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Gerald Ford, 38th President, Dies at 93

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Corrections Appended

Former President [Gerald R. Ford](#), who gently led the United States out of the tumultuous Watergate era but who lost his own bid for election after pardoning President [Richard M. Nixon](#), died at 6:45 p.m. Tuesday at his home in Rancho Mirage, Calif.

He was 93, making him the oldest former president, surpassing [Ronald Reagan](#), who died in 2004, by just over a month.

His death was announced late Tuesday night in a statement issued by his wife, Betty Ford, which gave no details. Further family announcements today gave no cause of death, but he had been in and out of the hospital since January 2006, most recently in October at the Eisenhower Medical Center for medical tests. He returned to his home in Rancho Mirage after five days of hospitalization.

Thrust by Mr. Nixon's resignation into an office he had never sought, Mr. Ford occupied the White House for just 896 days. But they were pivotal days of national introspection, involving America's first definitive failure in a war and the first resignation of a president. It was Mr. Ford's uncommon virtue to have presided with a common touch.

"He assumed power in a period of great division and turmoil," President [George W. Bush](#) said in a statement broadcast early this morning. "For a nation that needed healing, and for an office that needed a calm and steady hand, Gerald Ford came along when we need him most. During his time in office, the American people came to know President Ford as a man of complete integrity who led our country with common sense and kind instincts."

After a decade of division over Vietnam and two years of trauma over the Watergate scandals, Jerry Ford, as he called himself, radiated a soothing familiarity. He might have been the nice guy down the street suddenly put in charge of the nation, and if he seemed a bit predictable, he was also safe, reliable and reassuring. He placed no intolerable intellectual or psychological burdens on a weary land, and he lived out a modest philosophy. "The harder you work, the luckier you are," he said once in summarizing his career. "I worked like hell."

When he took the oath of office at a quickly arranged ceremony at noon on Aug. 9, 1974, the economy was in disarray, an energy shortage was worsening, allies were wondering how steadfast the United States might be as a partner and Mr. Nixon, having resigned the presidency rather than face impeachment for taking part in the Watergate cover-up, was flying to seclusion in San Clemente, Calif.

There was a collective sense of relief as Mr. Ford, in the most memorable line of his most noteworthy speech,

declared that day, "Our long national nightmare is over."

Two years later, as he accepted the Republican presidential nomination and began a campaign that would end in his first failure in an election, Mr. Ford scarcely seemed to be indulging in hyperbole as he recalled what it had been like to take office as Mr. Nixon's heir.

"It was an hour in our history that troubled our minds and tore at our hearts," he said. "Anger and hatred had risen to dangerous levels, dividing friends and families. The polarization of our political order had aroused unworthy passions of reprisal and revenge. Our governmental system was closer to stalemate than at any time since [Abraham Lincoln](#) took that same oath of office."

The pardon, intensely unpopular at the time, came to be generally viewed as correct. In May 2001, Mr. Ford was honored with a "Profile in Courage" Award at the [John F. Kennedy](#) Library in Boston. Senator [Edward M. Kennedy](#) spoke and said he had originally opposed the pardon. "But time has a way of clarifying past events," he said, "and now we see that President Ford was right."

Mr. Ford's decision to back the 1975 Helsinki Accords was furiously criticized in 1976 by both [Jimmy Carter](#) and Ronald Reagan. They complained that it had legitimized the post-World War II borders in Europe. But in his book "The Cold War: A New History" (Penguin, 2005), John Lewis Gaddis of Yale wrote that the pact's commitment to "human rights and fundamental freedoms" became a trap for the Soviet Union, which was facing ever-bolder condemnations by dissidents.

"Thousands of people who lacked the prominence of Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov began to stand with them in holding the U.S.S.R. and its satellites accountable for human rights," Mr. Gaddis wrote. The Helsinki process, he added, became "the basis for legitimizing opposition to Soviet rule."

Mr. Ford also advanced negotiations for a new treaty to turn over control of the Panama Canal to Panama, though he slowed the process during the 1976 campaign and left it to Mr. Carter, his victorious Democratic opponent, to complete.

Both inflation and unemployment fell while he was in office. And he vigorously tried to control federal spending with vetoes of spending bills, starting his first week in office. In a matter of months, however, after the Democratic landslide in the 1974 elections, Congress began overriding his vetoes.

But that did not stop him from threatening to veto a measure, sought by Mayor Abraham Beame and Gov. Hugh Carey, offering a 90-day \$1 billion line of credit to nearly bankrupt New York City in October 1975. "[Ford to City: Drop Dead](#)" was the front-page headline in The Daily News. The next month, the New York leaders came to Washington with a new plan with new controls on the city budget, and they got the short-term loans they needed. Mr. Ford brought to his duties an indomitable self-assurance.

"I can recall no incident, either in the Congress, vice presidency or presidency, where I didn't feel that I was prepared," he said in retirement. "I felt more secure, more certain of myself in the presidency than at any other time."

