

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**Aram Bakshian**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
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Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this. We really appreciate it.

Bakshian: My pleasure.

Smith: You were in the Nixon administration?

Bakshian: Yes.

Smith: We're interested in your story before the Ford story, but also in the larger context. One of the themes that we are exploring is the degree to which – particularly early in the Ford administration – there was or wasn't an integration of the Nixon holdovers with the incoming Ford staff.

Bakshian: There was some, but that was pretty quick. I was the only Nixon speechwriter who was actually kept indefinitely. When I quit, it was in the autumn of '75 because I'd been offered a fellowship at Harvard at the Institute of Politics and it was my idea. But within a few weeks, maybe less, I forget now, it's been a while, of the turnover, most of the writing staff was leaving or was planning to leave, or was told they wouldn't be there. There was one other writer, John Coyne, who was kept for more than just a pro forma courtesy period, but then left. And one by one, or several at a time, the Ford staff came in. When I left there was no one left who had been a Nixon speechwriter, and there had even been some shifts in the power balance of the Ford dynamic – Hartmann and so on.

Smith: It is interesting – maybe I'm biased, but I sense that the speechwriting operation is in many ways a metaphor of the Ford White House, its strengths and weaknesses.

Bakshian: The factions, too.

Smith: The factions and the trajectory, which you may or may not accept, of seeing someone thrust into this position and having not only to learn the job, but in

some ways unlearn the congressional mindset - the distinction between leading in Congress and leading as an executive.

Bakshian: Oh, very much so. And just having an office of a handful of handpicked people that you've worked with for years and a much bigger bureaucracy – nothing like the vast federal bureaucracy – but the White House is a much bigger machine than a congressional office. Actually, my impression was that Jerry Ford made the transition very well and became a very good president very quickly. The problem was a number of people, especially those who were about his age, sometimes a little bit older, who had for years been working in the small town on the Hill with him; who came in and they were sort of eaten by the machine or weren't up to it. In some cases they were up to it and in some cases they weren't up to it. And in other cases they just butted heads.

Gradually, as happens with most administrations, Washington regulars and power types are more in charge. Even the first year that starts to change. It happened in the Reagan White House, it happened in the Nixon White House. There were friends that each in their own time had had in California, for example, or had known on the Hill, in the case of Nixon, who were in the campaign and were in the administration briefly, but were marginalized. The same thing happened with a vengeance with Jerry Ford because it was such a tough time. I had nothing but respect for him, and I also think he probably got one of the most bum raps of any of our presidents thanks to the media, and also not just the media – the temper of the times because of what had happened before him. It was like taking over a sinking ship that was also in rather ill-repute at the time.

Smith: When you think of the popular culture, it's almost a parallel if you look at Britain in the late '50s, early '60s, with *That Was The Week That Was*. Harold Macmillan was the perfect target for that kind of humor. Here it went beyond irreverence - Saturday Night Live represents a wave in the culture.

Bakshian: It was a very adolescent age, and there was no check on it. Eventually, even some of the people who were doing the most nasty stuff felt badly about it and grew up. But also I think the public [got sick of it].

Smith: Some of them wound up at the Betty Ford Center.

Bakshian: This was like dumping drugs into the water system. The public had never seen all that before, so it was swept away with this massive cynicism, sarcasm. Then it got its balance as the American public usually does, but it takes a little while. And, I mean, here you had economic dislocation, the Vietnam mess, and then the Watergate thing – all piled one after the other. The country has never been through those sorts of crises of confidence. The one other president that had the whole world falling on him was Herbert Hoover, but that was a different age and a different set of circumstances.

Smith: Let's go back – tell me about how you came into the Nixon White House, and how that operated.

Bakshian: I used to say I got it through a want ad in the *New York Times*. It wasn't quite that. I'd worked on the Hill for then-Representative Bill Brock, and I'd also been a speechwriter for Bob Dole as chairman of the Republican National Committee, not on his Senate staff. So I had a background in speechwriting and in Republican matters. Those are just two of the various things I had done in that department.

But it happened that at the very beginning of '72, I wrote an OpEd piece as a conservative, as a writer, because I wrote pretty regularly for *National Review*, Bill Buckley's magazine. A group called, I forget whether they called themselves the Manhattan Twelve or what, but at any rate, pushed the Ashbrook candidacy, Representative Ashbrook from Ohio, as a conservative Republican to run against Nixon in the primary in New Hampshire, which was then – well, everything happened a little later then – and it was the first in the nation. I wrote a piece suggesting that it was cutting their nose off to spite their face because Ashbrook would probably do so badly that if anything, it would lead the administration to pay less attention to the squeaky wheels on the right. That, in fact, he would probably be outperformed by Pete McClosky, who was a liberal Republican, who was running and who did get about twice as many votes. So that it was a self-destructive, silly tactic.

I didn't write this with anything in mind about the White House – that was just my opinion, but as I found out later, at about this time the White House

was getting ready to gear up to add two new speechwriters or three – I think three, to the staff with the idea that there was a campaign coming on and so on. And also that they needed some fresh blood anyway, new blood. Not fresh blood – makes it sound vampirish. But anyway, I don't know, about a week afterwards, after that OpEd piece ran, I had a phone call from a Mr. Clark in White House personnel who asked me to come in – they were looking for speechwriters. And then I was interviewed by Ray Price, who was in charge of the speechwriting shop at the time; and Dave Gergen, who was his deputy, almost like the office manager for the operation in those days, or the managing editor. And then they decided to hire me.

But it had just happened, and I later found out, I think, as a result of seeing my files when I was leaving the White House at the end of the Ford period – or maybe it was actually the Freedom of Information Act at the end of the Reagan period. I finally, actually, took a look and saw that several people had apparently read the article, including Chuck Colson - that's the one name that comes to mind, I would have liked it otherwise – who had seen the article and said Price is looking for some speechwriters, here's somebody... Oh, and the squib on the New York Times thing said, "Has served as a speechwriter to the chairman of the National Committee." So there is a Republican speechwriting tie.

Anyway, so that's how it happened. And then as the campaign wound down, and I think the day after the election, everyone had to tender their resignation on the White House staff, but you knew that some people were going to be asked to stay and get a promotion and others' resignations were going to be accepted. Of the new hires, I was the only one that was kept and they got rid of several other people and so on.

Smith: That must have been a real downer. Here you scored this extraordinary victory, and Nixon himself writes about how he felt strangely unfulfilled.

Bakshian: He sensed, at some point he acknowledged also, he thought it was a mistake to do that, I think. I don't know if that was in conversations that have come to light subsequently, or what. I just read something recently, I hadn't heard about it before.

