

The Downfall of a President:
The Media Coverage of Richard Nixon's Resignation

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It would be a daunting task to name every important and transformative event that occurred in American politics during the 20th century. One of them was Watergate, the scandal so infamous that the "-gate" suffix is now attached to any scandal and controversy, political or otherwise. A basic summary of what happened during the Watergate scandal is that President Richard Nixon was discovered to have been involved in a wide-ranging and illegal attempt to cover up his administration's involvement in a break-in at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee and, as a result, had no choice but to resign from office. Nixon was the first and, so far, only U.S. President to ever leave office in such a disgraced manner. Although other presidents have been involved in scandals, made costly mistakes, lost re-election, or even gotten impeached, none except Nixon managed to tarnish the office of the presidency to the point where it became untenable for him to finish the term of office that he had been elected to serve. The unprecedented nature of Nixon's resignation raises a fair number of questions about how it was covered and depicted in the national media. Here are some of them: Was resignation seen as an

adequate consequence for Nixon? Were there any major concerns about the strength of the rule of law and the stability of our system of government? What was said about Nixon's accomplishments as president, if they even warranted a mention after the revelations of his wrongdoings during Watergate? Did anyone dare to express sympathy or support for Nixon? A piece from *The New York Times* titled "Excerpts From Editorials on Nixon" that compiled "excerpts from newspaper editorials in the United States on Richard M. Nixon's decision to resign the Presidency" serves as the main primary source for this inquiry.¹ This article was specifically chosen because it gives the reader a great opportunity to quickly and easily access and compare/contrast coverage from a variety of places around the country and gain a more comprehensive understanding of how Nixon resigning was received, which likely could not be attained by sticking to a single newspaper's coverage. Generally, the editorials saw Nixon's resignation as the only viable resolution to Watergate, but there was a diversity of opinion about what should be done afterward, if anything was needed at all, to fix the atrophied public trust in government and how to judge Nixon himself.

A popular theme found in the editorials is that while what Nixon did was egregious and indefensible, in the larger scheme of things, our representative democracy remained strong and that there was ultimately no need to worry about its underlying conditions. *The New York Daily News*, in an editorial titled "Mr. Nixon Bows Out," wrote that "the Nixon resignation is more a personal than a national tragedy. Our system—based as it is on laws and institutions which have endured wellnigh two centuries—can weather this crisis and continue strong and unimpaired."²

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. "Excerpts from Editorials on Nixon," *New York Times*, August 10, 1974, <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/08/10/archives/excerpts-from-editorials-on-nixon-mr-nixon-bows-out-a-president.html>.

². *New York Times*, "Excerpts from Editorials."

In other words, Nixon being forced to resign actually is compelling proof of how great and resilient the American system is because he was not able to get away unscathed with abusing his presidential power and obstructing justice, and the laws and institutions that are the cornerstone of our beloved democracy have survived and served the people well for close to two hundred years including, but not limited to, through times of war, economic hardship, social unrest and upheavals, and presidential assassinations. Many people reading this editorial in 1974 would have had firsthand memories of hard times and tragedies that fit into these categories. The phrase “endured wellnigh two centuries” can reasonably be read as an indirect message of assurance for those readers that functions by making them recall previous trying times in their lifetimes and the fact that they were not cataclysmic enough to destroy “our system—based as it is on laws and institutions.”³ Therefore, based on the system’s strong track record, a corrupt president who was found out will not be able to even do an iota of meaningful or long-term damage to it. “The Tragedy of Richard Nixon,” published by *The Evening Express* in Portland, Maine, had a point of view very similar to that of the *Daily News* when it asserted that Nixon’s resignation “is not a tragedy of the American people,” which even sounds indistinguishable from the line about how the resignation “is more a personal than a national tragedy.”⁴ *The Express* arguably goes even further in its optimistic tone by explicitly saying that “Americans all across our land may find in his departure a reaffirmation of our constitutional devotion to both law and justice.”⁵ Once again, the reader is told to celebrate Nixon’s resignation as evidence that, in the American democratic system, presidents are not all-powerful kings who have the privilege of being above the law and will be held accountable if they violate and disregard the law, just like anyone else would. The populist phrase “Americans all across our land” tells the reader that they have a personal stake in

³. *New York Times*, “Excerpts from Editorials.”

⁴. *New York Times*, “Excerpts from Editorials.”

