

Ford Expected by Some to Get More Responsibilities Than His Predecessors

OTHERS DUBIOUS ON FUTURE ROLE

Former Agnew Aide Feels an Activist in Post Would Soon Lose Credibility

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 6—Vice President Ford is expected by some members of the Nixon Administration to assume more responsibilities than any of his recent predecessors.

Melvin R. Laird, a Presidential counselor, said this week, for example, that Mr. Ford might well become the most activist Vice President in the nation's history, with broad responsibilities for coordinating domestic policy and for high-level Congressional liaison.

Gerald L. Warren, the deputy White House press secretary, who said that Mr. Ford and President Nixon had discussed the subject at length last Friday, ventured the guess that the new Vice President would "find plenty of work to do around here."

But Victor Gold, who served former Vice President Agnew as press secretary, expressed skepticism about Mr. Ford's ability to carry out any meaningful role while retaining the credibility he has enjoyed.

Substantive Vacuum

No recent Vice President has played a major role in the activities of the Administration he served. Mr. Nixon, Lyndon B. Johnson, Hubert H. Humphrey, and Mr. Agnew have all complained, in one way or another, about the substantive vacuum they found on taking office.

Mr. Agnew was asked, from time to time, to deal with the Governors, and he was used politically to make speeches that the President found desirable and useful but somehow un-Presidential. But he never had any impact on public policy.

Having never served in Washington until he was elected Vice President, Mr. Agnew knew far less about its byways than does Mr. Ford after 24 years in the House of Representatives. And Mr. Nixon needed Mr. Agnew, in the view of Administration insiders, much less than he now needs his successor.

Mr. Warren, greeting Mr. Ford with the kind of image-making that is customary on such occasions, noted that he

would become vice chairman of the Domestic Council and the National Security Council.

Another White House official, who asked not to be named, predicted that Mr. Ford would be asked to head the Domestic Council, to handle Congressional liaison and to make speeches around the country "giving the real picture of Richard Nixon the man."

Two Plan to Leave

Both Mr. Laird and Bryce N. Harlow, who has been handling a good deal of Congressional contact work in recent weeks, have told Mr. Nixon that they want to leave when Mr. Ford gets established. Both joined the Administration with some reluctance at a time when it had been shaken by early Watergate disclosures.

With their departure, Mr. Ford will be the only high-level official with practical political experience over a long period, which suggests to some observers that Mr. Nixon will have to make use of his talents in the 1974 campaign.

But Mr. Gold, who is now a newspaper columnist, said that he questioned, on the basis of his own experience, whether the Vice President would ever have enough access to Mr. Nixon to make him effective, and whether he would find the Vice Presidency an effective platform from which to lobby in Congress.

Neither Mr. Johnson nor Mr. Humphrey, both former Senators, had much success as White House advocates while serving as Vice President. Mr. Ford is the first man to go directly from the House to the Vice-Presidency since John Nance Garner in 1933.

Mr. Gold also suggested that Mr. Ford, who has been touted as a kind of "Mr. Clean" in Republican circles, "could lose his credibility inside three months—no, one month."

He'll get in there with the Secret Service, the red telephone, the planes and all that," Mr. Gold said, "and they'll dump a bunch of speeches on him and tell him to go out into the country and fight Nixon's battles."

The Big Question

"The question is: Can he look all that junk they'll hand him in the face and say, 'I'm not going to make that speech?'" If he can't, his chances will be finished. This Administration will take your credibility out of the bank and spend it before you know it."

Mr. Ford is apparently aware of the problem. He confided to a friend not long ago that he was confident of his ability to work on Capitol Hill and to deal with domestic policy.

"What I have to watch out for," he said, "is not to become Nixon's apologist. That won't help either of us."