Gerald Ford's Near Miracle of 1976

Watergate, the Nixon pardon, the Reagan challenge, a sick economy and a debate debacle left the incumbent Ford in a huge hole—yet he nearly pulled off the greatest presidential election comeback in history

by Yanek Mieczkowski

Gerald Ford was angry. He had just barely beaten back a challenge from his bitter political rival, former California Governor Ronald Reagan, in the midst of perhaps the most divided Republican National Convention ever. Now, his two top aides, White House Chief of Staff Dick Cheney and Political Director Stuart Spencer, were challenging his judgment and resisting his idea to kick off the campaign in Russell, Kansas, the hometown of Sen. Bob Dole, who Ford selected to be his running mate.

"Bullshit!" blurted out Cheney and Spencer when Ford broached the idea of going to Russell. The men protested that staff members had worked for three days straight with no sleep and needed a rest. They argued back and forth, the president growing visibly irate, until his aides relented. When Spencer sighed and said "if that's what you want, we'll do it," Ford grabbed the younger man by the arm and said: "Dammit, I know what I'm doing. I know a little bit about politics."

From the start, Ford seemed an underdog president, and he endured several such moments of doubts about his judgment and challenges to his leadership during his term and the ensuing 1976 election campaign. He was the only chief executive not to have won election to the presidency or vice presidency. In October 1973, acting under the provisions of the 25th Amendment, President Richard M. Nixon nominated House minority leader Ford to be vice president after Spiro Agnew stepped down amid corruption charges. Then, in August 1974, when Nixon resigned because of his role in the Watergate cover-up, Ford took office. In his first address to the people as president, Ford assured Americans that the Watergate scandal had ended, proclaiming, "Our long national nightmare is over."

Yet the unprecedented scandal's stains still darkened the White House. On September 8, when Ford shocked the nation and issued Nixon a full and unconditional pardon for any crimes he may have committed against the United States while president, his approval ratings plunged. Other setbacks followed. In late 1974, the nation slipped into a deep recession, forcing Ford to abandon his much-touted anti-inflation initiatives and instead move to stimulate the economy. Meanwhile, the Cold War raged on and, when Communist North Vietnam overran South Vietnam in April 1975, Ford ordered all Americans in Saigon

Gerald Ford came tantalizingly close to plowing through the obstacles of Richard Nixon's pardon, Ronald Reagan's slashing challenge, Bob Dole's snarling demeanor, Jimmy Carter's fresh face and his own gaffes and bumbling image.

evacuated. The last sad chapter of the American war in Vietnam appeared to be a superpower in retreat.

Then, as attention turned to the 1976 presidential contest, the challenges came from within Ford's party. Since his first election as a Michigan congressman in 1948, Ford had built solid credentials as a conservative Republican, yet as president, when he chose liberal Republican Nelson Rockefeller as vice president, conservatives were outraged, and some prepared to rebel. They supported Ronald Reagan, and both Cheney and Spencer recognized the threat that the former California governor posed. "Reagan had a major following in the party," recalled Cheney, and he "had been shooting for the '76 presidential campaign for probably eight years," ever since an abortive run at the nomination in 1968. Spencer, who had been close to Reagan and helped engineer the former actor's 1966 election as California governor, remembered Reagan "felt that he was the heir-apparent after Watergate," with Ford just an appointed interim president. After the Nixon presidency collapsed, Reagan stoked his supporters with regular radio addresses and a newspaper column.

> **"Urged to quit the race, Reagan instead vowed to run in every primary up to the convention even if he lost every single one"**

The Ford White House watched Reagan nervously, even after July 1975, when Ford said that he would seek a full term. Just four months later, on November 4, Ford announced that Rockefeller requested to be dropped from the 1976 ticket. The president dissembled about the move, later admitting that he asked the vice president to step aside to placate conservatives. Along with the Rockefeller announcement, on that same day Ford unveiled a massive administration overhaul, including the appointment of Donald Rumsfeld as defense secretary, George H.W. Bush as CIA director, and Cheney as White House chief of staff.

Rockefeller's dismissal failed to deter Reagan who, on November 19, 1975, telephoned the Oval Office to tell Ford personally he would challenge him for the nomination. With that call, Ford's political world changed. Instead of cruising to his party's nomination as the sitting president, he would have to hit the campaign trail. The first primary in New Hampshire was critical, because if an incumbent were to lose that contest, the wound could be fatal.

