

Ford: Maintaining His Record

Throughout the rash of post-mortems that have followed in the wake of President Ford's decision to pardon former President Nixon there is a common strain of surprise, astonishment, even incredulity. Yet his action is entirely consistent with his record on Watergate and Mr. Nixon's role in it.

The surprise is that so many were surprised, for Mr. Ford from first to last has slavishly defended his predecessor and his whole administration. Even toward the end of the House Judiciary Committee's hearings in late July, when other Republican leaders were calling for the resignation or impeachment of their leader, Mr. Ford was still shouting, "I can say from the bottom of my heart the President of the United States is innocent, and he is right."

Also from the beginning Mr. Ford has consistently made light of the worst scandal in U.S. history, dismissing it as "Democratic partisan politics" even in the face of a large bipartisan vote for impeachment by the House committee. He called the impeachment resolution a "travesty."

Almost up to the time of Mr. Nixon's resignation, the then-Vice President kept saying that "the preponderance of the evidence, all of it, is in favor of the President and exonerates him from any impeachable offense." Mr. Ford went so far in fact, that some of his closest associates were reported to be concerned, as some of them now appear to be distressed over the pardon decision.

A week or so before Nixon quit the White House, I myself felt obliged to write that Mr. Ford instead of becoming the Mr. Clean that his party had hoped for, had "become Mr. Whitewash." In view of the President's pardon action and his openly acknowledged desire to get Watergate off the

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front pages, I see little reason for altering that judgment.

Since taking over the White House, the new President has continued to surround himself with many of Nixon's closest aides, especially Gen. Alexander Haig, the closest of all. It is especially significant that Haig was in on the Nixon pardon, while Mr. Ford's own first appointee, J. F. terHorst, was not. The press secretary understandably resigned.

Also since becoming the Chief Executive, Mr. Ford has asked Congress to give his predecessor an unprecedented \$850,000 to tide him over the transition to private life. This would include not only \$160,000 for pension and perquisites along with normal moving expenses but such undefined windfalls as \$100,000 for "miscellaneous," whatever that may be. Congress, as it should, is taking a sharp look at Mr. Ford's lush handout to the man he succeeded.

It is depressing to see how so many Vice Presidents get in the habit of compromising their own independence by continuously bootlicking and kowtowing to the Presidents they serve under. Mr. Ford is not the first, for Spiro Agnew was also reduced to a press agent for Mr. Nixon, and before him Hubert Humphrey had to play the humiliating role of apologist for Lyndon Johnson. It is a process that takes something out of men.

It must be conceded that it is not easy for any Vice President to be his own man, especially in an administration like Nixon's. The Nixon White House used Agnew as both apologist and hatchet man. After he fell, it lost

no time in casting Mr. Ford in the same role. The President's men quickly sent him out to defend Mr. Nixon on Watergate and even wrote the speech for him. That was his initial Farm Bureau talk when he blamed the continuous "ordeal of Watergate" on a few extreme partisans, such as the AFL-CIO, ADA and other "powerful pressure groups."

He didn't mention that much or most of the agitation for Mr. Nixon's resignation was coming from some of the nation's leading Republican newspapers, as well as prominent Republican politicians.

Back in December, when Mr. Ford was sworn in as the first Vice President appointed under the 25th Amendment, many Republicans had high hopes that he would do for the party what Republican Calvin Coolidge did in the wake of the Teapot Dome scandal of the Warren Harding years.

When Harding suddenly died, Coolidge became the Chief Executive and, as the Mr. Clean of 1923, vigorously investigated and prosecuted the malefactors of his own party. He was not, in Mr. Ford's words, afraid of disturbing the nation's "tranquillity." As a result, the GOP made a quick comeback, with Coolidge winning big in 1924.

Mr. Ford, however, has shown little stomach for emulating Coolidge. The new President used to boast that he was "the first Eagle Scout Vice President of the United States." In the light of the new Watergate whitewash, it is not likely that he will become the first Eagle Scout President.