The Ford Presidency: A Conservative Perspective

An Honors Thesis by

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Preface

It is an ironic twist of historical fate that Gerald Ford was one of our least respected Presidents. He became the scapegoat for problems he neither created nor fostered. Ford's Presidency came on the heels of the most pervasive scandal that has ever rocked the office of the Chief Executive. Yet Gerald Ford was and is noted for his personal integrity. Even his most vociferous opponent would not dispute that the openness of Gerald Ford was a refreshing change from the shady silence of the Nixon Administration or the backslapping, but devious administration of Lyndon Johnson. Even the Kennedy Administration, reputed by many to be the modern Camelot, was more tight-lipped about the country's affairs than was the administration of Gerald Ford.

In many ways it would seem logical that Gerald Ford would be a candid President; he looks honest. You would buy a used car, or almost anything else, from this man. Gerald Ford is a classic American. In much the same way that Abraham Lincoln was the personification of the nineteenth century American Midwesterner, Gerald Ford symbolizes a modern American. His features are rugged, but his demeanor is calm. His speech is often nondescript, but to the point. Much as Lincoln was often the butt of cartoonists' attacks, Ford was often ridiculed in the press and through the television and radio mediums as a slow, practically stupid Midwesterner. Yet Ford was very near the top of his law school class at Yale. How is it that Gerald Ford, whose record reflects not only his personal honesty, but also his personal intelligence, came to be a target of humorists and lost his bid to retain his stable, if somewhat static, Presidency?
That question will be the focus of this thesis, for I believe that the American people (a slim majority of those who voted) made a serious error in choosing Jimmy Carter over Mr. Ford in 1976. A brief bibliography and notes on source material will be included at the end of the paper, but a good deal of the argument for Mr. Ford will be based on personal recollections and, in some cases, on the clear vision provided by hindsight.
Body

Gerald R. Ford, Jr. was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1919, but that was not his name at the time. Gerald Ford was Lesley Lynch King, Jr. when he was born. His mother Dorothy and Mr. Lynch, Sr. were divorced shortly after Ford (Lynch) was born. Dorothy took her young son to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where she met and later married a paint salesman named Gerald R. Ford. The elder Mr. Ford adopted Dorothy's son and changed his name to Gerald R. Ford, Jr. If being an adopted child had any adverse effects on the future President, they are not apparent. It seems ironic that an adopted child would later become a sort of adopted President. In the same manner that a step-father constitutes an almost quasi-father figure, it seemed that the nation was predisposed to make Gerald Ford a quasi-President, a bench warmer for the Democrat's candidate in 1976.

It was not in Gerald Ford's character to be a bench warmer for anyone. Ford was a participant in athletics at South High in Grand Rapids. He was also a capable student and enrolled at the University of Michigan after finishing high school. Although recruited by the University of Michigan to be a football player, Ford was able to maintain a B average in the classroom. Ford wanted to pursue his education and turned down contract offers to play football professionally. Instead he became an assistant football coach at Yale University, where he wanted to study law. The University was reluctant to accept Ford as a full-time student of law while he was working as an assistant coach, but eventually he was accepted and earned his LL. B. degree in 1941. Ford and a friend from his days at the University of Michigan began a law firm in Grand Rapids, but the partnership was short-lived; Ford joined the Navy on April 20, 1942.
Ford's Naval career was outstanding, though not as gaudy as that of John Kennedy. Beginning his career under the tutelage of former boxing great Gene Tunney, Ford rose to the rank of lieutenant commander. He was also a physical training director and an assistant navigational officer. After the war, Ford returned to Grand Rapids and began to practice law in the firm of Butterfield, Keney and Amberg. He continued in the practice for less than two years before deciding to challenge four-term Representative Bartel J. Jonkman in the Republican primary. Ford's effective campaigning and popularity gave him a substantial victory over Jonkman, and an easy win over his Democratic challenger. Election to the House of Representatives did not occupy all of Ford's thoughts in the autumn of 1948, however. In October he was married to a divorcée, Elizabeth Bloomer Warren. The year in which Ford began his tenure as a Michigan Congressman, he was also chosen by the United States Junior Chamber of Commerce as one of the ten outstanding young men in the United States. Gerald Ford was on the first rung.

