

FORD AD

# 7 Old Friends Offer Blunt Advice to Ford

*Unofficial Critics, at His Invitation,  
Try to Help Him Keep Perspective*

NYTimes By JAMES M. NAUGHTON JUN 23 1975

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 22 — Gerald R. Ford's best friends will tell him.

Every six weeks or so, some of the President's closest acquaintances outside the White House assemble in the Cabinet Room to criticize his work.

Since he took office, Mr. Ford's friends have taken issue with his pardon of Richard M. Nixon; expressed shock at one element of his original tax-cut proposal and quarreled with his reluctance to become a formal candidate for a full term as President. Once they even watched him rehearse a television address, found his manner wanting, and told him he needed more practice.

The "very blunt talk" to which seven of Mr. Ford's old friends have subjected him has been at the President's invitation.

Mr. Ford is no masochist, although he may be the most equable of recent Presidents when it comes to complaints about his performance. He merely wants people he trusts, who are seeking no jobs and have no administrative portfolios, to help him keep some perspective on himself.

How much impact the discussions have had on White House policy and whether they will continue to do so are, even among the Ford

friends, matters of conjecture. At least for now, both President and friends think them useful in staving off the delusions of grandeur that are thought to be endemic to the White House.

### No 'Imperial Presidency'

"It's another way to keep him open," said William W. Scranton, the former Governor of Pennsylvania who is one of the members of Mr. Ford's kitchen cabinet.

Political scientists have fretted for years about Presidents being cloistered in the White House and isolated—from people, from honest advice and, perhaps, from reality.

But one political scientist, James David Barber of Duke University, posed the cautious proposition, after observing Mr. Ford from afar for several months, that "the Imperial Presidency has disappeared," so far as the enshrinement of the White House occupant is concerned.

Similarly, George E. Reedy, the one-time press secretary to President Johnson, marveled recently, "What you are seeing is just the natural Jerry Ford." Mr. Reedy's comment came despite the warning he sounded, in a book called "The Twilight of the Presidency," of the se-

Continued on Page 20, Column 2

Continued From Page 1, Col. 3

ductive flattery and physical insulation that can lead Presidents to believe their own hyperbole.

One reason for Mr. Ford's relative openness is that he has what Bryce N. Harlow describes as "a group of old friends who sit down and tell him like it is, unblemished."

Mr. Harlow, once counselor to Presidents Eisenhower and Nixon who is back at his more permanent post as a lobbyist for Procter & Gamble and knows soft soap when he sees it, is one of the old friends.

The others, besides Mr. Scranton, are William M. Whyte, the Washington vice president of the United States Steel Corporation; Melvin R. Laird, the former Secretary of Defense and current counselor to Reader's Digest; John W. Byrnes, the retired Representative from Wisconsin who is now practicing law; Senator Robert P. Griffin of Michigan, the Senate Republican whip; and David Packard, the former Deputy Secretary of Defense who is back running his California electronics firm, Hewlett-Packard.

With the exception of Mr. Packard, they were all members of the quasi-official group of advisers Mr. Ford assembled last August to guide his transition from unelected Vice President to unelected President.

Although the transition has long since been completed, the "transition group," as the locker room cabinet is called, has met with Mr. Ford irregularly to offer what one White House aide described as "a bunch of things they think the President ought to hear, from the global to the trivial, from the official to the personal."

There are no ground rules, no records kept. The group assembles on a week's notice—usually late in the afternoon of a quiet day or on a weekend—to sit around the real Cabinet's varnished table and have an unvar-

nished conversation. Refreshments, as one participant noted with regret, are limited to a choice of coffee or iced tea.

"I'm always surprised when he reconvenes the thing," said Mr. Harlow. "I wonder how helpful it is to him. He calls us back together, so he must think it is."

The President has wondered aloud himself, in a somewhat bemused way, about why it is that he has subjected himself six times so far to the group's blunt critiques.

A private conversation, recounted by Mr. Scranton, best describes the relationship between President and friendly potshot artists. Mr. Ford and Mr. Scranton were talking one recent day about the collapse of South Vietnam when suddenly Mr. Ford stopped, eyed his guest and engaged in the following exchange:

MR. FORD: Bill, you were opposed to the Nixon pardon.

MR. SCRANTON: That's right."

MR. FORD: You weren't very enthusiastic about my economic program.

