

Second Sight on the Pardon

With great wheezing and grumping, the nation may at last be moving away from its assumption of Government by conspiracy. It is tough after six years. It is Jerry Ford's greatest challenge.

A few days ago he thumbed through a copy of a sermon given out in the Fountain Street Church, Grand Rapids, by Duncan Littlefair, a pastor who has been genially opposed to Ford's political theology for 30 years. It was a shaft of light in the pardon gloom that spread over Ford's enlightened beginning.

There was nothing dark or dishonorable about Ford's motives in pardoning Richard Nixon, the Reverend had said. "Forgive when you can. Mercy and forgiveness cannot be weighed, measured and balanced and counted—they must always be free, unearned and undeserved."

Jerry Ford felt a bit better.

If the first thought of the nation was to wonder about Ford's judgment, the second thought so painfully coming on is that he may be shown to have been more right than wrong. As Vice President, he was aware in Nixon's last frantic hours of all the pardon schemes proposed by Nixon's people. He stayed away from them. Almost his first impulse in office was to get Watergate behind us, and with Nixon in San Clemente he thought that the process had started. Then, on the afternoon of Aug. 28, he walked out of his first press conference in the East Room and he was bothered. There had been three questions on the pardon issue. The papers were filled with it. In the Oval Office that day, his instincts began to focus, and something told him that the issue was going to grow until something happened or he took action. His course was set. He asked for the pardon study from his counsel, Philip Buchen.

Ford's successful congressional career was based on the premise that there were right times "to give a little in order to get a little." In oversimplified terms, the pardon came down to a compromise, the kind he had negotiated as minority leader. The nation's problems needed attention, but they would not have it if everyone was preoccupied with the pardon and the tapes. The human consideration was also important. Ford had watched Nixon deteriorating for months.

When Alexander Haig, the chief of Nixon's staff, came to Ford's office Aug. 1 with word of the evidence against Nixon found on a new tape, Ford felt that Nixon's end was near. On Aug. 8, Ford was summoned to Nixon's office. Before Ford went in to see the President, he talked to Haig. Both men felt that Nixon was going to tell Ford of his plan to resign, but there still was uncertainty. Nixon continued to vacillate, Haig said. One minute he seemed ready to resign, the next he rallied and insisted that he would not. Ford walked in and sat down beside the President's desk. For a few seconds there was silence. Then Nixon looked up at Ford.

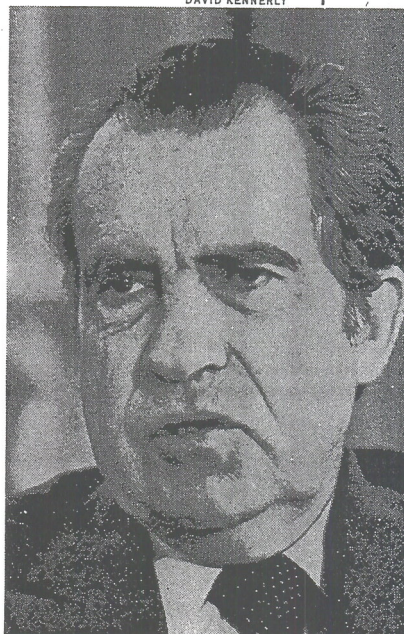
"I know you'll do a good job," Nixon said. The power had passed.

For the next hour, they talked about the job, about the nation, the world. Ford noted that Nixon was drawn. He just was not the strong person who had fought up and down this country for all those years going on in victory and defeat. Nixon could pull himself together and talk intelligently and realistically about the issues and events, but he was drawing on all his reserves.

What occurred to Ford in a way that even he has a hard time defining was the final realization of the horrible price that Nixon was paying for his guilt, which everybody, including Nixon, knew that he was carrying. The notion that Nixon was cynically slipping beyond punishment was just not true. Ford, sitting beside the desk of Nixon, perceived it in a dimension no one else could see or feel.

That sense stayed with him until the press conference, and it became part of his decision to pardon. On the playing field, Ford had never been vindictive. As a congressional leader, he had held magnificent grudges, then wiped them out after the issues had been resolved. The same logic compelled him in Nixon's pardon.

A fortnight ago Nixon phoned Ford. Nixon said that he was sorry for all the trouble the pardon had caused. Then he offered to send the pardon back if it would help. No, said Ford, he did not want that. He told the ex-President to stand firm. It would blow over. Ford told Nixon that he thought his decision was the right one. He still feels that way.



RICHARD NIXON

TIM B

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