His steadiness showed through as a timely presidential attribute, but it was always that way with Gerald

Rudolph Ford Jr. He was a man more fundamental than flashy, more immutable than immodest. He served undefeated through 13 elections to the House of Representatives and rose to be its Republican leader, yet in 25 years in Congress he did not write a major piece of legislation. He was overwhelmingly confirmed as vice president, the first to be appointed under the 25th Amendment, yet he owed his selection by Mr. Nixon to the likelihood that he would prove inoffensive in the job.

As president, he was quick to assert to Congress, in a play on words that nobody misunderstood, "I am a Ford, not a Lincoln." If it was true, as was often said, that the Oval Office shaped the occupant, Mr. Ford resisted the temptation of the imperial. On an early trip as president to South Korea, he called American enlisted men "sir." His prose was so pedestrian and his tongue so unreliable — he referred on one public occasion to the noble American "work ethic" and on another to the disease of "sickle-cell anemia" — that he became a favorite target of comedians.

Acts of Forgiveness

"I think it's progress that the presidency has been humanized," Mr. Ford remarked a few days before he left the White House. It might easily have been an epitaph.

He had sought to bind up the nation's wounds as much by instinct as by design. One of his earliest acts, combining courage with forgiveness, was to announce before a convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars that he favored leniency for Vietnam-era draft resisters.

When Congressional [Democrats](#) suggested that he had obtained Mr. Nixon's resignation by promising to pardon him, Mr. Ford did something presidents do not do: he went to Capitol Hill and testified, telling a House subcommittee, "There was no deal, period, under no circumstances."

He invited to the White House individuals who had been excluded as political "enemies" in the lists kept by the Nixon Administration. When Mr. Ford heard, as [a Republican](#) in Congress, that President Nixon kept such a list, he said to an aide, "Anybody who can't keep his enemies in his head has too many enemies."

His decision to grant a full and absolute pardon to his predecessor stunned the nation. After going to church the morning of Sept. 8, 1974, Mr. Ford went on national television to announce that there would be no formal judicial retribution against Mr. Nixon. Then, apparently untroubled by his decision, he played golf.

"I felt then, and I feel now, if I was going to do it, it had to be clean, sudden," Mr. Ford said months after he had left office. "It was a part of the healing process." He paused a moment, smiled, and added, "It didn't turn out to be quite as much of a healing at the time."

Revulsion and disillusion exploded in editorial comments and angry telegrams to the White House. Mr. Ford's biographer and friend, J.F. terHorst, resigned as White House press secretary rather than defend the pardon. For the rest of his term, Mr. Ford had to do the defending.

Those who were critical of the pardon, he said, "haven't thought through what would have happened over the next 18 months, 24 months, 36 months; that whole episode would have been on the front page."

He had expected some public criticism, he said, but it proved “far worse than I anticipated.” He insisted, however, in his 1979 autobiography, “A Time to Heal” (Harper and Row), and in conversations in retirement, that had Mr. Nixon been required to face indictment and trial over the many months of the Ford presidency, “all of the healing process that I thought was so essential would have been much more difficult to achieve.”

Hard Work, Honesty, Punctuality

Mr. Ford’s early circumstances made him an unlikely future president. He was born July 14, 1913, in Omaha to Leslie Lynch King and Dorothy Ayer King. Not for 17 years was he to learn that he had been christened Leslie Lynch King Jr.

When he was 2 years old, his mother divorced Mr. King and moved to Grand Rapids, Mich. She remarried, and her husband, Gerald Rudolph Ford, a paint salesman with an eighth-grade education, gave the boy his name in formally adopting him.

Gerald considered his mother “a human dynamo in a womanly way” and said she “probably had more friends than any woman I ever knew.” He revered his stepfather. Later in life, even in the White House, he would confront difficulty by wondering, “Now, how would he have done this?” It was perhaps the ultimate symptom of Mr. Ford’s uncommon commonness that he would try to approach the presidency after the fashion of a Grand Rapids merchant. What he respected in his stepfather’s manner was common sense.

His closeness to his stepfather was deepened, if anything, by the discovery that he was adopted and in particular by a brief encounter with his father.

It occurred at the age of 17, when he was a star on the state champion South High School Trojans football team, a 6-foot, blue-eyed blond with a husky voice and an infectious laugh. His mother and stepfather had told Mr. Ford that he was the product of a broken home, and the information did not appear to disturb him unduly. Mr. Ford went on with his schooling and, because the Ford Paint and Varnish Company was struggling to survive the Depression, with a job waiting on tables at Bill Skougis’s Restaurant. One day a patron in the restaurant stared at him and then told him, “Leslie, I’m your father.”

He was stunned.

Nearly half a century later, recalling the episode in an interview, Mr. Ford’s words remained drenched in bitterness: “It was shocking, in that he would intrude on a happy family life after he had neglected my mother and me by his refusal to pay what the court ordered him to pay as child support.”

