

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Ann Cullen
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: Thank you for doing this. Tell us something about Betty Ford that might surprise people.

Cullen: She loves dirty jokes and he did not.

Smith: Was it that he didn't get it, or he just didn't want to?

Cullen: No, I think that's just not the way his sense of humor worked. There would be times that Mrs. Ford and I - like if they would be getting ready to go to a dinner party or something - and I would be there helping her get ready and pick out jewelry or whatever. We would be in her dressing room just in hysterics about something, and he would be across the hall in his dressing room and he would come in and say, "Okay, girls, what is so funny in here?" And Mrs. Ford would tell him the joke and he would just kind of stand there like, and then the two of us would try to explain it to him and then our hysterics would become more so that we could never explain it. And he was just like, "I don't get it."

Smith: He had a sense of humor.

Cullen: Oh, he had a sense of humor, but it wasn't a joke-related sense of humor. I think he saw the humor in the things that happened around him, but I just don't think, telling him a joke, his mind just didn't go that way. He was thinking of much more serious things.

Smith: One of the things I found early on that surprised me about him - because most pols love gossip, not just political gossip, but they love gossip. And at first I just sensed it and then I *really* sensed it that he wasn't a gossip and, in fact, would politely find a way to steer the conversation away from personal gossip.

Cullen: Yeah, he didn't want to chat about people. I think you're absolutely right. I guess from my view, he always wanted to find the finer qualities about everybody he knew. And it was demeaning to the person that was doing the gossiping, I guess. He didn't want to have suspicions about other people, I guess. So it wasn't something he was happy with.

Smith: Do you think that at all, in some ways, fed a notion that some people had that he was maybe a little naïve?

Cullen: Yeah.

Smith: And I don't mean that in a negative way, I mean, it can be in many ways an admirable trait.

Cullen: I think because he was so honest in his own dealings with everybody and so trustworthy, he kind of assumed that everybody he dealt with would be the same way, and in that way he was naïve about it. I don't think he ever saw that people were nice to him because they were going to use him two weeks later for something. He just genuinely enjoyed people, he liked meeting new people. I think he was naïve about the fact that there was a lot of stuff that went on behind the scenes that he just either didn't see or chose not to see.

Smith: Well, see, that's what's fascinating to me. Because someone who'd been in DC as long as he was at the levels he was—

Cullen: Yeah, and to maintain that naiveté.

Smith: Yeah, you'd have to work to at it almost.

Cullen: Yeah, and I guess his theory that you can disagree without being disagreeable, it's all maybe part of that mentality that, maybe at the end of the day, everybody's a friend and you have your disagreements, but if you like a person, you like them. You get over those disagreements.

Smith: But you wonder if that quality - for example, whatever you think of Bob Hartmann - made a Bob Hartmann necessary, in the sense that—

Cullen: Somebody had to be the bad guy.

Smith: Yeah. Someone had to do the mistrusting for him and the suspicion about people's motives. Clearly at the time of the Haig-Nixon pardon business—

Cullen: And, I think maybe Mrs. Ford played a little bit of that role, too, in that I think she saw that in people before he ever would be willing to recognize that maybe there was something going on. She was a much better read on personalities.

Smith: It's funny, I never thought about this, but that's kind of a parallel to the Reagans.

Cullen: Mhmm. Oh, yeah, the guardian at the gate kind of thing with the women.

Smith: And it puts the wife in a very awkward position, difficult position.

Cullen: Yeah, it sure does.

Smith: How did your paths first cross?

Cullen: I was working in Delaware for Pete DuPont when he was governor of Delaware. And a friend of mine who was working for Pete – you know Dick Wennekamp.

Smith: I know the name.

Cullen: Well, Wennekamp was in the White House, in what capacity, I'm not sure at the moment, but anyway he worked at the White House and he was casually going out with this friend of mine on occasion. Mrs. Ford needed a new assistant, so, Dick called Marian and asked her if she'd be interested in the job. They were interviewing three or four people or something. She said, yeah, she would be. She went to New York, interviewed with Mrs. Ford, was offered the job and took the job and moved to California.

Smith: So this was post-White House.

Cullen: Yes, this was like a year after they'd left the White House. In fact, she had just come out of treatment, I think, when all this happened. Marian went to California, quickly moved to Vail. A couple of friends and I went to Vail and spent a week or so, just visiting, you know, because we had a friend who was

working for Betty Ford and this was a big deal when you're from Dover, Delaware. And, then in September, Marian called me and said, "You know, it is really expensive to live in the desert. Why don't you move out here and we'll share a house?" Which I thought, "This is perfectly nuts. I'm just going to pack up and move to California?" But the more I thought about it, the more I thought, "Well, it might be a pretty good opportunity and it will get me out of Delaware," and quite frankly, I'd sort of dated all the eligible bachelors in Delaware, which is a small pool.

Smith: It's a small state.

Cullen: It was a fairly small pool. And I went and talked to Governor DuPont and said, "What do you think if I would go out there?" And he said, "I think you should do it and if it doesn't work out, you have a job here you can come back to," which kind of made it risk-free. So, I moved out to California the end of September of 1979 and kind of hung out for a few months, started looking for a job and realized – I was working in urban planning work at that point – that to find a job, I was going to have to go to L.A. So, I started interviewing in L.A. And, at that point, President Ford was thinking about running again. I had done some campaign work for Pete and President Ford and Bob said, "We can't pay you to stay on, but if you can hang around for a little bit, there will be a job on campaign staff for you." So, I thought, "Oh, well, this sounds pretty cool."

Smith: So that sounds like this talk had gotten pretty far advanced.

Cullen: Yeah, and then I think it was in March that he decided that he was not going to run and at that point, I thought, "Okay, L.A., here I come." And about three weeks later, Marian decided that she was getting married and moving, at which point, President Ford said, "Well, you're either going to work for me or you're going to work for Mrs. Ford. We want you to stay here." And Mrs. Ford was not particularly sure that she wanted me to work for her. I think she thought I had too much experience and I might try and run her and she was not looking for someone to run her because she's a little bit of a control freak. And so I really thought I would end up working for President Ford, but she

finally said, “Well, let’s try it. Let’s give it a couple of weeks, see how it goes” and seventeen years later, I finally left.

Smith: Now, clearly, you, even just hanging around as you put it, must’ve made an impression.

Cullen: Well, I wasn’t very good at hanging around totally. I needed something to keep me out of trouble, so the Fords had all these photograph books that they had brought from the White House of pictures that had been taken of people, you know, state visits and parties at the White House and they were not in any kind of order. No one knew who any of the people were in the pictures. Some of them, they did. So I was given the project of putting the books together, which I spent a couple of months trying to figure out dates and knowing a couple of people that I could identify and going back and researching it and putting it together. And now, you know, in the breezeway of their house in California where all the elephant statues are, there are a bunch of photograph albums from the White House. If you go through those today, there are still my handwritten notes of who the people are in the pictures. I never got any farther than that, but I identified a lot of people and ended up with a job.

Smith: Tell us how the office functioned just generally, because that was pretty early in their post-White House years. What kind of coordination went on between her activities and his?

Cullen: There was still a little bit of the East Wing/West Wing syndrome that went on in that most people sort of figured that her work was not as important as his work. At that point, I worked for her. I had someone who worked for me, and that was it. There were the two of us who did what five or six people who worked for him did. I was pretty much an independent agent. I didn’t report to anybody else other than Mrs. Ford, and the thing that was kind of interesting about the position I had was that when President and Mrs. Ford traveled together, particularly for social events, I would be the person that traveled because I guess they thought I could help Mrs. Ford do things, but I could also handle some press issues if it was necessary. I could do some things for him as well. And I guess the other side of that was when Penny

became Chief of Staff, he was very leery about traveling with a very attractive blonde. So, the fact that I worked for Mrs. Ford made it a little easier. You know, there was an explanation for why I was along and the explanation for Penny would've been much more difficult for him. He was uncomfortable with that.

