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'Scrap Of Paper'

"Our long national nightmare is over," said Gerald R. Ford, as he prepared to pick up the reins of the presidency, "our Constitution works."

As the world watched with admiration, the Constitution did work. Though it was the first time in the nation's history that a president had been forced to resign before the end of his term and another who had not been elected took his place, the transition was smooth, immediate and unquestioned.

But why did the Constitution — the "system" — work?

It worked because we, the people, from ordinary citizen all the way up to highest government official, made it work. Because we pride ourselves on being a nation of laws, not men.

There is nothing magical about the Constitution, which, after all, is only words printed on what abolitionist Wendell Phillips once scornfully dismissed as a "scrap of paper," because slaves were excluded from its protection. The words themselves guarantee nothing. What counts is the willingness of the people to breathe life into them and give them practical meaning:

The constitution of Soviet Russia provides for free speech and press, freedom of religion, etc. In practice, these rights are meaningless because the Soviet system cannot tolerate them.

At the other extreme, Great Britain has no written constitution. Yet it is a democracy whose system works because individual Britons make it work. Tradition, fair play and a generally agreed upon way of doing things are more important guarantors of British freedom than formal statute law.

Nor is there anything immutable about the Constitution. In the 185 years that Americans have lived under it, where it has proved to be unsatisfactory or where it has been overtaken by changing social realities, they have amended it — usually peacefully but once in the forge of a terrible war.

When the 25th Amendment on presidential disability and succession was ratified in 1967, no one foresaw that seven years later we would have both a president and vice president who had not been chosen by popular vote. Some are calling for another amendment to provide for special elections to prevent this kind of situation from arising again.

If the people in their wisdom feel the need of such a change in the system, the change will eventually be made. Until then, we abide by the system we have. It would have been unthinkable during the recent "nightmare" to have done otherwise.

When we praise the American system, we are really praising ourselves.