

Having Jerry Ford to Kick Around

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A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Monday night prime-time television gave us a new quiz show: Jerry Ford playing 20 Questions with the White House press corps, a group which seldom distinguishes itself for its acuity. Yet even this body of high-status/low-enterprise journalists ought to be able to discern the difference between a Jerry Ford and a Richard Nixon.

It was these same reporters who, but a month ago, fired a skeptical nation with their bad writing about what a good guy Jerry Ford is. That, apparently, went out the window when Ford, by pardoning Nixon, did something they disapproved of.

On the basis of that single act a number of reporters—not all, by any means—felt entitled to attack Ford's honesty and probity under the guise of questions.

How else can this inquiry be described? "Do you find any conflicts of interest in the decision to grant a sweeping pardon to your lifelong friend and your financial benefactor with no consultation for advice on judgment (sic) or legal fallout?" Is that a question or an insult?

Or what about this inquiry, flung at the good-natured unfortunate trying to overcome his handicaps in the White House: "Last month, when you assumed the presidency, you pledged openness and candor. Last week you decided on the ex-President's pardon in virtually secrecy. Despite all you've said tonight, there would still seem to be some confusion, some contradictions . . . are your watchwords (sic) of your administration still openness and candor?" How is Jerry Ford supposed to answer that? Is he supposed to say, "No, I've reversed my policy. I'm going to lie, sneak and govern by stealth"?

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savings banks, whose situation is deteriorating so seriously that even Milton Friedman is advocating government subsidies to save them.

No questions on any of that or the major collateral issue of housing, although you can safely assume that the millions watching might have a passing interest in these frivolous topics. Any reporter needing to vent his angry spirit could have done so legitimately by asking Ford why he left the labor section of the recent White House economic conference to dedicate the World Golf Hall of Fame. They might have asked him if that

These are not questions asked to elicit information. They are statements by self-righteous journalists, few of whom can even claim to have been early public opponents of Richard Nixon, but who now, because of the fall of the former President and the part the press played in it, accidentally enjoy a power and a prestige few of them have earned.

In fact, the behavior of some at the Ford press conference gives rise to the surmise that the questioners were giving free reign to an almost Nixonian demagoguery. It was as though they were cashing in on the public reaction to the Nixon pardon, as though they were grabbing their chance to cop some cheap votes.

That they were motivated by a concern for equal justice is improbable, given their failure to ask a single question about what Ford might have in mind for the FBI. The more so since on the very day of the conference a federal judge in St. Paul had dismissed the Wounded Knee Indians while charging the Bureau with "misconduct" for what amounted to manufacturing evidence and framing the defendants. Sarah McClendon was the only reporter to get into this general area when she asked about protecting the privacy of people's income tax returns.

Only one question was asked about the economy: "I wonder how you feel about whether we are heading for a depression." Ford replied no, we're not and that was that. No follow-up question, and this was the evening of the day the Treasury Department had hiked the minimum denomination of its notes to \$10,000. The effect of this is to deprive working people of the chance to get the high interest rates and investment security the rich people get. The reason for the decision is an attempt to save the savings and loan associations and

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symbolic act reflects his judgment of labor's bargaining power or the importance of the subject.

In a half-hour press conference there was time for only 20 questions, although a lot more hands were raised. Maybe Ford was unlucky with his picks, and had he called on other waving arms he wouldn't have had buckets of moral excreta dumped on his head. Let's hope so, but the impression left by the press conference is that it is easier to puff up and play the Conscience of America—and certainly more satisfying—than to do the homework needed to ask useful questions. Assum-

ing a posture of high-headed moral outrage demands little thought and less study.

It is a bad pose to strike near Jerry Ford. This man of limited talent, gifts and bleakly narrow understanding is an easy target when attacked as a President, but not as a man. He's wrong on nearly everything, but he's not a bum, and if the high flyers who cover him can't make that distinction, Ford will be justified in abolishing the press conference as an institution that has not only grown to be archaic, but an obnoxious intrusion on the television quiz shows were at least they give away money.