Working for the president's campaign, Spencer was in a unique position, since he knew both candidates and understood Reagan's strengths and weaknesses. The former governor, Spencer said, was a "rhythm candidate." Once he got into a campaign speaking rhythm, he was nearly impossible to beat. But "when you knock him out of that rhythm, all of a sudden he's not *the* Ronald Reagan anymore," Spencer observed. The Ford campaign had to throw Reagan off-balance, and the key was to dig up the hundreds of speeches that Reagan had made as he prepared to run for president. Making that many speeches, Spencer predicted, a presidential hopeful would get sloppy and say something outlandish.

And Reagan had. In September 1975, he proposed transferring $90 billion in federal programs to the states. Such a move would place a huge tax burden on states—political poison, the Ford campaign knew, in tax-averse New Hampshire. Just ahead of the primary, Ford staffers fed Reagan's proposal to reporters, who then peppered him with questions and forced him on the defensive. "Reagan got out of rhythm," Spencer recalled, and was "stumbling through New Hampshire, trying to answer questions that he couldn't answer." On primary day, by only 1,317 votes, the president scored a slim but crucial victory, proving Ford could compete at the national level. When news of the victory came, speechwriter Robert Orben recalled the president striding into the White House mess and declaring with satisfaction, "I hope that's the last time I hear that the only elections I ever won were in my congressional district."

When Ford won the next primaries in Massachusetts, Vermont and Florida, White House political operatives urged Reagan to quit. Even his own aides were privately suggesting that he consider bowing out. After all, the Republicans had enough problems already following Watergate without a divisive primary fight, and Ford and Reagan were close on most issues, including tax cuts, smaller government and a strong national defense. The entreaties only served to stir Reagan's competitive juices. He told his aides that he would "run in every single primary from here to the convention even if I lose every single one," and then managed to pull off a surprise victory in North Carolina.

Reagan was gaining traction with the fictitious charge that Ford had let U.S. military power slip behind the Soviet Union's. Coming on the heels of the humiliating end of the Vietnam War, the accusation struck a responsive chord among conservatives, and for the rest of the primary season, Ford and Reagan traded blows. Ultimately, Ford won 15 state primaries to Reagan's 12, but neither candidate won enough delegates to sew up the nomination before the August convention in Kansas City. For the first time in half a century, a political party headed into the summer uncertain of its nominee.

By contrast, Democrats were united as Jimmy Carter beat out a crowded field of presidential aspirants to emerge as the nominee. He was an unlikely candidate, a former one-term governor of Georgia with virtually no national name recognition. But he turned his inexperience into an asset, capitalizing on the post-Watergate distaste for Washington and saying, "I'll never lie to you," a promise that resonated with scandal-weary Americans. Carter forged a balanced ticket by picking a Midwest senator, Walter Mondale of Minnesota, as his running mate, and by July the Democrats were well prepared to take on whomever the GOP advanced as its candidate.

evacuated. The last sad chapter of the American war in Vietnam appeared to be a superpower in retreat.

The Bicentennial Battle for the White House

Republicans

Ronald Reagan's tough challenge to Gerald Ford for the GOP nomination survived a string of early Ford primary wins. Reagan fought on, ultimatley taking 12 state primaries to Ford's 15. However, neither candidate had the necessary number of delegates for victory, leading to one of the most closely contested conventions in 50 years. Ford won with 1,187 delegates to Reagan's 1,070.

Gerald Ford

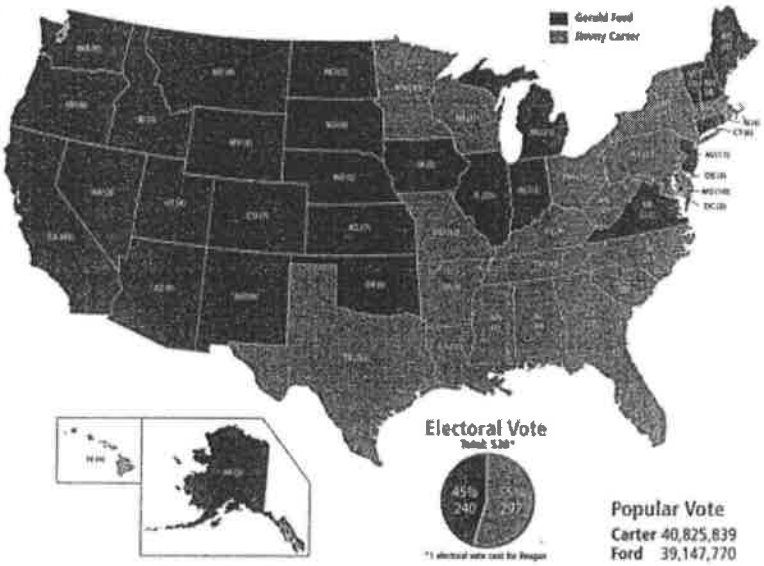
Ronald Reagan

Democrats

Jimmy Carter rolled over a crowded field of contenders for his party's nomination. The former Georgia governor then held a commanding lead over Ford in opinion polls at the outset of the 1976 general election campaign.

