

Jessica Sommerfeldt

Senior Seminar

Professor Bernstein

December 19, 2017

Who's Afraid of Gerald Ford?

How a Forgotten Presidency Taught a Wounded Nation How to Forgive

On April 4th, 2006, famed journalist and investigator Bob Woodward took the stage to address the audience at the University of Michigan's Ford Library. "Be careful about judging and predicting when things will happen," he advised. "Maybe it will look different in five years or more—try to stick to the facts." Then he made a statement that the younger Bob Woodward would never have dreamed of saying: "I concluded that the pardon was the right thing for Ford to do—the sensible thing to do—and the courageous thing to do."¹

The pardon he was referring to, of course, was the one that followed what would forever be known as Woodward's most shining achievement: after two years of spearheading the investigation of the Watergate wiretapping scandal alongside his partner, Carl Bernstein, President Richard Nixon was forced to resign from office, the first—and thus far, only—president to do so. One month later, on September 8, 1974, Nixon's former vice president and successor, Gerald Ford, issued Nixon a blanket pardon for all offenses he had committed "or may have committed" over the course of his tenure as Chief Executive. Both reporters were inflamed, with Bernstein lamenting that "the son of the bitch pardoned the son of a bitch." Five

¹ Tian Lee, "Woodward: President Ford Knew What Needed to be Done," (The University Record Online, April 10, 2006).

years after Woodward's speech, however, Bernstein came forward in agreement with his former partner's sentiment. "It was the right thing to do to pardon him," he said simply.²

For Bernstein and Woodward, Watergate was both a crowning achievement and a daily obsession. For years, the pair had devoted their careers to uncovering the truth behind Watergate, executing civil responsibility as well as freedom of the press, all to topple a corrupt administration. In one fell swoop, Ford pushed that all aside. Nixon was allowed to walk away a free man, and for the majority of Americans, faith in the government was irreparably fractured. With that in mind, Bernstein and Woodward's change in opinion is alarming. What could have occurred for two passionate reporters entangled in the Watergate reveal that would persuade them both that letting Nixon walk free was the wise course of action?

The simplest answer is *time*, the construct that was Gerald Ford's greatest enemy, ally, and concern. In September 1974, only 38% of Americans supported Nixon's pardon. By 1986, that number had risen to 54%, more than half of those polled.³ To understand what caused this drastic change in opinion, as well as whether or not the majority of Americans were correct in their judgment, requires a revisit to where it all began.

The first seeds of Nixon's downfall were sown on June 17, 1972, when five men were arrested after an attempt to bug the Watergate hotel, the headquarters for the Democratic National Committee. The White House denied any ties to the incident, but the press was not convinced. *The Washington Post*, led by Bernstein and Woodward, soon uncovered several links between the break-in and the Nixon administration, revealing the largest political scandal since Teapot Dome in 1923.⁴ This time, however, the whole world was able to witness every moment

² Mark Finkelstein, "Bernstein: Ford's Nixon Pardon 'Right Thing to Do,'" (Newsbusters).

³ Joseph Carroll, "Americans Grew to Accept Nixon's Pardon," (Gallup News, 2001).

⁴ Louis W. Liebovich, *The Press and the Modern Presidency: Myths and Mindsets from Kennedy to Clinton* (Westport, CT. Praeger, 1998), 85-93.

from the comfort of their living room couches. Modern television had long been Nixon's foe—some historians speculate that it was Kennedy's charming presence during their televised debates during the 1960 election that gave him the upper hand over his older, rougher opponent—and it only continued to derail his career as reporting on Watergate grew and public support for the Nixon administration dwindled.

As always, the crisis in Washington did not exist in a vacuum. While the press fretted over Nixon's potential criminal ties, the White House administration suffered a more immediate loss when Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned from office on October 10, 1973 after accounts of bribery and tax evasion surfaced.⁵ Initially, Nixon struggled to find an adequate replacement. Agnew had been tainted with the same mark of corruption as Nixon, and the president could not afford another scandal. What Nixon needed was someone with experience but without personal baggage. Unsurprisingly to the modern American, the number of politicians who fit the bill were few and far between. In a short amount of time, the Nixon administration set their sights on the best eligible candidate of the time: House minority leader Gerald Ford.

Born Leslie Lynch King, Jr. in 1913, Ford had an upbringing that was unconventional by most presidential standards. Although his mother gave birth to him in Omaha, Nebraska, she and her son left to go north when he was less than a month old, after her husband threatened to kill her at knifepoint. Although Ford's father was absent from his life, his step-father, Gerald Rudolph Ford, Jr. became a positive influence for him, prompting his step-son to legally adopt his name once he reached adulthood. A talented student and athlete, Ford played college football at the University of Michigan, but turned down an opportunity to play professionally in order to attend Yale Law School. After enlisting in the Navy during World War II, Ford was elected a member

⁵ Barry Werth, "The Pardon," (*Smithsonian*, February 2007).

of the House of Representatives in 1948, where he would continue to serve for a quarter of a century.⁶

At the time of Agnew's resignation, Ford had begun planning his retirement from politics. Along with the insurances of his wife, Betty Ford, the Michigan representative had made peace with the likelihood that he would not be elected Speaker of the House as he wished, and therefore saw little purpose in extending his tenure.⁷ But aside from his years in office, Ford also possessed a demeanor that set him apart from his peers. Having come from a humble background, Gerald Ford had earned a reputation for being "soft-spoken and unpretentious,"⁸ with a distinctly-Midwestern mild manner. His upbringing separated him from beloved political figures such as the Kennedys, but his good-humor and amenability also distinguished him from Nixon, whose reputation as a liar and a crook was beginning to gain traction among the public.

Perhaps what best qualified Ford for vice president, however, was his tendency towards centrism. If the 1950s was a time of domestic bliss and the 1960s was a time of violent progress, then the 1970s was the inevitable caffeine crash that comes after all the energy's been spent. The economy was taking a turn for the worst, and the passion of the many social movements of the sixties had dissipated. Long gone was the post-World War II victory high, and in its place were the fractured remnants of a decade wasted in Vietnam, and a new generation of men disenfranchised with American military prowess. Lyndon B. Johnson had been extremely liberal in his efforts to pursue widespread social welfare, and Nixon, who had made a name for himself through his work against Communism early in his career, had devoted the majority of his tenure as president to improving foreign affairs in China, Vietnam, and the USSR. Despite being a

⁶ John Robert Greene, "Gerald Ford: Life Before the Presidency," (Miller Center, July 17 2017).

⁷ Barry Werth, "The Pardon," (*Smithsonian*, February 2007).

⁸ Mark J. Rozell, "President Ford's Pardon of Richard M. Nixon: Constitutional and Political Considerations," (*Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Winter 1994).

lifelong Republican, Ford did not endorse any particularly extreme beliefs, and unlike the most recent occupants of the White House, he showed a particular interest in fiscal policy. This made him an acceptable replacement for Agnew in the eyes of prominent Democrats, whom Nixon's administration quickly realized would only accept a moderate politician such as Ford to fill the vacancy.⁹

Ford was the ideal solution to Nixon's vice president problem, although he received little in return. As a congressman rather than a governor, Ford had no executive experience, and he received meager assistance upon his ascension to vice president. This was not entirely unexpected: throughout his entire career, Ford never professed any desire or interest in being president, and in Nixon's mind, Ford was Washington's "chore boy," who was only appointed because there needed to be a vice president and Ford would make for a dutiful and non-abrasive choice.¹⁰

Unlike his new colleague, Richard Nixon had aspired to sit the Oval Office for decades, and was willing to do whatever he could to hold on to it. Convinced that the 1960 presidential election had been rigged in Kennedy's favor, Nixon grew increasingly more paranoid and secretive, and his fear of losing the upper hand was undoubtedly a contributing factor in his decision to attempt bugging the Watergate in the first place. That loss, along with his failed bid for the California governorship shortly afterwards, deeply compounded Nixon's pride. In December 1967, he bitterly wrote that he would not run for office again because losing had been too hard on his family and he was tired of groveling for support.¹¹ The only thing stronger than Nixon's pride was his drive, however, and he soon decided to take his chances one more time.

