

Jerry Ford Was No Accidental President

By Max Holland

Conventional wisdom attributes Gerald R. Ford's presidency solely to the Watergate scandal of the 1970s. Yet it is no less accurate to say that but for the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, it is likely that Ford never would have become president. His ascent was the culmination of eleven tumultuous years, not two.

To be sure, in the early 1960s, many Republicans believed the tall, blond, athletic congressman from Grand Rapids, Michigan represented the GOP's best response to Kennedy's youthful appeal, the perfect spokesman for a modern, postwar brand of Republicanism. But at the time, the 50-year-old Ford had only one great ambition in life, and it certainly did not include running for president. All he yearned to accomplish politically was to preside as speaker over a House of Representatives firmly in Republican control.

The November 22nd assassination changed all that. Akin to a political earthquake with large, persistent aftershocks, the assassination marked the first in a series of convoluted, yet interrelated, developments that would ultimately thrust Ford into the Oval Office. The sequence defied imagination in 1963, and remains astounding even in retrospect.

The first tangible effect of the assassination on Ford's career was the new president's decision to appoint him to the Warren Commission, the presidential panel charged with investigating the assassination. That single decision lifted Ford from being a parochial congressman—apart from his constituents, he was largely known only to the small club of reporters who covered Capitol Hill—and introduced him to the country at large as a politician worthy of national responsibilities.

When I interviewed Ford in 1996, I asked him about President Johnson's November 29th telephone call. Effectively, LBJ was asking Ford to serve under Chief Justice Earl Warren, whose competence and jurisprudence Ford harshly and regularly attacked on the House floor. Ford's recollection was that he was unenthusiastic, and had to be dragooned by Johnson into serving. Unbeknownst to Ford, however, LBJ was secretly taping their phone conversation, and the extant recording proved the opposite. Judging from the alacrity of Ford's expressed willingness to serve, he immediately recognized that the new president was handing him a great big political plum. He leapt, in fact, at the opportunity.

Ford might well have eventually risen in the GOP ranks on his own merits, but service on the Warren Commission—in its day, the equivalent of the 9/11 Commission—indelibly marked him as a leader, someone who “would rise to the consciousness of

responsibility,” as Speaker John McCormack (D-Massachusetts) put it when Johnson asked McCormack what he thought about selecting the little-known Michigan congressman to sit on the Warren Commission. After the 1964 election, in which the GOP suffered a landslide defeat, the so-called “Young Turks” in the House, led by a newly-prominent Jerry Ford, mutinied against the House minority leader, Representative Charles Halleck (R-Indiana). Ford won the vote to replace Halleck.

By 1966, Johnson rued the day that he had plucked the Grand Rapids congressman out of relative obscurity and put him on a national stage. LBJ would complain bitterly about Ford’s hard-ball tactics to Senator Everett Dirksen (R-Illinois), Ford’s counterpart in the upper body. The energetic Ford had proved to be far tougher in the political clinches than Halleck ever was, or some of the other GOP congressmen Johnson contemplated appointing to the Warren Commission.

Over the next decade, the landscape that Ford expected to contend with for the balance of his political life shifted dramatically, also precipitated in no small part by John F. Kennedy’s absence. By 1966, the Democrats’ New Deal coalition was coming unglued under the twin pressures of the Vietnam war and civil rights, and although the party’s congressional majority would largely persist for another 30 years, decay was in the air. The skillful Texan who succeeded Kennedy might have coped successfully with one of these elemental challenges, but not both taken together. Southerners and conservative whites elsewhere began abandoning the party in droves, effectively ending Democrats’ hegemony.

Of course, it’s absurd to think that John Kennedy would not have faced the same troubling issues that destroyed Lyndon Johnson’s desire to stay in office until 1972. Still, it’s hard to imagine, had JFK served two terms, that things would have worked out exactly the same for the Democrats, which is to say, as badly as they did. Johnson had to make critical decisions about South Vietnam in his first term, whereas Kennedy, facing the end of his tenure, might have cut American losses with the same cold calculation that prompted him to overthrow Ngo Dinh Diem. It’s also unlikely that JFK would have ever have lost the allegiance of the Democratic Party’s intelligentsia, much less have been subjected to its blistering attacks.

The 1968 Democratic crackup, symbolized by the party’s unprecedented repudiation of Johnson, culminated in the narrow election of Richard Nixon, who had seemingly been consigned to political oblivion following his defeats in 1960 and 1962. But with Democrats hopelessly split over foreign policy, Nixon could reasonably claim that a return to Republican stewardship was needed, and he augured in a nearly unbroken period of GOP control of the Oval Office until the cold war ended.

Nixon shared some of Johnson’s demons, specifically, paranoia about war protestors and the Kennedy mystique. Yet in his lawlessness Nixon was so brazen that it eventually threatened his own tenure in office. When he needed to appoint a vice president who might actually succeed him in office, the pool of plausible GOP candidates for a national office was not that large. Former New York governor Nelson Rockefeller was anathema

to GOP conservatives, and former Texas governor John Connally (another political phenomena formed by the shots in Dealey Plaza) was unacceptable to the GOP rank-and-file, not to mention a Democratic Congress. The GOP leadership in the Senate, after decades of being in the minority, was relatively old and uninspiring, which left the stolid, vigorous Ford as the only Republican who could plausibly claim to have national standing.

Rather than label Ford the accidental president, because he was never elected, it might make more sense to place him in the same category as a Harry Truman or Dwight Eisenhower. These were also men who, initially, never yearned for the presidency with every fiber of their being. Only events, and their performance in positions of responsibility, conspired to put them into the Oval Office.