

Transfer of Power

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Out of the despair of Watergate has come an inspiring new demonstration of the uniqueness and strength of the American democracy. A mammoth task of self-cleansing has been carried out under principles and procedures established by the Founding Fathers almost two centuries ago.

The checks and balances of a tripartite system, strained by the abuses of an aberrant Chief Executive, have proven adequate to restore faith in the integrity and responsibility of that system. When Gerald Ford takes the oath of office today, the circumstances under which the vast authority of the Presidency passes into his trust will go far toward setting straight the distorted image of itself America has given to its people and the world in the successive tragedies of Vietnam and Watergate.

No drop of blood has been spilled, no troops called out, no suspension of civil liberties ordered, to effect this transfer of power in what remains the most powerful nation on earth. On the contrary, the instrument of change has been a reaffirmation of the rule of law and orderly procedure, of the democratic processes that had been put in peril by the scornful actions of President Nixon and his associates.

The judiciary played its essential role at all levels. The illusion that any President could stand above the law or that the White House could become a sanctuary for lawbreakers was firmly dispelled.

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Congress, too long negligent in the exercise of its heavy responsibilities in every field from warmaking to the economy, provided impressive evidence of both its will and capacity to face up to national needs once it undertook the solemn duty of impeachment.

The proceedings before the House Judiciary Committee made it plain that men of good will in both parties could look dispassionately for the truth and agree on making the broad public interest paramount. Partisan feelings and personal animosities were at a minimum. That record bodes well for relations between the Congress and the incoming President. Equally important for the restoration of good government, it encourages hope that House and Senate alike will remain vigilant against future default on Capitol Hill of the kind that had fostered an undue drift of power to the executive branch.

Watergate, reflective of the worst in American politics, has also provided both reminder and demonstration of the best. It can mark the start toward a new era of national decency and social responsibility.