Smith: Which is revealing in and of itself.

Did you ever meet Phyllis?

Cullen: Phyllis.

Smith: His old girlfriend?

Cullen: No, I know the name. I think I saw pictures once upon a time, the girlfriend from New York.

Smith: Yeah.

Cullen: Yeah. No, never met her.

Smith: There's a wonderful story. Was it Jim Cannon who told us this story? Yeah, Jim Cannon. One of the last times he saw the President, the President said, "You ought to go see Phyllis," who, I think at that point, was in a condo in Las Vegas. And Jim went and was going in from the airport and thought, "Oh, how do I sort of introduce myself and ingratiate myself?" So he stopped and he got flowers and went up to the apartment and rang the bell and she opened the door and he said, "President Ford wanted you to have these." And she said, "Oh no, he didn't. He never got flowers!"

Cullen: She knew him fairly well, then, huh?

Smith: And at the end of the conversation, she told Jim, "Would you take a message to him for me?" And the message was, "I still think about him. I still dream about him. I still love him."

Cullen: Oh, wow.

Smith: And Jim dutifully passed the message on over the phone. There was a long, long pregnant silence and he finally said, “Well, that’s very nice, and Phyllis, she was a lovely girl, but I’ve had such a wonderful life with Betty.”

Mrs. Ford’s tardiness, was that—

Cullen: You mean “the late Mrs. Ford”? That’s how we referred to her.

Smith: Really?

Cullen: Yes.

Smith: Was it always a problem?

Cullen: Always. And I don’t know if it was based on insecurity and wanting to be perfect when she walked out the door or if it was, again, her control mechanism of ‘I can do this, therefore, I shall do this.’

Smith: And he was a stickler for—

Cullen: Oh, he was. When the schedule said “7:15 motorcade departs,” 7:15 he was at the front door ready to open the door to walk out so the motorcade could depart. She had exactly the same schedule that said, “7:15 motorcade departs,” but at 8:00 maybe, if she was ready to leave. And he would fuss a little bit but not much because he knew his life would be uncomfortable if he fussed too much.

Smith: Was that the biggest source of friction? I mean, were there habits that one had that the other had to put up with?

Cullen: There was some friction over her tardiness, but I think after all those years, he had to come to expect—

Smith: They were acclimated to it.

Cullen: Yeah, and I think if it was something that was really, really, *really* important to him, he would talk to her about the fact that, you know, “Now, dear, we really need to leave on time.” And she would make an effort and she could do it when pressed. And, you know, if we were on foreign trips and a plane was leaving or something, she could absolutely be ready, but she liked to take her

time and make sure that every hair was in place and that her purse was perfectly put together

Smith: She's a perfectionist?

Cullen: Oh, yes, very much so. She wanted everything, you know, clothes were, if there was a crease in something, she wasn't sure, because she was so used to having people judge her by her appearance that she wanted that appearance to be judge-able.

Smith: Did she enjoy clothes?

Cullen: She loved them, loved clothes. She loved to shop. She loved to go to the designer salons and, well, you know, she'd been a fashion buyer at Herpolscheimer's, so it was kind of in the blood, I think.

Smith: That leads to the other question. Was weight ever a concern?

Cullen: Never.

Smith: Ever?

Cullen: Never, ever. The only time it was a concern for her was when she had heart surgery and she lost a lot of weight and she was too thin. I remember, one day we were sitting out in the garden area around the pool at the house in California and there were a couple of women on the golf course. And they were not stout, but they had a little bit of meat to them. And she looked out there and then said, "Oh, I wish I looked like that." I said, "Oh, no, you don't. I'm going to hold that over you when that happens." And it never did. I mean, she gained the weight back. She got right back to her same size.

Smith: What was her size?

Cullen: She wore a size 8 forever and always as far as I know, and at the point that I worked with her, I was just a little bit too small to wear her clothes and now I'm way too big. Because there were a couple of items that I'd said, "When the time comes, I want that, I want that, I want that."

Smith: How would you define her preferences in clothes? Were there things that she was particularly drawn to or shied away from?

Cullen: She loved well-made suits of, I'd say, kind of the classic Chanel suit, well put together. She was always well coordinated. She was not into a lot of froofroo. She was a very classic dresser. I think Albert Capraro, who designed clothes for her in the White House and for years and years afterwards. I mean, she has closets full. I have a closet full of Capraro clothes, I think, that I was fortunate enough that were either passed on to me or when she would go buying, I would get to buy a couple of things, too.

Smith: And jewelry?

Cullen: She liked jewelry and I would say right now she has quite a bit of jewelry simply because over the years since they've been in the White House, it's been something that President Ford's enjoyed giving her for gifts.

Smith: Any favorites stones or...? Some people are partial to pearls or...

Cullen: I think she has some pearls that she really likes. It's a long strand that comes apart into two so that it becomes a double strand. I think she's always been very fond of that. There's a ring that Leonard Firestone and Dee Keaton gave her when we were in Hong Kong and it's a star sapphire with diamonds around it. I've always told her that I wanted that ring. There's no way I'll ever get it, but... And I never liked star sapphires, but this is a lovely ring and the star sapphire is approximately the color blue of President Ford's eyes. So it really meant a lot to her. And the fact that Leonard was involved in the gift.

Smith: Tell me about that relationship, because I've heard it said that it's no exaggeration to say that she saved his life.

Cullen: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, I've heard Leonard say that. He was very indebted to her for that.

Smith: Now they had been friends, he was apparently instrumental in their decision to—

Cullen: To move, yeah. The property that their house is on, I think he owned originally. So they lived right next door. And they lived right next door in Beaver Creek. Now that's got to be a pretty close friendship if you have two houses that are next to each other. And he was one of the loveliest men I've ever known. And, admittedly, I guess I did know him before he was completely sober, but I never—

And, in fact, my husband's name is Leonard and the only reason I went out with him the first couple of times was because his name was Leonard because I figured there was good karma there, that I'd been so fond of Leonard Firestone that, "I'll give this a try."

Smith: What was it about him that clearly endeared him to the both of them?

Cullen: He was just a kind, considerate man who, if you didn't know he was Leonard Firestone, you wouldn't know he was Leonard Firestone. He never held that up for people to take note before they knew him. It was something that, you know, if people knew, fine, but he didn't really care about it. And he was so generous to people. I mean, he was really kind to me over the years. There was one time we were on a trip, I know we were in Japan and Leonard Firestone and Nicky Firestone and a couple others of us had gone shopping in a camera store. We'd gone pearl shopping and I had made my big purchase and was wiped out for the rest of the trip and we went into a camera shop and he was looking at cameras and I said something about, "Oh, well, my little sister had said that when I was in Japan, if I was at any place to buy her a camera, but we've got another two weeks on the road or something, and so I can't afford to do that" and he said, "I'll loan you the money." And I said, "Well, no", I really didn't want to do that. And he just absolutely said, "I will loan you the money. You're buying the camera for your sister." And I bought the camera and when we got home, I gave him a check I guess to pay him back for the cost of the camera and I got it back with a note that said, "I can afford this. You can't." So, he was just a sweetheart. And his wife, Nicky, I was very fond of, too. She was just a lovely woman.

Smith: And his involvement with the Betty Ford Center grew out of his own personal experience?

Cullen: Yes, I think after Mrs. Ford got sober, and I don't know how long she had been sober, but not a whole long time, I don't think. And I don't know if Nicky came to talk to her or if Mrs. Ford just went and talked to Leonard on her own and just said, "You've got to do something." President Ford may have been involved, too. And Leonard just kind of said, "Oh, okay, if you think so, I will." And he got sober and they started talking about the fact that the desert would be the perfect place for there to be a treatment facility and he said to Mrs. Ford, "If this is something you want to do, I'll help you raise the money for it." And, so the two of them, you know, people came to be very afraid of seeing them approach.

