

# Ford as the President: Some Hard

By James D. Barber

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## Questions

DURHAM, N. C.—Gerald R. Ford is considered likely to be President of the United States soon. What kind of President will he be? A plastic "genial Gerry" on the Warren G. Harding model, ready to bend with whatever wind is strongest? A Truman-type straight-shooter from middle America?

Mr. Ford's sermonettes since his emergence last October have filled in few gaps in such guesses. Nor has the press been much help in assessing Ford-as-President.

Last October, The New York Times recommended as "the controlling considerations" in choosing potential Presidents "character and competence" for that high office. Today we know little more than that Mr. Ford is not a crook.

The choice of a President deserves the most serious and detailed inquiries reaching far beyond the question of ethical conduct, for the Presidency is not some top prize in a morality contest. It is first of all, a dangerous office, as the public has learned the hard way. Presidents can and do get people killed—a lot of people.

Their powers can swing decisions about who wins and who loses in the economy, who eats and who goes hungry. Presidents can ruin their enemies, scare you out of speaking your mind, keep you at home when you meant to go to a meeting.

Yet in choosing the President, or a probable President like Mr. Ford, we tend to suspend disbelief. The choice among clay-footed characters is turned into a choice between St. Peter and St. Paul, a kind of national Emmy contest as to whether this or that one will turn out to be "great" or only "near-great." Presidential politics becomes a Sunday spectacular, a "great American drama" of entertainment and imagery and gamesmanship, racy with colorful events. Richard M. Nixon understood that when he staged the Ford announcement at a White House party, calculating that we the people would forget what he did when last he chose a Vice President.

A rational investigation of Mr. Ford—and of any other potential President—would build on history: his, the office's and the country's. It would be a cold, hard look at patterns of experience, with the aim of producing specific predictions. At least five arenas of conduct need exploration.

### The Power Situation

Last October, David Broder of The Washington Post, probably the country's best-informed political reporter, thought that Mr. Ford as a potential Presidential candidate for 1976 could "probably be safely ignored."

Now Mr. Ford surpasses Edward M. Kennedy in the Presidential-preference polls and indeed it becomes increasingly probable that he will be President in 1974, a Republican incumbent facing, after November, sizable Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress.

Until and unless Mr. Ford moves beyond disclaiming any intention to run in 1976 and refuses outright, the hypothesis has to be that he will be no lame-duck President. (Indeed, there

is scattered evidence that Mr. Ford has been "drafted" for every leadership position he has held.)

If these estimates hold—and they need careful checking—the modern history of split-party governments gains relevance.

What does experience teach about the power of a President in that situation—to get what he wants and to stop what he opposes?

Similar assessments of the shape of power are needed regarding what Mr. Ford as President may face in the international arena, the Supreme Court, the Federal bureaucracy and the leading newspapers. For Presidential power, like all power in politics, is not something fixed in one man but a series of shifting relationships of persuasion.

### The Climate of Expectation

Presidents—people—react to what is expected of them. That changes from time to time; in politics, the

rhythm of fashionability can be charted—from a want for action to a need for rest, from moral uplift to anything goes, from challenge to reassurance.

Nowadays some of the most peculiar movements of public attitudes yet recorded are under way. The voices that Mr. Ford as President would hear, if hear he would, are already plaintive with the wounds of disillusionment.

The reputation of nearly every national institution is drifting down: Professors, doctors, the press, even "science" is in decline, with politicians leading the pack. The American people say in plain terms that they are disgusted with the way things are going and with the men in charge.

Among the many things the public finds disgusting, according to the polls, are the cheap and easy answers politicians offer for their ills, the placebos and Band-Aids, the I-can-get-it-for-you politics pressed on a largely under-thirty electorate by largely over-fifty inheritors of the New Deal mentality. Nor are the people any longer impressed by the tough guys in politics who advertise the weakness of their imaginations by the harshness of their cures.

*Vox populi* is no *vox Dei*, but politicians who ignore what the public is trying to say do so at their political peril. Sore as the present public is, there is strong evidence that they are American to the core: uninterested in revolution, increasingly concerned for their civil liberties, ready for sacrifice on an equal basis with the privileged, and, above all, watching and waiting for leadership to express and effect their new sense of the country's commitment to community, humaneness and candor.

Most of this, too, has passed unnoticed as the Ford era approaches. Instead, we get the latest polls on impeachment versus resignation, Kennedy versus Reagan, on the model of the citizen as maze-rat forced to choose between some preconstructed turn to the left or the right. What needs exploration is the deeper tide of popular attitude.



Michael Mathias Prechtl

*Would he be a 'happy warrior' in the White House?*

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Clearly a President Ford will have to cope with a large-scale accumulation of distrust and dissatisfaction and with a way of looking at politics hard for anyone born in 1913 to grasp.

### Political Style

How has Mr. Ford gone about doing what he would have to do as President? Presidents are asked to do many things, but there are three things they must do, lest the enterprise fall apart: address the nation, negotiate with other politicians, and manage the flow of detail that spreads across the desk.

A President's skill and stance in these tasks can be critically important. Whatever Mr. Nixon's character, for instance, his style of operation has had a big hole in it.

In many ways a master speaker and at least from his Duke University days a steady student, he has trouble relating to people close-up; the White House transcripts make that abundantly clear.

