

# Plain-Spoken Promises and a Level Gaze

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Jerry Ford became President without the ruffles and flourishes.

This was a time, he said, for "just a little straight talk among friends." No brassy salute when he walked in, no dramatic drum roll as he became the republic's 38th chief executive.

"My fellow Americans," Gerald R. Ford proclaimed in his dead-earnest manner. "our long national nightmare is over."

The moment of transition, the mystical ceremony of presidential oath-taking, always stirs patriotic emotion when power passes, silently and peacefully, from one national leader to the next. This time, it struck a deeper chord, made more reassuring by Ford's plain-spoken promises.

"In all my public and private acts as President," the man said, "I expect to follow my instincts of openness and candor with full confidence that hon-

esty is always the best policy in the end."

In other times, Gerald Ford's expressions of old-fashioned virtue, honesty and the Golden Rule and a human prayer for help might be brushed aside as political boilerplate. Yesterday, people savored his words and thirsted to believe them. Yesterday, his level gaze and flat Midwestern voice seemed

## Commentary

more dramatic than the loftiest rhetoric.

"I have not sought this enormous responsibility," he said, and people knew that was true. "But I will not shirk from it." They believed that, too.

The last bitter drop suddenly vanished from the majestic house on Pennsylvania Avenue when the helicopter went aloft yesterday morning, carrying away the 37th President. The disgraced leader assembled an audi-

ence in the East Room one last time before his departure and delivered a maudlin farewell, rambling over the thorns and roses of a whole lifetime.

Still, Richard Nixon left a fragment of poetry behind. "It is only a beginning, always," he said. "The young must know it, the old must know it."

"A beginning, always." So it was yesterday in the mansion where Mr. Nixon lived 5½ years as President, shrewd and powerful and, at the end, defenseless. The people who tend to such things scurried around at the appropriate moment and took down the Nixon pictures from the White House corridors. Gerald Ford, framed and in color, went up in his place, a symbolic gesture which confirmed the reality of the event.

An hour or so after Mr. Nixon left, many of the same people came back to the East Room for the second showing. Cabinet officers took their same seats

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# Drama of Plain-Spoken

## SCENE, From A1

on the left side of the room. The white-suited military ushers guided new faces into the front rows, family members and aides who are still obscure, but will become well known.

The three great chandeliers glistered dramatically under the TV lights, George and Martha Washington looked on from full-length portraits. As the selected audience filed in, the somber faces were gone, replaced by a chatty conviviality.

Henry Kissinger rushed over to greet the retired speaker of House, John McCormack, and introduce him to his new wife. The Michigan delegation, invited with homestate pride, filed in, more or less together.

The old soldiers from the Nixon years were there—Alexander Haig and Roy Ash and Earl Butz and even Rose

Mary Woods, the ex-President's personal secretary. So were the congressional titans who helped topple their leader, Rodino and O'Neil from the House, Scott and Mansfield from the Senate, among others. Old friends kissed and waved, like a bipartisan reunion at the interregnum.

Only the frantic click of cameras and the whispered commentary from TV broadcasters broke the silence. A loud voice announced the Chief Justice of the United States, then the Vice President and his wife. All rose in a swell of applause.

"Mr. Vice President," Chief Justice Warren Burger asked formally, "are you prepared to take the oath of office of the President of the United States?"

"I am sir," Mr. Ford said.

When the great oath was taken, "so help me God," Burger called him President and the transfer was complete.

"Congratulations, Mr. President," he said, and the audience gasped, then exploded in applause.

Mr. Ford kissed his wife, then spoke to the nation which did not elect him President. His speech was written with the aid of two staff writers, Milton Friedman and Robert Hartmann. The Vice President worked it over himself at his home in Alexandria Thursday night.

"I ask you to confirm me as your President with your prayers," Mr. Ford said.

For his fallen predecessor, he sought prayers too. "May our former President, who brought peace to millions, find it for himself," the new President intoned.

For the nation, he did not wheel out the high-powered rhetoric of inaugurations past, no vision of new frontiers or prosperity without inflation or solemn

# Promises and a Level Gaze

promises to eliminate poverty. Yesterday's hopes were more modestly expressed. Old clichés about government and law took on the wings of the highest aspirations.

"Our Constitution works, our great republic is a government of laws and not of men," Ford announced. "Here the people rule."

The red-jacketed Marine Band, assembled in the foyer, were silent until the President departed. Then it broke forth in a crisp rendition of "God Bless America." The guests retired to shake hands with their new leader and chat among themselves.

A few old Nixon hands were still red-eyed from the earlier ceremony. Others seemed giddy now that their ordeal of loyalty was ended.

Haig, closest adviser to one President at the finish and now counseling a new one in the transition, spoke

sternly to a reporter's question about the Nixon resignation.

"He made this decision by himself," Haig said. "By himself. Get that. Just like he did all of them."

Away from the ceremonial, President Ford began the ritual of symbolic meetings with economic advisers, senior White House assistants and foreign ambassadors. Pictures were taken to establish the continuity of the national government, a reassurance which is perhaps needed more overseas than it is at home.

The President began his honeymoon with the White House press corps, promising candor and cooperation. For awhile, at least, they will take him at his word.

Across the way in the Executive Office Building, the held-over hundreds of "White House employees" suddenly became more busy, not less. All of the

issues, all of the problems were new again, and the staff meetings started yesterday afternoon, preparing options and information for the new man who must decide so many things.

"People feel wrung out," said one domestic advisor, wrung out by the emotionalism of the last 24 hours. On the other hand, we're fairly excited about the prospects of continuing."

Many of them will continue, some of them doubtless will leave. In the meantime, they too believe the White House will be different under Mr. Ford.

"My sense of things," said one staff assistant, "is that his style in decision-making is going to lend itself to people-to-people meetings rather than paper. President Nixon clearly preferred position papers and memos. President Ford seems to prefer to arrive at decisions by talking about them—rather than checking off boxes on a piece of a paper."