

WXPPost

William Raspberry

Mr. Ford's No-Return Decision

The best and the worst thing to be said about President Ford's blanket pardon of his predecessor's White House offenses is that it is irreversible.

It was a gutsy call, in stark contrast with the Nixon record of temporizing and postponing, lying and hoping that this gesture or that would finally "put Watergate behind us." Mr. Ford didn't fool around. He did it, and there is nothing that anyone—including the President himself—can do about it.

But it was also a foolish, dangerous and, at least in terms of immediate necessity, avoidable decision.

Gerald Ford watched the last agonizing months of the Nixon administration and drew the wrong conclusion from what he saw. He saw a stalling, vacillating, play-it-by-the-polls President bringing grief upon himself and upon the country, and he decided he would handle it differently.

But Richard Nixon's delaying was a dodge to see how little truth he would have to let out in order to save himself. A little delay on the part of Gerald Ford would not only have produced more, not less, truth; it would also have given him time to be sure of his decision, and to try to bring the country along with him.

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But instead of taking his time, Mr. Ford made the one irrevocable decision he could make. It doesn't matter what anybody thinks; it's done. And what is not already known about the scandal-ridden Nixon White House will very likely never be known.

Mr. Nixon himself certainly won't be telling us much. His response to his pardon—so far as we know, the only price he paid for the pardon—was not exactly an anguished confession. He acknowledged his error "in not acting more decisively and more forthrightly in dealing with Watergate." And he admitted some unspecified "mistakes and misjudgments."

But Mr. Ford's "full, free and absolute" was not calculated to forgive his one-man electorate for "mistakes and misjudgments." It was to hold him immune from punishment for crimes—including but not limited to those specific crimes the House Judiciary Committee agreed unanimously he was guilty of.

He avoided an impeachment trial for those crimes by his decision to resign instead, when it became obvious that he would be impeached by the House and probably convicted by the Senate. And he managed to avoid trial in the courts with the decision by his hand-picked successor to spare him the grief of having the people learn the truth about him.

Some observers have concluded that

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a deal must have been struck between the present occupant of the White House and the man who put him there—a deal that said I'll appoint you Vice President (or I'll resign right away and let you take over) if you'll agree to give me a pardon before I have to tell the truth in the public courts.

I know the legal experts are saying that the pardon could help to bring out the truth since the Fifth Amendment provision against self-incrimination is no longer applicable to Nixon. As a result, the experts say, he could be subjected to some very tough cross-examination when he is called as a witness in the other Watergate trials. The pardon doesn't protect him from future contempt of court, so he'd have to show up; it doesn't protect him from future perjury, so he'd have to tell the truth.

It may be the only ray of hope in the whole fiasco, considering that Mr. Ford, no matter if he later decides the pardon was a mistake, cannot undo what he has done.

But I don't put much stock in the prospect of Richard Nixon, unfettered by the threat of jail, revealing to us the depths of his depravity. In fact, I don't expect him to tell us anything at all.

There is something suspicious about the efforts of his friends to convince us that he is cracking up. I first noticed the effort during the days before the resignation when White House aides were hinting that their man was unplugged from reality. While everyone around him was trying to figure how to save their disastrous situation, the man himself was acting as though things couldn't have been better. "Serene" is how they described him.

And now they tell us, through The Washington Post's Lou Cannon, that one of the reasons for Mr. Ford's decision to pardon him was Nixon's emotional state. Cannon said two Nixon friends told Mr. Ford that the former President was so emotionally depressed that he might not have been able to stand prolonged indecision.

I think they may be trying to get us ready for a move to quash the subpoenas for his appearance as a witness on the ground of mental or physical infirmity.