

Price of a pardon

Last week millions of Americans went around with a terrible feeling of disillusionment because Gerald Ford, a man they didn't even know six months ago, had let them down.

That feeling about our new President could turn out to be more damaging than the fact that our old one copped a pardon. Richard Nixon belonged to the past, and good riddance. Ford embodied our hope for the future.

Most of us had wanted desperately to believe in the man who described himself as "a Ford, not a Lincoln . . . but not a Model T, either." That was just the right kind of leadership to suit the national mood.

With the departure of Nixon and the advent of Ford, a new buoyancy came to the spirits of the country. It was as if a weight had been lifted from each of us. For a month Americans went about their business with a lighter step.

Even in the little things of life, far removed from politics, we found ourselves being friendlier and more helpful to each other. Trust returned. Decency was in fashion again.

But the Ford era of good feeling lasted only a month. Now we are back to the old wariness. Back to the old cynicism. Back to the bleak and bitter conviction that we can't trust the men who run the government.

That is the real price this nation is paying for Nixon's pardon, and it is a terribly high price.

Six days after telling the nation he had no intention of pardoning Nixon, President Ford opened negotiations with San Clemente.

Very well, he had a right to change his mind. But on a matter of such intense public concern, he also had an obligation to say that he had changed his mind.

Instead, the negotiations were kept secret, and when reporters got wind of them they were lied to — lied to glibly and

adroitly through a trusting press secretary who didn't know he was relaying a lie.

From that point on the scenario became distressingly familiar. It was as if the moral sickness of the Nixon administration were a contagion that had survived the removal of the bodies and infected the new occupants of the White House.

Instead of Haldeman and Ehrlichman we now have Hushen and Buchen — Philip Buchen, the White House counsel who denied the pardon was in the works, and John Hushen, the new press secretary who has found something better than declaring his own words "inoperative;" he tells 100 reporters they all "misinterpreted" what he said.

Left over from the original cast is Sen. Hugh Scott, the original patsy, emerging from the White House to assure the nation everything is hunkydory inside the bunker — the same Hugh Scott who stood on the same steps and said he had read the transcripts and Richard Nixon was innocent.

About it, all there's a sinking sense of *deja vu*.

President Ford is quoted as saying we will all understand why he pardoned Nixon "when all the facts are known."

Even if it's true, that remark reveals a deplorably patronizing attitude. Why not tell us the facts before the pardon? Americans aren't such ninnyes that we must be spoon-fed explanations for a *fait accompli*.

If concern for Nixon's privacy caused Ford to hold back the facts, that's a mistake. A pardon for an ex-President cannot be treated as a private matter.

Ford's first duty is to maintain public confidence. If he has facts to convince us that a pardon was wise and necessary, he should step forward immediately and state them loud and clear.

Personally, I hope he can do that. The country still needs the man we wanted to believe he was.