

The Flanigan Blunder

That Republicans will have to undergo unnecessary, embarrassing and escapably messy hearings this week on the nomination of Peter Flanigan as ambassador to Spain can be traced to two increasingly familiar shortcomings by President Ford: paying too much attention to continuity with the Nixon presidency and not enough attention to protection of his party's interests.

Flanigan, former New York financier and White House aide under President Nixon, will not enjoy the perfunctory confirmation hearings normally conducted by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Sen. Thomas Eagleton (D-Mo.), leading the attack against his confirmation, wants Flanigan put under oath to answer a long list of accusations.

The most serious by far are sworn accusations by former Nixon attorney Herbert Kalmbach implicating Flanigan in exchanging ambassadorial nominations for political contributions. Although denied by Flanigan, Kalmbach's charges are strongly supported by Albert Jenner, who interrogated him as a counsel at the House impeachment proceedings.

Even if Flanigan is confirmed, it will give poisonous memories of Watergate one month before the midterm elections. Thus, Republican politicians are talking about Flanigan's nomination as the Nixon pardon in microcosm: a politically self-damaging act fulfilling no ostensible need.

Flanigan, a haughty lace-curtainish socialite who bruised feelings all over Washington as a Nixon White House troubleshooter, had no visible support for a diplomatic post. High State Department officials, Republican members and many party leaders agree that the nomination needlessly borrows trouble. There is no sign that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger

pushed it, contrary to hints privately dropped by Flanigan.

The best explanation is that Mr. Ford signed an ambassadorial commission for Flanigan prepared during the Nixon administration as part of the new President's obsession with continuity during his first days in office. As with the Nixon pardon, there was little, if any, study of political consequences.

Some of the President's closest advisers were not even aware of last July's testimony by Kalmbach, Nixon's former attorney now serving a federal prison sentence. Kalmbach testified he had been told by Flanigan in 1971 to seek a \$250,000 campaign contribution from Dr. Ruth Farkas (later named ambassador to Luxembourg) and that, in turn, she would be named ambassador to Costa Rica. Flanigan has denied this, contending Kalmbach misunderstood him.

"I would believe Kalmbach's testimony," Jenner told us. Jenner termed Kalmbach "a splendid witness, with a very good memory and excellent records." Flanigan, Jenner added, "played things close to his vest and was careful about what he told Kalmbach."

Although Eagleton today has few allies in the drive against Flanigan, prospects for confirmation are blighted by one ominous fact: Sen. Robert Byrd of West Virginia, assistant Democratic leader and perhaps the single most potent figure in today's Senate, has announced against him. Whether Flanigan survives or not, even White House aides concede the hearings can only embarrass the Republican Party and the President at a time when his hands are full with more important matters.

The overwhelming house vote last week to cut off foreign aid for Turkey takes on particular political significance because of energetic—and

wholly unsuccessful—backstage efforts against it.

Mr. Ford placed a telephone call the morning of the vote to Republican Rep. Pierre duPont of Delaware, a co-sponsor of the Turkish aid cutoff. Arguing against the amendment, the President obviously wanted duPont to withdraw as a sponsor or at least tone down his amendment. DuPont did neither.

The night before, Mr. Ford made the same pitch at the White House to senior House Democrats. As a result, Speaker Carl Albert went into the well of the House the next day to support the President. So did Rep. George Mahon of Texas, powerful chairman of the House Appropriations Committee.

To no avail. The 307 to 90 vote against the President, stunning White House vote counters, was attributed by presidential aides to the fact that there are many more Greek-Americans than Turkish-Americans, with election day nearing.

But Republican congressmen on both sides of the issue think the debacle reflects Mr. Ford's grim decline following the Nixon pardon. Before Sept. 8, they believe, it would have been much closer.

Sen. Henry M. Jackson, who wants to avoid becoming the "conservative" candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, may soon get help from the left wing of the labor movement: a public endorsement by Machinists Union President Floyd (Red) Smith.

Smith has been a vigorous supporter of party reform and is allied politically with left-of-center unions against AFL-CIO President George Meany and his top political operative, Al Barkan. But Smith is as much a Jackson booster as Meany and Barkan and may soon publicly endorse him, significantly broadening Jackson's base of support.