

William S. White

Mr. Ford's Divisive Speech

Vice President Gerald Ford, who had been sailing on with restraint and poise in his new job, has now made a grievous error from which he would be wise to disentangle himself.

This blooper was his recent speech implying that only a "relatively small group of activists who are out to impeach the President" is at the root of the country's deep trauma over Watergate. While it is true that this phrase is considerably qualified when one reads the whole of the address, it is still on every count a most unfortunate bit of rhetoric.

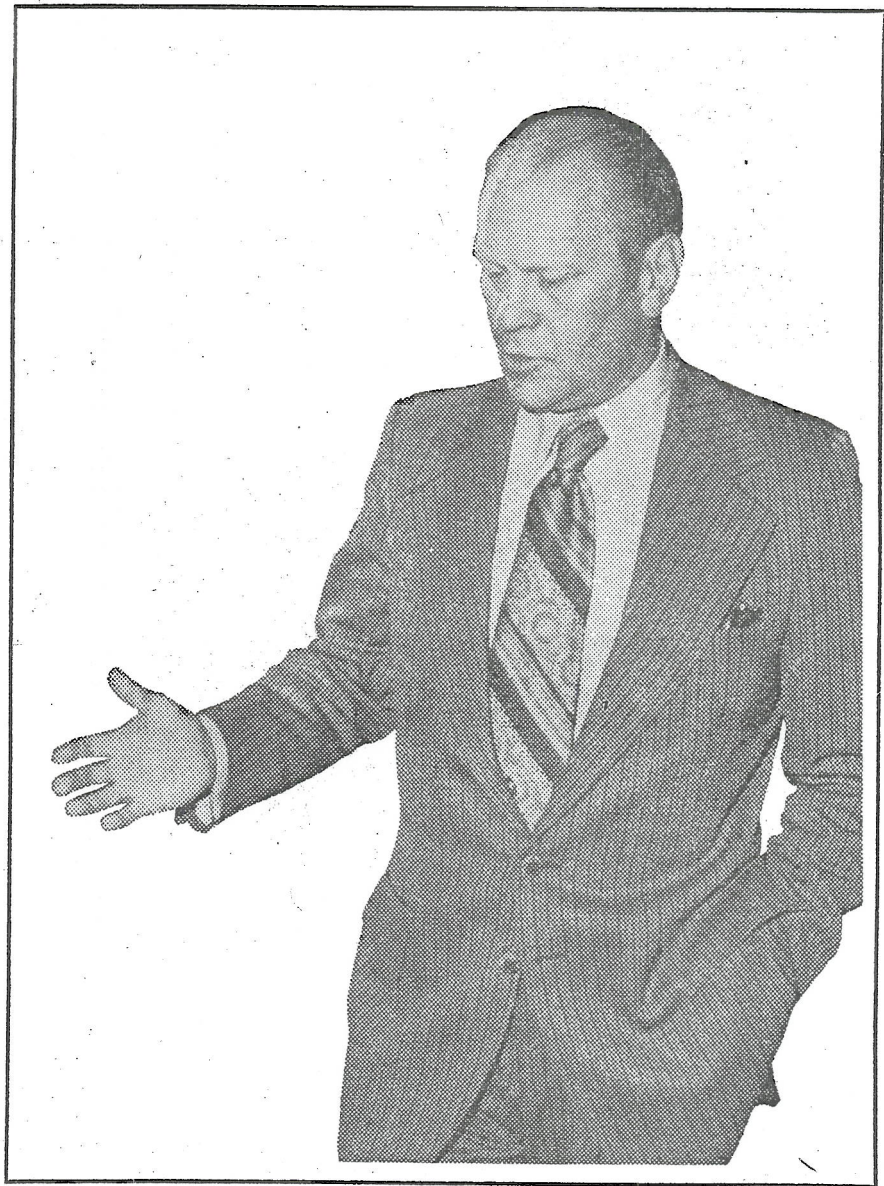
It is plain in this whole wretched business that Gerald Ford must not forget that he well may become President of the United States. He might be so elevated by the monumental tragedy of President Nixon's forced resignation or impeachment. He might ascend through the process of simply being elected in 1976. In either event no politician in a century, save one—Lyndon B. Johnson when John F. Kennedy was murdered—could be said to have come to power with as vast and delicate a responsibility to a people poignantly in need of some unity and of some common civility.

Whatever happens to Richard Nixon, his successor will find that he must lead a divided nation—and a nation, moreover, likely to be confronting crises within itself. While it is no good crying havoc at every turn (while indeed it is irresponsible so to do) it is clear at minimum that the age of careless affluence is over for the American people at home. And it is unhappily probable, if far less certain, that, even abroad, our national interests will remain far from secure and full of latent danger to us all.

This being the hard reality, to understand the gravity of Ford's mistake it is necessary to examine what the position would be if (a) Mr. Nixon should be forced from office and (b) if he is able to finish his term.

If the President is driven out, no matter by what sort of evidence, millions of Americans will believe him to have been victimized so that the overwhelming mandate he received in 1972 could be torn from him. The country is already polarized on the issue. Assume a situation in which an enraged minority adopts the conviction that Richard Nixon was unfairly destroyed: the operative point will not be whether this is a reasonable conviction; it need only exist for the country to be in grave trouble.

The successor in the White House will require almost super-human sensitivity and tact and tolerance in order to keep the country sane and healthy. Lyndon Johnson showed those qualities in the scary days after the murder of John Kennedy, but they were not qualities easily come by. They could never have existed without



Johnson's long prior experience in toleration and in bringing people and factions together when he was Senate Majority Leader.

Turn to the second alternative — that Mr. Nixon stays in office until his term is over—and much the same applies. In this case, the President's most implacable adversaries would feel

cheated of justice. They too would somehow have to be placated to avoid a prolonged and frightfully wasteful disunion and disarray.

Almighty God did not ordain immortality for a democratic society, no matter how many seem to suppose otherwise.

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