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President Ford Celebrates His 92nd Birthday An Ask Gleaves Tribute

President Gerald R. Ford was born on this day in 1913. He is 92 years old today. Gerald Ford was America's 38th president -- the only man to serve as president and vice president without being elected to either office. He served 25 years in Congress, and 8 as House Minority Leader. Before he replaced Vice President Spiro Agnew and President Richard Nixon, Ford's greatest ambition was to become Speaker of the House -- he never did.

A University of Michigan football star who was offered professional contracts by the Detroit Lions and the Green Bay Packers, Gerald Ford married Elizabeth Bloomer in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1948. In recognition of President Ford's accomplishments, Hauenstein Center Director Gleaves Whitney took a closer look at Ford's 1000 days in office, and perhaps his most gutsy decision -- to pardon Richard Nixon...**From Ask Gleaves, "1000 Days"**



Both John F. Kennedy and Gerald R. Ford served as president for about 1,000 days. Which chief executive accomplished more? Let's look at the context as well as the record of each man's presidency....

Barely a decade separated the end of JFK's presidency from the beginning of Gerald R. Ford's presidency -- but how our nation had changed during those brief years.

Ford didn't have the luxury of a swaggering, self-confident nation when he was sworn into office on August 9, 1974. He inherited an America that was under a black cloud. Because of Watergate and Richard Nixon's resignation, the nation was backing its way into a constitutional crisis. Dishonor had befallen the very office of the presidency. Energy shocks were making our economy reel. Vietnam had severely wounded the nation's honor. Anti-Americanism was running high around the globe. And at home there was anger at Washington, at government, at anyone associated with Nixon and the presidency. Indeed, within his first thirteen months in office, Ford survived two assassination attempts.

In the face of these crises, Ford immediately set out to put the shame of Nixon and Watergate behind him -- and the country. Like Lincoln, he endeavored to bind up the nation's wounds. By sheer force of his character, he was the credible person to lead the effort. Because of his integrity, he was able to restore dignity to the office of the presidency. Because of his honesty, he was able to rebuild trust in America's word both at home and abroad. He possessed unshakable calm and kept the nation together at our darkest time since Pearl Harbor and Fort Sumter. He led the economy out of a stubborn recession. He held the Soviets' feet to the fire at Helsinki in view of their appalling human rights record. And he consistently displayed executive leadership and the courage of his convictions, not just in his "full, free, and absolute" pardon of Nixon and his limited offer of amnesty to Vietnam War draft dodgers, but in vetoing more bills than any other president in a comparable period of time (66 vetoes in 18 months, 54 of which prevailed after going back to Capitol Hill). He knew that many of his actions would not improve his chances of re-election in 1976.

Nor would the mistakes he made help re-election chances. During his 895 days in office, Ford alienated the conservative wing of the Republican party by selecting Nelson Rockefeller to be his VP and by proposing a temporary tax hike. His campaign to Whip Inflation Now was ridiculed as a PR stunt. The evacuation of Saigon in April of 1975 was ugly, as was the attempt to rescue the SS *Mayaguez* in international waters.

Nevertheless, constitutionally, politically, and morally, Ford led our nation out of a storm and into stability. As Henry Kissinger put it, "he saved the country. In fact, he saved it in such a matter-of-fact way that he isn't given any credit for it." Biographer James Cannon remarked, "He was the right man for this country at the right time in the most extraordinary crisis in the constitutional system since the Civil War."

I told the reporter whose article you read that if you compare the two Cold War commanders in chief who served a thousand days, Ford in the end was the more heroic. The 38th president had a much tougher road to travel, and he did it with dignity and courage. He managed to accomplish much, despite the bad domestic and international hand he was dealt. It is no wonder that the JFK Library Foundation gave Gerald R. Ford its prestigious Profile in Courage award three years ago. As Senator Edward Kennedy remarked on the occasion, "I was one of those who spoke out against his actions then. But time has a way of clarifying past events, and now we see that President Ford was right. His courage and dedication to our country made it possible for us to begin the process of healing and put the tragedy of Watergate behind us."



Hauenstein Center Director Gleaves Whitney (left) and founding benefactor Ralph Hauenstein (right) visited President Gerald Ford in Rancho Mirage, California.

From Ask Gleaves, "The Nixon Pardon"

Richard M. Nixon resigned 30 years ago today. He was the only president in U.S. history to do so. Two other presidents, Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton, were impeached in the House of Representatives, but neither was convicted in the Senate and so not forced out of office. Since the Constitution explicitly provides for presidential succession, you are right to ask how the unravelling of the Nixon presidency entailed a constitutional crisis.