Ford served his first term quietly and was reelected in 1950, '52, '54 and so on until his final victory in the 1972 general election. He retained his popularity in his home district and was consolidating his own power in the House of Representatives. He was among the delegation of House Republicans who banded together in 1956 to persuade President Eisenhower to resist the attempts of Harold Stassen to remove Richard Nixon from the GOP ticket as the Vice-Presidential candidate. Ford was already a favorite of the Vice-President as Ford had joined Nixon's social and political "club" for Republicans, the Chowder and Marching Club. It was this organization that helped save Richard Nixon from political annihilation in 1956. Ford
further cemented his relationship to Nixon by being a whole-hearted supporter of the Nixon-Henry Cabot Lodge ticket in the 1960 campaign. Ford was more successful than Nixon and Lodge in the '60 elections and after being reelected, Ford became an active campaigner for more clout within the GOP delegation to the House of Representatives. In 1959, Ford had joined in the ouster of Massachusetts conservative Joseph Martin from his position as House minority leader. Martin was replaced by another conservative, Representative Charles Halleck of Indiana, but Halleck's disciplinary actions were considered too stern by the more moderate House Republicans. By 1963, these young Republicans, including Charles Goodell of New York, Robert Griffin of Michigan and Melvin Laird of Wisconsin, banded together and named Gerald Ford to replace the aging Charles Hoeven of Iowa as the chairman of the House Republican Conference. This group, which came to be identified as the "Young Turks," grew increasingly impatient with Halleck's heavy-handedness. Led by Melvin Laird, the "Young Turks" accomplished the unseating of Halleck as minority leader. To replace Halleck, the GOP chose one of Laird's cohorts, Gerald Ford. Thus Ford achieved one of his goals as a Representative: to become the House minority leader.

As do many Congressmen, Ford had a desire to be Speaker of the House, and his dream came nearer to reality with his ascendancy to the minority leadership position in 1965. During the previous year, Ford had been preoccupied with serving on the Warren Commission, investigating the assassination of President Kennedy. In 1965, Portrait of the Assassin, Ford's account of the Commission's proceedings, was published. In this book, Ford not only concurs with the findings of the Commission, but he also painted a lucid picture of Lee Harvey Oswald as an unstable psychotic, troubled by deep-
seated personal and emotional problems that made killing Kennedy the only means of achieving his major goal in life: fame.

As the war in Vietnam persisted and replaced Kennedy's murder as the primary object of public and Congressional concern, Ford became an outspoken critic of the Johnson Administration's conduct of the war. Ford was Hawkish on the war, feeling that American military strength was being poorly managed by LBJ and his advisors. Ford was one of many Americans who questioned the advisability of waging war without making a concerted effort to win that war. At any rate, Ford's criticism of the Johnson Administration's war effort was matched by his distaste of Johnson's Great Society. A fiscal conservative, Ford was not in favor of heavy spending for President Johnson's social programs while the nation's armed forces were foundering so badly in Vietnam. The "Ev and Jerry Show," featuring the House minority leader and the venerable Senator from Illinois, Everett Dirksen, was a criticism of Johnson's policies, both foreign and domestic, and gave Gerald Ford his largest national exposure to that time.

Representative Ford had little difficulty in finding a GOP Presidential aspirant to support in 1968. Ford was a loyal Nixon supporter when Mr. Nixon had served as Vice-President and the two had become friends while members of Congress. Ford's closeness to Nixon was to cost him a considerable measure of prestige in later years. Indeed, his close association to Nixon during the first term was a major factor in Ford's later inability to detach himself from the stigma of being a Nixon favorite. (A problem which could have the same effect on the junior Senator from Indiana in future years.) He became Nixon's spokesman in Congress, and because of his position was asked to deliver some curious proposals to an
often hostile Congress. At Nixon's urging, Representative Ford was at the forefront of the move to impeach liberal Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas in 1970. Ford's loyalty to Nixon prevented him from questioning the President's motive in removing Douglas. One of Ford's biographers, Clark Mollenhoff, suggests that Ford's acceptance of such Nixon edicts was predictable, but highly damaging to his reputation. Nixon was seeking to remove Douglas in political response to Congressional refusal to approve either Harold Carswell or Clement Haynsworth to fill the Supreme Court vacancy created by the forced retirement of Justice Abe Fortas. Of course the attempt to slap the wrists of an intransigent Congress was doomed to fail because of the large Democrat majority in both Houses. Ford had willingly carried the ball in Congress and was thrown for a large loss in prestige as Nixon's play calling was true to form.