In his 1994 biography of Mr. Ford, “Time and Chance” (HarperCollins), James Cannon wrote that Mr. King never paid the monthly child support ordered by an Omaha court after it found that he had beaten his wife, but that Mr. King’s father did pay the money his son owed. Those payments stopped when the elder Mr. King died, Mr. Ford wrote in his autobiography.

His father, Mr. Ford said in the interview, had “abandoned me for 6, 8, 10 years — I have forgotten how long; then he would seek to intrude on my family life, which was a happy one with my stepfather.”

“I really never forgave my father in a sense of totally forgiving,” Mr. Ford said.

Traditional Values

The home in which the future president was brought up, along with his three half-brothers, was imbued with the values of family loyalty, thrift and patriotism.

On May Day one year, Mr. Ford and other students at South High saw another group of youths painting anti-American slogans on the steps leading to the school building. The group Mr. Ford was in, mostly football players, dashed over, grabbed the paint cans and, by one account, splashed the paint on the others.

Mr. Ford ran for president of the senior class in 1931 on, as he later used to recall with a laugh, the Progressive ticket. He lost, but he was never to lose another election until he sought a different presidency 45 years later as more of a conservative.

His basic philosophy involved fiscal prudence, strong national defense, suspicion of alien lands and a belief that citizens should earn a living rather than be given one. This, he said, was a legacy “from both my stepfather and my mother — hard-working, typical Middle Western individuals who had themselves been brought up in families that had comparable philosophical views.”

“It was that environment plus, I think, my own instincts, which go back, I believe, to the fact that I always felt you had to work like hell,” he continued. “I did. Whether I worked in the restaurant, whether I worked in scouting or whether I worked in school, I was always very conscientious.”

He did well enough to win a scholarship to the [University of Michigan](#) at Ann Arbor. He applied himself with equal diligence to his studies and to football, and he worked as a dishwasher at the Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity to help pay his room and board.

To Law School, Then to War

In those days, both his professional and athletic ambitions were mixed. He said decades later that “one of my great ambitions was to be captain of the Michigan football team,” the Wolverines, in his senior year. But someone else was chosen as captain. Mr. Ford, a center, was instead selected by his teammates as the most valuable player; he was gratified, though he often joked of having been named most valuable member of a losing team.

After he graduated in 1935 from the University of Michigan, he had offers to play professional football for either the Detroit Lions or the Green Bay Packers (at \$110 per game). Mr. Ford remained fascinated with sports, but he chose the law, a subject that had appealed to him since high school. He enrolled at Yale Law School.

Political opponents would ultimately fasten on Mr. Ford’s sports background as a source of ridicule. President [Lyndon B. Johnson](#), angered at a legislative development inspired by Representative Ford, cracked once that he had played football too long without a helmet. And despite his real skill at skiing and golf, a tumble on the slopes or a tee shot drive into a golf gallery would be seized on by the comedy show “Saturday Night Live” as a

metaphor for a clumsy presidency.

If Mr. Ford's mental cast was more often instinctive than imaginative and his approach to issues more tactical than conceptual, he was no intellectual slouch. At Yale, Prof. Myres MacDougal wrote in interview notes on the young student: "Very mature, wise person of good judgment. Informational background not the best but interesting, mature and serious of purpose."

Initially, because he needed the income of an assistant football coach and a head boxing coach, Mr. Ford was so busy that he was not allowed to take law classes full time. He kept insisting he was capable of the dual schedule and was so persistent that he was allowed to become student and coach simultaneously in 1938. He finished in the top third of the class of 1941, with a B average.

He returned to Grand Rapids, and with a friend, Philip W. Buchen, who would later become his White House legal counsel, he set about establishing a practice specializing in labor-management matters. Shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he joined the Navy as an ensign.

The war, more than anything else, was responsible for altering his outlook and inspiring him to pursue a career in public life.

At first, the Navy assigned him as a physical training officer to work with recruits on the grounds of the [University of North Carolina](#). Mr. Ford kept applying for a transfer to a combat zone and kept being refused. Ever persistent, he applied anew and after a year of rejection was sent to the Pacific as a physical education officer on the U.S.S. Monterey, a light aircraft carrier.

By war's end he had risen to lieutenant commander and won 10 battle stars for participating in engagements at places like Okinawa, Wake, Taiwan, the Philippines and the Gilbert Islands. Just before Christmas in 1944, he nearly lost his life when a typhoon struck the Third Fleet and, topside on the carrier, he came within inches of being swept off the deck.

An Internationalist Takes Office

Mr. Ford never adopted the domestic liberalism of a Roosevelt or, later, a Johnson. But the war experience broadened his view, changing him "from a passive isolationist to an ardent internationalist," as he put it.

Having re-established himself in a comfortable law practice in Grand Rapids, Mr. Ford had a limited ambition at first. "I was 33, single, working and having a great time, playing lots of golf," he said later. "All I was interested in was enjoying life and getting on with my law practice."

But he kept reading a new magazine, World Report, to which he was a charter subscriber, and became an ever firmer advocate of the Marshall Plan of postwar assistance to Europe and an internationalist in a community of Dutch-origin conservative isolationists. He came to the attention of two forces — Republican reformers bent on taking control of the local party, and internationalists allied with Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg, the Republican leader, who was also from Grand Rapids.