- Smith: I mean, was it part of his dream of drastically overhauling the federal establishment?
- Bakshian: Very much so, because at that point, he was poised to – Vietnam was being phased out – he was poised to launch a series of major initiatives, some of which might have settled problems like healthcare back there. Or at least taken us a step further down the road to reconciling what the government would be. And that’s what he thought. He also felt that after four years, there are a lot of discardable people – and there were people who hadn’t been carrying their load during the campaign. Some of the people who were let go had it richly coming to them. Those who didn’t, and even some who did, were given a job somewhere in the government if they needed it. They weren’t just kicked out into the cold. But the idea of asking everyone for their resignation was one of those things that sounds like a good shock tactic, but is probably bad for morale. It’s the old Voltairian ploy of shooting one of the admirals to encourage the others or something. [reference to British Admiral Bye]
- Smith: During the campaign, of course, the Watergate break in occurs. Were there conversations about this?
- Bakshian: Yeah, but early on – remember, first of all, we were in the middle of a campaign, so we were all very busy with other things. Watergate becomes almost an obsession with some of the staffers when it’s in the defense mode afterwards. Also, nobody – only a real handful of people – had any idea, knew about the Plumbers or anything like that. So at the time of the break in, it was an odd news story and that was about it.
- Smith: The reaction that we get is everyone said it makes no sense. It’s stupid, it’s too stupid for us to do.
- Bakshian: That’s right. You felt it couldn’t possibly involve higher ups because higher ups can’t be that dumb. Ha ha.
- Smith: When we asked Pat Buchanan, I asked him, “When did you first hear about it? And when did you first read about it?” He said, “Oh I didn’t read about it. I got a telephone call. And as soon as I heard about it, I knew it had to be somebody on our side, and because, he said, they were getting material out of the Muskie campaign regularly.

Bakshian: Pat was involved much more in the partisan stuff, plus he had been working with Nixon. He had more of a personal line to Nixon and to the senior people that was separate from – he wasn't writing that many speeches anymore. His office was right next door to mine after I came in. He basically had a staff that put out the news digest, which he was very interested in - media handling - and wrote one or two speeches like Safire. But when Ray Price was made head of speechwriting after the departure of Keogh, because Pat, Safire and Ray had been co-equal senior writers, when Ray was put in charge of the day to day operations, the others were given autonomy and roving commissions. Which meant they also spent more time on campaign strategy and schmoozing with people who involved in these things. I'm happy to say I didn't know much about it.

Smith: Richard Nixon famously said of himself that he was an introvert in an extrovert's profession.

Bakshian: Yeah. He was the door to door salesman with bad feet.

Smith: I always said the most remarkable thing about the Nixon presidency is not how it ended, but that it ever happened at all.

Bakshian: That he ever got there.

Smith: Yeah.

Bakshian: Now, he's not a person one gets sentimental about, but I had two long conversations with him when he was working on his memoirs and I was out there to just help with some of the early years. Had two long, several hour conversations with him where I got to know him better than I had known him in the White House as a fairly late arrival, and his was a very insulated Oval Office. Very different from Jerry Ford's or Reagan's. Also I was more senior with Reagan. But, Nixon was a man who went into politics partially out of ambition. You've got to have ambition to put up with the aggravation, but who wanted to do good things for the country and also with the world view. He got burnt very early unjustly, which then made him very snappish.

Smith: Was that the fund crisis?

Bakshian: That sort of thing and also where he really became the enemy as far as the liberal media was concerned, was where he was absolutely right. And he was never an acolyte of Joe McCarthy's, but he is a House member who is investigating Alger Hiss. And he was right about Hiss, and the liberal establishment was wrong. Hiss was a Communist agent, the former Soviet archives have proven that. But at the time he [Nixon] was lumped in with McCarthy, and then was a target forever. And not being the most prepossessing winning personality, not a Reagan personality, and being easily bruised, it fed on itself. The media disliked him more and more; he disliked them more and more. Both sides developed a pathology about each other. It was very tragic because he wanted to be a good president and his motive for doing it – Johnson wanted to be a good president, but he was also an egomaniac – Nixon was not a egomaniac in that sense. He didn't want to brand the nation and make everybody have a first name that started with L and middle name that started with B and a last one with J.

Smith: Rex Scouten told us something I found extraordinary.

Bakshian: There's a man who has seen a lot.

Smith: And he's very discrete. Very appropriately.

Bakshian: That's why he was allowed to see so much for so long.

Smith: But he did tell us, as a Nixon Secret Service agent in the '50s, the family out in California had a room for him. I mean, they were that close. One day, out of the blue, on a plane, Nixon just started sort of pounding the edge of his seat for no reason in particular, and said, "I've got to be tougher. I'm not tough enough." Just a remarkable non-sequitar, but clearly revealing of some kind of inner turmoil.

Bakshian: He always thought he was not tough enough – that he was being ground down by external circumstances and that was because he wasn't being tough enough, ruthless enough. He needed to be smarter, he needed to get outside of his own head and see things a little more clearly. Ronald Reagan knew that he had press, a media establishment that was largely hostile, but he didn't let it get to him. The most angry I ever saw him was when he was a bit annoyed about coverage of some Republican fundraiser where they talked about how

many fur coats the women were wearing, as if at Democratic fundraisers there aren't women wearing fur coats. But it was just a slightly peeved remark and then he was smiling and talking about something else. Whereas, Nixon could brood for days at a time. Johnson also, as Vietnam got worse, became obsessed that way.

Smith: There are people who brood, who need enemies. Willa Cather said there is such a thing as positive hate. And I wonder if Nixon had some of that.

Bakshian: If you look at people who live to a great old age, they are usually very benevolent, or their hate keeps them warm and keeps them going. Their grudges, rewriting their will every other week – writing out this person or that.

Smith: In Julie's book, remember that wonderful line where not that long after he left office, Pat said to him some expression of astonishment at how he kept going and so on. And he said, "I just get up every day to confound my enemies." Which, on one hand is a great line, but it's also sad in some ways.

Bakshian: Well, it wasn't living well is the best revenge, but simply living is the best revenge. Although I think once he recovered from the basic shock of resignation, he became a more balanced person and took an increasingly more objective view of things afterwards.

Smith: Really? Including Watergate?

Bakshian: Yeah, gradually. And also, as he saw and recognized it. He asked me something when I was out there, because the memoir work was occurring after the '76 elections, actually before the inaugural. It was late in the year, and then I was back in January. And at one point he asked me, he really wanted to know what people – how with Carter coming in and this election – he said, "How do you think people are going to feel now about Jerry Ford?" I said, "Well, I'll tell you one thing. I think they are going to feel increasingly better about him as they see more of Jimmy Carter." Which is exactly what happened. And I also sort of meant, and I think that's what he was looking for, that once Jimmy Carter started screwing up on his own with that special gift that he had, people would then get a clearer view – especially of Ford – but also just generally.

Smith: Did he offer an opinion on Ford?

Bakshian: He liked Jerry Ford. Now, because he always felt he had to prove he was tough, if he was talking to the boys, sometimes he would say things, I'm sure, somewhere that were a little less than flattering, but he always, first of all, he knew that Jerry Ford was straight and solid - that he hadn't cut a deal with Jerry Ford - and that Jerry Ford for the good of the nation had done something generous for him. And also, out of compassion for him, had been very kind. And he always respected that. Plus he knew Jerry Ford morally, ethically, and as a man who understood the workings of government. He probably felt that Jerry Ford wasn't tough enough with anyone, but that would have been what he thought about everybody.

Smith: It's funny, something just dawned on me. Ford, until he got the Profiles in Courage award, he said, "For twenty years, everywhere I go, people ask the same question. After that they stopped asking." Which tells you something about the imprimatur of the Kennedys. But it occurs to me, Ford spent the rest of his life being asked that question. I don't think anyone ever asked Nixon that question.

Bakshian: No. Well, I think first of all, if there was an interesting answer, he wasn't going to give it, I don't believe, anyway. And also Nixon was fairly selective about whom he talked to. But, you're right, for example, David Frost, who probed into all sorts of things, I don't think even touched on that.

