

Ford's funeral: the hollow pomp of a corrupt and crisis-ridden establishment

By [Bill Van Auken](#)

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Sandwiched as it was between the obscene televised assassination-by-hanging of Saddam Hussein and the dismal although expected news of the 3,000th US soldier dying in Iraq, the attempts by Washington's political establishment and its servants in the corporate media to generate a wave of patriotic feeling with the funeral of former President Gerald Ford fell flat.

The death of a 93-year-old man who served as the country's unelected chief executive 30 years ago—lasting less than 29 months in office—and who is a virtual unknown to the majority of the country's population today offers little to work with for those trying to revive flagging national spirits and obscure the grim and unrelenting news from the Iraqi fiasco.

The brutal truth is that Ford—who allowed his personal opposition to the launching of the Iraq war and the policies of the Republican Party's "hard right" to be made public only after his death—has more than a passing connection to the current criminal catastrophe presided over by the Bush administration.

If he will be remembered for anything, it is for his decision, one month after taking office, to issue an unprecedented pardon to his predecessor Richard Nixon "for all offenses against the United States which he . . . has committed or may have committed or taken part in" during his more than five-and-a-half years in the White House.

(Less well-remembered, but highly significant in understanding the role played by Ford in the affairs of the American state, was his service on the Warren Commission, where he became one of the most steadfast defenders of the "lone gunman" theory, a thesis designed to cover up the political divisions and conspiracies that lay behind the Kennedy assassination.)

Ford's pardon, issued on September 8, 1974, prevented the country from holding Nixon to account for crimes enumerated in the articles of impeachment brought against him in July 1974. Among them were obstruction of justice, illegal spying on American citizens and the arrogation of extra-constitutional powers that were creating the scaffolding for a presidential dictatorship.

Another charge brought but not approved by the House Judiciary Committee concerned Nixon's launching of a covert and illegal bombing campaign against Cambodia in 1969, an act that overrode Congress's exclusive constitutional power to declare war.

Today, these same offenses that went unpunished in the persons of Nixon and Co., have reemerged in far more ominous forms—an illegal war in Iraq, wholesale NSA wiretapping, the unlawful detention, torture and "extraordinary rendition" of so-called enemy

combatants, etc. Moreover, these new crimes have been perpetrated in large part by individuals who were closely associated with Ford—in particular his two former chiefs of staff, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld.

Using such a politician with this political legacy to promote national pride and political goodwill among the population at large is no easy job.

But there was no lack of trying. The media has proclaimed the lifetime Republican politician the embodiment of “decency” and “openness,” the “Great Healer,” who brought an end to the “long nightmare” that constituted the waning days of the Nixon administration.

Certainly one of the most nauseating pieces produced in the media’s campaign to bestow belated sainthood on America’s 38th president—and effectively falsify history—came on the day of the funeral itself in the form of an op-ed article published by the *Washington Post* under the headline, “The Quality of his Mercy.”

Written by *Newsweek* editor Jon Meacham, the purpose of this piece was to attribute Ford’s pardoning of Nixon—a corrupt abrogation of justice performed by an establishment crony on behalf of a state criminal—to divine guidance and Christian charity.

Meacham makes much of the fact that in announcing his blanket pardon for a man undoubtedly guilty of high crimes, Ford invoked “laws of God” which he proclaimed to be higher than the US Constitution.

Incredibly, he goes on to draw an indecent parallel between Ford’s hackneyed invocation of a deity—hardly an innovation among today’s big business politicians—to justify his extra-legal protection of a political ally who carried out a wholesale attack on democratic rights and constitutional government with Lincoln’s references to God in his second inaugural address.

In particular, Meacham cites the passage in which Ford paraphrased Lincoln’s vow to continue “with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right,” a phrase the latter used after declaring his willingness to continue a civil war to abolish slavery “until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword.” One can hardly imagine a more inappropriate and sycophantic comparison.

In what amounted to a solid week of official mourning, the body of the ex-president was transported from California to be driven around Washington and then to lie in state in the Capitol’s Rotunda for three days before being brought to the state funeral on Tuesday. From there it was transported back again to Michigan for burial. All the while, the various hearses carrying the ex-presidential remains have been accorded seemingly endless televised coverage.

There is something both backward and barbaric about these official funerals. And there is little beyond the official in the attempt to feign national mourning over Ford’s demise.

Funerals fit for a king

The pomp that surrounds these ceremonies seems borrowed from monarchic dynasties, entirely alien to a genuine democracy. Indeed, the founders of the American republic would look with horror on such regal exercises.

George Washington, who died on December 14, 1799, was buried the next day in the family tomb at Mount Vernon, Virginia. While he had requested a simple funeral, Congress insisted on sending some troops and a band to participate.

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, who both died on July 4, 1826—the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence—were buried with simple graveside services, one in Quincy, Massachusetts and the other at his family’s cemetery at Monticello, Virginia.

Similarly, James Madison died in 1836 and was buried the next day in graveside services in Montpelier, Virginia.

State funerals were exceptions carried out for those who died—or were assassinated—in office, including the funerals of William Henry Harrison in 1841, Abraham Lincoln in 1865, James Garfield in 1881, William McKinley in 1901 and Kennedy in 1963. William Howard Taft, who died just weeks after stepping down as chief justice of the Supreme Court in 1930—the only ex-president to ever hold that position—was accorded similar honors.