Smith: I think it was John Schwarzlose who told us this story. They were on Frank Sinatra's plane flying to Las Vegas and coming back she had this captive audience and so the first pledges to the Betty Ford Center were written on cocktail napkins on Frank Sinatra's plane.

Cullen: And then, every time she went out to dinner, she had pledge cards in her evening bag. They'd be nicely folded up in this little, tiny jewel encrusted evening bag and whoever she was sitting next to, she'd say, "Oh, and by the way, I have something here I'd like you to take a look at."

Smith: So, she was a lioness when it came to fundraising?

Cullen: Oh, yeah. I mean, the Betty Ford Center was paid for when it opened because she and Leonard went out and beat the bushes. And she did things like, I mean, she hated public speaking, she was always a nervous public speaker, she didn't like it at all, but she knew she could raise money for the Betty Ford Center by going out and making speeches. So, she did it.

Smith: Do you think that factors at all into her late in life sort of reticence, withdrawal maybe, from the public eye? That, among other things, she doesn't have to go and give speeches anymore?

Cullen: Well, she doesn't have to do it. I think as soon as she felt that she didn't have to do it, it was like, "It's got to be something really wonderful for me to want to do this," because she would always, I mean, we'd be standing backstage and she'd say things like, "Oh my God, I think I'm going to throw up." And,

you know, she wouldn't. She'd get out there and she was always fine, but she would be really nervous doing a speech.

Smith: Why do you think that was? Because, here's a woman who was a performer, you know, who had aspired to be on the stage.

Cullen: Dance is one thing. Having words come out of your mouth was something different, I think. Because she did okay and she was much better. Having her stand there with cards that had a speech prepared on it, she was kind of a little bit stilted. She was not comfortable with it, but when it came to the Q&A session afterwards, that's when she really shone, because the personality came out. She was funny. She would just say things that people would kind of go, "I can't believe she said that!" So, it was the prepared speech kind of thing that set her on edge. Just talking to people, she was fine.

Smith: It's amazing. When you go back even now and look at the famous Morley Safer interview on *60 Minutes* - we had it on display at the time in the museum - and she was saying things we couldn't say today. Not that there wasn't controversy generated by Mrs. Ford saying them, but I mean, it was more on the Right. I think the country was changing in ways that some of the political types in the White House never anticipated. They're always fighting the last war, but the fact there was this Cub Scout den mother from Grand Rapids...

Cullen: Yeah, who shouldn't have opinions like that.

Smith: Exactly.

Cullen: But I think the fact was she was a much more independent, liberal thinking woman than anybody realized until that point. I think her husband knew it, but she had a mother that worked because she had to because her father had died.

Smith: Did she ever talk about the circumstances of her father's death?

Cullen: Not really, except that he passed away when she was 16. I think she said to me that she kind of always felt that it was a suicide, but never really sure as to what happened. The things she said in that interview with Morley Safer, I

think things were changing in this country for women and she was on kind of the progressive edge of that, unbeknownst to a lot of people.

Smith: Exactly, and I think that's why it made such an impact. We now know, and it's almost tragic that we didn't know then, we now know that Pat Nixon had opinions of her own and a life of her own.

Cullen: And just thought she wasn't allowed to have, or had been told she wasn't allowed to have them, perhaps.

Smith: Did you have a sense of Mrs. Ford's relationship, or his for that matter, with the former presidents and first ladies? I mean, obviously there were ceremonial occasions when they got together, funerals or library openings, but was there a—

Cullen: There was a real friendship there with Lady Bird Johnson. I was able, I think on two occasions, to spend a night at the ranch with Mrs. Ford and Lady Bird and it was really wonderful. And I think there was one time, I think, it was just the three of us and another time it was Mrs. Carter. I've got a picture somewhere, I was trying to think if there was someone else in there, but I don't think so. It was something they were doing, an article that was being done for *Good Housekeeping* or some magazine that everybody got together there for the interviews. And President Ford and Lady Bird were fairly close and I think he had enjoyed Lyndon Johnson.

Smith: Which, again, runs counter to the popular impression.

Cullen: Yeah. But when they first went to Congress, the Johnsons were in the Senate, I guess.

Smith: Had just gone.

Cullen: Just gone. Okay. And since the Johnsons had been in Washington for a few years, how they really met in the first place, I'm not sure, but I know that Senator Johnson and Mrs. Johnson at that time were very kind to the new kids on the block. They kind of took them under their wing. They introduced them to people. They made sure they were invited to some social things, so I think that really clicked a relationship there.

Smith: Plus, Lady Bird, I mean how could you not love Lady Bird?

Cullen: Oh, she was just such a sweetheart. And then in the later years, President Ford was on a board with her for a bank in Texas. So, he saw her like once a month for years. And she and Mrs. Ford stayed in touch and the girls at the museum at one point there was a First Ladies' conference or something and Lynda and Luci came out for that and I think they always felt close to President and Mrs. Ford.

Smith: There is a fraternity of sorts that people don't realize that's bipartisan, transcends political rivalries.

Cullen: Oh, absolutely. And you know I think a lot of people kind of look at the relationship President Ford and President Carter had and think, "You know, how can you be that friendly with the guy that beat you in the election?" But there're so few people that have ever worked in that office and walked in those shoes that it's a very small little private club and they are very supportive of each other when they need to be.

Smith: You know, it's funny, when you really sort of boil it all down, they may have spoken with different accents and belonged to different parties, but they had a lot of similar values and their upbringings were in many ways reflective.

Cullen: Sort of basic, honest human beings who were not from the big city.

Smith: Plus, they had shared in common running against Ronald Reagan.

Cullen: Well, they also had military backgrounds that they could share.

Smith: One of the most touching things I'll never forget was flying on Air Force One back to Grand Rapids from Washington after the service at the cathedral. And President Carter scooped up one of the great grandchildren and was walking up and down the isle with this baby. You wish people could see that side.

Cullen: That must have been Joy, Tyne's daughter, because I think she was maybe the only baby because Tyne was the only one who had a baby-baby on the plane at that point. But I mean there's a real fondness that, as you say, transcends

party because you know what they're going through. I mean, if it's somebody that's currently there, it's a life experience that very few of us can relate to.

Smith: And clearly there'd been a long-standing relationship between the Bushes and the Fords.

Cullen: Yeah.

Smith: Really going back to Prescott Bush in the Senate.

Cullen: And George H.W. - all kinds of years they were kind of intertwined and so, yeah.

Smith: You know, it's funny, before I forget, I've heard that afterward from very good sources, you know, it's interesting that both Johnson girls and the Carters, after the funeral, substantially revised their own plans because they were so impressed with the kind of intimacy and sort of family feel to this big ceremonial.

Cullen: My personal experience with that was, at Blair House, the reception that was there for ambassadors and the pallbearers and the other former first families who were there, when people came in, they went and saw Mrs. Ford. And I think you were there, weren't you? So then there was tea and wine and whatever, so people were standing around talking. And Luci Johnson who I've known casually over the years for a long time, came up to me and we were talking about stuff and she said something to me about, "What have you all done to get ready for this? What was the most important thing that you did?" And I said, "Well, you know, the services were important, but one of the things that we really worked really hard on was the guest list for all the services." And she kind of said, "Guest list? Oh my God, we haven't even thought of that." And I think based on talking to a few people at that point, they did go back and say, "We've got to get on this."