Because Gerald Ford was such a reliable, loyal supporter of President Nixon, he often bore the brunt of the criticism of Nixon's policies in Congress. Not only was Ford attacked for his support of the President by the Democrats, but liberal Republicans, including many of the former "Young Turks," also sniped at Ford's willing, staunch support of unpopular policies. Not surprisingly, Ford became a somewhat more reluctant ball carrier for the White House after being so roundly attacked for his support of the ill-fated attempt to impeach Justice Douglas. The House minority leader remained loyal to his party's President; however, and Ford's support of Nixon's policies never wavered. Ford gave many of the same contradictory statements regarding the bombing of neutral Cambodia and the later "incursion" into that country in Congress as were given to the American public by Nixon's staff personnel. Later Ford was a supporter of Nixon's controversial economic policies in
the President's multi-phase war on inflation. And, of course, many hold to this day that Gerald Ford was a knowing participant in the Watergate cover-up.

Ford was clearly a leader of the move to block the proposed investigation of the Watergate burglary prior to the 1972 Presidential election. Wright Patman of Texas was the chairman of a special committee investigating the affair in September, 1972 and Ford was able to hold the minority together during the preliminary hearings. The actions of Ford and his colleagues prevented the Patman committee from intensifying the hearings in the period before the election. The President's wielding of governmental authority was approved by a "silent majority" of Americans and the Watergate affair was a potential monkey wrench in a smoothly operated campaign headed toward a political massacre in November. Some suggest that Ford's role in blocking the efforts of Wright Patman was the key factor in Nixon's selection of Ford to replace Vice-President Spiro Agnew.

In 1972, some periodicals proclaimed that the landslide victory over George McGovern not only guaranteed Americans "four more years" of Nixon, but also insured at least four years of Spiro Agnew. These articles may have overestimated the Vice-President's personal appeal nationwide, but it was certainly plain that the American people were well satisfied with the Nixon Administration. The victory could not be savored very long. Richard Nixon was by far the most successful Republican in the '72 elections. The Democrats still held large majorities in both Houses of Congress and it was evident that the Democrats had not forgotten the Watergate incident. The Ervin committee hearings preoccupied the American public with the misdeeds of Nixon's henchmen in the summer of 1973. The President made futile efforts to divert national attention to his
foreign policies, but the problems of Vice-President Agnew helped to intensify the public pressure on Nixon.

Minority leader Ford's role in the long Watergate trauma was not a new one for him to play. Ford's position among the leadership of the House, his record for party loyalty and his long association with Richard Nixon made Ford the only logical choice to spearhead Nixon's defense in the House. In essence, Gerald Ford remained what he had been to the Administration throughout the first term of Nixon: an unquestioningly loyal member of the President's party in Congress. When Spiro Agnew's financial indiscretions came into the public limelight, it may have been that Ford received the appointment to replace the discredited Agnew because of his role in handcuffing the Patman hearings of 1972, but it seems more likely that the President picked Ford because he was politically the safest choice.

In October of 1973, Spiro Agnew resigned in disgrace from the Vice-Presidency and Nixon was faced with the politically difficult selection of a successor to his much-maligned Vice-President. Many felt that Nixon would choose either Nelson Rockefeller or Ronald Reagan to succeed Agnew. The choice of either of these veteran politicians would have further eroded Nixon's framework of support within the GOP. To avoid antagonizing either the liberal or conservative wings of his party, President Nixon chose Gerald Ford to be the new Vice-President. Stoppage of the Patman hearings a year earlier may have entered into Nixon's consideration of Ford, but it seems more likely that the President picked Ford to decrease the possibility of aggravating his already monumental problems of Congressional non-support. That Gerald Ford was a wise choice by
Nixon is evidenced by the relative ease with which Ford passed through the rigors of Senate confirmation hearings. This case presented the first opportunity for the mechanisms provided for Vice-Presidential replacement by the twenty-fifth amendment to the Constitution to operate, and the Democrat-controlled Senate was not inclined to let any Nixon appointee enjoy a rubber-stamp confirmation. Indeed, the hearings served to show Ford's personal integrity and to reinforce his record of honesty.

