

MAAD

THE CRISIS OF THE

1970s

AND THE RISE OF THE
POPULIST RIGHT

HELL

DOMINIC SANDBROOK



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Mad as Hell

The Crisis of the 1970s and
the Rise of the Populist Right

Dominic Sandbrook



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**For Catherine,
grá mo chroí**

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Preface

I have to make my witness.

—HOWARD BEALE, in *Network* (1976)

It is evening in New York City. Lightning flashes overhead, and rain thunders down on the shabby streets. Far above the crowds, in the tense quiet of a network news studio, a man is staring into a camera. Beneath his shabby beige raincoat, you can just make out the collar of his pajamas. His eyes are blazing, his face is haggard, his gray hair is plastered to his brow. “I don’t have to tell you things are bad,” he says. “Everybody knows things are bad. It’s a depression. Everybody’s out of work or scared of losing their job. The dollar buys a nickel’s worth, banks are going bust, shopkeepers keep a gun under the counter. Punks are running wild in the street and there’s nobody anywhere who seems to know what to do, and there’s no end to it.”

In the control room, the producers are looking nervously at one another; in the studio, the man is still talking. The air is unfit to breathe, he says; the food is unfit to eat; on television they tell you that fifteen people were murdered today, “as if that’s the way it’s supposed to be.” So, he says, you don’t go out anymore. You stay at home with your toaster and your TV and you ask only to be left alone. “Well, I’m not going to leave you alone,” he says, raising his voice, his eyes searing now. “I want you to get mad.”

I don’t want you to protest. I don’t want you to riot. I don’t want you to write to your congressman, because I wouldn’t know what to tell you to write. I don’t know what to do about the depression and the inflation and the Russians and the crime in the street. All I know is that first you’ve got to get mad. You’ve got to say, “*I’m a human being, goddamnit! My life has value!*” So I want you to get up now. I want all of you to get up out of your chairs. I want you to get up right now and go to the window, open it, and stick your head out, and yell: “*I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore!*”

He *is* mad, of course: not in the sense of being angry, but in the sense of being demented, deranged, mentally disintegrated. But people are listening. In the studio, word comes that people are yelling in Atlanta, then that “they’re yelling in Baton Rouge.” In his New York apartment, the president of the news division, an old friend, is watching the anchorman’s tirade in speechless horror. But his daughter goes to the window and sticks her head out into the darkness and the pouring rain. And she hears first one voice, then another, raised in a swelling public chorus: “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take it anymore!” “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take it anymore!” “*I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take it anymore!*”

Howard Beale never existed; he was merely a character in the satire *Network*, one of the best films of 1976. But he might as well have done, for many Americans *were* mad as hell in the 1970s, and every now and again, from quiet residential streets and spanking-new shopping

malls, there were reports of people shouting, “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take anymore!” On college campuses, visitors sometimes saw leaflets being handed around that read “IMAHAINGTTIAM Midnight.” And then, at the appointed hour, they would hear the clatter of windows being opened, and hundreds of youngsters would stick their heads out into the night and scream at the tops of their voices: “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take anymore!”¹

This book tells the story of why Americans became so mad, and why it mattered. It is the story of an extraordinary time in the nation’s history, a period of economic depression, political corruption, military defeat, and cultural introspection, but also one of unexpected popular protest and artistic vitality. It is the story of Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan, of stagflation, gas lines, and conspiracy theories. It is the story of the fall of Saigon, the collapse of détente, and the revolution in Iran; of the Sunbelt, the Me Decade, and the Third Great Awakening; of Archie Bunker, Farrah Fawcett, and Bruce Springsteen; of Milton Friedman, Roger Staubach, and Phyllis Schlafly; of *Roots*, *Hombre*, *California*, and *The Deer Hunter*.

At the time, many Americans did not know what to make of the 1970s. For one influential columnist, Joseph Alsop, they were “the very worst years since the history of life began on earth”; for another, Russell Baker, they were simply tiresome, their legacy “an engulfing swamp of boredom.” It was a decade that remained “elusive, unfocused, a patchwork of dramatics awaiting a drama,” wrote *Time*’s essayist Frank Trippett in December 1978. In the end, he decided that the 1970s would be remembered as “a confused time, neither here nor there, neither the best nor worst of times, as free of a predominant theme as of a singular direction.”²

Parceling up history into ten-year chunks is merely a journalistic trick borrowed from the calendar, and it often obscures as much as it illuminates the past. There was more continuity between the 1960s and the 1970s, or the 1970s and the 1980s, than we often remember. The great historical trends, from the rise of the suburbs and the Sunbelt to the decline of racism and the changing role of women, did not stop and start with the changing of the seasons. When conservatives rail against the legacy of the 1960s, complaining about the collapse of discipline and the family, the rise of crime, and the spread of pornography, they are often talking about things that peaked in the 1970s. And the continuities run even deeper than that, for, as this book shows, many things that we imagine started in the 1970s—women’s liberation, the New Right, the “culture wars”—actually had their roots in earlier decades. Every generation likes to think itself unique; in fact, the arguments people were having during the presidency of Jimmy Carter were often strikingly similar to those people had when Calvin Coolidge was in the White House.

And yet there was a palpable difference between 1976 and 1966, a difference that explains why so many ordinary Americans empathized with Howard Beale when he yelled that he was mad as hell. There was an indefinable change of flavor, of atmosphere, which meant that life often felt tougher, grittier, more heavily weighed down by gloom and disappointment. Once Americans had talked of possibilities; now they talked of limits. Once they had talked of growth and prosperity; now they talked of inflation and unemployment. Once they had

marched and campaigned, confident that moral fervor could move mountains; now the civil rights movement seemed fragmented, the peace movement had faded away, and even university campuses had fallen silent. By the end of Richard Nixon's first term, the passions of the 1960s seemed to have given way to the cold, hard realities of retreat abroad and retrenchment at home.

