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11-14-2006

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Recommended Citation
Whitney, Gleaves, "Model Ford" (2006). *Features.* Paper 40.
http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/features/40

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NOVEMBER 14, 2006 8:06 A.M.

Model Ford

Presidential longevity.

On Sunday Gerald R. Ford became the oldest former president in U.S. history. At 93 years and 4 months, he overtook Ronald Reagan, who previously held this distinction. Within the Republican party and certainly among conservatives, Ford has always taken a back seat to the Gipper, but with Sunday's milestone he outlives his rival. Longevity is a fine strategy if nature cooperates. Length of years was Hoover's payback to Franklin Roosevelt — he was delighted to "outlive the bastard!"

Republicans are fortunate that history is increasingly well disposed to both Presidents Ford and Reagan, but in GOP circles not enough recognition has been given to the man from the Heartland. Perhaps it is not just Ford's biological longevity, but his political longevity, that we should be looking at.

Ford became president on August 9, 1974. Because of the Watergate scandal and President Nixon's resignation, the nation had been brought to the edge of its most serious constitutional crisis in more than a century. In a presidency that lasted 895 days, Ford shepherded America from crisis to stability. He helped restore confidence in the presidency and also navigated the nation through rough economic seas. The mid 1970s saw one of the worst recessions since the Great Depression, and the president's policies helped put the economy on a steadier course.

These accomplishments were significant in retrospect. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who is not prone to hyperbole, says of his good friend: "I think he saved the country. In fact, he saved it in such a matter of fact way that he isn't given any credit for it."

Moreover, one of the best chronicles of the Ford administration, by journalist James Cannon, observed, "I remember him as a leader, first and foremost. He was the right man for this country, at the right time, in the most extraordinary crisis in our constitutional system since the Civil War."

Gerald R. Ford has dedicated his life to public service, first as a 13-term congressman, then as America's first unelected vice president, then as America's first unelected president, and finally as a civic leader. Holding public office from 1949 till 1977, he cut his political teeth on crisis after crisis, when Americans were grappling with everything from McCarthy to Watergate. It was not an Era of Good Feelings, and in two branches of government — as House minority leader (1965-1973) and as president (1974-1977) — Ford's leadership was sorely tested. Yet the man from Grand Rapids never shrank from the challenges. His integrity and hard work earned the respect of his colleagues in Washington and the citizens he represented in Michigan's Fifth Congressional District. How did he reach the heights? What were the marks of his leadership?

1. Trust. Ford's integrity, his unbending adherence to the truth, is legendary, and this was his strength every step of the way, from the U.S. House to the White House. It was a Michigan Democrat, the late Martha Griffiths, who perhaps best captured the probity of her colleague in Congress: "In all the years I sat in the House, I never knew Mr. Ford to make a dishonest statement nor a statement part-true and part-false. He never attempted to shade a statement, and I never heard him utter an unkind word."

In the 1970s, Ford's honesty was the prescription a sick nation needed. His former chief of staff, Dick Cheney, says that "simply by the sheer force of his character," Ford was able to "restore trust and confidence in the presidency and the White House. That was his single biggest contribution."

The honesty and openness were not only appreciated at home; they proved to serve the national interest abroad. Kissinger has long maintained that one of the president's greatest achievements was to forge trusting relationships with foreign leaders who counted on him to speak candidly and to keep his word. These relationships endured years after Ford left office, enabling him to serve his country as an elder statesman. Kissinger says, "He established what I believe was the closest relationship of any American president, in any period, with European leaders, and he did this by his special qualities — openness, intelligence, directness. And what is even more remarkable is that they have remained friends of his even after he left government…. Abroad his reputation was enormous." Ford has ever been the Eagle Scout — literally and metaphorically. Reflecting back on his childhood, he praises his mother and stepfather for their steadfast love and consistently high standards of conduct. "Tell the truth, work hard, and come to dinner on time" — that was the Ford family motto.

This utmost respect for the truth was also an attribute people appreciated in Mrs. Betty Ford, who as first lady developed a reputation for exceptional candor. It was to President Ford's credit that he did not interfere with his wife's openness with the American people when it came to her battle with breast cancer, alcoholism, and pain killers.

