

American History: Ford Leads Nation After Nixon Resigns



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U.S. Chief Justice Warren Burger administers the oath of office to Gerald Ford, whose wife, Betty, is at center

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STEVE EMBER: Welcome to THE MAKING OF A NATION -- American history in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.

This week in our series, we tell the story of the thirty-eighth president of the United States.

GERALD FORD: "Mr. Chief Justice, my dear friends, my fellow Americans, the oath that I have taken is the same oath that was taken by George Washington and by every president under the Constitution. But I assume the presidency under extraordinary circumstances, never before experienced by Americans."

(MUSIC)

Gerald Ford was sworn into office on August ninth, nineteen seventy-four. Ford was vice president to Richard Nixon, who had announced the day before that he would resign.

If Nixon had not resigned, he might have been removed from office. Congress had been moving to charge him with corruption in the Watergate case.

At his swearing-in ceremony, the new president spoke about the nation's future.

GERALD FORD: "My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over. Our Constitution works. Our great republic is a government of laws and not of men. Here the people rule."

He went on to say:

GERALD FORD: "As we bind up the internal wounds of Watergate -- more painful and more poisonous than those of foreign wars -- let us restore the 'Golden Rule' to our political process and let brotherly love purge our hearts of suspicion and of hate."

Gerald Ford became the only leader in American history to have served both as vice president and president without being elected.

Richard Nixon chose him as vice president in October nineteen-seventy-three. That was when Nixon's former vice president, Spiro Agnew, resigned because of criminal charges that he failed to pay his taxes.

When Nixon himself resigned, Ford became president.

Ford was a longtime congressman from the state of Michigan. He was well-liked by his congressional colleagues. His education was in economics and political science at the University of Michigan. Then he attended Yale Law School. During World War Two, he served as a Naval officer in the Pacific.

After the war, Ford entered politics. He was a member of the Republican Party. He was first elected to the House of Representatives in nineteen forty-eight. He won re-election twelve times. Republicans in the House elected him the minority leader during the administration of Democratic President Lyndon Johnson.

Ford was still minority leader when Richard Nixon, a fellow Republican, was elected president in nineteen sixty-eight. In his leadership position, Ford helped win approval of a number of Nixon's proposals. He became known for his strong loyalty to the president. It was no surprise, then, when Nixon named Ford as vice president.

Gerald Ford was an "accidental president." He came to office in a sudden turn of events. Almost as suddenly, he had to decide what to do about the former president.

After Nixon left office, he could have been charged with crimes for his part in covering up the events of Watergate. Instead, one month after Nixon resigned,

President Ford settled the question. He pardoned Nixon for any crimes that he might have committed.

The pardoning of Nixon made many Americans angry. Some believed he should have been put on trial. They thought he might have answered more questions about Watergate if he had not been pardoned.

Ford said he pardoned Nixon in an effort to unite the country. For a while, though, the pardon only seemed to intensify the divisions.

REPRESENTATIVE ELIZABETH HOLTZMAN: "And I wondered if anyone had brought to your attention the fact that the Constitution specifically states that, even though somebody is impeached, that person shall nonetheless be liable to punishment according to law."

In October nineteen seventy-four, President Ford appeared before a congressional hearing on the pardon. He gave a strong response to questioning by Democratic Representative Elizabeth Holtzman.

GERALD FORD: "Mrs. Holtzman, I was fully cognizant of the fact that the president, on resignation, was accountable for any criminal charges. But I would like to say that the reason I gave the pardon was not as to Mr. Nixon himself.



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I repeat – and I repeat with emphasis: The purpose of the pardon was to try and get the United States, the Congress, the president, and the American people focusing on the serious problems we have, both at home and abroad.

"And I was absolutely convinced then, as I am now, that if we had had this series – an indictment, a trial, a conviction, and anything else that transpired after that – that the attention of the president, the congress, and the American people would have been diverted from the problems that we have to solve. And that was the principal reason for my granting of the pardon."

