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In the Limelight

In his final address to the nation, Richard Nixon said “I’m not a quitter,” seemingly pleading the American people to trust him once again. He knew very well, though, that our faith was long gone. After months and months of endless investigation, President Nixon became the first person to resign the position of leader of the free world. For the rest of history he will be remembered for his blatant mismanagement of his administration and his deliberate authorization of illegal operations. However, while it is easy to criticize, if we take a moment to put ourselves in Nixon’s shoes we will quickly come to realize that his decisions weren’t purely motivated by a greed for power. They were his attempts to avoid further conflicts with the public. The culture of the early 1970s was one of rapid social and philosophical change in the midst of economic pressure and it produced a largely disillusioned view of the government. The turbulence of the era can be easily characterized by occurrences across the nation, including our very own Illinois. The culture of the early 1970s motivated Nixon’s political decisions including the Watergate scandal and his eventual resignation, and we must acknowledge that those events were a result of the culture that had developed rather than the wildly irresponsible persona we tend to ascribe to our 37th president. At the same time, technological advances propelled our nation into a new age as we continued to try to enjoy our social culture.

The seventies were a time of massive social reform. Many groups had felt alienated by the government and their fellow citizens for a long time and this discontent bred animosity. As minority groups began to vocalize their concerns in the sixties and early seventies, their issues became public issues and a part of every Illinoisan life. One such issue was women’s rights, for which numerous protests and demonstrations were held. On August 26 1973, St. Joan’s International Alliance, a Catholic women’s rights group, distributed leaflets in front of Chicago’s Holy Name Cathedral—one of the largest cathedrals in Illinois, The leaflets protested the passages that were read that day, specifically the fifth chapter of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians, which states “Wives should be submissive to their husbands as if to the Lord” (“Women”). This rebellion against the oppression of women was omnipresent across America, and thus Illinois as well. In the state’s capital, Springfield, an entire page in the newspaper was dedicated to discussing women’s issues. The article presented the viewpoints of many women who, among other things, thought women should be more politically active and that the men in power should consider women as equals. They wished for a change of attitude and to get rid of the traditional sexist stereotype of the brainless female role vs. the all-powerful male. In the end, women felt as if our political leaders weren’t doing enough to support women’s issues, which contributed to the public scrutiny that eventually forced Nixon to resign. (Musto).

Another minority group that felt disenfranchised by the government was gays. For decades, homosexuals hid their sexuality, and as they began to speak out they believed that the government should support them. Gay Liberation was a huge issue, and public demonstrations made it everyone’s issue. Even William Safire, a transparently homophobic person, wrote for the Chicago Tribune, “We can treat the gays as people with mental problems…or gratify our consciences by railing them as sinners; but when we fail to give them equal protection of the law, then it is the law that is queer” (Safire). In Chicago, the Gay Liberation Movement sponsored Gay Pride week, and they marched across town shouting “Gay power to gay people” (“Gay Liberation”). In Springfield, a smaller town, the issue was discussed in Ann Lander’s opinion column where the question asked, “Why are homosexual relationships considered illegal? Why is it considered a sex crime when there is no victim, such as rape or child-molesting? Why do some police departments hire men to tempt the homosexual and then arrest him for being a pervert?” (Landers). The issues of gay rights became a widely discussed topic and created an angry view of the government in the eyes of many, which, along with women’s rights cornered Nixon’s administration, pressuring him to commit crimes to save face with the public.

Minority groups weren’t the only ones who felt cheated by the government. Many average people felt that the government was foolish in continuing to risk the lives of their fathers and brothers in Vietnam, this anti-war protests were common and frequent. On May 18, 1970, Evanston residents blocked off a quiet residential street in protest of the war, symbolizing a separation of the neighborhood from the United States government (“Evanston”). On January 21, 1973, coinciding with Nixon’s second inauguration, nearly two thousand anti-war marchers walked through the Chicago Loop and gathered in the Civic Center Plaza for speeches calling for the President to sign a peace treaty immediately (“2,000 in Loop”). At the time of Watergate, the United States still had 24,200 troops in Vietnam and hundreds of thousands of mothers worried for the lives of their children and wished the government would bring them home faster (“Vietnam”). Nixon, in particular, was widely blamed for the prolongation of the war, and in his attempt to placate further damages to his public reputation, he found himself locked into the Watergate scandal.

In the midst of a number of social issues, the public also had to deal with a declining economy. Beginning in 1970, unemployment began to rise, causing many families to fall on hard times. On October 4, 1970, Adlai Stevenson, an Illinois’ Democrat nominee for the Senate, blamed Nixon’s policies for the rise in unemployment, which affected approximately 200,000 people in Illinois (“Stevenson”). He also blamed Nixon for the rise in cost of living, and urged the people of Illinois to reject Nixon’s policies. That sentiment was shared across America and thus across Illinois in cities including Chicago, Springfield, and Quincy (Young; Hunter). The unemployment crisis was made even worse in 1973 with the energy crisis. The implementation of a fuel rations sparked protest across the nation, and only made Nixon’s public impression even worse. One Chicago economist printed in the Chicago tribune, “We’re going to do it, but it is a foolish thing to do. It is going to be done because the federal government insists on trying to control the prices of fuel” (Bukro). In August 1973, gas dealers in Chicago held a 3-day strike in protest of the government’s policies (Zahour). The crisis affected everyone in the nation, regardless of where they lived. In Springfield, an article in the State Journal Register strongly contended that President Nixon must consider a gas ration as a last resort (“Avoid”). In Chatham, IL, the school board was forced to limit all field trips to a 50 mile radius, and cut back on heating in November of 1973 (“Fuel”). The failure to control the rise in unemployment and the impending fuel shortage in the early seventies created a nationwide sentiment that Nixon’s policies were incompetent at controlling the nation’s economy, furthering the his negative image that ultimately led to his resignation.

