

## ■ Nixon's Resignation Address

**Date:** August 8, 1974

**Author:** Richard Nixon

**Genre:** speech

### Summary Overview

For over two years, the Watergate controversy haunted President Richard Nixon and his administration—as well as the entire nation. The scandal caused many Americans to lose the trust they once had in their government and became a touchstone to which many later political controversies would be compared. While Americans did not necessarily think that Nixon himself had ordered the burglary of the Democratic National Committee headquarters, it became clear through investigation and court proceedings that he had participated in a cover-up of the facts of the case, attempting to use the executive privilege of the office of the president to keep investigators from discovering the truth. His obstruction of justice in the Watergate investigation caused the House of Representatives to pass articles of impeachment for only the second time in the nation's history, and rather than suffer the indignity of being removed from office, Nixon chose to become the first president in American history to resign, delivering this televised speech to the American public on August 8, 1974.

### Defining Moment

To many Americans, President Richard Nixon's concern with political power and the ruthless suppression of his political enemies bordered on paranoia, and this attitude was reportedly shared by his closest advisors. One ramification of this anxious atmosphere was the installation of a recording system in the Oval Office to accurately preserve all of his conversations. Another consequence was the decision made in August 1971 to break into the office of psychiatrist Lewis Fielding to hunt for information to discredit one of his patients, former military analyst Daniel Ellsberg, who had recently leaked secret documents known as the Pentagon Papers detailing the history of American decision-making during the Vietnam War.

The group of operatives that conducted the Fielding break-in were known as the “plumbers,” a team of former intelligence officers who reported to the president's domestic policy advisor John Ehrlichman and whose job it was to discredit those considered to be political enemies of the president. In the midst of the president's reelection campaign, five men operating under the leadership of “plumbers” E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy were arrested early on the morning of June 17, 1972, after breaking into the offices of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate hotel and office complex in Washington, DC. Though there was no proof that Nixon himself ordered the break-in, the events that unfolded over the next two years would have lasting effects on the nation.

Within the first months after the break-in, evidence surfaced that money from the Committee to Reelect the President had been used to fund the operation. Though Nixon won reelection in a landslide that November and he initially proclaimed that he was uninvolved in the affair, his problems were just beginning. Over the following several months, five of the men involved in the break-in pled guilty to all charges, and burglar James W. McCord Jr. and organizer Liddy were convicted of conspiracy and burglary early in 1973; Ehrlichman, White House chief of staff H. R. Haldeman, and Attorney General Richard Kleindienst resigned; and White House counsel and whistleblower John Dean was fired. By May 1973, the Senate had appointed a committee to investigate the matter, and on July 13, White House deputy chief of staff Alexander Butterfield informed the committee of the existence of Nixon's tapes of Oval Office conversations.

Though the committee subpoenaed the tapes, Nixon refused on the grounds of executive privilege; however, he eventually released edited transcripts of some tapes, including a version of a tape that had a gap just over eighteen minutes long. Dissatisfied, the Senate com-

mittee pursued the case over the tapes all the way to the Supreme Court, and on July 24, 1974, the court ruled that Nixon's claims of executive privilege did not protect evidence of criminal misconduct and that he must turn over the tapes of over sixty conversations. It became clear that the president had participated in a cover-up of the Watergate break-in, especially since one of the tapes included a conversation considered the "smoking gun," in which the president discussed stopping the Federal Bureau of Investigation's probing by having the Central Intelligence Agency warn them to stay away. That same month, the House Judiciary Committee passed three articles of impeachment against Nixon for obstruction of justice.

### Author Biography

By the time he was elected the thirty-seventh president of the United States in 1968, Richard Nixon was an exceptionally qualified and experienced politician.

He had been a congressman, a senator, and Dwight D. Eisenhower's vice president. After losing the presidential campaign to John F. Kennedy in 1960, he campaigned again in 1968, defeating Democrat Hubert H. Humphrey. During his years as president, domestically, he oversaw the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Internationally, he traveled to both the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union, reducing Cold War tensions and signing the first treaty with the Soviet Union to limit the superpowers' stockpiles of nuclear weapons. Yet, despite all of his accomplishments, the Watergate break-in and cover-up may be what stands out most in public memory about his administration, as they led to the passage of articles of impeachment for only the second time in American history. He resigned and officially left office on August 9, 1974. After suffering a stroke, he died on April 22, 1994.

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Good evening:

This is the 37th time I have spoken to you from this office, where so many decisions have been made that shaped the history of this Nation. Each time I have done so to discuss with you some matter that I believe affected the national interest.

In all the decisions I have made in my public life, I have always tried to do what was best for the Nation. Throughout the long and difficult period of Watergate, I have felt it was my duty to persevere, to make every possible effort to complete the term of office to which you elected me.