Even the president himself seemed unable to escape the shadow of the past. The Watergate scandal exploded into the headlines just as American involvement in Vietnam was ending, but its origins stretched back to 1960, when Nixon felt that the eastern establishment had robbed him of the presidency. The transcripts of his conversations show that he was obsessed with the events of the previous two decades, from the Alger Hiss case to the Cuban missile crisis. Nixon told the nation to move on from the 1960s, but he never did so himself. It was as though his psychological clock had stopped in 1968.

This book begins where the story of Watergate ends, with the resignation of a president whose career encapsulated the political passions of the 1950s and 1960s. In August 1974, when Nixon finally disappeared into internal exile, the nation was still struggling to come to terms with the effects of the global oil shock the previous October. More than any other event, in fact, it was this moment that marked the end of optimism and the onset of gloom: the point when Americans, whatever they thought of Vietnam or abortion or women's liberation, really started to get mad. For it was then that ordinary Americans, staring in horror at the price of gasoline in their local service stations, or reading headlines that warned of shortages and rationing, realized that they were living in the "age of limits." Indeed, the idea of limits, which reached its apotheosis in Jimmy Carter's notorious crisis-of-confidence speech, is one of the central themes of this book. One of the things that made the 1970s different from both the 1960s and the 1980s was that for the first time in more than a generation, ordinary Americans genuinely doubted that tomorrow would be better than today. They were not used to feeling so pessimistic—which is one reason why people who lived through the 1970s often shudder to recall them.

In their shock and disappointment at the apparent overthrow of their ambitions, many Americans turned inward, to introspection and self-doubt. Although Tom Wolfe's famous line about the 1970s being the "Me Decade" has become a cliché, it does have the ring of truth. To be sure, plenty of people still marched for causes much bigger than themselves, from the ERA to the Moral Majority. But when Carter talked of a "growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation," he was expressing anxieties that dominated much of the popular culture of the time, from the music of Bruce Springsteen to the films of Martin Scorsese.

This was a world in which traditional narratives were undermined by feminism, multiculturalism, and postmodernism, in which cherished notions of American virtue were challenged by Vietnam and Watergate, in which the boundless possibilities of the American Dream were denied by inflation, pollution, and unemployment. This was the world of war films in which Americans lost; of moody, tortured heroes; of murky ambiguity instead of moral clarity. And just as Americans were not used to feeling pessimistic about the future, they were not used to feeling uneasy about their place in the world—which is why, in the end, they returned to the comforting nostalgia of Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Ronald Reagan.

But the defining theme of this book, and the one that gives it its title, is the rise of a new kind of populism. Of course the politics of the people was deeply rooted in American history, from Jacksonian democracy to the Omaha Platform, from Tom Watson to Huey Long. But populism reawakened in the 1970s—partly as a reaction to Vietnam and Watergate, partly as a result of the growth of individualism, the decline of institutions, and the conflict between liberalism and traditionalism—it became the most powerful political and cultural force in the nation. The notion of the virtuous citizen locked in battle against big government, big business, and a decadent elite was the single most compelling theme of the 1970s. It drew on the pessimism of stagflation and the shock of defeat; it united liberals from Massachusetts who thought the military-industrial complex had killed President Kennedy and conservatives from Dallas who thought that the country was sliding into godless debauchery. It was there in George Wallace's attacks on pointy-heads and in Richard Nixon's farewell remarks; in the Boston busing protests and the Kanawha County textbook war; in the backlash against détente, the campaign to pass Proposition 13, and the rise of the Moral Majority. And it was there, above all, in Jimmy Carter's promise of a government as good as its people—and in the patriotic, small-government, anti-establishment appeal of the man who beat him.

And while this is the story of Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan, it is also the story of millions of unsung people to whom Howard Beale's tirade about being mad as hell made a great deal of sense—that vast majority who did not join protest marches or political groups, who never bought Eagles records or apocalyptic best sellers, who did not visit swingers' clubs or New Age retreats, but who went to college, got a job, fell in love, got married, bought a house, had children, and did all those other things that made up the texture of everyday life and individual memory. It is the story of Bill and Pat Loud, the first stars of reality television; of Lorraine Faith, whose teenage son was stabbed during the Boston busing protests; of Dorothy Waldvogel, who left her Illinois farm to fight against the ERA; of Penne Lainger, who tied a yellow ribbon round the tree in her yard while she waited for her husband to come home from Iran.

Many of them belonged to that group Richard Nixon had memorably called "the great silent majority," the "forgotten Americans, the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators." But in the 1970s, with the nation apparently under siege from without and within, they were silent no longer. They were mad as hell, and they were not going to take it anymore.

A Note on Money

Comparing monetary values from different periods is enormously complicated: the invaluable Web site www.measuringworth.com, run by a group of academic economists from the United States and Britain, gives six different ways of doing it. If we use a combination of the consumer price index and the so-called consumer bundle, a reasonable estimate is that a dollar in 1970 was worth between five and six times what it is today. During the following decade, however, inflation made rapid inroads into the dollar's value. In 1970, \$100 was worth about \$550 in today's money. Five years later, however, \$100 was worth only \$400 or so, and by 1980 it was worth just \$260 in today's money. As these figures suggest, inflation was no laughing matter, especially for savers.

