

A more complicated legacy

Former Hood professor's book examines Ford, Warren Commission

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FREDERICK — In the hours following the death of Gerald R. Ford, the 38th and only unelected president, public statements and obituaries remembered him as a man who tried to heal one of the most turbulent eras in the history of the executive branch.

Initially replacing disgraced Vice President Spiro Agnew and then taking over for President Richard Nixon, who resigned during the Watergate scandal, Mr. Ford faced the grim prospect of making sure he fulfilled his inaugural speech promise that the "long national nightmare is over."

"He performed reasonably in quieting the waters," said Gerald McKnight, a professor emeritus of history at Hood College. "I don't know if anyone else would have done any better. ...The '70s were a difficult decade."

The 93-year-old Mr. Ford, however, had played a significant role in an earlier national nightmare. With his death, the Warren Commission, established in 1963 to investigate the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, lost its last living member.

Mr. McKnight is the author of "Breach of Trust: How the Warren Commission Failed the Nation and Why," a book that indicts the body as nothing more than a masquerade for prefabricated truths and describes a more complicated legacy for Mr. Ford.

The book's research, which encompassed almost 5 million pages of material relating to the JFK assassination, revealed Mr. Ford acted as an information leak for the FBI during the commission's executive sessions.

"He is the one who served ... as the FBI's source," Mr. McKnight said. "He was the pipeline."



Associated Press file photo

Former president Gerald R. Ford puffs on his pipe in this January 1969 file photo. The House Republican leader was waiting to appear on a national television program in Washington.

Mr. Ford wasn't just a pipeline; he was also an editor.

"Breach of Trust" describes how Mr. Ford's revisions to the initial Warren report draft changed information taken from JFK's death certificate and "moved the wound in Kennedy's back from 'a point slightly below the shoulder to the right of the spine' to 'the back of his neck slightly to the right of the spine,'" thereby keeping the wounds consistent with a single-bullet theory.

"He just made sure that all the

pieces were in place," Mr. McKnight said.

The historian credited Mr. Ford with being a temporary check on the expanding presidential powers under both Lyndon Johnson and Mr. Nixon, but Mr. McKnight said he will always associate Mr. Ford with the Warren Commission and a report that, for many, will create more questions than answers.

"What obligation did he have to the American people?" he said. "To tell the truth."