

Government: More Than the Presidency

In all the frantic discussion these past ten days about the Nixon pardon, one interesting question has barely been addressed. There has been endless speculation and comment about Mr. Nixon's condition, President Ford's leadership capacity and the influences operating in today's White House.

But not much has been said about what the Washington reaction reveals about the character and climate of this capital. And that is, all things considered, perhaps the biggest cover-up of all.

What it shows, I am afraid, is that this political community is as hopelessly addicted to the distortion and magnification of the President and the presidency as it has ever been—that, in this fundamental sense, it has learned nothing at all from the painful experience of the past decade.

There is no question, obviously, that a President issuing a blanket pardon to his predecessor is big news—especially when the action comes in dramatic fashion on a Sunday morning, with no advance preparation and no very thorough explanation.

But the sirens that went off inside the heads of journalists and politicians here made it sound like a declaration of war had been issued or a man from Mars had just landed. Newspaper staffs were assembled, instant TV specials rushed on the air, and every press secretary on Capitol Hill went racing for his mimeograph machine.

To a journalist on assignment half-way across the continent, the Washington reaction betrayed, at least in part,

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an emotional backlash to a self-induced high. The press was betrayed, not by the real Gerald Ford, but by the mythical super-President created by the press’ own artifice during the previous month.

As has been said here before, the Ford succession offered the Washington press corps the opportunity to get the presidency back into human focus, by accepting him as the quite ordinary, unpretentious working politician he is, and by covering his official actions, rather than glamorizing his private life. Instead of that, what we produced was a tidal wave of guff about the euphoria of dancing parties in the East Room, poolside picnics at television correspondent's homes, and the internationally famous toasted English muffin caper.

Despite this flood of puffery, most Americans were able to make quite

sensible judgments about their new President. The day before the pardon, interviewing voters in a barometer precinct in Denver, one heard complimentary remarks about the personality of Mr. Ford and his apparent desire to be open and candid in his dealings. But when one asked those voters if they planned to support him in 1976, nearly everyone said, “It depends on how he does between now and then.”

That common-sense view seems to escape us in Washington. We are congenitally incapable of getting it in our heads that the President is just another politician who ought to be viewed with tolerant skepticism as a human being, and be judged over some reasonable length of time on the basis of the inevitable successes and failures of public policy for which he can be held to account.

Instead, we seem determined to take him with us on a roller coaster ride—elevating him to paragon status for no good reason and then condemning him utterly when, in our view, he makes his first mistake.

Above all else, we seem unable to broaden our view beyond the White House and let people know the government is larger and more complex than one man.

The result of that tunnel vision is that far worse examples of irresponsible behavior go by unheeded and unchecked every day in Washington than

those presidential aberrations that preoccupy us.

Why is it, for example, that almost no one has pointed out that most of those same senators and representatives who have been waxing indignant about the Nixon pardon were so conspicuously silent, during the previous month, when the Special Prosecutor looked to Capitol Hill for guidance on whether he should proceed with the Nixon case?

Why are those who are so vocally insistent on equal treatment before the law too busy to notice that Wilbur Mills is once again about to legislate new loopholes for the wealthy and increase the inequity in a tax system that affects far more people prejudicially than the presidential pardon?

Could not some of that relentless publicity focusing on the search for the mysterious person or persons who influenced Mr. Ford's decision shift, for a moment, to the four senators—George Aiken, Howard Baker, Peter Dominick and Ted Stevens—whose cloture votes on Thursday will decide whether the Agency for Consumer Advocacy bill is killed or saved in the Senate?

Why does the vigilance of the press not extend to the House Rules Committee, where the most serious, significant effort in a quarter-century to sort out the jumbled jurisdiction of House committees is slowly being talked to death by a combination of special-interest lobbies and seniority-conscious legislators?

Where were we all when a young Vietnam veteran named Kowalski asked the members of the New York congressional delegation to explain and justify a parliamentary sleight-of-hand by which the House reduced benefits for handicapped Vietnam veterans and killed a promised fifth year of schooling, supposedly in the interest of economy?

The answer to all these questions is that we are still acting as if the President were the entire government, and each of his actions the be-all and end-all of his entire public career. Where the devil is our sense of perspective?