

Ford's First National Campaign: Incumbent in Role of Underdog

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 21— President Ford's campaign plan, a key adviser says, is "to be the best President he knows how." His central campaign problem, the same counselor adds, may be an impatient public's sense that through 16 months of his accidental term, Mr. Ford has been the best President he knows how.

Mr. Ford's peculiar advantage in a large field of Presidential candidates is that he commands center stage as the campaign curtain goes up. In his State of the Union and budget messages next month, he will write the agenda of official business and have a chance to define the public debate for the coming year.

Yet Mr. Ford's peculiarly personal disadvantage, starkly con-

firmed in his own polls, is that he seems to many Americans less "Presidential" than rivals in both major parties. An unelected President, he has not yet, in the opinion of many, answered the questions that sitting Presidents usually use against challengers: Is he competent? Does he measure up to the office?

Entering his first election race outside his old House district

Presidential Candidates First in a series

in Grand Rapids, Mich., Mr. Ford appears to be on weaker footing than any incumbent Presidential candidate since William Howard Taft in 1912.

He is now viewed in the Gallup Poll and among many of his fellow Republican politicians as an underdog for his party's nomination against Ronald Reagan, the articulately conserva-

tive former Governor of California. If he wins that battle to lead a shrinking minority of Republicans into the fall election, he will face the new leader of a Democratic Party that shows tentative signs of healing and renewed confidence after two Presidential defeats. In the meantime he faces a hostile Democratic Congress in more of the daily battles — some won, some lost in the past — that have so far failed to dramatize his vision for the country.

Yet Mr. Ford, who seems to relish the role of underdog and continually expresses confidence that the improving economy will enhance his position next year, feels enough kinship with the late Harry S. Truman

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—another beleaguered, accidental President who was widely written off in the 1948 election—to display a Truman bust in his Oval Office and to evoke the Truman memory in speeches and conversations.

Their situations, however, are not quite parallel: Mr. Truman, despite splits with some Democratic leaders, was the overwhelming favorite of voters in his own majority party. Mr. Truman's popularity dipped precariously in 1948, but in the last Gallup Poll of the pre-election year he had the approval of 55 percent of the country—about 15 percentage points more than Mr. Ford has at the end of this year.

Mr. Ford's situation is unparalleled in another way.

The slogan and the substantive content of Mr. Ford's State of the Union Message are yet to be written, as Robert T. Hartmann, the President's political adviser and speech writer, flew today to the Virgin Islands, with a suitcase full of suggestions, to work on a speech.

Possible Scope of Speech

Other advisers hope the speech can provide a strategic map of the year's campaign against "big government." They also want to present concrete legislative initiatives including some form of national health insurance, sweeping welfare reform and perhaps a "negative income tax," an expanded Food for Peace program, innovation in transportation and energy development, and more generous Social Security benefits.

Mr. Hartmann says only that it will be "a broad view of one whole range of things down the road, a general philosophical statement about where we want to go."

As one campaign aide who has studied the President's private polls observed last week, "There are still an awful lot of people, at least half the voters, who say they don't know very much about Gerald Ford and what he stands for." Whether it represents hope or despair, that assessment is surely unprecedented in the long record of Presidents who set out to extend their lease on the nation's highest office.

A Question of Legitimacy

In large measure President Ford's difficulties reflect how he got to the White House: He is the first man ever to win his job by appointment — by appointment, moreover; from the first President ever to quit the office in the face of impeachment and imminent removal. From the beginning a question of legitimacy has hung over the Ford Presidency.

But in large measure, too, some of Mr. Ford's closest friends attribute his troubles to the "unpresidential Presidency" of a man who never saw himself as an executive, who until two years ago planned to be retiring from politics in 1976 after what would have been 28 years in Congress.

"Gerald Ford is not the sort of person who inspires you," one of his early White House assistants remarked last week, more in sorrow than anger. "The hope for his success has been that somewhere deep inside him he has the instincts of a leader. None of us has reason to expect that, or to condemn him for lacking it."

The other possibility was that he had the right general sense of the country and could get a high-quality staff that understood what the Presidency is all about. Instead he's surrounded himself with people he feels comfortable with, and they've brought second-rate people with them. He's tried to move the House minority leader's office up to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, and it just doesn't wash."

Ratings in Gallup Polls

The public's appreciation of the Ford Presidency, as measured in Gallup approval ratings, began with an uncommonly high "honeymoon," slipped quickly on the news of the pardon for former President Richard M. Nixon, recovered briefly last spring at Mr. Ford's military rescue of the merchant ship Mayaguez, and dipped toward 40 percent again last month after the President's reshuffle of his Cabinet.

Increasingly, it has seemed that relief at Mr. Ford's transparent personal decency has been offset not only by economic anxieties but also by the Administration's confused policy signals.

Mr. Ford's first major domestic initiative, a "WIN" button and a tax-increase proposal designed to "whip inflation now," turned into a tax-cut proposal addressed to economic stagnation. At various times Mr. Ford's aides have proclaimed deregulation of industry, a \$100 billion energy investment, and an attack on crime (couched in constitutional language about "domestic tranquility") as major themes of the 1976 campaign, but he has not yet given these the Presidential emphasis needed to build an issue.

Earlier this fall he roused Republican audiences in the hinterlands with promises not to "bail out New York City, but then he sealed New York's package of self-help taxes with a proposal to advance the city \$2.3 billion worth of loans.

The Ford campaign, to the degree it can be viewed apart from his Presidency, has shown outsiders and many friendly Republicans a similar lack of strategic assurance.

