

Thirty Years Ago...August 9, 1974

BY
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Recalling the impressions and emotions present at the White House thirty years ago, on August 9, 1974, the day that Gerald Ford was administered the oath of office of President of the United States, rekindled conflicting feelings. Feelings that included joy, anger, and exhaustion. But, above all, pride. Pride, derived from the historical context for simply having been there at that time. Pride, that evolves from having satisfactorily completed a difficult task. And pride, for having been privileged to provide assistance to a man of such integrity and intellectual honesty on that memorable date.

The Day Before

Early in the afternoon, one day before August 9, 1974, President Nixon met privately with Vice President Ford in the Oval Office. The President had something important to relate in person to his Vice President of nine months. "I have made the decision to resign...it's in the best interest of the country," Nixon said in a firm voice. The President's unprecedented announcement was followed by forty minutes of free flowing dialogue, with Nixon doing most of the talking. He spoke of foreign policy, SALT II negotiating with Russian Premier Brezhnev, the deplorable state of the US economy, Cabinet and senior White House personnel and possible worthy candidates for the soon-to-be-vacant Office of Vice President. When the arrangements for the next day's swearing in ceremony and Nixon's family departure were resolved, the conversation ended abruptly. President Nixon thanked the Vice President for, "his support over these painful weeks" and offered his "prayers in the days and years ahead."

The remainder of the Vice President's day was devoted to a thousand details that required planning, scheduling and coordinating the anticipated August 9 swearing-in. They included ensuring travel arrangements to Washington for Chief Justice Warren Burger, vacationing at the time in the Netherlands. An Air Force plane had to be dispatched to fly the Chief Justice to a location where a non-stop flight to Washington could be obtained. The already pared-down list had to be further reduced to no more than 275 guests, the maximum number of people allowed in the

East Room. Invitations to the ceremony needed to be hastily extended, received, and acknowledged. For some, like longtime colleague and golfing buddy, Tip 'O Neill, a personal telephone invitation was in order. When the Vice President invited Tip 'O Neill, the future Speaker demonstrated his well know charm and Irish wit, remarking "Isn't this a wonderful country? Here we can talk like this and you and I can be friends, and eighteen months from now (during the 1976 Presidential race) I'll be going around the country kicking your ass." The amused Vice President responded, "That's a hell of a way for a Congressman to speak to the next President of the United States."

Another person who needed to speak to the Vice President that day was Ford's longtime aid and speechwriter,

Bob Hartmann. Hartmann had quickly composed an Acceptance Speech (not an Inaugural Address) for the new President to deliver at the conclusion of the next day's swearing-in ceremony. Incredibly, given the limited notice afforded Hartmann to write the speech, the speech was perfect in tone and content for the next day's quasi-solemn, quasi-joyous ceremony. It was pure Jerry Ford. With one exception. The Vice President's sensibilities were offended by one sentence in the speech, believing it to be "too hard on President Nixon." Ford told Hartmann he wanted the sentence deleted. Hartmann disagreed... and a debate ensued. The one line was ultimately allowed to remain intact. Today, thirty years later, that one sentence remains the most quoted phrase from President Ford's Acceptance Speech, "Our long national nightmare is over."

At day's end, concluding with a late meeting with Henry Kissinger, the Vice President returned to his modest home in Virginia. After a quite dinner with Betty Ford and

the children, and a quick read of the day's News Summaries, the future President retired early. Tomorrow was going to be a busy day.

"The Festering Crisis is Resolved"

As if August 9, 1974 was going to be another day at the office, the Vice President rose early and made his own



Courtesy Nixon Presidential Materials Staff

"I have made the decision to resign...it's in the best interest of the country..."

breakfast (one toasted English muffin and coffee). At 8:00 AM, he carried his own briefcase to the Vice President's limousine, and, in the company of

Phil Buchen and Congressman John Byrnes, drove to the White House. Buchen and other members of a hastily formed ad

hoc Transition Team had drafted a four page memorandum for the future President. Buchen handed the memo to the Vice President as the limousine departed the Ford home. The Transition Team memo addresses a variety of subjects, including the sensitive topic of The Continuation of Nixon Staff and Nixon Policy versus Implementation of Ford Administration changes. The memo warned, "You must walk a delicate line between compassion and consideration for the former President's staff, and the rapid assertion of your personal control over the Executive Branch." Ford thanked them for a "fine job."

