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Sooner or later

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Reports of the return to public life of Richard Nixon will, it is hoped, prove to be greatly exaggerated.

The Republicans need him like they need to lose another dozen seats in Congress. The country needs him like it needs another Russian wheat deal.

There is, to be sure, little prospect that Nixon will ever again seek or hold elective office, or ever again exercise any influence in the party he so grievously wounded. But a number of friends of the disgraced president have been dropping hints that he may make at least a limited comeback.

Kansas Sen. Robert Dole, for instance, who was President Ford's running mate, suggests that Nixon might find some acceptable role in the field of foreign affairs because even his adversaries admit that "he did a lot of good in this area."

But it is hard to imagine Jimmy Carter employing Nixon's services, even though he did invite the former president to the inauguration as a protocol courtesy.

According to other sources, Nixon is setting great store by a series of four 90-minute television interviews with David Frost that are to be aired this spring. He believes the public is ready to put the "mistakes" he made in perspective and to listen to his side of the Watergate story.

Yet he had plenty of opportunities to tell his side of the story while he was still president, but chose instead to continue to try to

con the American people. Can the public, which is still recovering from Watergate, swallow six more hours of Nixon on television, even if it will be rerun time?

Then there is Mr. Nixon's book, which he has been working on since he went into exile at San Clemente and which is scheduled to be published next fall, with earlier serialization in the New York Times — the same newspaper he tried to prevent from publishing the Pentagon Papers.

"It's inevitable he's going to come out at some time," says Rep. Charles Wiggins of California, one of Nixon's faithful-to-the-end defenders on the House Judiciary Committee during the 1974 impeachment hearings. "I don't expect him to remain a recluse."

Neither does anyone else. Neither, unfortunately, do many people expect anything resembling true penitence from Mr. Nixon, or look for anything but the same self-serving statements that characterized his last dismal days in office.

If Richard Nixon does return to public life, it will be on the order of the late Duke of Windsor, another pathetic and useless figure whose comings and goings were solely of curiosity value. Or like the Russian emigree nobility who inhabited the social salons of Europe after the revolution.

They, too, had their little circles of retainers and admirers. They, too, dreamt of past days of glory. And they, too, were never able to admit they did anything to deserve their fate.