Smith: I don't mean to jump all around like this, but what were your memories of that week? Because I remember I was wearing two hats. I was with ABC for the first half of the week and I remember the very, very beginning out in the church, I think at Saint Margaret's, and we'd been tipped off. Basically the

media had been told, “Don’t be surprised if you see Mrs. Ford in a wheelchair.” And, of course, we never did until very briefly at the end and then very dramatically—

Cullen: And we kept saying to her, “Mrs. Ford, if you don’t think you can walk, we have a wheelchair at every location. Please use them. Don’t wear yourself out. This is going to be a long, grinding week for you.” She was so determined that she was walking everywhere. No one was going to see her in a wheelchair. And she pulled it off. I mean, I think going down the isle at the cathedral President Bush may have been carrying her part of the way. And that was one nice thing about General Swan. He was so big that we figured, “If necessary, one arm under an elbow and one arm around her and he could just scoot her down and no one would ever notice.”

Smith: The story was told after she came back here very shortly afterwards, someone had said how impressed they were particularly at that last long walk to the gravesite where she got out of the chair and walked and they had expressed sort of their admiration for her.

Cullen: Yeah, she was a real trooper through that whole thing.

Smith: And she said, “Well, that’s what my husband would’ve wanted.”

Cullen: Yeah, you know, again, when we were at Blair House, the first night we got there, because I had traveled on the plane with the family coming back from California and we were all having dinner there. And then, I don’t know if you’ve heard the story about Air Force One losing my luggage.

Smith: No.

Cullen: Yeah, I’m halfway across the country and I get a phone call from Richard Wennekamp in California saying, “I don’t know how to tell you this, but your luggage is still here.” Fortunately, I was the one person on the plane that lived here. So, my husband came and picked me up and I came home. I spent the night and I got other clothes, I went back. So it wasn’t any big deal, but I was going to be coming back home that night because I had to get a change of clothes so I could proceed. And I went over and I sat at the table with Mrs.

Ford and we were chatting a little bit and I said, “Now, I’m going to be going home for the evening, but I’ll be back tomorrow morning. If you need anything, Susan knows how to get a hold of me. Just call.” And she said something to the effect of, “Do you think this is going okay?” And I said, “Well, I’ve got to tell you, I think you are doing absolutely a magnificent job.” And she got tears in her eyes and said, “Well, I have to because I’m doing it for him.”

Smith: They must have been touched by the crowds that came out in Alexandria.

Cullen: I’ll tell you, when you said what was in my view of the whole series of events, the crowds just blew me away, because he’d been out of office for how many years. He’d been President for two and a half years. You know, he didn’t have an eight-year history of people and all that. And the crowds at the church in California, when the motorcade went through Alexandria, I mean, we were all sitting, I was in the fourth car back or something, sitting there with tears running down our face because they were six and eight deep in some places and people with little kids and with their dogs with signs around their necks. It was just unbelievable. And the same thing happened in Grand Rapids.

Smith: Well, I was told the morning when you went up to the cathedral because that was the morning – I couldn’t go because ABC wanted me up there – remember, when we were planning from the very beginning, the one thing he was adamant about was no caisson through the streets of Washington. But I was told from a number of people, including the media, that they were amazed, a lot of people were amazed at the public reaction and it seemed to grow as the week went along. But they were amazed that, even though there was no caisson, at the number of people who just turned out on the streets of Washington.

Cullen: Just stood silently and watched the motorcade go by. It was really unbelievable.

Smith: She was touched?

Cullen: I don't think she ever expected an outpouring like that. A personal example I'll share with you. I take riding lessons here in town and my riding instructor, I had a horse out at the barn and I was going to be gone for x number of days, so I was kind of staying in touch and, you know, called to say, "I'm not going to be home until this day. Will you make sure somebody rides my boy so that he's getting exercise?" And my riding instructor said, "Yeah, we're standing here in line." And I said, "You're in line? What do you mean you're 'in line'?" And he said, "We're waiting to go in to the rotunda." I just couldn't believe he and his wife and their two kids drove into town, got in line, and walked through. And I was so touched by that because the only relationship they had with him was through me kind of.

And there was another, on the drive out to the barn, there's a house that has a big flagpole in the front of it. And when I got home, the first day I drove out there, the flag was at half-staff. And I kept driving down and the day that the official mourning was over, the flag went back up. And I was traveling with some of those, I'm not sure what you call them, but anyway, you know the cards that were given out at the rotunda and at the viewing and I stopped and I went up and I knocked on the door and the man came to the door and I said, "I know you don't know me and I'm sorry to disturb you, but I've been watching your flag at half-staff and the fact that it's back up today. I know it was at half-staff for my former boss and I thought you might like to have this." And he was just astounded, "Oh, I can't believe this. This is so neat!"

Smith: And then of course when you got to Grand Rapids, I remember that night because I rewrote the end of my eulogy, which had to reflect the reality that we were experiencing. And the fact that I went out that night and the line was two miles long at midnight.

Cullen: My husband went out. He said, "I'm just going to go out," because we could see out the hotel window and he said, "I want to go out and see what this is really all about." And he was gone for the longest time and he came back and he said, "You won't believe it. They are four and five abreast and it goes on forever and there are kids in strollers and," and he said, "people just stop and talk to you." It was just an incredible experience.

- Smith: And obviously that got back to her.
- Cullen: Oh, yes.
- Smith: I mean she saw what was going on. And then of course in the rotunda with the kids and then they did it again in Grand Rapids, when the kids appeared.
- Cullen: And greeted people.
- Smith: That made a real impression.
- Cullen: That was a very nice touch for them to do that. And I guess maybe it was probably a help for them, too, because that had to be a really tough stint for all of them going through day after day after day.
- Smith: In public.
- Cullen: In public and trying to keep it together. Be the perfect child mourning for your father and to go and be able to talk to people and have people share experiences with them. I think that was probably helpful for them. And the people that they talked to were just so overwhelmed that the kids were there and sharing that with them.
- Smith: You know, I have a theory that I think explains some of what happened that week. First of all, it was a time when the country desperately needed to feel good about itself. But, more than that, there was a whole generation that weren't alive during the Ford presidency who were being introduced to him. Inevitably they were comparing it with more recent times. And he looked awfully good.
- Cullen: Yeah. And it was like, "Wow. And people didn't reelect this guy? What's the matter?"
- Smith: Here's a guy who was going to stake his reelection on a point that was unpopular at the time.
- Cullen: Who did what he felt was right. Unpopular at the time, but I think we all sort of agree now that it was what had to be done. Everyone outside our little

circle has come to that conclusion too. And, well, you know, getting the award from the Kennedy Center for Public Policy—

Cullen: I'd gone out to California and we were doing funeral planner, and I think we were out there doing maybe updating some stuff of his but working on her plan. Susan was there, so it, well, I still don't know which one it was, and Mrs. Ford asked me and Susan to come over to the house and have lunch. And Sue went over, the four of us sat there. We had a very nice lunch, chatted about stuff, but it was at a point where he was starting to not get around real steadily. And he got up from the table in the dining room and was headed back down to the sitting area and suddenly felt a little woozy so Susan and I grabbed a chair and put it down out in the hallway so he could sit down. And then he would get up and take a few more steps. At this point, Susan had him on one arm, and I had him on one arm and Mrs. Ford would kind of jockey a chair along and then he'd sit down and we got him downstairs and we got him into the bedroom and he said, "I really think I'll stretch out on the bed for a little while." And Susan left the room to go maybe get a glass of water or something and I was there with him by myself and I said, "Is there anything I can get for you?" He said, "Well, I've got some eye shade things I like to wear during the day and the quilt that's at the foot of the bed, would you pull that up over me?" And I pulled the quilt up and he took my hand and just kind of held it between his two hands on the side of the bed and said, "This is nice. It's just like you never left."

