

Ford: Nixon's

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EARLY IN 1971, Rep. Pete McCloskey and I concluded that Nixon administration policies should be challenged in the 1972 Republican presidential primaries. In June, I discussed this plan with Gerald Ford, GOP leader in the House, fellow Michigander and personal friend.

"Don't ever underestimate the capacity of a President to change the political environment," Ford said, "and be assured that this President will use that power as much or more than his predecessors." As we shook hands in his doorway, he added: "Don't be too surprised if the rug is pulled out from under you."

Four weeks later President Nixon announced he would visit mainland China. On Aug. 16 he froze wages and prices, reversing his long-standing economic policy. Weary months later, the footsore McCloskey challenge ended in the snows of New Hampshire, with Mr. Nixon pulling 70 per cent, McCloskey 20 per cent and Rep. John Ashbrook 10 per cent.

Richard Nixon's long career in politics has produced a dizzying succession of pulled rugs, and usually they have sent Nixon's opponents tumbling. But some of his most carefully pulled rugs have upended Mr. Nixon himself.

When he named Gerald Ford his Vice President-designate, for example, President Nixon clearly thought he had pulled one off again, using Spiro Agnew's demise to strengthen his own hold on the presidency. But of all Mr. Nixon's political decisions, that one, I believe, will ultimately be judged the worst he ever made for himself—and the best he made for the country. For Ford as Vice President will, I believe, prove fatal to Mr. Nixon's efforts to retain the presidency.

While it is impossible to foresee the precise ending—resignation, impeachment or physical disability—the President's end of the chess board has virtually been swept clean of defenders, with the exposed king scrambling frantically, and vainly, to save himself. Thus there is a growing consensus in Washington that President Nixon cannot survive in office much longer and that, for better or worse, Gerald Ford will be America's next President.

A Viable Alternative

WHILE HE WAS Vice President, Spiro Agnew's greatest value to President Nixon was as an insurance policy. It was impossible for rational people to seriously consider removing

Mr. Nixon with Agnew as the alternative. But Jerry Ford is not a Spiro Agnew; Ford is a viable alternative. It is too early to judge whether that feeling is yet held by a simple majority in the House and a two-thirds majority in the Senate, the numbers needed to impeach and remove a sitting President. But the blunt talk in the cloakroom indicates that the total who do feel that way is large, bi-partisan and growing.

The key to Mr. Nixon's fate ultimately lies with his fellow Republicans in Congress. At the moment they are worried and restless. Mr. Nixon's difficulties are serious enough, but having them rub off and in turn jeopardize their own political survival would be catastrophic.

For most Republicans in Congress, especially House Republicans, the Ford nomination produced genuine elation. Jerry Ford was their friend and popularly chosen leader, a man who had shared with them occasional victories and far more defeats, but, more than that, he was a man like themselves. Not a flashy charismatic figure, not a prima donna from the Senate or a governorship, not a strident ideologue, but a good Republican soldier who had plugged faithfully along in the ranks, expecting and getting small reward for his effort.

President Nixon probably thought at the time that he had greatly strengthened his base of Republican support in the Congress, for he had thrown them a large bone. There was indeed a burst of gratitude, a feeling that the President had, after a number of bumbles, made a wise decision. But that was before the Saturday night massacre, the missing and garbled tapes, and other subsequent events.

Now, Jerry Ford as Vice President has taken on a profoundly different meaning for Republicans. For it is dawning on them that they have a choice, Mr. Nixon or Ford. If they continue to back Mr. Nixon, they necessarily position themselves and their party in the shrinking corner the President now occupies. For if the GOP gambles and defends Mr. Nixon to the end and he finally exits disgraced, the damage to the Republican Party and Republican officeholders may well be irreparable.

Arrogance and Aloofness

KEY REPUBLICANS have a list of valid reasons to abandon an administration that has shown slight interest in congressional Republicans for the past five years. Few congressional Republicans, for example, have forgotten that the President ran alone in 1972. The Committee for the Re-Election of the President hogged available campaign funds and ended with a multi-million-dollar surplus while under-financed Republicans at the congressional and

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state levels were losing dozens of key races, their desperate appeals for help ignored by the Nixon campaign.

Also, few congressional Republicans have had serious access to the Nixon White House. Sen. William Saxbe, Mr. Nixon's current attorney general-designate, for example, was banned from the White House for four years. His crime: suggesting to the President in 1969 that he keep his promise and end the Vietnam war.

As a Republican member of the House during Mr. Nixon's first term as President, I heard congressional Republicans of all views complain bitterly of White House arrogance, aloofness, indifference. It was a legitimate complaint. There was a growing feeling that Mr. Nixon had aided the party and fellow Republicans only as long as he needed them to help him achieve the presidency. This suspicion was reinforced after Mr. Nixon gained the White House in 1968 and largely abandoned the party. In 1969, for example, when Mr. Nixon entered the White House, there were 31 Republican governors; the number has since dwindled to 18.

Thus, logic and close observations indicate that the Ford alternative looks almost divinely inspired to Republicans in Congress.

Removing the Albatross

FIRST AND FOREMOST, he can save them from having to go down with Mr. Nixon—Ford, if he becomes President, takes the Nixon-Agnew albatross from the neck of every incumbent Republican seeking reelection. Few could ask a bigger favor with the 1974 elections fast approaching and with the most recent Gallup polls indicating that public support for congressional Republicans is at its lowest level in 38 years. The October data showed voters favoring Democrats 58 per cent to 30 per cent with 12 per cent undecided—a landslide margin sufficient to elect a veto-proof Democratic Congress next year.

