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Watch What I Do

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Nov. 9—Watching Gerald Ford on "Meet the Press," one seemed to see the most open and amiable of men. He felt "compassionate" toward the unemployed; he was sure there was "a considerable degree of unanimity" between himself and Ronald Regan. Here again was the simple, appealing character who said when he became President: "Let brotherly love purge our hearts of suspicion and of hate."

Alas, life is not so simple. And neither is Gerald Ford. He is good-natured in personal contacts, true enough. But there is a curious detachment to his humanity, as if it were disembodied; a Cheshire Cat that fades away on real issues of policy. And the same for the seeming candor.

He has been President for fifteen months now, long enough to begin displaying his real values. In that time there have been four tests of character that, together, amply define Gerald Ford as man and political leader.

The first was of course his pardon of Richard Nixon. After implying that he would leave his predecessor's fate to the course of the law, he did the opposite. After an explicit promise by his lawyer to the special prosecutor that access to the Nixon tapes and papers would be assured, Mr. Ford tried to give away custody in a secret deal so one-sided that he quickly had to disavow it.

Just a month earlier, on taking the oath, Mr. Ford had spoken of his "openness and candor." The pardon reeked of stealth and deception. In-

ABROAD AT HOME

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dead, there is reason to suspect that we still do not know all that passed in that episode. I believed when it hap-

pened that the pardon probably determined the character of the Ford Presidency and its place in history. There has been no reason to change that view.

The second revealing episode came last May: the Mayagüez. It is almost surrealistic now to look back on the patriotic gore of that affair: the display of superpower machismo, the guileful hiding of diplomatic facts and casualties, the ignoring of law.

The truth of the Mayagüez affair is evident enough now. The ship was seized by local Cambodian forces, and the new Communist Government had neither direct control nor good communications. The crew members were released before we bombed the mainland—and we knew it but went ahead for demonstrative purposes. To "save" forty men, we lost 41 killed and missing and 50 wounded.

Third, there was the President's decision not to ask Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to the White House. He took Henry Kissinger's advice that to do so might "offend" the Soviet Union.

Nothing could more accurately have displayed the absence of imagination, the vulgarity of the American Government today. It was as if the President, paraphrasing Stalin on the Pope, had asked: How many divisions does Solzhenitsyn have?

Fourth, there has been Mr. Ford's attitude toward the New York financial crisis. The interest there lies not so much in his particular proposed solution as in his inflexible insistence on that course alone, his appeal to anti-New York feeling, his treatment of the city as unique in its sin, a pariah.

Speaking of New York, Mr. Ford never seems to mention that eight million people live there, most of them not rich or slick. He talks only about his assurance that there will be no great trouble "in the money markets."

The pardon, the Mayagüez, Solzhenitsyn, New York: more than enough for a portrait of a President. It is a picture of someone narrow in vision, unable to see beyond today's gratifications to the larger consequences of his acts.

Perhaps none of that is really surprising—except to optimists like me, who believed the inaugural words. What is surprising is that modest Gerald Ford should fall into the habit of personalizing America's fate in his own. That is what he first did in his stumbling, inconsistent attempts to explain his Cabinet shuffle: say that it was a matter of his prerogative and that the world needed assurance of his position.

Asked by Lawrence E. Spivak on "Meet the Press" what accomplishments he would cite in campaigning now, Mr. Ford said he had restored "public confidence in Government." The common feeling is to the contrary. After Watergate, there was an extraordinary opportunity for a President large in character to dispel American cynicism about Government. That will not be done by Gerald Ford.