⁹ Barry Werth, *31 Days: Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and a Government in Crisis* (New York, Anchor Books, 2006), 5.

¹⁰ Bob Woodward, *Shadow* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1999), 5-11.

¹¹ *Ibid*, Introduction.

By the time he was elected into office, Nixon had fully embraced an ‘us vs. them’ mentality, going as far as to record every conversation that occurred in the Oval Office as “proof” should one of the people recorded attempt to conspire against him.¹²

In an ironic twist, Nixon’s obsession with staying on top was causing his downfall, which started to escalate rapidly during the summer of 1974. After trying to prevent the release of potentially-incriminating evidence to special prosecutor Leon Jaworski in Supreme Court, the jury ruled unanimously in Jaworski’s favor, forcing Nixon to hand over tapes and documents pertaining to the Watergate investigation. Among the tapes was a June 23, 1972 conversation between Nixon and his Chief of Staff, H.R. “Bob” Haldeman, that indicated Nixon’s obstruction of justice.¹³ Nixon’s support was dwindling both in the press and on Capitol Hill, and the strain was showing. The president only held two press conferences between October 5, 1972 and August 21, 1973. The attempt to squelch the press mirrored something out of a blockbuster: reporters’ phones were bugged, and some were followed in public. Nixon attempted to deter *The Washington Post* from publishing more information by challenging their broadcast licenses in court, to no avail. Any staff member that Nixon mistrusted was promptly fired.¹⁴

In May 1973, the Senate Judiciary Committee commenced the federal investigation of Watergate, and from that point forward, little was accomplished in the White House. Nixon’s political career finally reached its tipping point on August 5, 1974, when the aforementioned Haldeman conversation—dubbed the “smoking gun” tape—was released to the public. By the time news of the tapes appeared on the evening broadcast, a new era of distrust had settled over

¹² Louis W. Liebovich, *The Press and the Modern Presidency: Myths and Mindsets from Kennedy to Clinton*, (Westport, CT. Praeger, 1998), 85-93.

¹³ Leon Hurwitz, “International Press Reactions to the Resignation and Pardon of Richard M. Nixon: A Content Analysis of Four Elite Newspapers,” (Comparative Politics, 1976).

¹⁴ Louis W. Liebovich, *The Press*, 85-86.

the American public.¹⁵ Until this point, the presidency always had an air of rather romantic mystery cloaking it—citizens only learned what technology permitted them to. For a century-and-a-half, this was limited to the newspapers, and in the second quarter of the twentieth-century, radio broadcasts became a vehicle of transmitting messages across a wide demographic by the White House. In this modern era of television, however, the barrier between the public and the government was thinner than ever before, allowing more journalists to investigate, and a new method to inform (or, alternatively, misinform) a larger audience. Watergate also revealed an uncomfortable but ultimately inevitable truth about the presidency that had been ignored until now: that the president was human, capable not only of strong leadership but also insecurity, paranoia, and deception, among other flaws that plague human beings. Watergate created a monumental shift in the collective American psyche, and this would remain part of Nixon's legacy long after his death.

Even more damaging, however, was the loss of Nixon's congressional support. Republicans who had steadfastly stood beside him over the course of the past two years were now withdrawing their support in light of the smoking gun tape, and this more than anything else indicated to Nixon that the end was near. "It's over," he told his Chief of Staff, Alexander Haig.¹⁶ Richard Nixon, the California Republican who had fought for decades to achieve his dream of political glory, had finally lost.

The effect of this humiliation took a heavy physical and psychological toll on Nixon, who was submerged in a state of crippling depression. For his administration, there were other concerns, mainly revolving around keeping Nixon out of jail. They had been instructed to inform

¹⁵ Louis W. Liebovich, *The Press and the Modern Presidency: Myths and Mindsets from Kennedy to Clinton* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 85-86.

¹⁶ Bob Woodward, *Shadow* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 3.

Ford of the resignation ahead of time, but not to divulge crucial information, such as when the resignation was to occur. In a meeting with Haig, Nixon's lawyer, J. Fred Buzhardt, discussed the various repercussions Nixon's resignation would have. Of all of them, the one Buzhardt lingered on the longest was the possibility of a pardon. While the two would never admit as much, Nixon's culpability in Watergate was plain to see, and the odds of avoiding indictment were not in his favor. Theoretically, Nixon could have pardoned himself and his aides prior to leaving office, but this would be both unprecedented as well as suspicious—if Nixon was planning on maintaining his innocence, this would not be the way to go about it. If there was any hope of the current president receiving a pardon, it would be from his successor, who had not been implicated in the scandal and would be assuming office in only a few days' time.¹⁷

On August 1, five days before the smoking gun tape was released and a little over a week before Nixon would ultimately resign, Haig met with Ford to discuss what had transpired between him and Buzhardt. Ford was surprised to hear the news of Nixon's decision, but being as dutiful as ever, did not balk at the prospect. Haig then went over the potential outcomes of the resignation, carefully presenting the possibility of a pardon without explicitly offering a deal. He even brought the paperwork required for a pardon and gave it to Ford to look over in the meantime.¹⁸

Gerald Ford did not lack for his own advisers. Immediately after Haig departed, Ford met with Robert Hartmann to discuss his meeting with Haig, and then later with John Marsh and Bryce Harlow, each devoted counselors to the vice president. None of the men trusted Haig or his agenda to protect Nixon, and all of them were astonished to hear that he had the gall to put forth such a bold—and potentially incriminating—suggestion. Their outrage grew when they

¹⁷ Bob Woodward, *Shadow* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1999), 5-6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

learned that Ford had not outright denied him. Ford's reasoning was characteristically simple: he did not turn Haig down because Haig did not actually offer a deal, which, to both their credits, was true. Ford's counselors were much more alarmed by this, knowing that few people were as straightforward as Ford and therefore much less likely to believe that a deal had not been made. Along with Ford's wife, Betty, they convinced the soon-to-be president to call Haig and establish that no deal had been made, nor would one be. This was done in front of witnesses, as was the destruction of the paperwork Haig had given him. In the following years, whenever Ford was asked about the situation, he would firmly reply that "there was no deal," and all parties involved corroborated this. Later that year, Ford would even volunteer to do a hearing on Capitol Hill to publicly confirm the true story and affirm that there had been no backhand deal tied to Nixon's resignation.¹⁹

Even when staring across the great abyss, Nixon had difficulty taming his fighter's spirit. On the first of August, Nixon told his aides that, "This is my decision and mine alone. I've resisted political pressure all my life, and if I get it now, I may change my mind."²⁰ Even without pressure, Nixon still reverted back to his old mentality the following day. "Let them impeach me," he declared. "We'll fight it out to the end."²¹ At this point, Nixon's council knew there was no turning back. Another of Nixon's lawyers, Herbert J. Miller, reminded Nixon of what the circumstances surrounding his potential impeachment would be. One of the pillars of the American justice system is the right to a fair trial, and after two years of Watergate coverage, the chance of having an impartial jury was impossible.²² Nixon was forced to agree. At 9:01 PM on August 8, 1974, Nixon announced to the public that he would be resigning the following day,

¹⁹ Bob Woodward, *Shadow* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1999), 7-25.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

²¹ *Ibid*, 12.

