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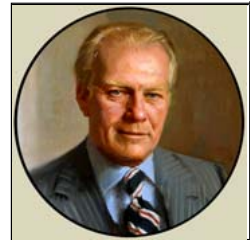
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Time and Chance

Gerald R. Ford's Appointment with History

By Laura Bulkeley Goldsmith

"Time and Chance: Gerald Ford's Appointment with History" is an aptly-named, solidly produced look at the life and improbable destiny of our 38th president. The opening segment is a compelling "teaser," presenting the indelibly memorable footage of Ford's inauguration day, August 9, 1974. The viewer is immediately reminded that his was an era of the "most serious constitutional crisis in a century," a reality that is repeated and repeatedly illustrated throughout. The style and substance is the simplest of all documentary works: historical context (provided by his contemporaries and a Ford biographer) combined with a vast amount of historical footage and photographs. Quite simply, as Nixon leaves the White House, Gerald Ford steps in to salvage the nation from the terrible wound of Watergate. Not so simply, the narrative thread of this non-fiction film has the feel of a great, character-driven novel.



We are introduced to key figures in Ford's life: Henry Kissinger, his secretary of state, James M. Cannon, his biographer, Dick Cheney, his chief of staff, and Susan Ford Bales, his daughter. The tone is set with Kissinger's assertion: "I think he saved the country. In fact, he saved it in such a matter of fact way that he's not given credit for it." A staggering assertion that "Time and Place" positions itself to prove in the six segments to follow.

Happiness is coming home to Grand Rapids.

Here it is established that Gerald Ford is the "favorite son" of Grand Rapids. Bright and colorful current day video footage of his 90th birthday celebration is mixed (and nicely contrasted with) wonderful black and white historical footage of the town whose "holy trinity" of "cleanliness, godliness, and thrift" helped to shape Ford's character. In spirit, both city and man exude a sort of pride, simplicity, and self-reliance.

*"Work hard, tell the truth and come to dinner on time."
--Ford Family Motto*

In striking contrast to what the average viewer might know about Ford, he was actually "born a King." He was born in Omaha, Nebraska and was named after his biological father, Leslie Lynch King. King abused Ford's mother, Dorothy, and after a divorce, she moved on to marry Gerald Ford, Sr., a salesman and Grand Rapids resident. Ford Sr. represented the "core values" of his stepson's life. He was "disciplined, gentle, self-confident, a man of his word, respectful of a lady."

The old photographs and family movies are the documents that make Ford's early history come alive, but it is a story told by current Vice President Cheney that is the most revealing. He speaks of attending a mural dedication in Grand Rapids in 1976, depicting the Ford family. He talks of Ford's strong emotional response and says that the mural as well as the former president's reaction to it, "captured the essence of who Gerry Ford was and where he was from."

In the film's most stirring side-by-side sequences, its true artistic centerpiece, we are first told that in Ford's young life, Dorothy made her son recite the Rudyard Kipling poem, "If." The poem is then recited by the authoritative voice of narrator Will Lyman over artfully appropriate photos of Gerald Ford's life, uncannily and to tremendous effect, as if it had been written with the former president in mind.

*If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings - nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforbearing minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!*

Also, immediately following, is mention of Ford's sports career. Rather than an aside, his biographer, Cannon, talks over vintage footage of Ford's playing days, saying that in sports he learned three important things, also prophetic: (1) Do your part, play your assigned role; (2) You are part of a team; (3) The player who does the most for his team does not necessarily get the most public attention. The full weight of Ford's place in American history is felt here. Yet it is as if only a great novelist could have constructed the twist and turn of events to follow.

Thereafter, we learn of Gerald Ford's Yale University Law School education and his early years as an attorney. Service in World War II launched him from a Midwestern isolationist background to a man ready to take on politics and a public life of service. His marriage to Betty Warren followed the war, and together, they went through thirteen congressional campaigns, all the way to the White House. As Ford was to say, "I am indebted to no man and only to one woman."

