



An Intervention Was Inevitable

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PRESIDENT FORD would probably have been obliged to pardon Richard Nixon soon or later. But by acting hastily, the President has shocked public opinion in a way bound to revive the worst Watergate divisions.

The most casual acquaintance with the Watergate coverup case shows why some kind of presidential intervention on behalf of Mr. Nixon was inevitable. The grand jury originally wanted to indict Mr. Nixon for his part in bribing witnesses, suborning perjury and otherwise obstructing justice. It named him as an unindicted co-conspirator only on being advised that a sitting President could not be indicted.

Resignation cost Mr. Nixon that protection. The Watergate special prosecutor, Leon Jaworski, has repeatedly indicated that duty might oblige him to indict and try the former president.

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THE TRIAL of Mr. Nixon would have been a devastating experience. Mr. Ford felt—rightly, I believe—that it would not serve the national interest. So he determined to intervene even before an indictment was handed down. Given that determination, Mr. Ford had reason to move with some dispatch.

Jaworski was heading toward a trial of the former President and a large segment of public opinion was lining up behind that idea. The six persons already indicted in the Watergate cover-up — including former Attorney General John Mitchell and former White House aides John Ehrlichman and H.R. Haldeman — were due to come to trial on September 30.

Now that Mr. Nixon has been par-

doned, they can argue that they too should get off scot-free. I don't think that argument is going to hold water. I think all six will be tried and convicted. But it would have been truly unfair to bring them to trial without letting it be known that the President intended to pardon Mr. Nixon for his role in the cover-up. So, fairness, in effect, dictated a September 30 deadline for the presidential action.

But Mr. Ford was late in seeing the need to move with dispatch. He allowed himself, before he had thought the matter through, to tell his press conference of August 23, "I think it is unwise and untimely for me to make any commitment" until "legal process has been undertaken" against Mr. Nixon.

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WHEN HE DID see the need to decide quickly, the President acted in a huffer-mugger, hole-in-the-corner fashion. Instead of preparing the country for the turnaround, he sprang the news suddenly on a sleepy Sunday morning.

The upshot is a fueling of the worst suspicions. Indeed, the simplest explanation of what happened is that there was some sort of preestablished fix all along—an arrangement whereby Mr. Ford, in effect, promised a pardon in return for the Nixon resignation.

Even those not disposed to such ugly interpretations now wonder what the word of Mr. Ford really means. It is perhaps one of the consolations of this whole affair that the President is now seen for what he is—an ordinary pol who cannot be deeply trusted, even if he does make his own breakfast.