

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**Bill Archer**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
**April 27, 2009**

Smith: Thanks for doing this, we really appreciate it. You came to Congress from Houston, from what had been George Bush's old seat.

Archer: That's correct.

Smith: Is it safe to say he was perceived to be a moderate conservative to moderate even at that time?

Archer: Yes.

Smith: Now, you were a rock-ribbed Republican particularly on fiscal matters.

Archer: Yes.

Smith: And yet you were in the House long enough to see in some way conservatism redefined, particularly when supply-side economics came in. I sense Gerald Ford was much more of a traditionalist, a fiscally austere conservative. Was there a generational change that took place? How did you deal with the new conservatism?

Archer: Initially, there was not that division. And that only came later on when Reagan became president and Jack Kemp was very instrumental in pushing supply-side economics. In fact, Jack and I had a lot of debates on that, personal debates, because he called me a traditionalist. In fact, he said I just had to move ahead into the new world and deficits didn't matter. And I said, "No, I think deficits do matter." And we had some very interesting debates about that. We were very close friends because we came in as freshmen in the same class.

I don't know if anybody has mentioned the Chowder & Marching Club in the interviews with you, but Jack and I were the two freshmen who were invited to join the Chowder & Marching Club in 1971, and it became a very significant part of my life. Jerry Ford was one of the early members and was

the leading member at the time that I joined. Well, he wasn't leading member, because Richard Nixon was the charter member of Chowder & Marching and he was president at that time so he would hold a meeting once a year in the White House, which was the way the club worked. And I got to know Ford better than I would otherwise because of Chowder & Marching, [which] also had a lot to do with Jack Kemp and I becoming very good friends.

Smith: What was the purpose of the Chowder & Marching Club? Was it ideological in any way?

Archer: Well, in a sense it was, it was all Republicans, but as the history was explained to me, after World War II there were a number of members who ran for Congress and were elected and fifteen of them who were Republicans decided that they would fight a bill that was being sponsored to give veterans a cash bonus. Since they were veterans, they felt politically they could get away with opposing it. They took the position that we served our country because of our patriotic duty and we don't want somebody to think they're abandoning us all by giving us sort of a cash bonus. They were able to defeat that very popular proposal by a few votes, but in the process of getting organized to work against it, they got together socially and they met a number of times and they got to know each other better and when it was all over, they said, "We should keep this group together."

No one knows why they picked Chowder & Marching as a name for the club and that's been searched and researched and no one's ever been able to determine. But in any event, it became a nucleus - that bill's support - for each of its members. I don't think I would've been able to get on the Ways & Means Committee except for the help of members of the Chowder & Marching Club within the process. And I benefited tremendously as a new freshman to be immediately meeting with Jerry Ford whom I held in awe coming into the Congress.

He was Minority Leader and highly respected by everyone, and it gave me an opportunity to get to know him personally by meeting every Wednesday afternoon. And in addition, we would have social gatherings several times a

year when we would have our wives with us and we would meet somewhere off of the Hill and that enabled me to get to know Betty Ford, too.

Smith: Let me ask you. Is that largely absent today, that kind of socializing? I mean, certainly between the parties, it seems to be.

Archer: Well, unfortunately, the Chowder & Marching Club no longer has the social gatherings. There are a number of us who think it would be good to reinstate them, but part of the problem is that it costs money and in those days, the ethics rules did not have the same restrictions as to how you could spend, whether it was outside your campaign fund or what. So it just hasn't happened in the last number of years.

What we do continue to do, however, is every five years, we have a gala to celebrate the beginning of the club. At one of our galas, we actually had four Presidents that attended. This year, we will have one in June, our five years is up, and if Jerry Ford were still alive, he would be there, I'm sure, because he was very, very good about coming. But we have a beautiful event. We will have it this year in Statuary Hall in the Capitol, a seated dinner and everyone gets dressed up in tuxes.

