

The Papers and the Public

by Anthony Lewis

A notable element in President Ford's House testimony was the colder view he took of Richard Nixon. He played down the element of sympathy in the pardon decision. He said Mr. Nixon had left office in "shame and disgrace," and had as good as admitted his guilt in taking the pardon.

Public acceptance of that view would help Mr. Ford get the Nixon problem behind him and turn the country to other pressing issues. But the trouble is that Mr. Nixon will not play. He insists on acting the part of an honorably retired President entitled to every dollar and privilege afforded others - a man more sinned against than sinning.

Within hours of Mr. Ford's visit to Capitol Hill, Mr. Nixon sent the White House a delightful reminder that he will not be so easy to forget. He sued to get custody of all his papers and tapes, arguing that his constitutional rights as a former President were being violated and that he alone could make the necessary delicate judgments on keeping some of the contents confidential.

Coming from anyone else, the galvanized gall of that argument would be breathtaking. It is a claim that a man disgraced when evidence of criminality was found in official records should thereafter be given charge of those records.

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The problem of the Nixon papers and tapes is a significant test for Mr. Ford, for Congress and for the country. How it is handled will indicate how well we have recovered from the illusion that Richard Nixon so long worked to create - that his personal interest was the same as that of the Presidency.

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