

April 9, 2024

Executive Committee  
The Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation  
& Board Members

Motto of the USS Gerald R. Ford: *Integrity at the Helm*

Dear members of the Executive Committee,

Fifty years ago, on August 9, 1974, Gerald R. Ford, was sworn in as the 38<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. He led our country out of the flaming wreckage of Watergate and set a fresh course for the nation. President Ford stepped into the job clear-eyed and ready to go, much as he had thirty years earlier as a young lieutenant gunnery officer on the deck of the USS Monterey directing anti-aircraft fire at attacking Japanese aircraft. He was a leader who led by example and placed his life on the line to do it.

President Ford honored me as one of his first appointees. I documented his short but impactful presidency and was in the room with him almost every day that he was in office. I was privy to everything, and observed firsthand what it was that made him such a great and intrepid person. I came to admire, love, and appreciate both him and Mrs. Ford. That wonderful relationship with them lasted until the day they died. Their memory and spirit will always be with me.

I observed the fortitude and courage of President Ford throughout his presidency and in the years after. Ten days after taking office he flew to Chicago to address the national convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of which he was a member. During his speech he announced he wanted “leniency” for draft evaders in order to bind the wounds of our country. I was in the car with him on the way to the VFW event. The

president told me what he was about to do, then chuckled as he added, “The one thing I don’t have to worry about is being interrupted by applause.” He wasn’t, and the vets in attendance were upset with his empathetic initiative. President Ford told the press pool aboard Air Force One on the way back to Washington that, “It would have been a little cowardice, I think, if I’d picked an audience that was ecstatic.”

That’s who he was. A person of deep and honest conviction who stood up for what he believed and never took the easy or expedient road. When gallantry was required, Ford was not quiet. When action was warranted, he took it. If President Ford could see the current state of his former party he would be shocked and royally riled.

President Ford’s decision to pardon his predecessor Richard Nixon most likely cost him the 1976 election. He didn’t hide out after signing the document, but instead went before Congress and sat there alone to testify about why he did it. Gerald Ford was the first and last president since Abraham Lincoln to make such an appearance.

In 2001 President Ford was given the JFK Foundation’s *Profile in Courage Award* by Sen. Edward Kennedy and Amb. Caroline Kennedy for “a controversial decision of conscience to pardon former President Richard M. Nixon.” Ted Kennedy had been one of his most vociferous critics after the pardon but reconsidered his protest in later years. While presenting the award Sen. Kennedy said, “At a time of national turmoil, America was fortunate that it was Gerald Ford who took the helm of the storm-tossed ship of state.” President Ford told me that the JFK award was one of the greatest honors he had ever received.

The Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation was created after he left office to foster “increased awareness of the life, career, values, and the legacy of America’s 38th President through activities designed to promote the high ideals of integrity, honesty, and candor that defined President Ford’s extraordinary career of public service.” Since 2002 the foundation has awarded the Gerald R. Ford Medal for Distinguished

Public Service to worthy leaders who have demonstrated: “Strength of character. Integrity. Trustworthiness. Fidelity to principles in decision making. Sound judgment. Decisiveness (particularly during periods of crisis). Determination in the face of adversity. Diligence. Self-confidence balanced with respect for the views of others. Self-discipline in personal life.” Recipients include Betty Ford, Tip O’Neill, Colin Powell, John Paul Stevens, Carla Hills, and other deserving people.

I strongly supported the effort this year to present former Congresswoman Liz Cheney, who is also a current board member, the 2024 Ford Medal. To me there was no other choice. In 2022 Liz also received a *Profile in Courage* award from the JFK Foundation along with Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. They said she had been a "consistent and courageous voice in defense of democracy" and that she had "refused to take the politically expedient course that most of her party embraced.”

After two people you selected instead of her demurred, I weighed in again with what I thought was a compelling presentation to some of the nominators where I reiterated Liz’s merits. When you rejected her again in favor of a third person, it became crystal clear to me that something else was going on. The process for honoring President Ford by recognizing his virtues in others was being undermined by the same pressures weakening Republican institutions and many conservative leaders.

A key reason Liz’s nomination was turned down was your agita about what might happen if the former president is reelected. Some of you raised the specter of being attacked by the Internal Revenue Service and losing the foundation’s tax-exempt status as retribution for selecting Liz for the award. The historical irony was completely lost on you. Gerald Ford became president, in part, because Richard Nixon had ordered the development of an enemies list and demanded his underlings use the IRS against those listed. That’s exactly what the executive committee fears will happen if there’s a second coming of Donald Trump. Did LT Gerald

Ford meet the enemy head-on because he thought he wouldn't get killed? No. He did it despite that possibility. This executive committee, on the other hand, bolted before any shots were fired. You aren't alone. Many foundations, organizations, corporations, and other entities are caught up in this tidal wave of timidity and fear that's sweeping this country. I mistakenly thought we were better than that. This is the kind of acquiescent behavior that leads to authoritarianism. President Ford most likely would have come out even tougher and said that it leads directly to fascism.

Those of you who rejected Liz join many "good Republicans" now aiding and abetting our 45th president by ignoring the genuine menace he presents to our country. America is fortunate to have Liz Cheney still out there on the front lines of freedom vigorously defending our Constitution and democratic way of life. But you don't have her back. In failing to honor Liz's courage, resolve, and integrity, you are retreating and hunkering down behind a wall of silence. Martin Luther King said, "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."

As you might suspect I find the executive committee's decision not to award Liz Cheney the Ford Medal inexplicable. What would the man I had worked with so closely have done if he were here with us? I believe he would have stood alongside Liz Cheney strongly, proudly, and publicly. Gerald Ford wouldn't have been intimidated by phantom consequences. He would have adopted a "damn the torpedoes" approach as he proceeded to do the right thing.

The executive committee's decision was also short-sighted. By not selecting Liz as this year's Medal recipient, the Ford Foundation has missed a critical opportunity to send a message to our fellow citizens here in America and the rest of the world. When Ford was in office people still recall his commitment to our allies, the rule of law, and meeting the challenge posed by tyrannical leaders. By saying that we stand with Liz Cheney in the name of Gerald Ford to support her critical

mission in this existential moment we also would have honored his memory. And shown that we fear no evil.

After this current divisive era passes, people will remember who stood up for what. But it's not too late to save the day. If you really want to correct this grievous mistake, create the "Gerald R. Ford Commendation for Political Valor," and make Liz Cheney its only recipient. That might help right the ship.

Failing that, I can't in good conscience stay on the board of an organization representing Gerald R. Ford that doesn't manifest his kind of guts. It's now a place whose leadership is cowed by a demagogue creating and promulgating the greatest crisis our country has faced since the Civil War.

Today I am resigning from the Gerald R. Ford board as a trustee. If the foundation that bears the name of Gerald R. Ford won't stand up to this real threat to our democracy, who will?

David Hume Kennerly  
Former Trustee  
The Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation