

Americans Ponder Future of Nation; Inflation Is Called Most Urgent Issue

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Once again, as they have so often in the last 11 years, Americans pondered yesterday the future of the country in the aftermath of national trauma.

Thoughts focused on the Presidency of Gerald R. Ford, and in interviews conducted in many parts of the country, people talked of their expectations about the conduct of the nation's highest office by a man none had elected to it.

In response to questions, they assessed his principal problems, weighed the question of his successor as Vice President, looked to the conduct of foreign affairs and spoke of the possibility of Mr. Ford's election to a full term in office in 1976.

Far more frequently than any other problem, "inflation" and "the economy" were listed by those interviewed as the issue most demanding of Mr. Ford's immediate attention.

Satisfaction With Kissinger

Most people expressed satisfaction with the idea of continuance of foreign policy as conducted during the Nixon Administration by Secretary of State Kissinger.

Choices for Mr. Ford's successor as Vice President ranged from Nelson A. Rockefeller, the former Governor of New York, to Representative Barbara C. Jordan, Democrat of Texas, with no individual commanding substantial support.

And although Mr. Ford has disclaimed any intention of seeking the Presidency after completing Mr. Nixon's term, many people said they felt he could win election to a full term in 1976 if he did a good job between now and then.

Doing a good job, it was made clear by many, meant making serious inroads against inflation.

"Ford's biggest problem is inflation," declared 23-year-old Dave Buchman, shirtless, hard-hatted, wearing boots and jeans as he tamped spikes at the Kennecott copper mine in Bingham, Utah. "It hits guys like me hard. I'm trying to work my way through college but everything is up. All the guys here feel the same."

And in Bethesda, Md., Eddie Wayne George, 24, the manager of a dry cleaning concern said: "Ford better start right away straightening out the messes Nixon made. The worst one is prices. They're outrageous, and he'd better cut back on them."

In Miami, John Willis, 53, a postman, said: "The main problem of the country is the economy now that we've got rid of Nixon. President Ford has to think about the little man like myself and not about fat cats and big corporations."

Although the economy emerged most often as the principal issue, people spoke frequently of the necessity of getting the country together again, winning the cooperation of Congress, uniting the people, restoring the confidence and winning the trust of the people and restoring the dignity of the Presidency.

'Money and Power'

In New Orleans, Clifton James, 31 an architect, observed: "Basically people feel government is really not for them, it's people who have money and power. This is the way I look at the whole Nixon Administration, and it's the problem that Ford is going to have to overcome."

Despite the widespread feeling that new initiatives were called for in dealing with economic problems, most people seemed to find no need for any alteration of foreign policy.

"Among all the things the Nixon Administration has done," said Gary M. Talesnik, 32, a Federal Government cost accountant from Olney, Md., "foreign policy has been the high point. Why change it?"

In Philadelphia, Miriam L. Gafni, a lawyer, said: "What Nixon did was good for business, to open markets in Russia and China. He did it in the interest of Republican businessmen. Ford is not going to change that. He's a social conservative."

In making clear their willingness to see present foreign policy continued, many people made clear their confidence in Mr. Kissinger. "It's a great relief that Ford said he's keeping Kissinger," said Shirley Brown,

52, a clerk in Tucson, Ariz. "All the magic done is by Kissinger, not Nixon. And Nixon knew it. And we who watched knew who was doing it."

In Chicago, Don Slomczewski, a 38-year-old newspaper truck driver, said: "Henry is my No. 1 man. He's smart enough not to run for President."

Despite the lessons of recent history about the importance of the Vice Presidency, some individuals showed no interest in the matter, and one expressed disdain for the apparent possibilities to succeed Mr. Ford.

In North Bend, Wash., east of Seattle, R. E. (Shortie) Seitz, a hard-hat, said, "For Vice President, Mickey Mouse is as good as any of the rest of the bunch they've got."

Richardson and Reagan

Among the possibilities for Vice President, Mr. Rockefeller was mentioned several times. So were Elliot L. Richardson, the former Attorney General, and Ronald Reagan, Governor of California. Also mentioned were Senator Howard H. Baker Jr. of Tennessee; E. Percy of Illinois; Senator Edward W. Brooke of Massachusetts; Gov. George C. Wallace of Alabama and Representative Shirley A. Chisholm of Brooklyn.

In Miami, Manuel Barceni, 35, a carpenter, said, "Ford should choose an honest man as Vice President, and I don't care who that man is going to be as long as he's honest."

In Charlottesville, Va., Dr. Charles Frankel, 65, said he would like to see "a man who is from Congress who has proven to be honest. That's a pretty difficult assignment."

Chances for 1976

Despite the links between Watergate and the Republican party, many people said they saw no reason why Mr. Ford could not run successfully for the Presidency in 1976, if he did well until then.

Dr. Frankel said he thought Mr. Ford could win because "the Democrats aren't bound to do anything. They've got to prove their ability to do anything besides capitalize on Watergate."