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Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

... With an 'Expected' Pardon

Hours before resigning the presidency in the face of hard obstruction-of-justice evidence against him, Richard Nixon was convinced that his successor, President Ford, would issue him a full and complete pardon.

But outgoing President Nixon never received assurances from Gerald Ford himself that a pardon could be counted on.

Indeed, even though President Ford secretly informed intimates that a presidential pardon for Nixon—eventually—was an absolute certainty, he did not undertake direct negotiations with Nixon on the pardon question.

The bridge between Nixon and Mr. Ford was Nixon's White House chief of staff, Gen. Alexander Haig, and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the senior member of the Cabinet and Nixon's closest collaborator outside the White House itself during Nixon's 5½ years in office.

In addition, one key Republican member of the House who supported impeachment against Nixon was authorized to inform Nixon just before his resignation that powerful House Democrats were totally opposed to his criminal prosecution. That strengthened Nixon's confidence about a pardon.

Against that background, Mr. Ford inexplicably succumbed to pressure last week from Nixon intimates and agents and secretly decided, without consulting a single politician, to pardon Nixon months before anyone expected it—except possibly Nixon himself.

It was Haig and Kissinger who carried on their shoulders the awful burden of convincing Nixon he must resign. Although neither one committed incoming President Ford to a Nixon pardon, Nixon left the White House convinced that President Ford was, indeed, committed.

"Nixon had one thought and only one on his mind during those last days and that was his pardon," one highly qualified Ford insider told us. "If he hadn't believed he had the pardon in his pocket he might have put the country through the torture of full impeachment proceedings."

It was precisely the prospect of that calamity which propelled Haig, Kissinger and every other major figure in the transition drama five weeks ago to get Nixon out of the White House. If the prospect of a full pardon was held out to Nixon in exaggerated form, that was the reason. All else gave way to the single objective—get Nixon out.

Nixon had been judged mentally



By Jeff MacNelly

"Although neither Kissinger nor Haig committed Ford to a pardon, Nixon left the White House convinced Ford was committed."

aberrant for fully two years by observant officials who had worked with him closely and known him well. Their judgment was ruthless—but, in the circumstances, inevitable. Nixon must be removed from the presidency to safeguard the nation.

With Nixon back in San Clemente, convinced his pardon was only a matter of time, and with Mr. Ford having revealed to close aides his hard intention to grant the pardon—presumably months in the future—the stage was set for the course of events that led to last Sunday's shocking decision.

Thus, President Ford several times wondered out loud why he saw no pictures of Nixon walking the beach at San Clemente—or riding the freeways, as he used to do. Heightening this presidential concern about Nixon were alarming reports flowing into the Oval Office—reinforced by Haig and Kissinger—that the former President was on the edge of a mental breakdown. At one point, Kissinger expressed a private fear that Nixon's life might be in danger by his own hand.

Adding to the pressure on Mr. Ford was a crescendo of warnings from Casa Pacifica that the allegedly promised pardon must be delivered soon or Nixon's health might be fatally undermined. So, acting with uncharacteristic

and politically damaging stealth, Mr. Ford made his decision to pardon.

In retrospect, some Ford intimates now deeply regret that the President did not embark on a major campaign in Congress for a resolution looking toward pardon the minute he took office. They feel that if Mr. Ford had spelled out immediately and publicly his own intention to issue a complete pardon, and used his full power to lobby a sense-of-Congress pardon resolution, he could have had it.

At least two powerful Democrats had given private assurances to the Ford White House that such a resolution was quite feasible.

Even without such a resolution, one leading House Democrat said that if Mr. Ford had given advance notice to allies in Congress, a powerful backfire could have been built, partially offsetting the devastating political reaction of last Sunday's shocker.

As for the true mental state of the former President, some Ford advisers doubt that he is any worse off than he has been the past two years. If so, those who propelled President Ford into his sudden decision—and his stunning political decline—made a delicate and complex political problem infinitely worse.