The incumbent representative from the Fifth District of Michigan was Bartel J. Jonkman, who seemed tailored

to the district: of Dutch descent, Republican, conservative, isolationist.

“I knew I was meeting a formidable incumbent,” Mr. Ford later recalled, “who for many reasons should have won. And I shouldn’t have expected to win.” Typically, Mr. Ford did expect to win, though, and with but a smidgen of apprehension that the challenge might be taken up, he dared Mr. Jonkman to debate. “Fortunately, he did not,” Mr. Ford said.

Aided by [President Truman](#)’s disputes with Congress that kept Mr. Jonkman in Washington, Mr. Ford worked tirelessly and won the Republican primary in 1948 by nearly 10,000 votes. Then he easily won his first term in the House. He never received less than 60 percent of the vote during a quarter-century as the Representative from Michigan’s Fifth District.

A Candid Helpmate

Shortly before the 1948 election, Mr. Ford paused from his campaigning to march down the aisle of Grace Episcopal Church in Grand Rapids — by local legend, wearing one black shoe and one brown shoe — with Elizabeth Bloomer Warren, who had been divorced and was generally regarded as the most attractive single woman in the city.

Betty Ford had been a model and a fashion coordinator. For two years, in New York City, she had danced in [Martha Graham](#)’s troupe. She was, and remained throughout Mr. Ford’s public career, a remarkably open and candid woman, given to strong opinions on [abortion](#), feminism and other issues and willing to talk about the radical mastectomy she underwent while in the White House. She encouraged the same outspokenness in the four Ford children: Michael Gerald, John Gardner (known as Jack), Steven Meigs and Susan Elizabeth.

Besides his wife and children, his survivors include his half brother, Richard Ford of Grand Rapids, Mich., and Naples, Fla.; seven grandchildren; and a number of great-grandchildren.

Mrs. Ford also battled drug dependency, which began in the 1960’s with prescriptions for pills to relieve pain from a neck injury, and alcoholism, which grew with her loneliness during Mr. Ford’s increasingly heavy travel schedule. In 1978, her family confronted her about her addictions, and, after initial denials, she finally admitted herself for treatment. Four years later, she helped dedicate the Betty Ford Center for Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation in Rancho Mirage, on the campus of Eisenhower Medical Center.

While Mrs. Ford reared their children, Mr. Ford rose doggedly from the obscurity of the House to the leadership of its minority. In his second term he won assignment to the Appropriations Committee, where he and other fiscal conservatives worked to curb government spending. By 1953 he was on such influential subcommittees as those dealing with funds for foreign aid and national defense; throughout the Korean and Vietnam Wars he was a stalwart supporter of American military intervention in Asia.

In the House

Bud Vestal, a reporter for The Grand Rapids Press, distressed Mr. Ford by noting in a biography that Mr. Ford “never authored a major program of legislation on his own.”

Mr. Ford's explanation was that as a member of the Appropriations Committee, he "was pretty preoccupied with very important matters" and "didn't have time, just as a pragmatic thing, to get involved in all the other pieces of legislation that others were writing or sponsoring or working for."

His legislative activity more often than not involved fealty to Republican Presidents Eisenhower and Nixon or obstruction of the liberal New Frontier and Great Society proposals of Democratic Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. For instance, Mr. Ford voted against a major housing assistance act in 1961 and fostered opposition to the Medicare program in 1965.

In a Congress that often seemed akin to a fraternity, he was nearly everyone's friend. He was thus an ideal prospect for minority leadership. When younger Republicans were casting about in 1963 for a point man in their rebellion against their aging leaders, they settled on Jerry Ford.

The group installed Mr. Ford as chairman of the House Republican Conference, the third-ranking post in the minority hierarchy. His name came to more prominent attention later that year when President Johnson appointed Mr. Ford to the Warren Commission to investigate the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. In 1965, after the huge loss that came with Senator Barry Goldwater's landslide defeat for the presidency the year before, the younger Republicans deposed Charles A. Halleck of Indiana as their House leader, supplanting him with Mr. Ford.

"I Need Your Vote"

With the exception of an ill-conceived effort in 1970 to impeach Associate Justice William O. Douglas, a liberal member of the Supreme Court, after Senate Democrats had twice rejected President Nixon's nominations of Southern conservatives to the court, Mr. Ford generally enlarged his circle of friends by establishing an amicable style of leadership.

When one or another Republican voted against the leadership's wishes, some party stalwarts sought to persuade Mr. Ford to discipline the offender. There were methods that might have been used: transfer to a minor committee, elimination of funds for overseas travel, loss of campaign money. Mr. Ford said no.

"That's counterproductive," he insisted. "That person knows that he disappointed you. To rub it in makes it, the next time, literally impossible to get his cooperation. You can lose one battle, but the most important thing is to win the war."

