Needed: A Grand Reconciliation

Not a determination of who was more moral on the war

By James Reston Jr.

For four years I've argued the case for universal amnesty for war resisters, and often I've been asked, mischievously, I'm sure, if I were for amnesty for Nixon. I never thought I'd have to address the question seriously. Amnesty for the powerful as well as the powerless—instantly and in the absence of any criterion, as if Nixon had not suffered quite enough. I'm sure I'll feel better when I know full well how much the Vietnam exiles have suffered.

But now I wonder: Richard Nixon has departed, humiliated politically and personally, perhaps as humiliated as any figure in history. His financial future is in doubt, not that that is my particular concern. Congress may consider whether he deserves the punishment of a normal ex-president. More important, under Articles I and II of impeachment, the Judiciary Committee found clear and convincing evidence for disciplining Nixon with violations of at least 15 criminal laws. And there is the tax matter, for which Nixon, the private citizen, may well be hauled into tax court.

Nesttheless, immunity for Nixon is a political matter, rather than a simple legal matter. The insanities of the American people have to be considered. Two years of Watergate have followed 11 years of Vietnam. Are we really about to prolong the agony of still another extended criminal prosecution of an ex-President?

The Americans for Democratic Action and even the American Bar Association say yes; the ADA recently passed a resolution expressly opposing immunity for Nixon, calling upon Congress to reject any such proposal and thereby "preserve the integrity of our system of justice." And the ADA warns every one of their past position, to be subject equally to the law. I'm sure most in the amnesty movement applaud these positions. But other are saying resignation under fire and disgrace is punishment enough. I have some sympathy in this argument in relation to the war resisters. Forced exile is punishment enough, as Richard Nixon will soon find out.

With Gerald Ford, the mood toward reconciliation, has dramatically changed. In his inaugural speech, the President spoke of "feeling up the internal wounds of Watergate," calling them "more painful and more poisonous than those of foreign war." Perhaps that is true for the political world. Perhaps the consequence of Watergate could have been the demise of our Constitution. But it is not true for a whole generation of young Americans who suffered through the Vietnam era. Watergate never had the concrete consequence of a weekly body count as high as 300 dead. But let's not dwell on old statements. Ford's amnesty initiative is laughable. At least now, the discussion is where it should be: not whether amnesty, but what kind.

Amnesty for Nixon alone is unthinkable. But I can support it, if it is part of a grand reconciliation of the elite after Vietnam and after Watergate. We have this one last great problem remaining from the Vietnam era. Ford should be sure that his amnesty proposal is not looked upon in the political world as an end run up the hill of amnesty for war resisters. Ford should be sure that his amnesty initiative is not looked upon in the political world as an end run up the hill of amnesty for war resisters.
The question is not whether the culprit is under the law or above it. It is, what will bring us tranquility after so much agony.