

WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #19

Late in July, 1974 President Richard Nixon was under enormous pressure because of the Watergate scandal. The House Judiciary Committee had dramatically voted to recommend three articles of impeachment: 1) obstruction of justice through the payment of “hush money” to witnesses in the Watergate hearings as well as the withholding of evidence; 2) using federal agencies to deprive citizens of their constitutional rights; and 3) defiance of Congress by withholding tapes from a secret taping system installed in the Oval Office. Before the House of Representatives could meet to vote on impeachment, Nixon handed over the complete set of White House tapes. On August 9th, fully aware that the evidence on the tapes implicated him in a cover-up, which would lead to his conviction by the U.S. Senate, Nixon resigned from office – the only American president ever to do so.

The next day – August 10th, 1974 – with his wife, Betty, at his side, Vice-President Gerald R. Ford was sworn in as president by Chief Justice Warren Burger. Ford, the former Republican minority leader in the House of Representatives, had not been Nixon’s original vice-president. He had replaced Spiro T. Agnew, who had himself resigned in October, 1973 for accepting kickbacks from contractors while he had been governor of Maryland and, also, during his term as vice-president. In a plea bargain Agnew agreed to a single charge of tax evasion.

Nixon had appointed Ford, a congressman from Michigan, as vice-president with the approval of Congress under provisions of the 25th Amendment. Ratified in 1967, that amendment provided for the appointment of a vice-president when the office became vacant. At the time of Nixon’s resignation, Ford insisted that he had no intention of pardoning the former president, who was still liable for criminal prosecution. The new president said, “I do not think the public would stand for it.” However, on September 8th – less than a month after he took office, Ford stunned the nation by granting Nixon a “full, free, and absolute” pardon. Ford’s decision generated a storm of criticism. The *New York Times* called it “an unconscionable act.” Ford explained that it was necessary to end the national obsession with the Watergate scandals. Although he had made a prudent and wise move designed to heal the nation, many Americans never forgave Ford for the pardon of the former president.

Many suspected that Nixon and Ford had made a deal, though there was no evidence to confirm the speculation. President Ford testified personally to a congressional committee: “There was no deal, period.” But Watergate spawned a wave of cynicism about the office of the presidency that has never completely disappeared. In the spring of 1974 polls showed that a majority of Americans believed that Nixon was lying about his complicity, but that four out of five Americans judged him as no more guilty of wrongdoing than his presidential predecessors. The Watergate scandals and Nixon’s resignation seemed to justify the most distrustful appraisals of American leaders and political institutions. Therefore, it is not surprising that barely half of the eligible electorate voted in the next presidential election in 1976.

During Nixon's last year in office, the Watergate crisis so dominated the Washington scene that major domestic and foreign problems received little executive attention. The perplexing combination of inflation and recession worsened. So did the oil crisis. At the same time, Henry Kissinger, who was by then both the U.S. National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, assumed virtually complete control over the management of foreign policy. He and Ford watched helplessly as the South Vietnamese forces began to crumble before North Vietnamese attacks. The American leaders attempted with limited success to establish a framework for peace in the Middle East. The Nixon administration had supported a CIA role in overthrowing Salvador Allende, the popularly elected Marxist president of Chile. Allende was subsequently replaced by General Augusto Pinochet, a military dictator supposedly friendly to the United States. Whether Allende committed suicide or was murdered by Chilean officers is still debated.

Ford inherited these simmering problems when he assumed office after the resignation of Nixon. An amiable, honest man, Ford had candidly admitted upon becoming vice-president, "I am a Ford, not a Lincoln." He enjoyed widespread popularity as president for only a short time. Ford soon adopted the posture that he had developed as a conservative minority leader in the House – a nay-saying leader of the opposition, who believed that the federal government exercised too much power over domestic affairs. In his fifteen months as president, Ford vetoed 39 bills, thereby outstripping Herbert Hoover's veto record in less than half the time.

