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From an old friend, personal stories
that suggest the kind of man Gerald
Ford is and the kind of President he
is likely to be

The President I Know

by Melvin R. Laird

August 19th, 1974
Bob - does
this look all right
now

Called Mel
8/26



While a young state senator from Wisconsin, I visited Washington in the spring of 1951 and witnessed a session of Congress for the first time. Listening to debate about a public works appropriations bill, I was struck by the attitude of one Congressman. He declared that although the stated purpose of the pending bill was land conservation, the government was using the legislation as a guise for concealed financing of hydroelectric projects. Whatever the government wanted to do, he insisted, it ought to tell the American people the truth about what was being done.

At a dinner party that night, friends introduced me to the Congressman whose arguments I had admired. He took time to talk to me, an obscure stranger, with a kindness and candor that enhanced my admiration. And our conversation was the beginning of a close friendship that endures today.



The Congressman was Gerald Ford who last August suddenly became the 38th President of the United States. Because I am such a longtime friend of President Ford, my judgments of him never can be entirely objective for we simply have been through too much together. In the late 1950s, we disagreed with President Eisenhower and successfully lobbied for rapid construction of Polaris submarines -- which proved a priceless national asset in the Cuban missile crisis. Ten years ago, in another politically difficult action, I helped lead efforts to elect Jerry House Minority Leader. A year ago, as a Presidential adviser I argued that Jerry was the best choice for Vice President. But despite my obvious bias, I have seen in Jerry's personal behavior over the years acts which I believe illustrate the kind of man he is and suggest the kind of national leader he is likely to be.

During an informal interview with a magazine columnist earlier this year, Jerry casually criticized Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger, asserting that he was maladroit in dealing with Congress. When publication of the criticism wounded Schlesinger and clouded his future, Jerry immediately regretted his words. Schlesinger is a good manager and a brilliant man, at home in the arcane realms of nuclear



strategy, computer theory and complex budgetry. But he had been at the Pentagon only a short while and its merciless demands afforded him scant opportunities to master the folkways of Congress. Jerry expressed his chagrin to me while we were playing golf. "You know, I was really unfair," he said. "It's too much to expect a guy to learn as much about Congress in a few months as it's taken you and me 20 years to learn."

Recognizing that he had made a mistake, Mr. Ford decided the only thing to do was to confess it. He telephoned Schlesinger to apologize and assure him of his personal support. Later he asked me to call the Secretary in his behalf to reinforce the apology. I was not surprised. Like all of us, Mr. Ford makes mistakes. Unlike many of us, he is not afraid to admit that he was wrong.

Mr. and Mrs. Ford last May heard depressing news about a couple they valued as old friends. After more than 20 years of marriage, the couple had quarreled and were on the verge of breaking up their home with a divorce. Mr. Ford was in the midst of a speaking tour that required four or five public appearances daily and left him little free time, even for sleep. Yet he worried so about his friends that he telephoned them. "It's time we had a good visit," he said. "Betty



and I are coming to spend the night with you."

It was a lot of trouble for everybody. The Secret Service had to install a special phone to ensure that the White House could reach the Vice President at any time. Complicated plans and schedules had to be rearranged. Purposely, Mr. Ford behaved as though all were normal, as if he were just renewing a friendship. He and his wife stayed up until the early hours of the morning reminiscing with the troubled couple. Throughout the conversation, Mr. Ford pointed out the deep bonds the estranged husband and wife had shared. The conversation did not make the difficulties evaporate, but it made the couple see how much they had to gain by overcoming them.

Jerry is able to communicate, as he did that evening, because he likes and is wholly at ease with people. He genuinely enjoys being with others and, above all, listening to them.

It is difficult to imagine moments more rewarding than those Mr. Ford experienced that night of August 12 when he addressed Congress after assuming the Presidency. His message delivered in an hour of severe national trial evoked immediate acclaim from the Congress, the press and the public. As he strode from the rostrum, cheers resounded



while political adversaries as well as allies crowded around to shake his hand.