(MUSIC)

Anger about the pardon was still strong when President Ford made another controversial decision. He pardoned men who had illegally avoided military service in the Vietnam War.

Most of them were not sent to prison. Instead, they were offered a chance to do work for their communities. Many of the men, however, did not accept the

president's offer. Some stayed in Canada or other countries where they had fled to avoid the draft.

President Ford received greater public support when he asked Congress to limit the activities of the nation's intelligence agencies. He hoped better control would prevent future administrations from abusing the constitutional rights of Americans, as Nixon had done.

On another issue, Ford, while serving as vice president, had described inflation as America's "public enemy number one." He had supported several measures to fight it. As president, however, an economic recession forced him to cancel some of those measures. Inflation decreased during the recession, but unemployment increased.

On foreign policy issues, Ford kept Henry Kissinger as secretary of state. Kissinger had won much praise for his service to Richard Nixon, including in the opening of diplomatic ties with Communist China.

But Kissinger had also received much criticism. Critics accused him of interfering with civil liberties in the name of national security. They also accused him of supporting the overthrow of the Marxist government of Salvador Allende in Chile.

By the time Ford became president, the United States and the Soviet Union had taken steps to try to limit the spread of nuclear weapons. Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev had signed two such agreements as part of the détente policy to ease Cold War tensions. Relations with China were also less tense than before.



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U.S. Marine helicopter crewmen carry Vietnamese civilians to safety aboard the U.S.S. Blue Ridge on April 29, 1975. Their evacuation helicopter crashed on the deck of the amphibious command ship.

American policy in Southeast Asia, however, had failed. Involvement in the Vietnam War had officially ended the year before Gerald Ford became president. But fighting continued between South Vietnam and communist forces from the North.

The peace agreement signed by the United States and North Vietnam in nineteen seventy-three left South Vietnam to defend itself. By nineteen seventy-five, South Vietnamese forces were clearly in danger of defeat.

President Ford tried to prevent a communist takeover. He asked Congress to approve seven hundred million dollars in military aid for South Vietnam. Congress said no. The American people were tired of paying for the war.

(SOUND)

Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital, fell to communist forces on April thirtieth, nineteen seventy-five.

President Ford ordered the rescue of American citizens and South Vietnamese who had supported the American efforts. Few people who saw those struggling to escape Saigon will ever forget that day.

MARINE AT AMERICAN EMBASSY: "Please stop pushing – one at a time."

Terrified Vietnamese were screaming for help at the American Embassy. Everyone was pushing, trying to escape the city. Some held on to overloaded military helicopters as the aircraft tried to take off.

As a signal to American citizens to prepare to leave, Armed Forces Radio had played the song "White Christmas."

(MUSIC: "White Christmas"/Bing Crosby)

Some were to go to an apartment building where a helicopter would pick them up from the roof. But other people also tried to get onto the helicopter -- a scene captured in a famous news photo of the fall of Saigon.

The former South Vietnamese capital was renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

(MUSIC)

In the Middle East, Henry Kissinger led negotiations after the nineteen seventy-three Arab-Israeli war. Israel agreed to give up some captured territory. In return, the United States promised not to recognize or deal with the Palestine Liberation Organization unless the PLO met certain conditions.

In September nineteen seventy-five, Israel and Egypt signed an agreement that included permission for American civilians to act as observers along the ceasefire lines. Henry Kissinger was praised for his peacemaking efforts, though peace in the Middle East would remain a challenge for future administrations.

(MUSIC)

At home, things seemed better as the presidential election campaign of nineteen seventy-six began. That year marked the nation's two hundredth birthday. The United States was not fighting any wars. Unemployment remained high, but inflation had eased. Most importantly, Gerald Ford had led the country through the difficult period after Watergate.

The nineteen seventy-six election will be our story next week.

(MUSIC)

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Contributing: Jerilyn Watson