So, the Chowder & Marching Club was not philosophically dictated in the sense of any views that might exist now within the Republican Party. Nobody really talked much about philosophy in those days and the social issues had not emerged as a dividing mark. There was the issue of are you a Rockefeller Republican or are you a Goldwater Republican. But that never interfered.

Smith: That's fascinating. Let me ask you very quickly. Had you met Ford before you came to Congress?

Archer: No, I had not. I, of course, knew [of] him, but I had not met him.

Smith: When you met him and got to know him, was there anything that surprised you?

Archer: I think because I had him up on a pedestal as a Leader of my party in Congress, I was a little bit surprised that he was so down to earth and so natural with no arrogance and no affected airs at all. And I think that was a

little bit of a surprise. Easily accessible, would talk to you openly about anything and I really appreciated that.

Smith: That may answer one of my next questions. What were his strengths as a party Leader?

Archer: At that time, I would say that his strengths were that people knew how genuine he was. He was not in any way artificial. He was not politically driven, per say, in just trying to find some political opening. He was a man's man. He got along well, and that's not to say that he didn't get along well with the few women that were in the Congress, I think there were only two Republican women at that time, but you just felt very comfortable with him. He'd pull out his pipe and smoke it and talk to you in a very down to earth way. And people respected him because he respected them. He respected every one of the members and spoke to them on their level and I think it was that mutual respect that really made him the Leader that he was.

Smith: And he obviously got along with the Democrats.

Archer: Yes, he did. He did. But it was a different environment then, too, very different than it is now.

Smith: Describe the differences.

Archer: There's been a lot of talk about how bipartisan it was at that time. And it was far more bipartisan, but what people forget is that there were forty or more Democrats who were as conservative as Republicans from a philosophy standpoint. So it was very easy to work across the aisle with those Democrats who shared your same philosophy. That is not true today.

Smith: Isn't it also true, though perhaps more in the Senate than the House, but both parties also had conservative and liberal wings. I mean, there were Republicans in the Northeast, some in the industrial Midwest, who were largely liberal by the standards.

Archer: By Goldwater standards.

Smith: Yes, they were Rockefeller Republicans.

- Archer: But not by the standards of what is a liberal Democrat. And so, particularly on fiscal issues, there was great unity within the Republican Party. And George Bush, for example, who was considered by some of the Goldwater Republicans to be too moderate, was as tough as anybody on fiscal affairs, and that came to the surface when he became president.
- Smith: So Ford's job was not complicated by having to herd cats, ideologically.
- Archer: It was much easier then than it is now. And you did not have the social issues emerging that become so frictional. Yes, he had an easier time and because of the philosophical harmony with so many Democrats, it was easy for him to reach across the aisle. And, what happened, too, was that even for those Democrats who are not what I would call conservatives, there were so many of them, whoever the Speaker was, whoever the leader of the Democrats was, he knew that he could not dismiss them totally, and therefore he was more inclined to work with Republicans and to work with Jerry Ford and it worked out fairly well.
- Smith: It's always been asserted that his real goal in life was to be Speaker. Did he ever talk about that?
- Archer: No, I never talked to him about that, but clearly that would've been his goal, to be Speaker. I don't think his goal was ever to become president. I don't think he would've said, "Gee, I'm gearing all of what I do to become president of the United States." I suspect that it was quite a surprise to him when he was picked to be vice president.
- Smith: The story is told that, again to illustrate just how different things were in those days, he and Hale Boggs used to debate one another down at the National Press Club and they would drive down to the club and decide on the way what they were going to debate. Get down to the club, do their debate, they'd go have lunch or a drink and go back to the Hill. You really can't imagine that happening today.
- Archer: I don't see that happening today, no. I really don't. As I mentioned earlier, the whole environment then was so different and then you also did not have

the advent of money to the degree that you do today. And I think that is pernicious to the system.