On his last night as president of the United States, Richard Nixon slept badly. As so often during his embattled presidency, he sat up into the small hours of the morning with the telephone clutched to his ear, asking old friends and allies for their reactions to the resignation announcement he had made just a few hours before. At almost two in the morning the thirty-seventh president made his last call, and then he sat alone, brooding in the shadows. When Manolo, his loyal valet, came to ask if he wanted anything, Nixon asked merely that he turn out all the lights in the Residence. It was, he said, “a time for darkness.”

The next morning, Nixon got up at six. Dressed in his pajamas and robe, he went into the little second-floor kitchen and asked the chef to prepare his favorite meal, corned beef hash and poached eggs—the same meal he had eaten on the famous occasion, after the invasion of Cambodia four years earlier, when he had paid an unexpected predawn visit to the young peace demonstrators camped at the Lincoln Memorial. Now he ate it on his own in his beloved Lincoln Sitting Room, scribbling on a yellow pad and staring into the fire’s dying embers. The desk, like those in the Oval Office and Executive Office Building, had already been emptied, its contents packed into boxes for the trip to California. After breakfast there was a knock on the door: Alexander Haig, bringing the ceremonial letter to Henry Kissinger. Beneath the words “I hereby resign the Office of President of the United States,” Nixon scrawled his name.²

Shortly after nine, Nixon strode in his familiar awkward gait across to the West Sitting Room, where the second-floor staff had assembled to say goodbye. He walked down the line shaking hands, and then led his family downstairs for the last farewell. For the first time since she became First Lady, Pat Nixon had not bothered to do her hair and was wearing dark glasses to hide her tears, but at the last moment she decided to take them off. It was “not a moment to be ashamed of tears,” said her son-in-law Ed Cox. Through the double doors they could hear the Marine band, playing a tune from *Oklahoma!* while their guests waited. In the last moments, an aide began to brief the president about the television cameras. “Television?” exclaimed Mrs. Nixon. “Who authorized television?” “I did,” her husband said curtly. Then he nodded to the others. “We’ll go out there and do it.”

As the doors swung open and the band struck up “Hail to the Chief,” Nixon led his family into the East Room and onto the platform, where they looked down at ranks of applauding staff members. Even on this last, emotionally searing occasion, everything had been planned with television in mind, and little pieces of tape indicated where each of them should stand. For Pat Nixon it was one last humiliation: her raw, reddened face, wrote Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, “seemed to convey her whole life.” And for Nixon’s elder daughter, Tricia, the ordeal was equally dreadful. “Platform ahead,” she recorded in her diary, remembering the scene. “Step up onto platform. Find name marker. Do not trip over wires. Stand on name marker. Reach for Mama’s hand. Hold it. Applause. Daddy is speaking. People are letting tears roll down their cheeks. Must not look. Must not think of it now.”

Exhausted from lack of sleep, emotionally shattered after eighteen months of unrelenting pressure, her father stood perspiring beneath the television lights. After everything that he had fought for, after all his hard work to drag himself from the parched earth of California

the elegant rooms of the White House, he was leaving in the deepest disgrace. The self-consciousness, the shame, must have been overwhelming. He stood there before the world red eyed, half-smiling, “fighting back a flood tide of emotions.” As so often at times of stress he retreated to the self-pity of the self-made man. “I had come so far from the little house in Yorba Linda to this great house in Washington,” he reflected. “I thought about my parents and I tried to tell these people about them.”³

“I remember my old man,” Nixon said thoughtfully. “I think that they would have called him sort of a little man, common man. He didn’t consider himself that way. You know what he was? He was a streetcar motorman first, and then he was a farmer, and then he had a lemon ranch. It was the poorest lemon ranch in California, I can assure you. He sold it before they found oil on it.” By now a deep hush had descended on the room, but on the platform the president’s mind was elsewhere:

Nobody will ever write a book, probably, about my mother. Well, I guess all of you would say this about your mother—my mother was a saint. And I think of her, two boys dying of tuberculosis, nursing four others in order that she could take care of my older brother for three years in Arizona, and seeing each of them die, and when they died, it was like one of her own.

Yes, she will have no books written about her. But she was a saint.

For a moment, there was total silence. Then, blinking away tears, Nixon pulled himself back. He took a book from Ed Cox, put on his glasses for the first time in public, and in a trembling voice read the moving words written by Theodore Roosevelt after the death of his first wife. At the last line—“And when my heart’s dearest died, the light went from my life forever”—his voice almost broke with the strain, and there were muffled sobs from the chairs before him. Yet Nixon went on, as he always had. Even the deepest anguish, he told his listeners, was “only a beginning, always.”

The young must know it; the old must know it. It must always sustain us, because the greatness comes not when things go always good for you, but the greatness comes and you are really tested, when you take some knocks, some disappointments, when sadness comes, because only if you have been in the deepest valley can you ever know how magnificent it is to be on the highest mountain.

On the last words, Nixon’s eyes briefly closed, as though he were lost in memory. Then abruptly, he dragged himself back into the present. He had some last advice for his audience. “Always give your best,” he said seriously, “never get discouraged, never be petty; always remember, others may hate you, but those who hate you don’t win unless you hate them, and then you destroy yourself.”