In picking a campaign manager, as in staffing his White House, Mr. Ford reached back to a Congressional friendship

for former Representative Howard H. Callaway of Georgia, impeccably conservative, and briefly a jolt to Reagan supporters in the South, but otherwise unknown and unknowing in the special world of nomination politics.

Mr. Ford's first deputy campaign manager, Lee Nunn of Kentucky, quit in anger; his first chief fund raiser, David L. Packard of California, quit in silent frustration. But those are only two examples of the sometimes mutinous acrimony that has been a mark of the Ford campaign. Unlike Presidents who have fought their way to the White House, Mr. Ford lacks his own band of comrades in arms, proved and bonded in past campaigns.

Criticism by 2 Allies

Melvin R. Laird, long a Ford ally in the House Republican leadership, keeps sniping at Mr. Callaway, for example. "I hope the campaign committee can get organized and get moving," Mr. Laird commented last week, six months after Mr. Callaway got started. In the same vein, Representative Barber B. Conable Jr. of upstate New York, another friend of Mr. Ford's, was quoted last week as saying, "The country still views him as the guy who is filling the gap between Watergate and the next election."

And Mr. Callaway has seemed to feed the criticism by repeatedly shifting directions in the campaign against Mr. Reagan. His original premise was evidently that an early announcement of Mr. Ford's candidacy and the enlistment of well-known Republicans, especially in California, could dissuade Mr. Reagan from entering the race.

Mr. Callaway's next tack, perhaps on the theory that Mr. Reagan wanted to be Vice President, was to declare Vice President Rockefeller's place on the ticket the No. 1 problem in the way of Mr. Ford's own nomination. But when Mr. Rockefeller took himself out of contention last month, the effect was to open Mr. Ford's left flank to attack without easing the pressure on the right.

Mr. Callaway's next move, somewhat behind the Reagan forces, was to begin systematic organization in Iowa, where the first Presidential caucuses will take place next month, and in New Hampshire, Florida and Illinois, the early primary states. Because it uses an incumbent's leverage with elected officials and party officers at every level, organization may yet be Mr. Ford's most promising tactic.

Attack on Reagan Record

But no sooner had the work begun in earnest than Mr. Callaway opened an attack on Mr. Reagan's record — first in a television interview, and last weekend among Southern Republicans in Houston. "This great fiscal conservative," in Mr. Callaway's mocking description, had raised income taxes and doubled state spending in eight years as California's Governor. "His rhetoric is great and his record is poor."

Republicans in Houston took umbrage at the attack in itself, but they also wondered at the angle of Mr. Callaway's fire: In accusing Mr. Reagan of pragmatism, he said in effect that Mr. Ford's opponent was more moderate, less extreme than other Republicans might have feared.

To the Reagan camp, the Ford campaign has been a laughable series of mistakes.

The sacrifice of Mr. Rockefeller was "sheer stupidity," it seemed to the Reagan opposition. "They really seemed to believe that Rockefeller was the problem, not Ford," one member of the Reagan camp said. "What they failed to realize was that Rockefeller gave them ballast on the left, and without that Ford had nothing solid on either side."

But President Ford is not about to be laughed out of office, no matter what his opponents say.

Incumbency — the popular

Mr. Ford leads in the first four primary states: New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Florida and Illinois.

Campaign contributions are improving after a long drop. Ford headquarters reported raising \$130,000 last week—10 percent of the \$1.3 million the campaign has collected since June.

Months ago there was a joke around Washington that if Mr. Reagan routed Mr. Ford in the early primaries, if John E. Connally of Texas, Mr. Rockefeller and others jumped into contention and the fight for the nomination got out of hand, Mr. Ford might make a good compromise candidate at the convention next August in Kansas City, Mo.

The story is being retold in earnest in some Republican circles these days. It is at least imaginable, the scenarists say, that if Mr. Ford could not defeat Mr. Reagan early, he would sooner return to the White House and do a President's work than chase Mr. Reagan through 30 primary states for three months; and further, that if the economy turned up and he found a convenient crisis to manage, he might be an attractive candidate again by midsummer.

The story illustrates at least a widespread apprehension among Republicans in Congress that Mr. Reagan, even if he defeats Mr. Ford in the primaries, could prove a dangerously divisive standard-bearer in the November election, as Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona was in 1964. Against that risk, the reasoning is, Mr. Ford might still be the candidate with whom other Republicans want to run.

But that story, as do all the other Ford scenarios, requires the President, by new-found luck or skill, to make his office work for him.

Tomorrow: Ronald Reagan

picture of President Ford doing his job—must inevitably work in his favor sooner or later, the Ford camp assumes. Mr. Callaway stresses the line that Mr. Ford is “the only President we’ve got”—a sobering thought among Republicans.

Both the White House and the Ford campaign office maintain they see silver linings in every dark cloud. A bad Gallup Poll is good, according to Stewart Spencer, the campaign's political director, because it alerts the President's idle supporters to get busy. Mr. Reagan “peaked too soon,” Mr. Rockefeller volunteered last week.

But there may be more solid grounds for hope. For a President who is thought to be in trouble, Mr. Ford still has broad sympathy in his party; none of the polls suggest large or implacable anti-Ford sentiment among Republicans. In Iowa, which will produce the first results in the nominating campaign, Gov. Robert Ray is putting his own popularity on the line for the President. Mr. Ford's private surveys, which confirm the November trend to Mr. Reagan that showed up in the Gallup Poll, still report that