

... And Reopened the Watergate Scandals

It would be hard to imagine any better way to give new life to the whole Watergate horror than for President Ford to grant a precipitous blanket pardon to former President Nixon. Until he did so, Mr. Ford had seemed to be ushering in a new era of reconciliation. Then contrary to previous statements—he jumped in before even the first steps in the judicial process had been taken.

His aides say he acted in the belief that by a quick, decisive move he would put the whole thing in the past. After a flurry of controversy it would be seen that his compassionate pardon was the only way to clear the air and relegate the whole matter to history.

If this was his motive he made a serious miscalculation. As he said nearly a year ago when asked about total absolution, "The public wouldn't stand for it." Nothing has happened in the intervening months to change that opinion. In fact the whole cycle of jail sentences, upcoming trials and the drama of Nixon's self-righteous resignation has strengthened that view.

One may question Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski's expressed

opinion that the pardon will not influence the outcome of the Sept. 30 trial of the principal Nixon lieutenants. That Jaworski learned of the pardon only shortly before it was publicly announced is a sad commentary on the status of the prosecutor. This has overtones of the Saturday night massacre which saw the firing of Archibald Cox and the resignation of Attorney General Elliot Richardson.

Comparison with the fate of former Vice President Spiro Agnew is inevitable. Agnew pleaded no contest in open court to a charge of tax evasion while the judge had before him a memorandum of 38 criminal offenses alleged against the Vice President as prepared by the Department of Justice. Agnew lost his pension. He was disbarred.

The suspended sentence and the small fine meted out to him produced cynicism and distrust. Was this equal justice under law or were men in high places immune from the penalties suffered by lesser figures? This will be the reaction to the Nixon pardon that came with such unexpected speed.

The extent to which Nixon aides

still in the White House were responsible for the decision is still conjecture. How much the former President himself supplied the motivation is also speculation.

Nixon is again the role player, as he has been throughout his career. Through calculated leaks out of the fastness of San Clemente has come the picture of a lonely exile suffering in silence. Hamlet walking the beach, to be or not to be, that was the role he assumed. It resembles in kind if not in degree the self-martyrdom that has repeatedly been at the core of his role playing. To separate the man from the role seems to have been more than even his one time psychiatrist could manage in the Nixon vice presidential years.

How great the damage and how long the recovery no one can yet say. The resignation of his press secretary, J. F. terHorst, was a blow. Confidence must be the basis of the relationship between a President and his press spokesman. If that confidence is non-existent, if the press secretary goes out on a doubtful limb then a job that is difficult enough becomes impossible.

I have known terHorst over the years as a colleague and friend. He is no ideologue with a tag of liberal or conservative but a first rate reporter respected by the Washington press corps. His resignation was the more impressive because it was the voice of his conscience that spoke.

A growing criticism of Ford has been his failure to move quickly to eliminate the carryover from an administration that had come down in disgrace. Until the pardon, this had seemed to be unfair. After all he did need time to make an orderly transition.

But if the pardon was a consequence of the influence of the men of the past then it is proof that he has waited too long. He is surrounded by conservative ideologues, and nowhere is this more evident than on the approach to inflation and the economy, who tell him that even jawboning or something as innocuous as wage-price guidelines can imperil the free enterprise system.

The new President must prove that he is his own man. But if the precipitous pardon is an example of that new man then we are in for trouble.