Second, they like Ford and know they would have access to a Ford White House. They could count on being heard, and on a generous flow of traditional favors to party members in Congress. Members of Congress prize presidential contact, however slight—so they may drop his name, be photographed with him, talk to him occasionally—and they know Ford would oblige.

Third, Ford is open and honest, a man they can respect and trust. After the presidential experience of recent years, the prospect of an honest, straight-forward President has enormous appeal to every member of Congress.

Fourth, Ford, after 25 years in the

House, is a bona fide congressional person; he obviously cares about Congress' role in the federal system. They know Ford would work for a more equal relationship between the legislative and executive branches. His presidency would mean an end to constant veto battles, arbitrary impoundments, and deliberate and unnecessary provocations of Congress.

Fifth, Ford would be a competent caretaker President—able to get the executive branch reactivated and running smoothly—while allowing the Republican Party to go about the business of sorting out its prospective 1976 presidential candidates.

This is not to say that all congressional Republicans are poised to flee Nixon en masse; some have a remarkable ability to resist the inevitable. Some will succumb to Mr. Nixon's last desperate enticements—and end up sharing the final bitter days with him. But most Republicans, I believe, will save themselves, their party, and the office of the presidency.

Tolerance and Respect

MY OWN VOTING record in Congress is nearly the polar opposite of Ford's. And in supporting the McCloskey challenge in the presidential primaries I was directly at odds with Ford. But despite all this, two weeks before the New Hampshire primary in 1972, Ford came into my district in Flint, Mich., to endorse my reelection and indicate publicly that, while he disagreed with my challenge to Mr. Nixon, he respected my right to do it, saying that I was not a disloyal Republican. Given the venomous attitude of the Nixon White House toward GOP dissenters, Ford's helping hand to a White House "enemy" earned him no brownie points at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

Clearly, his tolerance and respect for differing opinions are important facets of his character. But these qualities alone are not enough.

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A paramount concern involves his method of organization and staffing. Many observers feel that his congressional staff lacked strong issue specialists and policy heavyweights, and was instead almost exclusively geared to the standard service-to-the-constituents functions. Some draw the inference that Ford must be a narrow-gauge thinker, unwilling or unable to push forward on a broad range of urgent national issues. Thus, some question whether Ford, as President could adequately staff and manage the vast range of executive branch policy machinery.

It is a fair question, and a vital one. While it is impossible to accurately predict Ford's performance if he were President, there are some crucial facts about his past record that have been generally overlooked. On balance, they are a cause for hope.

Ford's sense for the issues and his leadership ability are probably best

measured by his performance as House minority leader from 1965 through 1968 rather than by the past five years. For Ford's behavior has varied dramatically, depending on the party in the White House.

With Lyndon Johnson as President, Ford was an activist, creative minority leader; when the Republicans gained the presidency, Ford seemed to see his role as limited essentially to that of advancing and defending Nixon positions. Under Mr. Nixon, Ford relied less on Capitol Hill staff work and more on White House marching orders. His leadership record during the Nixon years, like that of Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott, is rather dismal; it is more instructive to meas-

ure Ford's efforts when he felt free to be his own man.

Although it seems ancient history now, it is useful to recall that Ford was the prime mover of the reform effort by House Republicans in 1965 when he deposed Charles Hallack as minority leader. After failing to also purge the conservative Republican whip, Les Arends, Ford succeeded in naming then-Rep. Charles Goodell to head a new Republican planning and research committee. That committee gave birth to 12 task forces ranging in subject from urban affairs and education to congressional reform and voting rights.

Given encouragement and latitude by Ford, the task forces produced solid work. Goodell and Albert H. Quie, for

example, devised the "block grant" formula for funding education that was to become the prototype of today's revenue-sharing program. James Cleveland's task force effort on congressional reform produced a number of important recommendations.

In 1966 and again in 1967, Ford, along with the late Republican Senate Leader Everett Dirksen, presented a Republican version of the annual presidential State of the Union message, complete with specific legislative proposals. While the work was chiefly done by others, it was Ford who built the new structure, staffed it, and set the activist tone.

With the policy initiative shifting to the Nixon White House in 1969, Ford chose to follow rather than lead. It's

not surprising that he increasingly came to be perceived as a "Nixon rubber stamp," a "mindless yes man," for that's the way he played it.

A Cabinet-Type Operation

CLEARLY FORD'S recent style of operation would have to change if he assumes the presidency. He would again need to think and plan for himself.

It is probable that he would reinstitute a cabinet-type executive operation in the Eisenhower style, substantially diffusing executive power among cabinet officers and key subordinates. As to specific people, it seems likely that past House colleagues like William Cramer, Melvin Laird, Donald Rumsfeld, Charles Goodell and George Bush

would be asked to serve in strategic positions.

All this is not to suggest that Ford now has in mind, or would develop, a grand new design for dealing with foreign and domestic issues. He has already indicated he would pursue the broad outlines of the Nixon foreign policy, retaining Secretary of State Kissinger as the key individual. On domestic matters, he is apt to approach it in bits and pieces, parceling out time and attention on the basis of urgency.

Beyond the forced tending of crises, he would find himself almost fully absorbed by the task of restaffing and reactivating a badly depleted and largely inoperative executive branch. Given a term of three years or less, the reactivation of the executive machinery and prudent crisis management would fully tax any new President. Our immediate task, unfortunately, is recovery, not renaissance, and for this Gerald Ford may well be the right man.