

Helen Douglas' Message:

By Ruthe Stein

There are all sorts of things Helen Gahagan Douglas would rather talk about than Richard Nixon, who defeated her in a bitter charge-filled Senate race in 1950 that many people now view as a precursor of Watergate.

She would rather talk about the grass roots organizations voters are involving themselves in these days "of which your Proposition 15 (the nuclear safeguard initiative) is a prime example."

Or about the presidential candidates: "Well, I like Church very much, and I like Udall," said Mrs. Douglas, a life-long Democrat and three-term Congresswoman during the '40s. "I'm listening to Carter. I'm not as frightened of him as some people." But whoever is elected in November, "We need excellence. The problems are so difficult today. We need new ideas and new approaches."

Or about her husband of 44 years, actor Melvyn Douglas, who has just returned from Europe where he made two movies, or about their three children, an artist, a psychotherapist and a teacher, and six grandchildren.



Helen Gahagan Douglas today at 75 (left) and as a Congresswoman in 1950 (right) has no sense of vindication over former President Nixon

But inevitably the conversation returns to the 1950 Senate race, during which Nixon, objecting to her liberal voting record, said Douglas was "pink right down to her underwear"; and political advertisements for Nixon proclaimed that "The real import of the contest between Mr. Nixon and Helen Gahagan Douglas is whether America shall continue to tolerate Communist conspiracies within her own borders and government." (Nixon

later denied that he had ever called Douglas a Communist, which of course he personally hadn't in so many words.)

But despite the smear tactics used against her in that campaign, Douglas feels no sense of vindication over the hard times Nixon has fallen upon.

"No, I've never felt any need to be vindicated. I thought it was a great tragedy for this country what

Don't Dwell on the Past



we've had to go through over the last few years," she said, referring to Watergate and Nixon's subsequent resignation under fire.

"I would have much preferred if it had never happened. It would have been much better if he had turned out to be different from the way he is."

Now 75, Mrs. Douglas is a handsome woman with white hair and clear blue eyes and a presence

that recalls her early years in the theater. She knows when to pause to get the most mileage out of her lines. "I never felt that I left the stage," she says.

When she talks on college campuses, as she did last night at the College of Marin, it is not about Richard Nixon. The woman who proudly said during the 1950 campaign, "We didn't fight it the way he fought it — ever," prefers to speak on "a broader scope."

(She also was honored by the National Women's Political Caucus in Marin at a reception yesterday.)

Her message is that we should not dwell on the past. It is time — "Oh, God, yes, is it ever" — to forget Nixon and "move on to more important things."

She said she has no regrets about her decision not to run for public office again. "Well, immediately after the (1950) election, I felt my children needed me. We had been overseas and separated from them, and I felt they should have the opportunity to meet me other than by appointment. I don't know how to work unless it's full time."

She was approached to run for Congress again in 1958 but turned it down because "there were very

good people running, and I was very busy."

Instead she chose to involve herself in international concerns. In 1964 she was co-chairman of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She also attended the Soviet-American Women's Conference and reported on it directly to President Johnson. She has stumped for local candidates in Vermont, where she and her husband live.

Right now she is writing her autobiography and working with the University of Pittsburgh on a series of books covering the executive hearings of the Foreign Affairs Committee, of which she was a member when she was in Congress. She is also preparing an oral history for the UC-Berkeley library.

All those women following in her footsteps and running for political office are "better prepared" than the women of her generation, she believes.

However, Douglas is worried that many of the issues they are involved with are "so personal — they don't have wide appeal.

"The issues we should all be concerned with are those that are of concern to both males and females."