MR. SCRANTON: That's right.

MR. FORD: My food stamp decision drove you right up the wall.

MR. SCRANTON: It sure did.

MR. FORD: You didn't favor military aid to South Vietnam.

MR. SCRANTON: No, I didn't.

Mr. Ford paused, locked eyes with his friend and said, "Why are you for me at all?"

"Because," Mr. Scranton recalls saying, "you're honest and decent and the first President I ever knew—and I've known several—who could talk to me like that."

### Unplanned Boldness

The marvel, though, is that the outsiders could talk to the President like that.

"Almost everybody tends to trim when talking to a President," a senior White House official said. "Very few lay it on the line."

Indeed, according to several members of the "transition group," they hadn't planned to be quite so bold when they met for the first non-transition conversation with Mr. Ford last Oct. 23.

They sat there, not certain what was expected of them, and the President started going around the table asking each guest what he wanted to say. Mr. Scranton unwittingly set the tone, pulling out a sheet bearing all the subjects he had in mind, not the least of them the pardon granted to Mr. Ford's predecessor, and Mr. Harlow got right into the spirit of it, too.

"Bryce and I were very blunt," said Mr. Scranton. "From then on everybody has been. Oh, a couple of them are still pretty deferential, but most of the time it's man-to-man."



### Some Samples

Neither the President's friends nor the half-dozen senior White House aides privileged to listen in on the meetings are eager to provide details of inside criticism of Mr. Ford. And, of course, the discussions with old associates whose political philosophy is largely compatible with the President's do not always involve objections to his past or planned actions. Some examples have, however, emerged:

¶One session, on Jan. 11, happened to occur two days before Mr. Ford went on national television to outline his economic and energy pro-

grams. The kitchen cabinet watched the President cut a practice videotape. It was his first use of a television prompter. His friends were aghast at how wooden Mr. Ford seemed. They encouraged—"insisted on," said one—more rehearsals and some humanizing gestures. When he went before the nation, Mr. Ford had a fire burning, wandered around the White House library, gestured often—and still seemed wooden. Forget the television prompter and "freewheel it," he was advised later. For the most part, he has.

¶The critics objected vociferously when Mr. Ford told them of his plan to refund a flat percentage of 1974 Federal income tax payments to every taxpayer, no matter how small or large the income. One friend told Mr. Ford that was "unfair." Mr. Packard, a millionaire, noted that he didn't need a tax refund to afford a new auto or refrigerator and said, "For me to get a rebate is absurd."

Before making the proposal public, Mr. Ford set an upper limit on the possible rebate.

¶Much of the conversation at early meetings dealt with encouragement for Mr. Ford's instinctive desire, as a veteran Capitol Hill compromiser, to be accommodating with the new, heavily Democratic Congress. More recently, however, the advisers told Mr. Ford he would have to get tough with Congress, veto more spending bills and, as one friend put it, "be firm—make up your mind and stick with it." Mr. Ford has. His vetoes have held up.

¶Despite the President's reluctance to commit himself so early to a formal candidacy for his party's 1976 nomination, the kitchen cabinet began five months ago to try to persuade Mr. Ford that new Federal, state and party rules governing elections demanded an early start.

"Look, you've never done this," said one of the national campaign veterans with what might have been condescension in a different setting. "You've got a terrific proposition ahead of you."

"We were quite pushy, to be honest, about his campaign," confirmed Mr. Scranton.

There is an apparent limit to the friends' pushiness, however. One White House outsider expressed disappointment that Donald M. Rumsfeld, the President's chief of staff, was a witness to the sessions and another agreed that sharp criticism of Presidential aides, if warranted, had to wait for "another place and time."

There is, beyond that, a belief on the part of Mr. Reedy that Mr. Ford's tolerance is a direct result of the unique circumstances of his elevation to the Presidency.

"At present he holds his office by appointment," Mr. Reedy said in an interview published June 12 in *The Washington Star*. "He does not have that ultimate sanctification of an election. And I think that right now he himself has probably solved the isolation problem. I'm not certain that he'll have it solved after he's elected, assuming that he's elected."

As Mr. Reedy warned, "Having the mystical consent of the people to be their President is almost like being anointed with oil."

For now at least, the oil being applied by Mr. Ford's personal consultants seems, sometimes, to have been warmed first. And if he can't stand the heat, he can always throw out the kitchen cabinet.