he one day might become President.

"If, as expected," the Guardian said, "Mr. Ford is approved by Congress he is going to be significantly nearer to the presidency than the proverbial heartbeat. Legal as well as medical developments could still overtake Mr. Nixon because although a Watergate impeachment remains improbable, it is not impossible."

A less dire, but also troubled, outlook was expressed Monday by the Times of London.

In an editorial entitled, "President Nixon Plays Safe," the Times said:

"Most vice presidents have been chosen for reasons largely unconnected with the national interest"—meaning political factors—"and America is lucky that the absurdities of the job have been exposed with relative infrequency."

Because the President "did not have to think of his own election," the Times said, an appeal by him "to put country above party and sectional interest would probably have been successful" but "Mr. Nixon did not pose the challenge."

Ford, the British newspaper said, "represents the better side of conservative middle America" and "is probably the right man to pour oil on the troubled water of domestic politics." However, it said, "the most important consideration" is "whether he is the right man to be President."

The newspaper described Ford as "a worthy and honest man" who "is liked

and respected but his limitations are well known."

"The United States now faces several years of extremely difficult adjustment to the new pattern of world politics. Apart from the immediate dangers of the Middle East war there is the long-term task of reshaping relations with the Soviet Union, Europe, China, Japan and Latin America, where the Chilean disaster may still have repercussions.

"All this requires more than diplomatic negotiations . . . It requires sensitive minds with the sort of experience in foreign affairs that cannot be gained from a few briefings by officials or a few hasty trips abroad . . ."

The Times added, "Fortunately the lines have already been set, and with Dr. Kissinger in the State Department there will be no lack of momentum . . . If Mr. Nixon survives for his full term the right vice president could be a great asset. If he does not, the wrong vice president could be a disaster . . ."

In its on-the-other-hand caveat, the Times said, "Mr. Ford is unlikely to be a disaster, and he could well surprise everyone by surpassing the rather limited expectations with which he starts." The Times, in other words, along with many others abroad, is aching to be surprised, while it fears the worst.

Each foreign nation inevitably will be scrutinizing Ford's 25 years in Congress, in search of his voting record on its own national interests.

Ford is essentially unknown to the international community; public opinion polls indicate he is a virtually unknown quantity even to a majority of Americans. As a result, most Americans, as well as most foreigners, will be making their first assessment of him on the basis of the forthcoming congressional hearings on his nomination.

These hearings, the first for a prospective vice president, will be most surprising if they produce, in Ford's case, a projection of conceptual thoughts about the state of the world which can supply assuring insight on how he might perform as a President.

Not even Ford's warmest admirers credit him with profound capacity. He is regarded instead as an amiable, loyal plodder, geared to domestic vote-rallying, for whom questions on international affairs are more likely to be an obstacle course than an opportunity.

No predecessor has had to face a similar public hurdle with the world looking in on him. The challenge may be disconcerting on both sides.