In the past few days, however, it has become evident to me that I no longer have a strong enough political base in the Congress to justify continuing that effort. As long as there was such a base, I felt strongly that it was necessary to see the constitutional process through to its conclusion, that to do otherwise would be unfaithful to the spirit of that deliberately difficult process and a dangerously destabilizing precedent for the future.

But with the disappearance of that base, I now believe that the constitutional purpose has been served, and there is no longer a need for the process to be prolonged.

I would have preferred to carry through to the finish, whatever the personal agony it would have involved, and my family unanimously urged me to do so. But the interests of the Nation must always come before any personal considerations.

From the discussions I have had with Congressional and other leaders, I have concluded that because of the Watergate matter, I might not have the support of the Congress that I would consider necessary to back the very difficult decisions and carry out the duties of this office in the way the interests of the Nation will require.

I have never been a quitter. To leave office before my term is completed is abhorrent to every instinct in my body. But as President, I must put the interests of America first. America needs a full-time President and a full-time Congress, particularly at this time with problems we face at home and abroad.

To continue to fight through the months ahead for my personal vindication would almost totally absorb the time and attention of both the President and the Con-

gress in a period when our entire focus should be on the great issues of peace abroad and prosperity without inflation at home.

Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow. Vice President Ford will be sworn in as President at that hour in this office.

As I recall the high hopes for America with which we began this second term, I feel a great sadness that I will not be here in this office working on your behalf to achieve those hopes in the next 2 1/2 years. But in turning over direction of the Government to Vice President Ford, I know, as I told the Nation when I nominated him for that office 10 months ago, that the leadership of America will be in good hands.

In passing this office to the Vice President, I also do so with the profound sense of the weight of responsibility that will fall on his shoulders tomorrow and, therefore, of the understanding, the patience, the cooperation he will need from all Americans.

As he assumes that responsibility, he will deserve the help and the support of all of us. As we look to the future, the first essential is to begin healing the wounds of this Nation, to put the bitterness and divisions of the recent past behind us and to rediscover those shared ideals that lie at the heart of our strength and unity as a great and as a free people.

By taking this action, I hope that I will have hastened the start of that process of healing which is so desperately needed in America.

I regret deeply any injuries that may have been done in the course of the events that led to this decision. I would say only that if some of my judgments were wrong—and some were wrong—they were made in what I believed at the time to be the best interest of the Nation.

To those who have stood with me during these past difficult months—to my family, my friends, to many others who joined in supporting my cause because they believed it was right—I will be eternally grateful for your support.

And to those who have not felt able to give me your support, let me say I leave with no bitterness toward those who have opposed me, because all of us, in the final analysis, have been concerned with the good of the country, however our judgments might differ.

So, let us all now join together in affirming that common commitment and in helping our new President succeed for the benefit of all Americans.

I shall leave this office with regret at not completing my term, but with gratitude for the privilege of serving as your President for the past 5 1/2 years. These years have been a momentous time in the history of our Nation and the world. They have been a time of achievement in which we can all be proud, achievements that represent the shared efforts of the Administration, the Congress, and the people.

But the challenges ahead are equally great, and they, too, will require the support and the efforts of the Congress and the people working in cooperation with the new Administration.

We have ended America's longest war, but in the work of securing a lasting peace in the world, the goals ahead are even more far-reaching and more difficult. We must complete a structure of peace so that it will be said of this generation, our generation of Americans, by the people of all nations, not only that we ended one war but that we prevented future wars.

We have unlocked the doors that for a quarter of a century stood between the United States and the People's Republic of China.

We must now ensure that the one quarter of the world's people who live in the People's Republic of China will be and remain not our enemies, but our friends.

In the Middle East, 100 million people in the Arab countries, many of whom have considered us their enemy for nearly 20 years, now look on us as their friends. We must continue to build on that friendship so that peace can settle at last over the Middle East and so that the cradle of civilization will not become its grave.

Together with the Soviet Union, we have made the crucial breakthroughs that have begun the process of limiting nuclear arms. But we must set as our goal not just limiting but reducing and, finally, destroying these terrible weapons so that they cannot destroy civilization and so that the threat of nuclear war will no longer hang over the world and the people.

We have opened the new relation with the Soviet Union. We must continue to develop and expand that new relationship so that the two strongest nations

of the world will live together in cooperation, rather than confrontation.

Around the world in Asia, in Africa, in Latin America, in the Middle East—there are millions of people who live in terrible poverty, even starvation. We must keep as our goal turning away from production for war and expanding production for peace so that people everywhere on this Earth can at last look forward in their children's time, if not in our own time, to having the necessities for a decent life.

Here in America, we are fortunate that most of our people have not only the blessings of liberty but also the means to live full and good and, by the world's standards, even abundant lives. We must press on, however, toward a goal, not only of more and better jobs but of full opportunity for every American and of what we are striving so hard right now to achieve, prosperity without inflation.

