

Ford Presidency Is Question Mark

By Jack Anderson

For Gerald Ford the honeymoon is over.

The first 100 days are the most receptive and sympathetic period any President gets. At the close of this brief time of grace, he should be at the pinnacle of national esteem. He should have established a public confidence that will sustain him through the long and rocky passage that lies ahead.

But to most Americans, Gerald Ford today still remains a question mark. He has not exhibited the capacity to take charge; nor the clarity to lay down a consistent policy line; nor the force of personality that puts his stamp upon the Presidency; nor the vision to raise a banner around which a confused nation can rally.

Rather than any individual failure to succeed, it is this void that distinguishes the Ford presidency thus far. It must be taken, therefore, as a harbinger of failure. If he is to avoid a debacle, he will have to earn back slowly and painfully, against a misama of doubt and skepticism, what the nation was anxious to bestow upon him freely some 100 days ago.

Yet something about the man—decency, kindness, openness, unpretentiousness—and something about the circumstances that have bedeviled his debut, impel us not to write him off but to suspend our verdict while searching the debris for explanations.

He was brought on stage, almost involuntarily, by political tragedy, and he immediately inherited economic disaster. Yet he was denied the boons that tragedy and disaster often confer on new leaders.

The calamities that brought Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson to the presidency raised them up as guardians of an exalted legacy. Gerald Ford received, instead of a legacy, an albatross which Solomon himself wouldn't have known how to get from around his neck.

The rush of events the past two years has made him an anachronism. He is an Eisenhower back among us, the sort of Ike everyone likes, beaming benevolently upon the political scene. He speaks the same old words, practices the same old politics, makes the same old compromises.

But the people have been plunged suddenly into the 1970s. The news shocks of the past two years have given them a new maturity, a new sophistication, a new soberness. The old blarney no longer impresses them; they are on a different wave length.

Still, a benign Gerald Ford goes on grasping hands, slapping backs, kissing babies; he simply has gone out of style.

He is, nevertheless, a man of great decency and strong loyalties. His closest advisers urged him to clean out the Nixon Cabinet, to start his administration with a clean slate. But this violated Mr. Ford's sense of fair-

ness. He insisted on judging each Nixon holdover by his performance, not by his past association.

The new President's advisers also warned him against pardoning Richard Nixon. This violated Mr. Ford's feelings of compassion. By extending mercy and solicitude to Mr. Nixon, Mr. Ford associated his administration with Watergate, violated most Americans' sense of equal justice, frustrated our hopes of getting the whole truth and diluted the object lesson to future Presidents that many had hoped would be the lasting legacy of the impeachment ordeal.

And so at one stroke, he took the bloom off his month-old presidency and grimed it with some of the tarnish of the past. Yet had Mr. Ford waited only a bit and had Mr. Nixon been arrested, arraigned and then had succumbed to his illness, then the dogs of recrimination and irreconcilability would have been let loose in this country.

Whatever he did, or did not do, probably would have ended in a mess. He was in a no-win situation.

Franklin Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln inherited disaster, too. But along with disaster, they received the inestimable advantage of taking over a situation that had already hit rock bottom, with an identifiable enemy and no choice but to issue a heroic call for national mobilization.

Gerald Ford found himself faced, not with an unmistakable foe, but with a dilemma that

might be inflation, or depression, or a fiendish combination of both, for which there is no known government remedy.

Only a reckless gambler or a true visionary could have sounded forth the certain trumpet, and Mr. Ford is neither. And so he stalled for time, shifted from one foot to the other and offered half-measures that fully satisfied no one.

Unsatisfying, yes. But to have grandly mounted his horse and led his army galloping off in the wrong direction, against the wrong enemy, would have been fatal.

Give Mr. Ford his due. He has taken up the poor hand history dealt him without complaint or excuse. He has been in the main, accessible, candid and honest. He has shown himself willing to take personal punishment today for policies that may look better tomorrow.

He has in his earnest way restored to the conduct of our national affairs an atmosphere of decency, humanity and civility. And in so doing, he has begun to drain the venom that has long festered. He has pricked the bubble of White House pomposity and panoply that had begun to surround the presidency with all the degraded trappings of a crown.

If his vision proves limited and his policies faulty, none of this will be enough. But it is enough to warrant a suspension of the rules, an extension of the honeymoon. Let's give President Ford another 100 days.

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