Congressman Ford: Man of the House

The respect shown by Ford's colleagues and the press is palpable here, demonstrated in great detail. Mort Kondracke, Executive Editor of Roll Call, says, "This man could not help but be honest and forthright." Photos of little-available family time show just how much Ford passionately devoted his life to his work in the Congress. News footage shows his eventual nomination to Vice President by Richard Nixon, via the disgraced Spiro Agnew's resignation. House Speaker Carl Albert, the film claims, actually engineered Ford's place in history. As Albert himself said, "We chose the next president." History proves he did not quite get what he bargained for.

Mr. Vice President

Watergate rears its ugly head here, yet we are told that Ford considered Nixon a friend and a leader. Largely untitled historical ground is broken when it is revealed that the progressives of the Democrat Party attempted "as close as a coup d'état America has ever had." Of course, Ford prevailed at his December 1973 congressional hearings to become the first unelected vice president of the United States.

Despite all the turmoil, Ford remained well-liked by the people, the press, and his colleagues. When it came time for Nixon to resign, he stepped forward to announce to an anxious nation, "our long national nightmare is over." To have those words spoken over the image of Nixon's helicopter leaving the White House lawn is to feel the full force of historical documentary.

Binding Up the Nation's Wounds

It is in this segment that Ford's place in U.S. history is cemented. As President George H. W. Bush and others suggest, Ford's single biggest contribution was that he assumed his role as unelected president with calm and self-confidence, facilitating an orderly transfer of power during the single biggest Constitutional crisis the country had faced since the Civil War. He helped to restore people's faith in government and the presidency by the full weight of his honesty and integrity. He offered a limited amnesty program to Vietnam draft dodgers, to the horror of the right, and pardoned Mr. Nixon, to the horror of the left.

That Ford was a healer is given added weight and a somewhat spiritual tint by revelations that he had sought guidance from Dr. Duncan E. Littlefair, Senior Minister, Fountain Street Church, Grand Rapids, 1944-1978. Littlefair says that Ford is a "simple, religious man" who "knew that forgiveness is essential to being a decent human being." He goes on to make an astounding, yet difficult to argue assertion: "I don't think very many presidents have made a more courageous decision on a better religious, moral ground than he did."

In present day America, when the faith of an American president and its impact on policy is so hotly debated, it makes the viewer gasp to see and hear Ford's decision to grant Richard Nixon a full, free absolute pardon, in his words, decided "not as a president but as a humble servant of God."

Gerald Ford's fateful judgment of Nixon no doubt cost him the presidency, but we are granted a front row seat at the Kennedy Library as he receives the 2001 Profile in Courage Award. Indeed, time clarifies past events, the subtext of this (and all) history and historical documentaries.

The Ford Legacy

In his 895 days as president, Ford brought the country out of its involvement in Vietnam, Watergate, and a recession. He is now praised for his foreign policy initiatives and his "openness, intelligence, and directness" with other world leaders. His wife, Betty, is lauded as "the most influential first lady since Eleanor Roosevelt" for her courage in speaking out on issues of breast cancer and substance abuse. As for Ford's loss of the 1976 election, President Jimmy Carter gracefully admits that without the legacy of Watergate, Ford would have come out the winner.

As video of his 90th birthday celebration brings the viewer full circle, we are reminded of the virtues of Gerald Ford as he intones over images of the American presidency:

"May God guide this wonderful country, its people, and those they have chosen to lead them & So that we and all who come after us may be the humble servants of Thy peace. Good night. God bless you."

"Time and Chance" is a tremendous production, filled with archival photographs and film/video footage of enormous substance. The interviews are with largely familiar faces, each reliable and crucial in giving the flavor of the times, the context of his presidency, Mr. Ford himself, and finally, his character and its impact on American history. Producer/writer Mike Grass and the multi-talented director Rob Byrd utilize the considerable resources at their command: the Gerald R. Ford Library and Museum, *The Grand Rapids Press*, The Hauenstein Center For Presidential Studies at Grand Valley State University, and the National Archives to name but a few. The best historical documentaries happen when Art meets History, as in this work. Grass and Byrd work with intelligence and finesse. They grab the viewer immediately, maintain a steady pace, and ultimately, provide an in-depth, historically accurate yet narratively sound portrait of a president who has been undoubtedly and unfairly overlooked in the popular consciousness. If there is any justice, this documentary will change all that.