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**Special Issue**

**TIME**

**THE  
HEALING BEGINS**



## STATE OF THE UNION

# TIME FOR

It was over. At last, after so many months of poisonous suspicion, a kind of undeclared civil war that finally engaged all three branches of the American Government, the ordeal had ended. As the *Spirit of '76* in one last errand arced across central Missouri carrying Richard Nixon to his retirement, Gerald Rudolph Ford stood in the East Room of the White House, placed his hand upon his eldest son's Bible, and repeated the presidential oath "to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States." By the time the 37th President of the U.S. arrived at the Pacific, the 38th President had taken command of a new Administration.

It was the first time in American history that a President had resigned his office. The precedent was melancholy, but it was hardly traumatic. All of the damage had been done before in the seemingly interminable spectacle of high officials marched through courtrooms, in the recitation of burglaries, crooked campaign contributions and bribes, enemies lists, powers abused, subpoenas ignored—above all, in the ugly but mesmerizing suspense as the investigations drew closer and closer to the Oval Office. Now the dominant emotion was one of sheer relief.

A few of Nixon's last supporters still summoned up bitterness. Not a few Americans cracked open bottles of champagne for the event. Mostly, the nation was massively grateful to have it ended. As Ford said at his swearing-in, "Our long national nightmare is over." By his leaving, Nixon seemed at last to redeem the 1968 pledge he took from a girl holding up a campaign sign in Ohio: BRING US TOGETHER. The resignation brought at least the unity of hope for a fresh beginning, and with Ford, the hope for a new style of presidential leadership. After the long, obsessional preoccupation with Watergate and its claustrophobic underground works, most Americans felt last week as if they were emerging for the first time in a long while into the upper air.

The denouement was jarring in its swift resolution and therefore a bit surreal. Nearly 800 days after the Watergate break-in, 289 days after the Saturday Night Massacre, 97 days after the White House transcripts were released, twelve days after the Supreme Court voted, 8 to 0, that the President must surrender 64 more tapes, five days after the House Judiciary Committee voted out articles of impeachment, Nixon's defenses finally vanished. On Monday he issued the June 23, 1972 transcript that amounted to a confession to obstruction of justice and to lying to the American people and his own defense counsel. With that his clock had run out.

### His Healthy Practical Effects

His nationally televised resignation speech was a peculiar performance. In some ways, it sounded like a State of the Union address, a familiar recitation of his achievements in office. He admitted no guilt, only casually did he mention mistakes made "in the best interests of the nation." Yet in a way, he smoothed the process of transition by sounding, rather eerily, as if his resignation was, after all, a sort of parliamentary setback—no great dislocation. If some expected a bitter, angry valedictory, Nixon was controlled and ultimately conciliatory. Nixon once said that the test of a people is the way it handles the transition of power, and last week—in his resignation speech if not in his mawkish, self-pitying White House goodbye—he deserved credit at least for helping to bring off the transition with dignity in what must have been the most painful moment of his life.

Apart from its stimulating effect on American morale, Nixon's departure will have some healthy practical effects. Had he insisted upon a long Senate trial, lasting into the fall, the Republican Party might have faced disastrous results in the November elections—losses so great that they might temporarily have disabled the two-party system. As it is, Republicans have a new opportunity to fight their opponents on equal ground, out of the shadow of Watergate.



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# HEALING

A President who is not preoccupied with his own survival will be able to deal with much-neglected items of national business. The problems, of course, are extremely grave, and will not yield simply to candor and good will. The most urgent is inflation. Although Ford will not be a hyperactive President with a governmental solution for every problem, he will at least provide direction for reforms long overdue. The nation's foreign policy, despite Henry Kissinger's guidance, has also suffered from the suspense over Nixon's fate: the leadership crisis substantially reduced the chances for major agreements during Nixon's trip to Russia and if continued much longer, might have caused dangerous instability in the major-power relationships. With Ford securely in office, the conduct of foreign policy should resume the high level of competence Nixon and Kissinger established several years ago.

