

By William V. Shannon

WASHINGTON, Sept. 12—Why did he do it?

The public effects of President Ford's pardon of Mr. Nixon are clearly bad. But speculation as to his private motives continues here unabated.

Unless the President gives a clear statement of the reasons for his decision, no definitive explanation is possible. But it is reasonable to assume that like most of us when we make a major decision, President Ford had a mixture of motives.

As a politician, he may have calculated that the sooner he cleared up his Nixon problem the better.

As a private person, he is kindly and compassionate, Richard Nixon has been his political colleague and friend for 25 years, not a close personal friend—Mr. Nixon has only two or three intimates—but sufficiently close to make him feel a sense of obligation and concern.

Mr. Nixon, sure to go down in American history as one of the really great charlatans, skillfully played upon President Ford's sympathies. He floated rumors that his health was rapidly deteriorating. Through Nixon loyalists still in the Cabinet and on the White House staff, he planted the fear in the President's mind that he—Mr. Nixon—might commit suicide if the pardon did not arrive soon.

Sudden bad health is, of course, the oldest dodge of the criminal defendant. One is reminded of Albert B. Fall, one of the chief figures in the Teapot Dome scandal, arriving for his trial in a wheelchair, clutching a cane, and wearing a shirtcollar three sizes too big. Fall tottered to his courtroom chair and promptly pretended to faint. Mr. Fall's counsel pleaded with the

jury to send this dying man "back to the sunshine of New Mexico." The judge, with an asperity worthy of Judge John Sirica, told the jury: "Neither you nor I have anything to do with sunshine. You are here to decide this case on the evidence and nothing else."

Convicted for bribe-taking and sentenced to prison for a year, Fall recovered his health with remarkable speed and lived for another dozen years, dying at the ripe age of 83. I predict that Mr. Nixon, phlebitis and melancholia notwithstanding, will do the same. Clearly he was not too distraught last week to beat President Ford's emissary to his knees and get the pardon totally on his own terms. Would that we all protected our interests so well when we are distraught.

Unburdened by a conscience and unconcerned about anyone but himself, Mr. Nixon is invulnerable to remorse or shame. His iron ego protects his body against psychosomatic distress. Pardoned, he now will go serenely on for decades embroidering the truth and fantasizing his memoirs. In another year or two, he will be issuing statements and giving birthday interviews.

As Representative John Anderson, Illinois Republican, told a reporter in what was truly the quote of the year: "Why were we ever stupid enough to think this awful man would fade away like one of MacArthur's old soldiers? He was always going to be dragged, kicking and screaming, into oblivion."

Granted that President Ford was suckered a bit by the Clifford Irving of American politics and granted that on grounds of personal sympathy and political loyalty a pardon was always in the cards, the question still has to be asked why, as a politician, he did not proceed more carefully with re-

gard to the terms and the timing?

To arrive at an answer to this political question, President Ford's previous career has to be borne in mind. As House minority leader, he never disagreed with Mr. Nixon on the substance of legislation, on tactics, on appointments. The closest thing to a dissent that his record contains is a single vote against a mass transit bill.

During his nine months as Vice President, when he should have been quietly preparing himself to deal with inflation and other serious problems that he knew would soon be his responsibility, Mr. Ford was barnstorming the country making forgettable speeches and confusing his news conferences with his zigzag defense of Mr. Nixon.

"The weight of the evidence does not justify the President's impeachment," he said as the House Judiciary Committee prepared to vote—as if he had actually read the thousands of pages of evidence.

If Mr. Ford had been a member of the Judiciary Committee, there is little doubt that he would have been ranged with Representatives Wiggins, Dennis and Sandman, doggedly defending his party chief despite the evidence and the promptings of common sense.

In short, Mr. Ford became the nation's leader because he was a very good follower. When Mr. Nixon made him Vice President, there was no written warranty guaranteeing his political imagination or sensitivity. On the contrary, in his first month in the Presidential cockpit he has already displayed more of those qualities than most observers thought he possessed. But as the bumpy ride of the past week should have told you, our new pilot is flying this plane by the seat of his pants. Keep your seat belt fastened.