

The Resignation Speech of Richard M. Nixon



Richard Nixon leaves the White House, August 9, 1974 (White House Photo Office Collection [Nixon Administration], National Archives)

THE GILDER LEHRMAN
INSTITUTE of AMERICAN HISTORY

TL TEACHING LITERACY
TH THROUGH HISTORY

The Resignation Speech of Richard M. Nixon

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UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. These units were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original documents of historical significance. Students will learn and practice the skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary sources.

Students will read Richard Nixon's "Resignation Address to the Nation," which was delivered on August 8, 1974, and answer critical thinking questions. Following a discussion of the speech, students will write a response to one of the two essential questions that frame the unit.

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Analyze primary source documents using close-reading strategies
- Draw logical inferences and summarize the essential message of a written document
- Compose summaries of the major points in a document
- Develop a viewpoint and write a response to an essential question based on textual evidence

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- To what extent was the Watergate scandal a sign of weakness or strength in the US system of government?
- In his resignation speech, how compelling is Nixon's argument in his own defense?

NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS: 1–2

GRADE LEVEL: 7–12

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5: Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8: Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

MATERIALS

- Historical Background: “The Watergate Scandal and the Resignation of Richard Nixon,” adapted from David Sarias, “To Understand a Scandal: Watergate beyond Nixon,” The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History website, gilderlehrman.org
- Richard M. Nixon, “Resignation Address to the Nation,” August 8, 1974, Miller Center, millercenter.org
- Video: “President Richard Nixon Resignation Address,” August 8, 1974, C-SPAN, www.c-span.org
- Critical Thinking Questions: Nixon’s Resignation Speech
- Essential Question Response: Richard Nixon and Watergate

PROCEDURE

1. This lesson is a “drill-down” exercise into the text of one of the most important speeches of the 1970s. Students should be familiar with the Nixon presidency and the Watergate scandal.
2. You may share the Historical Background with your students to reinforce or supplement their knowledge. They can read the brief essay individually, or you may choose to “share read” it with the class. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
3. You may choose to have the class work individually, in pairs, or in small groups.
4. Distribute Richard M. Nixon’s “Resignation Address to the Nation” and the critical thinking questions and share read the first nine paragraphs of the document.
5. The students should now reread those paragraphs and fill in the activity sheet through Critical Thinking Question 5. Explain to the class that they must use evidence from the text to support their answers. If the students are working in groups, let them negotiate the answers.
6. When the students have completed the first nine paragraphs, show them the first 3.5 minutes from the C-SPAN video that shows Nixon addressing the nation in prime time on August 8, 1974. Discuss the following question: Does seeing the video change your perception of Nixon and the speech?
7. You can share read the rest of the document with the whole class or have students read the text aloud in their groups or silently to themselves. Students can brainstorm as partners or small groups but must fill in their own activity sheet in order to complete the assignment.
8. Class discussion should allow time for students to share their answers to the critical thinking questions. Compare the responses from different students or groups. Remind the students to cite evidence from the text to support their answers.
9. Students will then write a response to one of the two essential questions, using direct evidence from the speech and video to support their conclusion:
 - To what extent was the Watergate scandal a sign of weakness or strength in the US system of government?
 - In his resignation speech, how compelling is Nixon’s argument in his own defense?

Historical Background: The Watergate Scandal and the Resignation of Richard Nixon

In the early hours of June 17, 1972, police officers arrested five men suspected of breaking into the offices of the Democratic National Committee headquarters in Washington DC's Watergate office building. This building would lend its name to the subsequent political scandal that led, just over two years later, to Richard Nixon's resignation on August 8, 1974. To date, Nixon is the only president of the United States to have resigned from office. He did so as a direct consequence of his involvement in the attempted cover-up of the links between the arrested men, the White House, and the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CRP) during the 1972 presidential elections. In the process, more than forty members of Nixon's administration, including some of his top advisors and a former US attorney general, were investigated and nineteen of them were indicted.