No matter how many breakfasts with the Congressmen he holds, the ordinary give-and-take, the human connection that fosters compromise just isn't there. Watergate might not have happened if Mr. Nixon had learned the knack of listening at ease and dealing, directly and genuinely, with powerful friends and opponents.

It seems that Mr. Ford has that particular talent down pat. Like Lyndon B. Johnson, he is a political hugger. "It's the damndest thing, Gerry just puts his arm around a colleague or looks him in the eye, says, 'I need your vote,' and gets it," reported an old House colleague.

But what has been his persisting pattern of operation in intimate decision-making? The reviews are mixed. Some say he bends and backs off; some say he stands fast. Given the Johnson experience, it would be useful to know whether Ford-the-negotiator has been typically a perceiver and expresser of the going consensus or a leader who defines his own stance and fights to get it affirmed.

Similarly Mr. Ford's speechmaking style needs exploration. He has made

about 200 speeches a year. How does he relate to audiences? His style in Presidential homework is another uncertainty. Skeptics say he is not very bright (as if high intelligence were an important requirement for Presidents), but he takes his briefcase home and he is thought to have mastered the mysteries of the defense budget.

It is the patterns, the habits ingrained by repeated experience, that count here. If we want a President who can make the place work—with no rule book and no simple precedents to guide him—we had better trace Mr. Ford's style right on back to that first contest for Congress in 1948, when he found a winning way.

### Political World View

Style is how a President does things; world view is how he sees things. What is Mr. Ford's vision of politics—not just on this or that temporary issue—but on the basics?

For example, Mr. Ford at the start of the Senate hearings on his confirmation propounded that "truth is the glue that holds Government together."

Has he really believed that—believed it in the sense that it has been a steady shaper of his behavior? When he says that in Government "I don't think there is a decline in morality, frankly," and that political ethics have improved but the media make faults more visible, is he merely responding to the passing Watergate crisis or is he giving voice to an enduring hopefulness?

It was terribly important to Woodrow Wilson's Presidency that he believed God ruled the world and that he and the people were on God's side. Harry S. Truman's faith that man makes history, Franklin D. Roosevelt's trust in experiment, Herbert Hoover's individualism were convictions with consequences.

So are Mr. Nixon's perceptions that "frankly, most people are mentally and physically lazy," and that "there is one thing solid and fundamental in politics, and that is the law of change. What's up today is down tomorrow."

Such persistent assumptions about

social causality, human nature and political morals have guided Presidents to triumph and disaster.

Sorting out sham from substance in Presidential beliefs is a tough task; we are forever mistaking the President's idea-of-the-day for his guiding focus.

Again, life history can help. For example, adolescence is typically one stage when a person tries on various ways of understanding the world. Mr. Ford's youthful interest was sports, especially football; he became a star player, coached part-time at Yale, and served as an athletic officer in the Navy.

What did that long experience come to mean to him? The fact that he played center in itself tells us nothing of meaning. But when he says that "I was a lineman. I liked to do the blocking and tackling," he opens the door a crack, perhaps revealing an important theme research could uncover. Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Mr. Johnson, and Mr. Nixon carried over into their Presidencies attitudes already clear enough, in retrospect, in their youthful attitudes toward sports.

### Political Character

Last and most comes character. How does Mr. Ford orient himself toward life—not just to this or that role, not for the moment, but enduringly, comprehensively? What in the middle of the night does Gerald R. Ford think of Gerald R. Ford? By what criteria does he judge himself and what is the upshot of the judging? Once picked by the United States Junior Chamber of Commerce as one of "America's ten outstanding young men," and by the American Political Science Association as a "Congressman's Congressman," does he feel he is fulfilling his early promise?

Presidential character infuses every Government with the personal flavor of the man at the top. Warren G. Harding let them all go off on their own tangents, because he needed their love more than their loyalty. Mr. Wilson undercut his own cause, because it was more important to him to have his way than to achieve his goal. Mr. Eisenhower stood above the political roil of his day—because duty-honor-country meant more to him than did Joseph R. McCarthy or "those damn monkeys on the Hill." Only rarely, as with Franklin D. Roosevelt, have Presidents fused pleasure and purpose to gain genuine results through action.

On this dimension Mr. Ford remains a mystery. We know only the barest outlines, the *curriculum vitae*, but not what he made of his life when his character was under construction. He was born half a year after Mr. Nixon, on Bastille Day, before the curtain went down on Victorian optimism and hypocrisy.

He was christened Leslie Lynch King, Jr. His father left and when he was two his parents were divorced. His mother remarried a man who gave the boy his name and, years later, encouraged his political debut. He comes from Grand Rapids, Mich. He graduated from the Yale Law School. And so on.

None of that tells us what we need to know: how the boy-and-man-to-be invented himself in a context of home and pals, space and closeness.

Given who he is, would Mr. Ford be a happy warrior in the White House? A reluctant dragon? A power-driven man-machine? Or a nice guy who finished first, only to discover that not everyone is a nice guy?

These are not mere questions of mental health—I believe Mr. Ford when he says, "I'm disgustingly sane"—but of how within the bounds of sanity he seeks his personal peace.

We know now what Gerald Ford eats for breakfast (orange juice, an English muffin and hot tea). Soon we will know the menus for Mr. Kennedy and Henry M. Jackson, and Walter F. Mondale—and who can tell what Mr. X's yet to appear? Yet it may not be too late to ask, of each and all, just what sort of President would he make.

James D. Barber is chairman of the department of political science at Duke University and author of "The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House."