Smith: And, I imagine, a very different media environment. Now you have cable TV which is all about conflicts. Basically it's a food fight 24 hours a day. And the internet, which for all of its useful purposes, has also in many ways coarsened political discourse, rumor mongering and the like. None of that existed. I mean, it sounds like a much more civilized way to do business.

Archer: Well, it was, but again, philosophically, even beyond fiscal affairs, there was a lot more harmony. Scoop Jackson, Democratic senator from the state of Washington, was liberal on fiscal matters and liberal on more domestic matters, but, boy, when it got to foreign policy and defense, he was tough. And he was a big leader and he would get together with the Republicans to fashion a totally bipartisan foreign policy and you don't see that today.

Smith: How did the White House communicate its agenda to the House Republicans? Presumably Ford was a point man conveying that to his colleagues and vice versa. How did that work?

Archer: Well, with Nixon in the White House, the White House actually did a lot of liaison with the Congress and I think did it very effectively and many of the people who were in the White House who were charged with that would be on Capitol Hill frequently and would be talking to Ford and our leaders and talking to the Republicans as a group and, in addition, working with the conservative Democrats and developing the number of votes that were needed in order to pass something. There was a very healthy relationship between the White House and the House of Representatives. I can't speak to the Senate, I assume they were doing the same thing in the Senate. And that was very helpful and Nixon was very successful politically. This may come as a surprise to a lot of people, but history shows that to be true. He put in place the EPA, which was a totally bipartisan effort. He was working on a new form of welfare with Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the White House, which would be kind of unthinkable today and a number of issues.

Smith: It was kind of a creative conservatism.

- Archer: Yes, it was. Yes, it was. And to some degree, some of the more rock-ribbed conservatives in the Congress were really comfortable with it. There were a number of issues where Nixon was really extending and reaching out.
- Smith: I wonder if you felt, because clearly we now know in hindsight that a political realignment did occur. That America went from being a New Deal country to being a basically conservative country, peaking perhaps under Reagan and then with the '94 Republican sweep of Congress. And at the same time, Ford wanted to be Speaker, hoped that in 1972 with the Nixon landslide, you might get enough Republicans in the House. Did you sense at that time that you were part of this movement that would bring about fundamental political realignment?
- Archer: I was excited when Reagan was elected because I thought that was going to change the approach of the federal government. As it turned out, I don't think that it turned anything around. I think it slowed down movement toward a bigger and bigger federal government. But it was very interesting at that time to be a part of it. But once again, it was an activity that occurred and was successful only because the conservative Democrats, the boll weevils, so called, that got together with the Republicans by the Reagan White House. And Reagan had this great personal capability, but the fact was that he was also attacked by the media. It wasn't just all peaches and cream and let's sing "Kumbaya" and all come together.
- Smith: And you do forget how polarizing a figure he was. But that's true of most great presidents, successful presidents.
- Archer: Yes, but Jerry Ford was not polarizing. It just wasn't in his make up. It was in his make up to get along with people as best he could. And that doesn't mean he caved in on his principles, but there are different ways to do things.
- Smith: Let me ask you, because that's fascinating. He went to his grave believing that he didn't have an enemy. That he had adversaries, but he didn't have an enemy. I'm wondering, were there people in the House that he didn't get along with?
- Archer: Not to my knowledge.

Smith: Really.

Archer: Not to my knowledge. He never said or did anything that would be negative toward another human being. He held strong beliefs and he worked for those beliefs, but he was never frictional, he was never raspy in the way he conducted himself. We need more of that in politics.

Smith: He clearly was disappointed that the Nixon landslide in '72 did not bring in a lot of additional Republican House members. Were you disappointed in relative terms that you didn't have more Representatives in the House?

Archer: Absolutely. Absolutely. In fact, when I saw how difficult it was to get into the majority, I actually at one point went to Bob Michel when Reagan was president and I said, "Bob, we're not going to be able to elect you Speaker, but I believe we could elect a conservative Democrat as Speaker of the House and we could then have a bipartisan House with some Republicans as committee chairmen and some Democrats as committee chairmen, but we philosophically could then give Reagan a structure he could take full advantage of." And I fully believe that was possible. It would've meant Bob Michel would've had to step aside and tell the Republican conference, "I want us to nominate a conservative Democrat as Speaker," and he was unwilling to do that.