The staging of elaborate ceremonies for ex-presidents, replete with military trappings and lying in state, is a relatively modern phenomenon that arose only in the 1960s, beginning with Herbert Hoover and including the funerals of Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan. It is a practice that is unquestionably bound up with the assumption of ever greater powers within the office of the presidency itself and the increasingly open exercise of US imperial power.

The official eulogies for Gerald Ford reached their crescendo Tuesday with the state funeral at the Washington National Cathedral before an invitation-only audience of 3,000. The series of speeches from the pulpit revealed more about those who currently rule in Washington than the man who occupied the White House 30 years ago.

Former President George H.W. Bush praised Ford as the man who “restored the honor of the Oval Office and helped America begin to turn the page on one of our saddest chapter.”

He continued, “History has a way of matching man and moment. And just as President Lincoln’s stubborn devotion to our Constitution kept the union together during the Civil War, and just as FDR’s optimism was the perfect antidote to the despair of a great depression, so, too, can we say that Jerry Ford’s decency was the ideal remedy for the deception of Watergate.”

If indeed the man matched the moment, one can only say that the progression traced out by Bush senior is one of the steady and accelerating political degeneration of the American ruling elite. Once again one encounters the absurd comparison of Lincoln, the leader of one of the greatest revolutionary transformations in history, to Ford, the bagman for a political establishment rocked by crisis and scandal and eager to escape retribution at the hands of a radicalized and angry people.

Next came Henry Kissinger, one of the direct beneficiaries of Ford’s quashing of any prosecution of the crimes carried out under the Nixon administration. As secretary of state in both administrations, he represented a key figure in the continuation of those crimes. Kissinger remains to this day a key advisor to the Bush administration, and has helped craft its policy of colonial-style aggression in Iraq.

His eulogy represented a series of self-serving lies. He praised Ford’s “prudence and

common sense” for keeping “ethnic conflicts in Cyprus and Lebanon from spiraling into regional war.”

In the first country, Kissinger played a pivotal role in facilitating the Turkish invasion that cost thousands of lives. In the second, the US administration served as a patron of the Lebanese fascist Phalange, maintaining direct CIA aid to its butchery of the Palestinians and the Lebanese left.

He continued, claiming that Ford “sparked the initiative to bring majority rule to Southern Africa, a policy that was a major factor in ending colonialism there.”

Again, Kissinger must rely on general ignorance of history to dare such lies. Under Ford, Washington allied itself with South Africa, providing CIA aid to its bloody war in Angola that was to claim tens of thousands of lives, and it continued to back the Apartheid regime as it inaugurated its infamous Bantustan policy.

Kissinger concluded, “Historians will debate for a long time over which president contributed most to victory in the Cold War. Few will dispute that the Cold War could not have been won had not Gerald Ford emerged at a tragic period to restore equilibrium to America and confidence in its international role.”

He did not go on to add that part of this “victory in the Cold War” was won through ruthless repression that continued under the Ford administration throughout Latin America, facilitated by continuing US support for CIA-installed dictatorships that ruled much of the continent, murdering, torturing and imprisoning hundreds of thousands. It likewise included the Ford administration’s green light for the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, a military operation that claimed the lives of a third of the Timorese population.

The main point being made by the former secretary of state, however, is that the continuation of imperialist aggression abroad was impossible without the quelling of political crisis and mass popular opposition at home.

Kissinger was followed to the podium by former NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw, who gave a fawning eulogy that served to underscore the venality and subservience of the media. Recalling his days covering the Ford administration, he said, “There were other advantages of being a member of his press corps that we didn’t advertise quite as widely. We went to Vail at Christmas and Palm Springs at Easter time with our families. Now, cynics might argue that contributed to our affection for him. That is not a premise that I wish to challenge.”

The remark drew knowing laughter from the assembled mourners, who all know that media “personalities” like Brokaw, drawing multimillion-dollar annual salaries, now have their own homes in Vail, Palm Springs or similar elite watering holes, and can be counted upon to toe the propaganda line.

Finally came President George W. Bush, who described Ford as a “rock of stability” amid “a terrible time in our nation’s history.”

The incumbent president got quickly to the point, declaring, “And when he thought that the nation needed to put Watergate behind us, he made the tough and decent decision to pardon President Nixon, even though that decision probably cost him the presidential election.”

In other words, Ford carried out the job that he was sent in to do, even though it was an assault on constitutional forms of rule and was opposed by a clear majority of the American people.

Bush concluded, "President Ford's time in office was brief, but history will long remember the courage and common sense that helped restore trust in the workings of our democracy."

No doubt, the 43rd president, facing record lows in the opinion polls and implicated in gross violations of national and international law—from domestic spying to Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib and the Iraq war itself—views the role played by Ford with more than a just a thought in the back of his head that he could find himself in the need of a similar Mr. Fix-it in the not too distant future.

In the end, however, history will view Ford for what he was—a politically corrupt but trusted servant of America's capitalist establishment who helped stave off a profound and potentially fatal political crisis, thereby postponing a revolutionary settling of accounts.

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