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THE NICK THIMMESCH COLUMN

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THE SLOW TRANSFORMATION OF PRESIDENT FORD

by Nick Thimmesch

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WASHINGTON--There never has been a man who wasn't changed after becoming President. That office is so powerful and so focal that it alters the style and thinking of its occupants whether they be free and easy, hidebound or what.

There's reason to think that President Ford is no exception; that at some moment in recent weeks he crossed the line from being the collegial "nice guy"--a friendly congressman --to a man feeling comfortable in the mantle of the Chief Executive, thus a more commanding presence.

Despite the great diminution in the authority of the Presidency, people want a President who imparts the notion that he is in charge, is making decisions for the general good and has a strong backbone. The difficult economy and peoples' perception of Mr. Ford as not having come to grips with his office have given him unhealthy ratings in the public opinion polls.

(MORE)

Page Two...NICK THIMMESCH...May 13...opinion polls.

But this could soon change for the better for Mr. Ford. Recently, he hasn't refrained from expressing his displeasure when he thinks his adversaries are being truculent, unreasonable or downright wrong. In short, he's been described several times of late as being "damned mad," particularly over published reports that he has told confidants he won't run in 1976, and with the unwillingness of some Americans to welcome South Vietnamese refugees.

Asked at his last press conference whether U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin was effective in the evacuation, Mr. Ford politely but firmly rejected that suggestion and declared: "I never had much faith in Monday morning quarterbacks or grandstand quarterbacks. I would rather put faith in the man who carried out a very successful evacuation."

That answer had the ring of conviction in it, and his eyes had a steely look--qualities a President must have to get people to back him. A President must be assertive at times, else he ought to be out selling Fuller brushes. Lately, Mr. Ford has been quite assertive with Congress.

He has increasingly forced this second-rate body to come to grips with the energy problem.

(Paragraph continues)

Page Three...NICK THIMMESCH...May 13...energy problem.

With a scarcity of Republicans on The Hill, the President has had to battle to get Congress to move even an inch on energy, and the issue finally seems to be moving.

His performance on the economy seemed far less decisive. After the explosion of 'WIN' buttons and a call for a surtax, there was a wrenching turn last winter by the President, and suddenly we were asked to stimulate the economy and expect the mailman to bring us income-tax rebates. Mr. Ford was learning that it's different downtown than on The Hill.

To fairly assess the Ford performance, we have to consider how he started and what he inherited.

Mr. Ford is an unelected President, and had to build a constituency. He took over a Presidency weakened by his predecessor's incredibly bad judgments, two years of Watergate and a vengeful Congress. He had the problem of Richard M. Nixon around his neck. Mr. Ford also had inflation, the energy problem, a bad political situation for the Republicans and the chore of taking over a demoralized Administration.

That's a messy closet of problems all right, and others sprang from the mess. President Ford learned he couldn't deal with foreign or military policy the way he would like to because of public and congressional restraints.

(Paragraph continues)

Page Four...NICK THIMMESCH...May 13...restraints.

He saw his party lose badly in the fall elections, thus cutting his political strength even more and making new programs doubtful. Finally, his right wing, frustrated and angry over Watergate and Nixon's throwing the power away, cut loose at Mr. Ford.

He had to make presidential decisions. He pardoned Nixon, thus cutting his honeymoon short. He failed to get a handle on the stagflation illness. He went permissive on the budget. He indulged his Secretary of State a bit too much, mouthing Dr. Kissinger's latest huffings and puffings against Arabs, Israelis and Congress. And he kissed off the memory of Vietnam too quickly, though admirably sticking by the evacuation of refugees and his ambassador.

But really, even a Democratic President couldn't have done any better in this period between the exile to San Clemente and the fall of Saigon. Mr. Ford didn't do well, but he did his best, and he learned.

And, while I believe the office pushes him into more authoritative moments and stances, this man of Congress maintains his courtesy and patience. He listens to an uncommon amount of advice, probably too much, and is on the phone a great deal with congressmen. (Paragraph continues)

Page Five...NICK THIMMESCH...May 13...congressmen.

Mr. Ford goes out of his way in public settings to compliment people who would relish the torture and executions of any and all Republicans within grabbing distance. Collegiality has not fled him.

Maybe it will dawn on people that Mr. Ford is getting stronger while Congress fiddles. The other day, a freshman congressman was exuberant as he told me, "I made the AP wire this week with one little quote. I made the newswires!" Well, bully for him. Years ago, Sam Rayburn would have frozen him in his tracks with a stare as bleak as the Texas panhandle. This is a second-rate, underelected Congress, which makes it inferior to a plodding, sincere, nonelected President.

President Ford can grow more in his job than Congress can grow in its performance. Little by little, it might soak into peoples' minds that this is what is happening, and then Mr. Ford will rise in the polls and become an awfully credible presidential candidate, despite the low state of his party.

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