A leading House Democrat of the era, Representative Joe D. Waggoner Jr. of Louisiana, confirmed the technique's success. "It's the damndest thing," Mr. Waggoner said. "Jerry just puts his arm around a colleague or looks him in the eyes and says, 'I need your vote,' and gets it."

An Elusive Dream

Mr. Ford, as Republican House leader, worked to enlarge the minority, always pursuing the elusive dream of a Republican majority and, with it, the realization of his greatest political ambition, to be speaker of the House.

Asked in his retirement why he had coveted the speaker's post, he replied:

“I thought, as a member of Congress, that would be the ultimate achievement. To sit up there and be the head honcho of 434 other people and have the responsibility, aside from the achievement, of trying to run the greatest legislative body in the history of mankind, I think, in an efficient and effective way, to tend to the people’s business, both domestic and foreign, to make sure, whatever legislation was required, to see that it was done. I think I got that ambition within a year or two after I was in the House of Representatives.”

For a decade he crisscrossed the country, downing chicken dinners in 200 or so cities each year, extolling this or that prospect for a House seat and trying diligently to build a majority. But the closest the Republicans came in his years as leader was the 192 seats they held after the 1968 elections. That was still 16 short of the majority that would have made him speaker.

Apparently destined to be the perennial leader of a minority, Mr. Ford promised his wife in 1973 that he would make one more effort, however forlorn, in 1974 at winning a majority and would then retire from politics in 1976.

“I don’t want to be a minority leader in perpetuity,” he told friends.

“A Nice Conclusion”

On the night of Oct. 10, 1973, a few hours after Vice President Spiro T. Agnew rose in a federal courtroom in Baltimore to plead no contest to a charge of federal income tax evasion and simultaneously resigned the vice presidency, Mr. Ford was at his home in Alexandria, Va., trying to relax. The telephone rang; it was his old House ally Melvin Laird, now a White House counselor. Would Mr. Ford be interested in the vice presidency if it could be arranged, Mr. Laird asked.

“I suspect if I was asked, I would accept it,” Mr. Ford replied.

He turned from the phone, he later recalled, and told Mrs. Ford that “well, that would be a nice conclusion” for his career.

The next night President Nixon was the one who telephoned Mr. Ford’s home. He offered the vice presidency.

It was the first time that anyone had been nominated for the office under the terms of the 25th Amendment, which made the appointment subject to confirmation by both the Senate and the House. Much as Republicans had fixed on Mr. Ford as leader in 1965 because of his general acceptability, so Mr. Nixon chose him in 1973 to be vice president.

At the time, in late 1973, Mr. Nixon was locked in a legal duel with the Watergate special prosecutor and the Senate Watergate committee, refusing to yield documents and tape recordings that had been subpoenaed. Indeed, a few days after Mr. Ford was nominated for the vice presidency, President Nixon dismissed Archibald Cox, the first special prosecutor, for insisting on pursuing legal remedies to gain access to the White House evidence, and accepted the resignation of Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson, who declined to carry out the order to dismiss the prosecutor.

“I Believed What I Was Told”

There were Nixon allies who thought Mr. Ford might, as vice president, serve as a buffer against the efforts to impeach Mr. Nixon that were precipitated by the events of that “Saturday night massacre” in October 1973. Mr. Nixon remarked once to former Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller of New York, “Can you see Gerald Ford sitting in this chair?”

Mr. Ford accepted the nomination. “I thought,” he later reminisced, “well, if I could be helpful, I knew I could be confirmed. And it was a nice way to end a career. I wasn’t going to be speaker.”

He took it on faith, because he had been told privately by Mr. Nixon and others that the president was innocent of any involvement in the burglary at the Democratic Party offices in the Watergate complex on June 17, 1972, or of complicity in the attempt to cover up the extent of the conspiracy.

Three days after the break-in, Mr. Ford had asked John N. Mitchell, the former attorney general and the 1972 Nixon campaign chairman, if the break-in had been authorized. As Mr. Ford recalled it, Mr. Mitchell “looked me right in the eye and said neither he nor the White House was involved.”

“I believed what I was told,” Mr. Ford once said, referring to the belief that Mr. Nixon was not involved in Watergate wrongdoing, “so my whole conduct as vice president was predicated on that personal trust.”

Because it was the first such occasion, Mr. Ford’s vice-presidential nomination prompted an extensive investigation of his background by as many as 400 agents of the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#). His nomination was confirmed, 92 to 3 in the Senate and 387 to 35 in the House. At dusk on Dec. 6, 1973, to the thunderous applause of those with whom he had served in Congress, he strode down the center aisle in the House of Representatives to stand at the lectern, not as speaker but as vice president.

Mr. Ford took it upon himself as the heir apparent to try, initially, to make certain that Mr. Nixon would remain in office. In the eight months of his vice presidency he traveled more than 130,000 miles to speak up for Mr. Nixon.

As the House Judiciary Committee painstakingly assembled evidence on which its members would ultimately recommend three articles of impeachment, Mr. Ford proclaimed confidence in Mr. Nixon’s blamelessness, but privately he grew increasingly uncertain.

