

Gerald R. Ford: A Life in Brief

Provided by the Gerald R. Ford Foundation

Early Years

Gerald R. Ford, the 38th President of the United States, was born Leslie Lynch King, Jr., the son of Leslie Lynch King and Dorothy Ayer Gardner King, on July 14, 1913, in Omaha, Nebraska. His parents separated two weeks after his birth, and his mother moved with him to Grand Rapids, Michigan to live with her parents. On February 1, 1916, approximately two years after her divorce, Dorothy King married Gerald R. Ford, a Grand Rapids businessman. The Fords immediately began calling her son Jerry Ford, and in 1935 his name was officially changed to Gerald Rudolph Ford, Junior.

The future president grew up in a close-knit family that included three younger brothers, Thomas, Richard, and James. Ford attended South High School in Grand Rapids, where he excelled scholastically and athletically. He was named to the honor society and both the "All-City" and "All-State" football teams. To earn spending money he worked for the family paint business and at a local restaurant. He was also active in Scouting, achieving the rank of Eagle Scout in November 1927 - the only American President to do so.

College Years

From 1931 to 1935, Ford attended the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where he majored in economics and political science, graduating with a B.A. degree in June 1935. At a time of national economic hardship, he financed his education with part-time jobs, a small scholarship from his high school, and modest family assistance.

Outstanding Athlete

An extremely gifted athlete, Ford was a three year letterman and played on Michigan's national championship football teams in 1932 and 1933. He was voted the Wolverine's most valuable player in 1934. On January 1, 1935, Ford played in the annual East-West College All-Star game in San Francisco. That August, he played at Soldier Field against the Chicago Bears in the Chicago Tribune College All-Star football game, and his performance led to offers from the Detroit Lions and the Green Bay Packers. In tribute to one of its greatest student-athletes, Michigan subsequently retired Ford's jersey number 48. In addition, he was named to Sports-Illustrated's Silver Anniversary All-America football team, received the National Football Foundation's Gold Medal – its highest honor – and in 2006 was recognized by the NCAA as one of the 100 most influential student-athletes of the last century. In 2003, the NCAA created the NCAA President's Gerald R. Ford Award, which is presented annually to an individual who has provided significant leadership as an advocate for intercollegiate athletics on a continuous basis over the course of their career. In 2005, the "Gerald R. Ford Legends Of Center Award" was created to honor and promote President Ford's athletic and public service ideals. The award is presented annually to an outstanding former collegiate or professional football center, who has also made significant contributions to his community through philanthropic or business endeavors.

Yale Law School

Ford chose the legal profession over a professional football career. To help pay for law school, he initially took a dual position as assistant varsity football coach and boxing coach at Yale University, where he coached future U.S. Senators Robert Taft, Jr. and William Proxmire. He enrolled in Yale Law School, while also continuing his coaching responsibilities. Among an extraordinary group of law school classmates were future Supreme Court Justices Potter Stewart and Byron White, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Sargent Shriver, Pennsylvania Governors William Scranton and Raymond Shafer, U.S. Senator Peter Dominick, and author William Lord.

Ford earned his LL.B. degree from Yale in 1941, graduating in the top 25% of his class. After returning to Michigan and passing the bar exam, Ford and a University of Michigan fraternity brother, Philip A. Buchen (later to serve as Ford's White House Counsel), established a law partnership in Grand Rapids. Ford also became active in a local group of reform-minded Republicans calling themselves the Home Front, when the United States entered World War II.

Ford promptly joined the U.S. Naval Reserve, receiving a commission as an ensign in April, 1942 and subsequently being appointed lieutenant commander. Following an orientation program at Annapolis, he became an instructor at a pre-flight school in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. In the spring of 1943, he began service on the light aircraft carrier *USS Monterey*. Initially assigned as a gunnery division officer, then assistant navigator, he took part in major operations in the South Pacific, including the battles for Truk, Saipan, Guam, Formosa, Marianas and the Philippines. During a vicious typhoon in the Philippine Sea in December 1944, he came within inches of being swept overboard. Severely damaged by the storm and a resulting fire, the ship had to be taken out of service. Ford was honorably released from active duty in February 1946, having been awarded:

- Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with one silver star and four bronze stars,
- Philippine Liberation Ribbon with two bronze stars,
- American Campaign Medal, and
- World War II Victory Medal.

