

The Pardoner's Tale

By Anthony Lewis

There is a suddenness in the ending of summer. One day the sun, the air, the sea are different. The light goes unexpectedly early, and in the evening there is a Turner sky, clouds swirling on the horizon.

That feeling of change evokes a political memory now. It was just a year ago today that President Ford pardoned Richard Nixon for all crimes he may have committed, official or personal, while in the White House. Like an early frost, that sudden act withered hope, bringing us to a season of discontent.

The immediate political controversy over the pardon has naturally faded away; politicians cannot go on debating a decision that is effectively beyond recall. But the consequences of the pardon have not dissipated. They are as they were foreseen a year ago, if anything more serious.

A few days before the pardon a conservative commentator, George Will, warned that only letting the law take its course against Mr. Nixon could prevent him from "polluting American history" with future talk of his innocence. The pollution has begun.

His deposition in the suit over the tapes and papers, released last month, makes wonderful reading for fans of the unchangeable Mr. Nixon. There were the old lies, delivered in as brazenly imperious a tone as ever.

"The Special Prosecutor has been appointed," Mr. Nixon said, "and we have cooperated with the Special Prosecutor." Not a blink at the long record of evasion, resistance and destruction of evidence. Then there was the authentic Uriah Heep tone in his statement that he had 42-million White House documents, President Johnson only 32-million: "That doesn't mean that our Administration was better than his, I am not contending that."

Reading the deposition, one was struck again by the utter lack of contrition in this man. There is no consciousness of guilt in him, nor shame, because he does not have within him those standards of truth and decency that are the premises of civilized society. Nothing bothers him, neither the great wrongs he did nor the petty ones from which he still profits—the house improved with public money, the \$148,000 promised but not paid on his 1969 taxes.

And so we face the prospect of Richard Nixon pushing his way back

into our lives. He is writing memoirs, making television deals, posing for pictures by an old White House photographer who reports that Mr. Nixon is "kind of bushy-tailed again."

All that was predictable enough. What is sad is to see such ambitious dignitaries as Senator Charles Percy of Illinois visiting San Clemente. For that symbolizes a graver consequence of the pardon than a Nixon attempt to re-write history: a tolerance for lawlessness in our political life that has survived Watergate.

The fundamental lesson of Watergate, of the successful struggle to force a criminal President from office, was that our safety lies in law. Other democracies have their institutional protections; ours depends in the end on a commitment to the supremacy of law.

Diminishing respect for law has been one of this country's most worrying phenomena for years. For just a moment, in the summer of 1974, there was a chance to alter that trend—to confound the cynics who say the rich and the powerful too often escape justice. The pardon destroyed that chance, setting the most dramatic and enduring of bad examples.

The way it was done gave us an all too revealing insight into President

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Ford. Even a year later, the ineptitude of the business is staggering. The failure to obtain any admission from Mr. Nixon invited trouble. The absurd agreement on the tapes and papers, negotiated in secret haste by incompetent lawyers, is still causing confusion.

If one puts aside the conspiracy theories of the pardon, as I do, then President Ford did it to rid himself of nagging questions about his predecessor. And that accurately forecast what we have: a President who is blunt and brave but insensitive to the larger consequences of his acts—a man who tells jokes abroad about the insolvency of his country's greatest city, who encourages resistance to judicial decrees by ill-timed comments on busing.

Worst of all, Mr. Ford threw away the opportunity to give this tired country a fresh political start. That could only have been done by making a decisive break with the past—a break that required not physical courage but the courage of imagination. Americans talk today as if they had given up on politics and politicians. Ours is a politics of weariness, of hopelessness, and it began a year ago.