

Reports of Nixon Ill Health Are Questioned by Visitors

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By JOHN HERBERS SEP 10 1974
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WASHINGTON, Sept. 9 —

Several persons who have recently visited former President Richard M. Nixon cast doubt today on reports that he is in poor health, one of the reasons cited by President Ford yesterday in granting Mr. Nixon an unconditional pardon.

One former counselor to Mr. Nixon said that two close friends of the former President — C. G. Rebozo and Robert H. Abplanalp — who also have visited Mr. Nixon recently, had startled the talk that became common around San Clemente that he was on the verge of collapse.

"Those two guys were really lobbying, in effect," the former counselor said, implying that they had sought to arouse sympathy for Mr. Nixon before Mr. Ford's sudden action yesterday.

Other questions as to why Mr. Ford reversed himself — he had said he would await legal action before moving on a pardon — remained unanswered as the Ford Administration on its one-month anniversary today, drew widespread criticism for granting the pardon at this time on terms that seemed very favorable to the former President.

Reports of Mr. Nixon's health problems in the face of mounting legal problems were reported by a number of sources to have figured heavily in Mr. Ford's action.

Paul Resley, manager of the

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San Clemente Inn, who lives next door to Mr. Nixon said, "I had heard these reports and read them, and I was concerned like everyone else to see how he was coming along."

Then when he saw Mr. Nixon a few days ago, Mr. Resley said, he was surprised to see that he looked "super and more relaxed than when he was President."

"He said he had been sunning and walking," he added.

Mr. Nixon's brother F. Donald Nixon of Newport Beach, Calif., said when he visited the former President 10 days ago he found him "in extremely good health and spirits; he looked good — tanned and busy."

Yet in Washington today, Republicans close to Mr. Ford

said that the reports of Mr. Nixon's poor health were an important factor in the President's decision to grant the pardon.

"I have no doubt in my mind," said Senator Robert P. Griffin of Michigan, the Republican whip in the Senate, "that the condition of the health of the former President was a factor in the President's mind in reaching his decision."

Mr. Ford, in announcing the pardon yesterday, said, "it is common knowledge that serious allegations and accusations hang like a sword over our former President's head, threatening his health, as he tries to reshape his life."

Reports From Coast

The report circulating in San Clemente and elsewhere was that Mr. Nixon was depressed to the point of wandering aimlessly about his estate, poring over stacks of unopened mail and unable to keep his mind on a conversation.

Herbert G. Klein, the former White House communications director who is a long-time friend of Mr. Nixon, said today, "Yes, he's distraught and seems preoccupied at times. Sometimes he wanders in his conversation. But that's to be expected from a man who's been through what he has. I think his health is good and I'm sure his spirits are improved today."

The controversy over Mr. Nixon's health was one of several that Mr. Ford's assistants sought to lay to rest as the month-old Ford Administration was struck by an avalanche of adverse reaction to the pardon.

Not a Devious Deal

The aura of good feeling and optimism that enveloped the White House in the month since Mr. Ford became President evaporated. Confusion and uncertainty beset the staff as angry telephone calls and telegrams came in. White House aides said the reaction was running two to one against the new President and when he went to Pittsburgh this morning to deliver a speech he encountered hostile demonstrators for the first time.

Although Mr. Ford and his assistants said they knew the decision would be controversial, they were struggling to show that the President's decision to pardon Mr. Nixon was not a devious political deal.

They insisted that Mr. Ford had not talked to the former President by telephone during the one-week period that the pardon negotiations were going on. As to Mr. Nixon's health,

they said the President was influenced by the undocumented reports out of San Clemente.

"The President," said J. F. terHorst, who resigned yesterday as press secretary, "like the rest of us in the White House, had read all the reports in the papers and heard the reports on the air of former President Nixon's physical distress, that he was not looking well and given to, in a sense, moping around San Clemente."

Other aspects of the pardon, however, continued to raise questions.

One was why the President said in his news conference on

Aug. 28 that it would be inappropriate to make any commitment on the Nixon matter until there was some legal action, and then, two days later, initiated action for the pardon. His aides said Mr. Ford's own statement yesterday on signing the pardon would have to suffice as an explanation. In the statement, Mr. Ford said that by acting now he would save both the former President and the nation from further punishment in the Watergate scandals.

Another question was why Mr. Ford, who unlike his predecessor maintains wide politi-

cal and advisory contacts, kept in advance.

his plans to pardon Mr. Nixon so closely guarded. White House sources said only four persons besides the President knew of the negotiations and Mr. Ford's plan. These were Philip W. Buchen, the White House counsel; Alexander M. Haig Jr., the chief of staff; Robert T. Hartmann, Presidential counselor, and Benton L. Becker, a Washington lawyer who was brought in to work on the matter.

There was no immediate explanation for this, other than that Mr. Ford was anxious that word of his plan not leak out

In any event, Mr. Ford on Aug. 30 asked Mr. Buchen to find out whether a pardon could be granted immediately without awaiting legal action.

In a news briefing yesterday, Mr. Buchen said he was as much in the dark as anyone on why the President had changed his mind.

Q. Was there something that happened just prior to his coming to you that got his interest working in doing this thing just now?

A. If there was, I don't know what it was.

Later, Mr. Buchen added,

"I don't know what went through his mind. He didn't tell me."

But Mr. Buchen and other aides sought to lay to rest suspicions that the pardon — which was accompanied by an agreement for Mr. Nixon to destroy his tape recordings — may have been intended to cover up any scandal in the Nixon Administration that has not yet come to light.

Mr. Buchen said he had been assured by Leon Jaworski, the special prosecutor, that he was not investigating any new charges against the former President that might act as a

"time bomb" unless Mr. Nixon were granted immunity from prosecution.

On Labor Day weekend, Mr. Buchen brought in Mr. Becker, who served as a mediator between Mr. Nixon, his lawyers and staff and the White House. On Thursday, Mr. Becker went to San Clemente and informed Mr. Nixon that a Presidential pardon was probable. After intensive negotiations there, he returned to Washington on Saturday with an oral agreement that Mr. Nixon would issue a statement acknowledging error, but not criminal guilt, in the Watergate case.