

'Somebody Got to President Ford'

By succumbing to emotion and not even waiting for the completion of a secret study on the effects of pardoning Richard M. Nixon, President Ford has raised serious questions of his performance in time of crisis.

At the moment Sunday morning when Mr. Ford bloodied his young presidency by issuing the pardon, selected lawyers on and off the government payroll were quietly preparing a study he had requested on legal and political ramifications of a Nixon pardon.

Preliminary reports of that study submitted to White House counsel Philip Buchen suggested it was much too soon for any possible pardon. That view was shared by Buchen himself as well as other aides President Ford brought into the White House. "I don't know one Ford man, either on his staff or in his kitchen cabinet, who wanted an immediate pardon," a Ford insider told us.

Gen. Alexander Haig, the chief of staff inherited from Nixon, was viewed by these Ford insiders as advocating a quick pardon. But not even the mighty Haig is believed influential enough to have swayed the President from the resolve expressed at his Aug. 28 press conference to await action by Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski before considering a pardon for Nixon.

What changed the President's mind? The answer is put identically by several Ford advisers: "Somebody got to Ford." Specifically, that "somebody" told the President that Nixon was in precarious condition emotionally and physically and could not survive under threats of prosecution.

This certainly was not the message brought back from San Clemente by Benton Becker, the young Washington lawyer sent there by Mr. Ford to negotiate with Nixon. Becker encountered a composed Nixon, wholly in command of himself, and so reported to the White House.

Accordingly, the "somebody" was a



person in far more intimate contact with the real Nixon at San Clemente. In the opinion of one informed Ford adviser, it was Julie Nixon Eisenhower, the former President's engagingly bright daughter who has always been a favorite of Mr. Ford's.

Whoever the San Clemente caller, Mr. Ford's stunning reversal is seen by his closest advisers as dictated not by politics but by personal compassion. Here, then, is no repeat of the infamous Saturday Night Massacre. Mostly private criticism of the President within his own party goes not to motives but to judgment.

The cost of that bad judgment is running perilously high. By breaking past promises, Mr. Ford has shredded his own credibility and put all Republican candidates on the Watergate spot

less than two months before the election. His presidency, his relations with Congress and Republican campaign prospects all have been damaged.

Republicans are consequently asking whether this was a single abysmal aberration or a clue to congenital behavior in time of crisis. They desperately hope the former is the case because of the unwholesome parallel in this crisis with President Nixon, who never consulted his party.

Only Haig, Buchen and counselor Robert Hartmann were kept fully informed about the pardon. Mr. Ford took no advance soundings of congressional reaction. A longtime Ford intimate, House Minority Leader John Rhodes (one of the few Republicans giving the pardon his private approval), was informed Sunday noon

at the ninth tee at Burning Tree following the public announcement. Nor is there any sign that another wise old Ford crony, Melvin R. Laird, was consulted in advance. The Cabinet—including still another Ford crony, Secretary of the Interior Rogers Morton—was ignored.

Least explicable of all was the failure to confide in press secretary Gerald F. terHorst. It is believed at the White House that his resignation was dictated not only by substantive disagreement with the pardon but chagrin that, by being kept in the dark, he gave incorrect information to newsmen last week.

Attempting to protect the new President, terHorst removed from the payroll strident Nixon partisans such as Kenneth B. Clawson and Father John McLaughlin. Other Ford staffers believe Haig resented this rôle by terHorst. Thus, the puzzle deepens: why ignore terHorst, a savvy veteran of 16 years as a Washington correspondent and a friend of Mr. Ford's even longer, and instead consult Haig?

Some side events Sunday were indeed reminiscent of Nixon days. When one Cabinet member was informed Sunday morning of the President's decision, he got the strong impression from Haig that Jaworski had approved the pardon. When he later learned the Special Prosecutor had been properly neutral about presidential action, he felt he had been deceived.

Republicans are hoping that, though the euphoria of Mr. Ford's first month is gone forever, the pardon will not prove to be a running open sore like Watergate (and, for that matter, Chappaquiddick). What really nags at them is whether last week's trauma is a preview of President Ford under extreme stress—whether somebody as persuasive as Julie Eisenhower can deflect him from a sensible, operational strategy by a private appeal outside normal political channels.