And then it was over, and the suffocating tension was broken. “You will be in our hearts and you will be in our prayers,” he said, and turned to leave. Many, perhaps most of his listeners were in tears or holding hands; even hardened cabinet members were wiping their eyes. “At last the ‘real’ Nixon was being revealed,” thought Tricia, so that “people could finally know Daddy.” Alexander Haig thought Nixon’s performance had been “unabashedly old-fashioned and American.” But Henry Kissinger, who had endured a similar routine two nights before, had lost patience with his master’s appetite for self-flagellation. “It was horrifying and heartbreaking,” he wrote later. “I was at the same time moved to tears and

outraged at being put through the wringer once again.”⁴

There was just one goodbye left. With the applause ringing in his ears, Nixon led his family downstairs, where Vice President Gerald Ford and his wife, Betty, were waiting for them. “Good luck, Mr. President,” Nixon said coldly, staring his successor full in the face. The outgoing president stepped out onto the South Portico and walked slowly along the red carpet, past the honor guard, toward the Army helicopter. Pat and Betty clung to each other as they walked, in an endearing gesture of solidarity. Walking on the left of the foursome, Nixon had an oddly slightly deranged smile, as though he knew something nobody else did. Pat, her daughter Tricia, and her son-in-law Ed climbed up into the helicopter. At the foot of the stairs, the outgoing president paused, and Ford said nervously and incongruously: “Drop us a line if you get the chance. Let us know how you are doing.”

They shook hands again. Nixon mounted the steps and then suddenly turned to face the White House. Glaring furiously, he waved his right arm across in a clumsy farewell and then, in the final bizarre moment of his presidency, thrust both arms into the air in his trademark V-for-victory salute. He held the gesture for a moment, defying the world, his face cracked by an enormous grin. And then at last the helicopter lifted off the lawn, and he was gone.⁵

Gerald Ford lingered a moment on the lawn, his hand raised in farewell. He leaned toward his wife and whispered, “We can do it,” then he took her arm and walked back toward the South Portico. It had just turned ten o’clock, and he had a long day before him. Even as he walked toward his vice presidential office, aides were removing every trace of the outgoing president, whipping the Nixon family pictures off the walls of the West Wing and replacing them with images of the Fords. In the Oval Office, a removal team was swiftly working its way through the shelves, wrapping Nixon’s possessions in plastic and packing them in cardboard cartons for the journey to California.⁶

An hour later, Gerald and Betty Ford walked into the East Room, where the chairs from Nixon’s farewell were still in place and the Marine band was now playing gentle, soothing music. On the platform waited the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Warren Burger, a man Nixon had appointed. “Mr. Vice President,” Burger asked, “are you prepared to take the oath of office of President of the United States?” “I am, sir,” said Ford, and his wife passed him the family Bible.

Ford was obviously nervous, but as he turned to face the crowd, there could be no mistaking the lighter mood. There were smiles this time, not sobs. And if Ford’s voice sounded thin and shaky after Nixon’s familiar baritone, there was a reassuring sincerity to his words. This was “just a little straight talk among friends,” he said. “I am acutely aware that you have not elected me as your President by your ballots, and so I ask you to confirm me as your President with your prayers ... I am indebted to no man, and only to one woman—my dear wife—as I begin this very difficult job.” And then came the line that Ford thought was too strong but that his speechwriter, Robert Hartmann, had insisted remain. “My fellow Americans,” the new president intoned gravely, “our long national nightmare is over. Our Constitution works; our great Republic is a government of laws and not of men.”⁷

While Ford was speaking, his predecessor was picking mournfully at his lunch on board the *Spirit of '76*. Richard Nixon paid no attention to the new president’s remarks. Later, Nixon wandered along the gangway, trying to joke with his aides. “Well,” he said nervously,

rubbing his hands, "is everybody enjoying the trip?" He had a few words for everyone. "I see you remembered to bring along the good-looking girls," he said as he passed his press aide Diane Sawyer. When he reached the back, where his bodyguards were sitting in the place normally reserved for the press, Nixon said: "Well, it certainly smells better back here!" They laughed, and then he walked back alone to his cabin and closed the door.

A few hours later, the *Spirit of '76* landed in El Toro, California. It was a crystal clear summer's day, and a crowd of five thousand people cheered as the plane reached a standstill. Grinning wildly at the top of the steps, Nixon threw up his arms in another V-for-victory salute, strode down to the tarmac, and immediately plunged into the sea of hands. He might have been returning from Beijing in unimaginable triumph, rather than fleeing the White House in disgrace. The crowd broke into "God Bless America," and some of Nixon's aides started crying. At the microphones, the former president promised his listeners that he would "continue to work for peace among all the world." There were more cheers, and then he took his wife and daughter across the tarmac to the helicopter that would take them to Santa Clemente.

The first thing Nixon did when he got home was to pick up the phone to call Alexander Haig, ordering him to send his White House tapes and papers as soon as possible. Then he went out to the cliffs overlooking the Pacific, staring into the waves. Once again he found it hard to sleep, and the next morning his friends found him tired and listless. On Sunday he walked alone on his private beach, lost in thought, and the next day he picked up the telephone and called his old associates, chatting vaguely about nothing. But by Tuesday, he was ready to get back to work. At seven in the morning he was in his office, dressed in his blue suit, wondering what had happened to his staff. Half an hour later he started calling to get them out of bed. Nothing had changed, he said; they must go on as they always had. A week later, he asked them to assemble in the conference room he had used for National Security Council meetings. They turned up, slightly bewildered; one was even wearing Bermuda shorts. Nixon glared around the room. "I've called you here to discuss an important topic," he said. "And that is, what are we going to do about the economy in the coming year?"⁸

Gerald Ford spent his first afternoon as president in a flurry of energy, whisked from meeting to meeting: the congressional leaders, the press, the Nixon loyalists, the economic team, and finally fifty-eight foreign ambassadors, all of whom wanted photographs. Just before six, he met with his transition team, headed by the NATO ambassador, Donald Rumsfeld, before holding a brief session with Nixon's cabinet. And then, at last, it was all over. The guests had long since gone home, and the press had packed away their notebooks. Outside the White House, the streets were empty for the first time in weeks. Lafayette Park, where the anti-Nixon demonstrators had huddled with their signs, was deserted. A few placards still lay on the ground, turning damp in the cloudy weather. Dusk fell slowly over Washington. The White House stood silent and bare, a few lights still burning in the windows. And Gerald Ford, thirty-eighth president of the United States, sat in his office, his desk piled high with papers and folders and memos, and worked on alone into the evening.⁹

Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown.