Smith: Did you have a candidate in mind?

Archer: Yes, I did. There was a Texas Congressman named Sam Hall who was, again, a non-frictional kind of person and solid and strong. He later became a federal judge. I don't know if he's still on the bench now. But I didn't stress a particular individual. He's the one that I personally would've picked. I just stressed the idea of it. And Bob said to me, "No, we don't want to do that because we can use Tip O'Neill as an issue and we'll get a majority next time by running against Tip O'Neill." And I'll never forget saying to him, "Well, Bob, I don't think you're being very realistic, in fact, I've never bet over \$100 in anything in my life, but I will bet \$1,000 that we will not get a majority next time. And I'll give my \$1,000 to Billy Pitts," who was his chief of staff sitting in the room at that time. There were just the three of us. And he didn't



take me up on it. The point I'm making is that I was not encouraged that we were going to get to the majority. Not in the Jerry Ford, but in the Bob Michel era.

Smith: You'd said you'd gotten to know Mrs. Ford.

Archer: Not well, but because of the social interchange, I did get to know her.

Smith: What was your impression?

Archer: Well, she's just a lovely lady in every regard and everybody loved her and everybody respected her.

Smith: You didn't sense unhappiness on her part with her lot in life?

Archer: Richard, I didn't get to know her well enough to be able to pick up on anything like that.

Smith: Sure, sure. Was it difficult for political wives?

Archer: It's always difficult for political wives. The whole life of a congressman strains their family relationship and it's one of the sad aspects of being a member of Congress.

Smith: And it's almost paradoxical that the more successful a member is, the more visibility he achieves, the more demands placed upon him, in Ford's case, the more travel that the job entails, the greater the strain.

Archer: And it's even more now. Whoever is the Leader has got to go all over the country now to raise money. You did not have that same requirement at that time. Most of the money that was raised for Republican candidates for Congress was done by mail. And then Jerry Ford's colleague from Michigan, Guy Vander Jagt, who was head of the NRCC, travelled a lot and spoke a lot and raised an awful lot of money, but the Leader himself as I recall just really didn't have the same demand to go all over the country. He did travel, but not to the degree that exists today.

Smith: It's interesting that you mention Congressman Vander Jagt because I remember hearing President Ford say that he thought the reason that Vander

Jagt lost his seat was, in effect, that he did his job too well, the national aspect of the job, and he lost touch with his constituents.

Archer: It hurt him back home and ultimately the campaign that defeated him was that he was not paying enough attention to his own district. But he made life easier for all the rest of us because he was funneling campaign money into the races where it was needed. Fortunately, I never had a need for it in my district. I was very lucky. But it's a very different world today and I think that the fight for money increases the divisions. Members now are having to raise millions of dollars just to run for a House seat and then if they're in any kind of leadership position, they've got to raise extra money for other candidates or if they're a committee chairman or ranking on a committee. And yet I'm convinced, sadly enough, that that will never change until you amend the Constitution.

Smith: Let me ask you one thing and then we'll move on, because it goes to the heart of how you all saw yourselves at that point in the loyal opposition. Because as you know, certainly by the Gingrich era, it became fashionable in some ways to almost take pot shots at the Michel approach, the notion that, "Well, we're not confrontational enough. We're so accustomed to being in the minority that we're assuring ourselves of that status." And when you go back even to the Ford era, people talk about how genial he was and he got along with everyone else. Some people read into that a lack of competitiveness, almost a resignation to permanent minority status. What was the mood within the Republican caucus when you arrived, and how did it evolve?

