

Trump situation shows why we should have held Nixon accountable for Watergate

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Solomon D. Stevens has a doctorate in political science from Boston College and has taught American government, constitutional law and political theory. He wrote this column for the Chicago Tribune.

President Richard Nixon resigned in 1974 when it became clear that he would be not only impeached but likely removed from office. I still have a vivid memory of the day that he resigned. There were rumors that it might happen, but I was spending the night at my mother-in-law's house, and she was a huge Nixon supporter. I was hoping with all my heart that Nixon would at least have the decency to postpone his resignation until after I had left her house. I didn't want to have to listen to her defend Nixon once again.

But he resigned that day, and the speech he gave was a disgrace. He continued to refuse to admit he had done anything wrong, which delighted my mother-in-law. He said;

“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 will require. 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.”

He presented himself as making a noble sacrifice for the good of the country, when in fact it was clear at that point that even Republicans in Congress would vote to remove him from office in what would have been a humiliating impeachment trial. His resignation speech was just another lie. And we let him get away with this. I should have understood this when I saw my mother-in-law smile with pleasure after she heard what he had to say.

We were all traumatized by Watergate, and Nixon's vice president, Gerald Ford, wanted to make it possible for the country to move

forward, so when he became president, he issued a pardon for Nixon. I think he had the best of intentions. The country had been through so much with the Watergate affair, and Ford believed that it was time to free the country from the years of Watergate obsession.

My father was a well-known professor of political science and a very thoughtful man, and he supported Ford's decision, saying that the country should not have to see a former president stand trial and go to prison. But Ford was wrong, and so was my father.

The fact is that America never did heal after Watergate. We didn't move on. We needed to see Nixon pay for his crimes, but instead we saw him reclaim a place of honor in American history. The pardon served only to protect Nixon's presidency from a reckoning. Not only did he not go to prison, but his reputation was saved as well.

After Nixon left office, he wrote 10 books and developed a reputation as a "senior statesman," even though he had engaged in a plot to pay hush money to the Watergate burglars, used governmental agencies (including the Internal Revenue Service) to target and punish political enemies, and attempted to subvert a presidential election. Ford's generous and well-intentioned pardon actually changed the course of the American presidency, teaching future presidents that they could do just about anything they wanted to do and never suffer consequences. Nixon was invited back to the White House, and his opinions on world events were widely sought.

Ford issued the pardon, but it was the American people who made it clear that they were tired of controversy and wanted to embrace some form of normalcy. We longed to forget what had happened and live our lives as if the president had not defiled his office and threatened the rule of law. The American people are to blame.

Nixon famously said that when the president does something, it means it's not illegal. But that is a rejection of everything for which our country should stand. No one is above the law. The president cannot do what he wants to do just because he is the president. Donald Trump learned from Nixon and famously said, "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters." We are living with the consequences of

Watergate fatigue. We yearned for normalcy then, but our country has never returned to anything resembling that.

Nixon's dangerous legacy informs our politics today for one very important reason: He was never held accountable for his crimes against the country. We have never recovered from Watergate.

Nixon created a playbook for future presidents, and we are living with the consequences of never calling him to account. We must not make that mistake again.