There is little evidence of Nixon approving of, or even having any prior knowledge of the break-in, which had been authorized by CRP senior staffers John Mitchell, Jeb Stuart Magruder, and Robert Mardian. Nixon, in fact, can be heard in Oval Office tapes wondering aloud about who could have approved such a foolish action (although, on the other hand, he knew he was being recorded), and it is abundantly clear he was lied to by his subordinates. Yet, even if he had little to do with organizing the break-in, the tapes abundantly demonstrated how, in the course of the subsequent cover-up, the President's conduct fell within all three articles of impeachment passed by the House Judiciary Committee: obstruction of justice, abuse of power, and contempt of Congress.

But as Richard Nixon and his supporters often claimed in their own defense, such abuses were anything but oddities in American politics. Nixon's most loyal defenders have sought to exonerate him by emphasizing that all the great Democratic-progressive administrations, including those of Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson, had indulged in similar underhanded tactics to gain and retain office. Nevertheless, by the early 1970s, neither a significant part of the press nor the great majority of the American public were prepared to accept that kind of behavior in public life. After a group of senior Republican senators led by Barry Goldwater let him know that they could not guarantee his tenure, Richard Nixon became the first president of the United States to resign from office, on August 8, 1974.

The Watergate scandal drew to a close when, to the considerable frustration of many segments of the American public, Nixon's successor, Gerald R. Ford, granted the disgraced ex-president a full pardon, which put an end to all further investigations into his conduct in office. Ford's stated intent for issuing the pardon was to end the agony that Nixon had inflicted upon the nation, and to protect whatever was left of the prestige accorded to highest office in the land. As it was, Ford's decision significantly contributed—as he knew it would—to his losing the 1976 election. Nevertheless, this sacrifice possibly contributed to bringing about much-needed national healing earlier than would otherwise have been possible, and it almost certainly saved the entire political class some considerable embarrassment. Alas, it also fueled the subsequent, and persistent, perception of Watergate as unfinished business. The absence of a Nixon trial has fostered both a sense of injustice and the feeling that not everything is yet known (perhaps not even the most important details) about Watergate.

Source: Adapted from David Sarias, "To Understand a Scandal: Watergate beyond Nixon," The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History website, gilderlehrman.org.

Richard M. Nixon, “Resignation Address to the Nation,” August 8, 1974

Good evening.

1. This is the 37th time I have spoken to you from this office, where so many decisions have been made that shaped the history of this Nation. Each time I have done so to discuss with you some matter that I believe affected the national interest.
2. In all the decisions I have made in my public life, I have always tried to do what was best for the Nation. Throughout the long and difficult period of Watergate, I have felt it was my duty to persevere, to make every possible effort to complete the term of office to which you elected me.
3. In the past few days, however, it has become evident to me that I no longer have a strong enough political base in the Congress to justify continuing that effort. As long as there was such a base, I felt strongly that it was necessary to see the constitutional process through to its conclusion, that to do otherwise would be unfaithful to the spirit of that deliberately difficult process and a dangerously destabilizing precedent for the future.
4. But with the disappearance of that base, I now believe that the constitutional purpose has been served, and there is no longer a need for the process to be prolonged.
5. I would have preferred to carry through to the finish, whatever the personal agony it would have involved, and my family unanimously urged me to do so. But the interests of the Nation must always come before any personal considerations.
6. From the discussions I have had with Congressional and other leaders, I have concluded that because of the Watergate matter, I might not have the support of the Congress that I would consider necessary to back the very difficult decisions and carry out the duties of this office in the way the interests of the Nation would require.
7. I have never been a quitter. To leave office before my term is completed is abhorrent to every instinct in my body. But as President, I must put the interests of America first. America needs a full-time President and a full-time Congress, particularly at this time with problems we face at home and abroad.
8. To continue to fight through the months ahead for my personal vindication would almost totally absorb the time and attention of both the President and the Congress in a period when our entire focus should be on the great issues of peace abroad and prosperity without inflation at home.
9. Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow. Vice President Ford will be sworn in as President at that hour in this office.
10. As I recall the high hopes for America with which we began this second term, I feel a great sadness that I will not be here in this office working on your behalf to achieve those hopes in the next 2 1/2 years. But in turning over direction of the Government to Vice President Ford, I know, as I told the Nation when I nominated him for that office 10 months ago, that the leadership of America will be in good hands.
11. In passing this office to the Vice President, I also do so with the profound sense of the weight of responsibility that will fall on his shoulders tomorrow and, therefore, of the understanding, the patience, the cooperation he will need from all Americans.
12. As he assumes that responsibility, he will deserve the help and the support of all of us. As we look to the future, the first essential is to begin healing the wounds of this Nation, to put the bitterness and divisions of the recent past behind us and to rediscover those shared ideals that lie at the heart of our strength and unity as a great and as a free people.

