

Some New Problems

The Price Paid by Ford

By R. W. Apple Jr.
New York Times

Washington

Only 24 hours after the event, it was evident that President Ford had already paid a substantial political price for his decision to grant an unconditional pardon to former President Richard M. Nixon.

The President's decision cost him the services of his press secretary, Jerald F. terHorst — a loss that meant more than the ordinary departure of a White House aide.

It meant more in a job where ineptitude has got the

last two presidents in trouble; second, a key to the reputation for open-

Ford has cultivated, and third, a symbol of the differences in style and attitude between the Nixon and Ford administrations.

Thus, terHorst's abrupt resignation presents Mr. Ford with not only the practical problem of finding someone who can do the job as well as he had but also the political problem of finding another "Mr. Candor."

By his action the President has also re-identified himself and, to some degree, his party with Mr. Nixon, just when Republicans across the country were emerging from the caves where they had taken shelter during the Watergate storms.

It was no accident that many of the same Republicans who broke with Mr. Nixon while he still occupied

the White House criticized the new President. Among them were many senators who face difficult campaigns for re-election this fall — Richard S. Schweiker of Pennsylvania, Marlow W. Cook of Kentucky and Robert W. Packwood of Oregon. They clearly want no blame for the decision.

In a sense, Mr. Ford has re-energized the partisan and ideological alignments on Capitol Hill that were submerged during the so-called "honeymoon" period.

That probably means that

his programs, such as his amnesty plan for Vietnam deserts and draft evaders and his economic proposals, will be subjected to more vigorous criticism than they might have been.

Congress will bend with the public reaction which, by all account accounts, has been unfavorable so far. Mr. Ford was booed in Pittsburgh yesterday, and while he was away the White House switchboards were jammed with telephone calls reportedly running two-to-one against the President. A congressional aide reported that "our telephones have melted."

But in the face of all this, it may well be shortsighted to conclude that the President has taken leave of the political judgment for which he was so widely praised during the first month of his presidency.

Mr. Ford has seen the results of the Gallup Polls showing that 56 to 59 per cent of the American public opposed an early pardon. He said, however, that he could "not rely on public opinion polls to tell me what is right." more

Quite apart from the rightness of the basic decision to pardon Mr. Nixon, and quite apart from the separate question of whether Mr. Ford should have demanded from the former President some concession of guilt, it can be argued that his sense of timing was correct in spite of the immediate diffi-

culty it has caused him.

If he had decided that he must pardon Mr. Nixon at some point, then politically it may well have been best to get it over with now — at the peak of his popularity, when he has the greatest resources of goodwill to counteract what would have been an unpopular decision in almost any circumstances.

A year or so from now, the honeymoon would have long since been over in any case. Mr. Ford would have been seen not as the embodiment of the restoration of decency, but as a working, warts-and-weaknesses Presi-

dent — and one looking intently toward his campaign for re-election.

By acting now, moreover, he foreclosed the development of political passions — and perhaps even organized pro- and anti-pardon campaigns — that would have occurred in the wake of a Nixon indictment and public trial. Granting a pardon in that kind of atmosphere might have been politically suicidal, although no one can say for certain.

Had Ford waited, the pardon question might even have been caught up in the preliminary maneuvering for the 1976 presidential campaign — something that surely would have done him serious harm.

As for this fall's elections, it seems unlikely to most political professionals that Mr. Ford could have had much impact on the outcome, no matter what he did. And he has at least taken the onus of the pardon upon himself, allowing Republican candidates, if they wish, to disassociate themselves from it.

Perhaps the greatest long-term loss for the President will be some of his credibility. terHorst's resignation is part of that problem! so is Mr. Ford's sudden flip-flop on the pardon question, from his news conference of August 24 to his action on Sunday.

If, as reports from California indicated, Mr. Ford tried to pry from Mr. Nixon an ambiguous statement of guilt and failed, he may also be accused of giving up too much too soon. But obviously he felt prepared to pay that price to settle the matter, and his political instincts told him that he had better do so while still riding high.

Whether he was right or wrong, from a purely political viewpoint, will not be clear until we can see whether the nation puts the whole thing out of mind in a month or turns decisively against Mr. Ford as it did against Mr. Nixon after the "Saturday night massacre."