

This Day in History... August 9, 1974

Gerald Ford Inaugurated Following Watergate

On August 9, 1974, Gerald Ford was inaugurated as president following Richard Nixon's resignation. Ford was the first and only person to serve as both vice president and president without winning election to either office.

The Watergate scandal started with so-called "plumbers" being tasked with finding dirt on one of the opponents on Richard Nixon's List of Enemies, Daniel Ellsberg. In 1971, Ellsberg had released the "Pentagon Papers" to the press, revealing top-secret government decisions regarding the war in Vietnam. The president knew that most of the information would be lost on the public and that it tarnished the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations' reputations more than his own. Even so, the publication of such information could undermine the people's trust in their government and their commander in chief.

Nixon chose to make an example of Ellsberg to keep others from leaking information. An operation commenced to dig up dirt on Ellsberg to discredit him, but nothing was found. All charges against Ellsberg were eventually dropped when the government was found guilty of misconduct in the prosecution. The Nixon White House was completely disgraced. With an election year fast-approaching, Nixon could afford no further embarrassment. The series of actions taken by the Nixon Administration to preserve his office would be the same actions that would destroy it.

In the spring of 1972, Nixon's new target became the Democratic National Committee (DNC) offices at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, DC. That May, after two unsuccessful attempts, a team was able to break into the DNC offices and set up surveillance equipment. When the bugs and wire taps began to fail, the team returned to the DNC in June, but were unable to accomplish their task. The five men were caught and arrested for breaking in to the Democratic Committee offices at the Watergate Hotel. Evidence indicated they were connected to the Committee for the Re-election of the President – but the White House denied any association or knowledge.

Meanwhile, it was discovered that Vice President Agnew had accepted bribes. Facing possible prosecution, Agnew resigned on October 10, 1973. Gerald Ford was selected as his replacement and sworn in as our nation's 40th vice president on December 6, 1973. As the Watergate scandal spread, the public began to lose its confidence in President Nixon. Vice President Ford went on a nationwide tour giving speeches to business, civic, and youth groups in support of Nixon.

Within the year, Nixon himself had been implicated in the scandal and talks of impeachment were heard through Congress. The final blow came when transcripts of Nixon's taped phone conversations were released. It became clear that even if he had not been directly behind the illegal activity at the Watergate Hotel, Nixon was up to his neck in the coverup.

On August 7, 1974, three of the president's closest supporters, Senators Goldwater, Rhodes, and Scott met with him. They informed him they could only muster 15 votes if an impeachment trial were called for. The next day Nixon went on television and announced he would resign to begin "the process of healing which is so desperately needed in America." This was the first time in history a president had resigned from office.

When Ford was sworn in as the 38th president of the United States at noon the same day, he said: "I assume the Presidency under extraordinary circumstances never before experienced by Americans. This is an hour of history that troubles our minds and hurts our hearts."

On September 8, 1974, Ford awarded Nixon a "full, free, and absolute pardon for all offenses he committed or may have committed while in office." He further stated that Nixon had "suffered enough and will continue to suffer no matter what I do." The public reacted negatively – after all, Nixon had not yet been convicted of any crime. However, some people respected President Ford's decision, which he believed was in the best interest of the weary nation. Ford explained the pardon was an attempt to end division in the nation and "heal the wounds that had festered too long."



This stamp was issued the year after Ford died.



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