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Healing the Nation

Gerald R. Ford's 1975 Notre Dame Address

By Brian Flanagan

The Hauenstein Center Leadership Academy traveled to the University of Notre Dame in February 2006 to visit President Emeritus Theodore M. Hesburgh. Father Hesburgh has served nine U.S. presidents in the last fifty years. In 1974-75, Father Hesburgh played an integral role in helping President Gerald R. Ford heal the nation after Vietnam and Watergate.

Forgiveness was an important part of the nation's healing process in the wake of Watergate and the Vietnam War. In the first month of his presidency, Gerald Ford pardoned Richard Nixon and appointed a Presidential Clemency Board for Vietnam War draft dodgers and deserters.

Pictured: President Ford, Hesburgh -- front, right -- and the Clemency Board.



Ford asked Father Hesburgh to join the board charged with reviewing more 100,000 applications for clemency and pardons.

"I couldn't have picked a better man," President Ford later recalled, "We helped to heal the wounds of Watergate, Vietnam, etc."

Pictured: President Ford dining with Hesburgh and other members of the Clemency Board.



"With the country so divided on the issue," wrote Hesburgh in his autobiography *God, Country, Notre Dame*, "it was courageous of the new president to offer clemency.... Gerald Ford, personally a man of great goodwill, saw as his primary task as President the need to put an end to the acrimonious divisions in the United States."

Pictured: Hesburgh and the Presidential Clemency Board looks on as President Ford signs an executive order.



Another important part of the healing process was reconciliation. President Nixon's administration had alienated many, including most famously the press corps -- but also the nation's colleges and universities.

Pictured: President Ford and Father Hesburgh walk in South Bend, Indiana, on their way to the University of Notre Dame.

On St. Patrick's Day, 1975, President Ford and Father Hesburgh joined together at the University of Notre Dame in a conciliatory gesture between the Oval Office and academic institutions.

Pictured: Ford and Hesburgh at the University of Notre Dame.





In the spirit of reconciliation, President Ford -- formerly an All-American football player at the University of Michigan -- met with Notre Dame football legend and athletic director Moose Krause (left) and head football coach Dan Devine (middle).

In all, the president spent 12-hours on campus meeting with local college and university presidents, faculty, and the press. In the afternoon, he delivered a convocation address to Notre Dame's graduating class.

Pictured: President Ford, Father Hesburgh, and faculty members talk before the convocation.



Notre Dame Magazine's Richard Conklin recalled the president's visit twenty-five years later:

"President Ford came to campus at Father Hesburgh's urging... because they both wanted to heal a rift between academe and the White House that had grown wide during the presidency of Richard Nixon."

Pictured: President Ford and Father Hesburgh in their academic garb.

President Ford received an honorary doctor of laws degree from the University before delivering an address in defiance of "new isolationism."

Pictured: President Ford and Father Hesburgh enter the newly-constructed Joyce Athletic Center for the convocation.



"Woodrow Wilson said that 'what we should seek to impart in our colleges is not so much learning itself as the spirit of learning,' " said President Ford in his address. "Great Universities that pursue truth face the challenge that confronts the entire American people. It is whether we will learn nothing from the past and return to the introversion of the 1930s, to the dangerous notion that our fate is unrelated to the fate of others."

Pictured: Father Hesburgh and President Ford stand for the National Anthem.



"Good world citizenship," said President Ford, "requires more than moralizing about the role others should take. It requires each nation to put its own house in order. Good American citizenship requires more than moralizations about what is wrong with the United States. It requires personal involvement and action to bring about change. It requires voting and organizing and challenging and changing with the flexible and dynamic American political process."

Pictured: Father Hesburgh and President Ford.



"I am not alarmed when I hear warnings that the tide of history is running against us," the president concluded. "I do not believe it for a minute, because I know where the tide of history really is -- on this campus and thousands and thousands of others in this great country and wherever young men and women are preparing themselves to serve God and their countries and to build a better world."

Pictured: President Ford delivers the convocation address after receiving an honorary doctor of laws degree from the University of Notre Dame.

Photographs courtesy of the [Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library](#).