²² Adam Clymer, "At First, Nixon Spurned Idea of Pardon, Lawyer Says," (The New York Times, 1999).

citing a lack of a “strong enough political base in Congress” as his reason for doing so. “I have never been a quitter. To leave office before my term is completed is abhorrent to every instinct in my body,” he admitted. “But as President, I must put the interest of America first. America needs a full-time President and a full-time Congress, particularly at this time with problems we face at home and abroad.”²³

While eloquent and well-written, Nixon’s resignation speech revealed a great deal of the factors that contributed to his downfall. He referenced Watergate as vaguely as he could manage, and did not so much as hint at his own culpability in the scandal. Nixon affirmed that it was an honor to serve as president, and spoke highly of Gerald Ford, asking the public to grant him their full patience and support as he embarked on the presidency. He then listed the ways that the United States had improved its foreign relations during his tenure in office, including the end of the Vietnam War and newfound communication with China, among others.²⁴ It was plain to see that this was the legacy Nixon had yearned for—the one that fixed all of Kennedy’s and Johnson’s mistakes, the one that truly brought the US out of its isolationism—and now it was tainted by scandal and defeat. Nixon did not utter a word of apology during his announcement, nor did he implicate himself of any crimes. He would later confide in his wife that his official resignation was “the most humiliating day” of his life.²⁵

That Nixon shifted responsibility for Watergate was not a surprise for Ford’s counselors. Now that their head was about to assume the most powerful position in the western world, Marsh, Bryce, and Hartmann were more concerned with making it clear from the start that

²³ Richard M. Nixon, “President Nixon’s Resignation Speech,” (Character Above All Else: An Explanation of Presidential Leadership).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Barry Werth, *31 Days: Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and a Government in Crisis* (New York, Anchor Books, 2006), 322.

Gerald Ford was not another Richard Nixon. Ford was in agreement. “We’ll have an open administration,” he vowed. “I can’t change my nature.”²⁶ As his contemporaries knew, Ford was a genuinely decent man—often to a fault. Hartmann took up the task of writing Ford’s first speech as president, which Ford was pleased with, except for the opening lines: “My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over.” Ford postulated that it was “a little hard” on his predecessor, but Hartmann was not having any of it. It would be the one line that people would remember, Hartmann argued, and it was not until Hartmann nearly threatened with his own resignation that Ford finally conceded. The line stayed in, and Ford’s team prayed that the public would recognize him as an entity apart from Nixon’s corrupt administration.²⁷

When Ford was sworn in as president on August 9, 1974, it appeared that those prayers had been answered. Between the relief of Nixon finally departing office and Ford’s reputation as an everyman, the American public enthusiastically embraced their new Commander in Chief. According to polls, 71% of Americans approved of Ford in his initial rating, higher than any president at that stage since.²⁸ True to his word, Ford held consistent press conference throughout the entirety of his term, and it was clear from the beginning that the sixty-one-year-old former representative did not have the same demons as his predecessor. The closest thing to a candid photo that could be captured of Ford was of him fixing himself English muffins for breakfast. Gerald Ford lived a mellow life, but after years of public controversy, this only endeared Americans to him.²⁹

²⁶ Barry Werth, *31 Days: Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and a Government in Crisis* (New York, Anchor Books, 2006), 13.

²⁷ Bob Woodward, *Shadow* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1999), 12-14.

²⁸ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Gerald Ford Retrospective,” (Gallup, 2006).

²⁹ Louis W. Liebovich, *The Press and the Modern Presidency: Myths and Mindsets from Kennedy to Clinton*, (Westport, CT. Praeger, 1998), 95-98.

Even overseas, President Ford had widespread appeal as a “breath of fresh air rising above the usual Washington pollution.” Upon Ford’s inauguration, Louis Heren of London’s *The Times* wrote:

One does not have to be too concerned for President Ford in his new situation.

The American system of government may look odd to British civil servants, even ramshackle, but it is extraordinarily resilient. Men and ideas are always available to any President who wants them. It says much for a truly great democratic system, and the easy relationship in a country where all men are once again equal.³⁰

Despite the warm welcome he was receiving from the public, behind closed doors, Ford was embroiled with the demons Nixon had left behind. Watergate was not the only ailment to plague the nation during the 1970s. A relatively new phenomenon known as stagflation was seeping its way into the daily American vernacular, which occurred when the economy was experiencing a combination of high unemployment and slow economic growth. Inflation was affecting the costs of fuel, food, cars, housing, clothes, and more, and Nixon, who was more invested in foreign affairs, had not made much progress in remedying it.³¹ The Arab oil embargo had turned oil into a delicacy, and as Japan’s automobile industry rose in global prominence, the decay of the Rust Belt was beginning to assemble. Politically, nearly fifteen years of extreme

³⁰ Leon Hurwitz, “International Press Reactions to the Resignation and Pardon of Richard M. Nixon: A Content Analysis of Four Elite Newspapers,” (Comparative Politics, 1976).

³¹ Louis W. Liebovich, *The Press and the Modern Presidency: Myths and Mindsets from Kennedy to Clinton*, (Westport, CT. Praeger, 1998), 94.

societal change had created a similar rift in the party system, and Watergate's wake saw the rise of both the far-right and the far-left.³² And then of course, there was Vietnam.

With the war dwindling to a close, the scars from over a decade of conflict were still raw. Among the remaining problems was what to do about the approximately 50,000 draft dodgers who had previously fled the country, most of whom to Canada. This became one of the first major predicaments that Ford confronted as president. On August 19, before the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Chicago, Ford announced that draft dodgers would be granted "earned re-entry" via the Vietnam Era Reconciliation Program, allowing them return to the United States without penalty. The audience was largely non-responsive to this, and some of the more cynical attendees questioned whether Ford had an ulterior motive for such a measure. President Ford had supported the war in Vietnam in its entirety, but unlike most supporters would have expected, he was now pursuing a method of clemency in place of punishment.³³ After all, this was the same man who put his law career on hold to enlist in the Navy following the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Truthfully, anyone who knew Gerald Ford well enough was likely unsurprised by this course of action. The president had a history of placating difficult men. Long before Nixon there was Leslie King, his deranged biological father who often neglected to pay child support. As Ford grew older, he became something of a buffer between his parents, doing all that he could to broker compromises and keep the peace between the two. Richard Nixon was not, to quote historian Peter Wood, the first "self-centered man from the West who had given [Ford] everything and nothing."³⁴ If Gerald Ford's upbringing had taught him anything, it was how to persevere in lieu of others' poor decisions.

³² Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, (New York, HarperCollins, 2008), 35.

³³ Barry Werth, "The Pardon," (*Smithsonian*, February 2007).

³⁴ Barry Werth, *31 Days: Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and a Government in Crisis* (New York, Anchor Books, 2006), 311.

