

Books of The Times

DEC 28 1974

The Ford in Our Future.

By BILL KOVACH

GERALD FORD AND THE FUTURE OF THE PRESIDENCY. By J. F. terHorst, 245 pages, The Third Press, \$9.95.

During his first week in the White House, President Ford made one of those decisions that feed for months "what does it all mean?" sessions on Washington's cocktail circuit. Mr. Ford ordered the pictures of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson that flanked a picture of President Eisenhower removed from above the mantel in the Cabinet Room and replaced them with pictures of Lincoln and Truman. The question posed by Mr. terHorst in his recounting of the incident is, "how does Ford see himself: Honest Jerry? Give-em-Hell Ford? An Eisenhower sans stars?"

If there is a failing in this, the first in-depth biography of the man who became President without ever having run for public office outside the Fifth Congressional District of Michigan, it is that Jerry terHorst does not come to grips with the question.

Maybe it is his own dislike for amateur psychology that holds Mr. terHorst back, maybe after 26 years of covering Mr. Ford for The Detroit News he finds the analysis too complex. Despite the author's hesitation to push beneath the surface of Mr. Ford's life, however, the reader comes away from this biography with the feeling that its pages hold the raw material for understanding what kind of man we now have in the Presidency.

Playing by the Rules

The story of Mr. Ford's life is all there. The early days in a Grand Rapids full of earnest young men playing by the rules, about whom the best that can be said was not that they were liked but that they were well liked. The Depression years, which for the Ford family were years of a family touched but not bruised by the harsh times. Young Jerry could take time from work to devote to football, own a car, make it to Yale Law School and scrape up \$1,000 to invest in a modeling agency.

These years seem part of a pattern for Jerry Ford moving relatively unaffected through periods of storm in a career that led by the strangest route yet to the Presidency of the United States. It has been a career that reflects, more than anything else, an amazing grace in the act of shifting with the winds that blow through the political thicket. Although Mr. Ford maneuvered until the end to block or weaken the open house law of 1968, despite a revolt in the Republican party ranks that he led, he was never labeled a racist. He pushed a flimsy and failing campaign to impeach Justice William O. Douglas but escaped censure for his actions, as Mr. terHorst explains, because his acts "were taken with a grain of salt

in Congress and generally around the country." He twisted through a directionless labyrinth supporting Spiro T. Agnew and Richard Nixon until the end (in each case, to the point of public deception), but came to the Presidency described as: "decent, candid, forthright, trustworthy, brave and reverent—a Boy Scout, in the White House."

Perhaps the secret of his ultimate ability to float to the top without being swept away by turbulence was one learned early in his career. On his arrival in Washington with the 1948 wave of post-war Congressmen he was advised by Michigan's Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg this way: Congressmen are re-elected because they pay attention to the personal needs of their constituents—not by sponsoring important legislation or getting into the newspapers.

"He was my mentor," Mr. Ford said, and proceeded to follow this advice by virtually disappearing into the Congressional woodwork. He learned the committee system, understood the way the system generated power and, above all, how to be well liked. He learned so well that when the Young Turks in the Republican party revolted against their leadership in 1965, they chose Mr. Ford to replace the minority leader. As Charles Goodell explained the choice, "It wasn't as though everybody was wildly enthusiastic about Jerry. It was that most Republicans liked him and respected him. He didn't have enemies." Later a crippled President Nixon would choose him to fill the void left by Mr. Agnew's resignation for the same reason: He was liked in Congress and could be confirmed without a fight.

An Act of Principle

In the end, the key insight of Mr. terHorst's book may be in the epilogue. Chosen as press secretary to the Ford Administration, Mr. terHorst soon resigned rather than serve as a spokesman for a President who had just pardoned Richard Nixon for his involvement in Watergate crimes. More than Mr. Ford's words, Mr. terHorst's act of principle was seen in Washington as the kind of rejection of the corruption of power that was needed in the wake of White House lawlessness. The contrast between form and substance recounted in this epilogue provides the framework within which Mr. Ford's Presidency will be measured, and his biographer seems as unsure of how Mr. Ford will measure up as any of us.

"In time," Mr. terHorst writes, "the American people will expect not only integrity, but also a high degree of leadership and even inspiration from President Ford. Such qualities were not the hallmarks of his career in Congress, nor were they the reasons for his selection as Vice President."