Smith: Isn't that amazing? For people who weren't around then, can you convey some idea of what it felt like inside the White House as this thing unfolded? And was there a "Eureka" moment or just a gathering sense?

Bakshian: Toward the end, although even then it seemed unreal that a presidency could be toppled the way it was - but it was a death of a thousand cuts. You were bleeding but you were losing blood very gradually. Yet there were certain moments when you thought, well, another brick in the foundation just crumbled. First John Dean - well, the tapes.

Smith: Were you surprised?

Bakshian: Not entirely, because I had heard – not about his taping – but that there had been various things like that around. And as it turned out, even more than I knew. Ike even apparently always turned it on when he was having a one on one with Nixon, interestingly enough. Because it was something he would activate voluntarily, as opposed to a 24 hour automatic system. And FDR had wiretaps and so on.

Smith: Sure.

Bakshian: But I was surprised, first of all, it was almost a chance question, because I don't think the committee, unless there is something I don't know about that they knew about – I think they were just fishing around, and they happened to be talking to the guy who'd been assigned to do that, and who was under oath and who wasn't about to be a martyr for somebody he probably didn't even know very well and wasn't that crazy about.

Smith: I was going to say, was Butterfield regarded as something of a traitor?

Bakshian: Maybe by the fruit of the looms, but he was a man who was there under oath and was asked a direct question. It wasn't a matter of whether you remembered what happened in a meeting at some point, but was something you'd been in charge of running. So it would be like expecting the head of the motor pool to deny that he had anything to do with the choice of tires or whatever.

Smith: How was the President functioning through all of this? And particularly as it got worse?

Bakshian: Well, I'm sure he had his bad hours and bad days, but there were still vast amounts of governance stuff going through, including large amounts of foreign policy statements; and in the early phase of the second term, of policy initiatives. And I know for a fact that he was focused on – you could see mark ups and questions that would come back about speech drafts on policy and his input. So, he was able to compartmentalize to a large extent. He'd been compartmentalizing all of his life because there was such a conflict between who he was and what sort of personality he had, and wanting to be doing what he was doing. He did have an iron self-discipline, but it ate away at him. I'm

sure that phlebitis, for example, the blood clot leading to that – was stress related to a large extent. But that was an internalizing of the strain.

Smith: Let me ask you something awkward, but for the historical record, much has been written, perhaps too much has been made that suggests that maybe he had a drinking problem, at least at this point. That somehow it was a factor.

Bakshian: I think that's been exaggerated. I think he may have taken a drink occasionally – at night especially in family quarters. But he was never somebody who – and I know people who had known him since he was a congressman, and have always complained about - if he might call up somebody to give them a deep background during the Hiss thing, for example, [invite them] to his house in Spring Valley and how chintzy he was with booze. Because journalists being journalists in those days, they drank a lot and they thought he had this one bottle of Scotch probably for two years and he might have been watering it. So he had no history of drinking. Maybe there was some midnight drinking once or twice in the last days of his presidency. But a lot of this goes back to one or two episodes that are second and third hand. Kissinger, for example, was a source of one story where it's not even – I'm not clear how much Kissinger really described and how much is other people's descriptions of Kissinger's description to someone else.

Smith: And I guess by most accounts, he was the kind of drinker where one drink was about all he could take.

Bakshian: The sort of people that are found on the pavement on St. Patrick's Day because once a year they...

Smith: The Agnew thing. We talked to Jerry Jones who had been asked by Haldeman to reorganize the personnel office. And he got a call – Haldeman was still there – so this would be early spring of '73, and he wanted to know how many people worked directly for the Vice President. And Jones did some figuring and said around fifty. Haldeman said he wanted undated letters of resignation from all of them. Which raises, to me at least, a couple interesting possibilities: one, they were unhappy with the Vice President that day and Nixon gave him one of these off with his head orders; or two, which seems to

be more likely, they knew long before the *Wall Street Journal* ever wrote the story that the Vice President was at the very least, under investigation.

Bakshian: I suspect that they knew that there was a distinct possibility that something might happen. So this was working on that eventuality, and that also raises an interesting question. I don't know whether the Vice President's staff received the order right after the election, because that was technically meant for everyone on the White House staff – they were in the Executive Office Building – but they did receive from the President, at that point, a letter asking them to resign? Which everyone had to do – that all of us had to do the day after election. There had been stories going around, plus anybody being a native Washingtonian, anyone who knew anything about Maryland politics, knew that even if he had been immaculate as Vice President, as Groucho Marx once said about Doris Day, hell, there were people who knew him before he was a virgin when he was governor. Even if he'd been a well-intended person, just occupying that office, the way things were done, things would have probably happened. It certainly would be happening all around him.

Smith: Everything began to happen so fast. When you think of Watergate, something that was dragged out over two years, but then you have this acceleration.

Bakshian: It's like an illness that in the last days the person's symptoms get worse and worse, faster and faster. Again, it metastasizes.

Smith: It's amazing how quickly Ford was selected for Vice President.

Bakshian: I think the removal of Agnew, by the way, also whetted the appetite, or increased the appetite for both the liberal establishment on the outside and the Democratic congressional leadership to go for the kill because if Agnew had not had his scandal and then resignation, they wouldn't have been in that much of a hurry, or at least they would have had counter incentives to just pushing.

Smith: That certainly makes sense.

Bakshian: That accelerates the process, too. And that's an unrelated, yet, in the end, relevant development in a sense.

Smith: But it's interesting, there is a story, and I think it's true because in my Rockefeller research I think I can vouch for it. That Nixon, at one point, supposedly tells Rockefeller in the Oval Office, "Can you imagine Jerry Ford in that chair?" Now, Nixon may have been flattering Rockefeller, who wouldn't, I think, like to have been vice president.

Bakshian: And also he was showing he was tough.

Smith: Yeah. Did you have a sense of what the attitude was? One of the things that Ford did once he became vice president, he was obviously walking a tightrope, he probably could never be sufficiently vocal in defending the President for the President's strongest supporters; on the other hand, he spends a lot of time out of town. And we've picked up a sense that, at least there were some in the White House who thought maybe he wasn't defending Nixon as he ought to.

Bakshian: They were the same control freaks, who of course thought everybody was there, not to serve the country or even to serve the policies of the administration, but to fall on their sword or lie or cheat, or whatever. I thought Ford behaved well and most people did. Most people had no quarrel there. There are going to be a few that may. Jerry Ford became vice president, not because he needed that job or desperately wanted it, but because: a) he was somebody who was sufficiently respected by the other side on the Hill that he could actually – and who also was much more qualified than Nelson Rockefeller, for example, to be president in terms of experience with the federal executive branch and policy and so on. So I didn't feel that way. And I saw a bit more of it because I and John Coyne, the other one who was kept for a while afterwards, were detailed – not detailed, we were still writing for the President, but to help the rather nuclear Ford staff with speeches he had to give and draft a few speeches. And I made a point of keeping it – advocate, defend policies, defend the Republican Party, defend the administration – speak out if you think there is unfair criticism or something, but you shouldn't be walking around being a Rabbi Korf or something. A forgotten name, I'm afraid, for 99% of the public now. He and Rev. Moon were sort of the last two spiritual leaders even after Billy Graham developed a three month head cold, or whatever.

Smith: One quick thing and then we'll get into the Ford presidency. Was there an attitude in the White House towards Ford's performance as Minority Leader during the Nixon years?

