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Mr. Ford's Testimony: The Suspicions Remain

Anybody who previously had suspicions about a "deal" between President Ford and his predecessor has exactly the same suspicions now. There is no way last Thursday's namby-pamby session between the President and the House Judiciary subcommittee could have eased anyone's doubts.

Which isn't surprising. Considering the nature of the suspicions, there is no way they could be resolved short of Mr. Ford admitting (a) that he was involved in a treasonable conspiracy or (b) that his decision to pardon Richard Nixon was unforgivably stupid.

Rep. Elizabeth Holtzman (D-N.Y.), who provided almost the only life in that dull session, also showed why it was bound to be so frustrating.

I found myself nodding in agreement over nearly every one of her mostly rhetorical questions. She wanted to know "how you can explain having pardoned Richard Nixon without specifying any of the crimes for which he was pardoned, and how can you explain pardoning Richard Nixon without obtaining any acknowledgment of guilt from him?"

Those are infuriating omissions, to be sure, but it is hard to imagine any satisfactory answers. Nor did Rep. Holtzman seem to expect any. She hardly paused for breath, not to mention replies, as she hammered away:

"How do you explain the failure to consult the Attorney General of the United States with respect to the issuance of the pardon even though in

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your confirmation hearings you had indicated that the Attorney General's opinion would be critical in any decision to pardon the former President?"

"How can this extraordinary haste in which the pardon was decided on and the secrecy with which it was carried out be explained, and how can you explain the fact that the pardon of Richard Nixon was accompanied by an agreement with respect to the tapes which in essence, in the public mind, hampered the Special Prosecutor's access to these materials and was done, also in the public's mind, in disregard of the public's right to know the full story about Richard Nixon's misconduct?"

They were my questions, too, and yet not so much questions as statements of dark suspicion. And there was no way Mr. Ford could have supplied satisfactory answers without conceding that he was either a co-conspirator or a fool.

Try to make up satisfactory responses, and you'll see what I mean. "Gee, I guess I just forgot to ask him for a confession." Or "I asked for one but he

said no." Or "I didn't want to hurt his feelings; after all, he made me what I am today."

There was, for me, one startling moment of absolute intrigue. It came when Rep. Holtzman suggested that the reason the pardon and the tape arrangement had been made simultaneously was that President Ford wanted to protect himself.

"To alleviate this suspicion once and for all," she asked, "would you be willing to turn over to this subcommittee all tape recordings of conversations between yourself and Richard Nixon?"

What? There are recordings of conversations between then-President Nixon and then-Vice President Ford? Tapes in which there would have been hints of a deal, if indeed any deal were made? How could either of them have been so stupid as to make such recordings after all the trouble with the Nixon tapes...?

The reference, of course, was not to recordings of any such recent vintage but to some 80 or so conversations between the two men during the period of the Watergate cover-up but before it

became known that the Oval Office was bugged.

That was long before we knew the depth of the troubles that were later to drown Spiro Agnew, before Richard Nixon knew he would have to leave office in disgrace and, therefore, long before Gerald Ford knew he was about to become Vice President, much less President.

It is difficult, therefore, to imagine that the conversations in question could have involved a pardon-related deal.

That is not to say that release of the transcripts would not cause great embarrassment to Mr. Ford. It would probably not merely embarrass him but destroy his presidency as well.

Remember how embarrassing—and destructive—the White House tapes were to Richard Nixon, who knew they were being made. Now think of Gerald Ford, talking candidly to his long-time friend, President and fellow Republican bigwig and not knowing he was being taped.

Release of those tapes, on the vague ground of clearing the air of suspicions, would be an incredibly dumb thing to do.

And I wish he had said just that instead of playing games about the ownership of the tapes, the interests of the Special Prosecutor's office and the opinions of the Attorney General.

Better he should have given Rep. Holtzman his best incredulous look and said: "Are you kidding?"