Congress

Returning home to Grand Rapids, Ford became a partner in the prestigious law firm of Butterfield, Keeney and Amberg. A self-proclaimed "compulsive joiner", Ford was already well-known throughout the community. He rejected his previous isolationism and adopted, instead, an outlook more in keeping with America's new found responsibilities on the global stage. In 1948, with the encouragement of his hometown political hero, Senator Arthur Vandenburg, and reinforced by his stepfather, who was county Republican chairman, Ford decided to challenge isolationist Congressman Bartel Jonkman in the Republican primary. Against all odds, the upstart Ford defeated Jonkman. In the subsequent general election that fall, he received 61 percent of the vote.

At the age of thirty-five, Gerald Ford was on his way to Washington for the first of thirteen terms in the House of Representatives. A seat in Congress wasn't the only thing he won in the autumn of 1948. On October 15, at the height of the fall campaign, Ford married Elizabeth Ann Bloomer Warren. For over 58 years their partnership flourished, enriched immeasurably by their four children, Michael, John (Jack), Steven, and Susan, their seven grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Gerald Ford served in the House of Representatives from January 3, 1949 to December 6, 1973, being reelected twelve times, each time with more than 60% of the vote. The new congressman quickly established a reputation for personal integrity, hard work, and the ability to deal effectively with both Republicans and Democrats -- qualities that would define his entire political career. He once described himself as "a moderate in domestic affairs, an internationalist in foreign affairs, and a conservative in fiscal policy." He became a member of the House Appropriations Committee in 1951 and rose to prominence on the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, becoming its ranking minority member in 1961. In 1949, President Truman invited him to the White House for a personal tour to examine the dilapidated and dangerous conditions of the White House. Ford subsequently was instrumental in securing necessary Congressional funding to rebuild and modernize the White House during the Truman Presidency.

As his reputation as a legislator grew, Ford was called upon, among other assignments, to serve on the first NASA oversight committee and on the CIA and intelligence oversight

committees. Ford declined offers in the 1950s to run for both the Senate and the Michigan governorship; his political ambition was specific -- to become Speaker of the House. In 1960, he was mentioned as a possible vice presidential running mate for Richard Nixon. In 1961, a group of younger, more progressive House Republicans -- the "Young Turks" -- rebelled against their party's leadership, and Ford defeated Charles Hovey of Iowa for Chairman of the House Republican Conference, the number three leadership position in the party.

In 1963, following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, President Johnson appointed Ford to the Warren Commission that investigated the crime. Ford was the last living member of the Warren Commission. In 1965, he co-authored with John R. Stiles Portrait of The Assassin, a book about the findings of the Warren Commission.

The battle for the 1964 Republican presidential convention was drawn on sharp ideological lines between liberal Nelson Rockefeller and conservative Barry Goldwater. However, Ford had previously endorsed Michigan's favorite son, Governor George Romney, and, thus, did not become embroiled in the resulting schism in the party. In the wake of Goldwater's lopsided defeat at the hands of Lyndon Johnson, Ford was chosen by the Young Turks to challenge Charles Halleck for the position of Minority Leader of the House. With the help of then Congressmen Donald Rumsfeld and Bob Dole, Ford narrowly upset Halleck. He assumed his new position early in 1965 and held it for eight years. As Minority Leader, Ford's national stature rose quickly; as part of his efforts to rebuild the Republican Party, he typically made over 200 speeches a year across the country. Under Ford's leadership, the House Republicans steadily gained members, but never a majority. In both the 1968 and 1972 elections, Ford was a supporter of Richard Nixon, who had been a friend for many years. In 1968, Ford was again mentioned as a possible vice presidential candidate. Not even the Nixon landslide of 1972 could give Republicans a majority in the House, thereby leaving Ford unable to reach his ultimate political goal -- to be Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Vice President

When Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned in October 1973, President Nixon was authorized by the 25th Amendment to appoint, subject to congressional confirmation, a replacement. He needed someone who could work with Congress, survive close scrutiny of his political career and private life, and be confirmed quickly. Heeding an immediate and strong bipartisan consensus, he chose Gerald R. Ford. Following one of the most thorough background investigations in the history of the FBI, Ford was confirmed by a vote of 92 to 3 in the Senate and 387 to 35 in the House of Representatives and sworn in as Vice President on December 6, 1973.

President

The specter of the Watergate scandal, the break-in at Democratic headquarters during the 1972 campaign, and the ensuing cover-up by Nixon administration officials, hung over Ford's nine-month tenure as Vice President. When it became apparent that evidence, public opinion, and the mood in Congress were all pointing toward impeachment, Richard Nixon became the only President to resign. On August 9, 1974, Ford assumed the Presidency amidst the gravest constitutional crisis since the Civil War.

