

Integrity and Sincerity

By William Greider
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The more they thought about Jerry Ford, the more they thought of him.

He defied the percentages. Usually, when a public figure submits himself to relentless scrutiny in Washington, it diminishes him. Long-buried skeletons pop out of closets, old embarrassing speeches come back to haunt him.

But Gerald Rudolph Ford Jr., a plain man of comfortable familiarity, actually grew in personal stature as he moved methodically through the investigations and hearings which ended yesterday with his confirmation as the nation's 40th Vice President.

"He is one of those hewers of wood and drawers of

water upon which our country depends," said his friend, Rep. George Mahon of Texas, who probably holds as much power as appropriations chairman as Ford enjoyed as minority leader.

The remark was meant as a compliment, but it also described the limits of Ford's work-a-day reputation in the capital's politics—a reliable lineman in a town where quarterbacks get the headlines. He was nobody's superstar.

Then, day by day, as congressmen and senators and other political leaders came forward to assess the man, the idea of "Vice President Ford" sounded better and

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better to them and—who knows—even "President Ford" has a certain ring to it.

"I have known Jerry Ford for many years," said Michigan's Sen. Philip Hart, as liberal as Ford is conservative. "During that time, we have often disagreed, but I have never had reason to doubt his integrity and his sincerity. As for his voting record, I suspect he views mine in about the same light I view his, but in this period of swift change only the foolhardy offers his own voting record as a standard of wisdom and consistency."

Rep. Paul N. McCloskey of California, a wayward liberal who has often strayed

from Ford's flock, confessed: "I am puzzled sometimes over exactly what it is about Jerry Ford that causes me to like him so well and respect him so much." The explanation, McCloskey decided, was old-fashioned mid-western honesty.

"His word is good, not just to the letter of an understanding, but in the spirit of that understanding," said another liberal, Rep. Richard Bolling of Missouri, the intellectual patriarch of House reformers. "He is a man of strong convictions and opinions, but he is also a man who truly respects the opinions of others."

Even Ford's limitations were transformed into virtues. His lackluster style was described as a welcome



By Joe Heiberger—The Washington Post

Vice President Ford kisses his wife as Carl Albert looks on after swearing in.

tonic for a populace sick of flashy rhetoric. "Thank God he's got character, not charisma," a Democratic county chairman from California wrote to Sen. Alan Cranston. "We've had too much of the one, too little of the other."

Ford's modest intellect was described as a down-to-earth sense of the practical. The old LBJ wisecrack—the one about Jerry Ford playing too much football without a helmet—drew a thoughtful response from a California Republican leader:

"Things might be better if Richard Nixon had made that Whittier football team. Thank God Gerald Ford made the Michigan team. He's strong and he knows it.

He's tough and he knows it. He won't have to prove his manhood. And I'm not thinking only about Nixon when I say that—look at his predecessor. Thank God, too, that Ford wasn't a quarterback. He knows he doesn't know all the answers."

The bouquets for Ford became so thick and fragrant that Rep. Joe Waggoner, a Louisiana Democrat who has often worked with Ford to block liberal measures, couldn't resist teasing the minority leader.

"I've heard so many nice things about you," Waggoner told Ford, "I've concluded you've got to be a fairy—you couldn't be real."

A small, persistent band of liberals felt the same way. After all, this was the same Jerry Ford they insisted, who tried to impeach Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas a couple of years ago, who has stuck doggedly to partisan attacks on almost every issue, who voted against most of the major social legislation of the last decade, and who tried to weaken every important civil rights bill.

"They'll rue the day," warned Rep. Don Edwards, a liberal Democrat from California. "He is going to be a bad President. He's more conservative than Nixon and his judgment's not as good."

For the overwhelming majority, however, the confirmation of Ford by both House and Senate, established this principle: that partisan and ideological preferences must give way to another standard of judgment, the personal quality of the man, regardless of his views. On that scorecard, Jerry Ford stood remarkably high.

Senator Cranston, who canvassed hundreds of Californians from both parties on the nomination, was struck by the non-partisan tone of the responses from both Republicans and Democrats, as well as their assumption that confirming Ford may well be choosing the next President—if Mr. Nixon continues to slide. Cranston concluded:

"I doubt if there has ever before been a time when integrity has so surpassed ideology in the judging of a man for so high an office in our land."

A prominent California businessman passed on this story: a wealthy Michigan industrialist who is a friend of his has several times offered to let Ford share in

some legitimate and promising real estate deals. Each time, Ford politely declined.

In the confirmation hearings, old allegations of influence-peddling made by a small-bore Washington hustler named Robert Winter-Berger were examined closely and rejected as empty, even by the sternest Ford critics. In Ford's home district of Grand Rapids, even his 1972 Democratic opponent, attorney Jean McKee, told Ralph Nader's investigators that nobody took Winter-Berger's charges seriously because of Ford's own impeccable reputation.

"He would have to be actually caught smuggling heroin into the country or something," she said, "he has such an image of believability. I think he's probably as clean as anyone can be." In the year of Watergate, that quality turns out to be the most important one.

Charles Goodell, the former congressman and senator who helped Ford reach the GOP House leadership, put it this way:

"Should anything happen to the President, a Ford administration would be solid, honest, open and believable. We could do worse—and have."

When Gerald R. Ford was born on July 14 in Omaha, Neb., 60 years ago, his name was Leslie King. His parents divorced when he was still an infant and his mother moved to Grand Rapids where she remarried. Gerald R. Ford Sr., a small businessman, adopted the boy, gave him his name and raised him as his own. Tom LaBelle, a reporter for the Grand Rapids Press, discovered that Jerry Ford grew almost to manhood unaware he had another father, a rancher in Wyoming.

