

The Country He Leaves Behind...

Now that it is over, now that the long ordeal has ended for the man and the nation, now that the angry emotions have been vented into the vacuum created by his departure, what one can feel is compassion for Richard Nixon and renewed confidence in the country he left behind.

He wanted so much to be President. The office tantalized and terrified him for 13 years before it came into his possession. And like any passion too long nutured before it was fulfilled, it turned into something monstrous, something he could not control.

Had Dwight Eisenhower's heart not been so strong when that first severe coronary attack came in 1955; had Richard Nixon, then 42, unembittered and awed by his fortune, become President accidentally, he might have made something quite different of it, for those were simpler times and his was a less convoluted character.

His mentors then were men like Bryce Harlow, Bill Rogers and Jim Mitchell, the genial, decent Secretary of Labor. The cynical, secretive men like John Mitchell had not then even entered Nixon's life. His chief of staff was Bob Finch, not Bob Haldeman.

But that was not to be, and in the 13 years before the presidency was his, he suffered a series of humiliations that would have embittered and perhaps destroyed most men: the abortive "dump Nixon" drive of 1956, undertaken with Eisenhower's tacit blessing; his President's tactless "give me a week and I'll think of one" remark about Nixon's contributions to the Eisenhower administration record; the dictated surrender to Nelson Rockefeller at the "Fifth Avenue Summit"; the first debate; the heartbreakingly nar-

row and clouded loss to John Kennedy; the defeat in the California governorship race in 1962; the "last press conference," and its permanently embittering effects on his relations with the press; the fiasco of his self-promoted stop-Goldwater effort at the 1964 Governor's Conference.

All this and much more—the thousands of petty, personal slights that came to him as he wandered from Washington to California to New York and around the world, seeking another chance—he carried with him when he finally came to the Oval Office.

What we now understand is that someone who craves presidential power as much as Richard Nixon did may not be trusted with its possession; but most of us did not know it then, in 1968, and he may not have known it either. Those of us in the press who had witnessed the long saga were admiring of the personal tenacity and technique which marked his climb back from political ruin to the presidency. Only later, when it was too late, did most of us come to question whether the rigid self-discipline and the secretiveness that surrounded it were healthy in a President.

There is no blinking or condoning the abuse of power that took place in his presidency, or, what is almost worse, his cynical misuse of people and degradation of institutions. But in the end, Richard Nixon himself came to understand that he had irreparably lost the confidence of the people who had elected him and he relinquished what he had paid such a price to obtain.

Like Lyndon Johnson before him, he came—through pain—to accept that the presidency belongs to the people, not to any individual, and that when

a President cannot lead, he must stand aside.

Because the American people, in their mute strength, were able to bring this message home twice in six years to even their most powerful and insulated elected representative, American democracy has not only survived this ordeal but been vindicated.

The constitutional process did not fail us, and new leadership will soon be lawfully installed. The next President is one of us—with the simplicity and openness and honesty we like to think we possess as a people, and also with the limitations of wisdom and foresight which our history shows to be typically American.

He is, as he reminded us not so long ago, a Ford, not a Lincoln, but he is, like Lincoln, aware of the distinction between adversaries and enemies, and that is no small thing.

His presidency is as unexpected to him as it is to us, and, for that very reason, he may remember that it is circumstance and accident, not special virtue or wisdom, that has given that power, which belongs to the people, temporarily into his hands.

We have—Gerald Ford right along with the rest of us—been through a dreadful passage in the decade since John Kennedy was murdered, and none of us has been left unscarred.

But the people have not wavered, or buckled, or fled the responsibilities of freedom, or abandoned their faith in the destiny of this democracy. On the contrary, they have, under agonizing circumstances, proved themselves worthy of their heritage. And the pain they have suffered—Richard Nixon, not least—may be worth the price, if it reinforces the confidence vindicated in the cardinal principle of this Republic: Trust the people.