

Pardoning Nixon

On August 9, 1974, Richard Nixon resigned the presidency in the wake of the Watergate scandal and the release of the 'smoking gun' tape that could have indicted him for involvement in criminal activity while president. Following resignation, many Americans were angry with Nixon and also suspicious of Gerald Ford as he stepped into the presidential role. Nixon soon became extremely ill. On August 15, 1974, he was admitted to Bethesda Naval Hospital and diagnosed with viral pneumonia. One account suggests he was admitted with a recurrence of phlebitis. Nixon had a history of phlebitis, which can be fatal even if treated.

On September 8, 1974, President Ford issued a full and absolute pardon of Nixon for all offenses against the United States, making Nixon immune from any arrest, investigation, or imprisonment from his involvement in Watergate. The pardon infuriated many Americans. Suspicions arose of a possible deal between Ford and Nixon in exchange for Ford's prior nomination to vice president. All parties denied any such deal and no evidence in support of these allegations ever surfaced.

With the Watergate scandal consuming the nation, Ford signaled that he wanted to refocus the public and rebuild trust in the executive branch. He sought to move forward by concentrating on the nation's problems, such as ending the Vietnam War, rather than spending his entire administration dissecting the activities of the previous president for years to come. However, as a result of the pardon, Nixon would never be held accountable for activity widely thought to be criminal.

President Ford also believed from reports and advisors that Nixon's health was seriously compromised and that his death was likely imminent. In his speech announcing the pardon, Ford referred both to the health crisis of Nixon as well as his own personal constitutional duty to ensure domestic tranquility. At the time, it was impossible for Ford to realize that Nixon would eventually recover and live for twenty more years. Ford believed he acted in the nation's best interests. The public vehemently disagreed.



Discussion Questions:

1. How would you describe Ford's process of moral analysis in this situation?
2. Should Nixon have been held accountable for his behaviors without regard for his personal health or the new administration? Why or why not?
3. While President Ford was clearly within his constitutional right to pardon Richard Nixon, do you think Ford's decision was justified on ethical grounds? Why or why not?
4. Can you think of some alternatives to pardoning Nixon? Explain.
5. If you were in President Ford's position, what would you do, and why? What would be your process of moral analysis before taking action?

Resources:

Watergate and the Resignation of Richard Nixon: Impact of a Constitutional Crisis

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/watergate-and-the-resignation-of-richard-nixon-impact-of-a-constitutional-crisis/oclc/56535080>

The Presidential Pardon Power

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/presidential-pardon-power/oclc/294935761>

31 Days: Gerald Ford, the Nixon Pardon, and a Government in Crisis

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/31-days-gerald-ford-the-nixon-pardon-and-a-government-in-crisis/oclc/84656942>

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