

Post 5/13/01
MARY McGRORY

Courage All Around

Some were baffled, some upset; some said it was a joke. But others thought it was high time. We are speaking of the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award that is going to Gerald Ford for—of all things—his pardon of Richard Nixon.

The recent uproar over Bill Clinton's pardon of Marc Rich was but a tea-party tempest compared with the earthquake that shook the country on Sept. 8, 1974, when Gerald Ford shattered the Sabbath calm by announcing he had pardoned his predecessor for crimes that he had committed or might have committed. His press secretary, Jerry ter Horst, promptly resigned. There were howls of rage, hoots of derision, snarling accusations that Ford—whom the country was prepared to love as a man who toasted his own English

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muffins—was just another double-dealing pol cynically keeping his part of a deal (Nixon's resignation in exchange for Ford's pardon) that hung over him during the election that followed.

I myself contributed to the din with a series of screeds about unequal justice.

But almost 27 years later, it looks a little different. What seemed then to be cynicism now looks more like courage. A most dubious

decision has acquired the patina of the only one possible. Gerald Ford had two advocates at the Profile in Courage committee meeting: David Burke, one-time Kennedy counselor and network news executive; and David McCullough, the charismatic historian-biographer who made plainspoken Harry Truman a glamorous figure and could probably convince you that the sun rises in the west. The two of them

were apparently in fine form at the gathering, which took place late last month at Caroline Kennedy's New York apartment.

McCullough and Burke chose their man separately and independently, and found out about each other's decisions at the meeting. In 1974, both had inveighed against Ford. McCullough, a student of the presidency, pointed out that Ford fulfilled two conditions of the award: one, that the issue was of the utmost gravity; and two, that the action was taken with full knowledge that it could be politically fatal. McCullough said the fate of another president could hardly be exceeded in seriousness, that Ford had chosen a course with the country, rather than with his own career, in mind.

Burke argued that the pardon rid the country of Richard Nixon for good and for all. The spectacle of a former president going through indictment, appeals and endless polemics were definitively avoided.

The considerations were succinctly laid out on the morning of the pardon announcement—in a frank exchange between the new president and his golfing buddy, Mr. Democrat himself, Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., shortly before Ford went on television. As O'Neill recounted in his memoir:

Ford: "I am calling you to tell you . . . I am going to pardon the president."

O'Neill: "You're not asking my advice."

Ford: "The decision has already been made."

O'Neill: "You're never going to get reelected if you do that."

Ford: "Listen, I can't run the government the way it is and I think he has suffered."

David Burke, facing the flabbergasted and the skeptical at the recent awards meeting, reminded them that Ford voluntarily went before the

House Judiciary Committee and swore under oath that he did not make a deal with Nixon. Subsequently, Ford, of course, lost the election to Jimmy Carter.

Even so, the award committee's decision was not unanimous. One enthusiastic backer was Sen. Thad Cochran, a Republican from Mississippi. He began by thinking Ford didn't stand a chance, and was pleased when things started going Ford's

way. Cochran told the committee that he thought that honoring Ford would be a wise decision, and would give a bipartisan cast to this particular Kennedy activity.

The Kennedy Library received some calls from hard-core Democrats who said that the committee's judges were registering retroactive approval of Nixon. Spokesman Tom McNaught assured them that the prize was for Ford, not Nixon.

At Rancho Mirage, Ford's California retirement home, the former president is overjoyed. It wasn't just vindication. That already began some years ago, with a steady stream of second thoughts, many from Democrats who had come to see the wisdom of the pardon.

McCullough hopes the Profile prize will help Americans take a second look at Ford's presidency—to put aside the image of a hack who made a deal with the devil—and remember his decency, his excellent White House staff, his support of both the Panama Canal Treaty and the Helsinki accords.

The Lifetime Award for a Profile in Courage was voted unanimously to Democratic Rep. John Lewis of Georgia. There was not a syllable of dissent.



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Cynical or courageous? President Ford pardons his predecessor in September 1974.