

Early Peak

REGARDING 1976, perhaps Gerald Ford has peaked a little early. But life must look sweet from his current peak. He got there with a boost from the Cambodian Communists, who stole a country and a boat. No one blamed Mr. Ford for the former, and Mr. Ford looked convincingly presidential in response to the latter. But Mr. Ford, the man from Congress, owes his current position primarily to Congress.

The 94th Congress arrived here six months ago on an unprecedented wave of adulatory publicity. It was—so it and its flacks said—going to plow under the Imperial Presidency and establish Congressional Government, the special grace of which would come from the scores of freshman Democrats in the House of Representatives.

But in recent weeks Congress has failed three tests it set for itself.

Congress was going to rescue the nation's economy from Mr. Ford's "inhumane" concern with inflation. It was going to treat unemployment as the priority problem. To that end it ginned up a \$6-billion bill to put 900,000 people on public payrolls. Mr. Ford vetoed it, and Congress failed to override.

Congress was going to codify in laws the trendy environmentalism which appeals to an intense minority of its constituents. To that end it passed a tough law restricting strip mining. Again, Mr. Ford vetoed, Congress failed to override.

The third and most intense humiliation for Congress came when the House gutted the energy bill prepared by Representative Al Ullman (D., Ore.), new chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. Back at the Dawn of the New Era—in January—Mr. Ullman deposed Representative Wilbur Mills, and immediately became a symbol of Congress' new seriousness. But his bill arrived on the floor with a steep gasoline

tax and left with that and all other teeth pulled. It may be that Mr. Ullman's bill deserved its fate, but that is not the point. The point is that three months ago, when the Democrats voted to suspend Mr. Ford's first tax on imported crude, they denied that this was just typical congressional negativism, or just additional and redundant evidence that Congress lacks the nerve to inflict pain on the American public. They said: Give us three months. Then we will have a tough energy program of our own. They made energy the test of their ability to formulate coherent policy. Having turned the spotlight on themselves, they skidded badly on the banana peel they had tossed three months down their road.

Sure, the long-term political importance of Mr. Ford's current run of good fortune is uncertain. The perception that Mr. Ford is up and Congress is down is, although accurate, largely a Washington perception. And the idea that an incumbent President can successfully seek election by running against a Congress controlled by the other party is a durable myth deriving from a misinterpretation of the campaign of another accidental President. Harry Truman did flog the "do-nothing 80th Congress" from sea to shining sea, but he would have lost had there not been some fortuitous economic developments late in the campaign, or if his opponent had not worn a mustache.

Business Week, which wishes Mr. Ford well, sees his problem this way:

Now his Administration is preparing a domestic package that seeks to bolster his '76 candidacy with such diffuse issues as a strong defense posture, a tough anticrime program, a drive to aid business through tax reforms that assist in capital formation, and moves that would curtail government regulation of industry.

That means that, despite his serious split with conservatives, Ford at this point is running on little more than his basic conservatism. To complicate matters further, many of Ford's deeply felt convictions center on unabashedly pro-business stances that may be deflected by his political opponents into potent anti-consumer positions.

But there are two questions to be asked. Will Mr. Ford's obvious and

steady conservatism give him strength in November 1976? And will it protect him in March 1976—primary season?

The episodes that have established Mr. Ford's current ascendancy—the tiffs with Cambodian Communists and congressional Democrats—have strengthened the conservative definition of his Presidency. Inevitably—if, perhaps, unfairly—this makes Ronald Reagan's interest in challenging Mr. Ford seem less like a matter of principle than a matter of orthodox ambition.

Mr. Ford's potential "November" strength may derive from precisely what worries *Business Week*—his conservatism. This is not only because the nation's natural conservatism will make it reluctant to have three Presidents in less than three years. It also is because the nation is in a funny mood—one that, by whatever name, is conservative.

IT IS TRUE that only 13 per cent of the electorate will admit Republican allegiance. But that may not mean much these days. The three most important governorships—those of New York, Illinois, and California—are held by Democrats, Hugh Carey, Dan Walker, and Edmund Brown, respectively. Carey has shut off the money tap, leaving New York City in semi-receivership. Regarding spending proposals, he says: "The days of wine and roses are over." Walker says: "More often than not, it is better for government to stay out." To help the government of Illinois to stay out of lots of things, he has asked the state legislature to slice 6 per cent from his own budget. Brown has been called a "recycled Reagan": he has even cut the University of California's budget, not to mention his own salary. Asked if he would like to be President, he said: "Are you kidding? Just being governor is a pain in the ass." And of his approach to government, he says: "Action has been the catchword. But people feel things are being done to them, not for them. Sometimes non-action is better. Sometimes we need fewer programs, less planning, more space to live our lives."

Mr. Ford will get a fair hearing from the electorate that is making such men governors. □

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