

Problem for Parents: Explaining the Pardon To Puzzled Youngsters

By NADINE BROZAN

The American family has a new script for its dinner-table conversation. Parents and children, who used to debate whether or not President Nixon had committed crimes, now talk of why he was pardoned by his successor.

All week long, youngsters, who used to ask, "What did President Nixon do wrong?" have been inquiring, "Why won't he be punished?" and "What about the men who refused to kill people in the Vietnam war?"

If the Watergate cataclysm planted doubts in young minds about ethics, President Ford's unconditional pardon for former President Nixon has raised disturbing questions about penalties for ethics gone astray.

The pardon, announced on Sunday, also left mothers and fathers groping for answers. A group of metropolitan-area parents were interviewed this week because last fall they had described their difficulties in clarifying Watergate for their children. They were all opposed to the pardon and found themselves caught between the desire to be candid with their children and the hope that they would not pass on their own bitterness.

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We don't want to communicate that to children," said Mimi Hyman of Great Neck, L. I., the mother of an 8-year-old daughter. Mrs. Hyman began law school at Hofstra University this week.

"It raises doubts parents just can't explain," said Beatrice S. Frank of Manhattan, the mother of two and associate director of the New York University Law School/Channel 13 Consumer Help Center. "We just have no guidelines. We're dealing with things that have never happened before."

While many of the parents appeared more troubled by the timing of the pardon—before trial and establishment of guilt or innocence—the children are simply angry that Mr. Nixon has been let off the punitive hook.

As 8-year-old Shari Hyman sees it: He should be punished because every person who robs always gets punished, so why shouldn't President Nixon be?"

Nicholas Goldstein, 9, of Brooklyn, began calling for punishment as long ago as last November. His reasoning then: "He's the President and is supposed to be protecting the people against crime, not making crime. He should be punished more."

In addition to being critical of the decision itself, Nicholas has also been giving some thought to the judicial process.

"I don't think it's right," he said of the pardon. "Ford comes in and butts into somebody else's business. It should be the judge's [business]," he said.

Should the judge punish Mr. Nixon?

"I don't know," Nicholas said. "Nobody knows that he did the crime yet."

Do children resent the possibility that they may receive scoldings or spankings, and face withdrawal of privileges for disobedience while Mr. Nixon will escape penalties?

Very few make the connection. "There's no common ground, my children would never put themselves on the same plane as a President," said a Connecticut mother of four, whose husband worked as an advance man in Mr. Nixon's 1952 and 1960 campaigns.

When the children do draw a parallel, it does not eradicate their own punishment.

"Punishing kids is right; letting Nixon off isn't. Two wrongs don't make a right," said Sarah Hilsman, 11, of Lyme, Conn. Sarah's father, Roger Hilsman, a professor of government at Columbia University, served in the Kennedy Administration as Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs.

Sometimes parents create everyday analogies to clarify the enigmas of high-level punishment and pardon.

For instance, if Michael Rinzler, 9,

"Nixon should have at least a small trial to show if he was guilty or not instead of pushing him away or forgetting about it," said Anne, who is 9.

"If he was found guilty, we would know what he had really done," she continued. "And if he was guilty, we should go on with the trial. Why should Ford have the right to pardon him?"

Sarah Hilsman told a classmate, "If you were in a club and the leader of the club made plans to steal something, and then someone said that the leader had nothing to do with it and he got off, it wouldn't be fair if you went to jail and he didn't. I certainly don't think it's fair."

"The teen-agers are all talking about the unfairness," said Dr. Bernice Berk, psychologist at the Bank Street College of Education School for Children. "Adolescents are the ones who will have the hardest time dealing with this because they identify with the [Vietnam] amnesty consideration."

Beatrice Frank's daughter, Margie, 14, told her parents, "It's not fair that those people who did what they thought was right in refusing to fight a war shouldn't be treated the same way as someone who had committed criminal acts."

"My hunch," Dr. Berk predicted, "is that those parents with a strong Christian orientation will have an easier time rationalizing this. It's the New Testament concept that to forgive is divine. Ford said he would be judged without mercy if he didn't show mercy."

"The problem," she went on, "is that forgiveness comes after atonement, and Nixon never said he was sorry, which makes it hard for everybody to swallow."

Perhaps the most troublesome element is not the facts parents are called on to give but the attitudes with which they impart those facts. Thus, the same disapproval of the pardon has been expressed in drastically different terms.

"I think President Ford made a mistake, he was ill advised, but I don't want to come down too hard on him because for the first time since my children were born [1965], we've had a President of whom I can approve," Carol Rinzler said.

Bernard Goldstein, a lawyer, is at the other end of the critical spectrum.

"Nicholas told me, 'Nobody would want to become President today because Nixon has made it a contaminated White House.' And I can't deny him, I can't tell him he's wrong. This is an outrage. Those who expect parents to aid in the reinstallation of warmth toward the Government have little to work with; we must be honest with

were to ask his mother whether Mr. Nixon would be punished or not, she said she would tell him that he won't be punished totally, but there's punishment and punishment.

"I would ask him, 'Would you settle for being kicked out of Horace Mann and having your allowance reduced to five cents a week?'" said Carol Rinzler, publisher of Charterhouse Books.

Andy Pettee of Westport, Conn., a paralegal and the mother of six children, ages 7 to 21, translated the action into similar terminology.

"I said, 'Suppose you did something wrong, something you knew was forbidden, and I threatened to punish you. And then what if I came home and said, 'Darling little one, I love you and I have mercy, so you won't be punished.' They all agreed that wouldn't be fair,'" Mrs. Pettee said.

Fairness appears to be an unassailable code for all the youngsters. It is the yardstick on which they measure not only the pardon, but the threat of trial and punishment for Mr. Nixon's subordinates and the proposal of conditional amnesty for Vietnam draft evaders.

Fairness, indeed, weighed heavily on the thoughts of Anne Siegel of Weston, Conn., and Sarah Hilsman.