Growing Skepticism

The doubt was slow to take hold. In January 1974 Mr. Ford told an audience in Atlantic City that the impeachment movement was the work of “extreme partisans” who were trying to “crush the president” and in the process increase the Democratic majority in the Congress.

Alarmed, Mr. Buchen, Mr. Ford’s old friend from Michigan, and Senator Robert P. Griffin, another longtime Michigan ally, privately counseled Mr. Ford to be careful lest his faith be unrewarded and his loyalty further divide the country.

Thereafter, Mr. Ford loyally defended the president, but in his own words. The Nixon staff kept sending proposed texts to Mr. Ford’s office, but Mr. Ford’s aides toned them down.

Instinctively, too, Mr. Ford continuously and openly urged the president to demonstrate his innocence by yielding to Congress and the courts the Watergate tape recordings and documents that were being sought. When Mr. Nixon continued to “stonewall,” as the resistance came to be known, “it certainly began to raise some reservations” in Mr. Ford’s mind, he said, although he kept them to himself. Gradually, even Mr. Ford’s defense of Mr. Nixon began to take a skeptical tone. At a Republican Party conference in Chicago, Mr. Ford explicitly attacked for the first time the attitude of the 1972 Nixon campaign organization, saying that it had been led by “an arrogant, elite guard of political adolescents.”

“A Good Night’s Sleep”

At the end of July 1974, Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., then the White House chief of staff, made an urgent call to the vice president. General Haig advised him that a tape recording under subpoena by the special prosecutor — one of several that the Supreme Court had ruled could not be withheld by Mr. Nixon — would show conclusively that Mr. Nixon had tried to curb the Watergate investigation as early as June 23, 1972, six days after the break-in.

“That was the first concrete evidence that I had contrary to the assurances I’d had before,” Mr. Ford remembered.

For three days, as Mr. Nixon’s aides sought to persuade the president to make public the transcript of the June 23 tape, Mr. Ford continued to travel, saying nothing of the evidence.

The president did publish it. Although Mr. Ford was unaware that Mr. Buchen and others had begun making secret preparations for a Ford presidential transition, he began to wonder in the first days of August 1974 how soon he might be president.

On Aug. 6, Mr. Nixon assembled his Cabinet at the White House and declared that he would not resign. Mr. Ford, seated opposite the president across the massive Cabinet table, told Mr. Nixon, “I no longer can publicly defend you.” It was, for Mr. Ford, the loyal friend of the president, one of the most difficult things he had ever done, but, he told an interviewer, “with the development of the evidence, I had no other choice.”

Two nights later Mr. Nixon announced on national television that he would resign the presidency at noon on Aug. 9.

Mr. Ford and his wife watched the Nixon statement on the television set in the family room of their home in Alexandria. Then, despite the looming accumulation of pressures, Mr. Ford went to sleep.

That he could do so, with no particular difficulty, on the eve of the nation’s most unusual presidential transition, was illustrative. “My feeling is you might as well get to sleep” whatever the circumstances, Mr. Ford had said. “You’ll feel better the next day. If you’ve got a problem, you are better prepared to deal with it tomorrow. You sure can’t do much about it that night. It’s a blessing, really.”

The nation’s torment was on his mind as he spoke that next day, Aug. 9, 1974, of the import of his sudden inauguration as the 38th president of the United States, the first person never elected president or vice president to become president.

“I am acutely aware that you have not elected me as your president by your ballots,” he said to the dignitaries in the East Room of the White House and to the millions of Americans watching on television. “I have not sought this enormous responsibility, but I will not shirk it.”

With an empathy that came as a relief after months of White House aloofness, the new president said: “This is an hour of history that troubles our minds and hurts our hearts. Therefore, I feel it my first duty to make an unprecedented compact with my countrymen. Not an inaugural address. Not a fireside chat. Not a campaign speech. Just a little straight talk among friends.”

He urged his countrymen to help him “bind up the internal wounds of Watergate” and then added:

“My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over. Our Constitution works. Our great republic is a government of laws and not of men. Here, the people rule.”

The Man in the White House

Mr. Ford’s presidency was an extension of his own political personality: reactive rather than activist, instinctive instead of intellectual, humanistic but within the fiscal limits of conservative dogma.

Mr. terHorst, the biographer, puzzled over the seeming contradiction between the president’s personal and professional philosophies: “The problem with him — he doesn’t like to be kidded about it — but the fact is, this guy would, if he saw a school kid in front of the White House who needed clothing, if he was the right size, he’d give him the shirt off his back, literally. Then he’d go right in the White House and veto the school lunch bill.”

John Hersey, after spending a week in close observation of the president, wrote in *The New York Times Magazine* of April 20, 1975: “What is it in him?”

“Is it an inability to extend compassion far beyond the faces directly in view?,” Mr. Hersey wrote. “Is it a failure of imagination? Is it something obdurate he was born with, alongside the energy and serenity?”