The new President celebrated typically. At his modest home in Alexandria, Va., he gathered with his wife, the three of his four children at home and a few intimate friends. Some of us sat on the floor of the small living room and Betty served snacks as we talked. Having taken off his coat and tie, Jerry helped in the kitchen and made sure everyone was at home. He paid as much attention to the opinions of his children as those voiced by his friends. His questions showed me -- and them -- just how intently he was listening. I had seen Jerry in his shirtsleeves listening to others countless times. Now I realized I no longer was looking at Jerry but at the President. Yet I also saw that listening to his own children and others still was the President's idea of a great and relaxing time.

On university campuses, Mr. Ford has been so cordially received because the students sense that he listens and hears what they have to say. I have seen him change the views of my own children by carefully listening, then asking questions that gently induced them to reappraise their opinions. And I have seen him modify his own opinions because



he listened.

Jerry takes into account not only the views but the feelings of others, particularly his own family. The afternoon of October 10, 1973, I telephoned him with an urgent question: "Will you accept the Vice Presidency if it is offered? I have to let the President know in the morning."

Political campaigns, national crises, the unremitting pressures of Capitol Hill had stolen from Jerry and his wife, Betty, myriad hours that a close family wants to share. Both yearned for uninterrupted years with each other and their children; for a surcease from the endless family disruptions that public life imposes. So Jerry told me, "I don't know. First I'm going to have to talk with Betty."

Shortly before midnight, he informed me he would take the job if asked. But he added firmly: "I have made a commitment to Betty to serve only to the end of 1976. I promised her that then I will retire and go home to Michigan."

Not until some nine months later did Mr. Ford conclude that he could not keep his promise. All along, he believed that in the Water-gate scandals President Nixon had exercised some bad judgment and been



badly served by lieutenants around him. But, like many of us, he had been solemnly assured by Mr. Nixon himself that the President was not involved in the coverup and he had seen no conclusive evidence to the contrary. Then on Sunday afternoon, August 4, he received a fateful phone call informing him of evidence whose imminent disclosure surely would catapult him into the Presidency.

Once in the White House, Jerry realized that his effectiveness would be limited if he were committed to abandoning the Presidency after only two years. Thus, he went back to his wife and asked for release from his retirement pledge. In light of the radically changed circumstances, she agreed that he must be free to seek election to the Presidency in 1976.

The request was not simply a politic gesture from husband to wife. Gerald Ford always has considered himself rigidly bound by his word, whether given to his family, his friends or political opponents. During 24 years in Congress, he was so popular among Democrats and Republicans alike because he never broke his word, even though at times unanticipated events made it very painful for him to keep it. Had Betty Ford not waived his pledge, I doubt that he would have been a



Presidential candidate in 1976. As it is, I am sure he will be.

The late President Lyndon B. Johnson once remarked, "The only trouble with Jerry Ford is that he played football too long without his helmet on." Mr. Ford is blessed with such inner security that political barbs no longer bother him and he laughed at the joke as much as anyone. But its implications are erroneous. At the University of Michigan, Mr. Ford did play a lot of football. He was good enough to be a regular center and captain of the team and win contract offers from the Green Bay Packers and Chicago Bears. Instead, he attended Yale University law school where he maintained a B average even though he gave up large chunks of study time so that he could coach freshman football to help with his expenses. One of his players was William Proxmire, now a Democratic Senator from Wisconsin. "Jerry had a quick intellect and real intelligence," Senator Proxmire says of his former coach. Few issues considered by Congress in recent years have been more complex than the question of whether to authorize an anti-ballistic missile system. As Secretary of Defense, I briefed Congressional leaders about the proposed ABM program. After all the technical explanations, Jerry said: "The main issue here is whether we're going to reach an



agreement with the Russians about limiting all kinds of missiles. We can't bargain with them if they have something to give and we have nothing to give in return." He had cut to the heart of the matter, for that was the main issue, the real and only justification for the ABM. Repeatedly Jerry has demonstrated this capacity to comprehend quickly the core of a problem, whether it concerns defense, taxation, agriculture, health, education or welfare.