For more than a quarter of a century in public life, I have shared in the turbulent history of this era. I have fought for what I believed in. I have tried, to the best of my ability, to discharge those duties and meet those responsibilities that were entrusted to me.

Sometimes I have succeeded and sometimes I have failed, but always I have taken heart from what Theodore Roosevelt once said about the man in the arena, "whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again because there is not effort without error and shortcoming, but who does actually strive to do the deed, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows

in the end the triumphs of high achievements and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly."

I pledge to you tonight that as long as I have a breath of life in my body, I shall continue in that spirit. I shall continue to work for the great causes to which I have been dedicated throughout my years as a Congressman, a Senator, Vice President, and President, the cause of peace, not just for America but among all nations—prosperity, justice, and opportunity for all of our people.

There is one cause above all to which I have been devoted and to which I shall always be devoted for as long as I live.

When I first took the oath of office as President 5 1/2 years ago, I made this sacred commitment: to "consecrate my office, my energies, and all the wisdom I can summon to the cause of peace among nations."

I have done my very best in all the days since to be true to that pledge. As a result of these efforts, I am confident that the world is a safer place today, not only for the people of America but for the people of all nations, and that all of our children have a better chance than before of living in peace rather than dying in war.

This, more than anything, is what I hoped to achieve when I sought the Presidency. This, more than anything, is what I hope will be my legacy to you, to our country, as I leave the Presidency.

To have served in this office is to have felt a very personal sense of kinship with each and every American. In leaving it, I do so with this prayer: May God's grace be with you in all the days ahead.

## Document Analysis

When Nixon went on national television on August 8, 1974, to speak directly to the American people, it was the lowest point any president had faced in over one hundred years. The House Judiciary Committee had just passed three articles of impeachment against him as a result of the Watergate scandal, as evidence had mounted that Nixon himself was involved in the cover-up. While Nixon begins his address by stressing that his motive while in office had always been what was best for the nation, he also references an imminent impeachment trial, noting that he no longer has "a strong enough political base in the Congress to justify continuing" his efforts to stay in office. He explains

that quitting before the end of his term goes against everything he believes instinctually, but that the nation needs a president who will not be consumed with fighting for his own vindication and who will have sufficient support from Congress to fulfill the duties of the office. Thus, he reveals that he has decided to become the first president in the nation's history to resign, and that Vice President Gerald Ford will take his place the following day.

Nixon then speaks of his confidence in Ford, who had only been his vice president since the resignation of Spiro Agnew upon charges of bribery and tax evasion less than a year before. Therefore, while Nixon expresses confidence in Ford, he also asks for the sup-

port of the American people, as he acknowledges that Ford faces difficult times; the Watergate crisis had shattered the confidence that many Americans had in their government.

Already starting the long work of trying to redeem his legacy, Nixon then discusses what he views as the accomplishments of his administration, such as ending the Vietnam War, opening up the first diplomatic communication with the People's Republic of China, working toward peace in the Middle East, and signing the first treaty with the Soviet Union to limit the number of nuclear weapons. At the same time, he notes the challenges of the future, including to maintain these relationships, fight poverty in developing countries, and increase economic prosperity in the United States; he pledges to continue fighting for these causes in the years ahead. He also notes that world peace had been the foremost cause for which he had worked throughout his presidency, and that he will continue to work toward that goal for the rest of his life.

### Essential Themes

Nixon's resignation spared the nation the spectacle of an impeachment trial that, given the "smoking gun" tape that had been made known to prosecutor Leon Jaworski, would have served only to divide the nation further and would have likely have resulted in Nixon's removal from office.

As Nixon noted, the new president, Ford, faced a monumental task in restoring the faith of the American people in their government. Exactly one month after Nixon's resignation speech, Ford issued a full and complete pardon to Nixon, ending speculation that the former president might face a trial for his crimes while in office. Though a highly controversial move, Ford's pardon was not unexpected. Nixon would continue to be

a controversial figure in the years following his resignation. In 1977, television personality David Frost held a series of interviews with him that delved deeply into the Watergate scandal. Though Nixon did apologize for his actions, he still held firmly to the idea that if the president undertakes an action and feels it is in the interest of national security, then it is not illegal.

One legacy of the Watergate scandal was the reinforcement of the idea that even the president is not above the law, as it was the Supreme Court's decision in *United States v. Nixon* (1974) that forced the release of the Oval Office tapes. Another was the idea that government officials could not use the government or its agents to investigate their political enemies, as Nixon had done. However, perhaps the most pervasive, if not the most meaningful, impact of Watergate was on the language Americans use to discuss political controversy. The term "Watergate" became synonymous with the ideas of controversy and corruption, especially among politicians. As a result, many political controversies—and other general scandals—since then have been affiliated with the invented suffix "-gate," such as President Bill Clinton's affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky ("Monicagate").

—Steven L. Danver, PhD

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