Jerry was a senior in high school, working for \$2 a week at Bill Skougis's restaurant, when his real father came to town.

"He stands there and he keeps looking at me for a long time," Ford remembered. "I was washing dishes and serving hamburgers and making change. Finally, he walked over to me and he said, 'I'm your father.'"

"That was quite a shock. I'd never thought about it. I couldn't care less. From my earliest days, I always assumed that my stepfather was my real father."

Both men are dead now. So is his mother. Congressman Ford remembers that

the last time he wept was at her funeral in 1966.

As a boy, big and growing and athletic, he thought he would be a professional baseball player. In his adolescent years, when Clarence Darrow was a sensational figure, his head was turned toward the courtroom and politics.

He was a teen-age achiever—an Eagle Scout, captain of the football team, honored by the governor. But he was no saint, as he liked to point out. Once, caught “doping off” in school, the principal gave him a tongue lashing, but Jerry thought it was unjust, so he didn’t bother to tell his folks.

“The principal was an old and dear friend of my father’s,” Ford recalled, “so I got it twice.”

His father started a small paint and varnish factory in Grand Rapids. The business survived, but never brought in so much that Jerry and his three step-brothers didn’t have to work. After his brilliant career as an All-America center on the football team at the University of Michigan, Ford had to choose between professional football and law school. He chose Yale.

“The reason was purely pragmatic,” he confessed. “I could make \$2,400 as a Yale assistant coach and also go to law school or I could make \$2,000 with the Green Bay Packers or the Detroit Lions.”

Bill Proxmire, future Wisconsin senator, was boxing on the Yale team when Jerry Ford was in law school and helped coach freshman boxing and junior varsity football. A square and soft guy, Proxmire remembers, but he adds: “Jerry never got in the ring with us. He really wasn’t much of a boxing coach. He was going to law school and he needed the job.”

Among other things, Ford’s hometown newspaper unearthed a bit of nostalgia from that period in his life—a Look magazine picture spread which features a handsome young Yale named Jerry Ford squiring a New York model on a picture-book ski weekend in Vermont.

“A New York Girl and her Yale Boy Friend Spend a Hilarious Holiday on Skis,” Look proclaimed, with lots of silly pictures of the future Veep frolicking in the snow.

He is still an athlete—skiing at his place in Vail, Colo., and swimming from

March to November in the heated backyard pool in Alexandria, Va. His occasional partner, George Mahon, offers this assessment of the Vice President’s golf game:

“He knocks the ball a country mile, but his short game leaves much to be desired.”

From Yale, Ford went to a brief law practice back home, then the aircraft carrier USS Monterrey serving in the Pacific, then back to Grand Rapids and another law firm.

His first race for Congress was in 1948. He was styled a modern Republican and he defeated the isolationist incumbent Bartel Jonkman. That same autumn, he married Elizabeth Bloomer, who is Betty Ford to Washingtonians and now the mother of four children.

Ford’s own description of his political viewpoint is: “Internationalist in foreign policy, conservative in fiscal affairs, and a moderate in general domestic matters.”

A lot of his colleagues think that sounds too bland. He is strongly oriented to defense interests and big business, generally. Yet, as minority leader, he helped guide the GOP toward a broader policy perspective on the environment, revenue sharing and other issues during the middle 1960s when the Democrats held the White House.

Ford’s strongest card, however, has been his quality as a legislative leader, the ability to marshal his troops without gathering an army of enemies. Considering that he has presided over House Republicans for nine years, it is extraordinary that they all speak so well of him even in private, not to mention the friendly Democrats.

“He is not a man of imagination or humor,” said Sen. Proxmire, and a lot of congressmen probably would go along with that assessment. But they see compensating qualities. Rep. Martha Griffiths, a Michigan Democrat, described the change when Rep. Charles Halleck was replaced by Ford as GOP leader:

“Where Mr. Halleck was swift and ruthless, Gerald Ford was slow-moving, soft-spoken and kind. Some confused such actions with an inability to lead. They were wrong.” The evidence, she noted, is that, with one exception, House Republicans have managed to sustain every Nixon veto this year.

Joe Waggoner, who has

often led Southern conservatives into coalition with Ford’s conservative Republicans, gives him high marks as a tactician:

“He is practical. He always knew when the horses were there and when they weren’t.”

Rep. John Erlenborn, a conservative Republican from Illinois, describes how floor leader Ford squeezes a colleague for a vote:

“Only in the nicest way. He’ll say, ‘If you can possibly go along, I appreciate it.’ But there’s never any arm-twisting or threats. None of this business about a project in your district.”

Ford, some of them say, also has a stubborn streak and the habit of occasionally stating things rather crudely in order to make his point.

Once, during debate on the Alaska pipeline, he persisted in referring to Canada as a “hostile power,” much to the embarrassment of his colleagues.

Inevitably, now that Ford is Vice President, his old colleagues wonder about what kind of a President he might make, a possibility which is fast moving beyond the category of idle speculation. They are comfortable with the thought—even heartened by it.

“His whole life has been in Congress,” said a Democratic committee chairman who came to Washington in the same period, “so he wouldn’t try to run over Congress the way Nixon has. He might be more stubborn on some things, but he wouldn’t be devious.”

Rep. Donald Riegle, a converted Democrat from Michigan, who still warmly praises his old GOP leader, observed:

“Jerry Ford has often played the role of partisan battering ram and many properly wonder if he can rise above narrow partisanship. I believe he can and will, but clearly it will require him to reverse personal behavior patterns long established.”

Ford himself has promised to play the role of “ready conciliator and calm communicator between White House and Capitol. During confirmation hearings, he spoke against secrecy in government and for candor.

“Truth is the glue on the bond that holds government together,” Gerald Ford said.

If he becomes President, a lot of people will try to make him stick to those words.