Having comprehended and analyzed a problem, Jerry also can be quick in deciding what to do about it. Although he has acquired a reputation for accomplishment through conciliation, he sometimes decides to adopt unpopular and uncompromising stands on matters of principle. Last spring he had to decide whether to risk unpopularity, indeed enmity among many Republicans in order to uphold a principle.

Republican Representative Paul N. McCloskey had outraged a substantial segment of his Party. He repudiated the Nixon position regarding Vietnam and called for unilateral withdrawal of all American forces. Then he denounced President Nixon personally and as early as June 1973 demanded his impeachment. To numerous Party loyalists, this represented political treason deserving of harsh retribution. With the



approach of the California primaries, they organized a determined and well-financed campaign to purge McCloskey by denying him renomination.

No one disagreed with McCloskey more than Jerry and they argued vehemently, on and off the House floor. However, a clash of ideas stimulates rather than angers Mr. Ford. He can differ radically with a man yet still respect and admire him personally. And the two Congressmen remained on amiable terms.

In April, McCloskey perceived that his defeat was likely and he came to Mr. Ford. "Jerry, could you possibly see your way clear to help me?" he asked. Without hesitation, Jerry said yes.

Word that he intended to visit California in behalf of McCloskey brought down on him some of the most intense pressures of his political career. Important and good men in the Party importuned him not to go. Others threatened him. A man who had been a pillar of the Party and a supporter of us both telephoned me in the middle of the night, urging me to dissuade him.

I felt obligated to advise Jerry of the depth and bitterness of feeling his stand had provoked. "Whatever this costs me, I can't help it," he said. "I can't back down. I'm not defending Pete's



(McCloskey's) views. I still think he's wrong, but I know he's sincere. What's at stake is the right of any Republican to obey his political conscience. If we forced every Republican to think exactly alike on every issue, we'd be a Party of robots. The majority of people never would support us."

Not only did Jerry go to California, he persuaded a former member of the John Birch Society, Republican Representative John Rousselot, to join him in tacitly endorsing McCloskey. When the 60,000 Republican primary votes were counted, McCloskey had won by a margin of 800. "Without any question, Jerry's appearance and kind words made the difference," says McCloskey.

I don't think anyone can be a great President of the United States without some strong personal principles that transcend concern for self, and without the courage to take unpopular stands when principle requires. Mr. Ford has some strong beliefs. They were forged during the depression days of his Michigan boyhood, on college football fields, on the decks of a Navy aircraft carrier in World War II. There is no secret about what they are. Mr. Ford unashamedly embraced all the traditional American values that some now deride as "straight" or



old-fashioned -- individual liberty, self-reliance, hard work, honesty, sportsmanship, sanctity of family, patriotism. He believes that government exists to ensure all citizens equal opportunity to live their own lives according to their own lights and abilities; not to plan and control their lives as it thinks best.

Precisely how President Ford will apply these beliefs to the solution of the immense and urgent national problems he has inherited, no one can prophesy. Certainly it will be extraordinarily difficult and, at times, exceedingly painful to cope with the problems of inflation, dwindling natural resources, national defense, environment, disadvantaged minorities; the problems of rebuilding our vital foreign alliances and of charting peaceful relations with nations that still proclaim their determination to destroy Western democracy.

But I think there now exists among the American people a vast reservoir of good will and potential energy, a readiness to make sacrifices provided the people are shown why sacrifices are needed and why they will be meaningful. The tapping of this reservoir awaits only national leadership.

The first day I ever saw Gerald Ford he was appealing for



governmental honesty. On the basis of all I have seen of him in the years since, I am sure he will tell the country the truth, unpleasant though it sometimes may be. And in so doing I think he will call forth the greatness of the country not by pandering to the worse, but by appealing to the best in Americans.

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