

The New President Ford

The President who went on national television for a news conference Monday night was a new Ford. He threw arbitrary answers back at responsible questions.

He deliberately manipulated associates and friends into competition to become his running-mate in 1976. He came on, for the first time, as a man who had tasted power—and liked the taste.

Perhaps the most obvious sign was his attitude toward the press. In the past Mr. Ford has done his level best to answer squarely even the most embarrassing questions.

When Tom Brokaw of NBC once asked him whether he was "smart enough to be President," Mr. Ford not only gave a detailed response which did not in fact show him to be particularly bright. He later called Brokaw and thanked him for asking the question.

But Monday night the President consistently gave answers that he knew we knew he knew were bogus. A prime example is what he said, both in his opening statement and in his response to the last question, as to the timing of the changes he has made at the Defense Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council.

According to Mr. Ford he wanted to "maintain stability and continuity in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy" when he became President last year. Since then, he asserted, he had "successfully reassured our allies" and "convinced potential adversaries" that he would stand up for peace. Therefore, he concluded, he was now free to make the changes he wanted in the national security field.

But Mr. Ford told many people, including this columnist in a private interview on July 7 which I cited at the time, that he was "going to stick with the present cabinet." Far from having reassured the allies, the French and West Germans are so nervous about the Ford economic policy, which they consider more important now than security, that they are dragging him against his will to an economic summit in Paris next weekend. China—whose opposition to Moscow makes it this country's most important de facto ally—has been complaining in steadily louder tones against Mr. Ford's cooperation with Moscow in arms control and resource policy.

Apart from blandly offering explanations nobody could take seriously, Mr. Ford showed a me-big-chief quality. Despite repeated questions, he refused to offer substantive reasons for the changes he had made. Finally he cut off questions with abrupt self-assertion. "That's the

way I wanted it," he said of the change. "That's the way it is."

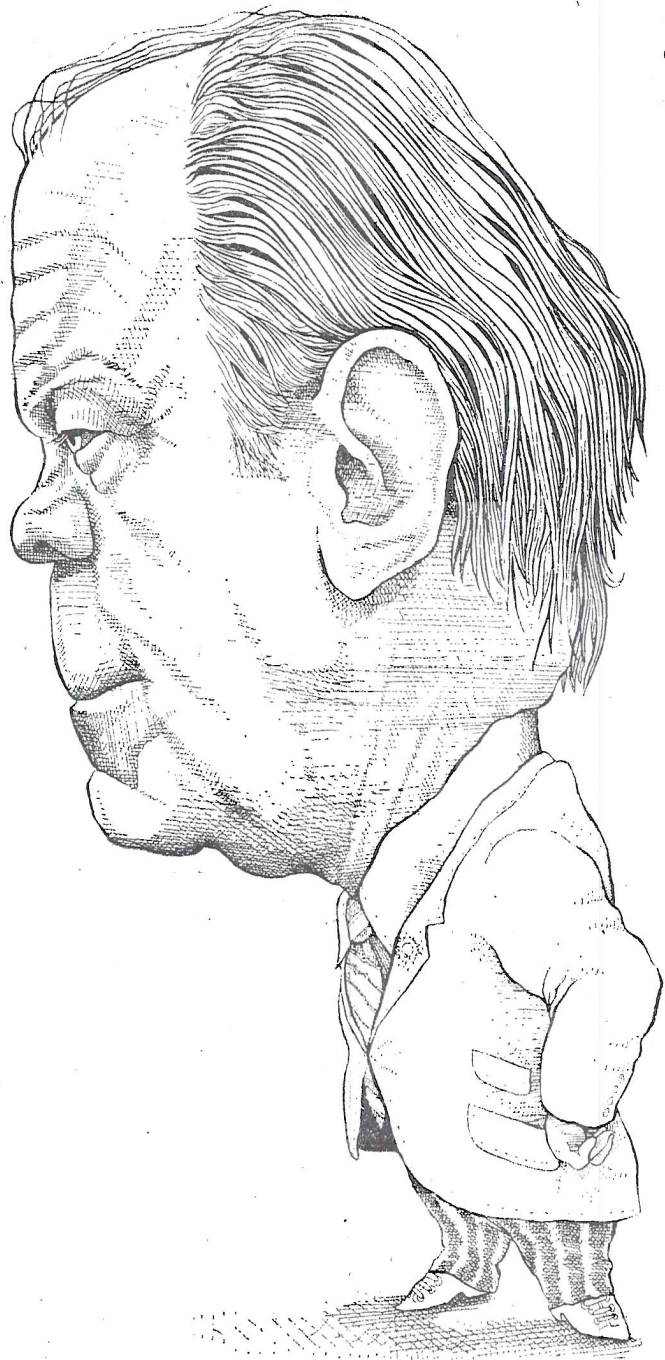
Finally there is the Vice-Presidential Derby Mr. Ford has so artfully set up. A sound tradition had kept the Defense Department and CIA jobs above politics. But Mr. Ford specifically indicated that he thought Donald Rumsfeld who now goes to Defense and George Bush who goes to the CIA are not "eliminated from consideration" for nomination as Vice President in 1976.

Elliot Richardson who comes back from the London embassy to the Commerce Department makes that shift only to be available as a possible vice-presidential choice. Several Republican senators, not to mention former Secretary of the Treasury John Connally, are also salivating for the job. So President Ford

has dangled the carrot of the No. 2 spot before all factions of the Republican Party in a manner reminiscent of the way Lyndon Johnson fostered subservience.

This self-assertion by the President is not necessarily all bad. The government and the country could stand an occasional smack of authority.

But when Presidents get full of themselves, Presidents tend to make bad mistakes. Mr. Ford has hardly been brilliant in his management of the economy, of foreign policy or even of his own election campaign. He may well get further over his head now and make costly errors at a time when what the country most needs is to get by until the election next year. The new Ford, in other words, may be a case of Mighty Mouse.



By Lurie for the Los Angeles Times