

The Washington merry-go-round

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With LES WHITTEN

WASHINGTON — Although the pardoning of Richard Nixon produced a political backlash, President Ford not only would do it again but he may also exonerate other Watergate figures by granting them presidential appointments.

He has mentioned to aides that ex-Atty. Gen. Richard Kleindienst, ex-White House aide Harry Dent and ex-Rep. Wendell Wyatt, R.-Ore., were caught in technical violations. All three pleaded guilty to minor Watergate-related crimes.

The President believes they are honorable men who have paid for their mistakes. He would like to give them back their good names by appointing them again to positions of public trust. He has in mind some honorary but prestigious spot for them, possibly on a presidential board or commission.

By bringing these Watergate figures back into government, the President might revive the controversy over the Nixon pardon. But there is a streak of Harry Truman in Ford. Just as Truman was stubbornly loyal to his friends, President Ford isn't likely to let political considerations deter him.

He still thinks it was right to pardon Nixon and spare the former President from being dragged through the courts. Ford is equally persuaded that some of the Watergate committees deserve public rehabilitation.

FOOD STAMP SCANDAL: Close to three million Americans, who aren't entitled to food stamps, are using them to buy food below cost — if an unreleased Agriculture Department study is correct.

The food stamp program helps feed 17 million Americans at a cost to the taxpayers of \$4.4 billion.

A survey of 30,000 households revealed that more than 17 per cent of the recipients were ineligible. The sampling is supposed to be an accurate index of food stamp abuses across the nation.

Supporters of the food stamp program, however, have told us they believe the study is slanted to discredit the program. It's no secret that the Agriculture Department would like to get out of the food stamp business and let the states handle the problems of feeding the hungry.

In four states, the study found more than 30 per cent of the food stamp recipients were ineligible. Illinois had the worst record, with a startling 51 per cent ineligible. Massachusetts was close

behind, with 50 per cent. Georgia was next, with 31 per cent; then Montana, with 30 per cent.

Supporters of the program claim the ineligibility figures have been made to look worse than they are, because people who are entitled to food stamps are counted as ineligible if they get tangled in government red tape. If they sign their nickname rather than their formal name, or if they forget to fill in a blank on the application form, they can later be declared ineligible.

BURN BEFORE READING: The venerable Morris Ernst, an adviser to presidents for nearly half a century, fired off a letter to Richard Nixon at San Clemente the other day.

"Dick," wrote Ernst, "I see in The New York Times that there is an attempt to get from you your personal mail. You may recall that for some years I had put on the top of my letters, 'Burn Before Reading.'"

"I am quite sure that I would have written differently if I would have thought that my random letters would have become public. Please return all my letters."

Ernst told us that he often labels his letters "Burn Before Reading" as a jocular way of impressing upon the recipients that the letters are intended for their eyes only.

"Secrecy is important so that people can change their minds," said Ernst.

SECRET CONTRIBUTIONS: For weeks, we have been pressing Ashland Oil for the names of the politicians who shared in the \$1.1 million in under-the-table contributions the company has been spreading around.

The Securities and Exchange Commission has now compelled the corporation to identify the recipients of the illegal campaign contributions. The list included Democrats and Republicans alike, ranging from former President Richard Nixon to Sen. Hubert Humphrey, D.-Minn.

We have also learned that Ashland money sometimes was funneled to Capitol Hill through two corporate vice presidents, Eugene Erickson and George Hardin Jr. Both contributed to congressional campaigns out of their personal funds, then the money was reimbursed by the company. Hardin got back one \$2,500 contribution in cash from another Ashland vice president, Clyde Webb.

Footnote: All the politicians listed by Ashland insisted they had no idea the contributions were illegal. A spokesman for Ashland promised humorously that future contributions would be limited to the United Fund and the Girl Scouts.

MOTORBOAT POLLUTION: A controversial, four-year study has cleared the outboard motor industry of water pollution charges. But the federal project officer in charge of the study has now confessed that he visited the test site only about "once a year."

The \$300,000 study was criticized from the outset because the Environmental Protection Administration allowed the boating industry to join in financing it. Leon McCarthy, the project officer, said the discharges from outboard engines were monitored by contractors hired by the industry and approved by the EPA.

Now the industry is using their findings to block state pollution measures against the hundreds of thousands of old outboards which gush gunk into rivers and lakes. The newer models have antipollution devices.