

Joseph Alsop

'A Pleasant Plainness'

Contrary to silly fashionable reports, spending an hour or so with President Ford is a decidedly reassuring experience. To begin with, what is now called "the imperial presidency" is plainly dead and buried.

If the empty phrase means anything at all, it means the kind of presidential pomp that began under President Eisenhower and considerably increased under each of his successors. Under President Ford, there is no pomp at all. A pleasant plainness is the general style—and if you think about it, an American President could hardly choose a more suitable style.

There is more to it than that, too. With the sole exception of Harry S. Truman, no President of the last four decades has inspired so little of that courtier-like response from subordinates which so often generates a perfect miasma in the White House. The blandishments, the false reverence, the prostrations in all but physical act—all these are now things of the past, thank God.

Last Tuesday, for instance, Donald Rumsfeld, Robert Hartmann and Ron Nessen were all at the luncheon table. The President led the talk—which is part of the inescapable fate of Presidents. But the others joined the talk whenever they wished and in such a natural way that the disappearance of the customary White House apple-polishing was the first impression I took away with me.

I had been kindly invited in honor, as it were, of my rapidly approaching disappearance from the ranks of columnist-reporters. After hearing so much of this dreary city's endless pseudo-elitist patronage of the new President, I must confess I entered the little top floor sunroom where we ate in a mood of intense curiosity. I also



came away wanting to offer a word of advice to the patronizers.

The advice is to remember what fools we now think all the self-promoted elitists were who were so grandly patronizing about President Truman. Admittedly, Gerald Ford is not the same sort of combative, picturesque fellow that Truman was. But he is at least a man instead of an empty blatherskite or an intestinal worm; and even the achievement of not being an intestinal worm represents a high level of superiority in political Washington nowadays.

As I reflect on that luncheon last Tuesday—and it has restored me almost ever since—I further find myself more and more struck by another aspect that is hard to put in precise words. Maybe the best-way approach is to recall President Johnson's contemptuous joke about President Ford's alleged boneheadedness.

I think what Lyndon Johnson mistook for boneheadedness was a curious, solid stolidity. Furthermore, I suspect this Fordian phlegm, this refusal to get excessively excited, may well be more valuable in these rough times than Johnsonian drama, Johnsonian excitability and the all too transparent Johnsonian craftiness.

For men with other habits of mind and speech, myself included, it is at first downright astonishing to hear the President discussing the problems now facing this country. He peers into the abyss without a change of expression. He defines what the abyss contains—whether possible war or possible financial smash or probable depression—without any change in the even tone of his rather flat voice.

At first, in fact, you incline to think something must be lacking in anyone who can thus gaze unblinking into the abyss and can thus describe its ghastly contents as though they were second-rate goods on a supermarket's shelves. Then you recall more precisely the President's actual words. You find that he defines great problems concisely and well; that he is thoughtful and anything but self-deceiving; and that his prescriptions, when he offers any, are down-to-earth and common-sensible.

This is not boneheadedness—indeed the opposite. Admittedly, he gives signs of being imperfectly sure of himself in certain key areas and sure of himself in others. Of the world's horrifying financial problems, for instance, he voiced a wish that he had "given a lot more study" to such arcane but vital subjects. Of the defense budget, in contrast, he said confidently:

"I feel happy when I work with that. I know it well from long experience."

But it is far better to have a man who knows what he does not know and sets out seriously to find out, than to have a man who mingles little knowledge and excessive self assurance. Later, too, he may be glad to have a solid, stolid pilot for the ship of state. In the hair-raising storms that probably lie ahead, there will be a lot of need for the quality Prime Minister Harold MacMillan once defined as "unflappability."

But will the President tell the country plainly the hard things that need doing to weather these storms? That is my sole remaining question.