

Proclamation pardoning Richard Nixon, 1974

Introduction

“My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over.”

Speaking half an hour after Richard Nixon submitted his resignation letter to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger on August 9, 1974, and minutes after taking the oath of office, President Gerald Ford began the difficult work of restoring the American people’s confidence in its government, giving a short speech that attempted to put the crisis caused by the Watergate scandal in the past. In addition to declaring an end to the nightmare, President Ford also urged a restoration of “the golden rule in our political process” and asked the public to pray for the Nixon family.

A month later, on September 8, President Ford issued a proclamation granting a “full, free, and absolute pardon” to Nixon extending to any actions he had taken throughout his entire presidency. In a televised address that night, in which he explained that he thought that someone needed to put an end to the Nixon tragedy, he also introduced a conditional amnesty program for Vietnam War draft dodgers. The contrast proved too much for President Ford’s press secretary, who resigned in protest. The American public was also outraged by the pardon to a degree President Ford had not been expecting, and a month later, he voluntarily became the first president to appear before a Congressional committee to explain his decision-making process.

James Cannon, an advisor to President Ford, revealed in a late 2006 *New York Times* article that President Ford privately justified pardoning Nixon with a 1915 Supreme Court decision, a copy of which he carried in his wallet. Pardons, the Court ruled, implied guilt, and accepting a pardon “is an admission of it.”

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

1. What do you make of the third paragraph of President Ford’s proclamation, which explains how the U.S. court system works?
2. Are you convinced by President Ford’s argument that President Nixon “had already paid the unprecedented penalty of relinquishing the highest elective office” and deserved to be pardoned? Why or why not?

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3. How do you think you would have reacted to the pardon?

THE PROCLAMATION AND THE EXCERPT ARE APPROPRIATE FOR ALL LEVELS. BOTH DOCUMENTS IN THEIR ENTIRETY ARE APPROPRIATE FOR AP/IB LEVEL. IT IS SUGGESTED TO PRESENT BOTH DOCUMENTS TOGETHER.

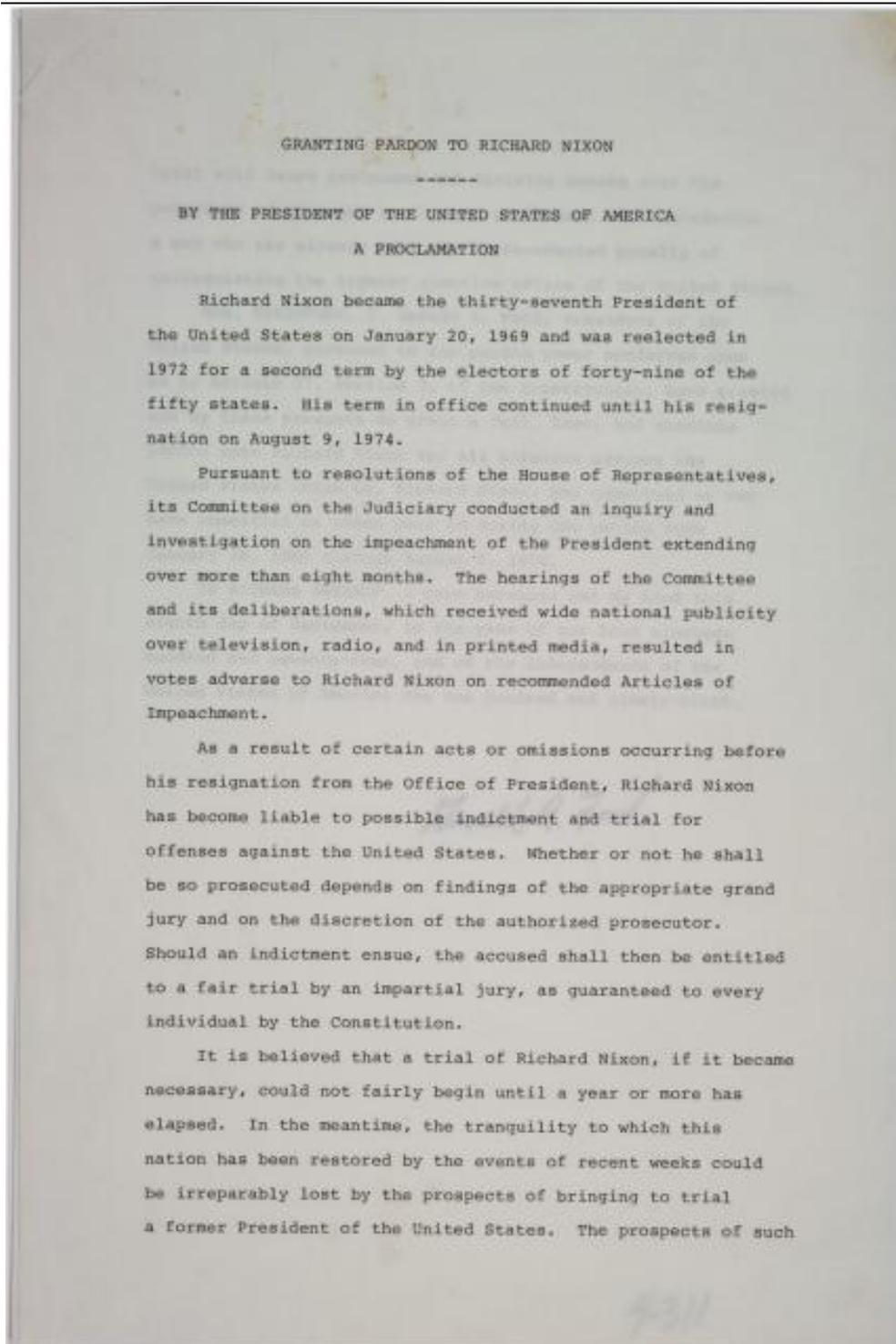
“Proclamation Pardoning Richard Nixon, 1974” and “President Ford’s statement on pardoning Richard Nixon, 1974”