⁵. *New York Times*, “Excerpts from Editorials.”

the outcome of the Watergate scandal and that it is not merely a distant Washington affair.⁶ That is because, when a nation is a democracy governed by law and justice, the leaders are supposed to be representative of ordinary people because voters are the ones who give them their mandates to govern. If more and more people become complacent and withdraw from the democratic process, it becomes increasingly difficult to hold politicians, including the president himself, accountable because they will have no real reason to care about the people they are meant to serve and represent. The editorial all but says that, without “our constitutional devotion to both law and justice,” Nixon might have been able to get off scot-free, despite being a crook.⁷

Another recurring opinion about Nixon’s resignation was that it was the best and only thing he could have done under the circumstances and that it was a necessary first step for the country to begin the process of healing from Watergate. *The Herald American* in Boston had an editorial titled “A Great Crisis Is Resolved” that, unsurprisingly, was in favor of that perspective. It says that “in the end Richard Nixon did the noble thing by resigning” because the nation was spared from “the further agony of more months of impeachment trauma and rudderless government.”⁸ While noble might be too positive of a word to describe Nixon, who only resigned after realizing that it was all but certain that he would be impeached by the House of Representatives and convicted by the Senate (the “Smoking Gun” tape was so damning that hardly any Republicans in Congress were still willing to stand by Nixon), the point about “rudderless government” is not invalid. As mentioned earlier, once the truth about what Nixon did was revealed, he was practically no longer able to do his job as president because he had so utterly desecrated the office of the presidency to the point where anything he now did or

⁶. *New York Times*, “Excerpts from Editorials.”

⁷. *New York Times*, “Excerpts from Editorials.”

⁸. *New York Times*, “Excerpts from Editorials.”

supported would be viewed as toxic by proxy of Watergate. The phrase “impeachment trauma” tells the reader that while Nixon unambiguously violated his oath of office, keeping Watergate at the forefront of our national attention for months to come, which impeaching and convicting Nixon would inevitably do, is counterproductive and will do more harm than good to the country. Therefore, now that Nixon is gone for good from the Oval Office, the better thing to do is to simply let bygones be bygones and return to a state of normalcy in politics and government. The reasoning is that if Watergate continues to occupy the center of American political discourse, the justified anger and disappointment felt towards Nixon will eventually evolve into a permanent state of disillusionment and distrust towards all institutions of government. On the other hand, public confidence can be rebuilt if people have reason to believe that, in the long run, Watergate was an anomaly and things will be fine, and that can only happen if the government can get back to business as usual. Another editorial that shared this opinion is *The Indianapolis Star*, which wrote in “Nixon’s Last Crisis” that “the President's decision is the best one he could have made for the country. Impeachment has been a traumatic experience comparable to a war or a depression in its effect on the public. But this country is sound. It will survive. So will the Presidency.”⁹ This editorial is even more unequivocal in opposing impeachment, putting the scale of its adverse effects at the same level as war and depression. The audience reading this editorial likely would have remembered how difficult and traumatic events like the Great Depression and/or World War II (the most plausible events it was alluding to) were for themselves and the people they knew, so they are told to see Nixon not being impeached as dodging a bullet of a similar scale. The sample ends with an almost overconfident declaration of how everything, specifically the American system of government and the office of the

⁹. *New York Times*, “Excerpts from Editorials.”

presidency, is now back in good hands and will undoubtedly revert to a pre-Watergate state of calm and stability. The article from *The San Francisco Chronicle* titled “Fastest Healing Agent” called Nixon’s resignation “undoubtedly the fastest healing agent he could have applied to the body politic of America,” which is once more insisting that the country will recover quickly and successfully from Watergate if people are able to stop hearing, talking, and thinking about it every single day.¹⁰ The unstated alternatives, Nixon remaining in office or a long and drawn-out impeachment process, obviously will fail to allow Americans to do those things for reasons that were already explicated when going over “A Great Crisis is Resolved” from *The Herald American*. In “The People Had Enough,” Cleveland’s *The Plain Dealer* writes that “Nixon’s resignation should not result in national agony, shameful though events were which led up to it.”¹¹ The meaning is that, even though what Nixon did was shameful to an extent never seen before from a U.S. President, it is not enough to justify Americans spending so much time being agonized by Watergate that their views of the government and political leaders are forever tainted by it.

However, not everyone shared this rosy outlook for a post-Watergate America. *The Times-Picayune* of New Orleans published “The Issues Now,” arguing that “the nation would do well to face the future now, rather than dwell on the past. Restoration of confidence in government, attention to severe domestic problems and strengthening the American image around the world are the issues, now.”¹² The opening sentence is one hundred percent in line with the articles examined earlier with its emphatic urge to stop devoting all of our time and energy to Watergate, which is now in the past. Additionally, only one of “the [important] issues now,”

¹⁰. *New York Times*, “Excerpts from Editorials.”

