

The Honorable Elizabeth Holtzman
U.S. Representative of New York (1973–1981)

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

Questioning President Ford

Representative Holtzman recalls questioning President Ford on the pardon of Richard Nixon.
Interview recorded March 10, 2016

And I anticipated that someone would ask questions before I did. I wrote out the questions I wanted to ask. And I knew that this was going to be a little bit of a heavy lift because, you know, I'm asking a President of the United States whether he's made a deal over a pardon, which is potentially even a crime. But I knew I had to ask the questions, and I prepared them, and I tried to be very respectful about it. And I was sure somebody was going to ask those questions. I mean, there were probably 10 people ahead of me. And I said, "Well, I hope I have, you know—I could just tear them up and won't have to ask them, somebody else will ask the questions." But it didn't happen. Everybody said, "Oh, Mr. President, how wonderful it is that you're here, and how, you know, a sign of candor, and honesty, and sincerity, and honorableness, and you're so wonderful in coming to talk to Congress. That's all they said. There were no questions, basically. And I'm getting more and more nervous because I see it's going down the row of committee members and it's going to come to me. And nobody's asking any questions. So, I was glad I wrote them out because I don't know that I would have been able to wing it at that moment. But I did what I had to do. I asked him the questions. And by this time—going back to the point you raised earlier about media—I knew that there would be media attention about this, but I didn't know what the reaction was going to be. I had no idea whether people would attack me back home, whether they would agree with what I had done. I had no idea. I knew this was a big risk, but I did what I thought was right. Going back to the civil rights movement, and just did what was in my conscience. And so the next day, of course, I got attacked by one of the New York newspapers for not calling President Ford, "President Ford." I called him once, "Mr. Ford." I didn't mean to be disrespectful. But when I started—when I got home that weekend and was walking on the streets, people came up and hugged me. So, I knew that I hadn't lost my seat in Congress, but I thought about that. I said, you know, maybe I'm risking everything here, but I just had to do it. That was it.