2. Self-control. As a child, Ford had a "raging temper." To help him overcome the nasty trait he'd inherited from his biological father, his mother Dorothy used to make him recite Rudyard Kipling's poem, "If," which begins,

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you….

Later in life he credited the poem with helping him learn to control his anger.

The self-control expressed itself in other ways. In Washington, as he assumed more responsibility and leadership, colleagues noted that pipe-puffing Jerry Ford always stayed cool. One of the journalists who covered him, Tom DeFrank, said the president had "grace under pressure." This quality was not always appreciated by outsiders. As *Roll Call* editor Morton Kondracke notes, "The press… underestimated his inner strength and resolve." And yet, the boy who had learned to calm himself down became the man who could calm the nation down.

His self-control was no doubt honed by going through some fairly harrowing experiences, which has a way of putting life in perspective. Ford is the only president to have survived *two* assassination attempts (both in September 1975).

Some three decades earlier, he had several brushes with death while serving as a lieutenant commander on the U.S.S. *Monterey*, which went through most of the major battles in the Pacific and had been threatened by Japanese torpedoes, bombers, and kamikaze pilots.

Actually, it was not the Japanese but a fierce storm that brought him closest to death. During a typhoon that killed several sailors, Ford was thrown off the flight deck. Miraculously, he was saved from drowning by landing on the catwalk, the only thing between him and the dark immensity of the Pacific.

3. **Physical presence.** Leaders can learn to use their physical presence — that combination of stature, strength, and stride — to political advantage. George Washington did, and so did Gerald Ford. As a young man, he had an opportunity to model and even made the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Naturally endowed with a strong, well-proportioned body, he stood 6 feet tall and weighed 195 pounds when he entered the Oval Office.

All along the road to the White House, it was what he did with nature's gifts that made the difference. At the University of Michigan, he became a star football player, determined to become a skilled center on offense and an impact linebacker on defense. In the process he became a leader. The captain of his team during his senior year, Ford was named the Wolverines' most valuable player. So impressive was his performance week-in and week-out that the Green Bay Packers and Detroit Lions tried to sign him on. He turned them down, went on to Yale Law School, and paid the bills by coaching football and boxing. Gerald Ford may have been the best athlete ever to reach the White House.

Even in the pressure-cooker of the presidency, he maintained his strength by dedicating a portion of each day to exercise. His daily regimen consisted of fifty pushups and twenty miles on the stationary bicycle — not bad for a man in his sixties.

4. **Vision.** No president can lead without vision, and Ford's vision of the nation focused on our constitutional form of government and on his faith in a faith-filled people. His formative years had been spent in Grand Rapids, Michigan, during the Great Depression (when he saw how people could overcome grinding poverty) and in the Pacific Theater during World War II (when he fought in an alliance of free nations that overpowered a militaristic empire).

Prior to the Second World War, much of the Midwest was isolationist. By the time Commander Ford came back from World War II, he had abandoned isolationism. Determined to go into public office and champion a more active U.S. role on the world stage, he challenged the isolationist incumbent in the GOP primary and beat him roundly.

But it was Ford's confidence in American citizens, and his devotion to our constitutional heritage, that helped him assume the burdens of the Oval Office in the wake of Nixon's downfall. He immediately set about restoring confidence in the presidency and healing the wounds of the nation. In his acceptance speech of August 9, 1974 — Lincolnesque in tone and one of the great speeches in U.S. presidential history — Ford said:

> *My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over. Our Constitution works; our great Republic is a government of laws and not of men. Here the people rule. But there is a higher Power, by whatever name we honor Him, who ordains not only righteousness but love, not only justice but mercy.*

> *As we bind up the internal wounds of Watergate, more painful and more poisonous than those of foreign wars, let us restore the golden rule to our political process, and let brotherly love purge our hearts of suspicion and of hate….*
>
> *With all the strength and all of the good sense I have gained from life, with all the confidence my family, my friends, and my dedicated staff impart to me, and with the good will of countless Americans I have encountered in recent visits to forty states, I now solemnly reaffirm my promise I made to you last December 6; to uphold the Constitution, to do what is right as God gives me to see the right, and to do the very best I can for America. God helping me, I will not let you down*
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> .