¹¹. *New York Times*, “Excerpts from Editorials.”

¹². *New York Times*, “Excerpts from Editorials.”

restoring confidence in government, is related in any way to responding to Watergate. Still, this editorial stands out from the previous ones by at least acknowledging that people's confidence and trust in government will have to be earned back and that it is not something that will just automatically return now that Nixon is gone from the White House. By grouping the "restoration of confidence in government" with tackling severe domestic problems (probably alluding to the oil crisis that began in 1973, runaway inflation, and high unemployment) and improving America's image internationally, the reader is told that fully succeeding at it will be as time-consuming, complicated, and Herculean as the other two issues. Everyone understands that the economy and foreign relations do not have quick and simple solutions, and the same should be admitted about repairing trust in the government after Americans watched a president resign in shame for what he did in office. *The Arizona Republic* was similarly prudent and nuanced in its assessment of Nixon's resignation in "Nixon's Last Crisis" by first giving him the expected plaudits for acting "with patriotism" and "forgoing his personal desires" and then conceding that "it does not resolve many of the questions raised by the Watergate mess."¹³ The many unresolved questions raised by Watergate possibly included if Nixon would face criminal prosecution (despite the impeachment proceedings being rendered moot by his resignation) and if America can bear to see a former president in the dock or even in jail, how long it will take to rebuild a sense of trust and confidence in the government and if that goal is even a realistic one, and what reforms should be implemented to ensure that a scandal on the scale of Watergate will never happen again. In short, the reverberations of Watergate in politics will last for years to come, and it is premature to say that all's well that ends well. Quite a few of the editorials mentioned just how much of a daunting mission faced Gerald Ford, Nixon's successor as president. *The Denver*

¹³. *New York Times*, "Excerpts from Editorials."

Post, in an article titled “Pervading Distrust,” said that Ford has “the formidable task of reuniting a people sadly worn by events of the past two years.”¹⁴ Both the title and the substance of this editorial point out that Nixon’s resignation is not a silver bullet that has managed to banish all of the distrust, cynicism, and anger towards the government that has arisen due to Watergate and, as a result, Ford has a lot on his plate. *The Cincinnati Enquirer* told “all Americans to join together behind President Ford... not for the sake of the man but for the goal of political stability at home and peace in the world”¹⁵ in “Time for All Americans.” The deeper implication here is that, even if one feels reluctant to give Ford a chance because he is supposedly too linked to the disgraced former president (he was Nixon’s vice president), it is incumbent to put that resentment aside and hope that he is successful as president for the greater good of the country, which is referring to domestic political stability and peace abroad. “Political stability at home” certainly includes fixing the breakdown of confidence in governing institutions ushered in by Watergate and might also be referring to the aforementioned worrying economic problems of inflation, unemployment, and gas prices, which cannot be tackled if the president is hamstrung by a lack of confidence. “Peace in the world” catches the eye because one usually never thinks about the international impacts of Watergate since it was a purely domestic affair with no shady foreign actors involved. However, this makes more sense once it is remembered that the 1970s were a Cold War decade, and Watergate and its fallout could decrease confidence in American leadership among its own Western Bloc allies and/or be weaponized by America’s geopolitical rivals as a way to discredit the superiority of Western-style democracy. So, Ford’s success as the new president will prove to both friends and enemies that America has not lost its standing on the world stage.

¹⁴. *New York Times*, “Excerpts from Editorials.”

¹⁵. *New York Times*, “Excerpts from Editorials.”

