

PERSPECTIVE

Knight News Service

WASHINGTON — Gerald Ford compares himself with Harry Truman. But there is an argument about that rippling around academic circles as historians and political scientists try to assess Ford's first year in the White House.

Among the half dozen who are were asked to compare Ford to presidents of the past, the score was: One Eisenhower, two Herbert Hoovers, a couple of Calvin Coolidges and one William McKinley.

To which Harvard's John Kenneth Galbraith, as usual, took exception. "Judging by some of Ford's economic advisers," he said, "one must go back to the 18th Century."

The academic discussion is not as flippant as it sounds. For scholars who once dismissed Jerry Ford as an accidental president, a likeable lightweight and a mere caretaker between elections, now think he may be around for a while.

And they have just begun to wonder seriously what kind of President he has been — and will be.

The man from Grand Rapids came to office in an unprecedented fashion and time, the first non-elected president in the nation's history.

Yet Brown University political scientist Erwin Hargrove, author of "The Power of the Modern Presidency," notes that "no one among my colleagues in the social sciences has given serious attention to Ford and his administration until now. I think that has been a great mistake."

In Ford's case, Hargrove says, not only has he been underestimated, he has been misunderstood.

Now, however, an increasing number of scholars and politicians of both parties have begun to realize that Jerry Ford is more than just a swell guy. He represents the first really genuine effort since the Twenties to restore traditional, orthodox American conservatism to national government and the body politic.

Dwight Eisenhower, the first Republican president in 20 years, slowed down the Democratic-liberal drive towards federal activism and social programs in the Fifties, but made no real attempt to turn it around.

Richard Nixon aimed at dismantling the structures of the New Deal, Fair Deal and Great Society through his New Federalism, but economics, politics, the war and Watergate got in the way.

It was logical, then, for politicians and scholars steeped in the past to suggest that when Ford became President and left his western Michigan constituency, he too would change. They thought he would broaden his views and temper his conservatism under the pressure of national responsibilities.

In the early days of his presidency, Ford did seem to be changing. But lately, as he has grown more popular and more self-assured, it has become increasingly evident that although Ford is out of Grand Rapids, Grand Rapids is not out of Ford.

His recent speeches make this very clear:

On June 17, for example, Ford told the National Federation of Independent Business: "In the months ahead, we face a very critical choice: Shall business and government work together in a free economy for the betterment of all? Or shall we slide headlong into an economy whose vital decisions are made by politicians while the private sector dries up and shrivels away. My resources as your President, and my resolve as your President, are devoted to the free enterprise system. . . . I see a direct connection between the spirit of the American Constitution and a competitive, privately oriented economy."

A week later, at a White House reception for Republican leaders, Ford said: "We are going to keep the course that we are on today, and that course involves the following: A total dedication to the free enterprise system, seeking to lift the heavy hand of government from business so that the free enterprise system can work. . . ."

On July 11, at a Chicago meeting of big business executives, the President said: "I happen to believe . . . that the free enterprise system is the best hope. . . . I believe that old values are as new as their need. . . . I believe, with no apologies, in so-called old-fashioned, individual responsibility. "

*Ford's first
year—why
the experts
admit they
were wrong*



Ford's words echo the past. Coolidge said, "The business of America is business." Hoover, in a famous 1928 speech, said: the choice is between "the American system of rugged individualism and . . . the doctrines of paternalism and state socialism . . ."

Many political scientists are convinced that Ford means what he says and is prepared to implement his conservative beliefs.

They point to his string of vetoes. His deeper concern with inflation than unemployment. His proposals to help business, his opposition to tougher environmental regulations, his preoccupation with providing industry with capital so it can generate jobs.

"Ford is something of a true believer," says political scientist James MacGregor Burns of Williams College.

"He is about as orthodox as anybody can hope to be in this day and age," says Galbraith.

"He is the most conservative and rigid president since Hoover," says Arthur Schlesinger, a historian of the depression and New Deal.

Duke University political scientist and president

watcher James David Barber compares Ford with Coolidge, who brought the Vermont front porch to the White House. With Ford, says Barber, it's the Grand Rapids living room. But like Coolidge, he seems to fit the times like a comfortable old shoe.

Barber says Ford has "little vision or imagination. He doesn't have big answers for a big time. He speaks in cliches and simplistic notions. That's not all bad, because great leaders have aroused people with rhetoric and simplistic speeches. But you get the idea that Ford looks backward."

Louis Koenig of New York University, author of "The Chief Executive," gives Ford excellent grades for putting the country and the presidency together again after Watergate, and for pursuing detente and an end to the Indochina War.

But on the domestic side, Koenig says "it's almost an insult to Hoover to compare him with Ford. Hoover, when he came into office, was on the progressive side of his party. He showed, in his efforts on behalf of war victims, that he had great compassion. And he wasn't a party politician. Ford is much more like Coolidge with his veneration of business and the free enterprise ethic while showing little sensitivity for the unemployed."

James Sundquist of the Brookings Institution doubts that Ford is as rigid as Coolidge or even Hoover, and likens him to Eisenhower.

"Ford's a much better politician than Hoover," says Sundquist. "He spent 25 years in the Congress and knows how to compromise and adjust when he has to. I think the vetoes are not an indication of his social and political philosophy, but part of a strategy of getting the best deal out of a Democratic congress and setting the Democrats up for the 1976 elections."

Hargrove, noting that Ford was one of the most conservative members in his party as House Republican Leader, suggests that the President did not change his basic beliefs on his swift journey from the House to the vice presidency to the White House.

"Ford is an authentic conservative, without the expedience of Nixon or the right-wing zeal of a Reagan," says Brown's Hargrove. "Ford's conservatism is rooted in the Midwest, in the Protestant ethic, and it includes an unquestioning belief in the assumptions of American life — growth, abundance, acquisition, private enterprise, individualism. He's the first true legislative conservative since McKinley to make it to the presidency, and I think we're about to get a real test of whether a conservative candidacy and approach to government can still be successful."

Ironically, even the scholars most closely associated with liberalism, concede that Ford has a good chance to sell his old-fashioned conservatism to the electorate next year.

"He's been a lucky President," says Schlesinger, "because he followed such a bad act, and has the kind of personality which will lead the nation to forgive him a good deal."

Burns says, "As long as the American people are in a state of trying to assimilate and rest from the last few years, they may not be in search of innovation and Ford probably can be successful."

"That's absolute crap," sniffs Galbraith, an architect of liberal economics and social legislation. But he acknowledges, rather sourly, that "Ford has going for him the failures of the liberal establishment to supply an alternative to Ford's yearning for the 18th Century."