5. **Hard work.** Ford was a hard worker all his life, a virtue already apparent when he played football at South High School in Grand Rapids. Coach Clifford Gettings said of him, "Jerry was one of the hardest-working kids who ever played for me, and totally dependable in every game." For the total effort he was rewarded with leadership positions; in his senior year, he was elected captain of the South High team that won the state championship, and was named all-state center and captain of the all-state team.

It was hard work that made his 24-year string of election landslides look easy; until 1976 he never lost an election. After returning from the war and deciding to run for Congress, Ford thrashed the Republican incumbent, Bartel Jonkman, in the primary. Jonkman's big mistake was to underestimate the young veteran and lawyer; he just didn't think that Ford was a serious candidate. Ford relentlessly worked the district, beat the odds, and beat his Democratic opponent in the general election. He was never again seriously threatened for his seat in Congress.

6. **Ability to compromise.** One of the lessons Ford learned from Coach Gettings was, "You play to win. You give it everything you've got, but you always play within the rules." In public office, Ford always played within the rules when in negotiation. It has been said that he had opponents, but not enemies. A pragmatist, he was willing to work in good faith with those with whom he differed to get things done. In WGVU's award-winning documentary *Time and Chance*, Mike Grass writes that "Ford practiced the political art of intelligent compromise with low-key Midwestern habits of fairness, civility, and truth-telling." The dean of White House journalists, Helen Thomas, notes: "What Ford gave was balance and good sense to decisions, and that was his great contribution."

7. **First-rate advisers.** Of course, no president makes decisions in total isolation. He must rely on his staff for advice. One of Ford's greatest strengths as a leader, according to Henry Kissinger, was his self confidence and sense of security around others. The advisors whom he hired included a number of extremely bright, capable people who are still on the scene: one of his key economic advisors was Alan Greenspan; his chief of staff was Dick Cheney; his second secretary of Defense was a very young Donald Rumsfeld; his second secretary of Housing and Urban Development was Carla Hills. The list of outstanding staff goes on and on.

8. **Connection to Everyman.** "Down to earth," "unpretentious," "approachable," "likeable" "an ordinary guy" — these are the words one often hears to describe Gerald Ford. In all his years in Congress, he never surrounded himself with all the media handlers who shape so many of today's politicians. Jerry Ford was no man's tool — what you saw was what you got.

People naturally liked him. From an early age he learned to get along with people from very different backgrounds. In 1931 he was voted Grand Rapids's most popular high-school senior. The prize was a trip to the nation's capital with 30 other young people from the Midwest. It was on this trip that Ford first saw the Capitol and White House. He was 17 years old.

Throughout his adult life, Ford has remained connected to the people of his community, always retaining the common touch. This helps explain why he was elected to Congress to represent the people of West Michigan 13 times. When he celebrated his 90th birthday in Grand Rapids in 2003, some 14,000 people turned out to pay him tribute. In the old Fifth Congressional District, Ford's still their man.

9. **Courage.** On September 8, 1974, barely one month in office, President Ford shocked the nation when he pardoned President Nixon; critics — and they were legion — saw it as the greatest plea bargain in history. In fact, after it appeared that Nixon would be impeached by the House of Representatives, his chief of staff, Alexander Haig, met privately with Ford and tried to suggest that he should pardon Nixon in exchange for Nixon's resignation; Haig even handed Ford the suggested draft of the pardon. The vice president adamantly refused: there would be no "deal."

After becoming president, Ford pondered and prayed and came to the conclusion that pardoning the disgraced president was the right thing to do, even if it jeopardized his chances of winning the 1976 presidential election. As Ford later reflected on it,

> *I agonized over the idea of a pardoné . But I wasn't motivated primarily by sympathy for [Nixon's] plight or by concern over the state of his health. It was the state of the country's health at home and around the world that worried me.*

Consistent with his goal of binding up the nation's wounds, Ford made other controversial decisions. One of them was to grant clemency to Vietnam War draft dodgers and deserters, much to the chagrin of veterans, conservatives, and hawks within his own party.

