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Historian Looks At Ford

NEW YORK (AP) — Gerald R. Ford ascends to a presidency that has been strengthened by the tumult of Watergate, but he may find his experience in Congress a hindrance to providing leadership for the nation, according to scholar James MacGregor Burns.

Burns, Pulitzer prize-winning author of several books on presidents and the presidency, said in an interview that the resignation of Richard Nixon reaffirms the strength of the constitution as a check on abuse of presidential power and he warned against tampering with the office in a Watergate backlash.

The historian said he expects the change of command at the White House to proceed without trauma, but added that Ford's position as a leader in Congress does not mean he will prove an able leader in the White House.

"I think Ford may be hurt more than he's helped by his

experience in the House," Burns said. "There is a role for independent leadership that goes far beyond the ordinary arts of compromise. And I don't think the House of Representatives is a good training ground for that kind of leadership."

Burns stressed, however, that the former Michigan congressman may well grow with the office that, he said, Richard Nixon "lowered to his own level."

Burns, Woodrow Wilson professor of government at Williams College, was interviewed by telephone at his home in Williamstown, Mass., shortly after Ford took the oath of office.

In the interview, Burns also discussed the political climate that spawned Watergate and the place the scandal is likely to assume in history. Here are excerpts:

Q. There is some sentiment that Nixon made mistakes like any other president but that his simply were brought to the public's attention. Do you disagree?

A. Absolutely. That's one of the worst bromides going around. Obviously, most presidents have been guilty of errors and occasional misdeeds. But there is absolutely nothing remotely in American history that can even be compared with the sheer range and depth of Nixon's misdeeds.

People ask me how I would rate Nixon's administration in history. My answer is that it cannot be compared, that it is incomparable in the bad sense of the term.

Q. Do you think that assessment will stand after 50 or 100 years?

A. I would say yes. I would say Nixon's administration will not be salvaged by history. Ac-

tually, it could be the other way. His big point, of course, is foreign policy. Well, we don't know yet. After all, war was raging in South Vietnam on the day he resigned. The Middle East situation is precarious, and there's war in Cyprus, so while we pay tribute to very skillful mediation and truce-making by Kissinger, and Nixon, all that could collapse in one day.

I think it will be an ignominious period in the historical perspective. Some historians have a little game of 'grading the presidents.' I don't think it's possible to give Nixon a grade. It's a whole separate criterion.

Q. What were your impressions of Nixon's farewell speech and his more emotional goodbye at the White House this morning?

A. I don't think the speech told us very much. This morning was very interesting. Once again, it makes us curious about this man. The most interesting thing to me was the dwelling on Theodore Roosevelt, who, after leaving the presidency, tried to become president again. It raised the question of whether Nixon might even be considering running again. As far as I know, he's eligible for another term.

Q. You think it's conceivable Nixon would try again for the presidency?

A. I think it's conceivable considering how fast things can change in the nation, but I'm certainly not predicting he'll do it. Nor do I think it would be successful. But I can imagine him doing it.



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