

# Ford, Nixon and 1976

## Polls Appear to Suggest Ex-President Is Liability to Successor in Campaign

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WASHINGTON, April 8 — In the new movie, "All the President's Men," there is a film clip showing Gerald R. Ford, then a member of Congress and chairman of the 1972 Republican National Convention, announcing that Richard M. Nixon had won the party's Presidential nomination.

The scene — in a movie that will undoubtedly be attended by millions of Americans — is one more example of the difficulty President Ford is having this election year in freeing himself from his association with Mr. Nixon in the public's mind.

The new book about Mr. Nixon by Robert Woodward and Carl Bernstein, "The Final Days," in which Mr. Ford plays a role as Vice President, will be another. So, too, will be a paperback edition of "All the President's Men," which will be issued soon.

So far, Mr. Nixon, the Presidential pardon of Mr. Nixon and Watergate generally have not been overt campaign issues, because Mr. Ford's rival for the Republican Presidential nomination, Ronald Reagan, has been in no position to make them so. As one of Mr. Nixon's staunchest defenders, almost until the bitter end, Mr. Reagan can hardly bring up Watergate with good grace.

### Issue Brought Up

But the Democratic candidate will presumably be under no such constraint, particularly if it is Jimmy Carter, much of whose success in the primary elections has been attributed to the supposed anti-Washington mood of the country. Some commentators have expressed the opinion that the mood is anti-Watergate rather than anti-Washington.

But Mr. Carter has said that he does not intend to bring up the Watergate issue. But he has done so repeatedly, if indirectly, by talking about the need for morality in government and stressing that he has not been tainted by serving in Washington.

Other Democratic candidates have brought up the issue from time to time. Representative Morris K. Udall, who advocates amnesty for all Vietnam War deserters, argues that President Ford should support amnesty because he granted it to Mr. Nixon.

Reporters traveling with the candidates have found that voters around the country do not ask many questions about Watergate and Mr. Nixon. But the reporters also found that these are very much on people's minds. When questioned at any length, voters often mention their lack of trust in politicians and ask about Mr. Ford's pardon of Mr. Nixon.

Even the Republican right wing has attacked Mr. Ford for his association with the

former President. Calling last week for Mr. Ford to drop out of the race for the nomination, James C. Roberts, executive director of the American Conservative Union, said that Mr. Ford "Owes his office not to the Republican party, but to Richard M. Nixon," who, with Congressional acquiescence, made him Vice President.

### Issue Is Behind Us'

In the White House and at Ford campaign headquarters, the President's aides insist that Mr. Nixon will not be a major issue in the 1976 Presidential campaign.

On his first day as the new chairman of the President Ford Committee, Rogers C.B. Morton said at a news conference: "The whole Nixon issue is behind us. I really don't think he will be a factor in this election."

Mr. Morton's comment sounded like the wishful thinking that marked the latter days of the Nixon Administration, when Mr. Nixon and his sup-

porters repeatedly proclaimed that "Watergate is behind us."

Mr. Ford's supporters may wish that Mr. Nixon would remain unobtrusively in exile at his seaside estate in California, but the former President has not done so. He keeps popping into public consciousness, often under ambiguous circumstances that raise questions about the relationship between him and the man who pardoned him.

The most recent episode of this kind involved the report submitted by Mr. Nixon on his trip to China. Mr. Ford and his aides were irritated by Mr. Nixon's trip in the first place, because it called attention to Mr. Nixon in the week

of the New Hampshire primary. Publicly, Mr. Ford said that he did not want a report from Mr. Nixon, because the former President was just one more private citizen visiting China.

But when Mr. Nixon returned, a White House aide was dispatched to California to pick up two copies of the report.

### A Political Asset

An official at the Ford campaign committee said that Mr. Nixon could be as much of a political asset as a liability to the President, because Mr. Ford could stress the difference between the conduct of his Administration and that of his predecessor's.

The official said that private polls taken by the Ford committee indicated that the pardon of Mr. Nixon may be an issue in the election, but otherwise the voters displayed little interest in Watergate as a political theme this year.

"If the economy is good, and our record in foreign affairs looks good on Election Day, then Watergate will have little impact on the results," the official said.

And Ron Nessen, the White House press secretary, commenting on the impact of "All the President's Men" and the new book, "The Final Days," on Mr. Ford's political fortunes, said that the White House view was that the movie and the book "would affect this President about as much as Chappaquiddick affects Hubert Humphrey."

However, the results of public opinion polls do seem to suggest that Mr. Nixon has been and continues to be a liability to the President. Mr. Ford's pardon of the man who appointed him Vice President led to a precipitous drop in his popularity, a drop from which he has yet to recover.

Shortly before the pardon, the Gallup Poll found that 71 percent of the people it surveyed approved of the way Mr. Ford handled his office. After the pardon, his rating sank as low as 37 per cent. In the most recent survey, taken in late February and early March, the President made a sharp improvement to the approval rating of 50 percent. But he is still far below where he stood before the pardon.

While the Nixon trip to China did not cause the President the trouble in New Hampshire that some of his political strategists had feared, it did have some impact.

### Political Problems

The chances are that the next time Mr. Nixon makes headlines, and each time after that, he will create political problems for his successor.

Meanwhile, President Ford seems to have taken no special pains to increase the distance between himself and Mr. Nixon. The President still goes beyond the demands of protocol to telephone Mr. Nixon from time to time for personal chats. He did not publicly criticize Mr. Nixon for traveling to China.

One White House aide explained that Mr. Ford believes any former President should be treated with deference, and he behaves accordingly to Mr. Nixon. That may be all there is to the relationship, but it is, nevertheless, a relationship that could hurt Mr. Ford this year.