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The Pardon and the Tapes

POX 9/20/74

There is an important difference between journalism's single-mindedness in the last days of Watergate and its current preoccupation with President Ford's pardon of his predecessor.

The Watergate coverage had the twin objectives of discovery and remedy. The newsmen covering that mass of scandal thought it important to get to the bottom of what had gone wrong, in large measure because that was the best way to remedy what had gone wrong.

With Watergate, there was something to be done.

The Nixon pardon, on the other hand, is very much a matter of split milk.

That is not to say that those of us who were outraged at the injustice, the untimeliness and the thoughtlessness of the pardon should have been reticent about expressing that outrage.

But there does come a time when outrage must either be channeled into some useful direction or abandoned as counterproductive.

The tough reporting, the detective work, the developing of sources and the relentless questioning of the former President himself may have seemed monomaniacal at times. But the upshot was the initiation of a process — impeachment/resignation — by which the full truth could be learned. Underlying the press' Watergate effort was the assumption that at some

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time (and everybody would know when) the effort would have paid off.

But there can be no pay-off for the Nixon pardon. The thing may be unfortunate, but it is irrevocable. One wonders what outraged reporters want Mr. Ford to do now: Say he shouldn't have done it? Apologize for bad judgment? Admit to a deal? Beg forgiveness?

No, there is nothing he can do about it or even reasonably say about it. And to keep harping on it is a waste.

Worse than a waste: It's counterproductive. For the preoccupation with what cannot be remedied detracts attention from what can be.

I don't necessarily mean that everyone who was on the Watergate beat should now turn his attention to the economy or housing or nuclear power plants. I mean that even those journalists who feel that the full Watergate story needs to be told are doing less to tell it by focusing on the pardon than they might by focusing on some other things.

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For instance, during the President's Monday night press conference, he was asked a dozen questions concerning the pardon, about which nothing can be done, and only a question and a half about his agreement to give custody of the White House tapes to Richard Nixon, about which a good deal can be done.

If the news media laid half as much stress on the preservation for the public good of the tapes and other documents as it has on the irrevocable pardon, it might generate enough public pressure to force Mr. Ford to alter the custody arrangement.

As he said in this week's news conference, the tapes and documents are still in the government's possession. Presumably they will stay there at least until details are worked out as to how to make them available for prosecutions and, particularly, what should happen to them in the event the former President should die before his former subordinates have been tried.

Who would get the key to the vault in such an event—Gerald Ford? Julie Eisenhower? Leon Jaworski?

And who should get it? The point I'm making is that the custody arrangement, unlike the pardon, is open to amendment, subject to meaningful debate.

The press could help to air that debate if it could be brought to shift its attention away from the pardon. Those tapes and documents, after all, are probably our one best chance of learning the truth about Watergate.

I would like as much as anyone to know the particulars of how the pardon came to be arranged, whether it involved a deal for the presidency or was merely Jerry Ford doing what he could for an old friend. But it does strike me as fairly obvious that you don't find out about a deal by asking the dealer.

Maybe the pardon pedants are merely expressing their outrage and using their questions not to elicit information but to punish Mr. Ford for not living up to the billing they gave him—as though any human being could.

Well, I'll be glad when they get back to providing information, which is their proper role, and stop trying to punish, which isn't.

If the information leads to punishment, as almost happened in the case of Richard Nixon, then fine.