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Prolonging the National Nightmare . . .

The sad thing about President Ford's mishandling of the Nixon pardon is that he has blown a big opportunity to end what he called the long, national nightmare. We are now in for a new orgy of moralistic recrimination and corrosive suspicion.

But the goal of exorcising the Watergate demon remains. Only now it will be a slower process, requiring much greater care and a thorough purge of all those associated with Watergate who remain in posts of high authority.

The long national nightmare finds its basic expression in the spirit of hostility to all authority which has dominated public discussion for nearly a decade. The active agents of this hostility are drawn from the cohort which emerged from the colleges and universities in the decade of the '60s.

Intellectually, the emphasis during that time was on idealism. The compromises made in the immediate post-war years were held up to the light and found to be full of blemish.

Suburban living was seen to have been achieved at the cost of subordinating racial justice. Economic growth was discovered to be the plundering of the planet. It came to be understood that national security had a dark side—represented by military force and secret intelligence services.

Normally, the ideals connected with these discoveries would have been tempered by life in the real world. But the '60s were a period of unprecedented boom. There was a dizzy demand for trained professionals. So no one of even moderate brainpower had to worry about making a living.

Moreover, two searing public events seemed to verify the power of uncompromising idealism. One was the Vietnam war. Many of those who directed the war at the very top were shown to be unfaithful to the public trust. Those who tried to calibrate positions, who sought to play it safe, to bend the logic of ideas to political interest were discredited by events.

Then there was Watergate. In a worse, and far more deliberate, way, the public trust was again violated by the highest official. There was systematic misrepresentation. Those who tried to find a middle road were again routed. As the President's supporters in the Congress discovered during the impeachment hearings, there was no room for moderation. There was no "other side."

The national temper which has emerged from this experience is understandably short on sweetness and light and tolerance and easy-going good nature. It is understandably high in indignation, outrage and suspicion. Among many educated persons under 40, at least, there is an automatic disposition to doubt anybody in authority. In this atmosphere self-government and a great many of the other activities central to American life become extremely difficult.

President Ford's great task is to wind down these acrid feelings, to foster trust and exorcise the demons of suspicion. His early emphasis on straight talk and some of his first appointments seemed promising.

But the Nixon pardon—especially

the way it was sprung and its unconditional terms—inevitably revived the worst suspicions of the bad old days. Even for those of us who share President Ford's belief that it would be wrong to put Mr. Nixon on trial, it is hard not to suspect that there was some kind of a deal between the former President and the man now in the White House. And it only makes matters worse for the President and his lawyers and spokesmen to talk about other pardons.

For the time being we will all have to endure a new bout of the feel-don't-think attitude to public affairs which Vietnam and Watergate have licensed. But though the first and best chance has been muffed, the objective of a return to normal trust remains valid. As President, moreover, Mr. Ford more than anybody can lead the way.

But now the process is bound to be long and slow. Mr. Ford will need to demonstrate in an unmistakable way that he is taking his distances from those who led the country down the road to disgrace and division. That means, among other things, getting rid once and for all of the remaining Nixonites in the White House.

Mr. Ford will also need to be a good deal more thoughtful than he has been to date. He will need to resist quickie statements and sleazy deals about amnesty. Above all, he will need to bring into his confidence persons with a far wider background than the stand-pat politicians who make up, and have made up, the Republican Party in the Congress.