Few Presidents confronted so daunting a challenge. Not only did the new President face widespread public disillusionment in the wake of the Watergate scandals and the Vietnam War, he had to grapple a devastating economic recession, a burgeoning energy crisis, and mounting tensions around the globe. The President who never sought the Presidency resolved that his time in office, however long or short, would be a time of healing and energizing the country to move forward in a positive way. But it was Ford's confidence in his fellow citizens, and his devotion to our constitutional heritage, that helped him shoulder so effectively the burdens of the Oval Office.

He immediately set about restoring confidence in the Presidency and healing the wounds of the Nation. In his first speech as President – Lincoln-esque in tone and Ford-like in its personal modesty – he said:

My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over. Our Constitution works; our great Republic is a government of laws and not of men. Here the people rule. But there is a higher Power, by whatever name we honor Him, who ordains not only righteousness but love, not only justice but mercy. As we bind up the internal wounds of Watergate, more painful and more poisonous than those of foreign wars, let us restore the golden rule to our political process, and let brotherly love purge our hearts of suspicion and of hate. With all the strength and all of the good sense I have gained from life, with all the confidence of my family, my friends, and my dedicated staff impart to me, and with the good will of countless Americans I have encountered in recent visits to forty states, I now solemnly reaffirm my promise I made to you last December 6; to uphold the Constitution, to do what is right as God gives me to see the right, and to do the very best I can for America. God helping me, I will not let you down.

Pardon and Amnesty

Shortly after becoming President, he announced amnesty terms for Vietnam-era draft evaders and pardoned his predecessor. Both acts were highly controversial at the time, but Ford courageously put America's best interests ahead of his own political popularity. The pardon of Richard Nixon was an act as personally courageous as it was politically detrimental. However, Ford strongly believed that protracted criminal proceedings would keep the country mired in Watergate and prevent the new administration and the American people from addressing other critical issues. Accordingly, he decided to grant the pardon prior to the filing of any formal criminal charges against the former president. Many in Washington and around the country were in an uproar, and Ford's political honeymoon was over; his approval rating plummeted immediately with an estimated 60% of the American public disagreeing with the pardon.

However, history has been much more generous regarding the pardon than were Ford's contemporaries. This historical re-examination of the pardon culminated in the May 2001 presentation of the Profile in Courage Award to President Ford by the John F. Kennedy Foundation. As Senator Edward Kennedy explained in presenting the Award:

"At a time of national turmoil, America was fortunate that it was Gerald Ford who took the helm of the storm-tossed ship of state. Unlike many of us at the time, President Ford recognized that the Nation had to move forward, and could not do so if there was a continuing effort to prosecute former President Nixon. So President Ford made a courageous decision -- one that historians now say cost him his office -- and he pardoned Richard Nixon. I was one of those who spoke out against his action then. But time has a way of clarifying past events, and now we see that President Ford was right. His courage and dedication to our country made it possible for us to begin the process of healing and put the tragedy of Watergate behind us."

Ford's Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was equally direct in concluding that Ford "saved the country. In fact, he saved it in such a matter of fact way that he isn't given credit for it."

New Administration

Within the month Ford nominated Nelson Rockefeller for Vice President. On December 19, 1974, Rockefeller was confirmed by Congress, and the country once more had a full complement of leaders. Ford confronted a divisive war in Southeast Asia, rising inflation at home,

and a desperate need to restore the credibility of the Presidency. Ford also found himself dealing with a Congress increasingly assertive of its rights and powers.

The Ford philosophy was best summarized by one of his favorite speech lines: "A government big enough to give us everything we want is a government big enough to take from us everything we have." In domestic policy, President Ford pioneered economic deregulation, formulated tax and spending cuts, and decontrolled energy prices to stimulate production. Through such steps, he successfully contained both inflation and unemployment, while at the same time reducing the size and role of a federal government whose growth to many observers seemed inexorable. Thus, President Ford foreshadowed subsequent efforts by his successors to continue these policies to make government smaller, smarter and more supportive of private initiatives. He championed policies and legislation that brought about changes that today we take for granted, including Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs), Automatic Teller Machines (ATMs), Title IX regulations for women's high school and college athletics, and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act.