Read the document introductions, the excerpts and the text. Then apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow. Answers to the questions may be drawn from either or both documents.

1. Why did President Ford believe it was necessary to pardon Richard Nixon?
2. To what extent are you convinced by President Ford’s argument that Richard Nixon had already “paid the unprecedented penalty of relinquishing the highest elective office” and deserved to be pardoned?
3. Which of the statements by President Ford before the Congressional Committee were most / least persuasive?
4. Research the reaction of the news media to the pardon.

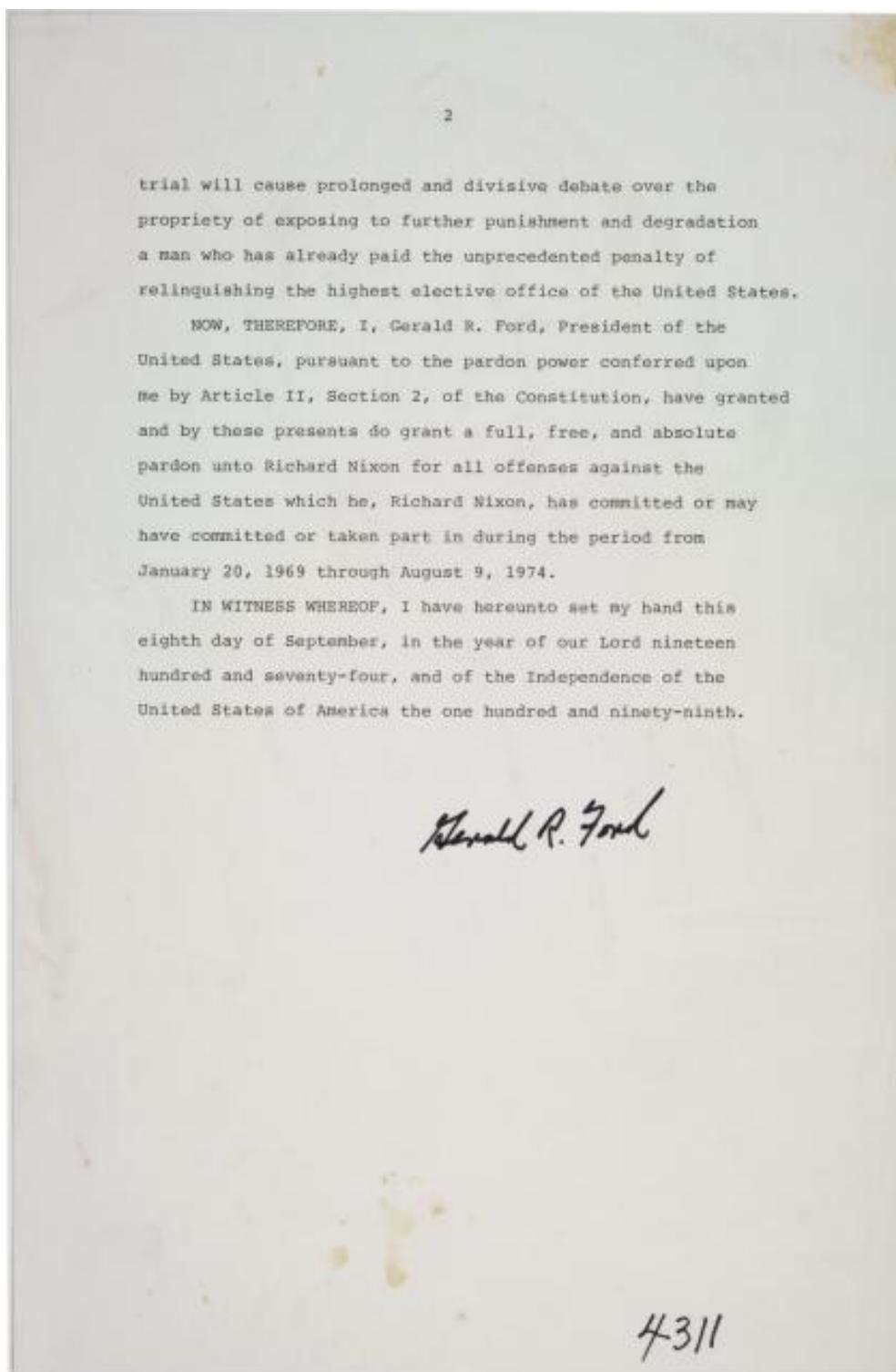
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Image



Gerald Ford, A Proclamation pardoning Richard Nixon, September 8, 1974. (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00045.45)

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