—LAWRENCE WALSH, in *Chinatown* (1974)

This just doesn't feel as good as I thought it would," one Delaware man said sadly after Nixon's resignation. Like most people, he was relieved that Nixon had finally gone, but after the long months of revelation and scandal, of Senate committees and Supreme Court rulings, of Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Mitchell, and Dean, had left him emotionally exhausted. Another man, a forester from New Hampshire who had voted for tickets carrying Nixon's name in eleven elections, thought that the resignation was like an inoculation: "You hate to get it because you know it's going to hurt. But when it's over, you're glad you got it."

In the Houston Astrodome, where twelve thousand people were watching a baseball game, the news of Nixon's departure was announced to a long silence and scattered, desultory applause. In Jacksonville, where thousands of people were watching a game in the new World Football League, cheerleaders burst into tears. And in Lawrence, Kansas, the telephone company put extra long-distance operators on duty to cope with the expected flood of calls, but found that there was nothing for them to do. People seemed numb, even sad.

Watergate, said *Time* magazine after Nixon's departure, had been "America's most traumatic political experience of this century." For two years the scandal had been a national obsession, and as one revelation followed another, the public recoiled from the pettiness and meanness of their political leaders. Breaking into the Democratic national headquarters, after all, had been only one detail in a wider story of dirty tricks, political espionage, and financial misconduct. If the newspapers were to be believed, President Nixon had spied on his opponents, fiddled his taxes, used public money to improve his homes, abused the intelligence services for political gain, and smeared the reputations of good and honest men. And he had bugged even himself, providing his detractors with all the evidence they needed. When the tape transcripts were finally released, the conservative *Chicago Tribune* called him "devious," "profane," and "humorless to the point of being inhumane." Walter Cronkite remarked that he wanted to "take Lysol and scrub out the Oval Office."¹

But what the journalist Theodore White called Nixon's "breach of faith" with the American people went beyond the crimes of one man. For many people, the president's misdemeanors had been part of a wider culture of deceit and corruption. "It is a classic idea that a whole community may be infected by the sickness of its leadership, by a failure of ideals at the top," wrote the columnist Anthony Lewis. "We are infected by corruption at the top, and most of us know it."

Corruption was the story of the year. In April 1973, the most sensational month of the Watergate investigation, Nixon had lost his chief of staff, his chief domestic policy adviser, and his counsel John Dean. But the same month also saw the indictment or sentencing, for quite different reasons, of a whole host of public officials: the mayor of Miami, the former governor of Illinois, the district attorney for Queens, New York, two Dade County judges,

two Maryland state legislators, and two Chicago aldermen. Before Nixon's presidency was out, they had been joined by two attorneys general, a congressman from New York, the mayor of Camden, New Jersey, the lieutenant governor of California, the former chief judge of the U.S. Customs Court, and the chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission.²

And as Nixon's fall demonstrated, even those entrusted with enforcing the law were not immune. "Who can trust a cop who don't take money?" asks a character in the hit film *Serpico* (1973), which tells the true story of a New York cop who went undercover to expose the corruption of his comrades. In Indianapolis, newspapers alleged that the police and county judges were up to their necks in bribery, prostitution, and drug rackets. In Philadelphia, a crime commission found that corruption was "widespread, systematic and occurring at all levels of the police department" and suggested that no fewer than four hundred officers were lining their pockets. Even at West Point, the hallowed military academy famous for its motto "Duty, Honor, Country," the bacillus was spreading. In August 1976, ninety-four cadets were expelled for cheating on a take-home exam, and another forty-four resigned. By the following summer, more than four hundred students had been implicated in an elaborate cheating ring. "The social incentives to deceit are at present very powerful," wrote the Harvard philosopher Sissela Bok in 1978 in her timely book *Lying*, blaming the pressures of the modern world for the fact that individuals felt "caught up in practices they cannot change."³

"After Watergate, it's crazy to have trust in politicians," one New Yorker told an interviewer after Nixon's fall. "I'm totally cynical, skeptical. Whether it's a question of power or influence, it's who you know at all levels." Indeed, trust in government—and in public life more broadly, too—had never been more fragile. Seven out of ten people, according to a survey in 1975, agreed that "over the last ten years, this country's leaders have consistently lied to the people." A year later, just two out of ten said that they trusted the government while for the first time an outright majority agreed that public officials did not "care much what people like [us] think." A decade previously, the answers had been very different. But as the pollster Daniel Yankelovich reported, "The changes move in only one direction, from trust to mistrust. They are massive in scale and impressive in their cumulative message."⁴