Spirituality also played its role. Grand Rapids was known for its strong Dutch Calvinist community, and President Ford and his family remained dedicated members long after leaving Michigan. Although Ford's Christianity continued to be a constant presence in his life—he attended both church and weekly bible study sessions, and was close friends with Billy Zeoli, a Christian film executive—he preferred to keep that part of his life private. Ford thought there was something inherently cheap about using one's faith to garner public approval, and when he would run against Carter during the 1976 election, he found his opponent's frequent public declarations of faith "unsettling." Furthermore, Ford was rather insecure about possibly having the opposite effect on his peers should he discuss his Bible study in detail. He did not want anyone to think he was claiming some sort of moral or intellectual superiority by revealing how devoted he was. For, Ford, faith was deeply tied to a sense of humility, as well as a firm belief in "mercy and healing."³⁵

The month between Nixon's resignation and Ford's pardon was arguably the most important of his tenure in the White House. The animosity between Ford's team and Nixon loyalists was as prevalent as ever, but Ford, ever the peacemaker, sought to smooth the transition from Nixon's administration to his own by allowing all of the aides who were unconnected to Watergate to retain their positions. Selecting a vice president was another matter entirely. Gerald Ford was the first and only president to serve without having been elected in a presidential campaign, and now he would be welcoming another politician into the White House who had not run for office. His pick, Nelson Rockefeller, was the emerging far-right's worst nightmare: a New Yorker born into one of the wealthiest families in the world who also known for being

³⁵ Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy, "The Other Born-Again President," (Time, 2007).

uncommonly moderate. Rockefeller was eventually confirmed as vice president, but only after completing a grueling two-month congressional hearing.³⁶

In the meantime, Ford was finding his frequent press meetings increasingly frustrating. Rather than discuss the Vietnam Era Reconciliation Program or new economic policies he hoped to introduce, the majority of questions coming from reporters were focused solely on Nixon. During his own congressional hearing for vice president, Ford had initially insisted that he would never pardon a suspect president,³⁷ but with the technicalities of Nixon's resignation being as complex as they were—for instance, Nixon's resignation had nullified any possibility of impeachment—that sentiment was essentially moot at this point.³⁸ When asked about the possibility of a pardon, Ford remained neutral. “Of course, I make the final decision,” he assured the press. “And until it gets to me, I make no commitment one way or the other. But I do have the right as president of the United States to make that decision.”³⁹

In private, Ford was less composed. “Goddammit,” he said to his aides after one particularly tiresome conference, “I am not going to put up with this.”⁴⁰

From a distance, Nixon's pardon appeared charmingly simple. After all, all it required was one televised speech and a signature. But the reasoning behind deciding to pardon Nixon was anything but uncomplicated. Multiple factors contributed to Ford's decision, beginning with what was happening ten feet from his podium. It became clear, almost immediately, that even though Richard Nixon had left the White House, the public was nowhere near done with him. Any chance of putting forth new policies or persuading the press to focus on different events

³⁶ Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, (New York, HarperCollins, 2008), 33.

³⁷ Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, (New York, HarperCollins, 2008), 30.

³⁸ Mark J. Rozell, “President Ford's Pardon of Richard M. Nixon: Constitutional and Political Considerations,” (Presidential Studies Quarterly, Winter 1994).

³⁹ Barry Werth, “The Pardon,” (*Smithsonian*, February 2007).

⁴⁰ Bob Woodward, *Shadow* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1999), 15.

would remain slim while Watergate was still hanging over everyone's head. It would only end when Nixon's case was closed, and that could take years.

Whether or not Nixon would make it that long was another concern. The last few months had left Nixon "emotionally disabled": angry, paranoid, and deeply depressed.⁴¹ He had secluded himself to his family's home in California, and soon began developing severe pains that resulted in his hospitalization.⁴² Nixon's dreams had been crushed—mainly through his own misconduct—and much like how Watergate played out in front of a large audience, the former president's health was also subject to public scrutiny. Richard Nixon was not the first president to suffer from health issues—as it would happen, his former rival John F. Kennedy was also ridden with physical pain and frailties—but unlike in the past, this knowledge was accessible to the public. Even with Nixon's determination to fight any impending indictments, the process would be costly, not just to Nixon but also to his family. The legal proceedings would have all but certainly bankrupted the Nixon family, leaving them not only emotionally strained but financially destitute.⁴³ With the future looking murkier each day, Nixon's friend, Leonard Garment, feared that he would be driven to suicide.⁴⁴

President Ford was not oblivious to this possibility, either, and admitted that he would "never be able to forgive" himself if Nixon died, either from declining health or his own actions, when Ford had the power to put an end to his suffering.⁴⁵ Miller expressed a different fear. Any attempt to imprison Nixon would "make the United States look like a Latin American banana

⁴¹ Bob Woodward, *Shadow* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1999), 4.

⁴² Barry Werth, *31 Days: Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and a Government in Crisis* (New York, Anchor Books, 2006), 334.

⁴³ Bob Woodward, *Shadow* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1999), 20-21.

⁴⁴ Barry Werth, "The Pardon," (*Smithsonian*, February 2007).

⁴⁵ Bob Woodward, *Shadow* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1999), 22.

republic,” he feared.⁴⁶ While journalists abroad may have viewed prosecution as the reasonable course of action, there was undeniably a sense of pride that many in Washington felt for having lived in a country where their leaders had largely avoided public scandals. Whether that can be chalked up to an underlying sense of American Exceptionalism or just a general protectiveness towards the country’s reputation, many were acutely aware of the embarrassment and international shame that would accompany a Nixon indictment. And as Miller had explained to his client before, the televised nature of Watergate would render an impartial jury virtually impossible. Any juror selected for the trial would already be aware of the case, and would bring with them their own preconceived biases.

What concerned President Ford the most, and what would be the basis of his official announcement of the pardon, was how allowing the indictment to commence would affect American society as a whole. The change in atmosphere following Nixon’s resignation was clear to everyone; the nation had breathed a sigh of relief and life continued to go on. This “tranquility,” as Ford dubbed it, only existed because the country had been briefly relieved of Watergate, which had spread like a tumor over the course of the past two years.⁴⁷ The public had taken to Ford precisely because he was Nixon’s polar opposite, but Ford was not quite like most other people, either. His past experiences—lawyer, military man, athlete, representative, husband, father, Christian, placater, peacemaker—had shaped him into someone who, while perhaps a shade naive at times, was deeply mature and pragmatic. Ford had long accepted that the right course of action was not necessarily the one that produced the most immediate or emotionally-fueled results. It was clear to Ford that prosecuting Nixon was something that would only bring the people a short-lived sense of righteousness. What came next would only prolong a

⁴⁶ Ibid, 20.

⁴⁷ Gerald R. Ford, “Proclamation 4311.”

great American tragedy. “Somebody must write the end of it,” Ford told his aides.⁴⁸ He had no pretenses about who that person would be.

Naturally, Ford’s advisors saw red flags all over this. Hartmann beseeched the president to wait; a pardon was possible, but it need not be so soon. Midterm elections were only three months away, and the pardon had the potential to sway voters against Republicans, particularly the moderate ones who were now given a chance to spread their influence thanks to Ford’s position. Rockefeller, who had yet to be raised to the vice presidency, supported the pardon, and surprisingly, Jarwoski was not opposed to it either. Jarwoski’s counselor, Philip Lacovara, held the belief that the sooner the pardon, the better. The case against the defendants in the cover-up trial was scheduled to begin in a few weeks’ time and, as was customary in the US legal system, their trial would likely be dragged out for months. If Nixon was pardoned while the trial was occurring, it had the potential to affect its outcome or delegitimize the case entirely.⁴⁹

Aside from the upcoming elections, there was also a question of backlash against Ford and his administration from both Congress and the public. To pardon someone before they were indicted would garner more questions about a possible deal between Ford and Nixon, and Hartmann believed that people would come to sympathize with Nixon more the longer he was out of office. It seemed much more prudent to wait.⁵⁰

Ever the pragmatist, Ford disagreed. “If I wait six months, or a year, there will still be a firestorm from the Nixon haters. . . But most Americans will understand,” he claimed. The way he saw it, to postpone the pardon would be pointless. “If eventually, why not now?”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, (New York, HarperCollins, 2008), 31.