Smith: The Kennedy imprimatur, it's funny, he said, "For twenty years everywhere I've gone, people asked the same questions and now they don't ask anymore." It was almost like flipping a switch and it was a gutsy thing on the part of the Kennedys to do. It really was.

Cullen: Oh, it was. Well, and that's another friendship that people probably weren't aware of. His office and John Kennedy's office were right next to each other for a few years anyway, when he first went into Congress. And Edward Kennedy has always been so kind and respectful to the two of them that, you know, like the first couple of times I was around him, I was like, "Where is

this old buddy stuff coming from?”, but I think it kind of stems from the relationship they had with his brother.

Smith: And of course Carolyn came to the library rededication and her brother interviewed President Ford for the magazine.

Cullen: It was one of the first interviews, wasn't it?

Smith: I think so.

Cullen: Yeah.

Smith: And I think at that point, too, President Ford was one of the dwindling number of people who really had known his dad, so I think he was really interested in coming back for the personal level, but they seemed to really hit it off. But, you're right, the one thing that appeared at the time of his death that I took exception to - and I've since talked to Jon Meacham about it - in *Newsweek* and, frankly, it was a very nice story, but it left the suggestion that he had deliberately cultivated liberal historians to sort of shape his legacy.

And, you know, there was no one in the world who gave less thought to how he would be portrayed in future history books.

Cullen: I think he definitely was, “I am what I am. You all interpret it as you will, but I'm not going to try and color it one way or the other.”

Smith: Part of it was he was accessible to pretty much anyone who wanted to see him. There weren't a lot of conservative historians. I mean, by that point, they were all sort of Reaganites and they weren't interested in writing about Gerald Ford. But the fact that people like Bob Woodward, who in some ways was a precursor to the Kennedy library, the fact that Woodward would come around. And Richard Reeves in the mid-1990s, who wrote a piece for *American Heritage* called *I'm Sorry Mr. President*. He had written a very unflattering book during the Ford presidency. But anyway, to counter that notion that he somehow was orchestrating this, he wasn't going to go to the Kennedy Library. He truly was not going to go and I remember getting a call from Ken Duberstein on behalf of the family, saying, “Is there anything that can be done?” And I said, “The one person who can persuade him is Mrs.

Ford. She will realize right away in a way that he might not just how significant this is.”

Cullen: How significant, yes. That he was asked to do that. I mean, I’m so glad he did.

Smith: You know, it’s funny, because she got the Medal of Freedom before he did. I mean, she got a lot of public recognition and yet he seems to have been delighted by this.

Cullen: He loved it. He *loved* the recognition that she got. He was so proud of what she did. I mean, their relationship, they were so in love through all those years and all the ups and downs that when she was getting the accolades, he was more than willing to stand back and be Betty Ford’s husband. I mean, and he used to joke about the fact, “Well, I only made it to President. She made it to Chairman of the Board.”

Smith: I’ve heard stories about the annual reunion event at the Center, he could be seen cooking hotdogs. I mean, he supported her role.

Cullen: Oh, yes. He definitely was the dutiful supporting husband at those things and as I said more than willing to take a step back and let her have the spotlight. He had no qualms about that. He glowed from the reflective glow, I guess.

Smith: But then you wonder if she was in turn pleased when late in life strings were pulled with the Clinton White House to assure that on the 25th anniversary of his inauguration, he received the Medal of Freedom. And it coincided a couple of days before the op-ed piece in the *Times* about affirmative action citing his black friend at the University of Michigan and all of that. There were a bunch of people getting the award that day, but in ways that hadn’t been predicted, he sort of was lionized.

Cullen: The centerpiece.

Smith: Exactly, because of his recent activities. I assume she was as pleased by that as he was by her.

Cullen: Oh, yeah. I think she really liked the fact that with those more recent accolades, proving that he had not been forgotten. That, you know, being President for a short period of time did not mean that his service wasn't worth what other people's were. And I think as we've looked back over the years, the time that he was there, there was a lot that went on. And there is a lot that has happened since that the players are a reflection of his White House.

Smith: What were her politics?

Cullen: Well, President Ford is dead now, so she's not voting the way he told her to, but she didn't then either. He was very dutiful in his support of the Republican Party throughout his entire life. And I came out there as a dutiful registered Republican and she was a dutiful registered Republican. We always voted absentee because we never knew what was going to happen with the schedule and where we were going to be so we always got absentee ballots. And before we would do our ballots, he would sit down with the two of us and go over in great detail why this Republican candidate we should vote for and we would go out of the room and kind of go, "Pfft." And vote the way we wanted to. And we never told him about it, but I think we probably had a majority of other ticket votes in a lot of cases. But we'd listen, we nodded our heads, we said, "Oh, yes, thank you so much. We appreciate your advice" and then we would go and do what we pleased.

Smith: Do you know if she voted in the last year's election?

Cullen: I have no idea. I have no idea.

Smith: She once told me, it was interesting, we were just chatting and out of the blue, she said, "You know, I don't know why people thought it was surprising," almost as if it was something she wasn't allowed to talk about, but just as a matter of course, she always had huge admiration for Eleanor Roosevelt. And she went on about why she thought she was such a great lady.

Cullen: Big deal, her husband was a Democrat. So what?! Yeah, I think she really didn't break things down into party lines very well.

- Smith: It's interesting because, of course, the party moved to the Right, particularly on cultural issues and all of that.
- Cullen: Boy, you aren't kidding.
- Smith: And they were marooned and long before he died every four years they would be a lonely kind of outpost.
- Cullen: Yeah, that moderate Republican that had no base anymore.
- Smith: And, you know, there was the abortion issue and also he's the only President ever to side sign a gay rights petition.
- Cullen: Mhmm.
- Smith: Now, did he change? Did she influence his change? Or how much of it is just by contrast with where the party went? Or is there some mix of the three?
- Cullen: Well, maybe a mix of the three. I guess I mean, the party changed and they were where they were and they stayed where they were. They did not choose to change with the way the party went. And I think she did influence him to a degree, you know, particularly with women's rights issues, maybe even gay rights, but I think they both were people who saw people as people. Who didn't see them as this person goes in this category and this person goes in that category. And they had friends who were just they were their friends. It didn't matter where they came from, where they're going, what they were sexually, professionally, politically. They just enjoyed people and I think they just had that respect for other individuals that it didn't matter to them.
- Smith: I also have thought, the older I get the more I realize ideology matters less than generational. Generational factors trump everything. And he was a conservative of a certain generation where he was clearly fiscally conservative, I mean, he was tight fiscally. Let's face it.
- Cullen: Professionally and personally.
- Smith: Yes. But obviously an internationalist, but then there was this whole host of what now are called social issues which basically people had a decent reticence about. You didn't talk about abortion. You didn't talk about sexual

preference and maybe we should've. But nevertheless, he was a consistent conservative in that he had a healthy skepticism of the government being involved particularly if it was the boardroom or the bedroom.

Cullen: Yeah.

Smith: Unlike today's "conservatives" who hate the government, but they're perfectly willing to enlist it in their cause.

Cullen: Yes, absolutely and I guess those were issues, you know, it's like the whole pardon thing. You do what's right. And that's the way they both were about abortion and gay rights. You do what is the right thing to do. You don't question your own feelings. If your feeling is that people deserve their individual rights, if women deserve the right to choose, then, by God, speak up for it. You can't just have that and tiptoe around it and have people think you think something else, perhaps, because you're not speaking up. I think it was what they believed, so it was what they said.

Smith: Were there issues on which they disagreed or subjects, humorously or otherwise?

Cullen: I'm trying to think. I mean, I'm sure there were things like how much time he spent on the golf course, but if he won, she got the money, so that kind of eased it off.

Smith: Really?

Cullen: Yeah, when there would be bets on the golf course, if he won, he would come in and say, "Okay, here, this is for you." And, believe me, it wasn't much. It wasn't like they were playing \$1,000 a hole or anything.

