

Ford Before Panel

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2-Hour Testimony on Nixon's Pardon Results in Some Pluses and Minuses

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 17—When Former President Richard M. Nixon first became mired in the Watergate charges early in 1973, some friendly Republican leaders told him that all a President needed to do to disarm a hostile Congress was to meet humbly with a Congressional committee and answer questions. Mr. Nixon could never bring himself to accept that advice. Mr. Ford did, and the result was as predicted: Members of a subcommittee — with the notable exception of Representative Elizabeth Holtzman, Democrat of Brooklyn—seemed so overwhelmed by the gesture of a President submitting to an open Congressional inquiry that much of the rancor caused by Mr. Ford's pardon of Mr. Nixon seemed to have evaporated, at least while Mr. Ford was in the room.

Yet as with most everything Mr. Ford does these days, the result seemed to many who followed the session to be a mixture of pluses and minuses. While his two-hour appearance on national television may well have helped in his effort to put the stigma of the Nixon pardon behind him, his explanations went little beyond his previous statements and thus did not directly address the questions that Representative Holtzman said had raised "very dark suspicions in the public's mind."

Responded to Queries

From the White House point of view, the pluses were substantial. During most of the Johnson and Nixon Administrations, Congress had fretted under an overpowering White House, so much so that the idea of a President's appearing before a House subcommittee to answer questions from junior Representatives was unthinkable.

Not only did Mr. Ford appear, with no semblance of Presidential condescension, but the questions he voluntarily responded to in his prepared statement were those posed by Representatives Bella S. Abzug of Manhattan and John Conyers Jr. of Michigan, both liberal Democrats whom the Nixon White House held in disdain.

Further, Mr. Ford came through on television as confident and in charge. There was no display of anger at Mrs. Holtzman's comments. Although he did not answer her questions, his assertions throughout that there was "no deal" with Mr. Nixon had a ring of conviction, according to members of Congress who have known Mr. Ford for years.

Also, Mr. Ford's assertion that his pardon of Mr. Nixon was primarily to "change the national focus" from Watergate to National and international problems struck many listeners as more valid today than it did immediately after the pardon, when the action aroused the country anew about the abuses of the White House.

Although the rumor has not died, it has now lessened to the extent that Mr. Ford is able to conduct the business of his offices without the daily preoccupation of Watergate. For example, questions on that subject no longer dominate the daily White House news briefings as they did for so many months. In any event, Mr. Ford and his assistants believe that the public indignation over the Nixon pardon is steadily fading.

On the minus side, Mr. Ford's failure to go much beyond his previous explanations did, in the opinion of some Judiciary Committee members, keep alive the "dark suspicions" raised by the pardon. Thus it is now considered likely that the subcommittee, rather than ending its inquiry, will call other witnesses to check out Mr. Ford's account.

Representative Holtzman made it clear that she did not

believe the "dark suspicions," as registered in mail from constituents, could be laid to rest in the two-hour hearing, and she used her time to fire a series of questions, one after the other, without pausing for answers.

Thus the hearing ended with Mrs. Holtzman's suspicious constituents apparently still unsatisfied with Mr. Ford's general explanations.

Also on the minus side, Mr. Ford, who has a generally good reputation for telling the truth, said he did not tell the truth on the weekend of Aug. 3, when he was making a speaking tour in the South.

Maintained Position

On Aug. 1, Alexander M. Haig Jr., then chief of staff at the White House, had informed Mr. Ford that the tapes the White House was preparing to turn over to Judge John J. Sirica under Supreme Court order contained "new and damaging evidence" that ran "completely counter to the position I had taken for months, in that I believed the President was not guilty of any impeachable offense."

Mr. Ford said he feared that if he changed his stated belief in Mr. Nixon's innocence or refused to answer questions on the matter, the press would conclude that "I now wanted to see the President resign."

"For that reason," he said, "I remained firm in my answers to press questions during that trip and repeated my belief in the President's innocence of an impeachable offense."

Talks in Mississippi

On Aug. 3, two days after his meeting with General Haig, Mr. Ford said, in answer to questions at a luncheon in Jackson, Miss., attended by 80 Republicans, that he believed President Nixon was not guilty of an impeachable offense.

It was not until he returned to Washington on Aug. 5, after Mr. Nixon had released the tapes showing that he had ordered a halt in the investigation of the Watergate burglary for political reasons, that Mr. Ford issued a statement in which he said he would thereafter have nothing further to say on the matter.

In effect, Mr. Ford said he had misled the public deliberately in the national interest, as many of former Presidents and officials have done and defended as proper. The admission, however, was not expected to enhance the rather high reputation for credibility that Mr. Ford brought to the Presidency.