The answer seemed to be a belief — one Mr. Ford was schooled in if not born with — in the essential dignity of human struggle. “Everything didn’t turn to gold just because I did it,” he remarked. “I had this foundation, and I had been brought up with the training that — and this is an oversimplification, but I think it’s indicative — the harder you work, the luckier you are. And whether it was in such things as the [Boy Scouts](#) or athletics or academics, I worked like hell.”

There were those who contended, as did Richard Reeves, the author of a critical biography, that Mr. Ford had a “tragic gap” in his understanding of such crucial matters as the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. More common was the assessment of Mr. Ford as “innately decent.”

Executive Decisions

Mr. Ford disputed the notion that it required forceful, even harsh, character to meet the tests of the White House. He was asked once if a nice guy should be president, and answered: “Those who allege that you’ve got to be a mean, sinister, devious person to be president are just dead wrong. I don’t see how a president in his

conscience could be that.”

He, too, could be forceful. He resented the accident of fate that had made him president as the nation watched South Vietnam and Cambodia — where so much of America’s human and economic treasure had been spent by three predecessors — fall to the Communists in 1975. Rebuffed by Congress when he sought a last-minute \$972 million in aid to Saigon, Mr. Ford made it possible for 130,000 or more refugees to come to the United States.

When the Cambodian Communists seized the American merchant ship *Mayagüez* in May 1975, Mr. Ford reacted with uncharacteristic emotion, sending United States military forces to recapture the ship.

The order was motivated in part by concern for national image. “We had just pulled out of Vietnam, out of Cambodia,” Mr. Ford said later, “and here the United States was being challenged by a group of leaders who were bandits and outlaws, in my opinion, and I think their subsequent record has pretty well proved it. And it was an emotional decision to tell the Defense Department we had to go in there and do something.”

Mr. Ford’s economic policies were traditional for Republican conservatives. He proclaimed, amid considerable White House ballyhoo, a campaign to “Whip Inflation Now,” complete with “WIN” buttons. Scarcely had it begun than mounting joblessness and the worst recession since the 1930’s caused Mr. Ford to abandon the anti-inflation program and propose tax cuts to stimulate the economy instead of tax increases to dampen it.

Congress, meanwhile, reflected its dominance by the Democratic Party in a steadily increasing number of spending programs and expansion of the federal deficit.

Difficult Dismissals

In what may have been his most difficult personal decision — because it went against the grain of his personality — the genial man from Michigan also acted forcefully in his dismissal of Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger.

There were no known policy differences of consequence between Mr. Ford and Mr. Schlesinger. But their styles and characters never quite proved compatible, and the defense secretary, a bookish and occasionally dogmatic intellectual who later became Secretary of Energy to President Jimmy Carter, got on the president’s nerves.

“There was a tension,” Mr. Ford acknowledged later. “There was a personality problem.” Mr. Schlesinger, he stressed, “is an honorable, decent person, but our chemistry doesn’t fit.” He did not need to add but did, “I’m not one that likes to fire people.”

Nonetheless, Mr. Ford did make another central personnel decision that troubled him: jettisoning Vice President Rockefeller from his 1976 campaign ticket. Mr. Ford did so even though he had declared, in nominating the former New York governor to be his vice president, that there was no one else in the country so well equipped to stand next in the line of presidential succession.

Mr. Ford eventually decided to seek a full term as president, something he had intimated in his testimony to Congress as nominee for vice president that he would be loath to do. He decided that a lame-duck president could not be effective in a political role. Besides, although he did not like to admit it, Mr. Ford and his wife,

Betty, had grown to like the perquisites of the White House.

As a candidate to succeed himself — and, he hoped, thus legitimize his accidental presidency — Mr. Ford grew politically timid. It was apparent that he would be challenged for the Republican nomination by Mr. Reagan, the former governor of California and a politician far more conservative than Mr. Ford.

On the Campaign Trail Again

Mr. Ford responded by becoming ever more conservative in his political statements and by undertaking the same sort of aggressive, energetic campaigning as an incumbent that had marked his campaigns as a member of the House of Representatives. From early 1975 until the summer of 1976, Mr. Ford traveled from one corner of the country to another. Even two attempts on his life by unbalanced women in California in 1975 did not deter him.

On one of those trips, to Sacramento on Sept. 5, he narrowly escaped an assassination attempt by Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme, who had been a follower of the convicted killer Charles Manson. Mr. Ford was moving through a crowd in Capitol Park, shaking hands and waving, when a Secret Service agent saw Ms. Fromme’s arm and the pistol. She was subdued, and it turned out that while the gun was loaded there was no bullet in the chamber. She was convicted of attempted murder and sentenced to life in prison.

The other attempt, by Sara Jane Moore, took place in San Francisco. A former Marine, Oliver W. Sipple, knocked a pistol out of Ms. Moore’s hand as she fired.

By the time Mr. Ford narrowly won the Republican nomination in Kansas City, Mo., in August 1976, he seemed to many of his political advisers to have diminished the value of his incumbency by traveling so extensively as to seem only another candidate. He was more than 25 percentage points behind the Democratic nominee, Mr. Carter, in the opinion polls. The economy was improving but not good. The Republicans’ identification with Mr. Nixon remained.