The early 1970’s were a time of massive government scrutiny, and maintaining a positive public image was imperative for any politician. For Nixon, 1972 was an especially important year, as it was the year of a presidential election. Although nobody truly knows Nixon’s motivations for the Watergate break-in, the general theory is summed up in an article by the Miller Center entitled “Richard Nixon: Domestic Affairs.” Watergate was much more than a single break-in and cover up. In 1971, Nixon had unconstitutionally created his own secret police organization, termed the “Plumbers,” to prevent leaks of some of his most damaging foreign policy secrets including the secret bombing of Cambodia and Laos. He created the organization after the leak of the Pentagon Papers which, although did not reference Nixon, made him fear leaks of his own secrets, especially in the face of the 1972 election. The public’s perception of him was already not positive due to the aforementioned social and economic issues, and the President was determined to not make it any worse. This is why two of the Plumbers broke into the physiatrist’s office that treated Daniel Ellsberg, the Pentagon Paper whistleblower. The same reason motivated the Watergate break-in and the ensuing cover-up, as the DNC contained something that could damage Nixon’s reputation and the culture of the 1970’s made such a stain hold dire consequence. When Nixon’s involvement in these illegal operations were finally revealed, his reputation took an even harder blow, eventually causing his resignation in the face of tremendous public outcry.

The culture of the time was not just protest against the government. The nation was making tremendous technological advances. Computing technology began to enter almost every facet of American culture, in cities large and small. An article in the Springfield Journal Register entitled “Expensive Homes are Sales Problem,” describes how real estate companies began to utilize computers to match properties with buyers, allowing long distance buyers to get a feel for the place before traveling to view it (Woodward). Another article in the Springfield Journal Register entitled “Computers Becoming Part of the Income Tax Blues,” gives us a glimpse at how personal finance became easier with new software that allowed income tax to be filed on the computer rather than by hand (Smith). The technology, however, did not come without a disadvantage. One advertisement in the Springfield Journal Register exploits the common fear of attackers tracing computer user’s personal information, breaching their privacy. Along with computers, alternative energy sources were also gaining popularity, especially after Nixon’s oil crisis. A Chicago Tribune article entitled “Alternatives to Oil” lays out the facts about alternative energy to the public. “We can develop large scale energy from the sun. Huge rotating mirrors, concentrating the sun’s rays on tank of water, would generate steam, from which we can generate electricity,” explained the article on the topic of solar energy. The solar technology we have today is largely a result of the early pioneers of the 1970s. Another article in the Chicago Tribune, entitled “Energy Needs and Ecology,” educates the public, reminding them that the fossil fuel consumption of the nation is nowhere near sustainable (Fri). The rapid advances of technology in the time period contributed considerably to the culture of the early 1970s in that it made the lives of the public easier, but also brought them to think about the future of the American lifestyle and what the nation must do to preserve it.

Aside from protesting politicians and learning about new technologies, Americans did have a social life. Illinois was bustling with social events and the political controversies of the time had little impact on all the fun. Articles in the Chatham Clarion advertise the production of a musical in the local theater, as well as a reenactment of Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, which attract visitors by the thousands. The Springfield Journal Register advertises the films being screened in the local theaters such as *Blazing Saddles*, and *Mame.* The Chicago Tribune advertises the performance of the world famous Bolshoi Ballet, and its annual music festival “Summerfest.” Clearly, Illinoisans know how to have fun, despite any political or philosophical differences between them.

Although we generally envision a power hungry criminal when we think of Nixon, we must not ignore the motivation behind his crimes. Nixon was forced to be excessively careful of his public image during his term in office due to the culture that was created. The 1970s were filled with public protests by minorities, unhappiness with the war, and hard economic times, which all fostered a negative view of the government. The reach of media made these issues a part of everyone’s lives: they heard about it in the newspaper, on the radio, on television, and in the streets. Nixon tried his best to contain any information that might further damage his reputation, but in the end, his efforts backfired. Ultimately, Nixon’s resignation was a result of the culture of the 1970’s, although not entirely direct. The incident marked the beginning of a newfound perception towards the government that still lives on today, in which high level corruption is not as far-fetched as we once thought it was. Despite the political and philosophical toxicity of the time period, the nation still made huge technological advances enabling an easier common life. In addition, Illinoisans continued to participate in social events such as dance and theater because, ultimately, they just wanted to be happy.