Against the advice of that same group, Ford also signed the Helsinki Accords, which, in the view of some historians, eroded the power of the Soviet Union, not by military might, but by the force of democracy, human rights, and free markets. Colin Powell called U.S. participation in Helsinki "a bold, brave, visionary act," "one of President Ford's greatest moments."

His political courage was also evident in the number of bills he vetoed. Some of Ford's critics charge that he was capricious with the veto pen; he vetoed 66 bills in all, the fourth-highest annual average of all the presidents. But in the wake of Watergate and Nixon's resignation, Democrats enjoyed a better than 2-to-1 advantage in both the House and the Senate, and the veto was the only way Ford believed he could force Congressional Democrats to craft fiscally responsible policies.

Politically, Ford almost survived the unpopularity of some of his decisions. Even his opponent in 1976, Jimmy Carter, concedes: "President Ford healed this nation to a great degree, and had he not had to assume some of the inherited responsibilities left over from the Nixon administration, I think he would have been invulnerable to any challenge from me or within the Republican party."

10. **Luck.** Presidential historian Robert Dallek speaks of the luck a number of our chief executives have enjoyed. There were numerous crossroads that Ford encountered when Providence seem to smile on him. He was born with intelligence and good looks. After a rough start, he landed in a good family. He attracted the attention of the University of Michigan. His life was spared during a typhoon in the Pacific.

In a sense, Gerald R. Ford was the luckiest man ever to reach the Oval Office. Through an improbable chain of events that may never recur, he became vice president, then president of the greatest constitutional democracy on earth, without aspiring to the office and without going through a national election. It all happened in just eight months. Without guile, without overarching ambition, he advanced on the checkerboard of national politics by virtue of the removal of the two big pieces (Agnew and Nixon) ahead of him.

Maybe luck really turns on the ability to inspire others to help you. I recall the story of how Jerry Ford was able to attend the University of Michigan in the depths of the Great Depression, when neither he nor his family had the money to pay the $50 tuition. Jim Cannon recounts:

> *Times were so hard that there seemed to be no way Jerry Ford Jr. could get to college. The meager child support from grandfather King stopped when the old Omaha entrepreneur died a few months after losing most of his fortune in the 1929 stock market crash….*
>
> *Without Ford's knowledge, the principal of South High, Arthur Krause, decided to help Ford, who was not only a promising athlete but a National Honor Society student. Krause wrote Harry Kipke, coach of the Michigan football team, and invited him to Grand Rapids to talk to Ford.*
>
> *Kipke did come to Grand Rapids, met Ford and his family, and took him to Ann Arbor. In that era there were no football scholarships to Michigan, but Kipke helped Ford find a job at the University hospital waiting on tables to earn his meals….*
>
> *A job waiting on tables was a start, but Ford had no money for tuition. Principal Krause called him in one day and said, "Jerry, tuition at Michigan is fifty dollars a semester, one hundred a year. I know your dad doesn't have that. But, you know, we have a bookstore at South High, and I think we ought to start a scholarship with the profits. I think we'll make the first award the first award to Jerry Ford."*
>
> *With that gift, and enough money saved from summer jobs to pay the rent, Ford could go to college.*

Ford would call the opportunity to go to U of M "the luckiest break I ever had."

THE ONE BIG THING

In the perspective of history, maybe it is We the People who are the lucky ones since, at a critical time, Gerald Ford served as the nation's president. Yanek Mieczkowski, grappling with the 1970s context of the Ford administration, observes:

> *Ford ameliorated the decade's problems. Keeping a steady hand on the tiller, he led a country confronting perhaps its greatest challenges of the postwar era. Domestically, he restored economic stability; overseas, he projected power confidently; on a personal level, his White House radiated a civility and openness, replacing earlier attitudes…. The decade's challenges were daunting, and Ford struggled to bring them under control. In the end, he left a lighter burden for the country to bear.*

Richard Reeves puts Ford's achievement this way: "We judge presidents by the one or two big things that they do. Nobody remembers that Lincoln balanced the budget, and nobody cares. In the end, President Ford did the one thing he had to do, which was hold the country together."

"Gerald Ford," says Mort Kondracke, "represented the best in American politics… and [a style] that I'm afraid we are never going to see again."

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