⁴⁹ Barry Werth, “The Pardon,” (*Smithsonian*, February 2007).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Nevertheless, Ford knew that Nixon had committed a crime. In order to move forward with his plan, he needed some kind of legal or historical justification to support his decision. He enlisted the help of his friend, attorney Benton Becker, to research any cases that could possibly be held up as a precedent for the impending pardon. After several days at work, Becker found his answer in the 1915 *Burdick v. United States* Supreme Court case. The defendant, George Burdick, was charged after publishing a series of inflammatory articles in *The New York Tribune*, only to then refuse to answer several questions when taking the stand. President Woodrow Wilson issued Burdick a blanket pardon, which he shockingly declined.⁵² His reason for doing so, according to newspaper articles at the time, was because a pardon carried “an imputation of guilt,” and that accepting it would be “a confession of it.”⁵³ This discovery solidified any trace of doubt that may have lingered for President Ford, as well as providing what he deemed an adequate compromise. Richard Nixon would not serve time in prison, but by accepting the pardon, he would essentially be confirming his own culpability. Ford’s team may have had their reservations, but his own mind was firmly set. “Once I determine to move,” he wrote on the night before the pardon, “I seldom, if ever, fret.”⁵⁴

On the morning of September 8, 1974, President Ford visited St. John’s Episcopal Church, the preferred chapel for presidents since the days of James Madison, where he prayed for “guidance and understanding.” Upon returning to the White House, he would have to begin calling congressional leaders to inform them of what was about to occur, but before then, he had rifts within his own administration to deal with.⁵⁵ Ford’s friend of twenty-five years, Jerald

⁵² Barry Werth, “The Pardon,” (*Smithsonian*, February 2007).

⁵³ Shane Scott, “For Ford, Pardon Was Always Clear-Cut,” (*The New York Times*, December 2006).

⁵⁴ Barry Werth, “The Pardon,” (*Smithsonian*, February 2007).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

terHorst, had recently been appointed as the new press secretary upon Ford's inauguration.⁵⁶ An accomplished journalist, terHorst, like Ford, began his career in Grand Rapids, Michigan, before advancing to news outlets in Detroit and Washington D.C. Most notably, terHorst had been riding in the same car as John F. Kennedy in Dallas when the former president was shot and killed. Due to both skill and chance, terHorst had climbed the ranks of the journalism world, and his devotion to the craft was unparalleled.⁵⁷

This devotion was called into question shortly after his appointment. terHorst had supported Ford for a quarter of a century, but Watergate had proven too close to home. He presented his resignation letter to President Ford upon his return to the White House that morning, and Ford received the news stoically. "I know there will be controversy over, but it's the right thing to do, and that's why I decided to do it now," he told his old friend. "I hope you can see that."⁵⁸

With the opinions of Congress, the press, and members of his own administration opposed to him, Ford took the air at 11:01 AM. Without referencing Watergate or any other specific crime Nixon had been accused of, Ford explained that the former president was now "liable to possible indictment and trial for offenses against the United States," and that "should an indictment ensue, the accused shall then be entitled to a fair trial by an impartial jury, as guaranteed to every individual by the Constitution."⁵⁹ This led to the heart of the issue, Ford argued, stating that:

⁵⁶Louis W. Liebovich, *The Press and the Modern Presidency: Myths and Mindsets from Kennedy to Clinton*, (Westport, CT. Praeger, 1998), 94.

⁵⁷ Barry Werth, *31 Days: Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and a Government in Crisis* (New York, Anchor Books, 2006), 318-319.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Gerald R. Ford, "Proclamation 4311."

It is believed that a trial of Richard Nixon, if it became necessary, could not fairly begin until a year or more has elapsed. In the meantime, the tranquility to which this nation has been restored by the events of recent weeks could be irreparably lost by the prospects of bringing to trial a former President of the United States. The prospects of such trial will cause prolonged and divisive debate over the propriety of exposing to further punishment and degradation a man who has already paid the unprecedented penalty of relinquishing the highest elective office of the United States.

Citing the right to a presidential pardon under Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution, Ford then issued a full pardon to his disgraced predecessor, Richard M. Nixon, former president of the United States of America.⁶⁰

The response was immediate. Within a matter of minutes, the White House was flooded with phone calls. The public's outrage that Richard Nixon was getting off scot-free was paralleled only by the utter shock that President Ford would issue a pardon before there had even been an indictment. In the words of Deputy Press Secretary John W. Hushen, the pardon had been "delivered . . . to the country like Pearl Harbor." While the pardon was protected by the Constitution, as Ford had attested, that did not stop the press from questioning the legality of it. Many news sources claimed the pardon was "too vague," suggesting that Ford was not even fully aware of Nixon's multitude of crimes, and that the pardon was itself an obstruction of the impeachment process.⁶¹ Between September 9th and 12th, *The New York Times* ran five separate editorials criticizing Ford, declaring the pardon a "bludgering intervention" and "an

⁶⁰ Gerald R. Ford, "Proclamation 4311."

⁶¹ As mentioned earlier, since Nixon had already resigned, he could not technically be impeached.

inappropriate and immature” decision that was “unconscionable,” “profoundly unwise, divisive, and unjust,” and “affronted the Constitution and the American system of justice.”⁶²

Overseas, the press was no kinder. Journalists in London, Paris, and Hamburg expressed shock that such a thing was even legal, and insisted that the same could not have happened in Europe. It was a double standard of power, *The Times* argued, to allow a high-ranking politician to walk free while his subordinates were put on trial. Doubt was expressed over Ford’s capabilities as a leader, and whether he had the patience or skill to occupy the Oval Office. Watergate had been a political nightmare, but it was the pardon that was now being deemed “a disaster for American prestige.”⁶³

Nixon, for his part, showed more anguish in light of the pardon than gratitude. The realization that Watergate was destined to be his legacy continued to weigh on his mind, and he once again attempted to minimize his own involvement in the scandal when issuing a statement shortly after the pardon was announced. While Nixon admitted that “mistakes” and “misjudgments” were made, he framed the admission to deflect personal responsibility. Rather than stating that these actions were his own, he instead broadened the scale by appointing the blame to “the White House” at large. Therefore it was the White House, and all its constituents that was “wrong in not acting more decisively and more forthrightly in dealing with Watergate,” not the man who had been in charge at the time.⁶⁴

Nixon’s pride and shame eventually prompted him to contact Ford eight days after the pardon. He apologized to his successor for all the grief he had caused him and offered to reject

⁶² Mark J. Rozell, “President Ford’s Pardon of Richard M. Nixon: Constitutional and Political Considerations,” (Presidential Studies Quarterly, Winter 1994).

⁶³ Leon Hurwitz, “International Press Reactions to the Resignation and Pardon of Richard M. Nixon: A Content Analysis of Four Elite Newspapers,” (Comparative Politics, 1976).

⁶⁴ Richard Ben-Veniste, “A Pardon in History’s Hindsight,” (Washington Post, December 29, 2006).

the pardon, if Ford believed that would help make matters right. President Ford realized that this was a gesture more than a genuine offer, and after coming this far, he was not backing down now. He declined Nixon's proposal, telling him, "I've done it, and I think it was the right decision, and I think history will prove my point."⁶⁵

Across the country, Americans expressed sentiments of anger and disbelief. Just when it seemed that the corruption that plagued the age of Nixon had finally subsided, any remaining hopes for justice had been dashed. The man the country had welcomed with open arms was now aiding the crook who had betrayed their trust. Once word of terHorst's resignation reached the public, he was glorified as a symbol of defiance and justice. Protesters gathered in Pittsburgh to denounce the pardon, chanting "Jail Ford!" and sporting signs that read "terHorst in '76."⁶⁶ The polls revealed an even stronger reaction: Ford's approval rating fell by 16% following the pardon,⁶⁷ and it would soon reach a low of 37% between January and March of 1975.⁶⁸

The co-conspirators that many were convinced were being conned by the pardon were far less opposed to the decision, however. Two of the aides who were eventually convicted for the role they played in Watergate, Jeb Stuart Magruder and Bob Haldeman, both approved of Ford's pardon, agreeing that the nation would only be further damaged by the indictment of a former president.⁶⁹ It stands to question if, as two men who devoted their careers to supporting and protecting President Nixon, Magruder and Haldeman viewed their own conviction as a

⁶⁵ Barry Werth, *31 Days: Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and a Government in Crisis* (New York, Anchor Books, 2006), 334.