Jimmy Carter

1976 General Election Results



Popular Vote
Carter 40,825,839
Ford 39,147,770

Until Ford became president, Cheney recalled, Reagan "was much better known.... And the president had never run outside of Grand Rapids in his congressional races." But as the incumbent, Ford enjoyed enormous advantages. Celebrating the country's bicentennial in July 1976, the president functioned as the nation's master of ceremonies, leading events in Washington, New York and Philadelphia. During these observances, Ford used the power of incumbency to woo uncommitted delegates, enjoying photo opportunities and a majesty that Reagan's team could not summon. "We'd arrive in Air Force One, they'd arrive in charter. We'd have Secret Service, we'd have the trappings," Spencer remembered. "All of those things we milked as much as we could."

A major political blunder by Reagan also greatly aided Ford. The challenger took an unprecedented step by naming his running mate before the convention. In an effort to attract moderates, Reagan chose liberal Republican Sen. Richard Schweiker of Pennsylvania, a pick that infuriated loyal conservatives. Making matters worse, at the convention, the Reagan camp tried unsuccessfully to change procedural rules to force Ford to name his running mate early, a tactic that Ford's staff dubbed "misery loves company." In Kansas City, the momentum shifted toward the president, who won the nomination on the first ballot. In doing so, Ford thus became the only man ever to beat Reagan in a head-to-head political race.

A Ford-Reagan ticket might have quickly unified the party. But Reagan had declared himself out of consideration, and given the bruising battles and the poor personal chemistry between the men, they would have had trouble patching up their differences. "Ford wasn't eager to have Reagan on the ticket. Reagan wasn't eager to be on the ticket," Cheney said. "There was a belief that that would have been the best combination we could have come up with. But they had been so competitive with one another through the course of the primaries," Cheney remembered, that a Ford-Reagan combination was nearly impossible.

Instead, Ford chose Dole, who could help the ticket in the typically Republican farm states, which, in 1976, were trending toward Carter, a peanut farmer. Dole's conservative reputation could also help in mending fences with Reagan's supporters, an idea that Reagan seemed to confirm when he met alone with the president after Ford clinched the nomination. After Ford mentioned six possible running mates, Reagan singled out Dole, saying he would be excellent.

The first campaign stop in Kansas—which Ford, Cheney and Spencer had so vigorously argued over—proved a political boon. As Air Force One descended into Russell, Ford gleefully pointed out the window, showing aides that the roads were clogged with

SOURCES: GERALD R. FORD PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY; REAGAN, RONALD REAGAN PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY; CARTER LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; MAP: BLUE MARBLE MAPS LLC

The Bicentennial Battle for the White House

Republicans

vehicles for miles. Dole gave an emotional speech in front of his hometown crowd, weeping as he thanked supporters. The heavy media coverage gave the Ford-Dole ticket a shot in the arm.

Ford desperately needed such drama. Trailing Carter by 33 points in the polls, he looked doomed to lose. In his nomination acceptance speech, he took a gamble, challenging Carter to debate on national television—something no sitting president had ever done. Ford had more to lose by giving Carter television exposure, and a poor performance—such as Vice President Nixon suffered in his 1960 face-off against Sen. John Kennedy—could do inestimable damage. Still, with Carter so far out front, the president needed to convert millions of voters to his side within just two months. "Shaking hands wasn't going to get you there," Cheney believed. "You had to come up with something far bolder...that would let you reach out and touch a lot more people. And that's why the debates were attractive."

Ford's campaign team took another strategic gamble. They noticed that when Ford hit the hustings, his popularity in the polls took a dive. Even though people who met the president personally came away impressed with his warmth, his oratory was wooden. In a confidential memo, White House photographer David Kennerly boldly criticized the president: "Your speeches are usually long, boring, and filled with rhetoric that turns people off." Ford's strategists decided to keep him at the White House to act presidential, leaving the heavy hitting on the campaign trail to Dole.