To answer, I should first point out that the United States of America has, in practice, two constitutions. (1) Our nation has the written document as amended, which you no doubt became familiar with on the road to citizenship; the U.S. Constitution is the fundamental law of the land. (2) Our nation also has what is called an "unwritten constitution" that involves the political customs by which we have agreed to live. Take, for example, the existence of political parties. Our fundamental law says nothing about parties, yet it is impossible to imagine how we'd constructively channel political differences without them. We live as though the Democratic and Republican establishments were engraved in stone. Maddening as our two-party system can be, it has effectively organized Americans' disputes around the most basic political question of all: How shall we live together?

If you accept the notion that the U.S. has both a written and unwritten constitution, then it becomes easier to see the ways in which 1974 was the most severe constitutional test to our nation since the Civil War. The test unfolded on many civic battlefields, and in a single essay I cannot possibly do your question justice. But in essence the battles involved Democrats duking it out with Republicans, and the executive branch of government resisting the legislative and judicial branches.

1. To get at the constitutional crisis, you have to understand the broader sense of crisis in the early 1970s. Americans were deeply divided over Vietnam. The nation was being dragged down by a war that was disastrous to American morale. Because of Vietnam, 1972 was shaping up to be an especially tense election year. Nixon was seeking re-election and was ahead in the polls, which frustrated the Democrats who despised him. Zealots in both parties engaged in illegal tactics to weaken the opposition. Daniel Ellsberg leaked Pentagon papers to the media to discredit the Nixon administration's handling of the war. Nixon aides authorized breaking into Democratic party offices in the Watergate Hotel in June 1972 to gather unflattering information of their own. While both Democrats and Republicans broke the law to get the upper hand in an election year, it was the Republican president who exacerbated the situation by participating in the cover-up of the Watergate break-in. By participating in the cover-up, Nixon opened himself to potential impeachment in the U.S. House of Representatives. When news of the break-in and cover-up tumbled into public view, a battle between two branches of government was triggered.

2. It gets worse. After Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned in disgrace in October 1973, several elected Democrats on Capitol Hill, led by New

York Congresswoman Bella Abzug, hatched a plan to circumvent the Twenty-fifth Amendment. They intended to block Nixon's nomination of a new vice president. By blocking the Republican nominee, they hoped to force Nixon to nominate the Democrats' choice of VP, so that when Nixon later resigned or was impeached, a Democrat would become president. To House Speaker Carl Albert's eternal credit, he refused to go along with the blantly unconstitutional scheme. This is the closest to a coup d'etat that the country has ever come.

3. Nixon's choice of House Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford to replace Spiro Agnew was itself cynical. According to Tom DeFrank, a journalist who covered the White House, Nixon viewed Ford as "impeachment insurance." I.e., the 37th president did not think the Congress would see Ford as presidential material, and thus would never press to impeach Nixon.

4. Nixon fought the judiciary tooth and nail over releasing Oval Office tapes. He made a credible case for executive privilege and indicated through a press secretary that he might refuse to turn the tapes over, regardless of how the U.S. Supreme Court ruled. Had Nixon refused to obey the Supreme Court, the nation would have descended quickly into a constitutional crisis. Despite the shadow boxing, Nixon did comply with the Court's order to turn over the tapes. The conversations on them damaged the president's credibility further, and within weeks he was out of office.

5. How strange was it when, upon Nixon's resignation, a successor was sworn in who had never been elected either vice president or president? Had the Founders ever anticipated that happening in our constitutional republic? Not at all -- it's the stuff of which riddles are made.

6. Within 30 days of becoming president, Ford granted former President Nixon a full pardon, giving rise to speculation (proven untrue) that Nixon and Ford had agreed to the Mother of All Plea Bargains: Nixon would resign if Ford would pardon him. The pardon dismayed many Americans, and cast severe doubt on the moral legitimacy of the American presidency. There were two assassination attempts on Gerald Ford in the weeks following the pardon.

All of these events and others brought the nation to the brink of a constitutional crisis in the early 1970s. There was enough blame to go around both Republican and Democratic camps. In retrospect, however, most historians and even many prominent Democrats give President Ford credit for shepherding the nation through the "long national nightmare."



Learn more about President Ford

Books:

- Cannon, James. [Time and Chance: Gerald Ford's Appointment with History](#). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998
- Greene, Bob. [Fraternity: A Journey in Search of Five Presidents](#). New York: Crown, 2004.
- Greene, John Robert. [The Presidency of Gerald R. Ford](#). Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995.
- Mieczkowski, Yanek. [Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s](#). Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005.

Films:

- [Gerald R. Ford Turning 90](#). DVD. WGVU Productions, 2003.
- [Time and Chance: Gerald Ford's Appointment with History](#). Dir. Rob Byrd. DVD. WGVU Productions, 2004.

On the Web:

- [Gerald R. Ford Biographies](#)
- [Gerald R. Ford Foundation](#)
- [Gerald R. Ford Library and Museum](#)
- [Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy](#)
- [White House: Gerald R. Ford](#)
- [Wikipedia: Gerald Ford](#)