

FORD WAS IMMUNE  
TO THE  
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CHAMELEON-LIKE SEARCH  
FOR EVER-NEW IDENTITIES,  
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THIS SEARCH CREATES.

countrymen recognize his qualities as a leader and as a man. Not that he didn't have a little help from his successor. In December 1976, I happened to spend a few weeks at San Clemente, California, one of many writers and former staffers asked to contribute some editing suggestions to the memoirs Richard Nixon was writing in those lonely, early days of exile. In one long, rambling conversation Nixon asked me what I thought history would make of Jerry Ford.

"Just give Jimmy Carter a year or two," I replied, "and Jerry Ford will look pretty damned good."

He looks even better today. No President ever faced more challenges with fewer resources; none shouldered the burden more bravely, calmly, and uncomplainingly. The homely virtues that Gerald Ford brought to the White House never glittered. But, over the years, they have acquired a noble patina that will never fade.

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## "I NEVER ENCOUNTERED A HIDDEN AGENDA"

By Henry Kissinger

**A**fter the so-called smoking-gun tape was released on August 5, Vice President Gerald Ford, at a Cabinet meeting the next day, took the unprecedented step of dissociating from President Nixon. He would no longer defend the President's position on Watergate, he said, and, indeed, he would not have done so in the past had he known what was on the tape. Publicly he would maintain silence on the matter on the ground that he was a "party in interest"—pointedly reminding everyone that he was next in line for Nixon's office. But Ford stressed that even though he was dissociating from the President, he would continue to support Nixon's policies.

In the week of Nixon's resignation soon after, I had no time to speculate on how it would affect my own position. Before I could address the subject, Ford took the decision out of my hands

by telephoning me on the morning of August 8, after Nixon had informed him of his departure. Ford asked me to come to see him and, in his unassuming way, left the time up to me. In the course of the same conversation he asked me to stay on, and in a way that made it sound as if I would be doing him a favor by agreeing.

Dramatic events are not always ushered in by dramatic dialogue. As I recall this conversation from the perspective of two decades, I am struck by its matter-of-fact tone and concerns. At the time, I was affected by the understated way in which Ford conveyed Nixon's decision, which would make him President, without rhetorical flourishes and without mentioning the emotional impact on himself. And I was moved by his tact in so swiftly putting an end to any personal uncertainty I might be experiencing.

The atmosphere of the conversation carried over into our meeting that afternoon. I sat on a sofa near the balcony overlooking the White House lawn, Ford in an easy chair with his back to the window. He seemed casual and calm, neither grandiloquent nor pretentiously humble. He opened the conversation by saying he intended to announce even before he had taken the oath of office—in fact, that very evening—that I would be staying. Artlessly, he added that he felt confident we would "get along." I replied that it was my job to get along with him, not the other way around.

Perhaps the most lasting impression of that first conversation was its after-

math. For the first time since I came to the White House, I left the presidential presence without afterthoughts, confident that there was no more to the conversation than what I had heard. Starting with that first meeting, I never encountered a hidden agenda. He was sufficiently self-assured to disagree openly, and he did not engage in elaborate maneuvers about who should receive credit. Having been propelled so unexpectedly into an office he revered but never thought he would hold, he felt no need to manipulate his environment. Ford's inner peace was precisely what the nation needed for healing its divisions.

Gerald Ford was an uncomplicated man tapped by destiny for some of the most complicated tasks in the nation's history. He was called, after the Vietnam War and Watergate, to heal the most severe national divisions since the Civil War. As different as possible from the driven personalities who typically propel themselves into the highest office, Gerald Ford restored calm and confidence to a nation surfeited with upheavals, overcame a series of international crises, and ushered in a period of renewal for American society.

Gerald Ford performed his task of overcoming America's divisions and redeeming its faith so undramatically and with such absence of histrionics that his achievements have so far been taken too much for granted. To a great extent, this neglect was because Ford bore so little resemblance to the prototype of the political leader of the Television Age. The media and many of his colleagues were at a loss when it came to fitting him into the familiar stereotypes.

The curious paradox of contemporary democracy is that while political leaders have never been more abject in trying to determine the public's preferences, respect for the political class has never been lower. Gerald Ford, though, was about as different as possible from the familiar political persona. He was immune to the modern politician's chameleon-like search for ever-new identities, and to the emotional roller coaster this search creates.