When the Vice President's limousine arrived at the White House, President Richard Nixon was completing his final breakfast in the Lincoln Sitting Room and busily making notes on his farewell speech to his White House staff, scheduled for later that morning. Nixon was interrupted by Chief of Staff, Al Haig, who handed the President an unsigned letter of resignation addressed to the Secretary of State. "Something has to be done, Mr. President," said Haig. Nixon read the brief one sentence letter and, without comment, signed it. The letter read, "I hereby resign the Office of President of the United States, effective twelve noon, Eastern Standard Time, on August 9, 1974."

At 8:45 AM, Secretary of State Kissinger visited the Vice President to suggest scheduling a number of ten to fifteen minute meetings later that afternoon, from 2:30 to 7:00 PM, with foreign Ambassadors. The Vice President agreed, carefully reserving some allotted afternoon time for Transition advisors. After Kissinger left, and following a quick review of the text of his Acceptance Speech, in the quite solitude of the Vice President's Executive Office Building office, the Vice President of the United States, like so many of his fellow Americans that morning, turned on the television and watched President Nixon deliver an emotional farewell address to his White House staff and Cabinet. Years later, in

Courtesy Nixon Presidential Materials Staff



"...the two couples then walked four abreast, as equals, down the White House lawn."

an interview with historian James Cannon, President Ford described his feeling at that moment. "I was inwardly, deeply saddened that a longtime, personal friend...whom I admired greatly as a superb foreign policy Commander in Chief would resign the Presidency... To have such a tragedy happen to good friends was extremely difficult to understand and accept." "On the other hand, it was a tremendous relief to have the festering crisis resolved. For the previous nine months I had been sitting on a time bomb, with a blow up likely to take place at any time, as damaging evidence kept surfacing."

At 10:50 AM, the Vice President and Mrs. Ford were seated in the Diplomatic Reception Room, awaiting the arrival of President Nixon and his family. When the Nixons arrived, the two men spoke quietly to each other, whispering remarks of consolation and friendship. The moment was awkward and tense. Within moments, the outside door of the Reception Room swung open, and the President and

Mrs. Nixon walked out onto a bright red carpet on the White House lawn. Pausing for the Fords to join them, the two couples then walked four abreast, as equals, down the White House lawn. The red carpet led to a helicopter, ready to transport the

Nixons to nearby Andrews Air Force Base, and from there, to board Air Force One for San Clemente, California. No farewell remarks were scheduled to be made by the departing President. The Nixon family boarded the helicopter first, and

as President Nixon climbed the steps of the craft, he momentarily halted before entering. Impulsively, he turned around to face the White House lawn (and the nation, via national TV) and



Courtesy Nixon Presidential Materials Staff



Courtesy Nixon Presidential Materials Staff

"...and the Administration of Gerald R. Ford was about to begin."



Courtesy Nixon Presidential Materials Staff

“Alexander Haig delivered President Nixon’s letter of resignation to Secretary of State Kissinger...”

At 11:35 AM, as the White House helicopter was making its way toward Andrews Air Force Base, Alexander Haig delivered President Nixon’s letter of resignation to Secretary of State Kissinger in Kissinger’s White House office.



“...the arrival of the Vice President...”

where less than ninety minutes earlier President Nixon had delivered his farewell to the staff. This gathering of dignitaries and friends for the Ford swearing-in could well have been described as... the government of the United States. Wearing his traditional black robes of office, the silver haired Chief Justice entered. He calmly walked to a raised platform in front of the room, patiently prepared to preside at the appointed time. The atmosphere was a strange blend of solemnness (almost funeral like) mixed with a collective sense of relief. At 11:58 AM, the Marine Band struck up The University of Michigan Fight Song, as the Vice President and Mrs. Ford entered the room. Believing the occasion inappropriate for musical flourishes, the Vice President had earlier directed that Hail to the Chief not to be played. An invisible microphone intoned “The Vice President of the United States and Mrs. Ford.” A deafening silence covered the room as the Fords joined the Chief Justice on a small platform.

raised both arms upward above his head, flashing for the last time his “V” for victory signal. He turned back and boarded the helicopter quickly. In a moment, it was over. The helicopter motors accelerated, the craft ascended, the White House shrubs and trees shook...and the Administration of Gerald R. Ford was about to begin.

