ONE AMERICAN’S STORY

On August 9, 1974, Vice-President Gerald Ford became president after Richard Nixon resigned. During 25 years as a congressman from Michigan, Ford had gained a reputation for integrity and openness.

As president, Ford inherited a nation that had suffered through the years of Vietnam and Watergate. He tried to reassure Americans that the turmoil of the Nixon years was behind them.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

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. . . . 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.

Gerald Ford, speech on August 9, 1974

Ford pardoned former President Nixon, a decision that brought him much criticism. In this section, you will learn more about the difficulties presidents Ford and Jimmy Carter faced in the 1970s.

Ford Takes Over

In his first weeks in office, Ford set out to restore confidence in the presidency. He soothed the nation with his plain speaking, openness, and willingness to talk to the press and to work with Congress.

However, within a month, Ford lost the support of many Americans when he pardoned Richard Nixon for any crimes he might have committed during the Watergate scandal. It had been Ford’s hope to spare the country the spectacle of a former president being brought to trial. But
many people felt strongly that Nixon should be charged with crimes because of the Watergate cover-up. Ford’s popularity dropped sharply.

Making life even tougher for Ford was the fact that the economy was not in good shape. Inflation was spiraling higher while a recession was throwing more people out of work. Many Americans were having a hard time making ends meet. Ford proposed a voluntary campaign to “Whip Inflation Now.” He asked Americans to cut spending and energy use. The WIN plan received much publicity but failed to help the economy.

In foreign affairs, Ford had mixed success. He asked Congress to help South Vietnam when the cease-fire in the Vietnam War broke down in 1974. But Congress refused. In 1975, he negotiated a treaty with European nations and Canada called the Helsinki Accords. This pact spelled out basic human rights for the citizens of the signer nations.

Ford’s pardon of Nixon and his difficulty in improving the economy caused him problems in the 1976 presidential campaign. He only narrowly won his party’s nomination over California governor Ronald Reagan. Then he lost the presidency in a close election to Democrat Jimmy Carter.

Carter was a former peanut farmer and governor of Georgia. He had run for president as a Washington outsider and one who would “never lie” to the American people. He promised honesty in government and support for human rights throughout the world.

**Carter as President**

Many Americans were still suspicious of their government as Carter took office in 1977. Since Carter had never served in Washington, Americans hoped that he would bring fresh ideas to the presidency.

Carter immediately tried to show that he was one of the people. On inauguration day, he and his family walked from the Capitol to the White House rather than take the traditional limousine. However, being a Washington outsider would make political life difficult for Carter.

Carter and Congress often clashed. One point of conflict was the energy crisis. Early in 1977, shortages of oil and natural gas forced many schools and businesses to close. In response, Carter asked Americans to conserve energy. He also sent a national energy program to Congress. It would cut oil imports, increase production of oil and natural gas at home, and promote alternative energy sources like coal and nuclear and solar energy.

After months of debate, Congress passed some of the measures. But they were of little help when OPEC again sharply raised oil prices. Inflation surged beyond 10 percent. Unemployment rose. Like Nixon and Ford, Carter could not solve the nation’s economic problems.
Carter had more success in accomplishing his foreign-policy goals. He wanted to end the long-standing conflict with Panama over the Panama Canal. As you read in Chapter 23, the Panama Canal was built and controlled by the United States. Most Americans wanted it to stay that way. But Carter thought winning the good will of Latin America was worth losing control of the canal. Under treaties signed in 1977, the United States agreed to give the canal to Panama in 2000.

Carter also tried to reduce tensions in the Middle East. In 1978, he helped to negotiate the Camp David Accords. Under these agreements, Egypt and Israel signed the first peace treaty between Israel and an Arab nation, thus ending 30 years of conflict.

The Environmental Movement Begins

Protection of the environment was also a goal of Carter’s. He supported a movement to save the environment that had gained momentum in the 1970s. Actually, the first laws to protect the nation’s natural environment had been passed in the late 1800s. But environmentalism, or work toward protecting the environment, only began to attract wide public attention in the 1960s. In 1962, biologist Rachel Carson wrote of the dangers of heavy pesticide use in her bestseller, Silent Spring. She warned that some of these chemicals could kill animals, cause disease, and destroy the environment unless their use was limited or stopped.

In 1969, a huge oil spill near Santa Barbara, California, polluted miles of beaches and killed many marine animals. The cry for tougher laws to protect the environment grew. In the 1970s, Nixon, Ford, and Carter all proposed laws to restrict pesticide use, to regulate the cleanup of oil spills, and to curb air and water pollution. With these laws in effect, many polluted lakes began to recover, and high levels of some air pollutants began to drop. But environmental disasters continued to occur.

In 1979, an accident occurred at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania. Radioactive water leaked out of the plant, causing
fears that the nuclear reactor might explode. Within a week, the reactor was shut down. Disaster was averted. To assure people it was safe, Carter visited Three Mile Island. But not long after, he faced another disaster—a political one—in Iran.

Reagan and the Conservatives Win

For decades, the United States had supported the Shah (king) of Iran. In 1979, Muslim leaders overthrew his government. When Carter allowed the Shah to come to the United States for medical treatment, Iranians struck back at the United States. On November 4, 1979, they overran the American embassy in Iran’s capital of Tehran and took 52 Americans hostage. The Iran hostage crisis had begun.

Carter tried negotiating to get Iran’s leaders to release the hostages but without success. He approved a secret military mission, but it failed. The continuing crisis affected the election in 1980. Americans blamed Carter for the plight of the hostages, for the nation’s economic ills, and for making America look weak to the world.

Meanwhile, support for conservative ideas had been growing for more than a decade. The Republicans chose a conservative—Ronald Reagan, a former actor and California governor—to be their candidate in 1980. He vowed that, if elected president, he would not allow the United States to be pushed around. Reagan’s get-tough talk appealed to many voters.

Carter eventually won release of the hostages. But the majority of voters had already decided that it was time for a change and elected Reagan president. The hostages left Iran on January 20, 1981, the day Reagan was inaugurated. In the next chapter, you will read how Ronald Reagan took the nation in a more conservative direction.

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**ACTIVITY OPTIONS**

**MATH**
Research inflation in the 1970s. Make a graph to show the annual rate change or create a political cartoon about inflation’s effect on people’s lives.

**ART**

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**Reading History**
D. Reading a Map
Locate Tehran, the capital of Iran, in the map on this page.