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Pardon was defining moment of Ford's term

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WASHINGTON - The presidential pardon of Richard Nixon's Watergate misdeeds defined Gerald Ford's singular presidency.

That's not exactly what Ford had hoped. He saw Nixon's pardon as the first step toward being elected to the presidency on the merits of his own work. And there was no way Ford could focus on the nation's business as long as Nixon's legal fate remained unresolved. A criminal trial could take years, and Nixon would not wait out that time quietly, Ford wrote in his autobiography.

Yes, he hoped that pardoning Nixon would soothe the wounds of anger and distrust inflicted on the nation by Watergate. He felt, too, that Nixon and his family had suffered enough.

But in pardoning Nixon on Sept. 8, 1974, Ford was tending to his own future, too.

"I had to get the monkey off my back," Ford wrote in his 1979 memoir, *A Time to Heal*.

In fact, pardoning Nixon did nothing to seal Ford's place in history as, he hoped, a popularly elected president. Instead, the pardon had the effect of denying Ford his goal and delivering Democrat Jimmy Carter the White House in the 1976 election.

Even as he pondered the question that summer of 1974, Ford saw the downside no matter what he did.

If he sided with the 56 percent of Americans who wanted Nixon denied a pardon and tried in court, the legal drama would overshadow Ford's administration and possibly his election campaign.

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