

Joseph Alsop WXPPost

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Behind the Nixon Pardon

Amid the rumors and counter-rumors, denials and counter-denials, one thing seems more and more probable. Eventually, the record will show that when President Ford so abruptly pardoned his predecessor, President Nixon was suffering from a near-breakdown.

As anyone ought to perceive, it would have been a major national nightmare if the former President had slipped over the edge into a full scale nervous breakdown. It is now known that President Ford had always intended to grant a pardon to President Nixon in the end. But it also seems probable that fear of President Nixon soon slipping over the edge was what led President Ford into clumsily abrupt action last Sunday.

One can only say that this seems "probable" because of the perfect fog of uncertainty that still hangs over the White House. The fog is only being broken, as these words are written at any rate, by lurid flashes of self-serving untruth from certain among the factions that now divide the White House staff. So one cannot be sure who really knew what in the White House itself.

On the central question, however, it is now possible to be much more positive. Two weeks ago and more, President Nixon's telephone calls from San Clemente had convinced key senators that their caller was frighteningly close to the most dangerous sort of breakdown.

There were a good many of these

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calls to senators and representatives; their pattern was far from uniform. Most commonly, President Nixon showed no disturbing loss of self control. For example, he was completely "master of himself" with Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania; but he also revealed the main theme of his concern by saying to Sen. Scott that he "hoped they wouldn't harass the old man"—"the old man" being himself.

Characteristically, however, President Nixon has never really let himself go except with the extremely narrow group he more or less trusts. On Capitol Hill, the sole members of this narrow group are a few of the more rightwing Republicans and Southern Democrats. In his calls to more than one of these men, the former President became totally "distraight," even talking in a manner that suggested he might try to do away with himself.

The most important recipient of this type of call from San Clemente appears to have been the wise and kindly chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, James Eastland of Mississippi.

Sen. Eastland, when asked about the matter, now replies with "no comment"; and it is, of course, possible that one of the senator's colleagues warned him the former President was worryingly close to breakdown. At any rate, Sen. Eastland was convinced, and he took preliminary action.

The action taken was to explore the problem with members of the "Bipartisan Committee of Eight." This was the group, informally named when Leon Jaworski was confirmed as Special Prosecutor, to hold a general watching brief and especially to insure the Special Prosecutor's freedom from White House pressures.

The members of the committee are the Republican and Democratic senior members of the House and Senate Judiciary Committees and the leaders of both parties in the House and Senate. There was no meeting of the committee nor was there full scale consultation. But all four Republicans were alerted, and the facts were also laid before Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield of Montana.

Sen. Mansfield reserved judgment

for the time being. Meanwhile Sen. Eastland, Sen. Scott, House Minority Leader John Rhodes of Arizona, and the two other Republican members of the committee, were all in general agreement on the best course to take. If they could secure a "consensus"—meaning six votes out of eight—they were ready to warn Special Prosecutor Jaworski of the seemingly grave state of President Nixon's health and to urge the unwisdom of any prosecution.

It is difficult to believe that Sen. Mansfield would not have provided the sixth vote needed for "consensus," if he too had become convinced that the former President was near to full scale nervous collapse and might even seek to end his life. And if the others were firmly convinced of the danger—as they were—it is easy to imagine Sen. Mansfield becoming convinced, too.

But it is useless to speculate, at this late date, upon what might have been. The main point is simple. If President Nixon has been anywhere near real nervous collapse—and sensible, decent men are firmly persuaded the danger has been uncomfortably near—a lot of people are currently behaving in a way that recalls the Empress Wu.

The Empress Wu was a great ruler of China's Tang Dynasty who was unkind to the vanquished. One beaten rival's hands and feet were cut off and she was thrown into a pig-sty, where the Empress Wu used to go and watch her being fed. It does not make a pretty picture.