

"Pardon me," we might say if we stepped on someone's toe, passed in front of them to reach our theatre seat, interrupted a conversation between two people.

We ask to be excused for troubling or inconveniencing someone else, or to be forgiven for an unavoidable failure to treat another person as we would like to be treated.

In recent months people of the United States have seen the head of our government toppled as never before in our history. We have seen the democratic system move, ponderously to be sure, but move, nonetheless, to protect itself.

Without becoming immersed in the quagmire of who did what to whom and why, let's consider the simple fact of President Ford's unprecedented pardon of former President Richard Nixon, the possible reasons for it, and let's examine our responses.

It appears Mr. Nixon is suffering what can be described in laymen's terms as a "nervous breakdown". Given the circumstances, the man's personality, the pressures he's been under for several years finally culminating in his resignation from the land's highest office, it's not surprising.

President Ford would know of Mr. Nixon's condition before we, the people of our nation, are told of it. Mr. Ford, in announcing the pardon, referred to Mr. Nixon's health and to his own action as one of compassion.

We may be well-advised to temper our own anger with a modicum of compassion. True, we feel we've been betrayed by our erstwhile leader. On the other hand, the man carried burdens far greater than those most of us can comprehend. If the stresses were beyond his capacity to endure, as they well could have been, and he cracked, do we stand to gain anything by submitting him to degradation in his darkest hours?

Our initial reaction to the pardon was one of anger and a feeling of further betrayal, this time at the hands of Nixon's successor. Based on the facts available to us at the time of the announcement, this was normal.

Now, as the fact of the man's condition begins to seep out, we may find it within us to understand President Ford's action. We are not a vengeful people. We have a long history behind us of helping others, even others who have tried to harm us.

After bitter and costly wars, we have freely given of our wealth to rebuild countries we warred with and conquered; only through our compassion were the people of those nations able to regain stability and national health.

Are we going to crucify one of our own at his calvary?

When it comes to the "henchmen", those who manipulated the man who may, even then, have been at the breaking point (or beyond), I feel little need to exercise compassion.

When it comes to wrapping into the same bundle the bright young men who built the House of Straw within which our former President lived, there seems to exist no corrolary for pardon.

And when it comes to inclusion in blanket pardon the deserters and draft-dogers who fled the country or ran away from their duty to their home and country, there appears no parallel rationale.

cape service, no matter what their motives, knew well what they were doing and made that personal choice. Wholesale amnesty, to him who ran scared and let another put his life on the line instead, is something else.

It's suggested each case be judged on its own merits. President Ford judged a single case on its own merits -- that of his predecessor in the Oval Office.

It can be fairly recommended that those who seek amnesty from prosecution for their treason -- and that's what it is -- might well come before their peers for judgement, come before the men who took their places when they defected.

That is, after all, what our system of justice is all about. That's what a jury is: twelve untrained people who hear the evidence and reach a conclusion and decide upon guilt or innocence.

It may be that a great service could be performed by the various veterans organizations in the country if they were to select from amongst themselves panels to hear and to judge each individual request for amnesty.

Every community in the country has its Veteran's of Foreign Wars, its American Legion, its Am-Vets. Sadly, almost every community also has had its defectors. There are enough veterans' organizations to handle the cases, quickly and finally, without establishing another federal office for the taxpayer to support to hear these appeals for leniency.

It would be good to see returned to us those young men who have a valuable contribution to make to our nation's future; men who, in spite of their unwillingness to fight for our country and our world a better place for all to live in.

The boys who are truly dedicated to that end may prove to be better Americans because of their experiences living in other countries.

Well, it's conceivable, isn't it?

The people best-equipped to judge whether this is actually the case of each man requesting to return are those who filled his shoes when he stepped out of them.

They, too, can most easily spot the ones who want to return for less admirable reasons, or who have little of value to offer.

Is that a pretty hard-boiled attitude? Cynical? Uncompassionate? Probably so.

We do have a responsibility to give something to our country, our state, our community, however, and not simply be on the receiving end, for all the goodies, from birth to death.

If people who "jumped ship" want to come back aboard, then they ought to have to provide proof they're ready to haul their own oar and be a part of the crew.

In another era, mutineers were keel-hauled, Compassionate? No. But it effectively discouraged others with mutinous inclinations, and insured the safety of every other man on the ship.

That's what we're up against, at this time in our history; we face some serious problems, and it's going to take every man-jack of us doing his best to weather the storms ahead.

As for Mr. Ford's pardon of Mr. Nixon, now that my initial feeling of anger has subsided, if it stops there, I'll go along with it because I don't see there's anything in particular to be gained by prosecuting a man who's emotionally ill, nor in persecuting a man who's arrived at the bottom of his own particular long steep decline.