

# President Ford's 'Easy-Going Style'

Minutes after President Ford's economic speech to Congress Oct. 8, a leading Republican summed up with this devastating innuendo the growing complaint about Mr. Ford's infant presidency:

"If only he had come up here acting like a President, instead of like just a former congressman."

Indeed, the criticism now besetting former Congressman Jerry Ford arises in large part because he is a power-hater bent on restoring the legislative branch to parity with the presidency. Almost everything he has done since taking office is calculated to end dangerous centralization of oval office power which reached its peak under Richard Nixon.

The new President is, therefore, in an agonizing dilemma. Critics want him to meet the national crisis with muscular leadership which both contradicts his own instincts and runs counter to the easy-going style that won euphoric approval his first month in the White House.

Going before a House Judiciary Subcommittee to explain the Nixon pardon is a striking example. His decision was based partly on his abhorrence of Nixon's use of executive privilege to protect the White House from Congress. Yet, however noble the motivation, that decision is privately ridiculed as demeaning to the presidency by the very same congressmen so affronted by Nixonism.

Similarly, the President's extraordinary self-control in handling rough press conference questioning stems from that same decent desire to reduce the presidency to human dimension after Nixon royalism.

His harshest test in turning the other cheek, he has said privately, came when reporter Clark Mollenhoff questioned his pardon of Nixon as "a lifelong friend and your financial ben-

*"Mr. Ford's political friends wish he would flex his presidential muscles and stop being so nice."*

efactor." Controlling his impulse to lash out, he replied no, the pardon was "to heal the wounds throughout the country." Old friends wish the President had shown some anger.

His closest Republican allies now fear Mr. Ford may be reading national politics backwards. With the western world on the edge of catastrophe and the U.S. facing its worst economic crisis since the great depression, voters want confident leadership able to make tough decisions, not a "Mr. Nice Guy" image in conscious contrast with a ruthless Nixon.

Even Republican candidates running behind today are questioning Mr. Ford's political wisdom in campaigning through 20 states. They feel he might do more for a lost cause by hard-nosed leadership from the oval office.

Some of his own aides seem to agree. One asked Mr. Ford on his flight back to Washington from Burlington, Vt., last week whether the trip had been worth it. The mission started at 5 p.m. from the White House lawn and ended at midnight, all for a 30-minute talk.

Mr. Ford strongly defended the exercise. It was his job to do everything in his power to avoid calamity for his party (a motivation that seldom bothered Richard Nixon). Besides, he added, "I like campaigning."

Yet, with his rating in the national polls now under 50 per cent, party managers frankly doubt that Mr. Ford's coattails will make much difference. As one midwestern Republican chairman told us: "Sure, we asked him to come out here, but it's grasping at straws."

Mr. Ford's oldest political cronies, moreover, feel he has no grand design for building a Ford constituency from the shattered ranks of Nixon Republicans. Unlike Nixon, who even today commands perhaps 20 per cent of the nation's voters, Ford has no hard core of support. Nor does the first President ever elected to national office seem to be bidding for personal support among some voting blocs at the cost of affronting others.

A case in point was his veto message this week on the Turkish military aid ban. Instead of sounding a loud political alarm to arrest the decline of American prestige in the western alliance, he appealed to Congress in gentlemanly tones.

Yet in the privacy of his office, Mr. Ford can use more pointed language. The most fruitful period of U.S. foreign policy, he confides, began when a Republican Congress joined with Democratic President Harry Truman in 1947 to pass Greek-Turkish aid, opening the way to European economic and political recovery. Now, he points out, a Democratic Congress refuses the appeal of Republican President to restore American influence in the same part of the world.

In short, Mr. Ford's political friends wish he would flex his presidential muscles and stop being so nice, precisely the way Harry Truman found his political salvation. For Jerry Ford, a genuinely decent man schooled in a quarter-century of congressional compromise, that may be asking too much.