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Treating Mr. Nixon With Full Honor

Richard Nixon seems to be getting better. Monday's medical bulletin hinted that he probably would be walking soon. It was the second consecutive optimistic bulletin and followed what Dr. John C. Lungren called "his best morning since hospitalization."

That's good. Good, of course, because it involves the life of a human being and the agony of his family. But good, as well, because the nation needs Richard Nixon alive now. Or to put it more baldly, his death might produce more divisiveness and rancor than even the last days of his presidency.

Imagine, for instance, the problem of deciding whether there should be a full state funeral. Millions of Americans—and not all of them die-hard Nixon supporters—would insist that what ever the man's faults, as a former president, he should be accorded the final dignity that former presidents have always been accorded, whatever their faults.

Millions more—and not all of them confirmed Nixon haters—would insist that this former president is unlike any other former president; that he managed to avoid forcible removal from high office only by resigning in the face of certain impeachment; that, save for his controversial pardon by his appointed successor, he almost certainly would have faced criminal charges and, quite likely, imprisonment.

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It would be bad enough, they would say, that he and Mr. Ford, by the combination of resignation and pardon, managed to frustrate the judicial process. But how could anyone possibly justify a hero's funeral?

Soldiers who disgrace themselves in battle are, after all, not honored with flag-draped coffins at Arlington. But, then, most burials of servicemen, in Arlington or elsewhere, are relatively private affairs. Burials of former presidents have, until now, been public spectacles, which is what makes the problem so difficult.

It would have been far easier if impeachment had run its course. For then, Nixon would either have been exonerated and his presidency saved, or he would have been convicted and thrown out of office in obvious disgrace.

But he resigned, without any official finding of guilt, except as implied in

his acceptance of the Ford pardon. Now he is in bad health, and the question, however delicate, is there.

The point here is not to be morbid but simply to acknowledge the inevitable and to suggest that someone ought to be thinking about how to deal with it.

Maybe someone already is: it isn't exactly the sort of thing you call a press conference on. Maybe Nixon and his family have agreed among them on a small, private ceremony. After all, Washington must hold some terribly unpleasant memories for them. Moreover, there is the risk that someone will do something hateful and tasteless to ever dignity a state funeral would confer.

But more likely, nobody is dealing with it at all. Certainly no administration official is likely to do so without word from the President. And Presi-

dent Ford, on his record, has not quite come to grips with the fact the Nixon leave-taking was not just another resignation based on health or "personal reasons."

Mr. Ford, in the event worse came to worse, could be expected to remember only that Richard Nixon used to be president, and not that he left in disgrace.

That would mean a state funeral, lying in state at the Capitol, a funeral procession, burial with honors—everything. And the results almost certainly would include the rekindling of anti-Nixon passions and renewed political strife in a nation already in trouble enough.

On the other hand, President Ford would be in almost as much political trouble if he decided not to honor his predecessor. Beyond that, he would be open to charges of abject ingratitude.

One way out would be for the Nixon family to hold a private service in California and for the Ford family to attend it.

There is another way out that I find even more attractive, and that is for Richard Nixon to live to a ripe old age, giving time for our passions to cool and for his place in history to be made clear.

For that reason at least, I am reassured by the bulletins out of Long Beach.