

On the 8th of August, 1974, America's 37th president - Richard Nixon - gave his 37th Oval-Office address to the nation. He told the country he was resigning. It was a tough thing for him to do, as he said in his resignation address:

In all the decisions I have made in my public life, I have always tried to do what was best for the Nation. Throughout the long and difficult period of Watergate, I have felt it was my duty to persevere, to make every possible effort to complete the term of office to which you elected me.
In the past few days, however, it has become evident to me that I no longer have a strong enough political base in the Congress to justify continuing that effort. As long as there was such a base, I felt strongly that it was necessary to see the constitutional process through to its conclusion, that to do otherwise would be unfaithful to the spirit of that deliberately difficult process and a dangerously destabilizing precedent for the future ...

What had happened during "the past few days" to change the President's mind? A previously unknown tape recording - made on the 23rd of June, 1972 - became public on the 3rd of August. It turned into a "smoking gun" against the President.

Before August 3, 1974, Nixon had insisted he knew nothing about a cover-up designed to prevent anyone from learning the truth about the Watergate break-in. The newly released tape (of a conversation between Nixon and his adviser, H.R. Haldeman) proved otherwise. Not only did it reveal Nixon knew about the cover-up plan, he is heard approving it:

Haldeman: ... "the way to handle this now is for us to have Walters [CIA] call Pat Gray [FBI] and just say, 'Stay the h__ out of this ... this is ah, business here we don't want you to go any further on it.'
Nixon: ... All right, fine, I understand it all. We won't second-guess Mitchell [the attorney general] and the rest ... You call them in [to tell the CIA to tell the FBI to go no further with an investigation]. Good. Good deal. Play it tough. That's the way they play it and that's the way we are going to play it.

Those words implicated the President, causing some of the Congressmen who had previously stood by him to withdraw their support. If Nixon did not resign, he likely would have lost his impeachment trial. He did not want to put the country - or his family - through that disruptive process:

I would have preferred to carry through to the finish whatever the personal agony it would have involved, and my family unanimously urged me to do so. But the interest of the Nation must always come before any personal considerations.
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 would 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 interest of America first. America needs a full-time President and a full-time Congress, particularly at this time with problems we face at home and abroad. To continue to fight through the months ahead for my personal vindication would almost totally absorb the time and attention of both the President and the Congress in a period when our entire focus should be on the great issues of peace abroad and prosperity without inflation at home.
Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow. Vice President Ford will be sworn in as President at that hour in this office.

The following day - the 9th of August, 1974 - Nixon submitted his resignation letter. After saying goodbye to his staff, he and his family left Washington, D.C.

Credits:

Clip from President Nixon's resignation address, online courtesy the U.S. National Archives and the Nixon Presidential Library.

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