Anyone serving as Vice-President under Richard Nixon in late 1973 and the first half of 1974 would have had difficulty in retaining his credibility. Gerald Ford stepped into the number two position in December after confirmation of his selection by the Senate in an administration facing more tribulations than have confronted any peace-time President in American history. The situation was further complicated by the fact of Ford's long-time personal association with Nixon and Ford's propensities to party loyalty. Richard Nixon was still a Republican and still the President, and Ford's nature dictated that he support a man who was not only the President, but Ford's friend as well. Throughout the early months of 1974, Vice-President Ford indeed supported the President, if somewhat half-heartedly. Most of the campaigning Ford did in those months was not for the faltering President, but for candidates involved in the upcoming "off year" elections, in which it was hoped that the Republicans could gain seats in the House and Senate. But it was also evident that the Democrats would not allow the elections to impede the processes of impeachment. It was also paramount to House Democrats to conclude the Judiciary Committee hearings on impeachment expeditiously, to have the hearings finished during the summer, well before the general
As the impeachment hearings ground to their climax in July, Ford's position became increasingly difficult. On the one hand, he could play the role of Administration proponent and agitate against the forces of impeachment. On the other hand, he could anticipate the seemingly inevitable demise of Richard Nixon and attempt to create a national constituency for his own Presidency. Nixon was badly in need of a leader to organize support for his Presidency in Congress and probably hoped that Ford would be the loyal Congressional mouthpiece sorely needed by the tottering Administration. But Gerald Ford was no longer the House minority leader and his personal advisors urged the Vice-President to separate himself from the beleaguered Nixon Administration. As the most damaging evidence against Nixon came to light, and as he persisted in his bulldogish refusal to surrender subpoenaed materials in their entirety, Congressional hostility toward the President was unremitting, and was matched by a growing bitterness among the people who had given the President his overwhelming electoral victory in 1972. The President, because of Congressional activities and the virtually continuous media coverage of the events, lost his base of support nationally as approval of his tactics as Chief Executive plummeted.

As the nation lingered in the death throes of the Nixon Administration, Vice-President Ford became more ambivalent in his support of the President. Ford's public appearances increased, as did his national exposure, as he made a series of trips around the country, ostensibly to garner support for GOP candidates in the November elections, but more likely in the attempt to gain popular approval in the event that Nixon was removed from office or resigned of his own volition. In those appearances, Ford's vocal support of
of the Nixon Administration became cautious. He maintained his belief that Nixon was personally innocent of any wrongdoing other than being something less than candid about the affair when speaking to the American people. As the likelihood that the Vice-President would soon be the President increased, Ford could not alienate the potential supporters of his Presidency. Putting the Presidency back into operation after having spent just over two years attempting to "apply the brakes" to the accelerating Watergate crisis would require a broad base of support among the American people; as Nixon's Vice-President, Ford faced a difficult task in attempting to make the American people forget two years of political infighting and confirm a new administration to put the government back into normal operation. In its hearings on the question of impeachment, the House Judiciary Committee recommended three separate articles of impeachment against Nixon. Coupled with the Supreme Court's unanimous decision against the President in the case regarding the fate of the subpoenaed tapes, the "other" branches of government provided by the Constitution exercised their duty to act as a check on the executive branch. The President had been charged with obstruction of justice in Congress and had been denied the cloak of national security to guard his infamous tapes.

Congress was in the process of laying the groundwork for the trial of Richard Nixon in the House chamber on three bills of impeachment when Nixon abruptly announced his inevitable decision to resign on August 8. Gerald Ford was sworn in by Chief Justice Burger as the thirty-eighth President and asked the American people to bind together and seal the open wounds of Watergate. Actually Watergate was the salt in the Vietnam wound that had barely begun to heal when one branch of American government:
collapsed. The wounds of Watergate aggravated what proved to be a greater problem for Ford than the lingering aroma of the scandal: the new President's lack of a constituency. As a member of the House of Representatives, Ford had been careful to maintain the image and presence of a Congressman from Grand Rapids. Now all that Gerald Ford had to do was unify the nation without having been chosen to do so by the very people he was to unite! A President whose party is a minority in Congress must have a vocal national constituency to pressure Congress to approve Presidential policies. Ford was supported by Republican organizations throughout the United States, but it soon became apparent that most Americans felt that he was too closely associated with the former President to be taken seriously. In spite of his strong record, Ford was often the butt of jokes among his fellow Representatives and this unfortunate reputation was a continual plague to Ford during his Presidency.

President Ford was a good deal more popular with the press than was his predecessor. He was also popular among the American people. Perhaps the new President's popularity was more a function of national relief that the Watergate trauma was no longer a cancer preventing the effective operation of the executive branch than of any general approval of the new President. At any rate, Ford basked in the warm glow of personal popularity. While few expected Ford's leadership to be assertive or dynamic, all agreed that the President's reputation for stable leadership offered welcome relief from the two-year struggle to apply the nation's laws to President Nixon. Ford himself offered the nation salve for its critical injuries. But along with the obvious national afflictions, the nation was suffering from a plethora of chronic diseases that served to
aggravate the pains of Watergate.