The heavily Democratic Congress often disagreed with Ford, leading to numerous confrontations and his frequent use of the veto to restrain runaway government spending. Presidential historian Richard Norton Smith described the essence of Ford's leadership and strength of character: "President Ford never confused compromise with surrender, or moderation with weakness. While he had adversaries, he never had an enemy." Award-winning documentary producer Michael Grass summarized Ford's effectiveness: "Ford practiced the political art of intelligent compromise with low-key Midwestern habits of fairness, civility, and truth-telling." Columnist Mort Kondracke noted, "Gerald Ford represented the best in American politics . . . and [a style] that I'm afraid we are never going to see again." Through tough negotiations and principled compromise and despite large Democratic majorities in Congress, landmark legislation was enacted, to promote energy decontrol, implement sweeping tax cuts, deregulate the railroad and securities industries, and reform antitrust laws.

Outstanding Cabinet and White House Staff

One of Ford's greatest strengths as a leader was his self-confidence and sense of security around others. According to columnist David Broder, President Ford "had one of the most competent staffs any of us have seen." The advisors he appointed included a large number of extremely bright, capable people who would go on after the Ford Administration to render further outstanding service to the American people. George H. W. Bush was his CIA Director; his White House Chief of Staff was Dick Cheney; his Secretary of State was Henry Kissinger; his chief economic advisor was Alan Greenspan; Donald Rumsfeld was his Secretary of Defense; his Attorney General was Edward Levi; his Secretary of Housing and Urban Development was Carla Hills; Brent Scowcroft was his National Security Advisor, David Matthews was Secretary of HEW; his Under Secretary of Commerce was James Baker; his Secretary of Transportation was William Coleman; Frank Zarb was Administrator of the Federal Energy Administration; his OMB Director and Deputy Director were James Lynn and Paul O'Neill; and his White House staff included Robert Gates, James Cannon, John Marsh, William Seidman, Max Friedersdorf, Terrence O'Donnell, Robert Hartmann, Red Cavaney, David Gergen, Larry Speakes, and Roger Porter. The list of President Ford's outstanding advisors who continued with distinguished public service careers goes on and on.

Foreign Policy

In foreign policy, Ford was resolute and visionary. He continued the policy of détente with the Soviet Union and developed an aggressive "shuttle diplomacy" in the Middle East. U.S.-Soviet relations were marked by on-going arms negotiations, the Helsinki agreements on human rights principles and East European national boundaries, trade negotiations, and the symbolic Apollo-Soyuz joint manned space flight.

One of President Ford's boldest, and at the time most controversial, foreign policy

initiatives occurred in southern Africa. For many years, U.S. policy was to support the government of South Africa, which for decades had practiced apartheid. In 1976, President Ford decided that a change in U.S. policy was long overdue, despite political considerations that strongly suggested otherwise. Secretary of State Kissinger went to Zambia and announced President Ford's decision that the long-standing U.S. support of South Africa, with its unconscionable policies of apartheid, was over. Former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, William Scranton, characterized this decision by President Ford as "one of the finest achievements" of twentieth century U.S. foreign policy.

President Ford forcefully pushed for conclusion of the Helsinki agreements. His tireless efforts in negotiating those agreements, though politically controversial at the time, are now seen with the benefit of history as the first step towards democratization of Eastern Europe and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union. Years later Colin Powell declared Ford's leadership and personal participation in the Helsinki agreements as "a bold, brave, visionary act" and "one of President Ford's greatest moments."

Ford's personal diplomacy also included trips to Japan -- the first by an American President -- and China; a 10-day European tour; and establishment of the annual international economic meeting of leaders (today known as the G-8 Summits). In addition, as America's Bicentennial President, Ford received numerous foreign heads of state in the Nation's capital. Henry Kissinger noted the depth and breadth of Ford's achievements in foreign policy: "President Ford established what I believe was the closest relationship of any American president, in any period, with European leaders, and he did this by his special qualities -- openness, intelligence, directness. And what is even more remarkable is that they have remained friends of his even after he left government. . . . Abroad his reputation was enormous."

With the fall of South Vietnam in 1975 as background, Congress and President Ford repeatedly clashed over Presidential powers, oversight of the CIA and covert operations, military aid appropriations, and the stationing of military personnel. On May 14, 1975, just days after Saigon fell, Ford ordered U.S. forces to retake the *S.S. Mayaguez*, an American merchant ship seized by Cambodian gunboats in international waters two days earlier. The vessel was recovered, and all 39 crewmen were saved. Unfortunately, 41 brave Americans lost their lives in the preparation and execution of the rescue. The President himself did not escape the tumult of those times. On two separate trips to California in September 1975, Ford was the target of assassination attempts.

The next year, he fought off a strong challenge from Ronald Reagan to secure the Republican nomination for President, and a chance to have his leadership confirmed by the voters. He chose Senator Robert Dole of Kansas as his running mate. The Ford-Dole team succeeded in narrowing Democrat Jimmy Carter's large lead in the polls, only to fall short in one of the closest presidential elections in U.S. history.

