“A Position of Sufficient Respect and Trust”

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When President Gerald Ford took over the presidency in August 1974, he had to balance continuity and change. On foreign policy, Ford wanted to communicate to other nations that the United States would stay the course and not make drastic changes. But domestically, he had to differentiate himself from his predecessor.

Herbert J. Storing: What do you think are the things that were especially well done in the Ford White House, and what things, if any, were not so well done? Don, would you be willing to start us off?

Donald H. Rumsfeld: Well, maybe the way to start is to just comment briefly on what I think it’s probably accurate to say President [Gerald] Ford was *trying* to do. Then one can, I suppose, ask the question whether or not that’s what he ought to have been trying to do and how well he did it. But the sense he had, and the sense that I think a number of the people in this room who were around him had, was that the problem he faced was one of trying to deal with basically two things at once. One was to provide a degree of continuity as the first President who wasn’t elected and came in abruptly, and to see that the government ran, and that things worked this way. This was particularly important to foreign policy and national security affairs. And you can detect in the things he did a reflection of a concern that the United States be seen as a country where people had a reasonable idea which way they were going internationally and from the security standpoint.

At the same time, he recognized the need for change. There had *been* a change. There was a new President. There was a need in the country for something other than what had been, as a result of the resignation. There obviously was, he felt, a need for a sense of change because of the problems a President has leading and the fact that, for the preceding period, the preoccupation had been with Watergate as opposed to governing. As the

ambassador [Frederick E. Nolting Jr.] indicated, the desire to do those things that might contribute, along with the most important ingredient of time, to restoring the Executive Office of the President to a position of sufficient respect and trust that a leader, who has to lead by persuasion and consent, is able to function. And, further, from a political standpoint, the elections that were associated with the Watergate period were not helpful to the Republican party. As a political leader, he had a desire to have sufficient change so that the prospects in the coming elections would hopefully be better. These are some of the things he was thinking about and the people around him were thinking about, trying to do during that period. And, of course, that period was an important part of his administration, given the fact that it was a rather short one.

Storing: How did those concerns manifest themselves in operations or organization, or behavior in the White House?

Rumsfeld: Just one example, one of the first things he did—in fact, I was not in the country, but it is my recollection—even before he was sworn in, he indicated his support for Henry Kissinger [National Security Advisor, 1969–75; Secretary of State, 1973–77], his desire to have the world understand that he knew they were in general agreement, that he was going to stay, and that the rest of the world could rely on a degree of continuity from the standpoint of foreign policy. I don't remember when he did it, but he had done it by the time I was back in the United States.

Brent Scowcroft: One of his very first acts on Inauguration Day was to call in the ambassadors of virtually every country with whom we had substantial relations and talk to them. He spent a good part of the first day doing that, in batches for some, singularly with others.

End of excerpt 1.

Richard B. Cheney: Maybe the key point here in terms of the transition—I can't overemphasize strongly enough, in my own mind, how important it is to separate out that kind of transition from, even though it's within one party, Republican-Republican—it was unique respective to Kennedy to Johnson or someone else. Whereas [Lyndon Baines Johnson] LBJ was perfectly free when he took over, and indeed all of the external pressures, so to speak, on him were to stress continuity—that he'd ask everybody to continue and that, to some extent, his own political future in 1964 depended upon the ability of him to identify with his predecessor—we had exactly the opposite situation. Although there was great pressure for continuity in foreign policy, there was much greater pressure—not relative to the pressure for continuity but greater pressure relative to what a new President ordinarily finds coming into office in that fashion—for *change*: to be able to persuade the American people that we had significantly modified and altered the way of doing business in the White House, who the key people were, made some changes in the cabinet and so forth, the kinds of pressures that LBJ, for example, never had to face. And I think it was a factor for two and one-half years, all the time we were there.

End of excerpt 2.

Scowcroft: There's another element to the 25th amendment and that is the character of events which led to it. In many respects, the transition was not that different in the fact of a new President assuming office in a very sudden manner to Kennedy-Johnson. Circumstances were very different. The assassination of Kennedy brought the country together. There was an enormous outwelling of support and national unity. Quite the converse was true when President Ford took over. He took over in circumstances of deep division within the country, and the circumstances of the resignation led him to take an act very shortly thereafter, the pardon, to deal with those circumstances which I think pretty nearly ended the traditional honeymoon of the new President, in giving him time because, you know, this mobilized the press and it focused attention on him and in a critical way, which didn't happen with Johnson.

End of excerpt 3.

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