

Problems Of a Nice Guy

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, April 16 — Vice President Gerald Ford keeps saying he is not a candidate for the Presidency but keeps talking like a candidate, and in the process he is stumbling into trouble.

It is the "nice guy" quality in Mr. Ford that is getting him into trouble. He is an honest and sympathetic character in a tough and almost impossible job. He wants to please the President, who picked him out for a historic role at an awkward time. So he defends the President in public on Watergate, without reading the documents and the evidence.

At the same time, he wants to be faithful to his own buddies in the House and Senate, who are considering the impeachment of his boss, and when they talk to him in the night, he tells them about his fears and doubts about how the President is handling the impeachment crisis.

The Republican party wants him to go around the country reassuring the faithful that everything is going to come out all right and he wears himself out flying all over the Republic. But after his standard speeches, he has to meet the local press, and get back on his plane and travel for hours with the Washington reporters, who are following him to find out what kind of man he is and what kind of President he would make.

So he talks to them too the way he always has in his 25 years in the House. He is not a calculating man. He has always talked freely to reporters. He likes them, and he never had many state secrets to conceal, and they ask him what he would do if by accident he became President, what kind

WASHINGTON

of Cabinet would he have? What about Henry Kissinger at State, James Schlesinger at Defense, Ron Ziegler in the White House? And he answers their questions, not taking himself seriously, and not thinking about the consequences.

The consequences, of course, are serious. Next day it is all over the front pages and on the tube that the Vice President was sure that the President was "innocent," that the documents would prove it, though he hadn't read them. Also, that he thought the Republicans would do all right in the November elections despite Watergate; then, the next day, that he was worried about the political effects of Watergate.

Beyond that, he had tried to get a compromise between the White House and the Congress on the tapes, and avoid a House subpoena and a "confrontation" between the executive and the legislature, but had failed. And, still insisting that he would not run for the Presidency, that he would keep Mr. Kissinger and fire Messrs. Schlesinger and Ziegler, if by accident he did have to replace Mr. Nixon.

Obviously, and for good reasons, the White House was sore, and even Jerry's friends wondered about his judgment. But maybe indiscretions and blunders like this are inevitable for a man like Mr. Ford. In a way, he is the opposite of Mr. Nixon. He is a natural and spontaneous character, and he is getting in trouble now, not because of his bad instincts but because of his good instincts.

In fairness to the Vice President, part of his problem, maybe the main part, is that he was chosen to be the second man to the President, to stand in line for the Presidency, but was not given the chance to prepare for it.

He was not really brought in on the major questions before the President. The members of the Cabinet did not invite him to share their problems, because, if they did, they might seem to be preparing him to succeed to the Presidency. So he was left, like Mr. Agnew, to be a propagandist for the President and the party, and he did what he had always done: He gave the old party hurrah, but being more honest than most politicians, he gave honest answers to hard questions after the party rally was over.

This may not be a tribute to Mr. Ford's judgment, but it is a tribute to his integrity. There has always been a question around here about whether it was better to have an honest naive man or an intelligent and cunning manipulator, and Mr. Ford has demonstrated that he is not very smart but that he is honest.

Meanwhile, he has learned his lesson. It is too bad in a way, because what this town needs is a few straight characters, even if they get in trouble, but he will be more careful from now on. It hadn't quite occurred to him that his life had changed, that he was being regarded as a possible President, and therefore that what he said was news, not only in Grand Rapids but in the country and the world.

From now on, he will probably be different. He has always wanted to retreat and learn his job quietly in departments, but the President has never really given him the chance. In a way he knows himself better than anybody else.

Everybody is cutting him up now, in the White House, the party, and the press; but his mistakes have been the mistakes of a decent man, and if the White House finally gives him a decent and private job of learning the problems of the Presidency, he is the kind of man who would gladly disappear and try to learn.