

Ford's Challenge to The Conservatives

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IN HIS FIRST press Conference since the Saigon collapse, Gerald Ford was at his most presidential. The leader who appeared at that White House press conference for 35 minutes last week seemed a man who understood both the gravity and complexity of America's problems, a man in charge.

All his answers will not satisfy everyone, but the straight-from-the-shoulder response of Mr. Ford on a number of controversial questions suggests a man who has set his course, and who knows precisely where he is headed.

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THERE are other signs of late from the White House that, after some scoreless political innings, the West Wing is getting it all together for 1976.

Item: President Ford's veto of the farm bill took a measure of courage; but it started building a record against the Congress; and it started a long overdue mutual repair job on the President's fences with the right wing of his party.

Item: Three weeks ago, the President fired off a "Dear Mr. Chairman" letter to Abe Ribicoff telling him that the plans for Ralph Nader's pet pork barrel project for 1975, the "Federal Agency for

Consumer Advocacy," should be filed away somewhere, for future reference. Sam Ervin couldn't find adjectives nasty enough to describe the plan. And the President's tough letter has raised hopes for the first time that a coalition can be brought together on the Hill to sustain a presidential veto, when it comes to that.

Item: The White House last week finally got around to creating a political strategy board, featuring respected leaders from every faction of the party, and chaired by Dean Burch, Barry Goldwater's national chairman and Richard Nixon's political counselor in his final months in office. Notice has thereby been sent to the Reagan camp that the President does not intend to concede the party's conservative wing to any challenger on the right.

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WHAT does it all mean? It means that the White House has belatedly come to appreciate the magnitude of the political danger on the right; and is prepared to do the spade work, and make the necessary concessions to contain it. Which is going to make it all the more difficult for any conservative challenge to succeed against Gerald Ford and Nelson Rockefeller within the Republican party.