

Post 7-13-74

The Unfinished Business (Cont.)

AS A PRACTICAL MATTER there is nothing to be done about President Ford's premature pardon of Richard Nixon for offenses that were not even specified. Mr. Ford's action is not revokable, and the damage to current judicial proceedings and to public confidence in our institutions simply must be endured. Politically, far from terminating the Watergate anguish, as he had hoped to do, Mr. Ford appears to have revived and prolonged it. You could argue that the President's error proceeded from a misplaced belief in one of his own rhetorical flourishes: Watergate was neither a "nightmare" nor a "bad dream" from which the nation could simply be awakened by a President determined to restore its tranquility. Watergate happened. It was a reality, and all along the problem was finding the proper public instrument to deal with that reality. The most disturbing aspect of Mr. Ford's precipitous action is that despite the best efforts of Richard Nixon and his associates for more than two years, the Watergate squalors had finally been removed from the jurisdiction of reporters and politicians and consigned—as they should have been all along—to the orderly, unobstructed processes of criminal justice. To a very considerable extent, Mr. Ford has put new obstacles in the way of these processes and revived the very "prolonged and divisive debate" which he intended to bring to an end.

Mr. Ford has had his Bay of Pigs, you could say, and one can even be generous about it if that is what this was: an early and monumental blunder, born of miscalculation, ingenuousness, and a considerable degree of self-indulgent and unpresidential impulsiveness on the part of a new and untested President. We won't be sure about this for some time, and the cost to the Ford presidency is going to be high in any case—despite the gratifying evidence of a return to the rule of law in his prudent second thoughts about a general amnesty for all of the Watergate participants. But even the high cost of the presidential pardon can be partially redeemed, in our view, if Mr. Ford derives one inescapable lesson from his recent misadventure. It is that it is time for him to become wholly his own man. By that we don't mean to endorse the isolation in which he apparently took his decision to pardon Mr. Nixon. Rather, we mean that he should be moving quickly and forcefully to remove the Nixon men and the Nixon memories—in short, the Nixon influence—from the White House.

If Mr. Ford is to be able to govern he cannot indulge the misconceptions and assumptions concerning public office that got his predecessor in so much trouble. Public office is a public trust. It is not a privilege to which some persons are specially entitled. Government service is not something you seek instead of getting a job. It is not a reward and still less is it a means of saving people's faces or reputations. It is not a device to spare people the harsh and ordinary realities of non-governmental

life. Sooner or later people who have been to the mountain top are going to have to stand in line at a check-out counter, or take a bus, or drive themselves to work.

In recommending that the Nixon aides not only be removed from the White House but also retired to private life rather than promoted to new positions in government, we are not advocating punishment or penalties for mere association with the former President. It simply seems to us that while these people deserve no special stigma they also most assuredly deserve no special rewards. For it is indisputable that, out of whatever collection of better and worse motives and whatever stubborn disinclination to question the cause they served, the more conspicuous holdovers currently in Mr. Ford's White House entourage contributed in some substantial measure to bringing the nation as a whole and the presidency itself to the sorry state in which Mr. Nixon left them. And it is also indisputable that many remain at least as determined to protect the interests of Mr. Nixon as those of the new President. There is obviously also some self-interest here: by salvaging what is left of Mr. Nixon's reputation they not incidentally serve to protect their own.

We would not deny that Gen. Alexander Haig, to take just one important example, rendered a service under cruel and precarious circumstances in helping to effect Mr. Nixon's resignation when the Nixon presidency could not be saved. One could even say that this fully redeemed the long service he put in as an active and loyal participant, whether witting or not, in the deception and cover-up that characterized Richard Nixon's last year in office. But we fail to see why this should mean that the general, who was thoroughly politicized in the process and who obviously chose to ignore the evidence lying all about him of what was going on, should automatically be considered a candidate for a high military position for which there must be abler candidates who have worked their way up to the top rank in a conventional military way. Why should General Haig receive such a reward any more than Mr. Nixon's verbal hatchet-man, Patrick Buchanan, should have been considered (apparently at General Haig's suggestion) as a candidate for an important ambassadorship? Nothing could be more demoralizing at this point—not just to professional military men or diplomats who would be thus displaced, but also to the public at large—than the spectacle of a mutual protection society among the powerful, of spent men being packed off to comfortable government jobs because anything less would seem to burden them unfairly for their service in Mr. Nixon's cause. If these men lack the grace to depart, they should be sent away—not, we repeat, in disgrace but simply in recognition that Mr. Ford is entitled, if not indeed mandated by circumstances, to begin anew and that their day in government is done.