The Presidency of Gerald Ford

The Presidency of Gerald Ford is defined by his personal integrity and unbending adherence to the truth. Ever the Eagle Scout -- literally and metaphorically -- in reflecting on his life, Ford consistently referred to the straightforward standards of conduct taught by his parents: "Work hard, tell the truth, and come to dinner on time." Openness was, and is, a core Ford family value. Equally honest and open was Betty Ford, who as First Lady developed a reputation for candor and lack of pretense. President Ford strongly supported his wife in her battles with breast cancer, alcoholism, and prescription medicines, and he warmly endorsed her frank talk about these and other issues.

In 2003, Vice President Dick Cheney observed, "President Ford restored trust and confidence in the Presidency and the White House simply by the sheer force of his character." Thus, by the time of the Nation's Bicentennial, the American people had a renewed pride in their free institutions, and in themselves. Presidential biographer, Richard Reeves acknowledged that

his earlier assessment of the 38th President had been unduly harsh. A quarter century later, Reeves took a very different tack: "We judge presidents by the one or two big things that they do", he wrote. "Nobody remembers that Lincoln balanced the budget, and nobody cares. In the end, President Ford did the one thing he had to do, which was hold the country together."

With the passage of time and the perspective of a broader historical context, the Presidency of Gerald Ford has been understood and acknowledged with much greater clarity and appreciation. Columnist David Broder was unequivocal:

"In an odd, inexplicable way, the truth has begun to dawn on people ... that he was the kind of President Americans wanted – and didn't know they had."

Former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill concluded,

"God has been good to America, especially during difficult times. At the time of the Civil War, he gave us Abraham Lincoln. And at the time of Watergate, he gave us Gerald Ford – the right man at the right time who was able to put the Nation back together."

Former Senator Tom Daschle observed: "As our President, Gerald Ford did more than wake us from our long national nightmare; he made it possible for us to dream again."

As President Jimmy Carter graciously acknowledged on January 20, 1977, the man from Grand Rapids had indeed healed the land.

Private Citizen

Upon returning to private life, President and Mrs. Ford moved to California where they built a home in Rancho Mirage. President Ford's memoir, A Time to Heal was published in 1979. President Ford remained an active participant in the political process. He spoke out on important political issues, and wrote numerous op-ed columns and other articles dealing with issues ranging from support for stem cell research and affirmative action, to urging a censure alternative to the impeachment of President Bill Clinton. In 1999, twenty-five years after he assumed the Presidency, he returned to the East Room of the White House to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He and Mrs. Ford were also awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, the first ever joint presentation of Congress' highest civilian honor. In November, 2006, President Ford became the longest living president in U.S. history.

1981 saw the dedication of the Gerald R. Ford Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and the Gerald R. Ford Museum in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Both institutions quickly established themselves as an important part of the Ford legacy. In 2006, the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy moved into its new home at the University of Michigan. President Ford was a frequent participant in conferences examining Congress, the Presidency and foreign policy; Soviet-American relations; German reunification, the Atlantic Alliance, the future of American foreign policy; national security requirements for the '90s; humor and the presidency; and the role of First Ladies in the life of the Nation. At hundreds of colleges and universities, he lectured on Congressional/White House relations, federal budget policies, and domestic and foreign policy issues. He attended the annual Public Policy Week Conferences of the American Enterprise Institute, and in 1982 established the AEI World Forum, which he hosted for many years in Vail, Colorado. This continues as an international gathering of former and current world leaders, as well as business executives -- all gathered to discuss issues of topical concern.

On August 9, 2004, President Ford spoke in Statuary Hall at the U.S. Capitol to members of his Cabinet and White House Staff and reflected on his life and Presidency:

“At my stage in life, one is inclined to think less about dates on a calendar than those things that are timeless – about leadership and service and patriotism and sacrifice, about doing one’s best in meeting every challenge that life presents.

History will judge our success. But no one can doubt our dedication. We set out to bind America’s wounds, and to heal America’s heart. By the time we celebrated our Bicentennial in 1976, we celebrated more than a distant event – we were able to take heart ourselves from the renewal of the great truths expressed by our Founders.

Without seeking them, I was called upon to fill this nation’s highest offices. For two and a half years, I had the greatest privilege that can come to any American – to lead my countrymen through trying times, and uphold the sacred honor of free men and women everywhere.

So I ask you to join me in saluting the past, savoring the present, and anticipating the future. For in America, the best has never been -- it is always yet to be.”
