

*William S. White*

# Gerald Ford: The Man to Beat in '76

The current spate of talk that Gerald Ford will be only an obedient "caretaker" Vice President and thus pretty surely out of it for the 1976 Republican presidential nomination has a certain important shortcoming. It is nonsense.

He will be very far from out; far more likely he will be the man to beat. What might be called the present devaluation of the currency of Gerald Ford, President Nixon's choice to succeed to the vice presidency vacated by Spiro Agnew's forced resignation, proceeds from three sets of people.

One set is formed of those Republicans who themselves want the 1976 nomination. They are thus assuring everybody in sight that good old Gerry is only going into the vice presidency as a very temporary stand-in. They are of course doing what comes naturally.

The second group that is already engaged in burying Ford's political future is filled with honest partisan malice. It is made up of Democrats who, though quite sensibly not willing to concede that Ford would be a tough opponent in November 1976, are nevertheless far from certain that he wouldn't be. They too are only doing what comes naturally.

The third set that is busily marking down the shares in Gerald Ford, Inc. are mainly journalists. These are not arguing so much from partisan or ideo-

logical considerations. They just don't understand much about Congress and specifically they underestimate the pre-convention power to gather up delegate votes that can be exercised from the Capitol by a truly savvy party floor leader such as Ford has long been. (Barry Goldwater did it in 1964; and he was not even a member of the leadership.)

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This third set of skeptics is far more impressed by, say, some articulate Assistant Secretary of State than by a congressional patriarch—in this case Ford—whose muscle in the world of reality is about 10 times that of any Cabinet officer so long as the patriarch knows how to use that influence.

Ford knows exactly how to use it; in fact for years has done so, and will not altogether lose it even when in due course he is confirmed by the House

and Senate as Vice President and so changes his hat.

The negative things being said about him are that he lacks "glamour" — which is totally correct — and that he lacks the quality of real leadership — which is totally incorrect to those who over the years have seen his operations in the House.

As to "charisma," its absence may turn out to be rather for better than for worse. Many fairly acute politicians believe the people are very tired of both charisma and its opposite, as currently represented by the lonely and withdrawn attitudes of Mr. Nixon.

The doubters call Ford "the All-American boy." But while he would not wow them in Berkeley there is an awful lot of Toledo out there — an awful lot of country in which a quietly competent, unstrident and strictly "square" presidential candidate might look pretty good three years hence.

But will Ford "really want" the nomination, after all? Well, did Harry Truman, another Midwestern square so long presented as only an absent-minded afterthought by Franklin Roosevelt, intended only to keep the vice presidential chair warm for a while, "really want" the nomination later on? Party forces of immense power tried to take it from him — and history knows how far they got.

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