

The Resignation Speech of Richard M. Nixon

by Ron Nash

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History resources, designed to align to the Common Core State Standards. It can also be modified to conform to the C3 Framework. These units were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original documents of historical significance. Students will practice the skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned viewpoints on these source materials.

Students will read the entire text of Richard Nixon’s “Resignation Address to the Nation,” which was delivered to the nation on August 8, 1974. Following a discussion of the speech students will write an assessment of one of the two essential questions that frame the document and unit.

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Analyze primary source documents using close-reading strategies
- Draw logical inferences and summarize the essential message of a written document
- Compose summaries of the major points in a document
- Develop a viewpoint and write a response to the lesson’s essential question based on textual and visual evidence

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- To what extent did the Watergate scandal reflect the strengths and /or weakness of the US system of government?
- Should Nixon have resigned the presidency?

NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS: 2

GRADE LEVEL: 7–12

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.5: Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8: Evaluate an author’s premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Many events from June 17, 1972, through August 9, 1974, are lumped together in the American historical memory as Watergate. What began as a “third-rate burglary” escalated into the most severe Constitutional crisis since the Civil War. As a result of these events Richard M. Nixon became the only president of the United States to resign from office.

Watergate remains contested history for many Americans. Nevertheless, Watergate and the surrounding crisis is a profoundly significant moment in US political and constitutional history and is central to any evaluation of Nixon.

MATERIALS

- Richard M. Nixon, “Resignation Address to the Nation,” August 8, 1974. Source: Richard Nixon, “Address to the Nation Announcing Decision to Resign the Office of President,” August 8, 1974, Miller Center, millercenter.org/president/nixon/speeches/speech-3871
- C-SPAN video clip of President Richard Nixon’s Resignation Address, August 8, 1974. Source: C-SPAN, www.c-span.org/video/?8664-1/president-nixon-resignation-address
- Document Analysis Organizer: Critical Thinking Questions

PROCEDURE

1. This lesson is a “drill-down” exercise into the text of one of the most important speeches of the 1970s. The lesson also assumes that this is a culmination activity to the study of Watergate and the Nixon presidency. Students should have become familiar with most of the following terms, personalities, and events: Spiro Agnew, Warren Burger, Alexander Butterfield, Archibald Cox, CREEP, John Dean, John Ehrlichman, “the 18-and-a-half-minute gap,” Enemies List, Sam Ervin, Patrick Gray, H. R. Haldeman, Richard Helms, Alexander Haig, Leon Jaworski, Henry Kissinger, John Mitchell, “plumbers,” “Saturday Night Massacre,” John Sirica, White House tapes, and Rose Mary Woods.
2. After distributing copies of the speech and the “Document Analysis Guide” to everyone in the class, begin a “share read” of the first nine paragraphs of the document. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
3. The students should now reread the first nine paragraphs of the speech and fill in the document analysis organizer through critical-thinking question 8 as they read. Explain to the class that they

must use evidence from the text to support their answers. If you are having students work with partners or in groups, let them negotiate the answers.

4. When the students have completed the first nine paragraphs, show them a 3.5-minute clip from C-SPAN that shows Nixon addressing the nation in prime time on August 8, 1974. Discuss the following question: Does your perception and initial response change when you see and hear the video?
5. Divide the class into pairs or small groups to complete the rest of the worksheet. You can share read the rest of the document with the whole class or have students read the text aloud in their groups. Students can brainstorm as partners or small groups but must fill in their own organizer in order to complete the assignment.
6. Class discussion should allow time for students to share their answers to the critical thinking questions. Compare those with the responses from other groups. Remind them to cite evidence from the text to support their answers.
7. Following the completion of the reading and discussion, students will have the opportunity to choose and write a response to one of the two essential questions that have guided the study of this unit:
 - Was the Watergate scandal a sign of weakness or strength in the US system of government?
 - Should Nixon have resigned the presidency?

Richard M. Nixon, "Resignation Address to the Nation," August 8, 1974

Good evening.

1. This is the 37th time I have spoken to you from this office, where so many decisions have been made that shaped the history of this Nation. Each time I have done so to discuss with you some matter that I believe affected the national interest.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. But with the disappearance of that base, I now believe that the constitutional purpose has been served, and there is no longer a need for the process to be prolonged.
5. 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 interests of the Nation must always come before any personal considerations.
6. 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.
7. I have never been a quitter. To leave office before my term is completed is abhorrent to every instinct in my body. But as President, I must put the interests of America first. America needs a full-time President and a full-time Congress, particularly at this time with problems we face at home and abroad.
8. 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.
9. 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.