The Nixon Administration had been incapable of any active role in domestic affairs as the battle with Congress and the Courts concerning the legal authority of the President to withhold materials from the other branches of government continued during the first half of Nixon's second term. Former President Nixon had been unable to pursue such domestic reforms proposed in his New Federalism campaign. Nixon hoped to cut the size of the bureaucracy by decentralizing the federal government. His plans called for the elimination of certain federal services and the return of tax funds to the states, which could appropriate the funds for specific programs of services as dictated by the needs of the locality. Congress had approved of revenue sharing legislation, but that policy and other pet Nixon projects were rejected during his abbreviated second term. Nixon was also unable to take any action to correct the sagging economy as Congress zealously pursued its investigation of his covert activities.

Neglect of national problems under Nixon assured that the economy would falter badly, and this problem gave President Ford his worst long-term headaches, but it was his pardon of the former President that first brought public wrath to bear on the Ford Administration. By all accounts Ford was convinced that pardoning Nixon was the only effective means of rapidly terminating the public debate over Nixon's guilt or innocence. By his own account President Ford continues in his regret that he failed to fully explain to the nation the admission of guilt implicit in the acceptance of a pardon. In Ford's estimation, Mr. Nixon was too hard-nosed, too belligerent in defeat, too unwilling to surrender and admit his errors. The President also expressed his concern for Nixon's well-being, as
the traumatic experience of toppling from a position of maximum power had taken a heavy toll on Nixon's psychological and physical welfare.

Ford hoped the pardon would enable the nation to turn its attentions and energies to correcting the ominous currents of the economy and other problems left virtually unattended as the government worked to rid itself of a rotten branch. Instead, he aroused the ire of the vast majority of Americans who had been forced by the weight of evidence to conclude that the former President was indeed guilty. From the President's own party came the criticism that Ford had not acted quickly enough to salvage sufficient support for any of its candidates in the upcoming elections. Many Democrats charged Ford with dealing the pardon in exchange for the earlier resignation. Ford vehemently denies all such charges. From time to time he has lucidly stated that, in view of the potential weakness that would have persisted for the United States if a trial of Richard Nixon had been conducted, the national interests would have been better served if Nixon had "contritely" accepted the pardon and its implicit admission of guilt.

Perhaps in an attempt to calm the storm of protest that erupted because of the pardon, Ford announced his conditional plan of amnesty for those who had refused to serve in the armed forces during the Vietnam war. The plan solved few of Ford's problems and probably served to increase pressure on the President from conservatives within his own party. The President plunged headlong into economic problems, taking numerous leaves to campaign for the ill-fated GOP candidates in the '74 Congressional elections. The tidal wave of "Watergate backlash" swept former Nixon supporters out of office and a horde of young Democrats into both Houses. It was
clear that any strong policy advocated by the President would face much resistance from a Congress in which the opposition party held a two-thirds majority in the House and was within one vote of such a majority in the Senate. After the crushing defeat of Republicans in the '74 elections, many came to regard Ford as a Presidential bench warmer for the Democratic nominee in 1976. Thus Ford was restricted by Congressional opposition in initiating vigorous programs to alleviate inflation and balance the economy.

The President's decision to embark on the "WIN" campaign was tempered by the lack of Congressional support for more concrete attacks on the nemesis of inflation. Ford was aware of the fact that Congress would not be supportive of his proposed tax cuts because of their accompanying reduction of governmental services, which may or may not be essential, but are of personal interest to individual legislators. The Whip Inflation Now campaign, publicized by colorful buttons, was little more than a voluntary program for consumers and businesses to cut corners, save money and force prices down. The economy was obviously headed into a major slowdown, caused in no small measure by Congressional obsession with the Watergate affair. Republican losses in the elections guaranteed that there would be minimal agreement on appropriate economic measures during the remainder of the Ford Administration.

Congress did agree to the income tax rebate program in an effort to give consumers enough money to make the necessary expenditures to get the economy in motion. Rates of inflation stabilized as spending decreased, but the result was a slowdown in industrial production, which increased the level of unemployment. Congress could not run roughshod over the President in matters of domestic policy, because the former House minority leader was not reluctant
to quash the desires of Congress by use of the veto. Ford was given plenty of opportunities to display his willingness to negate Congressional policies by effectively wielding the veto power.