Bakshian: Well, again, you would have people like Colson and some of the others, and also Nixon in his tough moments, who would say, "The trouble with the leadership on the Hill is they've been used to accommodating and they aren't willing to kick ass," etc. But that just said more about them than anything else. I don't think that was a widespread attitude amongst those of us who hadn't come to the White House as Nixon groupies, although we'd been for Nixon, but who understood it all and spent time on the Hill.

Pat Buchanan was one of the hot heads. A friend of mine, you've got to remember that he really had had virtually no political experience. He had written editorials for the *St. Louis Globe*, or whatever. And then he'd worked with Richard Nixon. He was a groupie. I don't mean that in a dismissive way. Or he was a personal retainer, who then came to the White House. Even though he was raised in Washington, he had nothing to draw on, no experience to draw on about governance. And then there were other people – some of the California mafia who had never been to Washington.

Smith: Were you in the East Room on the morning of August 9<sup>th</sup>?

Bakshian: No, I was very fortunate. I had blocked off a vacation six months or three months before because *Readers Digest* had international editions and the year before I had done a profile, *The Last of the Viennese Waltz Kings*, about Viennese composer Robert Stolz. He was in his nineties, but I used my vacation to go interview him and so on. So I was in Europe for two and a half weeks or so during the crisis. And I had a new assignment. A year or two before the centenary of the Bayreuth Festival, I was asked to go Bayreuth to do a piece for the world editions of *Readers Digest* on Richard Wagner, but also to interview Wolfgang Wagner, who just died recently, who was the composer's grandson and was still running the festival, etc. So I blocked off that schedule.

I actually watched the resignation speech on a small black and white television in the lounge of the Hotel Meurice in London, which later became

Quaglino's which is still a restaurant, but no longer a little hotel on Bury Street, just off Jermyn Street in London. And then the next day I watched the farewell speech to the staff. I had a sister and brother-in-law who were there, and my old friend Ben Stein was there, who was the only person who actually managed in that East Room to cry and chew gum at the same time while Nixon was making that speech.

So I happened to be overseas for the last few days and I when flew back and came through customs at Dulles, they hadn't changed the photograph yet, "Welcome to the United States" and Nixon's picture was still up there. Also, the night of his resignation speech, there was one other guest at that little London hotel. This was a respectable, rather posh, hotel, but small, just fifty rooms or so, and they had a West Indian night porter, and he was watching it along with myself and one other guest. He didn't know I had any connection with the White House. He said, "I wonder if anything like that is going to happen again soon?" I said, "Not soon, but sooner or later."

Smith: So, you came back...

Bakshian: I heard stories about people just getting drunk that night of the resignation. It was like VE Day if you were German.

Smith: Or if you were in the bunker.

Bakshian: Yeah, that's right. But that had all burned out beforehand. I don't get that carried away, and I was from Washington. I hadn't come to Washington to be in the Nixon White House. It's like the tsetse fly – the local Africans have survived it and developed a certain immunity to it. Same thing with Potomac Fever. But I'm glad I wasn't there in the sense that I think I would have seen a few people I liked being rather silly or maudlin, or making fools of themselves, understandably. But I'm just as glad I didn't see it. If you know a married couple and you like them both, and you're glad you're not there when some scene happens...

Smith: Well put. On the 9<sup>th</sup>, after the Ford swearing in, there was a receiving line and reception down in the State Dining Room. And you could watch the Nixon people sort of peel off.

Bakshian: I can believe it.

Smith: Which is understandable.

Bakshian: They also knew, if they had any brains, that most of them were going to be history, regardless of how good a job they had done. If they were fairly visible, it just had to happen.

Smith: That's interesting because that raises a larger question about Ford and whether, in some ways, he was almost too much of a Boy Scout. Whether part of this learning process entailed... Rumsfeld insists, and I don't dispute it, Rumsfeld urged him early on to clean house, to basically convince the country that this was a different White House. Ford took a much more measured approach. One, because he thought it was unfair to the vast majority of people who had nothing to do with Watergate; two, because he needed some continuity; three, because there were a lot of very capable people working in that White House.

Bakshian: I think he was right on all three scores. And the only one you could fault him for as commander in chief, would be the first one. That's surely compassionate. The other two were good for good governance. They may not have been good politics, but they were good for good governance and he first and foremost, always saw himself as President, not a candidate for re-election. And that was one of the things I most respected him for. You also have to look at – I've known Rumsfeld for years – Don Rumsfeld's motivation. First of all, Don Rumsfeld was always a, not only take no prisoners, but a don't worry about killing anybody with friendly fire if it's going to get you where you're going kind of guy. He would have loved to mow down everybody that hadn't been a personal hire of Don Rumsfeld's. Forget about Jerry Ford.

Smith: Dorothy Downton, the President's personal secretary, told us he tried to get her fired.

Bakshian: I don't doubt it. In the same way that Erlichman and Haldeman repeatedly tried to get Rose Woods.

Smith: But that raises another question, because...

- Bakshian: But that's separate from Watergate and everything else. That's the old power thing.
- Smith: Oh, absolutely.
- Bakshian: Anybody with an independent mind, or independent loyalty on the part of the President.
- Smith: Which explains a lot. But it also raises this other question. There is a school of thought that says beneath the Boy Scout exterior, was someone who was shrewder, more calculating, more ambitious than he let on; someone who was not above using the image that people had of him to his advantage. I mean, the nice guy, whereas, having a Don Rumsfeld, could in fact...
- Bakshian: Nice guys almost always have someone like Don Rumsfeld. Reagan was that way. Eisenhower. It's part of being an effective leader. Jerry Ford was never naïve. He was a nice guy, but he was nobody's patsy. But I think what he usually did, and it had nothing to do with naivety, was to put the national interest and his duty as president ahead of cynical, political choices. If something might have helped him, but it might not have been in the national interest he wouldn't do it. He was quite capable of being political, and he was very often. But he never let that distract him from his duty, I don't think.
- Smith: Is the pardon the most obvious example of that?
- Bakshian: I think so. Although I'm not sure that it was quite the turning point that people make it out to be. The country, and the GOP even more so, were suffering from mental fatigue. It was a bad brand. People were fed up. Jimmy Carter, had a free ride in 1976, although the media very quickly turned on him, partially because he turned out, I think, in their minds to be a bigger jerk than they thought; but also because having eliminated their favorite targets – that is, the GOP having been routed and Jerry Ford being gone – they needed somebody to punch. Obama is finding that out now. And also the Democratic leadership on the Hill. But I think Jerry Ford was a very substantial guy – and when you sat with him in the Oval Office, or anyone who ever met him, or delegations that came in and talked with him, if they had not met him before, always came away very impressed because they had been going by this outside image and found a fuller, more impressive figure.

And the other problem was that bum knee, even though he was by no means a klutz. In fact, he was probably the best athlete who had ever been president. He also occasionally got tongue-twisted, tongue-tied, and it had nothing to do with the thinking process. I saw that again and again. As speechwriters we were told about keeping the sentences short and so on. I think actually we were over told that. I think there were some people, including old loyalists of his, who almost liked the idea that they had uniquely captured his cadence and knew what he needed. And they were taking care of baby more than baby needed to be taken care of, I suspect. But, who knows?

Smith: You do wonder because that obviously raises the whole Hartmann thing. I assume there is a very thin line, maybe almost no line between being protective and being possessive. Or maybe they are two sides of the same coin.

