

Don't Sell Ford Short

By James Reston

The guess here is that President Ford has much more support with the American people than he has in the Congress, the press, or the universities. The popularity polls may not show it yet, and his policies on the economy and the Nixon pardon do not support it, but there is something about this man that makes people believe in him, even when they disagree with his decisions.

His personal appearance before members of a House Judiciary subcommittee to explain why he pardoned former President Nixon helps explain the paradox. He didn't satisfy many members of the committee that his decision, and particularly the timing of his decision, were right, but he satisfied even the members who thought he was wrong that he was honest and telling the truth.

This is a big advance in Washington. It has long been argued by political cynics that cunning and devious leaders with good intentions do less damage than honest naive men, and it may be true; but after a decade of it may be true; but after a decade of clever twisters at the top of the American Government, President Ford is a temporary relief, even if he's wrong.

The key word, of course, is "temporary." Personal honesty, good intentions, locker-room exhortations and WIN buttons won't solve the economic crisis, but in dealing with the Nixon pardon, Mr. Ford at least tried to restore the missing sense of trust, which is essential to the resolution of all our other problems.

The Ford contrast with Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson is startling. The tragedy of Vietnam and Watergate was not the original policies but the cover-ups. Mr. Johnson took the country into the war and Mr. Nixon into Watergate by stealth, both deceiving and evading the Congress when they got into trouble. The comparison is unfair and the analogy inaccurate, but President Ford, when he got into trouble on the pardon, at least had the gumption to face the opposition.

Obviously, it was an easier problem, but Mr. Ford's instinct was true. He decided not only to answer the questions of the Judiciary subcommittee but to appear before it and state his

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case. In the process, he destroyed the outrageous Nixon claims of excessive "executive privilege" and set a precedent of Presidential accountability that may be much more important than what happens to Mr. Nixon.

Moreover, he expanded national television into the democratic process, not only on judging candidates but on deciding basic policy issues. Now we have not only a "question hour" between the President and the Congress, as between the Prime Minister and the House of Commons in London, but a dialogue between the President, the Congress and, through TV, the people.

From President Ford's point of view, this historic appearance in the dock of the Congress and before a national television audience was a brilliant political decision, all the more so because it was probably not calculated, but came as a natural response to serious questions from his old colleagues in the House of Representatives.

He didn't have to go to Capitol Hill. The basic issue had been settled. He had pardoned Richard Nixon, and nobody questioned his right to do so. The only questions were whether he had made a deal with Mr. Nixon on the pardon, and whether his judgment was right on timing it before Mr. Nixon was indicted or convicted.

There was no "deal," he said, and he pardoned Mr. Nixon before indictment or conviction because he thought a long Nixon trial would divide and tear up the country for over a year. He wanted to end the controversy and get on to the questions of the future on wages, prices, trade, balance of payments, and peace.

Well, maybe his judgment was wrong, for by pardoning Mr. Nixon before indictment or conviction, he didn't end the Watergate controversy but revived it. Nevertheless, he insisted that a struggle in the courts and press would have diverted the country from its serious problems at home and abroad; that, anyway, Mr. Nixon had resigned "under shame and disgrace," and that, by agreeing to the pardon, Mr. Nixon had conceded his guilt.

The way President Ford said this, however, was probably the main thing for the Judiciary Committee and the television audience. He was, in his appearance, his manner, and his answers absolutely the opposite of Mr. Nixon.

He was not ducking the Congress. He was there in committee room. He was not invoking "executive privilege." He was not fighting the Congress. He was courteous and even respectful of his questioners.

So you can say Jerry Ford is wrong on prices and wages, and wrong on pardoning Mr. Nixon too soon, and silly to spin around the country raising funds for the Republicans at chicken dinners when he is needed back in Washington, but he proved in the Nixon pardon hearings that he is not to be underestimated.

He left many unanswered questions, but the committee was with him on the whole, and the television audience, probably more so, caught his integrity, which has been the missing element in Washington for too many years.