Mr. Ford reassessed the situation with his advisers. Together they altered his political strategy and style. He spent most of the campaign period hunched over his desk or greeting guests in the Rose Garden of the White House, trying to reinforce the image of incumbency and to stress his claims to having achieved “peace, prosperity and trust.”

Strides, Then a Stumble

In one of the most remarkable political comebacks in presidential campaign history, Mr. Ford nearly overcame adversity and odds. One late stumble, insisting in a debate that “there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe” and that Poland was not “dominated by the Soviet Union,” halted the Ford surge.

In the end, his loss to Mr. Carter, the former Georgia governor, was narrow, by only 1,682,970 votes. Mr. Ford had 48.0 percent and Mr. Carter 50.1 percent.

But neither Poland nor a last-minute bit of bad economic news was central to his defeat. The Nixon pardon was.

Stuart Spencer, his campaign manager, said that polling data about the pardon had made it clear that “it cost him the election.” He said seven percent of Republicans had either voted for Mr. Carter or stayed home because of the pardon, and it hurt with Democrats and independents, too.

Robert S. Strauss, who was Democratic National Chairman in 1976, agreed . He said Mr. Ford “was never forgiven for it.”

“People always assumed there was a deal, even though there was no evidence of one,” Mr. Strauss said.

Even so, Mr. Ford’s political recovery, although incomplete, reflected a positive aspect of his brief presidency. It indicated the extent to which he seemed to have re-established a sense of trustworthiness in the nation’s most visible and symbolic office.

One political aide said of those who voted for Mr. Ford: “They’re voting for something solid — a simple, honest, decent man.”

After the White House

In the years after he left the White House, Mr. Ford took on two new roles, senior statesman and newly arrived millionaire, with his characteristic easygoing manner and energy. He had become something of a one-man academic, political and business enterprise, and by 1983 his income was estimated to be more than \$1 million a year.

Mr. Ford frequently criticized President Carter on economic and defense matters, but the attacks on his successor never grew bitter or personal. On some foreign policy issues, like the Panama Canal treaties, which his own Administration had quietly sought, he supported his successor.

For three years Mr. Ford contemplated another race for the presidency. In 1975, he had told aides in the White House that “Reagan would be a disaster” as president. After Mr. Reagan won the 1980 New Hampshire primary, Mr. Ford told The New York Times that it would be “impossible” for Mr. Reagan to win a general election, and he cautiously invited Republicans to ask him to run again.

But the draft he invited never came, and Mr. Reagan cruised to the nomination. When the Republicans gathered in Detroit in 1980 to Mr. Reagan, he asked Mr. Ford to be his running mate.

For hours, representatives of the two men, with former Secretary of State [Henry A. Kissinger](#) acting for Mr. Ford, negotiated the outlines of a possible Reagan-Ford Administration, in which Mr. Ford would have been given extensive authority in making appointments and managing the executive branch. But the negotiators were unable to reach a formula that satisfied Mr. Ford’s desire to be more than a traditional vice president while also giving Mr. Reagan a free hand to govern as chief executive.

Mr. Ford nevertheless worked on the 1980 campaign trail for Mr. Reagan and his running mate, George Bush. Two months after the inauguration, Mr. Reagan sent Mr. Ford as his representative to China to reassure leaders there that Washington wished to continue improving relations.

The next October, after President Anwar el-Sadat of Egypt was assassinated, Mr. Ford represented the United States at the funeral along with the two other living former presidents, Mr. Carter and Mr. Nixon.

In August 2000, Mr. Ford appeared at the Republican convention in Philadelphia but was hospitalized for a week after a stroke.

As a result of Mr. Ford's new income, the Fords enjoyed a way of life that contrasted with their modest existence when he was a congressman, establishing homes in Rancho Mirage, in the California desert, and at Vail, in the Colorado mountains.

In addition to attending fund-raising functions, teaching at the University of Michigan and giving 30 paid speeches a year, Mr. Ford bought interests in two Colorado radio stations and served on the boards of at least eight corporations.

He also supervised and participated in sporting events, mostly golf, including an invitational golf tournament bearing his name in Vail; promoted a Southern California real estate development; and helped advertise a commercially minted coin set commemorating the presidency. He even made his acting debut at the age of 70, portraying himself on an episode of the nighttime television soap opera "Dynasty."

Asked in an 1978 interview about his life in retirement, Mr. Ford said that he was having trouble with chipping and putting in his golf game, but otherwise, "everything is wonderful."

Correction: December 29, 2006

An obituary yesterday about former President Gerald R. Ford misspelled the surname of the Democratic representative from Louisiana who commented on Mr. Ford's technique of persuasion. He was Joe D. Waggoner Jr., not Waggoner.

Correction: January 3, 2007

An obituary on Thursday about former President Gerald R. Ford misstated his relationship to the three brothers with whom he was raised. They were his half-brothers, not his stepbrothers.

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