

Gerald Ford--A Potential President



David Broder

EVERY Vice President can be graded in three ways — as the occupant of that office, as a potential contender for President, and as a potential President. How does Gerald Ford rate?

He seems a perfect choice for the kind of No. 2 man President Nixon wants — not a partner in policy-making or an apprentice President, but someone to fill the podium at Republican fund-raising dinners for the next three years.

Ford has vast experience in the work and has shown a willingness to go into any district for any brand of Republican from Pete McCloskey to H. R. Gross. He will raise funds and raise Republican spirits — and do so in a way less prickly than his predecessor's.

The White House also claims he will be a great help to Mr. Nixon with Congress, but that's a more dubious proposition.

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FORD is well-liked on Capitol Hill, but popularity is not power. As the range rider who consistently corralled enough Republican votes to make the President's vetoes stick, Ford was far more potent at the House Minority Leader's desk than he can be as Vice President.

His focus now moves to the Senate side of the Capitol, and Senators take unkindly to lobbying by their presiding officer, whether he happens to be an old leader like Lyndon Johnson, a former colleague like Hubert Humphrey or a stranger like Spiro Agnew.

Ford can serve as a listening post for the White House on Capitol Hill, but it's doubtful he can do much more.

What about his second role as potential presidential candidate? It can probably be safely ignored.

Despite the frenetic efforts of some White House aides to make Ford seem something other than the "caretaker" Vice President he is, his protestations of non-candidacy in 1976 deserve to be taken at face value.

The height of his ambition has been to be Speaker of the House, but despairing of that, he told political chums that he would run once more for the House and then retire in 1976.

What, then, of Ford as a man who might become President at some point in the next three years? He is obviously not the most distinguished choice Mr. Nixon could have made, and the President can fairly be faulted by those who thought the situation of the country required that kind of choice.

As Ford himself would agree, there are dozens of Republicans — including some in the House — who have quicker minds, better grasp of issues and more polished speaking styles.

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BUT FORD has compensating virtues as a potential fill-in President which should not be overlooked, particularly by those who have been vocally worrying about the abuse of presidential powers.

His style of politics is open, frank and direct. It is keyed to consultation and negotiation, not confrontation. The very fact that he is a plodder means he does not cut corners — legal, moral or political — the way those hell-bent on advancement of victory-at-any-cost are wont to do.

Should circumstance make him President, Ford's caution might be a comfort to the country. He is clearly not the best choice Mr. Nixon had available, but he is far from the worst.