13. By taking this action, I hope that I will have hastened the start of that process of healing which is so desperately needed in America.
14. I regret deeply any injuries that may have been done in the course of the events that led to this decision. I would say only that if some of my judgments were wrong—and some were wrong—they were made in what I believed at the time to be the best interest of the Nation.
15. To those who have stood with me during these past difficult months—to my family, my friends, to many others who joined in supporting my cause because they believed it was right—I will be eternally grateful for your support.
16. And to those who have not felt able to give me your support, let me say I leave with no bitterness toward those who have opposed me, because all of us, in the final analysis, have been concerned with the good of the country, however our judgments might differ.
17. So, let us all now join together in affirming that common commitment and in helping our new President succeed for the benefit of all Americans.
18. I shall leave this office with regret at not completing my term, but with gratitude for the privilege of serving as your President for the past 5 1/2 years. These years have been a momentous time in the history of our Nation and the world. They have been a time of achievement in which we can all be proud, achievements that represent the shared efforts of the Administration, the Congress, and the people.
19. But the challenges ahead are equally great, and they, too, will require the support and the efforts of the Congress and the people working in cooperation with the new Administration.
20. We have ended America's longest war, but in the work of securing a lasting peace in the world, the goals ahead are even more far-reaching and more difficult. We must complete a structure of peace so that it will be said of this generation, our generation of Americans, by the people of all nations, not only that we ended one war but that we prevented future wars.
21. We have unlocked the doors that for a quarter of a century stood between the United States and the People's Republic of China.
22. We must now ensure that the one quarter of the world's people who live in the People's Republic of China will be and remain not our enemies but our friends.
23. In the Middle East, 100 million people in the Arab countries, many of whom have considered us their enemy for nearly 20 years, now look on us as their friends. We must continue to build on that friendship so that peace can settle at last over the Middle East and so that the cradle of civilization will not become its grave.
24. Together with the Soviet Union, we have made the crucial breakthroughs that have begun the process of limiting nuclear arms. But we must set as our goal not just limiting but reducing and, finally, destroying these terrible weapons so that they cannot destroy civilization and so that the threat of nuclear war will no longer hang over the world and the people.
25. We have opened the new relation with the Soviet Union. We must continue to develop and expand that new relationship so that the two strongest nations of the world will live together in cooperation, rather than confrontation.
26. Around the world in Asia, in Africa, in Latin America, in the Middle East, there are millions of people who live in terrible poverty, even starvation. We must keep as our goal turning away from production for war and expanding production for peace so that people everywhere on this earth can at last look forward in their children's time, if not in our own time, to having the necessities for a decent life.