By resisting congressional pressure to reduce taxes and increase federal spending, he succeeded in plummeting the economy into the deepest recession since the Great Depression. Unemployment jumped to 9 percent in 1975, and the federal deficit hit a record the next year. When New York City announced that it was near bankruptcy, unable to meet its payrolls and bond payments, Ford vowed "to veto any bill that has as its purpose a federal bailout." The headline in the *New York Daily News* was: "Ford to New York: Drop Dead." Fresh appeals ultimately produced a solution. The president relented after the Senate and House banking committees voted to guarantee a loan to the city. Banks agreed to declare a three-year moratorium on municipal debt. New York was saved from insolvency, but Mayor Abraham Beame was forced to cut city services, freeze wages, and lay off workers. One pessimistic observer declared that "the banks have been saved, and the city has been condemned." Ford rejected wage and price controls to curb inflation, preferring voluntary restraints that he tried to bolster by passing out "WIN" buttons, symbolizing his campaign to "Whip Inflation Now." Ford urged Americans to cut food waste and do more with less. Instead, his campaign was deeply unpopular among the American people. The "WIN" buttons became a national joke and a popular symbol of Ford's ineffectiveness in the fight against "stagflation" – a combination of persistent high inflation with high unemployment and stagnant demand in the nation's economy.

In foreign policy Ford retained Kissinger as secretary of state and attempted to pursue Nixon's goals of stability in the Middle East, rapprochement with the People's Republic of China, and detente with the Soviet Union. Late in 1974 Ford met with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev at Vladivostok in Siberia and accepted the framework for another arms-control

accord that was to serve as the basis for SALT II. Meanwhile, Kissinger's tireless shuttle diplomacy between Egypt and Israel produced an agreement – Israel promised to return to Egypt most of the Sinai territory captured in the 1967 Six-Day War, and the two nations agreed to rely on negotiations rather than force to settle future disagreements. These limited but significant achievements should have strengthened Ford's image, but they were overwhelmed by the criticism that followed the collapse of South Vietnam in May, 1975.

Not only had a decade of American effort in Vietnam proved futile, but the Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian Communist movement, had also won a resounding victory, plunging that country into a bloodbath committed by fanatics under Pol Pot. Meanwhile, the OPEC oil cartel was threatening another boycott while other Third World nations denounced the United States as a depraved and declining imperialistic power.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the new American ambassador to the United Nations, sought to answer these shrill accusations with his own unique blend of passion and stridency. But this only succeeded in further aggravating American relations with the developing countries. Ford also lost his patience, sending in the marines to rescue the crew of the American merchant ship, *Mayaguez*, which had been captured by the Cambodian Communists in May, 1975. This vigorous move won popular acclaim until it was disclosed that the Cambodians had already agreed to release the captured Americans. The 41 Americans killed in the operation had died for no purpose.

By 1976 the Democrats could hardly wait for the presidential election. They were salivating over the turmoil that had existed in the nation since the Watergate fiasco. At the Republican convention Ford managed to fend off a powerful challenge for the nomination from the former California governor and Hollywood actor, Ronald Reagan. Because even the Republicans were divided over Ford's leadership and because Ford had not solved economic and energy problems within the nation, whoever the Democrats nominated seemed to be a shoo-in for the presidency.

Surprisingly, the Democrats chose an obscure former naval officer turned peanut farmer, who had served one term as governor of Georgia. James Earl "Jimmy" Carter emerged with the presidential nomination of his party in 1976. Capitalizing on the post-Watergate cynicism and his down-home image, Carter pledged to restore morality to the White House. He cited his inexperience as an outsider in the byways of Washington politics as an asset, even though he selected Walter Mondale of Minnesota as his running mate to ensure his ties to traditional Democrat voting blocs.

Meanwhile, Ford chose Senator Robert Dole of Kansas to join the Republican ticket as its vice-presidential nominee. Dole was a wounded veteran of World War II, a tough campaigner, and a decent man.

To the surprise of many so-called political experts, Carter revived the New Deal coalition of Southern whites, blacks, urban labor, and ethnic groups to win a popular majority of 50% to 48% – 41 million votes to 39 million for Ford. Carter's electoral vote majority was

narrow – 297 to 241. A heavy turnout of blacks in the South enabled him to sweep every state in that region except Virginia. He also benefited from the appeal of Mondale, his liberal running mate and a favorite among blue-collar workers and the urban poor. Ford won most of the trans-Mississippi West. The big story of the election of 1976 was the low voter turnout. One reporter commented, “Neither Ford nor Carter won as many votes as Mr. Nobody.” Almost half the eligible voters, apparently alienated by Watergate and the lackluster candidates, chose to sit out the election. Ford still might have prevailed, but his pardon of Nixon likely cost him enough votes in key states to swing the election to Carter.