Smith: That gets back to the frugality.

Cullen: Yes, I mean, he and Bob Hope bet maybe 50 cents a hole or something.

Smith: By the way, I wonder how much of a cautionary tale there was for them in seeing Hope in his last years, and how he was dragged out in public at a time when—

- Cullen: Oh, it was painful. I guess President and Mrs. Ford - their feeling was, "If that's what the Hopes wanted to do, more power to them." And I think, you know, maybe for Delores Hope it was that Bob had always been so in the public eye, he still, even though he was not in the best condition to be in the public eye, she knew that he still enjoyed it. But, yeah, President and Mrs. Ford, I think, were very aware of the decline and not wanting to have the pictures and the press gathering. You know, the deathwatch kind of thing.
- Smith: That's fascinating you say that because I can't tell you how many conversations I had with Penny during those last few years. Once was I actually able to use some contact with ABC to get one camera crew out of the neighborhood. You certainly can understand their feelings, but they were kind of public property. How do you balance?
- Cullen: Yeah, how do you balance it? But there needs to be a degree of respect, I guess, for when people get to a point in their life where they don't view themselves as there for public consumption anymore. And I think that limit is when you are in your declining years. There should be the respect and the dignity afforded you that you get to choose how you go out. That it's not gory details and helicopters hovering over, hoping they're going to see you fall out of your chair on the back porch or something.
- Smith: Well, and let's face it, talk about ethical - apparently sources at the hospital who would tip off the media.
- Cullen: Oh, yeah, "He's here!" Yeah.
- Smith: That must've been frustrating.
- Cullen: I don't know if they've ever figured out who that was, but there's all sorts of stuff that goes on now. So that whoever that person is, they're not going to know if she's ever over there.
- Smith: Maybe I shouldn't bring this up, but remember Father—
- Cullen: Certain?
- Smith: Yeah, whose 15 minutes were kind of—

Cullen: Oh, his 15 minutes were expanded as far as he could expand them. Yes. You know, it's such a shame because he is such a good priest. I mean, he was such a good priest and he did such a nice service, but he just didn't understand when he was told, "Keep your mouth shut." He just, "It does not apply to me somehow." I think he understands now. So, yeah, that was really uncomfortable for everybody. "Quick, turn on the news this morning! He's there again! Didn't someone just talk to him yesterday?!"

Smith: They valued their privacy? Or maybe a better way of saying it was they valued their dignity.

Cullen: They valued their dignity. I mean, I think they both really understood that their privacy was something that they had pretty much given up. I mean, they had Secret Service for all those years. They had me running in and out of their bathrooms. You know, stuff that regular people would be going, "What are you doing here?!" So their privacy had been shot, but their dignity - and I think everybody gets to have respect - and that's all that they were asking for in those last few months of his life. That he had given so much to this country that, you know, let him decide how this is going to end.

Smith: I take it that must have really been her life at that point, caring for him.

Cullen: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. I don't think she really left the house much at all. I mean, she might have gone once a week to get her hair done or something so that she would look nice for him. But that became her job, to make sure that he was taken care of, that he was comfortable, that he had a companion there to talk to, play gin rummy with, you know, watch television with, eat his meals with. That was her role.

Smith: And they insisted on going to Vail.

Cullen: And no one could talk them out of it. I mean, everybody tried. But, you know, they loved the house up there. They both loved the house. They loved the people up there. It was a wonderful life up there.

Smith: And by all accounts, they were loved, beloved.

- Cullen: Oh, they were the mainstay of that community, pretty much. And they loved being there. I was very lucky in that, you know, I got dragged up every year. You know, I went up there. Penny and I would go and spend the summers up there. It's not a bad duty to live in Rancho Mirage part of the year and Vail the other part of the year.
- Smith: What was the house like?
- Cullen: The house was - I'm going to say - a traditional Alpine house that grew like Topsy. It started out, I think, with maybe four bedrooms on the second level and then, when they realized that if they put a pool in the back, they were going to have to dig into the mountain. And once they had opened up the mountain, they might as well blow the back of the house out, so then there was a theater room and another bedroom and another bedroom. It probably was twice the size as they originally intended it to be, but it served their family very well because everybody could be there at Christmastime and eventually the families got big enough that they kind of only overlapped for maybe one or two nights, but they could all be there. And I think that was important to all of them. They had done it since the kids were high school age or something, whenever Vail first started, and they had had a condo in town.
- Smith: And did they as late as '95 for example, did they still, did the family gather?
- Cullen: Well, I left in February of '96, so yeah, I mean, Christmas of '95—
- Smith: Forgive me, I meant literally 2005, the year before he died, would they still be trying to assemble?
- Cullen: 2005... You know, I can't answer that question, but I sort of think so, because that summer was when they went up and they had a limited time. You know, I'm just not sure because the couple of years that they didn't go out there was like the year that she had her heart surgery which was right before Christmas. Everybody came to the desert.
- Smith: And how, I mean obviously it was serious, was it something that had been in the works for awhile or something that presumably could not be put off any longer?

Cullen: Her surgery?

Smith: Yeah.

Cullen: Yeah, it was at the time that her second book came out and I was with her doing a book tour and we used to say that the book tour was a death march with room service. And the book tour ended and we came back to the desert and she started to not feel great and, you know, didn't think anything really seriously of it, but went in and had a check-up and they said, "Oh, wait a minute, there's some blockage here." And it was like, "You've got five days and you're going to be in the hospital." So she went in and they had to go in a second time because she had some, I don't know if the stitches didn't adhere properly or something, but all of a sudden, she started bleeding at the dining room table one night while everyone was there at Christmas, I think, because I was in Vail skiing for Christmas and suddenly got this phone call saying, "Mrs. Ford's gone back to the hospital." And it was taken care of but then she got a staph infection which was quite lovely.

Smith: How did he handle that?

Cullen: I think he was scared to death and he didn't quite know what to do. He wanted to make it better, but he knew he couldn't make it better; so therefore, it just was not a good place for him to be.

Smith: I can't imagine him imagining life without her.

Cullen: Oh, yeah.

Smith: He always assumed that he would go first.

Cullen: You know, and I think she, because of her health issues, thought that perhaps she would go first just because her body had been damaged by other things. But I think she also knew that he wouldn't function very well without her, so it was best that it happened the way it did.

Smith: I've heard her quoted since as saying to someone, I guess not surprisingly, "I don't know why I'm still here."

Cullen: Mhmm. She doesn't have a job anymore.

- Smith: Now she's told people she's retired. That it's her choice, which sounds voluntary. Must be an enormous amount of satisfaction. I mean how many people create an institution and then have the satisfaction of knowing while they're still alive that's its future is ensured, because Susan is doing what she's doing?
- Cullen: Absolutely and Susan's doing a fabulous job with it. I mean, it's been really interesting to watch Susan step into that role.
- Smith: Very big shoes.
- Cullen: Scary shoes, I would think.
- Smith: Well, sure. Does Mrs. Ford follow the progress of the place?
- Cullen: Yeah. Now, I'm not sure today if she's following it on a day-to-day basis, but when she was chairman, she knew everything that went on at that place, much to John Schwarzlose's chagrin on some of the occasions, I'm afraid. And after Susan took over, her mother still stayed very actively involved in what was going on. And then she tried to back off a bit. I think some people kind of wanted her to stay involved and were shuffling Susan aside, as you know, "She's just a little girl. She can't do this." So, Susan had to kind of get a ramrod back and step up and say, "Wait a minute. I'm the one that's doing this now. My mother is not and if you don't believe me, you can ask her, because this is what she wants me to do." And it's worked out nicely, but it took some doing on Susan's part, I think, because for a long, long time, she was just the Ford's little girl and she's not anymore.
- Smith: What kind of grandparent is Mrs. Ford?
- Cullen: Doting. She's the kind of grandmother which I understand today, having a grandchild of my own, that when the grandchildren were there and she had had about enough of the noise and the commotion, she would retire to her room. She would just disappear and there were times I thought, "Don't you want to be here playing with the kids?" But now it's something I understand fully, it's like, "Oh, please, quiet! Peace!"
- Smith: Was the President like that as well?

