

John Osborne

Gerald Ford: Looking to The Future

*Pos
4/13/74*



Gerald Ford continues to say publicly and in private that he expects to be Vice President and expects Richard Nixon to be President of the United States until January 20, 1977. The Vice President also continues to say that he has no intention of running and no plan to run for the presidency in 1976. But he concluded some weeks ago that it was foolish to go on pretending that there is no possibility that he, the first Vice President who was appointed to the office, may become President by succession before Mr. Nixon's second term is finished and may be the Republican nominee in 1976. . . .

What follows is an account of his thinking as I've been led to understand it. This report is presented solely upon my authority, and readers will just have to assume and believe that I haven't made it up out of nothing.

Of course the Vice President thinks about a mid-term succession to the presidency. He doesn't expect it to happen, he doesn't want it to happen, but he realizes that it could happen. This being so, he naturally thinks about who he'd want to have with him in a Ford administration and at a Ford White House if it does happen. His vision of a Ford Cabinet is far from complete but it is fairly precise so far as his thinking about it has gone. He is certain, he has been assured, that Henry Kissinger would be his Secretary of State. He has said publicly that he considers Kissinger to be "a superb Secretary of State" and he really does. Kissinger was recently understood and reported to have told several members of Congress that he could no longer serve effectively and would resign if President Nixon were impeached or otherwise compelled to leave office. Kissinger immediately got in touch with the Vice President and

assured him that the report was erroneous. Kissinger said he would be happy to remain as Secretary of State if Ford became President and hoped that Ford would allow him to remain. Ford assured Kissinger that he would be not only allowed but asked to remain.

There's George Shultz, who recently resigned as Secretary of the Treasury and expects to leave office as soon as a successor is confirmed. Ford thinks Shultz is a great public servant who has been a tremendous asset to the administration and the country. Ford as President would want and welcome Shultz back in government, at the Treasury or elsewhere, if he were willing to return. The Vice President esteems Secretary of Labor Peter Brennan and would want him to stay. Ford thinks Rogers Morton has been an excellent Secretary of the Interior and would hope to keep him in that office. Ford is aware that James Lynn, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, has an excellent reputation. The Vice President assumes that Lynn deserves the reputation and would retain the office if he wants to. The Vice President hasn't seen enough of Transportation Secretary Claude Brinegar and doesn't know enough about him to know whether he'd be asked to remain.

The Nixon Cabinet member with the big question mark over his name is Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger. Ford thinks Schlesinger is in many respects an excellent Secretary of Defense. He admires Schlesinger as a person and as an official. He agrees with Schlesinger's policies (although,

quite apart from the information on which this report is based, I'm not certain that the Vice President agrees entirely with the administration's and Schlesinger's approach to strategic arms limitation and negotiation). Ford's reservation about Schlesinger has to do with Congress. In the Vice President's opinion, Schlesinger doesn't understand Congress and doesn't know how to deal with Congress. Ford holds that one of any administration's biggest problems in the foreseeable future is going to be dealing with Congress on defense matters and that an effective Secretary of Defense has to know how to deal with Congress or, if he doesn't know, have somebody at Defense who does know how. Ford spent most of the last week of March working on a problem in Congress that, in the Vice President's opinion, Schlesinger simply didn't know how to handle and was not equipped to handle. The problem was how to resolve a serious controversy between Chairman F. Edward Hebert of the House Armed Services Committee over which of the two committees should determine the level of U.S. military assistance to South Vietnam. Hebert's committee had authorized \$1.6 billion in the current fiscal year and had attempted to nullify the Appropriations Committee's vote to cut it to \$1.1 billion. The Nixon administration wanted \$1.6 billion and was afraid that it wouldn't get approval of even \$1.1 billion if

The writer is the White House correspondent for The New Republic from which this article is excerpted

opponents of aid to South Vietnam joined with defenders of the Appropriations Committee's prerogatives to block any amount. Ford realized at the end of the week that he hadn't resolved the controversy but he felt that he'd done more to bring Mahon and Hebert into agreement than Schlesinger and his people could have done. The President thought the issue was very important and Ford agreed. The Vice President felt that with his work on it he'd done more to earn his pay than with anything else he'd done since he succeeded Spiro Agnew in the vice presidency last December 10. Ford was a member of Congress for 25 years, so it's not surprising that the experience left him in some doubt about Schlesinger at Defense.