⁶⁶ Barry Werth, *31 Days: Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and a Government in Crisis* (New York, Anchor Books, 2006), 331.

⁶⁷ Mark J. Rozell, "President Ford's Pardon of Richard M. Nixon: Constitutional and Political Considerations," (Presidential Studies Quarterly, Winter 1994).

⁶⁸ "Presidential Approval Ratings—Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends." Gallup News.

⁶⁹ Mark J. Rozell, "President Ford's Pardon."

preferable alternative to the disgraced former president suffering the same fate. Either way, neither men expressed any dissent with President Ford's decision.

Neither the press nor the people retaliated as fiercely as Congress, however. While Ford had the support of his soon-to-be Vice President, Rockefeller, the majority of politicians were infuriated by the pardon. Only a few weeks prior, on August 22, the House Judiciary Committee had issued a report on Nixon's involvement with Watergate. Approved by 412 votes to 3, the report claimed that there was "clear and convincing evidence" that Nixon had "condoned, encouraged . . . directed, coached, and personally helped to fabricate perjury."⁷⁰ With their efforts now invalidated, Congress was forced to look for other methods of compensation.

Leon Jaworski quickly confirmed that the pardon was constitutionally legal—and therefore could not land President Ford in prison—but after a decade of Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon continuously pushing the boundaries of presidential power, Capitol Hill had finally had enough.⁷¹ The following year, Congress passed the Presidential Recordings and Materials Act, which demanded that the National Archives seize any and all of Nixon's papers, records, and tapes that could be connected to Watergate. Up until now, all presidents had had a right to claim their tapes and files upon leaving office, which for Nixon included 950 reels and 46 million pages of documents. Some materials had already been shipped to Nixon's California estate, but Ford was now forced to order the rest to remain in the Washington's custody. In the meantime, Senate passed a resolution forbidding more Watergate pardons until the defendants had been tried and convicted, and the House passed two resolutions requiring the White House to submit "full and complete information and facts" regarding how the decision was made.⁷²

⁷⁰ Barry Werth, "The Pardon," (*Smithsonian*, February 2007).

⁷¹ Mark J. Rozell, "President Ford's Pardon of Richard M. Nixon: Constitutional and Political Considerations," (*Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Winter 1994).

⁷² Barry Werth, "The Pardon."

Additional limitations were also placed on the president's power over "budget making and war making."⁷³ Ford had not shown any inclination to issue more pardons, and he had expected a backlash from Congress, but the restraints now being placed on the president's authority was unprecedented.

The remainder of Ford's term was consistently tumultuous. The president was simultaneously suspected of being both a dunce who was incapable of making rational decisions, and a schemer who had clawed his way to the top.⁷⁴ Lyndon B. Johnson's quip that Ford could not "walk and chew gum at the same time" was now re-circulating among critics, and he was frequently lampooned as a clumsy fool on *Saturday Night Live*. In an attempt to be a good sport, Ford agreed to appear in three taped appearances on the show, but even this was criticized as an act of "legitimiz[ing] lampooning."⁷⁵

Reporters began attacking Ford's every move. Any mistake made, such as mispronouncing someone's name or merely tripping on the steps, was suddenly front-page news. Ford's attempts to foster improved relationships with China and the Soviet Union were decried as "unnecessary politicking," done to create an image boost. In an effort to rouse spirits in the face of the struggling economy, Ford tried to imitate Franklin Delano Roosevelt's patriotic efforts by producing Whip Inflation Now (WIN) badges. This, naturally, was painted by the press as manipulation.⁷⁶

Even within his own cabinet, Ford faced opposition. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger frequently and publicly disobeyed direct orders, resulting in Ford's humiliation and

⁷³ Bob Woodward, *Shadow* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1999), 30.

⁷⁴ Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, (New York, HarperCollins, 2008), 29.

⁷⁵ Louis W. Liebovich, *The Press and the Modern Presidency: Myths and Mindsets from Kennedy to Clinton*, 96-97.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 96-98.

Schlesinger's discharge.⁷⁷ Tensions within the Republican Party took a turn for the worst following the November 1974 election, when the Democrats gained forty-nine seats in the House and five seats in the Senate.⁷⁸ At this point, fellow moderate Republicans had all but lost their influence, and in their place was the emerging far-right.⁷⁹

"What [Ford] had portrayed as an act of mercy for a broken man was bitterly attacked as a betrayal of justice, even as a 'deal' secretly arranged in advance with Nixon," Jerald terHorst later explained. "Newspapers, network commentators, and private citizens from coast to coast expressed their outrage and dismay. Instead of encouraging the healing process as he had hoped, Ford had reopened the Watergate wound and rubbed salt into the public nerve ends thus exposed."⁸⁰

President Ford's explanation was much simpler: "I thought people would consider his resignation from the Presidency as sufficient punishment and shame. I thought there would be greater forgiveness."⁸¹

Ford's tenure saw the end of American involvement in Vietnam, bringing with it both a sense of relief and an air of shame among the public for having seemingly achieved nothing after a decade involved in such a horrendous mess. In September of 1975, Ford survived two separate assassination attempts, making him the only president to be nearly-assassinated by a woman (two women, no less), as well as the only president to nearly be killed by an acolyte of Charles Manson.⁸² As far as women went, however, the public eventually began to soften towards the

⁷⁷ Bob Woodward, *Shadow* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1999), 34.

⁷⁸ Mark J. Rozell, "President Ford's Pardon of Richard M. Nixon: Constitutional and Political Considerations," (Presidential Studies Quarterly, Winter 1994).

⁷⁹ Barry Werth, "The Pardon," (*Smithsonian*, February 2007).

⁸⁰ Mark J. Rozell, "President Ford's Pardon of Richard M. Nixon: Constitutional and Political Considerations," (Presidential Studies Quarterly, Winter 1994).

⁸¹ Barry Werth, *31 Days: Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and a Government in Crisis* (New York, Anchor Books, 2006), 330.

⁸² Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, (New York, HarperCollins, 2008), 64.

Ford family, thanks to Betty's influence. The First Lady was uncommonly candid for her time, and in various interviews she expressed support for women's and equal rights, the right to abortion, and a quasi-libertarian indifference to marijuana use. While this was considered scandalous to conservatives in Congress, a surprising number of Americans responded warmly to Betty's progressivism. Her popularity among young women continued to grow after Betty underwent a mastectomy in 1974 and then chose to discuss her decision publicly as a way to raise cancer awareness. She would later go on to discuss her struggles with alcoholism and eventually found a rehabilitation center, further broadening her scale of admirers.⁸³

In spite of his original lack of presidential ambition, Ford decided to run for election in 1976. At this point, approval of the Nixon pardon had dropped to 35%,⁸⁴ and the far-right seized the opportunity to increase their influence. Rather than throw his support behind the sitting president, former California governor Ronald Reagan challenged Ford for the candidacy. Although Reagan was eventually defeated, it was a close call,⁸⁵ and many Republican voters appeared to agree with the far-right's claim that the United States was dropping to "second-class status."⁸⁶ In an effort to placate the party, Rockefeller agreed to step down as Vice President following the end of the current term (a decision Ford later regretted, blaming his own "cowardice"), and Ford selected Bob Dole as his new running mate.⁸⁷

His opponent would be Jimmy Carter, the Georgia governor who also came from a humble background and was similarly distrusted by his own party. His status as an outsider worked in his favor, however, as it allowed him to separate himself from the pollution of

⁸³ Louis W. Liebovich, *The Press and the Modern Presidency Myths and Mindsets from Kennedy to Clinton*, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 101.