Yet the steady decline of trust actually predated Watergate, and even though the culture of suspicion reached its peak in the 1970s, it was really a product of the years beforehand. The shock of the Kennedy and King assassinations, the tumult over civil rights and urban unrest, and the corrosive effects of the Vietnam War had all played crucial parts in destroying popular faith in politicians. It was not just trust in the government that was in steep decline; it was trust in authority, in the collective, in public life itself. "The energy shortage is the least important of the shortages in our life," Harold Enarson, president of Ohio State University, remarked in 1974. "American society is now short of those attributes that mattering the most, undergird all else: integrity, high purpose, confidence in one another, faith in a brighter future."⁵

Across the board, institutions were in retreat. Between 1966 and 1975, confidence in Congress, corporations, colleges, and medicine suffered a severe drop. Of course this was not a uniquely American phenomenon, but in the United States, where individualism and suspicion of the state were so deeply rooted, the turn against public life was more striking than anywhere else in the Western world. Buoyed by affluence and educational opportunities, many people clearly felt that they no longer needed the solace of the institutions—famil-

church, school—that had supported their parents and grandparents. And as Vietnam and Watergate eroded their faith in the moral superiority of their leaders, an entire generation—the baby boomers—refused to give their generals, doctors, and lawyers the respect once taken for granted. The success of Garry Trudeau’s irreverent comic strip, *Doonesbury*, first syndicated in 1970 and rewarded with a Pulitzer Prize five years later, was only one illustration of this new skepticism. Medical malpractice suits, for example, became so common that in 1975 the major insurance companies tripled their doctors’ premiums. “An authority in our society is being challenged,” concluded a report by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. “Professional athletes challenge owners, journalists challenge editors, consumers challenge manufacturers.”⁶

From skepticism and suspicion it was only a short step to paranoia. Thanks to Vietnam, Watergate, and the assassinations of the 1960s, what Richard Hofstadter called the “parano style”—“heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy”—had seeped deep into American popular culture by the time Nixon gave way to Ford. In January 1973, for example, Lyndon Johnson gave a last interview in which he hinted that his predecessor had been murdered by a conspiracy. In March, reviewers scratched their heads over Thomas Pynchon’s conspiracy-theory masterpiece *Gravity’s Rainbow*, a bewildering journey through the twentieth century that ends with the mysterious 00000 rocket heading for a Los Angeles cinema managed by one “Richard M. Zhubb.” In May, *The New York Review of Books* printed an essay by the radical activist Kirkpatrick Sale arguing that the country was run by a hidden “nexus of power” and that Watergate was really a secret struggle for power between the old eastern interests and the new money of the South. And in November, the Burt Lancaster movie *Executive Action* told how an unholy alliance of Texas oilmen, industrial magnates, and CIA-trained professionals had plotted to kill President Kennedy. At the end of the film, the screen shows a collage of eighteen witnesses to the murder, sixteen of whom had allegedly died of unnatural causes by 1965. The odds of them all doing so, a voice-over grimly intoned, were 1,000 trillion to one.⁷

At the center of the whirlwind of suspicion was an institution once synonymous with the struggle against Communism, but now a byword for conspiracy and corruption. On December 22, 1974, *The New York Times* ran a front-page article by the muckraking reporter Seymour Hersh charging that “the Central Intelligence Agency, directly violating its charter, conducted a massive, illegal domestic intelligence operation during the Nixon Administration against the antiwar movement and other dissident groups.” Some of Hersh’s details were wrong, but the shocking thing was that his story merely scratched the surface. Just a year before, the CIA had commissioned an internal report which revealed that the agency had wiretapped and followed a number of reporters and columnists, broken into the apartments of former employees, kidnapped and locked up Russian defectors, opened ordinary citizens’ letters, and collected thousands of files on members of the antiwar movement. On top of all that, the CIA had conducted mind-control experiments on unwitting members of the public, using LSD, heroin, mescaline, and marijuana, and had also organized unsuccessful assassination plots against Fidel Castro, Patrice Lumumba, Rafael Trujillo, and the Chilean general René Schneider. That the Castro plot had been devised in collaboration with the Mafia boss Sam Giancana, using Kennedy’s mistress Judith Campbell Exner as a go-between, only added to the impression of lurid fantasy.⁸

Hersh's revelations set the scene for what was later called the "Year of Intelligence." A presidential commission under Nelson Rockefeller failed to mollify the agency's critics; instead, attention focused on Senator Frank Church of Idaho, who called the CIA a "rogue elephant" and began holding public hearings in September 1975. It was a disaster for the administration and, above all, for the CIA. Day after day, under the gaze of the television cameras, agency chiefs admitted spending millions on poisons and biological weapons. With an eye firmly on the coming presidential race, Church even posed for the cameras holding a silent electric gun that fired poisoned darts, hilariously described by the CIA as "Nondiscernible Microbioinoculator." Wiretaps, assassinations, exploding seashells, Mafia bosses, poisoned darts: it was the stuff of a James Bond film, yet even the most daring Hollywood screenwriter would have struggled to make it up.⁹

As it happened, just ten days after the Church hearings began, Hollywood gave it its best shot. Few films capture the mood of the Ford years better than Sydney Pollack's thriller *Three Days of the Condor*, the story of a junior CIA officer (played by Robert Redford) who spends his days studying books and newspapers from around the world, but who returns after lunch one day to find that a hit man has killed everyone in his office. After going on the run, the Redford character soon realizes that he cannot trust anyone, not even his own colleagues; even the postman turns out to be a hired killer. In the end, he tracks down the conspirators, a CIA cabal with a plan to invade the Middle East in the event of another oil crisis. "As a serious exposé of misdeeds within the CIA," remarked the critic Vincent Canby, "the film is no match for stories that have appeared in your local newspaper."¹⁰