Thus Ford adhered to a "Rose Garden strategy," which one staffer dubbed the "no-campaign campaign." By tending to economic policy and diplomacy, he remained above the fray. He did practice hard for the debates, rehearsing responses to questions and closing statements, and when the first debate took place in Philadelphia on September 23, Ford was ready. As he strode onto the stage wearing a three-piece suit, the executive image was clear, and at 6 feet 1 inch tall with a football player's build, Ford cut a more impressive figure than his slender, 5-foot-10 opponent. Carter seemed tentative during the debate while Ford appeared in command, criticizing the former Georgia governor for vacillation and vagueness. He set the tone with his opening line: "I don't believe that Mr. Carter has been any more specific in this case than he has been in many other instances."

Polls showed that viewers considered Ford the narrow winner and—more important—his strong performance sliced into Carter's lead. Carter further damaged his campaign with an embarrassing interview in *Playboy*. The venue was unusual enough—a magazine featuring nude women—but Carter's revelations raised even more eyebrows. Though deeply religious, Carter displayed an odd tendency to mix crude language with pious pronouncements. After openly discussing his faith, he used terms like "screw" and "shack up" to discuss sex and then admitted: "I've looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart many times."

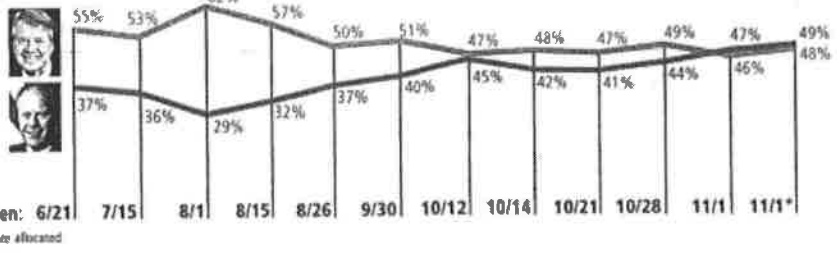
Many Americans were shocked. While Carter had built his campaign around the post-Watergate yearning for honesty, this was too much. His words helped cast doubt upon the very character virtues that had brought him from political anonymity to his party's nomination. He faltered in the polls, with one survey even showing him lagging behind Ford. Momentum—a critical factor in presidential races—was now on Ford's side as he prepared for the second debate, focused on foreign policy, in San Francisco.

On paper, Ford seemed poised to dominate that contest. Whereas the former Georgia governor had no diplomatic experience, the president had traveled extensively overseas and could boast of arms-control negotiations with the Soviet Union, a first-ever presidential trip to Japan and the 1975 Helsinki Accords, which promoted human rights and greater freedom in the Soviet Union's Eastern European satellites. But it was precisely that breakthrough that got Ford into trouble. Conservatives and Americans of Eastern European descent denounced the accords for allegedly ratifying the postwar Iron Curtain boundaries. Ford had grown defensive about those charges. When a debate panelist asked him about the Helsinki Accords, he reflexively hit back hard, proclaiming, "There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, and there never will be under a Ford administration." Ford had meant to say that he "does not accept" Soviet domination over Eastern Europe, but he flubbed the line and overstated his case. After four agonizing days of media criticism, Ford apologized and retracted the remark.

The mistake proved costly. Cheney remembered the fallout began just after the debate, when he faced reporters. As he walked to a podium, journalist Lou Cannon of the *Washington Post* "hollered at me from the back of the room. He said, 'Hey, Cheney,

Time Runs Out on Gerald Ford's Comeback Campaign

Gallup's preference polls leading up to the November 1976 vote illustrate the amazing surge of Gerald Ford. The final poll, taken a day before the election, actually gave Ford a one point lead.



* with undecided vote allocated

Carter's vehicles for miles. Dole gave an emotional speech in front of his

lead. Carter further damaged his campaign with

an hometown crowd, weeping as he thanked supporters. The heavy

how many Soviet divisions are there in Poland?' And I knew right then we were in trouble." Whereas Ford had built a head of steam after the first debate, he stalled in the polls after the second.