Bakshian: And the person in that conflicted emotional situation is the last person to be able to see it clearly.

Smith: I'm sure. Why was Hartmann such a divisive figure?

Bakshian: Well, he was an abrasive guy. I have no complaints about him. He was one of the people that asked that I be kept, and I got along with him.

Smith: What did it take to get along with him?

Bakshian: Well, basically, I could write and I could write quickly, and so I guess he felt I served a need. I also was a writer on the writing staff, I was not somebody in a different branch of the thing. So we were not rivals for the President's ear or anything. He'd been part of a little group, most of whom were at least as old as Jerry Ford, but who had not grown much because they were doing the household work of serving on the Hill and that is a very small town setting up there. And especially if you've been in the minority all that time.

They suddenly come to the White House, and whereas Jerry Ford had been a leader and policy-wise and everything was ready for it, these guys, I don't think, were for the most part. And most of them didn't last, or were marginalized. Don Rumsfeld is a particularly ruthless guy and I mean that in both the good and the bad senses. So he made a small meal out of most of

them. But I don't think they were quite up to it anyway. Jerry Ford was young for his age, healthy, plenty of stamina, and also a very positive man – not a lot of bitterness, not a chip on his shoulder.

Smith: Uncomplicated?

Bakshian: I think he was much more complicated than people thought, but I think he saw and felt clearly. He wasn't labyrinthine. Straightforward, let's put it that way. Because I think he was capable, for example, about weighing all the pros and cons. But he didn't have a lot of pulls and pushes going on inside him. And he didn't have trouble dealing with people or things. He didn't have little warring voices inside – without citing anyone in particular who might have.

Smith: David Broder said he was the sanest - I think he said, the least neurotic president in my lifetime.

Bakshian: That's right. I once, as a joke, said to President Reagan when I was leaving, just like a goodbye conversation where we were sitting around talking for quite some time, and I said it as a joke and he knew I meant it as a joke. I would never have said it outside. I said, "Mr. President, I can't tell you how grateful I am to you. I've worked for three presidents, you're the third. The first one was abnormal, the second was subnormal, and now you're normal." What I really meant, and I think he knew it - the first one was a bit kinky, the second one was normal and now you were dealing with a born-natural.

Smith: By the way, did you ever hear Reagan talk about Ford?

Bakshian: Well, it never came up. The Ford loyalists and the Reagan loyalists all hated each other.

Smith: And the wives, I'm sure, was a factor.

Bakshian: Oh, yeah. Because of the '76 run. And I can remember in '76, after I'd come back from Harvard, I was helping in the campaign, the actual election campaign. And Lyn Nofziger was there, who of course worked very closely with the President – President Reagan. And at one point we wanted to get a tape. We were doing things for surrogates – statements and speeches – we'd take them and then spread them. And they wanted to get Reagan to do one heartily endorsing Ford and Nofziger said, "Oh, Reagan would never agree to

it.” But someone got through to Reagan’s office, and obviously he supported Ford, and Reagan did it. Reagan didn’t hesitate to do it. It got back to the bad blood. the Hartmanns and the Nofzigers were much more that way than the big guys themselves.

Smith: Who is the guy we interviewed who ran the convention for Ford? [Stanton Anderson] He was a young guy then, he’d been at the RNC. But he’d run the ’68 convention, or ’72 convention.

Bakshian: Not Bill Timmons?

Smith: No. In any event, Ford finishes the acceptance speech and he gave it to him, to this guy. He gave him the speech, he said, “You deserve this.” And then he said, “I’d like to get Governor Reagan down here.” You couldn’t go down on the floor, so this guy, he went down through all the bowels, past the locker room, past everything, then up into the skybox. Pokes his head in, and says, “President Ford would really like to have Governor Reagan join him on the podium.” And before he could finish his sentence, Nancy says, “Don’t do it, Ronnie.” And Nofziger said the same. And Deaver had a somewhat milder version.

Bakshian: Looking to the future...

Smith: But Reagan said, “Naw...” and he did it.

Bakshian: Reagan was smart.

Smith: He was very smart.

Bakshian: Reagan not only was “that’s the sporting thing to do,” and he was, he and Jerry Ford - although they happened to butt heads - both were gentlemen. They were both nice people and treated people individually, treated people well. And so it was the natural thing for Reagan to do, but it was also the smart thing for him to do. Much more so than the soreheads who were much more busy about getting even.

Smith: And who were living in the moment.

Bakshian: That’s right, couldn’t look ahead.

Smith: Did you ever see Ford's temper?

Bakshian: I never saw him really blow up, but I saw him express impatience once or twice. But it was not to someone in the room, it was when we were dealing with a speech or something. I don't even remember what, but about someone being such a pain to deal with, or a major road block or something like that. I know he could do it. And God knows it's a job where there are enough little prods all the time. But I never actually saw him blow up.

Smith: Again, the speechwriting operation as a metaphor for what he had to learn and the degree to which he learned it, mastered the job. It does seem curious that he would tolerate a situation where eventually you had, in effect, dueling speech operations.

Bakshian: Yeah.

Smith: How did that come about? How did it work, and what does it tell you ?

Bakshian: Most of that started happening shortly after I left to go to Harvard. But I knew Dave Gergen very well, for example. I think Rumsfeld recognized that Jerry Ford was never going to actually give the gate to his old and trusted friend Hartmann, and in addition, to a large extent, although they shifted – that is Paul Theiss was eventually replaced by Bob Orben – but that you were never going to be able to abolish the speechwriting staff that was supposed to report to Hartmann. This isn't Russia or the Nixon White House, for that matter. And you're not just going to execute them all and bring in new troops, or move them all to Siberia. Actually they were sort of moved to Siberia – not moved, but they were allowed to continue, but other things were done. I think that actually showed you that with Jerry Ford, there was a point beyond which he would not go about mistreating old friends. And yet he was convinced he needed better work coming in. Now I say "convinced," I said *was* convinced because I'm sure that Rumsfeld was constantly explaining how much, what the "problems were," sometimes when they weren't necessarily coming from there. At any rate, Rumsfeld prevailed and Dave Gergen was brought in to run a "shadow" speechwriting operation.

Smith: I think the first real flashpoint is the '75 State of the Union Address. There are those who believe, and who assert as a fact, that Hartmann was perfectly

capable of withholding work until the last possible moment, so as to make sure that it was his work – it wasn't staffed out.

Bakshian: That would be in character, certainly.

Smith: And that's an unaffordable luxury in the White House.

Bakshian: Yeah. Well, also Hartmann before had worked with Jerry Ford, but he worked in a situation where maybe one or two other people were involved in the process and he took it to Ford. And also it was last minute, usually up there on the Hill it is a last minute process. And also, there is no clearance process.

Smith: I was going to say, who cares what the Minority Leader says, to be honest ?

Bakshian: Yeah, and to Hartmann, probably even the legitimate clearance process in his mind was enemy forces.

Smith: Did he tend to see enemies?

Bakshian: Well, he was right about Rumsfeld, but then it's a chicken and egg thing, too. If he came in with an attitude and with certain inadequacies, other people were going to recognize them and as he decided more and more people were out to get him, he would get more and more the way other people recognized as a problem.

Smith: We interviewed Al Haig a year before he died, and it was still not clear to me whether he was simply an emphatic personality given to sometimes extreme assertions, or sort of borderline senile. But he came out swinging.