In many ways, though, the impact of films like *Three Days of the Condor* was to make the small-print revelations of the newspapers seem terrifyingly real. The very intensity of the moviegoing experience—the enveloping darkness of the auditorium, the enormity of the images, the sheer power of the sound—seemed perfectly suited to the new populist nightmares. Even before Nixon resigned, a black vein of paranoia ran through the most successful films of the era, from the police brutality in *Dirty Harry* and *The French Connection* (both 1971) to the corporate irresponsibility in *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), the demonic possession in *The Exorcist* (1973), and even the negligent skyscraper construction in *The Towering Inferno* (1974). Of course there was more optimistic fare, too. But not for nothing were the two most critically lauded films of 1974, Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Part II*, both unrelentingly cynical revisions of the American Dream. At once a commentary on contemporary political corruption and a revisionist interpretation of the nation's recent past, *Chinatown* is set in 1937 and tells the story of Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson), a Los Angeles private eye who uncovers a conspiracy to steal water from the city supply, creating a drought that will enable the corrupt developer Noah Cross to buy up the San Fernando Valley. Unlike the classic private eyes of the 1930s and 1940s, Gittes is powerless to stop him: he even spends much of the film with his wounded nose wrapped in a bandage, like a badge of impotence. And *The Godfather Part II*, too, rewritten recent history to show the villains as the winners. In the previous *Godfather* film, Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) had been a fresh-faced war hero; now he broods in the shadows like Nixon in his final days, his vampiric face glimmering in the darkness. But Michael's crimes do not place him outside the American mainstream; instead, they put him at its very heart, blackmailing senators, infiltrating the FBI, running casinos in Havana and Las Vegas. As he

tells the senator who dares to challenge him: “We’re both part of the same hypocrisy.”¹¹

But the most paranoid film of all—its effect all the greater because it was set in the present—was Alan J. Pakula’s thriller *The Parallax View* (1974), inspired by the Kennedy assassinations as well as the disillusionment of the Nixon years. Reluctantly drawn into investigating a senator’s murder, the film’s endearingly scruffy hero, Joseph Frady (Warren Beatty), discovers that the mysterious Parallax Corporation is recruiting assassins to eliminate troublesome presidential candidates. Slowly, he, too, is sucked into the conspiracy, and in the film’s shocking denouement he is framed for the murder of another senator and gunned down by the real assassin. In this supremely suspicious vision of contemporary life, conspiracy is everywhere. Even modern architecture is implicated: as Frady penetrates deeper into the conspiracy, he wanders through an alienated, unconventionally framed landscape of clean lines, wide spaces, and white surfaces, from a gleaming West Coast office complex to a new Atlanta hotel and a cavernous conference center. But in the very last scene we return to the shadows: just as at the beginning, an investigating panel, barely visible in the darkness, announces that the “assassin” acted alone. “Although I’m certain that this will do nothing to discourage the conspiracy peddlers,” says the chairman flatly, his face imperceptible in the gloom, “there is no evidence of a conspiracy ... There will be no questions.”¹²

If Hollywood’s casting directors had been asked to pick one man in Washington to banish the paranoid suspicions of the Nixon years, they might well have chosen Gerald Ford. When the new president addressed both houses of Congress on the evening of Monday, August 14, struggling to contain his emotions as applause rolled down from the galleries, the contrast with Nixon could hardly have been greater. Where Nixon had appeared a dark, unhealthy figure, hunched and introverted, Ford came across as open and trustworthy, every inch of six feet tall, fair-haired, square jawed, and broad shouldered. He seemed an American Everyman, a simple man who said his prayers and loved his football, whose favorite meal was steak and baked potato, and butter pecan ice cream. *Time* likened him to “the furniture that used to be produced in such abundance in his Michigan home town, Grand Rapids: durable, dependable, and easy to live with.”¹³

Months before he assumed the presidency, Ford told an audience that it was “the quality of the ordinary, the straight, the square that accounts for the great stability and success of our nation.” And it was the sheer ordinariness of the Ford family that impressed observers during his first days in the White House. While Pat Nixon had always maintained an icy reserve and her daughters had been stereotyped as robotic political props, Betty Ford and her children—Mike, Jack, Steve, and Susan, were manifestly flesh and blood. Lonely and unhappy as a congressional wife, Betty had started drinking, taking tranquilizers, and seeing psychiatrists during the mid-1960s. In interviews she freely admitted that she had experienced mental problems, although she played down the fact that she was still swallowing more booze and pills than were good for her. Yet her problems made her seem human. The Fords might be “a bunch of squares,” as one reporter put it, but at least they were an ordinary family with ordinary problems. And to the delight of the press, the new First Couple made no secret of their mutual affection, moving their king-sized bed into Pat Nixon’s old room so that they could be the first presidential couple since the Eisenhowers to sleep together. “We’ve been doing it for 25 years and we’re not going to stop now,” said Betty defiantly.¹⁴

Richard Nixon inevitably cast a long shadow over Ford's first days in the White House. Yet for a time this worked in the new man's favor. *Time's* front-page appeal for "a time for healing" had struck a chord across the nation. In his first days in his new job Ford struck all the right notes, reaching out to friends and foes alike, inviting reporters to White House parties, repeatedly proclaiming his modesty and humility, commuting from his Alexandria home rather than moving in straightaway. The new chief executive liked his comforts, but he could hardly have been less at ease with the grandiose trappings of the imperial presidency. Out went "Hail to the Chief," with the White House band instructed to play the Michigan fight song, "The Victors," instead. The White House living quarters reverted from "the Executive Mansion" to simply "the Residence." Press conferences, organized by Ford's new press secretary, Jerry terHorst, were held in front of the long White House hall, the door thrown symbolically open, while even the presidential aircraft, which Nixon had renamed the *Spirit of '76*, returned to plain Air Force One. And when Betty Ford described their private sitting room to CBS, with "Jerry's favorite blue leather chair and footstool, and his exercise bike, and all of his pipes and his pipe rack, and our old television set," it sounded like the sitting room of any middle-aged businessman.¹⁵

