

NOV 3 1975

Good Old Gerry Reagan

NYTimes

By Anthony Lewis

There has been a puzzlement about Gerald Ford all along. From the day he became President he was described as a nice man, a decent man: good old Gerry Ford. But the description did not fit certain nasty pages in his record—episodes of political ugliness.

There was, for example, Mr. Ford's attempt to impeach Mr. Justice Douglas—on the ground, among others, that a Douglas article had appeared in the same issue of a literary review as some sexy pictures. As late as his Vice-Presidential confirmation hearings, Congressman Ford tried to wave those pictures at the television camera. Nice? Decent?

Now there is President Ford's rhetorical treatment of the New York fiscal crisis. Why should a pleasant, open man play to the country's prejudices against New York City? Why take a problem, complex in origin, and misrepresent it, in demagogue's style, as the result of bad guys' sins? Why pretend that his solution, municipal bankruptcy, will maintain the purity of our federalism when he knows it will require massive Federal money and involvement?

The explanation is not obscure. Peel Gerald Ford, layer by layer, and you find nothing but politician. There is little except politics in his adult experience, his life, his mind. And it is politics of a narrow, parochial kind. If your President is smarting from the defeat of two nominees to the Supreme Court, you help him get even by using an F.B.I. dossier to attack a sitting Justice.

Political necessity, as his limited vision perceives it, has determined the way he is playing the New York crisis. Mr. Ford has one big thing on his

ABROAD AT HOME

mind right now: beating Ronald Reagan for the Republican Presidential nomination. The way to do that, in the Ford canon, is out-Reagan Reagan.

And so the President went directly to Reagan country from his speech on the New York situation. He campaigned up and down California against the wastrels in New York, the shiftless everywhere waxing fat on the Federal food stamp program. He went back to 1906 to praise San Francisco for its self-reliance in rebuilding after the earthquake—wrongly, since San Francisco got Federal aid.

Even some who see practical ad-

vantage in dealing with New York's difficulties through the bankruptcy process, as the President proposes, find his political performance disturbing. By treating New York as a pariah, they think, he is obscuring the real issue—which is much larger than New York. It is the decay of urban culture, threatening America's peace and civilization.

"No serious person thinks this is just a New York problem," one economic analyst said. "If we had a sustained recession for another year or two, half a dozen big cities would be defaulting, maybe more. Then it might be easier for people to see this for what it is: a national crisis."

A political leader who had some larger reason-for-being would have used the New York situation to educate the country about our urban illness. He could fairly have criticized New York's politicians, but at the same time recognized that there is more involved here than their failures. Instead of education, Mr. Ford has offered distortion, worst of all on the question of American federalism.

The idea of state and local independence remains a valid and necessary one for the United States. No liberal, any more than a conservative, would want to concentrate more power in Washington after the experience of recent years. But it is fatuous to ignore the realities of responsibility in our system today.

Fifty years ago the Federal Government had little to do with the state of the national economy. Now it is decisive. American business hangs on Washington, and so do cities. Taxes, the level of Federal spending, interest rates: The decisions of Federal officials shape the business cycle and with that the economy of the cities.

This same is true to a significant extent in the social sphere. When the Federal Government cuts drastically back on its housing activity, as the Nixon Administration did, that has a sharp impact on cities. Federal programs that encourage mechanization of farms send migrants north to the cities. Federal policy favoring suburban over city housing and highways over mass transit have enormous consequences.

Pontius Pilate would have a hard time, in the circumstances, washing his hands of Federal responsibility for the troubles of American cities. In any event, in a Federal system, the center must be prepared to help the constituent parts in emergencies. That is why the very first Congress of a still-weak United States passed legislation in 1790 to assume the states' Revolutionary War debts. Statesmen thought the country's economic health was more important than politics.

The irony is that Mr. Ford's rhetoric may not work as politics, either. It is doubtful that anyone can out-Reagan Reagan. Mr. Ford is not convincing the right, and the Republican center is uneasy at his Reaganite stance. Judging by the New York episode, I think there is increasing reason to believe that he will end up losing both general respect and his party's nomination.