By 11:36 AM, seated somewhat tightly in the East Room anxiously awaiting the arrival of the Vice President, were 275 quiet, well mannered “inaugural” guests. The East Room was the same room

“...a sentimental visit with President Ford’s former congressional colleagues...”

“...are you prepared to take the oath of Office of the President of the United States?”



The Chief Justice stated, “Mr. Vice President,” (he would never again be addressed that way) are you prepared to take the oath of Office of the President of the United States?” Ford replied, “I am, sir.” Betty Ford, standing on the platform between her husband and the Chief Justice, passed a family Bible to her husband, opened to Proverbs 3, 5, and 6. At twelve noon, the oath of office was administered. The new President then addressed the nation.

Mr. Ford’s voice was strong, but one could sense an inner conflict between an effort to maintain stern control and an effort to avoid personal emotion. The crowd reacted noticeably with head nods and barely audible sighs as the new President announced, “Our long national nightmare is over.” One emotional eruption occurred during the speech, when the President asked for the nation’s “prayers for Richard Nixon and his family.” Speaking these words brought to the President’s mind his own recent prayers for guidance and he became emotionally caught up, pausing momentarily before continuing.



“...the newly installed President and First Lady exited the East Room.”

The entire ceremony was over in less than twenty minutes. The Marine Band played America the Beautiful as the newly installed President and First Lady exited the East Room. They proceeded to the Red Room for a sentimental visit with President Ford’s former congressional colleagues Speaker Carl Albert (now for the second time in his life, number one in presidential succession), Senator Mike





“The balance of the day... was spent conferring with Ambassadors...”

Mansfield and various others.

As the East Room crowd disbursed and departed, the crowd’s prior despondent manner followed. An obvious and noticeable change permeated the East Room (and concurrently, the nation). It was, as Bryce Harlow stated, “The nation’s frown had been replaced with a national smile.”

Guests departing the East Room and entered the White House hallways could not avoid noticing the change that evidenced the passage of the torch of freedom to a new leader. Less than thirty minutes earlier those same White House walls that had for the past five years displayed framed photos of Richard Nixon, the Nixon family and Tricia Nixon’s White House wedding, now only featured framed photos of Gerald and Betty Ford and the Ford children, giving the impression that Gerald Ford had been President for years, not minutes. It was, at first, shocking...than reassuring. The newly hung White House photos carried a not too subtle message to the new President; Transition at the White House moves quickly and efficiently.



White House. The thirty-ish year old former assistant’s name was Dick Cheney.

The remainder of the day was a whirlwind. At 1:30 PM, President Ford was unexpectedly ushered by Chief of Staff Al Haig into an unscheduled meeting with the senior members of the Nixon White House staff. This brief session was followed by a prolonged Economic Conference in the Cabinet Room with Federal Reserve Board Chairman Arthur Burns, the Reserve Board Chairman designee Alan Greenspan, Treasury Secretary William Simon and others. This meeting would be the first of hundreds and hundreds of hours, the new President would spend on over the next three years trying (successfully) to cure the nation’s massive economic woes. The balance of the day, through 7:00 PM, was spent conferring with Ambassadors, assuring them and their nations that US foreign policy remained the same, notwithstanding our change in Head of State. Some of the foreign Ambassadors that conferred with the new President that afternoon and evening represented Russia, Japan, People’s Republic of China, Israel, and various Latin American nations. During the session with USSR Ambassador Dobrynin, the Ambassador was forcefully informed by the new President that under no circumstances should the Soviet Union seek to take advantage of this new period of change in the American Presidency.

At 5:40 PM, the President met in the Cabinet Room with the new Transition Team that had been assigned the task of organizing and carrying out the ongoing Executive Branch



“...an unscheduled meeting with the senior members of the Nixon White House staff.”

earlier, while vacationing in southern France, Rumsfeld received a message that the Vice President had requested him to come to Washington “immediately.” A White House car and driver met the Rumsfelds at the airport, whereupon Ambassador Rumsfeld was handed a sealed envelope containing a letter from Ford asking him to head his new Transition Team. Rumsfeld invited his former assistant, who had also met the Rumsfelds at the airport on that faithful day, to accompany him to the



“...a prolonged Economic Conference...”