The next contest—a historic first-ever debate between vice presidential candidates—also hurt. Dole the campaigner showed a slashing wit that earned him epithets such as "hatchet man" and "Doberman Dole." He lived up to the billing in his October 15 debate with Mondale, coming across as caustic and making an unfortunate remark about 20th-century "Democrat wars," implying that the two world wars and other conflicts were partisan. Dole's poll numbers fell, and Carter began reminding audiences of the "Ford-Dole" ticket to stimulate growing doubts about the president's running mate

As Election Day neared, perhaps the biggest blow to Ford's prospects came from the faltering economy. Late in the summer, Alan Greenspan, chairman of the president's Council of Economic Advisers, warned Ford that the economy would "pause" in rebounding from the recession, a normal economic hiccup but one that would slow the rate of recovery. By early fall, the pause had arrived, and in October, when September's jobless statistics came out, the news was bleak, with unemployment at 7.8 percent. During the third and final presidential debate in Williamsburg, Va., Carter pounded away at economic themes, blaming Ford for "the highest unemployment rate since the Great Depression." Still, the president pointed to the nation's overall economic recovery, including substantially lower inflation.

> **"Watergate was the sword hanging over the election as polls showed that by a 2-1 margin, Americans considered Ford's pardon of Nixon wrong"**

During the last 10 days before the election, the Ford campaign unleashed a massive advertising blitz and, by November 2, Ford had pulled even with Carter in the polls. It was one of the greatest political comebacks in history.

But, on Election Day, as Cheney flew home with the president, "All the way across the country, there wasn't a cloud in the sky," he recalled. "I mean, it was just brilliant sunshine. And that meant we were going to get high voter turnout in a lot of the cities in the Democratic areas. So by the time we landed, I was concerned." After watching returns late into the evening, Ford went to bed at 2 a.m., knowing Carter's position was better than his.

Ford awoke the next morning to find he had lost to Carter by just 57 electoral votes and two points in the popular vote, 50 to 48 percent. He had won more states than Carter, 27 to 23, but, in addition to capturing the Democratic Northeast, Carter swept his native South, which Republicans had started to count as a stronghold during the 1960s. Carter also won more than 90 percent of African-American ballots, which proved a decisive margin.

Ford's comeback effort "came very, very close—almost pulled it out," Cheney later said. "I always felt good about the campaign because I felt like we gave it our best shot and that it was an uphill climb from the very beginning—partly because you had the Nixon pardon in the background and it was the first presidential campaign after Watergate. We were carrying all that baggage."

The 1976 election reflected the country's disillusionment after Watergate and telegraphed a trend. The scandal was the sword hanging over the election, and polls showed that by a 2-to-1 margin, Americans considered Ford's pardon of Nixon wrong. That especially hurt Ford in Republican areas. Spencer reported "post-election studies showed that basically 7 percent of the Republicans in America couldn't forgive Ford for pardoning Dick Nixon. That's a big hunk of your base." Watergate also made voters more leery of Washington's professional politicians. In every election since Watergate, except for George H.W. Bush in 1988, the winner has come from outside the Beltway, typically a governor touting executive experience.

After leaving office, Ford often pointed to the Nixon pardon as the decisive factor in his defeat. However, had he not pardoned Nixon, he might have faltered sooner. A Nixon trial would have certainly stretched into 1976, keeping the disgraced president in the headlines and reminding Americans of Ford's association with him—which might have tipped the balance in Reagan's favor for the GOP nomination. Instead, the more moderate Ford prevailed, and in doing so helped rehabilitate the party. During Watergate's darkest days, just 18 percent of voters identified themselves as Republicans, prompting *Newsweek* to wonder whether the GOP was "slowly and painfully dying." By healing the party's wounds and showing it was viable, Ford's strong comeback and election performance breathed life back into the nation's two-party system.

During retirement, when asked about his life's greatest regret, Ford said that it was seeing little playing time until his senior year on the University of Michigan football team. Only after being reminded did he mention losing the 1976 election.

That response spoke volumes about Ford. He kept politics in perspective, never letting it loom too large, placing it behind his great loves, his family and sports. Ford especially showed pride in his family, and in 1976 his four children—Mike, Jack, Steve and Susan—campaigned for him. In later years, though, they expressed some relief that he lost the race, for it represented a trade-off. Steve Ford believed his father "lived probably 10 years longer because he didn't win, because it takes so much off your life, that second term as president. Selfishly, I'm glad we had him around more as a father."

Exactly three decades after that loss, Ford set a new record. In November 2006, at 93 years and four months, he became the oldest former president in history, beating the mark set by Ronald Reagan. Just weeks before he died in December, Ford once again had the satisfaction of besting his old rival. ❑

because how many Soviet divisions are there in Poland?' And I knew right

I felt like we gave it our best shot and that it was

an uphill then we were in trouble." Whereas Ford had built a head of steam