

Jack Anderson's Washington Merry-go-round

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—with Les Whitten

WASHINGTON — A harried but stubborn Richard Nixon was headed in September 1974 for the trial of the century.

Sources inside the Special Prosecutor's office told us that he definitely would have been indicted for obstruction of justice.

At the same time, sources close to the former President have told us that he would never have agreed to a deal with the prosecutors. He would have spurned plea bargaining and would have fought for his freedom in the courts.

This epic drama was aborted on Sept. 8, 1974, when President Ford granted his predecessor a pardon. Millions of Americans still wonder whether it was a set-up, whether Ford in return for his vice presidential appointment had promised to keep Nixon out of prison.

In response to literally thousands of requests, we have conducted a painstaking investigation into the circumstances that led to the controversial Nixon pardon. We have uncovered some fascinating details that can now be revealed for the first time.

Gen. Alexander Haig, then the White House staff chief, first raised the question of a pardon with Gerald Ford on August 5 — four days before Ford replaced Nixon in the White House.

Haig notified Ford to be prepared to assume the presidency. In discussing several possible contingencies, Haig mentioned that Nixon could pardon himself before resigning or might be granted a pardon after he resigned. Ford gave no inclination what he might do.

But thereafter, Ford noticed for the first time, he later confided, that Nixon looked drawn and defeated. He also appeared to have lost weight.

Gerald Ford took the oath as President on August 9. Not until August 27, so far as we can learn, was the subject of the pardon raised with him again. Then aides Jerry terHorst and Robert Hartmann alerted him to expect questions about it at a press conference

the following day.

Immediately after the press conference, the President instructed his general counsel, Philip Buchen, to explore the possibilities of a pardon. We are privy to the backroom discussions, which are too detailed to relate.

But shortly after Labor Day, Buchen approached Nixon's attorney, Herbert J. Miller, about the possibility of a pardon. Buchen strongly suggested that Nixon should issue a statement of contrition. But this was not a condition, Buchen added carefully, to the pardon.

Privately, the White House wanted a statement that would keep Nixon from proclaiming his innocence once it was no longer possible for the courts to establish his guilt. Miller agreed to seek a statement from his San Clemente client.

The President sent a close friend, Washington attorney Benton Becker, to San Clemente to make the arrangements. Benton and Miller flew to California together. Although they didn't reach San Clemente until 11 p.m., Pacific time, they went immediately into a three-hour huddle with Nixon aide Ronald Ziegler.

The talks were resumed the following morning in Ziegler's office. Frequently, Ziegler and Miller would slip out of the room for whispered consultations. At one point, Ziegler received a call from the White House. It was Haig on the phone, advising Ziegler that Nixon didn't have to sign any statement at all.

An understanding was reached, nevertheless, that any pardon would be followed by a statement of contrition from San Clemente. Not until the negotiations were completed did a fatigued, forlorn Nixon appear. He looked aged as if he were not Nixon but Nixon's father, Becker recalled. The former President also gave Becker the impression that his head was too big for his body.

He was despondent, disoriented. "Thank you for being fair," he murmured. "You are a fine young

man." Then in the middle of the conversation, he grabbed Becker's arm. "You are a big boy," Nixon blurted out of context. "Did you ever play football?"

Later as Becker was leaving, Ziegler intercepted him and said the deposed President wanted to see him again. Becker was ushered into a sparse office. Nixon greeted him solemnly.

"Mr. Becker," he said, "you have been a gentleman. You haven't been a bully. I have had my share of bullies. I want to give you something." Then he extended both arms toward the sparse office walls. "But I don't have anything," he said, his voice almost breaking. "They took it all away."

Swallowing hard, Nixon pulled open a desk drawer and produced a pair of cheap, presidential cuff links and a tiepin. He handed these dramatically to Becker. "Pat took these from my jewelry box," said Nixon sadly. "Hang on to them. They are the last ones in the world."

Back in Washington, President Ford had already made his decision to grant the pardon. He instructed Hartmann to draft an announcement. Hartmann warned that the decision would cause an uproar. The President said he had already made up his mind. He didn't want Hartmann's opinion, just the statement.

Benton Becker, back from San Clemente, consulted with the President on September 7. Ford asked how Nixon had looked. Becker gave a disturbing report. Afterward, the President personally added to his statement, as another reason for the pardon, "the threat to (Nixon's) health."

Sources close to both Ford and Nixon have assured us that the two men never spoke to one another about the pardon. The President told his subordinates emphatically that there had been "no deal, period." A source intimately familiar with Nixon's side of the story said he was "99 per cent certain there had been no advance agreement."

*Jack Anderson and Les Whitten***Nixon Pardon Drama**

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Sources close to the former President have told us that he would never have agreed to deal with the prosecutors. They said he would have spurned plea bargaining and would have fought for his freedom in the courts.

This epic drama was aborted on Sept. 8, 1974, when President Ford granted Nixon a pardon. Many Americans still wonder whether Mr. Ford, in return for his vice presidential appointment, had promised to keep Nixon out of prison.

Gen. Alexander M. Haig, then White House staff chief, first raised the question of a pardon with Mr. Ford on Aug. 5, 1974—four days before Nixon resigned.

Haig notified Mr. Ford to be prepared to assume the presidency. In discussing several contingencies, Haig mentioned that Nixon could pardon himself before resigning or might be granted a pardon after he resigned. Mr. Ford gave no inclination as to what he might do.

But thereafter, Mr. Ford later confided, he noticed for the first time, that Nixon looked drawn and defeated and appeared to have lost weight.

Mr. Ford became President on Aug. 9. Not until Aug. 27, so far as we can learn, was the subject of the pardon raised with him again. Then aides Jerald F. terHorst and Robert Hartmann alerted him to expect questions about it at a press conference the following day.

Immediately after the press conference, the President instructed his general counsel, Philip W. Buchen, to explore the possibilities of a pardon.

Shortly after Labor Day, Buchen approached Nixon's attorney, Herbert J. Miller, about the possibility. Buchen strongly suggested that Nixon issue a statement of contrition, but added that this was not a condition to any pardon.

Privately, the White House wanted a statement that would keep Nixon from proclaiming his innocence once it was

no longer possible for the courts to establish his guilt. Miller agreed to seek such a statement.

The President sent a friend, Washington attorney Benton Becker, to San Clemente to make arrangements. Benton and Miller flew to San Clemente, arriving at 11 p.m., Pacific time. They went immediately into a three-hour huddle with Nixon aide Ron Ziegler.

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Then in the middle of the conversation, Nixon grabbed Becker's arm, according to Becker. "You are a big boy," Becker said Nixon blurted out of context. "Did you every play football?"

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