Cullen: Well, he always had the office, you know, so it was, “I have to make some calls,” you know, “I’ll be back.” So he could plan his escape and everyone accepted that a little more. But she had a system and I don’t remember how it worked now, but from the time the first grandchildren were around, where they got so much money a month from grandma, and, like, half of it they could spend and half of it had to go into the bank. And as they got older, it increased and then, you know, the new grandchildren came up and then I think it got to be a pretty healthy chunk of change she was handing out there, but she thought that would be good for them to have their own money and to know that they had to put some of it away, they couldn’t blow it all.

Smith: Was she the kind of grandmother - you know, there are some kind of grandparents who could talk to grandkids about things that parents can’t.

Cullen: I would imagine that she is one of those grandmothers because I could always talk to her about anything. I mean, there was stuff I’d think, “There is no way I’d have this conversation with my mother, but having it with you is perfectly okay.” So I think, yeah, she’s very open and, you know, I think if anyone came to her with a question or concern, she certainly would not be the type to say, “Oh, no, you have to talk to your parents about that.” She would be, “Oh, you came to me. Okay, well, sit down right here and let’s chat.”

Smith: Mary Fisher told us that I think she may actually have told Mrs. Ford before she told her own parents—

Cullen: That she was HIV positive.

Smith: Yes, and they cried and they laughed and then she said, “Now, you’ve got to tell the President.” And she said, “Oh, no, I can’t do that” and so on and so on. Finally she prevailed on her to do so. And it’s good because I asked her, “Did you ever see him angry?” And she said, “There were two times and one was a professional thing back at the White House” and this was the other time. She said, “He was so angry” and it’s the sort of reaction you would expect from a father, not from a friend of the family.

Cullen: Yeah. Well, when I was leaving and moving back to the East Coast, Susan had called me and said, “Hey, since you’re going to drive back, I’ll fly out to

the desert and I'll drive back with you." Well, after President and Mrs. Ford found out that we had this plan, I mean, neither one of us was a 20-year old little innocent. I was 50-years old, I think, at the time. Well, maybe not quite that old, but I was getting close. And the intercom rings and he says, "Ann, would you come into my office?" "Okay, what have I done now?" And he said, "Sit down for a minute." So I sit down across from him at the desk and he says, "Now, I understand from Susan that the two of you are planning to drive across country. It's not going to happen. There are axe murders," and, I mean, he went through this whole tirade of, "You girls cannot do that. You can't." And I finally said, "Well, sir, okay, I guess you can tell Susan that she can't do it, but I've got a car and a couple of cats and I'm going to have to figure a way to get across country somehow." So, and this is off the record, Susan and I drove across country and he never knew.

Smith: Do you think he was sensitive, I assume she was, to this public impression about his clumsiness - you know, the whole Chevy Chase business by contrast with his real athleticism?

Cullen: I think it ticked her off. I think he just kind of was, "Pfft." It was no big deal. And I remember one time there was some event in LA where Chevy Chase was there and they ended up sitting up at the same table together or something and he gave him a hard time about the hard time that Chevy Chase gave him about falling down. You know, I think he just kind of thought, "Well, the photographers were there, they took the pictures, you can't refute that. I know what I'm capable of doing." But I think she hated the fact that people always brought that up.

Smith: He was astonishingly comfortable in his own skin.

Cullen: He was. He knew himself so well and was so comfortable and just, you know, "Take a pot shot, I know who I am. It doesn't bother me." I mean, that always was my read on him - he didn't care what people thought because he knew who he was.

Smith: Just a couple other things and we'll wind up.

Do you have any other memories of that last week either at the cathedral or Grand Rapids? For example, I'm sure you've done this when you were in a position like that, I remember when I was talking, just being in a fog. You know, I was just focused. They were sitting right in front of me, which in some ways makes it harder.

Cullen: But the rest is just a blur.

Smith: Exactly. But I remember that for some odd Roselyn Carter was weeping. And I thought to myself, "Talk about coming full circle. That says it all."

Cullen: Well, I thought President Carter, the way he started and ended his eulogy with the line from his inaugural address, that was so touching. And when President Bush, Sr. went up to do his eulogy and he walked by the casket and tapped it, I thought that was—

Smith: And you knew he didn't want to break down.

Cullen: Mhmm. And there were a couple of times he kind of—

Smith: Exactly. Yeah.

Cullen: Yeah, the evening in California with the public viewing, I went over late one night with Greg Willard. We had heard about the crowd that was there and we wanted to see it. And we walked over. The Secret Service was around the side, and we walked into the church, where a huge line of people was waiting. And there was a Marine standing in line. I remember this exactly correctly. There was a rope across so that people could just walk up near the casket, and then they had to move off to the sides. Greg went up to this young Marine in uniform and said, "Sir, why don't you come with me?" And I walked up with the Marine and Greg. Greg took the stanchion down and walked us right next to the casket. The Marine stood there for a moment, then came to attention and snapped a salute. I thought I was going to fall down with emotion!

Smith: What kind of relationship did they have with the Secret Service?

Cullen: Love/hate.

Smith: That's an honest answer.

- Cullen: For the most part, I think they really liked the people that were in the Secret Service. They respected the job they were doing, but there were times they just wished they would get lost.
- Smith: Just because of the intrusion?
- Cullen: The fact that they had to know every second of their lives. But they also recognized that how would they have gotten around without them? Neither one of them had a driver's license, and having been on a golf cart with him once when he was driving, it was a good thing.
- Smith: What do you think they'd think about Squeaky Fromme being released?
- Cullen: You know, I wonder if Mrs. Ford's even aware of it. I mean, I'm sure she reads the paper and watches the news.
- Smith: And, of course, Sara Jane Moore recently.
- Cullen: Yeah, uhm, I don't know what she would think of it. Maybe, "You've served your time" and I'm sure at the time she was scared to death when all that was happening.
- Smith: That gave her a particular - I don't know how you would ever fully shake - that sense of vulnerability.
- Cullen: Yeah.
- Smith: Having been through it twice. So that even long after you've left office, there's still this lingering.
- Cullen: That fear. And, you know, there are always nuts out there. And, you know, at the time that I guess when the first sort of terrorist attacks were going on and suddenly out in front of the office there were the concrete buttresses and all that stuff going on and you thought, "Boy, it just kind of never ends."
- Smith: The other thing is I've heard stories about how every week, one day a week, he'd set aside for autographing.
- Cullen: With Lee and they would just sit there and sign and sign and sign.

- Smith: And people have no idea. And on occasion, she would go in. He would be the goad, “Now, mother, you’ve got to...” and they would be at the opposite ends of the table with their piles and I’ve often thought about that as a metaphor because once he was removed, once that goad disappeared, if her life would change in ways more than most. I mean, most widows have the luxury of living a private life.
- Cullen: Yes, and I think she tries to live and fairly successfully to this point has chosen to live a private life. She kind of dedicates herself now to children and grandchildren and that’s the visiting that she does.
- Smith: And I assume there’s just the fundamental fact that when you’re 91, you’ve probably outlived most of your friends.
- Cullen: And there is that. I think that’s got to be a hard thing for her because like Lee Annenberg has just died recently. Delores Hope is still around, but I certainly don’t think they see each other because Delores is not able to get around as much and certainly Mrs. Ford is not going out to parties and out for dinner. And so, yeah, they both had outlived a large, large percentage of their friends.
- Smith: I had a sense and I don’t want to exaggerate it, but in the times that I was around them - that they really made an effort to surround themselves with younger people.
- Cullen: Well, I don’t know if they really made an effort or if they just liked people and it just got to a point that the younger people who were the ones who were kind of filling the spots that were available. You know, if you’ve got 20 friends that you’re going to have around you, you want to keep those spots filled, so younger people came in and they enjoyed that. I don’t think they really necessarily sought out, “Okay, we need younger friends, because that’s going to keep us younger” but it was, “We’ve lost so much of our group.” And, I mean, they did so many social things. They went so many places where they could meet and get to know younger people, so that they could bring them into their group.
- Smith: And all of the trappings didn’t get in the way of making new friends?

