

Mr. Flip And Mr. Flop

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, Sept. 7—President Ford and Governor Carter are now charging one another with "flip-flopping" on the Presidential campaign issues, but the voters should not be deceived. For this is obviously a contest between Mr. Flip and Mr. Flop.

The issue bubbled up the other day before Old Faithful in Yellowstone National Park when Mr. Ford proposed a ten-year, \$1.5 billion transfusion for the National Park system. Fritz Mondale replied that "the only Park Mr. Ford has supported in the last eight years is the President of South Korea." Jody Powell, Carter's press secretary, called the Ford offer a calculated election year "flip-flop" and the President then said that Mr. Carter was "the biggest flip-flopper I know of."

Let this be a warning on the level of the debates to come, for the flip-flop issue is bound to be part of the political acrobatics of the next two months, and the record is extensive on both sides. For example:

¶Carter on repeal of the Taft-Hartley Section 14 (b) or Right-to-Work Law, March 1976: "I don't care one way or the other" about its repeal. Carter later that month: "I think 14 (b) should be repealed."

¶Carter on grain embargoes (Aug. 25, 1976): "I prefer to go from my farm to the White House and stop embargoes once and for all. . . . There'll be no more embargoes if I'm elected President." Aug. 26, 1976: "Obviously there are circumstances" in which a President must act to prevent the exportation of commodities to other countries, for example in the "extreme event" of a catastrophic crop failure. "Anybody in his right mind would not rob our people of food. . . . You have to keep any statement within the bounds of rationality. . . ."

¶Ford on the 1976 race (Oct. 13, 1973): "I declare as emphatically and

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as strongly as I can, I have no intention of being a candidate for any office, President, Vice President or anything else in 1976."

¶Ford, Aug. 28, 1974: "I will probably be a candidate in 1976. . . . Feb. 4, 1975: "With the optimism that I think will come from more employment, less unemployment, and a better battle against inflation, I think the economic circumstances will be good enough to justify at least my seeking election. . . ."

¶Ford on the Nixon pardon, November 1973: "I don't think the public would stand for it. . . ." Aug. 28, 1974: "In this situation, I am the final authority. There have been no charges made, there has been no action by the courts, there has been no action taken by any jury. And until any legal process has been undertaken, I think it's unwise and untimely for me to make any commitment. . . ." Sept. 8, 1974: "Now, therefore, I, Gerald R. Ford, President of the United States . . . do grant a full, free and absolute pardon unto Richard Nixon. . . ."

You could fill most of this page with similar flips and flops on both sides. Carter on "ethnic purity," later described as an "unfortunate use of words." Ford on "balanced budgets" and WIN buttons, followed by one of the largest deficits in peacetime history.

Carter on unemployment as the major issue of the campaign before the A.F.L.-C.I.O. board in Washington, followed this week by emphasis on inflation as the major issue. Ford on the differences between his philosophy and Governor Reagan's (while he was fighting Reagan for the nomination) followed by the statement at Kansas City that Reagan was "a person whose philosophy is virtually identical with mine. . . ."

But, enough. If consistency were a critical test of Presidential candidates, nobody would ever be elected. The surprising thing is that the Republicans have raised it so persistently against Mr. Carter when they are so vulnerable to the charge themselves. Nevertheless, the Republican campaign in its opening phase at least, is based on the twin charges that Carter is "fuzzy" on the issues if not downright deceptive, and that he is not only inconsistent but inexperienced.

Senator Barry Goldwater and Senator Dole set the tone of the Republican attack on Carter at the Kansas City convention by charging him with saying one thing in the North and another in the South, one thing to the rich and another to the poor, one thing to the blacks and another to the whites—all of which Carter denies.

But in Presidential campaigns, a few harsh slogans are often more effective than a library of "position papers," and in the last few days, the Carter-Mondale response has been picking up speed and losing altitude.

Mr. Mondale, in particular, has been getting the Watergate scandals into his talks by innuendo, and comparing Ford with Herbert Hoover—pleasant men who lost control of the economy. When Mr. Ford said he was going to campaign on the economy, crime, foreign policy, etc., Mondale remarked: "He's got a spy on his staff who slipped him a list of his failures, and he read it, not knowing the difference."

So let the voter beware. It will be flips and flops and jokes and gags from now until November, but no one side has a monopoly on this sort of thing. It reaches epidemic proportions every four years, but it's not fatal unless you take it seriously.