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The Year That

for
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Decency Was News

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AT THE end of his first year in the White House, and the beginning of his campaign for four more years beyond 1976, President Ford must know that, even among the vast majority of his fellow-countrymen who wish him well, there is a strain of doubt.

The doubt is not primarily about this last year, though you can get an argument about his policies in both parties. His personal conduct has been almost faultless. He has been open, available, candid and truthful, even at times when it exposed his own misjudgments, and contradictions.

After Nixon, for the transition, this was probably more important than anything else. He removed the atmosphere of conspiracy.

All this has come out in the newspaper and television reviews of his first year in the White House. The reporters and commentators who watch the calendar and have to write about these political anniversaries have all concentrated on the point that Ford is "a decent human being." This tells us something about the sad state of our politics — decency, fairness and openness are now news, not things to be taken for granted, but maybe enough to elect a man in his sixties for another four years.

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THIS IS the big change in the President in the last year. He had a clear picture of himself not so long ago as an appointed Vice President and an accidental and astonished President.

But in this last year, surrounded by the majesty of the White House, and reassured by the press and his ceremonial duties at home and abroad, he has decided to go for another term. This is where the element of doubt comes in.

It is easy to be grateful for his modesty and grace in the transition from Nixon. He has been an almost perfect interim President, but when he takes popular acclaim for the transition as support for another four years into the radical 3/ problems of the 1980's, he raises a different question.

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HE IS a deeply conservative and national man in an increasingly radical and interdependent world. The nation and the world are suffering from disruption and shock. He is a happy and appreciative man, with a kind of thumbby practical wisdom, but he does not really grapple with the perplexing problems or the insurgent hum of the age.

In the crunch he comes down on the side of things as they were, and worries more about the threat of Reagan than the threat of the coming revolution of the hungry two-thirds of the world.

There is something very amiable, and even good about all this, if you look merely at the last year, when the nation needed a respite from the tensions of Vietnam and Watergate, but in looking at the President at the end of his first year, it is important to distinguish between the past and the future.

He has glimpses of the elusive future, but he has an officious conscience about the Republican past and the threat of conservative opposition at the Republican nominating convention next year. He can go to Helsinki and give amnesty to the Russians for their aggressions in Eastern Europe, but not to his own fellow countrymen who opposed Vietnam. It is hard to discern any guiding purpose in this thought, any visible center in his philosophy for the future, or any directing brain.

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IN SHORT, he has knifed the poison in our political system in the last year, which is quite an achievement, but in being grateful for that we should not forget the question he has now put to the people, namely that we should reward him by electing him to lead us through the radical problems into the Eighties.

These are problems for the young men of the rising generation, and the tragedy of American politics is that we seem to be stuck in both parties with men in their sixties.

For the last year of Gerald Ford, we should be grateful, but for the four years after 1976, since an election is not a judgment on the past but a bet on the future, maybe we should be careful. It is easy to celebrate his happy first birthday in the White House, but not necessarily to wish him many happy returns.