



Gerald R. Ford

Gerald R. Ford, the only American president never elected to national office.

9 of 9

Gerald Ford: An Unelected President After Watergate

President he succeeded: Richard Nixon

Term of office: August 9, 1974–January 20, 1977

Gerald Ford did not become president because his predecessor died, but his path to the White House was more accidental than that of any other president.

Ford had not even been elected vice president. Richard Nixon appointed him in 1973 after Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned amid a criminal investigation. Congress confirmed the widely respected Michigan congressman under the Twenty-Fifth Amendment.

Ten months later, the Watergate scandal forced Nixon to resign. Ford took the presidential oath and told the country, “Our long national nightmare is over.” He remains the only American president never elected either president or vice president.

Ford’s first task was restoring trust in government. His openness and personal decency helped, but his decision to grant Nixon a complete pardon produced an immediate backlash. Critics

suspected a secret agreement, and Ford's approval rating plunged. Ford insisted that continuing the legal battle over Nixon would prevent the country from healing.

The pardon probably damaged Ford politically, but many observers later concluded that it helped bring the Watergate crisis to an end.

Ford also faced inflation, recession and energy shortages. His "Whip Inflation Now" campaign was widely ridiculed and produced few results. He initially resisted federal assistance for financially troubled New York City, although he later supported loans after the city adopted spending reforms.

Overseas, his presidency witnessed the fall of South Vietnam and the evacuation of Americans and Vietnamese allies from Saigon. Ford ordered military action after Cambodian forces seized the American merchant ship *Mayaguez*. The crew was recovered, but forty-one American servicemen died during the operation and its aftermath.

One of Ford's more enduring foreign-policy accomplishments was signing the Helsinki Accords. Although criticized for recognizing postwar European borders, the agreement included human-rights commitments later used by dissidents challenging Soviet rule.

Ford narrowly lost the 1976 election to Jimmy Carter. His reputation gradually improved as Americans looked more favorably upon his steadiness, moderation and honesty. After Watergate, Ford's character itself became part of the nation's recovery.