

History Played Out On Familiar Stage

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 17—John M. Doar was there. The television cameras were on again, the 28 klieg lights dazzling. The President's conduct was in question once more. But the drama was enacted differently today before rememblers of the House Judiciary Committee.

President Ford's voluntary appearance as a Congressional witness; to explain and defend the pardon he granted to his predecessor, took place in the same Room 2141 of the Rayburn House Office Building, where the votes were cast hardly three months ago to demand Richard M. Nixon's removal from the White House.

But this time Mr. Doar was on hand, not as the special counsel on impeachment but as a silent spectator. This time it was the President, not those on the Judiciary Committee, who made history, with an appearance for which only legend provided precedent. And this time the tone of the confrontation between Chief Executive, appearing in person, and members of Congress was strikingly different: civility replaced cholera, deference supplanted hostility.

"Yes, sir," the President said to questioners.

"Thank you, Mr. President," the questioners said to Mr. Ford.

It was as if "Love Story" had been presented as a sequel to "Crime and Punishment."

Mr. Ford sat, alone, at the huge wooden witness table, where Mr. Doar and a battery of aides had constructed the case against Mr. Nixon. He crossed his ankles, relaxed, as he read a statement for 44 minutes in response to the questions posed in two formal resolutions of inquiry about the pardon.

The pardon's purpose, Mr. Ford insisted, was not to assist the man who had chosen him to be heir to the White House but to remove the nation's focus from Watergate and thus pursue "domestic tranquility." Whether the objective had been attained remained in question, but having said so, Mr. Ford tranquilly stacked the loose leaves of his text into a neat rectangle, laid them aside, sipped a third of a glass of water and scratched his left knee.

His calm demeanor was matched by most, but not all, of those seated before Mr. Ford at the double-decker

dais of the Judiciary Committee.

The hearing was technical, before a subcommittee, and its chairman, Representative William L. Hungate, Democrat of Missouri, began the proceeding by declaring, "The Subcommittee on Criminal Justice of the House Committee on the Judiciary today welcomes the President of the United States, Gerald R. Ford," and then promising not to keep the panel's guest past noon.

Mr. Ford made the point that he was there to answer only those questions relevant to the pardon—and not, for instance, to such matters as the controversial agreement giving the former President custody and eventual control of the Watergate tape recordings—and the subcommittee did not press for exceptions to the stipulation.

Although 22 of the 38 members of the full committee were present, only the nine on the subcommittee were permitted to interrogate the witness. They did so, with one exception, gently.

The exception was Representative Elizabeth Holtzman, Democrat of Brooklyn, who voiced "d'smay" that she would be permitted only five minutes to question Mr. Ford and that the panel had not agreed with her that the President's appearance should follow interrogation of White House subordinates who took part in the pardon arrangements.

Miss Holtzman spoke of "dark suspicions" in the land that the pardon was part of a "deal" with Mr. Nixon and read off eight separate questions at once, winding up with "would you be willing turn over to the subcommittee all tape recordings of conversations between yourself and Richard Nixon?" Mr. Ford responded to only one of the questions, but appeared to answer none. Miss Holtzman's time expired.

Representative Lawrence J. Hogan, Republican of Maryland, chided Miss Holtzman for "her accusatory opening speech" and used most of his five minutes to hail Mr. Ford "for the statement and your openness and candor in coming in this very historic event" and to describe the "absolute power" of Presidents to issue pardons.

Mr. Hungate's most salient question was whether Mr. Ford had consulted, as he suggested in his opening statement, with his wife, Bet-

ty, after being told in early August that he was likely to become President soon.

"I certainly did, Mr. Chairman," the President replied.

The two members of the House who had precipitated the event by introducing their separate resolutions of inquiry could not take part. One of them, Representative John Conyers Jr., Democrat of Michigan, a member of the Judiciary Committee but not the subcommittee, sat mute at the dais doing a slow, but silent, burn. He caressed his thick mustache while Mr. Ford was present and complained as the President departed that the hearing had been unsatisfactory.

The other sponsor of a formal resolution of inquiry, Representative Bella S. Abzug, Democrat of Manhattan, is not a member of the Judiciary Committee. Despite a characteristic brown print dress and broad-brimmed brown hat, she was uncharacteristically inconspicuous in a rear corner of the spectators' gallery.

"A certain amount of reverential deference was shown," Mrs. Abzug remarked later of the proceeding. But she said "the whole subject has just begun to be discussed, and I think we have to unravel it."

NYT

10-18-74