If there was one president whom Ford tried to emulate in his early months, it was Harry Truman. Ironically, as a young man Ford had been a fierce critic of his Democratic predecessor, but Truman's forthright, small-town style had never been more fashionable. Merle Miller's book *Plain Speaking*, a collection of Truman memories, sold more than two million copies, while James Whitmore's one-man show *Give 'Em Hell, Harry!* was a hit across the nation. In antiques stores, Truman buttons fetched as much as \$150; walking down the streets of major cities in 1974 and 1975, visitors could see Truman T-shirts and bumper stickers; and the rock group Chicago even recorded a song called simply "Harry Truman." "America needs you, / Harry Truman, / Harry, could you please come home?" the lyrics begin. And as a self-consciously ordinary man who had worked his way up from small-town obscurity to the vice presidency and was unexpectedly catapulted into the Oval Office, Truman made an obvious role model for the new president. In the Cabinet Room, Ford hung a portrait of Truman alongside Lincoln and Eisenhower. And when reporters came to see him in the Oval Office, he ostentatiously left a copy of Merle Miller's book on his desk. Truman, he explained, "had guts, he was plain-talking, he had no illusions about being a great intellectual, but he seemed to make the right decisions."¹⁶

While Ford undoubtedly had much in common with his pugnacious predecessor, he was taking over in an altogether different institutional context. When Truman had succeeded to the presidency in 1945, it had been the most respected office in the land. But Vietnam and Watergate seemed to have put paid to that. In 1973 the War Powers Act reined in the president's power to send troops into combat without congressional approval, while in 1974 the Budget and Impoundment Control Act challenged his power over the nation's finances. To many observers, it was not the White House but Congress, with its new General Accounting Office and research service and hordes of eager young staffers, that set the national agenda. One Maryland voter spoke for many when he told an interviewer in 1976 that "what happens in our country is not really controlled by the President. It's controlled by Congress."¹⁷

As Ford well knew, however, Congress was in the throes of radical change, reflecting deeper shifts in the way Americans thought and voted. For ordinary voters and electors

politicians alike, loyalty to the party machine was no longer the binding force it had been in Truman's day. Many of the new arrivals on Capitol Hill in the early 1970s, especially Democrats such as Gary Hart (Colorado) and John Glenn (Ohio) in the Senate, and Tom Harkin (Iowa) and Paul Tsongas (Massachusetts) in the House, had cut their teeth on the civil rights and antiwar struggles of the late 1960s and were impatient with the conventions and rituals of the past. The Democratic majority leader in the House, Tip O'Neill, reflected that many "never came through the organization, never rang a doorbell in their life, never were a precinct worker, never stayed late at the polls, never brought people to an election, weren't brought up in the realm of party discipline." Instead, they wanted "to come down to Washington and change the establishment. They wanted to open it up. They wanted to take the power out of the hands of the committee chairmen." They wanted, in other words, to blow away the cobwebs.¹⁸

If there was one moment that captured the changing mood, it was what happened to Wilbur Mills in the fall of 1974. The elderly Arkansan had chaired the pivotal Ways and Means Committee for almost twenty years. Often considered the most powerful man on Capitol Hill, he was the classic southern party baron, exercising a virtual veto over great swaths of domestic legislation. On the night of October 7, however, his car was pulled over by the Washington police for speeding. Closer examination revealed Mills behind the wheel, clearly drunk and covered in bruises, while his companion, a stripper called Fanne Foxe, "the Argentine Fire-cracker," threw herself into the Tidal Basin in an attempt to escape. Both were arrested, yet in November Mills disgraced himself again, staggering drunkenly onto the stage while Foxe was performing in a Boston nightclub. Of course congressmen had drunk too much, cavorted with courtesans, and behaved badly in the past; what had changed, however, was the attitude of the media. Mills woke to find his picture on the front page of every newspaper in the nation. Not only was he forced to give up the chairmanship of his committee, but Ways and Means was stripped of its crucial power to make committee assignments for other Democrats.¹⁹

Change would undoubtedly have come even if Wilbur Mills had kept off the bottle; yet there was no better symbol of the new era than the humiliation of the man who had once dominated the House. When other elderly chairmen followed him onto the scrap heap, it was as though a moldering, darkened old building suddenly found itself bathed in dazzling sunlight. By the end of 1976, some 150 different subcommittees were competing for attention, each with its own budget, staff, and independent momentum. There were now so many, joked the Democrat Morris Udall, that he greeted any unfamiliar congressman by saying: "Good morning, Mr. Chairman." Staffs swelled accordingly: between 1972 and 1976 the House committee staff more than doubled, while the Senate staff increased by more than a third. Almost overnight, the echoing corridors of Congress had come alive with activity and enthusiasm. It is no exaggeration to say that it had become a different institution: the place that Wilbur Mills had entered in 1939, and in which he had spent most of his adult life, simply no longer existed.²⁰

And yet there was a serious downside to the reforms of the early 1970s. With the hierarchies broken up, there was no real sense of organization or leadership in Congress, making it harder to secure working majorities and sometimes almost impossible for the president to get his bills passed. With a proliferation of subcommittees, single-issue politi-

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