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## **What Exactly Did Gerald Ford Heal?**

**by Sheldon Richman**

Over the last several days former President Gerald R. Ford has been repeatedly praised for “healing” the nation in the aftermath of Richard Nixon’s Watergate scandal. Democrat, Republican, and solemn pundit alike paid extravagant tribute to the man who, in their view, saved the American people from “disaster.”

But is that what Ford really did? Let’s recall the context. The burglary and cover-up we call “Watergate” gave the American people a rare glimpse at raw government power. The break-in at the Democratic National Committee was not the only criminal activity that Nixon administration operatives had committed. They had also broken into the office of the psychiatrist of Daniel Ellsberg, who had leaked to the *New York Times* the Pentagon Papers, which disclosed former President Lyndon Johnson’s determination to fight the war in Vietnam even though his advisors knew it couldn’t be won. Nixon’s infamous “plumbers” unit had wiretapped people thought to be undermining the war effort. He also had used the IRS to harass people on his notorious enemies list.

For once Americans could see the truth about unrestrained government: its subservience to privileged interests, its disregard for freedom, its pettiness. The wizard’s curtain had been pulled aside momentarily — and the people were disgusted. Respect for government and the presidency plummeted. This terrified the bipartisan power elite. The broad revulsion threatened to undermine the tacit consensus that had supported the Democratic-Republican power structure for years. Who knows what might have happened if the public’s outrage had not been contained? Maybe a third party would have flourished. Power and lucre were at stake.

Something had to be done. The people had to be persuaded that Nixon was an aberration (he wasn’t, really) and that the system was basically sound and good for the public welfare. What better way to accomplish this than to appoint nice-guy Jerry Ford as president?

“The long national nightmare is over,” Ford said. But it wasn’t a nightmare for the American people. It was a nightmare for the power elite. Their very legitimacy was in peril. The

debt to Ford for restoring their legitimacy is owed by those who hold and aspire to power, not by those who suffer under it.

Thus, what Ford accomplished was to stanch a growing public cynicism about government and to restore complacency. This is universally heralded as a good thing. Observe how nearly every political figure and establishment pundit thinks Ford's pardon of Nixon was wise. But why is it good that we were "spared" a full accounting of Nixon's offenses? Could it be that the American people might have learned too much and drawn more-general conclusions about the morality of this government than the power elite would have preferred?

I submit that Ford's grand achievement was actually contrary to the public good.

For too long people have trusted the political system: the government schools and the establishment news media unceasingly propagandize that, despite the partisanship, deep down the system as we know it serves the people's interests and deserves their support. But government today is an exploitation machine that milks the taxpayers for the benefit of favored interests, especially military contractors and other big well-connected businesses. A superficial party rivalry obscures the great, overarching common interest both parties have in keeping the machine running smoothly — which requires that people not catch on that they are being milked for the privileges of others.

In his eulogy, former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld praised Ford for "[restoring] the strength of the presidency." After six years of autocratic War President George W. Bush and Ford protégés Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney, can anyone honestly believe that was a good thing?

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