Bakshian: I'd say one from column A and one from column B.

Smith: I think that is probably very fair.

Bakshian: Plus, he had nothing to lose anymore. He was never going to run for president again, and he was a bit PO'd about a lot of things that have happened. So he was paying back.

Smith: He was nice about the President, very nice about Mrs. Ford, but boy, he came out swinging against Hartmann. Said the Secret Service had come to him and warned him about Hartmann, etc. etc. That he had gone to see the President. And the interesting thing is, I could hear Ford saying this. Haig was going on

about “I’ve seen one president brought down because of so on and so on, and Ford, according to Haig says, “Al, you’ll have to let me handle this.” At which point Haig says he said, “Well, then I know you don’t want me to stay.” And allowing for a little bit of dramatic license, I can envision that scene - Haig having a very large chip on his shoulder.

Bakshian: Oh, yes. That’s more or less the way he was – because, later, he would throw many tantrums in the Reagan White House. I was much more aware of that in a way, because I happened to be on the plane on Air Force One once where Judge Clark had to calm down Al Haig on the phone. This was before he finally was let go. Because as a result of the President, the Vice President, and, I don’t know whether it was the Senate Majority Leader or the Speaker of the House had also needed executive planes, Haig, as secretary of state, had been given a military transport plane that he considered infra dig in the pecking order of airplanes, and was having a hissy fit on the phone. And Judge Clark had to – it was like talking him off the ledge. And everyone was shrugging about it like, “Oh, there he goes again.” And, of course, he did it once too often.

Smith: So, he had that kind of temperament?

Bakshian: Yeah. He’d been in military command. And if you are base commander, you are base commander. Or, for that matter, if you are deputy whatever, there aren’t two, and I think he felt that way. If he was chief of staff, then if he came to the President identifying someone as a problem, and he had done that, it was him or me.

Smith: Doesn’t that illustrate so richly the shortcomings? And in some ways, foreshadowing what happened in the Reagan presidency. It was almost unavoidable.

Bakshian: Although many of us really think that in the meantime, Haig’s bypass surgery aggravated that. Something had to be there to begin with, but that kind of really super-trauma sometimes tends to aggravate the tendencies. There are some people around with that opinion about Dick Cheney, by the way.

Smith: Right.

- Bakshian: I've known Dick Cheney since he started on the Hill. I don't know about the medical bit, but I've seen him evolve.
- Smith: You left, I guess, before Rumsfeld turned the reins over to Cheney?
- Bakshian: That's right. Because when I came back to Washington, Rumsfeld tried to hire me as his speechwriter at the Pentagon.
- Smith: Oh, really?
- Bakshian: I was dubious in general, but having then gone out to talk to him at the Pentagon and figured out what it would be like to work in that pigsty and what kind of lunches you'd be likely to be get - that did it.
- Smith: Nelson Rockefeller went to his grave convinced that Don Rumsfeld did him in. And, of course, no one ever wants to blame the President. But George H.W. Bush clearly believes that Rumsfeld deep-sixed him at the CIA. And it's fascinating to talk to people thirty years later.
- Bakshian: Rumsfeld has always been that kind of an operator. I first knew of him when I was working for Bill Brock on the Hill in 1966, and there were various fights for just little think tank operations and so on going on in there, where all of a sudden – the old thing about Rumanians and revolving doors. You know, all of a sudden, Rumsfeld had got through and was in front of people that he'd been behind, and there is no reason to believe that changed. And he's a very competitive man.
- Smith: And, reputedly, leaves very few fingerprints.
- Bakshian: He's good at it. He loves his work. I've worked closely with him and I always got along with him, again, because I'm not somebody running against him. He needed a certain skill set. Also, I've never worked for him on a staff. It's one thing to help with something, and maintain your autonomy with somebody like that.
- Smith: Did you have any contact with Rockefeller?
- Bakshian: No, just his staff once or twice about something. But, no.
- Smith: Was there a sense of tension there?

Bakshian: They were very much in a world of their own over there. They were just – the whole thing didn't last that long, and he didn't have a real Washington nucleus. I see this with political campaigns - people talk about you've got to raise enough money to run for office. It's very dangerous when you raise all the money you need and then some, and Rockefeller, he always had more talent than he needed. He always bought more talent than he needed, and some of it wasn't very talented. And so there were a lot of hacks who were professional Rockefeller people, he thought were very good, who weren't necessarily. And who also were not an easy fit with Washington or the presidential staff - either used to throwing their weight around or something.

Smith: He'd been governor of New York for fifteen years. He was a Rockefeller.

Bakshian: He was a Rockefeller. He was also paternalistic about taking care of people who had worked for him. And he had a lot of breadline cases, some of whom he didn't realize were breadline cases.

Smith: Really? The reputation was he had this great staff.

Bakshian: Well, he had it and then he had lots of stale leftovers mixed in. How did he not get the nomination all those times, if money could have bought the best campaign staff? He had other problems, but...

Smith: Oh sure. I realize you left before the campaign per se started. Were they slow to take Reagan seriously? Either the possibility that he would run, and then the fact that he might, in fact, be a formidable opponent?

Bakshian: No more so than just about everybody else was, I mean, other than Ronald Reagan and his core staff. I think, if anything, Ford was probably accepting the Washington, the inside the Beltway, commentary and interpretation of where things were, because I don't think he underestimated Ronald Reagan any more, maybe a little less, than the liberal press, the Washington Republican establishment and everybody else. So it wasn't a matter of him uniquely and willfully ignoring it. There was nobody there that was sounding the alarm. Everyone was taken sort of off balance by that. The other thing was – well, Reagan had just always been underestimated.

- Smith: It's interesting because you can argue, in a different way, Ford was underestimated.
- Bakshian: But he was a man of Washington. Reagan, to the Washington press corps, was California.
- Smith: Actor – right wing, too old.
- Bakshian: And also, they just never had to cover him in detail. They hadn't had to cover him day to day. They'd never taken the measure, because the guys that had didn't underestimate him.
- Smith: Right, the Lou Cannon. What were Ford's strengths as President, and did you see any evolution in his grasp of the office?
- Bakshian: I think he was a quick learner about how the White House worked, but you wouldn't hear that from the "Ford loyalists" because part of him figuring out how the White House worked meant he had to recognize certain limitations on some of his old friends that he brought in. So, to them, that would have been him being manipulated by the other people.
- Smith: Would you include Phil Buchen, for example?
- Bakshian: I never had to deal with him in great detail, so I don't know how he interacted with all that. But the people that were old friends – Jack Marsh and various other people – that came there who sort of talked slowly and moved slowly. And Jerry Ford, I think, didn't get out of breath going onto that presidential treadmill where you're running even when you're standing still, both politically and metaphorically. And a lot of these people did. So I think he was a quick learner, but still it was a stunning change, the most difficult since Harry Truman. Well, come to think of it – well, Lyndon Johnson – but Johnson, first of all, loved being president, even though he shed genuine tears when JFK was shot. Plus he'd had such an unpleasant time being vice president, I'm sure that whoever looked after the presidential dogs had more entry than he did.
- But I think Jerry Ford was up to it from day one, and he learned from day one. But I think he was more qualified than most vice presidents are because of his

long experience. I just had a high opinion of him, which the more I saw of him, the more it was confirmed.

