

Joseph Alsop

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The Ford White House: A Crisis of Authority

The President's press conference was a doughy effort to regenerate the hopeful atmosphere of his first month in office. As a practical matter, however, the effort is unlikely to succeed—partly because it is becoming increasingly clear that President Ford does not yet have a firm grasp of his own situation.

To begin with, he seems to have been taken in by all the superficial twaddle about his "honeymoon" with Congress and the country. But the new President was not really welcomed for himself. He was welcomed as a likeable man who had replaced a man whom no one liked. What was called a "honeymoon," in fact, was mainly a nationwide sigh of relief.

To go on with, the new President was rather plainly deluded by the fashionable nonsense that began to be talked about his awe-inspiring office in the Johnson and Nixon administrations. Hence all and sundry were informed that we were now going to have an "open" White House, which would also mark the end of the "imperial presidency."

Yet any fool ought to be able to see that the modern White House can never be "open." All Presidents are politicians, and all successful politicians keep their own counsel until they think the time is ripe to speak. In the later twentieth century, moreover, every American President has to carry a huge, mixed bag of life-and-death responsibilities which cannot be success-

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fully discharged in a permanent babble of loose talk.

At the beginning of this century, President Theodore Roosevelt was bitterly criticized for his un-neighborly decision to put a sturdy fence around the White House grounds. Even after that, until the onset of the second World War, the fence still remained low enough to be scaled by any reasonably athletic youngster. But in our very different era, does anyone think it would now be safe to go back to that kind of "open" White House?

What has happened to the physical White House is in truth exactly comparable to what has happened to the policy-making White House; and the process is irreversible. It is the same process, moreover, that has necessarily led to the great increase in presidential power implied in that silly phrase, "imperial presidency."

President Ford, thank God, has jettisoned a lot of the cheaply grandiose trappings that some of his predecessors seemed to enjoy. But he cannot jettison the increased power of his of-

fice for the simplest of reasons. Ours is a presidential government. It cannot work without a strong White House. And throughout the last 50 years, the areas of governmental action—and therefore of needed White House action—have been vastly, continuously and unavoidably increased by all sorts of strategic, economic and world-political developments.

Right here is President Ford's main problem. The outlook for his presidency is not bad just because he showed himself a bad tactician in the manner and the timing of his predecessor's pardon. Instead, the outlook is bad, at least for the moment, because President Ford has not prepared himself for all the difficult actions which he will surely have to take.

For one thing, the White House staff is a perfect shambles. Among the staff members the new President brought down from Capitol Hill, too many combine jealous possessiveness with a marked lack of qualification for their new responsibilities. They cannot do the work themselves, but they can—

and do—backbite non-stop. Without General Alexander Haig to serve as a kind of left-over Chief of Staff, this situation is also likely to get considerably worse.

For another thing, this was no time for an easy-going transition between administrations. The threat of a great depression; the threat of renewed war in the Mideast; the threat of the inflation that will not go away; the energy problem's long-term threat to the world's financial system—all these are urgent problems of appalling magnitude, needing rapid and decisive action.

Yet except for Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, no major figure in the Executive Branch is immune to the rumors, often originating in the White House staff, that he will soon be on the way out. In no major area of government except foreign affairs, has the President as yet installed a permanent team, or made it crystal clear he means to keep the existing players. Getting a working government is even more important for the President than getting a competent personal staff.

No wonder, then, that the Ford presidency is now suffering from a crisis of authority. Furthermore, when and if the President finally gets his own house in order, he will still have to ask a bitterly partisan, wholly unorganized Congress to take steps Congress will hate to take. All in all, this is a worrying time.