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Mr. Ford's Bad Politics

By James Reston

The President and the press are giving each other a lot of free advice these days, not for the first time. The press is advising the skipper to be a little more careful, lest he gain a few votes and lose his life, and the President is advising the press to be a little less sensational lest it make heroes of assassins and encourage the violence it deplures.

The odds are that both will agree in principle but go on as before: The President will keep working the crowds, with or without his safety vest, and the press will keep playing up the unusual, both on the assumption that this is what pays off with the public.

Mr. Ford is obviously not going to listen to the warnings that scrimmaging crowds may be injurious to his health, but he might listen to the argument that it's bad for the Republican party. The evidence is fairly clear that it is. He wows the Republican regulars and raises a lot of money for the G.O.P., but the more he travels and talks, the more he seems to decline in the polls.

This tends to prove "O'Neill's Law." Tip O'Neill, the Democratic leader in the House and Mr. Ford's old adversary, friend and present golfing com-

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panion, has always said: "Gerry's a lovely guy but maybe a lousy President. You have to see a lot of him to know how little there is to see."

The reasons for Mr. Ford's decline in the polls are fairly clear. He has very little to say on these trips around the country about the present and coming predicaments of the nation, and he says it rather badly.

He is a dead honest conservative confronted with radical problems—high rates of inflation, unemployment, frustration and even anger—and he gives the country locker-room pep talks on the glories of fiscal responsibility.

Richard Nixon failed because he didn't have any principles, and ironically, Mr. Ford may very well fail because he has. For he honestly believes that he can bring the country back to its senses by vetoing the Democratic spendthrifts. New York is drowning and he gives it a lecture and throws it an anchor. "Waste not, want not," he says. "Help not, vote not," reply the big-city voters.

He is such a modest guy with such long association and sympathy for the sort of conservatives who dominate Republican nominating conventions, that he actually takes the Reagan threat seriously.

His main political problem actually is not to worry about the nomination but to win the election, and this he cannot do with the Hooverish speeches he has been making in Dallas and the West. He is running a little south of center, and assuming that the country is in a conservative counter-revolution against the welfare state.

Maybe so, but unless the American people have suddenly decided on a course of spiritual reformation and redemption, which is hard to notice here in Times Square, the Ford strategy of dramatizing his political limitations all over the country is not likely to be very successful.

As long as he stayed in Washington struggling with the inflation, the unemployment and the energy crisis, he was "steady old Gerry," fighting the divided and leaderless Democrats to a scoreless tie. The Capitol had never before seen as many amiable vetoes, and if nobody was very impressed with his performance, nobody was very mad at him either.

But now he is so obviously in the political race that he is diminishing his most precious asset: the feeling in the country that he was concentrating on a hard job and not on himself or his political ambitions.

Ever since he announced that he was a candidate he had to be careful to disguise his political speeches so that the Democrats couldn't demand equal time under F.C.C. regulations. So he has been mixing up his Presidential and political responsibilities, so that nobody quite knew what was political and what Presidential, and who should pay for what.

This has not helped his good-guy, straight-guy image, and has led him into literally scores of speeches, interviews, coffee klatches, offhand comments, etc.

You should try to get through the transcript of everything the President actually says on one of these three-day invasions of the country. Taken on the whole it is troubling and revealing—obvious, trite, amiably shallow, and all the more so because it is so utterly sincere.

So maybe these trips should be reconsidered on political grounds if not on security grounds. They may not be bad for his physical health, but they are proving to be bad for his political future.