Smith: Rod Hills said in our interview, “The older I get and the more presidents I see, the more I think, at least one definition of presidential success is making government work.” Knowing how to make it work and making it work.

Bakshian: And under those adverse circumstances.

Smith: But that is the opposite of the theatrical, self-dramatizing nature of the presidency in the television age.

Bakshian: Jerry Ford was neither an egomaniac nor insecure. Most presidents tend to be a little of both. He and Reagan, temperamentally, were very similar, except that Reagan was a master of the camera and was more aware of the importance of that, I think. Plus, he had more time to do it.

Smith: Was it frustrating at all for those of you who were responsible for the public Ford, at least Ford the communicator. My sense is he was at his best away from the camera. He was at his best one on one...

Bakshian: And around the table.

Smith: Where his knowledge of government and his manner really could be very, very effective. Was there a sense of frustration at all that some of that couldn't be better communicated in the arena?

Bakshian: A sense of frustration and challenge trying to rack your brains about what's the way of saying this that makes it come across. But there were only so many major speeches where that really mattered, though, because he comes in and all of a sudden it's already 1974 midterms, and so he's saddled with all these crappy speeches he has to give, which can't be finely tuned. And which also are going to be, if there are film clips of them on the news, standing at an outdoor podium with the wind blowing through your hair and bad acoustics and having to shout. When you think of it, he was quite capable of giving a good Oval Office speech. There just weren't that many of them.

His first speech as President of the United States couldn't have been done better. And I think, by the way, that poor Hartmann - who in many ways

failed to measure up - he deserves, he has a niche in history about something important, where he struck the right note and probably was able to do it better than the most brilliant ghost who might have been brought in from the outside, because he also knew the man who was going to give the speech.

But my point is, that down the line, if and when he was well served, that kind of speech, as opposed to the standing up before a live audience, Ford was quite capable of doing that because that was closer to what his manner would have been if you were sitting there in the room with him. With the speechwriters themselves, he actually was much more interactive than most presidents. I dealt with three and I'll show it to you on the way out, just one of several pictures that were taken of the speechwriters – there were several of us all sitting around, really going over speeches with Jerry Ford. I used to bring the Reagan staff in, or some of them, for an Oval Office meeting because I had one once a week with him automatically. We talked about the upcoming schedule, but we weren't really going over speeches. He [Ford] did that.

Smith: Again, right before the '74 elections, when all of these candidates had the burden of the pardon on top of everything else, and he goes to California and everyone said don't go to see Nixon, and he insists on going to see Nixon. It was the decent thing to do.

Bakshian: He was a man of honor. He was decent, but not necessarily soft. It was being true to your code. That was being tough, by the way, in a way that Richard Nixon might not have understood or appreciated.

Smith: When we talked to Benton Becker - this was during Ford's vice presidency, and Earl Warren died. And Becker said, "It would be a nice gesture if you went and paid your respects." And Ford sort of thought, and said, "Well, I don't think the President would like that very much." He said he'd think about it. Well, Becker finds out later in the day, without telling him, Ford on his own had gone up to the Supreme Court and placed a wreath at Warren's casket. Needless to say, Nixon was not happy.

Bakshian: Nixon was not happy, but TS, in addition to which, this wasn't somebody who just happened to have been a Supreme Court Chief Justice. The Warren

Commission was something that Ford had been involved in, so they had had an association.

Smith: Yes, of course.

Bakshian: And to have ignored that...Richard Nixon visited Harry Truman while he was president and all sorts of other things, so I don't think there was any real grounds for...

Smith: What were Ford's weaknesses? Apart from the communications.

Bakshian: Just the actual, physical delivery bit. He didn't have any impediment as a speaker, per se, but it was almost like a slight handicap.

Smith: Judge-a-ment and gar-an-tee.

Bakshian: He put the extra syllable into judgment. But other than that, if he'd been a little more ruthless, if instead of actually being a nice fellow, he'd mastered the art of pretending to be a nice fellow, but had been a little more of an ass kicker, he probably would have served himself well politically. I don't know whether it would have improved his presidency. But I think he was a genuinely nice man who was not ruthlessly ambitious; not in it for himself – being an honorable man is the key. Nice implies sort of soft. He wasn't soft. But he was honorable and he wasn't going to do something shabby; he wasn't *not* going to place the wreath at Earl Warren's lying in state. Wasn't *not* going to when he was in California visit the former president. It's funny how you still, when you worked for them when they were president, you still tend to say... We're here to talk about Ford, so I can't talk about him as Jerry Ford or Ford, but the others I keep referring to as president.

Smith: One other thing, tell me about his intelligence.

Bakshian: Again, I believe that both and he and Ronald Reagan were at least as intelligent as Nixon, but they did not have intellectual aspirations and pretenses. I think they both, to use the J word, they both had a lot of judge-a-ment. To me, leadership effectiveness consists of raw intelligence, judgment and character which really go together, and then experience. But, of course, you can have all the experience in the world and learn nothing unless you've got both the raw intelligence and judgment and character. So I would say, I

think he was a bright student, and the amount of stuff he knew and could draw on and deploy intelligently from his experience, proved to me that he was an intelligent man. I have no idea what he would do on an IQ test, but I think those are abstract, to a certain extent, too.

Smith: We've been told the decision to have Ford introduce his own budget and to stand in a room and answer every single question until there were no more questions - I think the last president to do that was Harry Truman - and it's not been done since and probably won't be anytime soon. But that that was, in effect, a tactic.

Bakshian: Well, first of all it showed he knew what he was doing; and, in fact, it showed him doing something that very few other people could have done in his place; very few other presidents could have done. I agree entirely. I give him top marks. Imagination wasn't his strong point, but he was not there at a time where imagination would have been much help. He was first of all dealing with an overwhelming pile of things that couldn't be changed by imagination. It wasn't a matter of choose your theme; choose what you address today, because they were already there. So I don't think that was a problem.

Smith: My sense is he was a real fiscal conservative. He was tight, financially.

Bakshian: I admired his use of the veto. And in fact, the thing I have the most, I won't say contempt, but the thing I felt the most damning about the second George Bush, was that either he was totally heedless of the problem, or was afraid to use the veto against his own party out of responsibility to the nation. And Jerry Ford again and again did it where it didn't necessary help him politically, but it was the right thing to do and sometimes it prevailed.

Smith: Now, you said you came back and worked on the campaign.

Bakshian: In the last month or so.

Smith: Post-convention.

Bakshian: Yeah, when it was the general election campaign, which I could do while also pursuing my own writing and so on.

Smith: Now, he was gaining ground – clearly – from where they'd been.

Bakshian: I think it's amazing how close it became. It would have been almost a miracle to overcome the odds, but he came remarkably close.

Smith: What do you think were the factors that – people tend to zero in on the Nixon pardon. I've often wondered, because you had some economic numbers released at the very end of the campaign that Greenspan famously said was a pause, and I just wonder whether...

Bakshian: I think it was more than that. I think the pardon thing is something that people can point to a lot, but the people who were the most enraged about that were not going to vote for Jerry Ford anyway. It didn't help him with anybody. It may have helped him to a certain extent with the conservative base – a little bit. But it hurt him, but I don't think it, by itself decided anything. In fact, if you start playing that game about well if it affected X percent of the voters, you can do that about umpteen other issues, too.

Smith: And we'll never know.

