

# Old Issue Haunts Press Conference

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The scandal is over, but the melody lingers on.

President Ford discovered yesterday, when he held his first press conference, that the liveliest topic at the White House is the same old one which haunted his predecessor—the potential criminal liability of Richard M. Nixon.

Should the disgraced ex-President be prosecuted? Would Mr. Ford pardon him?

"In the last 10 days or two weeks," the President acknowledged, "I have asked for prayers for guidance on this very important point."

In all, the reporters asked him 29 questions—eight of which dealt with the legal jeopardy of citizen Nixon. The President expected as much. He shuffled through some cue cards when the

first question was asked and found the one dealing with Mr. Nixon's continuing problem, the threat of indictment for his part in the Watergate cover-up conspiracy.

Mr. Ford gave several different answers. At one

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point, he invoked compassion and seemed to be nudging Watergate Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski to lay off the Nixon case. But later Mr. Ford insisted that he wouldn't tell Jaworski how to do his job.

As for a presidential pardon of a former President, Mr. Ford ducked gracefully. "I am not ruling it out," he said. "It is an option and a proper option for any President."

Keeping-options-open is the time-honored language with which Presidents and other politicians sidestep the tough, unsettled questions which reporters ask, sometimes prematurely.

Yesterday the new President showed that he can two-step with professional style.

On the whole, it was a workmanlike performance, not very exciting, but noteworthy for the ordinary tone which Mr. Ford reintroduced to the tattered tradition of presidential news conferences.

President Nixon simply stopped having them and, when he did make a rare venture before the pack from the press-room, it was a sweaty, snarling moment of confrontation, often demeaning to both sides.

President Ford began with a joke. A small joke, a

self-deprecating wisecrack, prepared beforehand, it was not exactly a show-stopper. But in his own bland manner, Mr. Ford was saying that the new job has not gone to his head.

After all, he has experience at this sort of thing. For years, as a congressional leader, he mingled amiably with the working press. As Vice President, he held press conferences more or less regularly and is fully at home with the routine, the soft lazy pitches and the inside fast balls.

For their part, the reporters were considerably more civil than on some of the past occasions when they were trying to squeeze some straight answers out of Mr. Ford's predecessor. Still, the new good-natured relationship did not soften the questioning. They are already asking him about his political problems and the elec-

tion of 1976, the one after next.

In picking out questioners from the chorus, Mr. Ford demonstrated more democratic tastes than his predecessor. He called on Esther Van Wagoner Tutty, a grand old lady of the press corps who represents a batch of Michigan newspapers and is seldom in the spotlight these days.

He even called on the Rev. Lester Kinsolving, an Episcopal priest-columnist whose belligerent questioning of White House tergiversation used to drive Nixon press aides up the wall. When President Ford smiled on him, Kinsolving almost fell over.

Mr. Ford made some other changes. Instead of the regal blue drape that always backed up Mr. Nixon, Mr. Ford's press advisers turned everything around in the East Room and put Mr. Ford in front of open doors and the red-carpeted center hallway of the White House.

He stood at a modernistic rostrum and, after a brief flutter of nervousness at the start, settled down to a routine and amiable dialogue. No startling announcements, no sharp exchanges, just a low-key recital of what's doing at the White House, inflation, unemployment, oil, and all that.

Reporters grumbled among themselves afterward about the general skimpiness of the hard news. Even so, they conceded that, considering what the past few years have been like at the White House, blandness may be the best politics right now.