The use of the veto did little to endear the President to Congress, which was also making a priority of regaining power lost to the executive branch during the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon Administrations. Nixon and his foreign policy coordinator, Dr. Henry Kissinger, compounded the powers assumed in the operation of American foreign policy by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. Escalation of the war in Vietnam, and later its deescalation, détente with the Soviets and the first step toward rapprochement with Communist China were concluded virtually exclusive of Congressional participation. Pressured because of the continuation of the Vietnamese war, Nixon and Kissinger began conducting foreign policy by means of face-to-face negotiation. Congress was left with the role of ratifying treaties, but could exercise little or no control over executive agreements, which became the foundation of foreign policy under Nixon. In an effort to prevent the sidestepping of Congress that had resulted in the nation being plunged into the morass of Vietnam during the Johnson Administration, Congress passed the War Powers Act in 1973, which severely limited the President's authority to commit American troops to an extended war. This law did little to prevent Nixon and Kissinger from conducting foreign policy by direct negotiation and executive agreement, however. Indeed, Kissinger negotiated the cease fire that brought an end to the Yom Kippur war between Israel and its Arab neighbors with little or no consultation of the legislative branch.

Policy by negotiation gave the Chief Executive great latitude in foreign affairs and the United States began to bargain with the
two nations it had aggressively opposed for a quarter of a century. Elevated to the position of Secretary of State after having served as chairman of the National Security Council, Henry Kissinger was free not only to bargain in the best interests of the United States with long-time allies, but also with long-time enemies where the formerly ideologically separated nations could help one another. Kissinger's hands were free enough to allow him to practice "shuttle diplomacy" and temporarily defuse the Middle East time bomb, lead the American delegation to the Paris peace talks with the Vietnamese Communists and help to preserve detente with the Soviet Union despite pressures to limit dealings between the superpowers. President Ford asked Kissinger to remain as a member of his administration and Kissinger agreed to do so. But with the war in Vietnam winding to a collapse of South Vietnam and American interests not imminently threatened in the world, Congress was more abrasive to Secretary Kissinger and conducted a probe into allegations that Kissinger had used illegal wire taps.

If the Congressional inquiry into Kissinger's possible use of illegally gained information hearkened back to the fall of Richard Nixon, the fall of South Vietnam in April, 1975 hearkened back to American involvement in the most divisive external war in the history of the United States. The recession abated but the economy remained stagnant and many Americans began to perceive that the United States was in a sort of limbo between the upheavals of the previous decade and the need for change to meet the nation's growing problems in energy and natural resource management. The Arab oil embargo of 1973 illustrated American reliance on oil imports and the conflict over the construction of the oil pipeline across Alaska showed the difficulty of the dilemma caused by the interference of interests in the nation. On the one hand, the
nation needed the oil of Alaska's north shore and coal resources in the Midwest and West. On the other hand, the continued use of nonrenewable resources could not continue unrestricted; the pipeline was potentially harmful to wildlife in Alaska and coal presents ecological problems in all phases from mining to burning.

Gerald Ford was in the unenviable position of having to serve as a link between the countervailing forces in American life. He had to do so as a President not elected by the people but appointed by a man whose ouster from the Presidency was deemed necessary by an overwhelming majority of the American people. President Ford was in the unprecedented position of having to pick up the pieces of an administration broken by the alienation of its supporters. The Republicans remained loyal to the President for the most part, but there was little public support for Ford's solutions to American problems. The American people apparently wanted the government to leave them alone. The legislative and executive branches had not yet resumed normal relations after having spent nearly eighteen months in an adversary relationship. Congress was ardently pressuring Nixon and the Democrats controlling the legislature were reluctant to support President Ford's policies, particularly after his pardon of Nixon allowed the object of the Congressional hunt to slip into the briers of political exile. Congress and public opinion seemed to conspire to limit Gerald Ford to the status of a lame duck President, holding the office only for the interim between elections.

The 1976 Presidential election began much earlier than has any other such election in our history. The eventual winner after the seemingly endless campaigning started his drive for the Presidency more than a year before the election was to be held. President
Ford had been forced to campaign for support from the beginning of his administration. Ford had to sell his policies to the American people at every turn. Ford was generally approved of by Americans, but the approval could be more aptly described as toleration. Often such minutiae as a Presidential head-bumping, a fall on a ski slope or a trip on a boarding ramp were events worthy of coverage by the national news media. Ford had long been the butt of jokes in the nation's capitol and, after he became President, the tendency to ridicule the good-natured Ford became something of a national pastime. Many felt that the small scale blunder associated with the "recapture" of the Mayaguez indicated the President's incompetence. Of course, these people fail to realize that, while the President can take action to commit American troops, he has very little control over where these troops end up. That they were sent to the wrong island was more likely the fault of the commander directly involved than of the Commander-in-Chief. Nonetheless, the Mayaguez incident became more fuel for the engine of ridicule that drove away President Ford's credibility.