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transition from the Nixon to the Ford Administration. The President appointed four former House veterans with whom he had worked closely as Minority Leader to head the Team. The four were Donald Rumsfeld, Interior Secretary Rogers Morton, Pennsylvania Governor William Scranton and Jack Marsh. Phil Buchen's unofficial ad hoc team would be dissolved and replaced with this new team. Contrary to Richard Reeve's scathing (and fictional) description of this meeting in his 1975 volume "A Ford, Not a Lincoln", it was the new President, not Al Haig, who demonstrated "a commanding presence" throughout. Taking a moment to describe his personal work habits to the group, the President related that he, "starts work at 8:00 AM, and would begin with a daily intelligence briefing, followed by meetings with Bob Hartmann, Jack Marsh on legislative liaison and with the Press Secretary." By 10:00 AM, and not before, President Ford told his Transition Team he would be ready for morning appointments and other commitments, "I'll have an open door," he warned "but don't waste my time." Finally, desirous of a flexible White House presidential access structure, the President asked the Team to consider the feasibility of implementing a "spokes-of-the-wheel" procedure he had employed in his House Minority Leader office. Under that system, a Chief-of-Staff would be replaced with a number of co-equal assistants who would report to the President on different subjects daily. Although not vocalized at the time by any Transition Team member, the suggested system was not warmly received. Particularly not by Al Haig. The meeting concluded with Don Rumsfeld warning that, barring some major catastrophe, the Transition Team should conclude their work expeditiously and, "be out of here in a month." (The Team finished its work and disbanded in two weeks.)

A brief meeting with the Nixon Cabinet members followed. It featured the new President informally walking from chair to chair around the Cabinet table, shaking hands and speaking privately to each Cabinet member. The long day concluded with two late scheduled foreign Ambassador conferences. Like a Las Vegas casino, the White House has no clocks and the day was extended further by two unanticipated matters. The first involved a private Presidential briefing with CIA Director William Colby, lasting over thirty minutes. The second was a request for answers to two questions posed to Press Secretary Jerry ter Horst late that afternoon. The questions were: "Did former President Nixon sign a pardon for himself prior to leaving office?" "Did the former President take the White House tapes with him or are they still in the White House?" After seeking and obtaining an accurate response to the questions, ter Horst reported back

"...the President met in the Cabinet Room with the new Transition Team..."

to the White House press corp that Nixon had signed no pardons for himself or others, and that the Nixon tapes "are still in the White House." A reporter then cited Ford's response to a question asked of him during the then Congressman's fifteen plus hours of testimony at the Senate and House Vice Presidential Confirmation Hearings, and asked the Press Secretary, "If Ford's position was still not in favor of granting Nixon immunity from prosecution?" "Yes," the Press Secretary responded, "I can assure you of that."

The work day mercifully ended at 8:00 PM.

On August 9, 1974, the Office of the President of the United States inherited by Gerald Ford was discredited and devoid of public trust. That adhesive "glue" (truth) that President Ford spoke of at his swearing-in, that was used to hold government together had dried out and been discarded. A significant number of the American people doubted, disputed and suspiciously questioned every announcement and utterance of the federal government, particularly if it originated from the White House. This public distrust adversely infected every aspect of the nation's being, including its ignored and sinking economy, its confusing perception by the international community, its non-legislating Legislative Branch, and its polarized generation of citizens opposed to the continuation of governmental status quo. This almost indescribable chaos awaited Gerald R. Ford thirty years ago on August 9, 1974. As usual, Henry Kissinger has it right, when on August 9, 1974 he wrote, "No one had taken over the Presidency under more challenging circumstances."

Throughout history, the American people have been blessed with exceptional Presidential leadership in times of national crisis. Lincoln in 1860, Franklin Roosevelt in 1941 and Theodore Roosevelt in 1900 readily come to mind. To this exalted list, add the name Gerald R. Ford in August 1974...and, on behalf of the nation, join me in expressing our heartfelt thanks to him.

[Sources used in this article include the personal memory and notes of the author, James Cannon's *Time and Chance*, Robert Hartmann's *Palace Politics*, Richard Reeve's *A Ford, Not a Lincoln*, and Gerald R. Ford's *A Time to Heal*.]



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