Cartoonists had great fun with Ford's occasionally fractured syntax. They forgot

—if they were ever aware—that being articulate is not the same as having analytical skill, which Ford had in abundance. For a national leader, courage and devotion to principle are, in any case, the more important qualities.

Ford was well aware of his relative lack of suavity and, unlike the modern political leader, was not embarrassed to admit it. “I am not one of those oratorical geniuses,” he said to me on the telephone on January 15, 1975. “There is no point in my trying to be one. I just have to be myself.”

Ford reacted to the seemingly inexhaustible volume of challenges without either self-pity or doubt about the good faith of his political adversaries. Ford viewed his role not unlike that of a doctor ministering to a patient just recovering from a debilitating illness. He therefore resisted demands for heroic posturing and prescribed a regimen of building and conserving strength. Ford thought it essential to prove to the American people that crisis and confrontation were a last resort, not an everyday means of conducting policy.

Ford displayed personal goodwill to friend and foe alike. At times, I thought his apparent equanimity excessive, especially when his reluctance to impose penalties made resistance to presidential authority appear free of risk. In retrospect, I have come to appreciate Ford’s self-restraint, for it gradually drained the American political system of its accumulated poison and created the conditions for the restoration of faith in American institutions.

This unflinching sense of the national interest enabled Ford in his 29 months in office to navigate his country through a series of crises that could have filled a two-term presidency. Other Presidents were to receive the credit for winning the Cold War. But I am certain the time will come when it is recognized that the Cold War could not have been won had not Gerald Ford, at a tragic point of America’s history, been there to keep us from losing it.

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Henry Kissinger served as Gerald Ford’s Secretary of State. These remarks are adapted from his just-published memoir *Years of Renewal*.

## THE “ANTI-CLINTON”

By James K. Glassman

**A**s President Clinton gave his testimony in the Lewinsky scandal, I was thinking about Gerald Ford. Like Bill Clinton, he is a graduate of Yale Law School, but the similarity ends there.

Ford came to mind because I had heard him speak twice in recent months. A remarkable man, he can still hold his own with the intelligentsia from the think tanks. Having turned 85 last July, he looks 20 years younger, with clear blue eyes and the stature of the football star he once was. At one of those talks, he made a broad tour of the horizon, discussing the economy, the performance of Congress and—a subject to which he warmed—the coming election.

Ford is an optimist. He has the proper degree of wonder as he looks at the world: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the budget surplus, the spread of prosperity. He laments the passing of a more congenial politics, but he will not criticize the perpetrators of today’s more contentious process. Despite what must have been a difficult life, with his wife’s addiction and breast cancer, he seems a happy man, but most of all, a real adult—in striking contrast to the current occupant of the White House.

I also believe that Ford was a great hero. His pardon of Richard Nixon was a necessary and courageous act. It spared the nation a terrible ordeal—the trial of an ex-President—but it cost Ford the 1976 election, an outcome he certainly could have predicted.

He did the right thing and took the consequences. Again, can one say that about Bill Clinton?

Larry King recently asked Ford to comment on the Clinton scandals. “There’s no question,” Ford said, “the White House...has been undercut and damaged.... It’s sad because the White House, historically, is looked upon as the epitome of integrity and leadership.” Indeed, in an age in which military threats have diminished and the economy rolls ahead (under Fed chairman Alan Greenspan, who was Ford’s top economic advisor), the most important function of the President is to serve as the



Tony Orlando and Betty Ford dance the bump.

symbol of national honor and strength and decency.

In that function, Clinton has clearly failed.

The Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans issued a report not long ago based on a survey of young people aged 14 to 18. When asked “which category their role model would be from,” less than 1 percent of all teens now pick a political leader (and that 1 percent is split between foreign and American leaders).

Is it really surprising that no more than one teenager in 200 saw Clinton as a role model? I only wish more young Americans could see what a plain but dignified leader looks like, talks like, and acts like. Like Gerald Ford.

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*James Glassman is the Reader’s Digest-DeWitt Wallace Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. A different version of this article was published in Intellectualcapital.com.*

## A DISSENTING VIEW

By Joseph Sobran

**T**o conservatives, as a rule, Presidents look better in retrospect. Another way to put this is that every President tends to