As for whether anyone had anything positive to say about Nixon, there were a couple of editorials that praised what he accomplished during his presidency, but none went as far as to say that he did nothing wrong or deserved to remain in office. The *Boston Globe* was the most glowing by writing that, in the long-term, the world may “enjoy what President Nixon always claims was his greatest aim, a generation of peace” and that historians “will take due note of the part Mr. Nixon played in the achievements...regardless of the circumstances of his leaving office”¹⁶ in “A Moment for a New Beginning.” To his credit, Nixon was not terrible at foreign policy. He notably pursued détente, the process of easing strained relations between two countries through dialogue, with the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China, two of America’s longtime communist rivals. Some of the results of détente included the normalization of relations with China and the signing of two landmark arms control treaties with Russia: SALT I and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. The irony of Richard Nixon, who had a reputation for being one of the most hardline anti-communist politicians, doing so much to avert conflict and ensure peaceful co-existence between America and the Communist bloc has been noted by many observers. Another part of the so-called “generation of peace” likely is the gradual ending of American involvement in the unpopular Vietnam War through the policy of Vietnamization. The *Globe* is certain that, once enough time has passed to temper our fury at Watergate, Nixon will be viewed in a deservedly more positive light because historians and the general public will then be able to fairly evaluate his presidency by striking the right balance between criticizing him for Watergate and giving him his due for the undeniably good things he did in office. The *Detroit Free Press*, in “Stain of Scandal” also mentions Nixon’s many accomplishments “in the area of foreign policy” but bluntly says that “those achievements, real as they are, pale beside the awful

¹⁶. *New York Times*, “Excerpts from Editorials.”

stain of scandal that finally caught up with him.”¹⁷ In contrast to the previous one, this editorial argues that Nixon does not deserve and will not receive any kind of generous re-evaluation down the line because he had done such unspeakably horrible things during Watergate that nothing whatsoever will ever lessen the blow. An analogy would be how one does not praise a serial killer for being a dog lover. The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* pithily remarked in “Nixon’s Tragedy” how “it was tragic that Nixon was able to get Americans out, of Vietnam, but was not able to get himself out of the Watergate web.”¹⁸ It is pointing out the irony of Nixon succeeding in resolving the long quagmire of Vietnam but lacking the foresight to realize how his actions during Watergate would come back to bite him. In other words, it is a backhanded compliment.

Looking at Watergate now in 2022, the wrongdoings that forced Nixon to take the never-before-seen step of resigning as president can almost seem quaint, considering the shameless behavior later presidents have gotten away with, including Reagan’s Iran-Contra scandal, George W. Bush lying America into war with Iraq, and Trump extorting Ukraine to hurt a political rival and inciting a violent insurrection to keep himself in power after losing reelection. None faced any meaningful consequences for the wrongs they committed unless one counts Trump getting impeached twice but failing to be convicted by the Senate. Before accusations of a vendetta against Republicans are hurled, there is no instance of a post-WWII Democratic president doing anything remotely on the same scale. Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden are not perfect by any measure, but it is imprudent to fall into the trap of false equivalences. Going back to the earlier assertion about Watergate looking “quaint,” the main reason for writing a research paper centered around this particular presidential scandal was that it sticks out as the point of no return for the post-WWII sense of political stability. While a

¹⁷. *New York Times*, “Excerpts from Editorials.”

¹⁸. *New York Times*, “Excerpts from Editorials.”

president behaving badly and violating norms is just another normal part of the news cycle these days, that was definitely not true for a time where trust in the government to do what is the right thing “just about always” or “most of the time” was always over 50% (look at the level of public trust in government under Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon pre-Watergate).¹⁹ Most would expect the press to react to Watergate with the same shock and distress that one would if they were woken up by being doused with ice-cold water. While no one downplayed Watergate itself or saw Nixon as innocent, it was a bit surprising to see so many editorials, obviously not all of them, demonstrating strong optimism by basically saying that it is best to move on and not wallow in despair over Watergate because America’s system of democratic government has survived unharmed, and the happy days before Watergate will return soon now that Nixon is no longer president. While it is impossible to prove that impeachment and/or criminal charges would have fully restored the public’s trust in government to earlier highs, Ford’s unconditional pardon of Nixon certainly did not do the job as demonstrated by the data from polls amalgamated by Pew.²⁰ To stop problems in government from getting worse, they need to be vigorously nipped in the bud, no matter how difficult or exhausting it is, because letting them slide ensures that they will come back to haunt the country. The best modern example is the urgent need to hold Trump accountable for his attempts to overturn the legitimate results of the 2020 presidential election that culminated in the storming of the Capitol. Leaving January 6, which is one of the few things accurately dubbed worse than Watergate, in the past means putting free and fair elections and the peaceful transition of power, the bedrock of democratic governments, on the line, and that danger is clearly not gone, despite Trump being out of office. An uncomfortable number of Republican politicians and officials at the federal, state, and local levels still actively embrace election

¹⁹. “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2021,” *Pew Research Center*, May 17, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/05/17/public-trust-in-government-1958-2021/>.

²⁰. “*Pew Research Center*, “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2021.”

conspiracy theories and have expressed their willingness to challenge and nullify election results, and who knows what could happen in 2024 and beyond.

About the author

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