

DEC 1 3 1973

Gerald Ford: Walking a Political Tightrope

Vice President Gerald Ford, whose swearing-in evoked the only genuine political sentimentality in the Capitol since the Watergate scandals, has dismayed supporters by rejecting important advice from longtime political intimates.

Advice No. 1: that Ford forego his annual skiing vacation over the Christmas holidays and stay in Washington, thus building the "take-charge" image of a Vice President in a unique situation who is fully equipped to lead the country if Richard Nixon falls.

Advice No. 2: that Ford hire a sophisticated politician of wide experience as his chief aide to run a serious Ford staff largely independent of the White House and capable of tackling major issues.

Having been in office only one week, Jerry Ford has plenty of time to create the impressive staff his supporters envision. The disappointment is real, however, that on the strength of a pledge to his longtime administrative aide, Robert T. Hartmann, he has now made Hartmann his chief of staff.

"Bob Hartmann is a bright guy and a tough guy, but he rubs almost every-

one the wrong way without even knowing it," one Ford intimate told us. In sum, Hartmann falls short of the dynamism that Ford allies feel is needed, even though his toughness will be an asset in predictable battles between the Ford and Nixon staffs.

One bright spot in the new Ford staff is Kenneth Belieu, a former Lyndon Johnson aide who served in high Pentagon jobs for both President Kennedy and President Nixon. Belieu will run Ford's legislative affairs office, and he has high prestige with Congress.

Ford's staff is just beginning to grow. Major changes—including the all-important spot of staff chief—cannot be ruled out in the future. Far more important to Ford, as the only Vice President in history chosen by Congress on the recommendation of a President, is his political relationship with Mr. Nixon and the Republican Party. It is here that the decision not to postpone his skiing vacation until February may have cost Ford a symbolic advantage.

As one Republican elder told us: "The President is going South or West,

Congress is going home, but the political crisis over Nixon's future, the energy thing and the Middle East will stay right here in Washington. Ford should stay here too, to show that he is different and to begin to fill that terrible leadership vacuum."

But Ford chose Christmas as usual, a hint that he will not allow himself to become a foil for Republicans who want the President to resign. Moreover, no sooner had Ford been sworn in than he began a major defensive sweep for the President, clearing him of Watergate blame and praising his release of personal financial data.

That is precisely what bothers Ford's political friends, and other Republicans well to Ford's left, who see the party's only salvation in Ford replacing Mr. Nixon well before the 1974 general election. For these Republicans, Ford's first week was vaguely disappointing.

Yet, Ford himself is well aware of the risks of becoming a White House patsy. For example, Mr. Nixon at first insisted that the Ford swearing-in be a Nixon operation, held in the White House. Ford, backed by the entire con-

gressional leadership of both parties, said no.

What helped finally persuade the President was Ford's private word, spoken with candor, that a walk down the House aisle with Ford might enhance the beleaguered President.

Perhaps more significant, despite his reputation for following the letter of any presidential command, Ford at least once in the recent past flatly refused to do the White House bidding in a matter involving high and confidential national politics. The reason: Ford thought it would be personally dishonorable.

In short, despite Ford's seeming lack of guile, he has shown he can sharply circumscribe his obligations to Mr. Nixon.

Whether sharply enough remains to be seen. He is walking a tightrope as hand-picked Vice President to an all-but fallen President. To fulfill his obligations to his party and to the presidency (as opposed to the President), his closest political friends feel he must not become front man for Mr. Nixon, but instead the number two man in the nation.