10. As I recall the high hopes for America with which we began this second term, I feel a great sadness that I will not be here in this office working on your behalf to achieve those hopes in the next 2 1/2 years. But in turning over direction of the Government to Vice President Ford, I know, as I told the Nation when I nominated him for that office 10 months ago, that the leadership of America will be in good hands.
11. In passing this office to the Vice President, I also do so with the profound sense of the weight of responsibility that will fall on his shoulders tomorrow and, therefore, of the understanding, the patience, the cooperation he will need from all Americans.
12. As he assumes that responsibility, he will deserve the help and the support of all of us. As we look to the future, the first essential is to begin healing the wounds of this Nation, to put the bitterness and divisions of the recent past behind us and to rediscover those shared ideals that lie at the heart of our strength and unity as a great and as a free people.
13. By taking this action, I hope that I will have hastened the start of that process of healing which is so desperately needed in America.
14. I regret deeply any injuries that may have been done in the course of the events that led to this decision. I would say only that if some of my judgments were wrong—and some were wrong—they were made in what I believed at the time to be the best interest of the Nation.
15. To those who have stood with me during these past difficult months—to my family, my friends, to many others who joined in supporting my cause because they believed it was right—I will be eternally grateful for your support.
16. And to those who have not felt able to give me your support, let me say I leave with no bitterness toward those who have opposed me, because all of us, in the final analysis, have been concerned with the good of the country, however our judgments might differ.
17. So, let us all now join together in affirming that common commitment and in helping our new President succeed for the benefit of all Americans.
18. I shall leave this office with regret at not completing my term, but with gratitude for the privilege of serving as your President for the past 5 1/2 years. These years have been a momentous time in the history of our Nation and the world. They have been a time of achievement in which we can all be proud, achievements that represent the shared efforts of the Administration, the Congress, and the people.
19. But the challenges ahead are equally great, and they, too, will require the support and the efforts of the Congress and the people working in cooperation with the new Administration.
20. We have ended America's longest war, but in the work of securing a lasting peace in the world, the goals ahead are even more far-reaching and more difficult. We must complete a structure

of peace so that it will be said of this generation, our generation of Americans, by the people of all nations, not only that we ended one war but that we prevented future wars.

21. We have unlocked the doors that for a quarter of a century stood between the United States and the People's Republic of China.
22. We must now ensure that the one quarter of the world's people who live in the People's Republic of China will be and remain not our enemies but our friends.
23. In the Middle East, 100 million people in the Arab countries, many of whom have considered us their enemy for nearly 20 years, now look on us as their friends. We must continue to build on that friendship so that peace can settle at last over the Middle East and so that the cradle of civilization will not become its grave.
24. Together with the Soviet Union, we have made the crucial breakthroughs that have begun the process of limiting nuclear arms. But we must set as our goal not just limiting but reducing and, finally, destroying these terrible weapons so that they cannot destroy civilization and so that the threat of nuclear war will no longer hang over the world and the people.
25. We have opened the new relation with the Soviet Union. We must continue to develop and expand that new relationship so that the two strongest nations of the world will live together in cooperation, rather than confrontation.
26. Around the world in Asia, in Africa, in Latin America, in the Middle East, there are millions of people who live in terrible poverty, even starvation. We must keep as our goal turning away from production for war and expanding production for peace so that people everywhere on this earth can at last look forward in their children's time, if not in our own time, to having the necessities for a decent life.
27. Here in America, we are fortunate that most of our people have not only the blessings of liberty but also the means to live full and good and, by the world's standards, even abundant lives. We must press on, however, toward a goal, not only of more and better jobs but of full opportunity for every American and of what we are striving so hard right now to achieve, prosperity without inflation.
28. For more than a quarter of a century in public life, I have shared in the turbulent history of this era. I have fought for what I believed in. I have tried to the best of my ability, to discharge those duties and meet those responsibilities that were entrusted to me.
29. Sometimes I have succeeded and sometimes I have failed, but always I have taken heart from what Theodore Roosevelt once said about the man in the arena, "whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again because there is not effort without error and shortcoming, but who does actually strive to do the deed, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause,

who at the best knows in the end the triumphs of high achievements and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.”

