

America's 38th President Gerald Ford dead at 93

RANCHO MIRAGE, Calif. (AP) — Former President Gerald R. Ford, who declared "Our long national nightmare is over" as he replaced Richard Nixon but may have doomed his own chances of election by pardoning his disgraced predecessor, has died.

He was 93. The nation's 38th president, and the only one neither elected to the office nor the vice presidency, died at his desert home at 6:45 p.m. Tuesday.

"His life was filled with love of God, his family and his country," his wife, Betty, said in a statement.

Ford was the longest living former president, surpassing Ronald Reagan, who died in June 2004, by more than a month.

Ford's office did not release the cause of death, which followed a year of medical problems. He was treated for pneumonia in January and had an angioplasty and pacemaker implant in August. Funeral arrangements were to be announced Wednesday.

"President Ford was a great man who devoted the best years of his life in serving the United States," President Bush said in a brief statement to the nation this morning. "He was a true gentleman who reflected the best in America's character."

Former President Carter described him Wednesday as "one of the most admirable public servants and human beings I have ever known."

Ford was an accidental president. A Michigan Republican elected to Congress 13 times before becoming the first appointed vice president in 1973 after Spiro Agnew left amid scandal, Ford was Nixon's hand-picked successor, a man of much political experience who had never run on a national ticket. He was as open and straightforward as Nixon was tightly controlled and conspiratorial.

Ford took office moments after Nixon resigned in disgrace over Watergate.

"My fellow Americans," Ford said, "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."

And, true to his reputation as unassuming Jerry, he added: "I am acutely aware that you have not elected me as your president by your ballots. So I ask you to confirm me with your prayers."

He revived the debate over Watergate a month later by granting Nixon a pardon for all crimes he committed as president. That single act, it was widely believed, contributed to Ford losing election to a term of his own in 1976. But it won praise in later years as a courageous act that allowed the nation to move on.

The Vietnam War ended in defeat for the U.S. during his presidency with the fall of Saigon in April 1975. In a speech as the end neared, Ford said: "Today, America can regain

the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned."

Evoking Abraham Lincoln, he said it was time to "look forward to an agenda for the future, to unify, to bind up the nation's wounds."

Ford was in the White House only 895 days, but changed it more than it changed him. Even after two women tried separately to kill him, his presidency remained open and plain. Not imperial. Not reclusive. And, of greatest satisfaction to a nation numbed by Watergate, not dishonest.

Even to millions of Americans who had voted two years earlier for Nixon, the transition to Ford's leadership was one of the most welcomed in the history of the democratic process - despite the fact that it occurred without an election.

After the Watergate ordeal, Americans liked their new president - and first lady Betty, whose candor charmed the country. In a long congressional career in which he rose to be House Republican leader, Ford lit few fires.

In the words of Congressional Quarterly, he "built a reputation for being solid, dependable and loyal - a man more comfortable carrying out the programs of others than in

initiating things on his own."

When Agnew resigned in a bribery scandal in October 1973, Ford was one of four finalists to succeed him: Texan John Connally, New York's Nelson Rockefeller and California's Ronald Reagan.

"Personal factors enter into such a decision," Nixon recalled for a Ford biographer in 1991. "I knew all of the final four personally and had great respect for each one of them, but I had known Jerry Ford longer and better than any of the rest. We had served in Congress together. I had often campaigned for

him in his district," Nixon continued.

But Ford had something the others didn't: he would be easily confirmed by Congress, something that could not be said of Rockefeller, Reagan and Connally. So Ford became the first vice president appointed under the 25th amendment to the Constitution.

On Aug. 9, 1974, after seeing Nixon off, Ford assumed the office. The next morning, he still made his own breakfast and padded to the front door in his pajamas to get the newspaper. Said a ranking Demo-

cratic congressman: "Maybe he is a plodder, but right now the advantages of having a plodder in the presidency are enormous."

In 1976, he survived an intraparty challenge from Ronald Reagan only to lose to Democrat Jimmy Carter in November. In the campaign, he ignored Carter's record as governor of Georgia and concentrated on his own achievements as president.

Carter won 297 electoral votes to his 240. After Reagan came back to defeat Carter in 1980, the two former presidents became collabo-

rators, working together on joint projects.

"His life-long dedication to helping others touched the lives of countless people," Carter said today. "He frequently rose above politics by emphasizing the need for bipartisanship and seeking common ground on issues critical to our nation."

At a joint session after becoming president, Ford addressed members of Congress as "my former colleagues" and promised "communication, conciliation, compromise and cooperation."

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