Cullen: No, because I think at first, the first time you met them it was kind of, “(gasp) This is a former President and First Lady,” and “Oh, I’ve heard so much about them,” and then after you’ve been around them a couple of times, you realize that, “These are really just genuinely nice people. I don’t have to worry about what I’m going to say. I don’t have to worry about whether my tie is straight or using the right fork or whatever. These are just people who like other people and I can be myself.”

Smith: What would make her angry?

Cullen: Me. I’m trying to think what would make her angry. What would make her angry was that she had agreed to do a speech and then she had to do it. And therefore we had to come up with the speech and therefore she had to have me give her something that she could start working on and she didn’t want to do it and so therefore I became the bad guy there for a while. But she didn’t get angry at a whole lot of things.

Smith: What would disappoint her?

Cullen: If her children, not that they failed, but if something went wrong with one of the kids that they hadn’t gotten something that they wanted, she would be disappointed *for* them, not *in* them. I don’t know what else. I guess she would be disappointed that perhaps her husband in a certain circumstance didn’t get the respect that she thought was due because, you know, she knew what a great guy he was and thought that everybody else should know what a great guy he was.

Smith: I love the image: We were told when we were out there at Rancho Mirage in the summer that on occasion they would go to the movies. And they remember she walked out of *Titanic* I think right after the ship hit the iceberg because she didn’t want to see the rest. And so literally she was out in the lobby.

Cullen: I’m not aware. That was after I was gone.

Smith: There’s a wonderful story someone told us, one of the gals working out there. It wasn’t Penny.

[Other]: Marie?

Smith: No, one of the women on the staff. They'd gone to a movie over the weekend and he came back from some romantic comedy and he came back and said, "You'd really like it. It's a chick flick."

Cullen: I'm sure he got that term from her. A 'chick flick'. Yeah, not exactly his terminology.

Smith: Did they enjoy going out like that or was it problematic?

Cullen: It was problematic in that they couldn't just go out and be themselves and just spend an evening enjoying being out with each other because there was always somebody that would come up and say, "Oh, can I have your autograph?" You know, they would be in a nice restaurant having dinner, just the two of them, the Secret Service discreetly over somewhere trying to be unobtrusive, and there would be someone who would come up with their napkin or something and say, "Oh, Mr. President, can I have your autograph?" And for the most part, he was pretty good about it. Every once in a while, it would just be, "Enough."

Smith: Tell me about his temper.

Cullen: It was there and it was gone.

Smith: Summer thunderstorm.

Cullen: Yeah, it was white light and then it was calm, but you didn't want to be in there when it was white light. Well, we used to - I don't know if anyone else has told you that we used to - call them 'God damn it' days. And it would be, you know, "Oh, this is a seven 'God damn it' day" or "This is just a two 'God damn it' day." So, when he was really upset about something, it would be "God damn it" this, "God damn it" that, and "God damn it" the other thing. And you know you wouldn't want to go in the office if it was a seven.

Smith: That was the worst language you heard?

Cullen: Yeah, that was the very worst.

- Smith: One sensed that he was genuinely offended by the Nixon tapes as much as anything else because of the language.
- Cullen: Yeah, I think he just couldn't believe that there would be that kind of talk because he just didn't do that. I mean, as I say, "God damn it," that was pretty much it for him. She, on the other hand, might have had a couple of other words in her vocabulary, but we won't go into that.
- Smith: One of the most moving of all of our conversations has been with Lorraine, the cook. What an extraordinary story. She never had been on an airplane and was scared to death and the President convinced her that everything was going to be fine. And then, of course, she'd never seen snow and he took her to the ski school and, you know, it's almost a paternal feeling.
- Cullen: Yeah, all of us who worked for him I think he kind of took, I mean, he and Mrs. Ford referred to themselves as my second parents to me. So I think they really felt that. There may have been people that worked for them that they didn't have that relationship with, but there were a lot of us that they did. They felt very protective and, you know, if we were dating someone that they didn't quite like, we heard about it.
- Smith: Did you have to introduce—
- Cullen: I mean, on occasion, I introduced them to people and, you know, when I would be going out with a Secret Service agent or something, I would get this look like, "Oh, you can do better than that." But I had a good friend that I'd grown up with in Dover who was a priest at Grace Episcopal in Grand Rapids while we were doing a lot of traveling back and forth to Grand Rapids. So, when I would go to Grand Rapids with the Fords and we would be staying in the hotel, I would get in touch with John and say, "I'm going to be in town. Let's go have a drink. Let's go have dinner" or something. And he would come to the hotel to get me and the only deal was he had to come in full regalia, big cross, dog collar, black suit, the whole bit. And the agents would be, "What?! She's dating a priest? What is this?!" And John and I just thought it was hysterical.
- Smith: You still talk with her?

Cullen: I do on occasion. I write to her now more than I talk to her just because I think, I mean, I like to talk to her, but I think sometimes it's tiring for me to be on the phone with her and keep asking questions and, "How are you?" and "What's been happening?" I can tell her more about what's going on with me if I put it in the written word and send it to her and then I call every once in a while and we just have a chat. It's amazing how much a part of my life they both were, are.

Smith: We asked everyone how they think the Fords should be remembered historically, but in a more personal way, because you're in a position to answer that question in a much more personal way than most, how do you remember them?

Cullen: Very kind, caring, thoughtful, just really good friends. I mean, they opened their lives to me without reservation and I think I kind of gave that back to them and we spent a lot of time together over the years I was out there and we did become very close. And I can't believe that I had that opportunity to be with them and to do the traveling I did with them and to meet the people that I met through them and it was amazing.

Smith: Were they fun to travel with?

Cullen: They were. They could be very interesting in that he always wanted to get on the plane first and she always wanted to get on last, so it was always this big discussion in the car and then it would be, "Well, okay, God damn it. I'm getting on. You come when you're ready." You know, things like that, but it was fun and, yeah, I would drag cats back and forth to Vail in private planes.

Smith: You must have met lots of interesting people.

Cullen: I met lots of interesting people. Brent Scowcroft taught me to drink Saki in Tokyo. Stayed with the sultan of Oman's cousin in Oman in his house and, you know, just amazing people that I got to meet.

Smith: Were you with them when the Clintons visited them in Vail?

Cullen: Yes.

Smith: How was that?

Cullen: That was very cordial and, you know, they stayed in the Firestone's house next door, so, you know, it was terrace to terrace, they just had to walk across a little piece of grass to get from house to house. I do remember there was a dinner party one night that may have been down at the Betty Ford Alpine Garden and it was something for the ballet that was in town. And Mrs. Ford sat next to him, to President Clinton, at dinner and I had gone to the dinner and I rode back up to the house with them afterwards. And we were sitting around talking and I think she was getting undressed and I was in the dressing room with her and we were just sitting there talking about the evening and she said, "That is the most charming man I have ever met in my life." So, she saw what was there apparently. And, well, Mrs. Clinton had been an intern in the Ford White House and she brought the picture, I think, to show him that had been taken. They got along very well.

Smith: Perfect. That's perfect.

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