Ford has also thought about the staff he'd want with him at the White House. He knows who among his present staff of more than 40 he'd take with him into the presidency. One of them is Robert Hartmann, who worked for him in Congress and is the Vice President's chief of staff. Ford has concluded, and understands that Hartmann agrees, that Hartmann isn't up to staff management on either a vice presidential or presidential scale. L. William Seidman, a friend, lawyer and accountant from Ford's home town of Grand Rapids, Michigan, has been surveying the Vice President's staff needs on a temporary assignment and has just agreed to join and manage the permanent staff. President Ford would want Seidman on his White House staff. Another Grand Rapids friend whose name comes up in this connection is Philip Buchan, who was Ford's first

law partner and for many years has been among Michigan's and Grand Rapids' leading attorneys. Buchan considers himself to be on temporary and part-time duty with Ford, setting up a staff to draft proposals for the protection of citizens' privacy. He'd probably wind up with President Ford. Bob Orbin, a New York writer of material for comedians—Red Skelton has been an Orbin client—has joined Ford's staff as a provider of the light some touch and he'd be in demand at a Ford White House.

Former Congressman, Defense Secretary and White House Counsellor, Melvin Laird, who recently left Mr. Nixon for the *Reader's Digest*, an outgoing Counsellor Bryce Harlow would be asked to return to the White House staff under President Ford. He understands that both of them have had enough of public employment for awhile and would be reluctant to resume it. But the Vice President is confident that he as President would be in a position to ask many people, Laird and Harlow included, to do things that they may not particularly want to do. A Nixon assistant who definitely would not be asked to stick around is Press Secretary Ronald Zie-

gler. An assistant who would be asked to stay is Gen. Alexander Haig, who succeeded H. R. Haldeman as President Nixon's staff chief last May. Ford thinks that Haig is a great manager and that he's done a tremendous job for Mr. Nixon in staving off staff collapse and chaos under Watergate pressures. Just how Bob Hartmann, William Seidman and Gen. Haig would fit into one White House staff isn't clear. . . .

Vice President Ford's notion of how he as President would use Gen. Haig provides an insight into how President Nixon uses Haig and handles himself. Ford is under the impression that Mr. Nixon takes up so much of Gen. Haig's time in small talk, jawing away at him in the Oval Office or in the President's hideaway quarters in the Executive Office Building, that Haig the superlative manager doesn't have enough time to manage. Ford would leave

Haig alone to do his intended job and absorb no more of his time than the job requires him to spend with the President. Ford is a pleasant, easy, surprisingly facile conversationalist in his off hours. But he doesn't like small talk in business hours. It bothers and offends him and he thinks the President is much too given to it. Although in his experience the President's small talk is always about big things, in Ford's opinion it can and does waste a lot of other people's time. Ford has heard that the President and Ron Ziegler spent a lot of time with each other after Watergate began to overwhelm the presidency last year. The Vice President has the impression now, however, that Mr. Nixon wants and demands much less of Ziegler's company than he did for a while. Ford, as previously indicated, could and would do entirely without Ziegler's company. Recent reports that he doesn't get as much time with the President as he needs and would like to have genuinely puzzle Ford. The hours that he's had to spend with the President, mostly listening to Mr. Nixon talk about this and that, have on a few occasions driven the Vice President close to distraction. . . .

Ford doesn't quarrel with journalists, among them some of the best political reporters in the business, who write after traveling with him on his rounds of party fund-raisers, press conferences and speeches to Republican groups that he's running hard for the GOP presidential nomination in 1976. He realizes that he's behaving as if he were after the nomination and that it's probably asking too much of the reporters who trail him about the country to expect them to believe that his sole interest is in doing what he can to save the Republican Party and its candidates from disaster in the 1974 election. His thinking about 1976 encompasses a possibility that inhibits him from flatly and conclusively ruling out the nomination for himself—something he has not done and doesn't intend to do. The envisioned possibility is that the leading active candidates—Rockefeller, Reagan, Percy come to his mind—may be in such close competition for the nomination that the 1976 convention will be threatened with deadlock and ruinous division. What if Vice President Ford or President Ford, as the case may be is then offered the nomination and urged to accept it for the party's sake? Ford foresees that it would be hard indeed, perhaps impossible, for him to refuse the nomination in such an event. The cynic who will inevitably deride this projection as a tricky cover for Ford's actual purpose and ambition may be right, of course. All I know is what I'm told, and that is that this is the one and only circumstance in which Gerald Ford might accept the 1976 nomination. . . .