27. Here in America, we are fortunate that most of our people have not only the blessings of liberty but also the means to live full and good and, by the world's standards, even abundant lives. We must press on, however, toward a goal, not only of more and better jobs but of full opportunity for every American and of what we are striving so hard right now to achieve, prosperity without inflation.
28. For more than a quarter of a century in public life, I have shared in the turbulent history of this era. I have fought for what I believed in. I have tried to the best of my ability, to discharge those duties and meet those responsibilities that were entrusted to me.
29. Sometimes I have succeeded and sometimes I have failed, but always I have taken heart from what Theodore Roosevelt once said about the man in the arena, "whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again because there is not effort without error and shortcoming, but who does actually strive to do the deed, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows in the end the triumphs of high achievements and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly."
30. I pledge to you tonight that as long as I have a breath of life in my body, I shall continue in that spirit. I shall continue to work for the great causes to which I have been dedicated throughout my years as a Congressman, a Senator, a Vice President, and President, the cause of peace, not just for America but among all nations, prosperity, justice, and opportunity for all of our people.
31. There is one cause above all to which I have been devoted and to which I shall always be devoted for as long as I live.
32. When I first took the oath of office as President 5 1/2 years ago, I made this sacred commitment: to "consecrate my office, my energies, and all the wisdom I can summon to the cause of peace among nations."
33. I have done my very best in all the days since to be true to that pledge. As a result of these efforts, I am confident that the world is a safer place today, not only for the people of America but for the people of all nations, and that all of our children have a better chance than before of living in peace rather than dying in war.
34. This, more than anything, is what I hoped to achieve when I sought the Presidency. This, more than anything, is what I hope will be my legacy to you, to our country, as I leave the Presidency.
35. To have served in this office is to have felt a very personal sense of kinship with each and every American. In leaving it, I do so with this prayer: May God's grace be with you in all the days ahead.

Source: Richard M. Nixon, "Resignation Address to the Nation," August 8, 1974, Miller Center, University of Virginia, millercenter.org

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Critical Thinking Questions: Nixon's Resignation Speech

1. What guiding principle does Nixon claim has influenced his decision making?

2. According to his speech, why is Nixon resigning?

3. Nixon uses the word *process* three times in paragraphs 3 and 4. What process is he talking about here? Is this clear or unclear? Explain your answer.

4. Why does Nixon refer to the "interests of the nation" in paragraphs 5 and 6? Scan the text and identify where he makes a similar reference elsewhere in the speech.

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5. What is the tone of the speech through the first nine paragraphs?

6. Scan the first eighteen paragraphs of the speech. Which pronoun is most frequently used by Nixon? How might this be interpreted or be important?

7. Scan paragraphs 19–24. What happens to Nixon’s pronoun usage? Does this change the tone of the address and appeal to his audience? Why or why not?

8. What happens to the pronoun usage in the remainder of the speech? How does this affect your reaction to Nixon’s message?

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9. Nixon uses the phrase “I regret” in paragraph 14 and the word “regret” in paragraph 18. How are these uses different or similar in intent?

10. In paragraphs 12–16, is President Nixon taking responsibility for “healing the wounds of the nation”? Why or why not?

11. What record of achievement does Nixon refer to in paragraphs 19–24? Be specific and cite all of the examples you can from the text.

12. According to Nixon, what should be the domestic focus of the nation going forward?

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13. In paragraph 28, Nixon employs a quote from Theodore Roosevelt. Put the quote into your own words. How are the events of Watergate relevant to the Roosevelt quote?

14. What does Nixon say has been the greatest cause that he dedicated his life to?

15. What does Nixon view as his greatest legacy? Be specific by citing the text.

16. How does Nixon conclude his speech? Do you find this to be a satisfactory conclusion? Why or why not?

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Essential Question Response: Richard Nixon and Watergate

Choose one of the following essential questions:

- To what extent was the Watergate scandal a sign of weakness or strength in the US system of government?
- In his resignation speech, how compelling is Nixon's argument in his own defense?

Write an essay that argues your point of view. It is important to use evidence (quotes and ideas) taken directly from the speech. Clearly cite this evidence in your essay.

(Attach additional pages if necessary.)