

Former US President Gerald Ford dies

Pardoned Nixon for Watergate crimes

By David Walsh
28 December 2006

Gerald Ford, the 38th president of the United States, died December 26 at the age of 93 at his home in Rancho Mirage, California.

Ford, the only occupant of the White House who was never elected to national office, assumed the presidency at a time of intense political crisis, in August 1974 following the resignation of Richard Nixon.

One month later, in the act for which he is best known, Ford pardoned Nixon for crimes he committed in the Watergate scandal, contrary to the wishes of the vast majority of the American people. In the 1976 presidential election Ford was narrowly defeated by Democrat Jimmy Carter, a loss generally attributed to his decision to allow the hated Nixon to go scot-free.

Besides his pardon of Nixon, other major events of Ford's administration include his denial of federal aid to New York City in 1975 when the city hovered on the brink of bankruptcy—which prompted the famous *New York Daily News* headline, “Ford to City; Drop Dead”—and the fall of Saigon to North Vietnamese troops in April of the same year.

Adhering to a pattern that has become standardized and entirely predictable, the American media and political establishment has fallen to eulogizing Ford in the most fulsome manner. The dead politician is remembered as a healer of the nation's wounds, a selfless leader, a man gifted with the “common touch,” an individual of unimpeachable integrity, and so forth.

According to George W. Bush, Ford “reflected the best in America's character.” The current president, whose father served in the Ford administration as CIA director, asserted that the deceased man “stepped into the presidency without ever having sought the office. He assumed power in a period of great division and turmoil. 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 most.”

Vice President Dick Cheney, who, along with former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld, also served in the Ford administration, praised the former president in equally improbable terms, claiming that when Ford “left office, he had restored public trust in the presidency, and the nation once again looked to the future with confidence and faith.”

Former President Carter weighed in, calling Ford “an outstanding statesman” who “wisely chose the path of healing during a deeply divisive time in our nation's history.” Bill and Hillary Clinton issued a statement praising Ford for having “brought Americans together during a difficult chapter in our history.”

The tumultuous episode to which the various politicians refer—without, however, illuminating any of its essential features—was the Watergate scandal of 1972-74 and, beyond that, the explosive state of American political life in the early years of that decade.

The immediate incident involved a break-in at the Democratic National Committee offices at Washington's Watergate complex in June 1972. One of the five individuals apprehended was an official of the Committee to Re-Elect the President (i.e., Nixon), James McCord. The others were Cuban exiles with longstanding connections to American intelligence.

The evidence ultimately pointed to the involvement of White House officials and Nixon himself.

The background to the scandal which unfolded over the next two years, culminating in Nixon's resignation in disgrace in August 1974, was a growing political and economic crisis of the postwar American and world order.

By the early 1970s, US engagement in Southeast Asia was proving disastrous. Despite the infusion of massive numbers of troops and savage bombings, the American military and the army of the South Vietnamese stooge regime were steadily losing ground to the Vietnamese national liberation forces. Opposition within the American population was growing, as the proliferation of anti-war demonstrations, some of them vast in size, demonstrated. The eventual withdrawal of US troops in March 1973 represented a humiliating defeat for the American ruling elite.

Hostility to the war nourished social conflicts in the US. The civil rights movement had mobilized millions of blacks, including some of the most oppressed layers of the working class. In the late 1960s, virtually every major American urban center witnessed rioting and upheavals. Militant labor struggles shook various industries and services. Major strikes occurred at General Motors, General Electric, the US Postal Service, and on the docks. American workers were not prepared to see their living standards sacrificed to the overseas ambitions of the corporate and political elite.

The global position of American capitalism, which had seemed so unassailable in the immediate postwar years, was visibly deteriorating. Powerful economic challenges were emerging in Asia and Europe. The “American Century,” proclaimed by Henry Luce on the eve of US entry into the Second World War, was threatening to be remarkably short-lived.

The postwar economic arrangements, anchored by the American dollar as the basis of international exchange, threatened to unravel as the US economy was gripped by a balance of payments crisis, worsened by budget deficits and the cost of the Vietnam War. Vast foreign dollar holdings dwarfed US gold reserves and obliged Nixon in August 1971 to remove the gold backing from the dollar, which had been established at the 1944 Bretton Woods conference, inaugurating a system of floating currencies. By the end of that year, the value of imports exceeded that of exports and the US registered its first balance of payments deficit in the twentieth century.

In the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War in October 1973 between Israel and various Arab powers, the Arab embargo on shipments of oil to Europe and the US wreaked economic havoc. Drivers lined up for hours at gas stations in the US as prices (and tempers) soared. Thousands of independent truckers went on strike, blocking the highways. Factory output fell by 10 percent in 1974 and joblessness nearly doubled. The country teetered on the edge of political and social chaos.

Under these conditions, with the Watergate scandal spreading like a “cancer on the presidency,” the American ruling elite lost confidence in

Nixon and the decision was taken to remove him, or at least prepare for that eventuality. The first step was the removal of Nixon's vice president, Spiro Agnew, a former governor of Maryland and Nixon's hatchet man in attacking anti-war opponents. He was forced to resign his office in October 1973 after charges of tax evasion and money laundering were brought against him.

Veteran Michigan Congressman Gerald Ford, a Republican politician little known beyond the confines of the capital, but one deemed a more dependable and less polarizing figure than either Agnew or Nixon, was appointed vice president by Nixon and confirmed by Congress in December 1973.

