

Remembering Jerry Ford

by Herbert G. Klein

On the wall of my home office is a poster that proclaims me as "The Official U.S. Blabbermouth." The poster was presented to me at a party a few days before being sworn in as the first White House director of communications.

Most prominent among the signatures on the poster of government officials and newsmen is that of Jerry Ford, then the Republican minority leader of the House of Representatives.

Ford was that type of person. Busy as he was with the new Congress convening, he found time to join in the festivities for an old friend.

Different words fit different presidents of the United States, but for President Ford, the terms thoughtful, compassionate and decisive leadership paint an accurate picture. He was all those things and more. Ford had the ability to put America back on the path of sanity at a time when cynicism threatened our culture.

Two of the most difficult decisions made by an American leader in the past 50 years are almost forgotten today, but each changed the course of the country.

The first was Vice President Nixon's decision not to challenge the results of the 1960 elections despite major evidence of fraud in several states. Nixon was under great Republican pressure to challenge the results, but he decided that such a move would endanger the country at a key time in the Cold War. He met privately with President-elect John F. Kennedy and announced that his role would be that of the "loyal opposition."

The second major decision of this magnitude was Ford's decision to pardon Nixon. The decision brought major turmoil, but it allowed Ford to concentrate on governing.

Both decisions had a major role in strengthening the country as it moved ahead toward victory in the Cold War.

Much has been said about the fact that Ford was not elected to the offices of president or vice president, but it is perhaps more important to remember that he had planned to retire and never aspired to these offices as do so many today. Ford accepted public service responsibility and executed his duties diligently at a critical time in U.S. history.

As president, Ford had to put up with many unnecessary problems. When he announced his decision on the Nixon pardon, his press secretary, Jerry terHorst, resigned in protest, giving new ammunition to Ford's critics. In the White House culture, press secretaries may argue a case with the president, but they are expected to remain loyal.

President Lyndon Johnson once told reporters "Jerry Ford can't walk and chew gum at the same time." That started a series of stories about the president's athletic and mental abilities. The media and the comedy shows picked up on it. Ford would hit a spectator with a golf ball or slip on ice, and it would become a story undermining the public confidence in the president. Truth was that President Ford, as former center and "most valuable player" for the championship University of Michigan football team, may have been the greatest athlete we have known in the White House. The episode illustrates how unfair a media "feeding frenzy" can be.

The presidency changed Ford's wife, Betty. When he served in Congress, she stayed in the background raising the four children in their family. When she became first lady, she blossomed forth and took an admired public role. It was discovered that she had breast cancer, and would require a mastectomy. After a successful operation, she became a champion of breast cancer prevention programs. Later, she admitted to alcohol-abuse problems and again became a champion of preventive programs. She has won more admiration than any other modern first lady and saved countless lives.

There is debate over whether Ford lost his race against Jimmy Carter because of the split within the Republican Party caused by Ronald Reagan's close challenge for the nominations, the Nixon pardon issue, or because of the controversy caused by a description of the Polish people during a debate with Carter. Ford said the Poles were not dominated by the Soviet Union, and Carter and the media made a major issue of it. Ford later said he meant the Polish people were more pro-American than pro-Soviet, a fact that was obvious to many of us who had been in Poland at the time.

Ford was stubborn and refused to back down from his words, and this may have been the key factor in his close loss to Carter. Clearly Ford, who had been to Poland and other international centers, knew far more about foreign policy than did the governor of Georgia who since has acquired world expertise.

Most new presidents prepare for the White House with a transition staff honed from the election campaign. Overnight, Ford became president, and having had no campaign, immediately turned to a transition team made up of experts who he felt he could trust. His transition team was one of the most powerful ever assembled and included Bryce Harlow from the Nixon and Eisenhower staffs, probably the greatest expert on White House structure. Among those joining him were Sen. Bob Griffin, of Michigan, Melvin Laird, David Packard, Bob Hartman, Rep. John Burns of Michigan, Leon Parma, Phil Buchanan and Don Rumsfeld, then the ambassador to NATO. Rumsfeld became chief of staff.

As Ford found out, White House and Cabinet staffs are difficult to fill because there are no firm job descriptions.

The most trying time during the Ford presidency occurred when North Vietnam violated its cease-fire agreement and roared south with a devastating and horrifying conquest. The memory of people hanging from helicopters probably still was in Ford's mind as he died. The truth is that as president, he was helpless because Congress had tied the hands of the president after Watergate. It was a tragedy.

Throughout his career, Ford never lost his ardent interest in sports. His last disappointment came in November when his beloved Michigan lost to Ohio State in a battle for No. 1 in college football. Propped up in bed, he watched the game with his still-close friend, Parma. Had he lived, he would have been cheering on his team against my alma mater, University of Southern California, in the Rose Bowl on New Year's Day.

Recently, Midge Costanza, then a member of Jimmy Carter's staff, told the transition story about being invited by Dick Cheney, then Ford's chief of staff, to be shown her new office. At the end, Cheney told Costanza that President Ford would like to greet her. Costanza had recently lost a close congressional race in New York to Barber Conable, a close friend of Ford and Nixon. "The president thanked me for battling clearly on the issues, not Watergate. He set high standards," she said.

Ford was a competitor all of his life, and was a partisan, but among the legacies he leaves is his lifelong belief in bipartisanship, particularly at the water's edge. He supported Harry Truman when he first arrived in Congress, and he never lost sight of the importance of unity in the face of the enemy. That is a legacy we need to remember. It is forgotten too often in the blood bath going on in Washington today.

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