Ford's stabilizing influence on American government in the wake of the Watergate crisis did not go unnoticed or unappreciated among those who had been supporters of former President Nixon. As the '76 election drew near, most interest was focused on the large field of candidates vying for the Democratic nomination. Senator Kennedy was indeed serious about his refusal to run, but several Democrats offered themselves as the candidate who could complete the reversal of the 1972 disaster. Regardless of Watergate, Senator George McGovern had had little hope of unseating the successful incumbent in 1972, but Nixon's fall from power and the massive victories by the Democrats in the 1974 Congressional elections made it
clear that the Democrat's nominee would hold the inside track to victory in the '76 Presidential race. As the primaries proceeded, the earliest announced candidate, Jimmy Carter, won important early victories and staved off strong challenges from Representative Morris Udall, Senator Henry Jackson, Senator Frank Church and Governor Jerry Brown to secure the Democratic nomination. In spite of the large number of candidates that competed for the nomination, the selection of Carter was not divisive. Democrats enjoyed more unity in 1976 than they had experienced at any time since the LBJ landslide of 1964.

Unfortunately for Gerald Ford, the Democrats were not the only active challengers to his Presidency. Many Republicans shared the view that Gerald Ford was an interim President. There were strong currents within the GOP that suggested Ford's seeking election to the Presidency would allow the Democrats to make use of the considerable leverage of Watergate. This group of Republicans was largely conservative and it chose former California governor Ronald Reagan to challenge President Ford for the Republican nomination. Ford was supported by Nixon's more moderate supporters and was still favored by liberal Republicans. Ford was the choice of most GOP regulars in most states, but Reagan proved to be a formidable opponent. In the primaries, Ford was the consistent winner in the industrial states of the Northeast and the Midwestern farm belt, but Reagan won important victories not only in his home state, but also captured the potentially pivotal states of Texas, Mississippi, Florida and Indiana. Because the Reagan victories were nearer to the Republican convention, the internal challenge to the incumbent President gained momentum and further eroded President Ford's prestige. Rarely had an incumbent President been so severely
tested from within his own party since the institutionalization of the Republican-Democrat two party system in the latter nineteenth century. The Republicans were leaning to the right, often ignoring the fact that the American ship of state was sailing smoothly again after narrowly avoiding being dashed on the rocks of pervasive corruption. Ford had been able to restore stability to government but had been unable to inspire confidence in his leadership among the American public. Seemingly endless presentations of the President as a harmless buffoon did little to reinforce the public's trust in Ford's leadership.

At any rate, President Ford's campaign for reelection survived Reagan's tenacious challenge, and once again the President faced an uphill struggle. Jimmy Carter's popularity was great following the Democratic convention, and Ford was shown well behind Carter in polls conducted after the Republican convention. Carter held strong majorities among black voters and was conceded predominance in much of the South. President Ford held most of his strength in the West Midwest. In the industrial states of the North, the candidates ran nearly a dead heat. Carter campaigned as the crusading Washington outsider, untainted by the corruption and ineptitude of past administrations. Ford campaigned on his record. He sought to rebuild the image of the remainder of Richard Nixon's second term in the White House, and accentuate the high points of his own administration; the stabilization of the economy, continued advancements in foreign affairs and a return to normal government functions after the near collapse because of Watergate.

Democrats had not forgotten that it was Richard Nixon who had given them one of the worst defeats in the history of American Presidential elections. Jimmy Carter was not unwilling to remind
Americans of the links between President Ford and his predecessor. Ford was continually compared to Nixon in terms of domestic policy; Henry Kissinger's domination of foreign policy provided another tie to the Nixon Administration, and was criticized because of Kissinger's affinity for secrecy in conducting foreign policy. The televised debates gave each candidate the opportunity to elucidate his particular plan of action for the approval of the United States electorate. Each candidate had ample opportunity to expound his proposals; each made his points in the course of the debates, but neither was able to use the debates as well as the Kennedy organization had in 1960. Carter offered the American people open government, promised to trim the bureaucracy, balance the federal budget by 1980, reduce unemployment and make the government responsive to the needs of the people. On the other hand, Ford asked the people to provide him with the opportunity to govern the nation with a popular mandate. In substance, Ford's policies were basically a continuation of Nixon's first term policy aims. Tax cuts were necessary, in Ford's view to help the American people enjoy the benefits of an economy somewhat healthier than it had been when he took office.

As clearly as each contestant stated his proposals in the debates, each made glaring errors in his appeal for votes. Carter vacillated on the specifics of his proposals to reduce the size of the bureaucracy and balance the budget where they touched existing programs. Not surprisingly, Ford's most glaring error, his statement regarding the autonomy of the Poles and other Eastern European peoples, was seized upon by the media and helped to convince an already skeptical American public that Ford should not be re-elected. On balance, the challenge to Ford lacked depth. Although Carter's promises were attractive, close scrutiny of them should
have shown the American people that Carter's inexperience in national politics made his proposals unrealistic. Ford's steady leadership became overshadowed by his reputation as a good-natured bungler.