⁸⁴ Joseph Carroll, "Americans Grew to Accept Nixon's Pardon."

⁸⁵ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Gerald Ford Retrospective," (Gallup, 2006).

⁸⁶ Louis W. Liebovich, *The Press and the Modern Presidency*, 101.

⁸⁷ Bob Woodward, *Shadow* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1999), 34.

Watergate and the rest of the baggage attached to politics in the seventies. Most of all, Carter presented himself as the candidate with the “high moral character of the American people,”⁸⁸ and the people responded with their ballots. Carter won the 1976 election by a margin of 50.1% to Ford’s 48%, bringing an end to President Ford’s short but turbulent tenure in the Oval Office.⁸⁹

Ford’s loss may have seemed inevitable given the circumstances, but what is more curious are the statistics. The margin between the two candidates is remarkably slim—more so than in 1960, which remains controversial to this day for having possibly been fixed—and Ford was still able to muster 241 electoral votes. One could blame this on a reluctance to vote for Carter as well as Ford, since the voter turnout was the lowest since 1948, at a meager 54%.⁹⁰ There is reason, however, to question whether public support for Gerald Ford may have been growing. Although the pardon itself still had a low approval rating, Ford’s presidential approval rating was slowly increasing, and by the time he left office in January 1977, it had risen to 53%.⁹¹ After leaving office, this trend in popularity continued. While Americans were most likely to describe Ford’s presidency as “average,” his approval ratings remained stable, with the average from 1990 to 1993 being 54%. Between 1999 and 2006, the year of Ford’s death, his average approval rating jumped a full ten points to 64%.⁹²

The same polls that had shown the unpopularity of the Nixon pardon soon began showing a change in direction. By 1982, the number of Americans who supported the pardon had risen to 46%. Four years later, in 1986, the approval rating reached 54%, with the percentage of

⁸⁸ Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan*, (New York, HarperCollins, 2008), 70.

⁸⁹ Louis W. Liebovich, *The Press and the Modern Presidency: Myths and Mindsets from Kennedy to Clinton*, (Westport, CT. Praeger, 1998), 101.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Jeffrey M. Jones, “Gerald Ford Retrospective,” (Gallup, 2006).

⁹² Ibid.

Americans opposed to the pardon hitting a new low of 39%.⁹³ Over the span of ten years, the Nixon pardon had gone from being hugely unpopular to accepted and even supported by the majority of the American public.

Not everyone has been so forgiving, of course. Detractors argue that the pardon set a bad precedent for future presidents, allowing them to be “above the law.” This stance is most prevalent among liberal journalists who believe that Reagan’s and George H.W. Bush’s dealings with the Iran-Contra were excused too easily, and that both presidents may have been guilty of crimes that have been swept under the rug.⁹⁴ When Congress conducted investigations of the CIA, FBI, and NSA in the years following Watergate and found unsatisfactory results, little was done to temper this.⁹⁵ In addition to that, critics argue that the interpersonal factors behind the pardon should not have been permitted interference with the judicial process: poor health should not be an excuse to avoid justice, and Ford let this and his friendship with Nixon affect his judgement.⁹⁶ Lastly, modern critics of the pardon claim that Ford was shirking responsibility by pardoning Nixon. “Stability and confidence” were mere code words for avoiding messy conflict, and partisan warfare only grew more severe in the ensuing decades.⁹⁷

These detractors all make valid points, although it must be noted that these renewed denouncements of the Nixon pardon were issued only a few years after 9/11, at the height of George W. Bush’s presidency and the conflict in the Middle East. Presentism was a clear factor at play here, much like how the current presidency of Donald Trump is coloring the way Americans view history today. That does not invalidate their arguments—on the contrary, it adds

⁹³ Joseph Carroll, “Americans Grew to Accept Nixon’s Pardon,” (Gallup News, 2001).

⁹⁴ Timothy Noah, “Why Pardoning Nixon Was Wrong,” (Slate Magazine, December 29, 2006).

⁹⁵ Rick Perlstein, “Watergate’s Most Lasting Sin,” (Salon, September 8, 2014).

⁹⁶ Timothy Noah, “Why Pardoning Nixon Was Wrong.”

⁹⁷ Rick Perlstein, “Watergate’s Most Lasting Sin.”

a great deal of perspective—but it does create a certain bias that does not necessarily represent the country as a whole.

For contrast, there is the 2006 retrospective Gallup poll, conducted over thirty years after the pardon, which found that 60% of Americans approved of Gerald Ford's presidency.⁹⁸ Very few inquiries have been made as for why Americans, beginning in the early eighties and continuing into the modern day, have softened towards Ford and the pardon they had once protested so fiercely, but we can attempt to extricate an explanation based on the events that followed the pardon. For one, Richard Nixon was never able to return to the world of politics. While he managed to live another twenty years, his political influence was largely lost, meaning that while Nixon did not serve any time in prison, he was no longer a recurring presence in the everyday American's life. Secondly, Ford's image was redeemed to a degree by Jimmy Carter's lackluster tenure in office. Both one-term presidents, Ford had a generally higher average approval rating (47.2% to Carter's 45.5%) and whereas Ford's lowest approval rating was a meager 37%, Carter's came in at a whopping 28%, nearly as low as Nixon's had been.⁹⁹ The country still struggled with unemployment, inflation, and oil shortages with a Democrat in office, only now at least the evening news was not being bombarded with snapshots of Watergate. Ford's term also represented something more persistent: self-segregation by party was at its lowest in the mid-70s, and compromise in Congress was not unattainable. Historians have even gone as far as to dub the period the "Golden Age of Bipartisanship."¹⁰⁰ (Which begs the question: were investigations during the Reagan and Bush administrations derailed because of Ford's precedent, or was it rather because Congress was less capable of cooperating?). In this

⁹⁸ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Gerald Ford Retrospective," (Gallup, 2006).

⁹⁹ "Presidential Approval Ratings -- Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends." Gallup News.

¹⁰⁰ Timothy Noah, "Washington's Jones for Gerald Ford," (Slate Magazine, December 27, 2006).

respect, America truly had achieved the “tranquility” Ford had praised, and it was lost after he left office. It stands to reason that as the political parties grew less cooperative and more clannish, a portion of the country came to long for the days of bipartisanship, and the largely-centrist leader who oversaw them.

Perhaps the most notable factor, however, was the change of direction within the media. Whereas the average American recovered from Watergate by the mid-eighties, it took the press an additional ten years. “I’m Sorry, Mr. President,” read the headline of a 1996 Richard Reeves article, and he was not the only one.¹⁰¹ Bob Woodward’s change of heart began around the same time, realizing that Ford had “all the right instincts for that moment in history.” At this point in time, Richard Nixon had passed away, with the shame of Watergate having indeed been the punishment Ford had foreseen for him. Woodward compared the two, stating that, “Nixon was a hater. . . Ford was the opposite of this.” He even expressed some regret over Ford’s 1976 loss, insisting that “only those who are willing to lose for principles should win in the polls.”¹⁰²

Journalists who had neglected to announce their reversal in opinions came forward following Gerald Ford’s death on December 26, 2006. Ford “threw himself on a grenade to protect the country from shame,” Peggy Noonan declared.¹⁰³ *The New York Times* writer Roger Wilkins put forth his own acquiescence. “Ford was right,” he wrote. “The country really needed to move on. . . If Ford hadn’t done a thing else in his presidency, that would have been a great service to the country.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Barry Werth, *31 Days: Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and a Government in Crisis* (New York, Anchor Books, 2006), 343.

