

By William Safire

ESSAY

WASHINGTON — "What is truth?" said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer."

The question that St. John, and later Lord Bacon, attributed to Pontius Pilate—the responsibility-ducking Governor of Judaea who found no fault with Jesus but who went along with the mob demanding crucifixion—concerns us again in the testimony given to Congress by President Ford as he explicated his pardon of Richard Nixon.

In the week before he became President, Gerald R. Ford had to ask himself what was truth, or more accurately—when does a man in public life avoid telling the truth in order to be true to his conscience or true to his vision of the public interest?

The facts are not in dispute. On Aug. 1, General Al Haig told then-Vice President Ford the contents of the tape that showed Mr. Nixon had been a participant in the cover-up of Watergate. The new revelations, testified President Ford last week, "ran completely counter to the position that I had taken for months in that I believed the President was not guilty of any impeachable offense."

With that new knowledge of Mr. Nixon's guilt, Mr. Ford faced appearances in Mississippi and Louisiana on Aug. 3, 4 and 5. What to do? Mr. Ford related:

"In the previous eight months I had repeatedly stated my opinion that the President would not be found guilty of any impeachable offense. Any change from my stated views or even refusal to comment further I feared would lead in the press

to conclusions that I now wanted to see the President resign . . ."

"For that reason," said the President, explaining why he had deliberately lied, "I remained firm in my answers to press questions during that trip and repeated my belief in the President's innocence of any impeachable offense."

That's quite an admission. Before reacting with a knee-jerk "for shame!" let us explore Mr. Ford's alternatives at the time.

He could have contracted "diplomatic illness," pulled the covers over his head and have become incommunicado. This would have been duly—and alarmingly—reported, and rumors would have been rife about "What does Ford know that has caused him to slam his door?"

Or he could have told the truth, an alternative never to be overlooked. But consider the consequences:

Since the information had been given to him in absolute confidence, it would have been immoral for him to have revealed it, much as a reporter feels guilt revealing an off-the-record comment or exposing a source.

More important, if the Vice President were suddenly to demand that the President resign, he would forever be branded as a usurper by a sizable segment of the public. Since the Vice President always has a vested interest in a Presidential resignation, ethics require him to hold himself aloof from any influence on that decision.

Most important, the national interest during that momentous week ending the Nixon Presidency called for

coolheadedness all around. Events were rolling toward the revelation of truth and the necessary response of resignation at the top; an announcement by the man next in line declaring the President to be guilty might have derailed the train, prolonged the agony, and left the country in paralysis.

And so Mr. Ford "remained firm" in his answers, continuing to say publicly what he had previously believed to be true, but what he knew to be false on that last weekend of the Nixon Presidency.

Only after the evidence was made public on Aug. 5 did Mr. Ford let it be known that he would no longer affirm the President's innocence. By waiting two days—by lying for two days—the President-to-be paid in the coin of his own credibility for an orderly and amicable transfer of power.

In retrospect, a better case can be made for the alternative of having contracted sudden laryngitis that weekend, but no case at all can be made for being the first to tell the truth when the truth was steadily unfolding.

The public interest sometimes requires a public man to fall silent and tell less than the truth, but rarely if ever requires him to tell an outright lie. That is what we can hope this fascinating episode has taught Mr. Ford, but it will be no lesson at all if we insist that he should have blurted out the truth that weekend.

Unlike Pontius Pilate, President Ford is not running away from responsibility for his actions. On the contrary, his willingness to reveal publicly his moral dilemma should cause us to set aside simplistic reactions—to ask, jesting aside, "What is truth?"—and to stick around for an answer.