30. I pledge to you tonight that as long as I have a breath of life in my body, I shall continue in that spirit. I shall continue to work for the great causes to which I have been dedicated throughout my years as a Congressman, a Senator, a Vice President, and President, the cause of peace, not just for America but among all nations, prosperity, justice, and opportunity for all of our people.
31. There is one cause above all to which I have been devoted and to which I shall always be devoted for as long as I live.
32. When I first took the oath of office as President 5 1/2 years ago, I made this sacred commitment: to “consecrate my office, my energies, and all the wisdom I can summon to the cause of peace among nations.”
33. I have done my very best in all the days since to be true to that pledge. As a result of these efforts, I am confident that the world is a safer place today, not only for the people of America but for the people of all nations, and that all of our children have a better chance than before of living in peace rather than dying in war.
34. This, more than anything, is what I hoped to achieve when I sought the Presidency. This, more than anything, is what I hope will be my legacy to you, to our country, as I leave the Presidency.
35. To have served in this office is to have felt a very personal sense of kinship with each and every American. In leaving it, I do so with this prayer: May God’s grace be with you in all the days ahead.

Name-_____ Period-_____ Date-_____

Document Analysis Guide: Critical Thinking Questions for Nixon's Resignation Speech

1) What guiding principle does Nixon claim has influenced his decision making?

2) How does Nixon frame the idea of Watergate? How many times does he refer to Watergate in his speech? Do you see this as a critical element of the speech structure? Why or why not?

3) Based on your knowledge of the Watergate crisis, was Nixon's justification for his resignation an accurate representation of the situation?"

4) According to the speech, why is the President resigning?

5) Nixon uses the word *process* three times in paragraphs 3 and 4. What is the process he is talking about here? Is this clear or unclear? Explain your answer.

6) How does Nixon frame the issue of personal versus national interest in paragraph 5?

7) Why does Nixon refer to the “interests of the nation” in paragraphs 5 and 6? Scan the text and identify where he makes a similar reference elsewhere in the speech.

8) What is the tone of the document through the first nine paragraphs?

9) Scan the first 18 paragraphs of the speech. Which pronoun is most frequently used by Nixon? How might this be interpreted or be important?

10) Scan paragraphs 19–24. What happens to Nixon’s pronoun usage? Does this change the tone of the address and appeal to his audience? Why or why not?

11) What happens to the pronoun usage in the remainder of the speech? What do you make of this?

12) Vice President Ford has been in office for how many months? How much time has Nixon been in office? Why the discrepancy? Can this fact be connected to the “process”?

13) Given the benign nature of the first 11 paragraphs, why does the President use the words “wounds” and “healing” in paragraphs 12, 13, and 14?

14) Nixon uses the phrase “I regret” in paragraph 14 and the word “regret” in paragraph 18. How are these uses different or similar in intent?

15) In paragraphs 12–16, is President Nixon taking responsibility for “healing the wounds of the nation”? Why or why not?

16) What record of achievement does Nixon reference in paragraphs 19–24? Be specific and cite all of the examples you can from the text.

17) Nixon uses the phrase “we must” in the sentence after stating his record of achievement. Why do you think he does this? Provide examples from the text to support your answer.

18) According to Nixon, what should be the domestic focus of the nation going forward?

19) In paragraph 28, Nixon employs a quote from Theodore Roosevelt. Put the quote into your own words. How are the events of Watergate relevant to the Roosevelt quote?

20) What is Nixon suggesting will happen to him in paragraph 29? How does this fit into the rest of the speech?

21) What does Nixon say has been the greatest cause that he dedicated his life to?

22) What does Nixon view as his greatest legacy? Be specific by citing the text.

23) How does Nixon conclude his speech? Do you find this to be a satisfactory conclusion? Why or why not?

Name-_____ Period-_____ Date-_____

Essential Question Response: Richard Nixon and Watergate

Choose one of the two essential questions that have framed our unit of study for Nixon and Watergate:

- To what extent did the Watergate scandal reflect the strengths and /or weakness of the US system of government?
- Should Nixon have resigned the presidency?

Write an essay that argues your point of view in support of one of the essential questions. It is important that you use evidence (quotes and ideas) taken directly from the primary sources we have used during this unit of study. Clearly cite this evidence in your essay.

(Attach additional pages if necessary.)