¹⁰² Tian Lee, “Woodward: President Ford Knew What Needed to be Done,” (The University Record Online, April 10, 2006).

¹⁰³ Rick Perlstein, “Watergate’s Most Lasting Sin,” (Salon, September 8, 2014).

¹⁰⁴ Peter Baker, “38th President Leaves a Legacy of Healing,” (Washington Post, December 28, 2006).

At Gerald Ford's funeral, various speakers took the podium to praise the unlikely president. "For a nation that needed healing and for an office that needed a calm and steady hand, Gerald Ford came along when we needed him," President George W. Bush said. Jimmy Carter's commemoration was even grander. Once political rivals, Ford and Carter became close friends later on in life, with Carter claiming he was "one of the most admirable public servants and human beings I have ever known." When faced with a difficult decision, Ford "wisely chose the path of healing during a deeply divisive time in our nation's history" and "frequently rose above politics by emphasizing the need for bipartisanship and seeking common ground on issues critical to our nation."¹⁰⁵ Everything Ford valued most—forgiveness, pragmatism, human decency—was now being honored in his memory. But beneath the pageantry, the final message came down to what Roger Wilkins had summed up in three words: Ford was right.

Prior to his death, Gerald Ford remained immersed in politics, preferring to do so from a less public vantage point. He had been critical of the country's foreign intervention and, alongside his wife, had professed support for LGBT rights, but what concerned him most had been the lack of cooperation among the political parties.¹⁰⁶ Ford had always been willing to compromise, and as it would happen, that was what required the most bravery in the face of Watergate, America's seemingly unending nightmare. In 2001, that bravery was formally rewarded when Ford was presented with the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation's Profile in Courage Award.¹⁰⁷ The pardon, which had once been the bane that allowed the press to hound Ford for years and arguably cost him the 1976 election, was now regarded as his greatest achievement, the only bright spot in the midst of a disastrous scandal. In retrospect, this was an

¹⁰⁵ Peter Baker, "38th President Leaves a Legacy of Healing," (Washington Post, December 28, 2006).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Shane Scott, "For Ford, Pardon Was Always Clear-Cut," (The New York Times, December 2006).

even greater hurdle for the man who had never wanted to be president than it had seemed at the time. “What he inherited was a series of problems,” wrote Ford’s biography, James Cannon. “He inherited a recession, the worst since the Great Depression. He inherited Vietnam, which four presidents had been unable to end, and he ended it—raggedly, but he ended it. Most of all, he restored the integrity of the presidency.”¹⁰⁸ With history now on his side, it appears the nation finally agrees.

¹⁰⁸ Peter Baker, “38th President Leaves a Legacy of Healing,” (Washington Post, December 28, 2006).

Works Cited

- Baker, Peter. "38th President Leaves a Legacy of Healing." *Washington Post*. December 28, 2006. Accessed November 30, 2017. <http://www.washingtonpost.com>
- Ben-Veniste, Richard. "Richard Ben-Veniste - The Pardon in History's Hindsight." *The Washington Post*. December 29, 2006. Accessed October 29, 2017. <http://www.washingtonpost.com>
- Clymer, Adam. "At First, Nixon Spurned Idea of a Pardon, Lawyer Says." *The New York Times*, November 13, 1999. Accessed October 12, 2017. ProQuest.
- Carroll, Joseph. "Americans Grew to Accept Nixon's Pardon." *Gallup News*. May 21, 2001. Accessed November 06, 2017. <http://news.gallup.com/poll/3157/americans-grew-accept-nixons-pardon.aspx>
- Finkelstein, Mark. "Bernstein: Ford's Nixon Pardon 'Right Thing To Do'." *NewsBusters*. March 9, 2011. Accessed October 12, 2017. <http://www.newsbusters.org>.
- Ford, Gerald R. "Proclamation 4311—Granting Pardon to Richard Nixon," September 8, 1974. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=4696>.
- Gibbs, Nancy, and Michael Duffy. "The Other Born-Again President?" *Time*. January 2, 2007. Accessed November 30, 2017. <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1573304-1,00.html>.
- Greene, John Robert. "Gerald Ford: Life Before the Presidency." *Miller Center*. July 17, 2017. Accessed November 08, 2017. <https://millercenter.org/president/ford/life-before-the-presidency>.
- Hurwitz, Leon, Barbara Green, and Hans E. Segal. "International Press Reactions to the Resignation and Pardon of Richard M. Nixon: A Content Analysis of Four Elite Newspapers." *Comparative Politics*. 1st ed. Vol. 9. New York, NY: Comparative Politics, Ph.D Programs in Political Science, City University of New York, 1976. 107-23. Accessed October 12, 2017. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/421294>.
- Jones, Jeffrey M. "Gerald Ford Retrospective." *Gallup News*. December 29, 2006. Accessed November 06, 2017. <http://news.gallup.com/poll/23995/gerald-ford-retrospective.aspx>.

Lee, Tian. "Woodward: President Ford Knew What Needed to be Done." *The University Record Online*. April 10, 2006. Accessed October 29, 2017. <http://ur.umich.edu>

Liebovich, Louis W. *The Press and the Modern Presidency: Myths and Mindsets from Kennedy to Clinton*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998.

Nixon, Richard M. "President Nixon's Resignation Speech." *Character Above All Else: An Exploration of Presidential Leadership*. Accessed November 30, 2017. <http://www.pbs.org>

Noah, Timothy. "Washington's Jones for Gerald Ford." *Slate Magazine*. December 27, 2006. Accessed October 29, 2017. <http://www.slate.com>

Noah, Timothy. "Why pardoning Nixon was wrong." *Slate Magazine*. December 29, 2006. Accessed October 29, 2017. <http://www.slate.com>

Perlstein, Rick. "Watergate's Most Lasting Sin: Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, and the Pardon that Made Us All Cynics." *Salon*. September 08, 2014. Accessed October 29, 2017.

"Presidential Approval Ratings -- Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends." *Gallup News*. Accessed November 06, 2017. <http://news.gallup.com>

Rozell, Mark J. "President Ford's Pardon of Richard M. Nixon: Constitutional and Political Considerations." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*; Washington 24.1 (Winter 1994): 121. Accessed October 12, 2017. ProQuest.

Scott, Shane. "Critics of Ford's Nixon Pardon Now Call It Wise - Americas - International Herald Tribune." *The New York Times*. December 29, 2006. Accessed October 12, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com>

Scott, Shane. "For Ford, Pardon Decision Was Always Clear-Cut." *The New York Times*, December 2006, Late Edition (East Coast) ed. Accessed October 12, 2017. ProQuest.

Werth, Barry. "The Pardon." *Smithsonian* 37, no. 11 (February 2007): 54-62. *America: History & Life*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 12, 2017).

Werth, Barry. *31 Days: Gerald Ford, The Nixon Pardon, and a Government in Crisis*. New York: Anchor Books, 2006.

Wilentz, Sean. *The Age of Reagan*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008.

Woodward, Bob. *Shadow: Five Presidents and the Legacy of Watergate*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1999.

"38th President Leaves A Legacy of Healing." The Washington Post. December 28, 2006.
Accessed October 29, 2017. <http://www.washingtonpost.com>