## A Triumph for the System

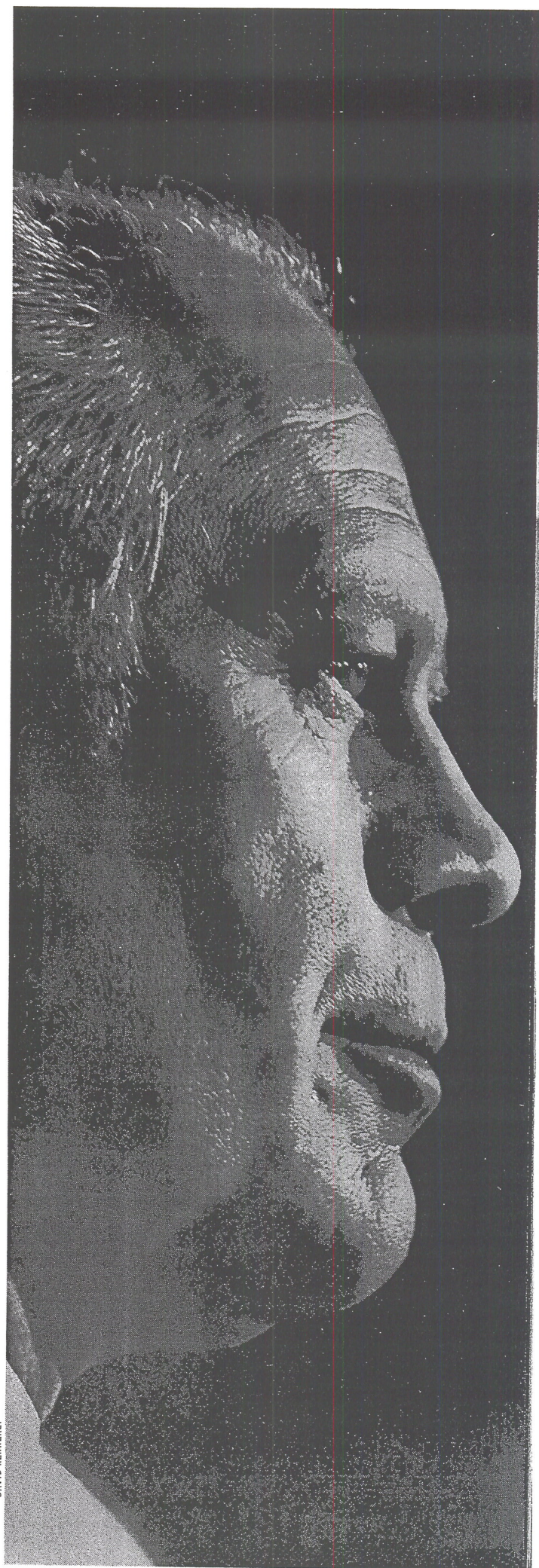
Nixon virtually ignored his Cabinet. Ford promises to restore its power and influence. Most important, the Administration should be able to develop once again a coherent legislative policy. The leftover Nixon legislative program is a shambles. There is no energy policy. Attempts at a foreign trade bill, welfare reform and land-use legislation have bogged down. In what promises to be a protracted honeymoon period, and the President undistracted by scandal, such programs can presumably be pushed forward again.

Nixon's resignation leaves a residue of unanswered questions, some of them with long-range historical reverberations. What of Nixon's legal future? Should he be prosecuted? What becomes of the White House tapes and documents that may contain the full story of Watergate? Should Nixon have stayed to allow the constitutional process to play itself out to a crushing bipartisan vote of conviction in the Senate? No doubt a kind of selective memory will set in among hard-core Nixon supporters, a feeling that the case was never clearly judged, that Nixon martyred himself for the good of the nation. But the case against Nixon was so clear that most of his supporters had deserted him before he quit; he was in effect *judged* by his own friends and allies in the Congress. It should be sufficiently obvious to history that Nixon was not driven from office but resigned because he was guilty of, at least, obstruction of justice, and his cause was hopeless. Some diehards, of course, will always believe that the offense was not really serious anyway—and other Presidents have behaved badly too.

Did Nixon's departure weaken the presidency? Will future Presidents have to operate with one wary eye on the polls and the opposition in Congress, not to mention the press, because the precedent now exists that a President can be overthrown? On the contrary: it was Nixon himself who foreshortened the constitutional process out of a realization that the case against him was overwhelming. By resigning, he conceded the inevitability of impeachment and conviction. Anyone who argues that Nixon was hounded unjustly from office has a quarrel not with Nixon's enemies but with the U.S. Constitution, for the Constitution would have done the work that Nixon chose to do himself.

The departure of Nixon was, above all, an extraordinary triumph of the American system. The nation is not wrong to permit itself some self-congratulation on that. Just after he had sworn in the new President, Chief Justice Warren Burger grabbed the hand of Senator Hugh Scott, the Government colleague nearest to him. "Hugh," said Burger, "it worked. Thank God, it worked." He meant the system.

There were, of course, useful accidents of fate and generous helpings of blind luck. A night watchman named Frank Wills came upon the Watergate burglars one night when they taped some door locks with an almost ostentatious incompetence. The system was fortunate that Judge



DAVID KENNEDY



## THE NATION

John Sirica pursued the case. And above all that Richard Nixon was surreptitiously taping his own conversations, and that he somehow never thought, or considered it necessary, or perhaps just did not dare, to heave all the tapes into the White House incinerator after their existence became known. Had it not been for the tapes, Richard Nixon would quite possibly have remained in the White House until January 1977. (Still, much of his misconduct could have been inferred.) No presidency in the nation's history has ever been so well documented, and it is safe to predict that none will be again.

But it was, at last, Richard Nixon who destroyed his own presidency. In his farewell speech to his staff, he counseled his audience never to be petty and never to hate those who hate them, because such hatred can destroy. Yet his White House, as revealed in the transcripts, was saturated with pettiness and hatred, a siege mentality, Us against Them. It was an unhappy and self-defeating spirit in which to govern a democracy.

In a curious way, Gerald Ford comes to the presidency under a kind of grace precisely because he was not elected to the

office. No one would propose such a succession as a model for a representative democracy, but it has its refreshing advantages just now. It is frightening to contemplate the prospect if Spiro Agnew or John Connally, Nixon's first choice to succeed Agnew, had been sworn in last week. But Ford promises a new and welcome style in the White House, an openness and candor harking back perhaps to Truman or to the more amiable qualities of Eisenhower. The office, surely, will be shorn of some of the pretentious Caesarism that has been growing for 40 years, of its imperial paraphernalia and edgy hauteur.

Nixon is gone—not a martyred figure as he may believe, but tragic at least in his fall from a great height. He is gone because, with all its luck in this case, the American system, the Congress and the Judiciary, with the eventual overwhelming support of public opinion, slowly and carefully excised him from the body politic. If there is a certain "the-king-is-dead-long-live-the-king" spirit in the American mood, the nation feels also that it deserves something better in its leadership, and is going to get it.