

Royce Brier

On Mr. Ford and A Pardon 'Deal'

THE HISTORY OF VERACITY in the American Presidency has been reasonably clear and satisfactory to thoughtful people for 185 years.

We must of course exclude from the estimate credibility in purely political situations. That is, Presidents or candidates for the office have always been accused of deceptions or outright lying by advocates of an opposing party. But this has been accepted by the body politic as normal polemic, and charges have had a way of dissolving with time or a change of circumstance.

It would be difficult to discover a President bearing the stigma, excepting in political scrambles, until Richard Nixon reached his final months in office. Then he was compelled to release tapes of his conversations which belied his earlier statements of his Watergate activity. The disparity dumfounded many leaders of his own party, and ended his hope of serving out his term.



★ ★ ★

A GENERAL AIR of cynicism touching the Presidency swept across the nation, literally poisoning the national mind, leaving it sick and bewildered.

In this sorry moment there was a new President. Almost with his first words, Gerald Ford undertook consciously to divorce himself and his leadership from the immediate Presidential past. He earnestly and almost naively asked the people to give faith to his word.

But shortly he perpetrated what may have been a political error — without warning, possibly prematurely, he pardoned Mr. Nixon for all Watergate misdoing.

★ ★ ★

IT HAD A POTENT two-pronged effect: it angered large segments of the people who longed for Mr. Nixon's punishment by law, and it revived a dissolving cynicism, evoking charges Mr. Ford's clemency was pursuant to a "deal" between him and the ex-President.

Mr. Ford denied it, explaining he had granted clemency, not primarily for Mr. Nixon but for the national welfare. But the Ford statement text had noted a belief Mr. Nixon has "suffered" enough, and though the national welfare motive was superior, the deal charge would not down.

Facing this turmoil, Mr. Ford broke national precedent and last week appeared before the subcommittee on criminal justice of the House Judiciary Committee.

There, he repeated formally what he had been saying informally of the pardon. He said: "I want to assure . . . members of Congress and the American people there was no deal, period."

This placated some committee members, not all. Some wanted to call General Haig, former chief White House aide, with whom Mr. Ford had discussed a pardon.

There is no rational cause to call Haig, or pursue the matter further. If Mr. Ford testifies there was no deal, it is evidence beyond a reasonable doubt there was no deal. Our 185-year experience is that Presidents are truthful, and Mr. Ford gives every appearance of conforming to that pattern.

October 21, 1974