The American people became insensitive to President Ford's pleas for support. There had been two attempts to assassinate Ford within a year; the President was a target of national contempt. After Nixon's attempt to circumvent the law, the public and the media made certain that Gerald Ford did not amass enough power to challenge the Constitution. By making Ford a butt of jokes, it became possible for Americans to refuse to take the President seriously. It mattered little what policies Ford had backed or how strong his leadership could have become had he been taken seriously; his policies were ridiculed because they were Ford's policies.

The United States was apparently obsessed with the feeling that a man who admits to being human, who bumps his head in low doorways, who falls on ski slopes, who refuses to promise what he cannot deliver, cannot effectively govern the American people. Democratic majorities in both Houses of Congress made his task of governance more difficult, but such a condition is certainly not unheard of in American politics. For many, the Ford Administration hearkened back to the Nixon years, but Ford's relations with Congress, the media and the American people were far more open and candid than were most previous Presidencies. The candor of the Ford Administration carried over into his family, and possibly cost him some votes in the election. Betty Ford's candid discussions about life in modern America cost Ford conservative support in the primaries and may have been a factor in the election.

Although Gerald Ford had attempted to guide the nation into the post-Watergate world and, by and large, had been successful in
doing so, it was his link with Richard Nixon, particularly the pardon, that doomed Ford's attempt to succeed himself to failure. For the most part, the American people wanted to be left alone by politicians. Jimmy Carter offered the promise of a leader for the United States who was not a member of the increasingly suspect political leadership. President Ford's connections to Richard Nixon were rendered unforgettable by the pardon and, combined with public dissatisfaction with Washington-based government in general, served to swing a slim majority of American voters into the camp of Jimmy Carter.

Once again, the American people had voted for party affiliations and neglected to weigh the credentials of the participants. Carter was inexperienced in foreign policy and had few connections with key individuals in Washington. Although his proposals struck close to the major concerns of many Americans, he was vague on specifics and it was doubtful even to Carter's supporters that he could make his promises fact. Gerald Ford was a known quantity; he had well-developed contacts with Congressional leaders. The continuation of Henry Kissinger's foreign policies had considerably reduced ever-simmering Cold War tensions and helped to relieve pressures in the unpredictable Middle East. Many Americans were unemployed, but upward pressure on prices had been reduced and the country's economy was in slow motion operation, which is a good deal more desirable than a nonmoving economy, as it had been when Ford took office. The American people (a slim majority of those who voted) opted for the unknown in Jimmy Carter and rejected the stability promised by the retention of Gerald Ford. Ford fought uphill battles into the House leadership, had walked the tightrope between disloyalty and practical leadership as Vice-President, and
served adequately as an interim President confronted by overwhelming Democratic majorities in both Houses of Congress. The people were not willing to elect Ford to the Presidency, but by voting for Carter they denied one of this country's most able, honest and hard-working politicians an opportunity to fully exercise his abilities to govern backed by a national constituency. Perhaps we would not now be mired in the muck of indecisiveness if the American people had been fair-minded enough to allow Gerald Ford a full opportunity to govern.
Notes on Sources

Information on the Ford Presidency is not easily found. Much of the primary source material remains unavailable to the researcher. This problem is further compounded by the fact that none of Ford's major biographers include a bibliography in their works. There are several good books on the Ford Presidency, however. The Ford press secretary who resigned after the Nixon pardon provides a critical assessment of Ford's abilities in his book, *Gerald Ford and the Future of the Presidency*. Ford's other press secretary, Ron Nessen, provides a journalistic account in *It Sure Looks Different from the Inside*. Another book more critical of the Ford Administration was written by Clark Mollenhoff: *The Man Who Pardoned Nixon*. A more favorable account is Richard Reeves' *A Ford not a Lincoln*. John Hersey examines one day in the life of President Ford in *The President*. Jonathon Moore and Janet Fraser edited a useful look at the 1976 campaign through the eyes of the campaign managers in *Campaign for President*. Malcolm MacDougall also considers the '76 campaign in *We Almost Made It*. Ford's view of the United States is recounted in Robert Winterberger's compilation of *The Gerald Ford Letters* and Ford's view of JFK's murderer, *Portrait of the Assassin*. 
BIBLIOGRAPHY