Ford had proven his reliability and loyalty to the ruling elite over the course of decades of undistinguished service in the House of Representatives. Born in Nebraska but raised in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Ford was first elected to Congress from a conservative district in western Michigan in 1948. He was elected 12 more times, eventually rising to the position of Republican leader in the House in 1965. In 25 years in Congress his name was not attached to one major piece of legislation.

A fairly typical Eisenhower Republican, a narrow representative of Midwestern business interests, Ford opposed public housing, the minimum wage and repeal of the anti-union Taft-Hartley Act. However, he also voted against the poll tax, which kept African-Americans and the poor from voting, and he voted for the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. He was an early supporter of the Vietnam War, calling for the bombing of North Vietnam and a naval blockade.

With the election of Nixon in 1968, Ford became a loyal spokesman and advocate for the Republican president's policies. In 1970, in retaliation for Democratic blockage of several of Nixon's Supreme Court nominees, Ford launched an effort to impeach William O. Douglas, the most liberal of the Supreme Court justices, on trumped up charges.

After the Watergate break-in, Ford worked assiduously to prevent an investigation into the episode—a fact not mentioned in any of the glowing obituaries this week.

Ford and one of his protégés from Michigan led the effort to prevent Democrat Wright Patman's House Banking and Commerce Committee from conducting hearings into the burglary at the Democratic Party headquarters. It has been suggested that Ford's nomination as vice president was a payoff for his work in preventing a full investigation of Watergate prior to the 1972 presidential election, easily won by Nixon.

Despite a growing body of evidence, Ford continued to vigorously defend Nixon in late 1973 and early 1974, a fact also not mentioned in the obituaries.

On January 15, 1974, for example, speaking at a convention of a conservative farmers' organization, Vice President Ford accused "the AFL-CIO, the Americans for Democratic Action and other powerful pressure organizations" of "waging a massive propaganda campaign against the president of the United States." Ford went on to declare ominously, "If they can crush the president and his philosophy, they are convinced that they can dominate the Congress and, through it, the nation." He denounced what he called "the relatively small group of activists who are out to impeach the president."

As late as July 6, 1974, the vice president told a news conference that "I have detected a movement in the House that is favorable to the president... No impeachable offense has been found... the case has not been made." Even after the House Judiciary Committee voted for a third article of impeachment against Nixon on July 30, Ford continued to argue for his innocence.

Ford claimed that only when he was presented with incontrovertible evidence by White House Chief of Staff Alexander Haig on August 1, in the form of damning taped conversations between Nixon and his aides pertaining to Watergate, was he convinced of the president's guilt.

According to journalist Bob Woodward, Haig asked Ford that

afternoon, "'Are you ready, Mr. Vice President, to assume the presidency in a short period of time?' New Watergate tapes, he said, would show Nixon had ordered the cover-up of the burglary. Ford was stunned."

Woodward writes that Haig presented Ford with a number of options, including three involving pardon: Nixon pardoning himself and resigning, pardoning his aides and stepping down or resigning in return for an agreement that the new President Ford would pardon him.

In Woodward's account, "Haig handed Ford two pieces of paper. The first sheet contained a handwritten summary of a president's legal authority to pardon. The second sheet was a draft pardon form that only needed Ford's signature and Nixon's name to make it legal. 'It's my understanding from a White House lawyer,' Haig said, 'that the president does have authority to pardon even before criminal action has been taken against an individual.'"

Ford later claimed that no deal with Haig or Nixon on a pardon had ever been reached. There is good reason to doubt this.

In any event, Nixon resigned a week later and Ford took the oath of office August 9, 1974, promising that "our long national nightmare is over." Thirty days later, on September 8, Ford granted the disgraced former president a full pardon for all federal crimes he committed or might have committed while in the White House.

Popular opposition to the pardon was massive. As the *Washington Post* noted in its obituary, "Every opinion poll showed a large majority of Americans opposed the pardon." Ford's press secretary resigned in protest against the decision.

Within forty eight hours of the pardon, the White House received 17,000 telegrams and mailgrams, which ran 6 to 1 against the new president's action. The *Post* comments, "By January 1975, his [Ford's] approval rating had plummeted to 36 percent."

Ford claimed, and the claim finds its echo in all of the media accolades following his death, that he was merely attempting to heal the national divisions produced by the "poisonous wounds" of Watergate. In fact, he was engaged in damage control at the highest levels. The prospect of placing a former president on trial frightened large sections of the ruling elite.

The thorough discrediting of the White House and its gangster methods—break-ins, illegal wiretaps, "dirty tricks" against political opponents, mass arrests of anti-war demonstrators—threatened to transform a political crisis into a massive social and political movement potentially directed against the entire political establishment, something neither party had any desire to see. The crisis had to be contained, the legitimacy and credibility of the country's highest institutions restored—and Ford's future political career was a small price to pay.

Even in 1974, the ruling elite was prepared to go only so far in defending democratic norms. Ford's pardoning of Nixon was a deeply undemocratic and reactionary act. In its fashion, it foreshadowed the outcome of the following decade's Iran-Contra scandal, in which Ronald Reagan and his officials got off with a slap on the wrist for their illegal activities.

Moreover, it encouraged and facilitated the later operations of the political underworld around George W. Bush (including former Ford aides Cheney and Rumsfeld). These include the theft of the 2000 election, an assault on democratic rights that goes far beyond that of the Nixon administration, and the launching of an illegal invasion of Iraq, for which, if the establishment has its way, no one is to be held accountable.

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