

Growing Old Believing in the

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

From Wilson to Nixon, in time of crisis the White House has cut itself off from the nation. In the suspenseful hours, what they've always shown us is limousines arriving and limousines leaving, officers of high rank, gray and powerful, committee chairmen wearing faces of official portraiture.

Not this time around. It isn't our crisis anymore. For us the war's long over; it's the White House that's just getting the news, but here too there's no drawing in, no canceling of speeches, no presidential disappearance. In

the midst of what would be tension and secretiveness under other Presidents, Mr. Ford allows John Hersey from The New York Times to spend seven straight days with him, from breakfast to bedtime. The secret of this White House is the absence of secrets; its defense is its porous accessibility.

Our President is making friends with us. The more we head about him, the more we see him out among us making speeches, chatting comfortably with Uncle Walter Bear Cronkite, our most comfy newscaster, the more we're allowed to see him functioning in a most difficult moment, the more our affection for him grows. Here, at last, is a person whose private and public life is a continuum, a modest politician, a President who prays

American Century

Poster

in the closet, a highly scrupled man, a square dealer, a Christian and, alas, a potential killer.

A part of him, because it suits both his nature and his politics, strains to overlook who's to blame for Vietnam. The word is no recriminations, but the other part of him is frantic. It permits the recriminations to bubble out in spite of himself. It's the peace party in Congress that did it, that wouldn't vote the money, that lost us Vietnam to the Reds.

This is not a macho trip, as it might have been with his predecessors. Jerry Ford is an achieved athlete. He didn't sit on the bench at Michigan in non-varsity humiliation. That boy won his letter.

No, Mr. Ford is a young man grown old believing in

The American Century. That was the phrase Henry Luce, another believing Christian, another ardent Yalie, ordered his Time-Life media machine to dub our age. Missionary imperialism.

Harry Truman said, "I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." Mrs. Ford found a bronze bust of Truman in the warehouse and Mr. Ford has it placed in the Oval Office next to Lincoln and Washington. The American Century.

Outward Christian Soldiers bound in retreat with their

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Vietnamese camp-followers. The Americans weren't left in Saigon overly long as part of a cheap plot to draw us back. The President and Dr. Kissinger couldn't believe the end would come so fast, but if it is the end, then we will march out in our own time, taking what and when we wish, and if that means the temporary reintroduction of troops, the getting off of one more good, stinging lick, this is the American Century. We're going because we made up our minds to. We weren't pushed.

Dr. Kissinger warns the world, don't draw the wrong conclusions from this. Small nations, hunker down and stay in line. We're circling to give someone a zap. Nicaragua, watch out. Portugal, you're going to push a little too far and we're going to wap you. America knows the duty of war for this is our time, our century.

"It is easy to skip into an attitude of imperialism where war becomes an instrument of public policy rather than its last resort," Mr. Republican, Robert Taft, warned a long time ago when Jerry Ford was beginning in Congress. Taft was a naysayer, a man of recriminations.

The American Century brooks no internal divisions, no recriminations; it is unitary and bipartisan. But if President Ford will stifle his recriminations, he will be recriminated at. Why were weapons enough to arm 10 North Vietnamese armies abandoned? Why does America still have the sluggish, overpowered, over-air conditioned Spanish Armada of an army such as we send to Vietnam to bog down in Coca-Cola? Whose jobs are these unwanted Vietnamese refugees going to take? Why do we have perpetual, open-ended foreign policy com-

mitments to take care of our useless allies' grandchildren? If we give you a bigger navy, will you use it to defend us or to make a bigger mess? Where does the right to declare war vest in our form of government? When will you tame the FBI? When will you civilize the IRS?

When Henry Luce published *The American Century* in *Life* magazine and reprinted it millions of times across the country, he told us that we must "accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and in consequence to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit."

The American Century is over. It didn't last 35 years.

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