Bakshian: We'll never know. I think he did remarkably well for anybody who was in that situation at that time. It was time for a Democratic president, especially one who came from outside of Washington, and had nothing but cheerleaders in the press corps.

Smith: Again, no one will ever know, although I think Ford certainly gave it a lot of thought at the time and later, what the consequences would have been if he hadn't pardoned Nixon.

Bakshian: That's right. Where would we have gone? What sort of due process would have been followed and what would have been dominating the story, not just to the diminution of his efforts as president, but to the detriment of the country? That's why I think he was so right, both ways.

Smith: A couple of things, then we'll let you go. The fall of Saigon; that must have been a searing experience for anyone in the White House. And there was a speech at Tulane where he, in effect, I think, overrode Kissinger and said the war is over as far as we're concerned. There must have been an internal debate over that.

Bakshian: The frustration to me, it's not a matter of anger, or even sorrow, the frustration was, to this day I believe and I suspect Ford may have, that if it hadn't been for Watergate and then the irresponsible attitude of partisanship on the Hill, it didn't have to end the way it did. With the North essentially being able to do a victory parade into the South. It didn't have to end the way it did, and if it hadn't ended that way, probably fewer people would have suffered and there would have been a more normal evolution of things over there. That said, under the conditions, it was over and I think that to the extent that Henry Kissinger wanted to do things to prolong the agony, it was at least as much out of egotism about his own policies and his "legacy" or reputation, as it was any realistic chance of changing what had been set in motion some time before. Because of Watergate and because of the total irresponsibility, to my mind, of the Democratic leadership on the Hill.

Smith: Even people who criticize Ford's presidency acknowledge that he built a remarkable Cabinet.

Bakshian: Yeah. He was secure around talented people. Plus, his first thought wasn't was he building up a rival? And that was partially because of the time frame and everything else. But also because that was the kind of person he was.

Smith: And apparently the one exception to that appeared to be Jim Schlesinger.

Bakshian: Well, Schlesinger, I think, was one of the less talented members.

Smith: Oh.

Bakshian: If you look at his subsequent career, he was a prima donna. He and Al Haig have certain similar characteristics. And it's interesting that the two people who are sort of the most – not totally embittered – but who left somewhat under a cloud, they were both prima donnas and they weren't necessarily the most brilliant, brightest bulbs in the chandelier.

Smith: Yeah, that's interesting, very interesting. I asked Dick Cheney, "Was it difficult for Ford to fire people?" He said, "Not when it came to Schlesinger."

Bakshian: Schlesinger probably also had a very high opinion – he was an intellectual in the sense of somebody who was much more intellectual than he was intelligent and who probably drastically underestimated Jerry Ford's

intelligence, and probably exuded that attitude Jerry Ford, who didn't miss much – so Jerry Ford would have already known where Schlesinger was coming from. So when the time came, he would not have had to shed a tear and say, “Gee, too bad about that.” Nor should he have.

Smith: At the end of the campaign, did you think you'd caught up?

Bakshian: No. I had a feeling that Ford had done remarkably well, but this was one of those things that was over. And it was over before that campaign started and he had done everything. There is a scene in *A Night to Remember*, an old film about the sinking of the *Titanic*, toward the end, where they've rescued the first officer who survives and is on the deck of a ship, the name of which I forget, the *Beringeria*, or whatever it was, that caught up with them and picked up the survivors. And the first officer says to the rescue ship's captain, “I wonder what I might have done,” and the captain says, “You did everything that was humanly possible.” Jerry Ford did everything that was humanly possible. And he did remarkably well. But it was in the cards. Barring Jimmy Carter actually suddenly having stopped lusting with his mind and starting to lust in a motel two days before the election and getting caught on camera, I just think it wouldn't...

Smith: Did you have any contact with him in later years?

Bakshian: Alas, no. Because, until the Reagan years, I wasn't involved in politics, I was doing my own writing and all. And I didn't ever see him at anything and I didn't happen to be at loose ends that day in the Reagan White House when he was there on his way to the Sadat funeral. I was busy with something, where I didn't have time to come over just to, you know, say hello.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Bakshian: First of all, as a man who distinguished himself in every responsibility he ever took on in public life; as a man, especially for a politician, of stainless honor. A man who was up to the occasion, including a number of times, where he was thrown impossible assignments on short notice, under minimal conditions. But most of all, a man who steered us through a very painful time, and I can't think of anyone who could have done it better, or how he could have done it better than he did. And a lot of that was where he was doing it

from his gut, not because of the most expert people around. Very often they were wrong or giving him conflicting advice. And I think that's how, with most Americans who paid attention, and with most historians, he will be remembered. And I think that's justice.

Smith: It's interesting. I wonder if you were at all surprised – I was wearing two hats the week of the funeral, I was with ABC during the first part of the week and then with the family the second part – and I can tell you, journalists, particularly younger journalists, were surprised, particularly as the week went along...

Bakshian: They were learning about him for the first time.

Smith: They were. And I think there was a whole generation who were seeing him in these old film clips and comparing him to today and he looked pretty good.

Bakshian: Yeah. Absolutely. And, again, especially when they pictured him in the context of the hand he was dealt. As I say, it is sad, but even Nixon, Nixon's death – when I was talking to him in his retirement, he also was still talking about how do you think history will judge? And I didn't have the heart to say, "Yeah, but, actually the day after you passed away, that's when the positive re-evaluation will begin in earnest." With Jerry Ford, it had already, among insiders, begun. But a whole new generation, not just of journalists, but other people, when they saw his story, I think they gained a fuller appreciation of him. And now that's more on the record than it was and more than it was before.

Smith: Final thing, did you have any contact with Mrs. Ford?

Bakshian: I didn't, but my sister, Mimi Timmons, who happens to be married to Bill Timmons, knew her very well from the Hill and then as First Lady, and loved her. As everybody, as far as I know, did. The possible exception is Nancy Reagan, I don't know. They never were personal friends. To me, I always have had a high respect for those people in public life, especially way up there, who had a real marriage and the husband and wife loved each other and the marriage survived all that stuff. The Reagans, in a very different way, but it was true of them. The Fords in a much more full rounded way, because I think they had a more normal relationship with their children, too. Which to

me was an added plus – just in how you felt about them. So, I loved her from afar, but I didn't have any real dealings with her.

Smith: After they moved in and she told someone that – I guess presidents have always had separate bedrooms, presidents and their wives – and they shared the same bed. And concerned Americans wrote in to the White House to protest.

Bakshian: Well, in the old days, (in the 50s and 60s) sitcoms, if there was a marital bedroom scene, it always had to be two beds. And, of course, with the Nixons, if it had been a single bed in one bedroom there probably would have been a demilitarized zone.

Smith: Did you have a sense of what that marriage was like?

Bakshian: No, I think Richard Nixon had very little of a private life at that point. He loved his daughters, but I think his whole persona was wrapped up in being “the President.” I'm told by people that saw a lot of him after the presidency that, ironically, or sadly in a way, but better late than never, when Pat Nixon had her first serious stroke, he then started appreciating how she had given up so much of her life for him. She had totally accommodated his career and so on. And there was an appreciation and closeness that then developed for the duration, in the twilight years. I think earlier it had been just something that – also she, probably, probably just withdrew. I think they both withdrew into themselves as opposed to having something going on on the outside or having detested each other or anything. It withered. And then I was glad to hear that toward the end...

Smith: This is great.

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