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Growing Dossier

Hopes for an "open Presidency," marked by candor and forthrightness, threaten to become casualties of Mr. Ford's mishandling of the Watergate aftermath.

Apparently, no one in Congress—and few in the White House—were consulted or even informed about the delicate decision to pardon Richard Nixon. An obscure private lawyer was engaged to make contacts with the former President in deepest secrecy, just two days after the President had informed the country that he would not move in advance of the normal processes of law.

The official White House spokesman was instructed by Presidential intimates to deny categorically that there had been any negotiation with Mr. Nixon in his San Clemente hideaway—a full week after the clandestine talks began. To his great credit, the spokesman, J. F. terHorst, quit his post.

The President explained that fears for the health of his predecessor figured largely in his decision to grant clemency, but it is far from clear on what information he based those fears. Only whispered reports from several of Mr. Nixon's old cronies have come out so far, and these are totally at odds with testimony of less involved visitors to San Clemente, who found the former President in glowing health. How well can a President so easily swayed in a decision of such moment measure up to the challenges involved in fateful negotiations with foreign powers and domestic interests eager to capitalize on gullibility or weakness?

Even more ominous for the future, President Ford has allowed a dangerous note to creep in to his public evaluation of the Nixon Administration's fatal scandals. They were a national tragedy "in which we all have played a part," Mr. Ford said in granting pardon.

It is accurate to say that all Americans have been victims of this tragedy. But there is no accuracy at all in suggesting that the American people, not just the cynical handful who occupied positions of highest power, bear the blame for it. If that is President Ford's considered judgment, it is a fuzzing of responsibility which bodes only ill for the near and distant future.