Archer: Well, clearly we wanted to get in the majority. I don't think anybody sat back and said, "Gee, I'm so happy to be in the minority. This is a wonderful life." It became very frustrating to me because once I got on the Ways & Means Committee, fortunately, it was a very bipartisan committee. Wilbur Mills was chairman of the committee and we had three Democrats who were as conservative as Republicans and every day we could put a majority together when we went into the committee room. And the staffs worked together, did not fight each other. So that was a nice situation, but after the '74 elections was when things really changed.

- Smith: This may be a silly question, but to people who don't know, what's the difference between being in the minority and the majority?
- Archer: Well, the difference is primarily that you lose if you're in the minority and if you believe strongly in what you were doing, and that was certainly true for me, you aren't comfortable losing. I didn't run for Congress just to see my name in lights, I wanted to do something for my kids or my grandkids, and it's very frustrating. I was 24 years in the minority and at least Ford had been in the majority at one point in his career and Bob Michel had, too, but I'd never been in the majority and I would work hard and I would attempt to articulate well and I could never win.
- Smith: Apart from simple roll call votes, what was it about the nature of the House, the way the House ran in those days, that made being a minority even more unattractive?
- Archer: Well, it depended to a great extent on your committee. In my first term, I was on the Banking Committee and we had a chairman, Wright Patman, who really did not like Republicans, in fact, to such a degree that he would not recognize Republicans to even offer an amendment or to even speak on the committee. So when you say, 'What was it like?', clearly that was very, very frustrating. And the staffs fought each other, everything then was as bitter as it is now on the Banking Committee. But then, when I went over to Ways & Means, it was like going to legislative heaven because the staffs worked together and the chairman encouraged everybody to participate irrespective of their party or their philosophy. It was a delight to be there until the '74 elections and then everything flipped.
- Smith: Tell me about the importance of the '74 elections, because we all know about the whole generation of Watergate Babies, so called, who came into the House and rewrote rules. What happened?
- Archer: They just turned the House upside down from where it had been and they rewrote the rules. They were determined to rid the Democrat party of the conservative Democrats, so they took away seniority that protected the committee chairmen and most of the senior Democrats were from the South.

They had been reelected over and over and over again and they were chairmen of most of the committees, though not all of them. And most of them were very good chairmen. Most of them were gentlemen and treated everybody fairly.

A good example was Wilbur Mills, Ways & Means Committee, and George Mahon of Appropriations. I could maybe not name all of them now, but the new Democrat majority made every committee chairman subject to the selection of a majority of their caucus. And that changed everything. In addition, they packed the Ways & Means Committee. The Ways & Means Committee had historically been 25 members, 15 majority and 10 minority. That had been as far back as anyone could remember. Well, they packed it to 36 and then put a bunch of their Watergate freshmen Democrats on the committee. Wilbur Mills created some of his own problems, and when he was no longer chairman, the new chairman was just totally partisan, taking no input from Republicans on the committee.

I remember so much about that, of course, all those years were a lot more impressionable on me early on than later on, but there was a delightful Democrat from Boston named Jimmy Burke who never voted for any tax increase and never voted against any spending increase and he would say, "My people like spending. They don't like taxes." And he got away with that. I mean, he was just amazing. And he went up to a Republican on the committee, I'd been on the committee for six months and he said, "Jerry, you know, Bill Archer's been a real good addition to our committee. He works hard. He attends all the meetings. He does his research right and he articulates well, but he's got one real problem." And the Republican said, "Well, Jim, what is that?" And he said, "Archer thinks this is all on the level." And so there was that sort of thing that went on, too.

Smith: My sense is, 20 years earlier, Ford established himself very early as someone who worked hard, read everything, took this stuff home with him on the weekend, asked good questions. I mean, a workhorse, not a show horse. So those same qualities would shine through at any time. That also suggested not everyone on the committee was equally dedicated.

- Archer: I've used the term frequently that there are two of horses in Congress, a workhorse and a show horse. And to me the workhorses are the ones who really got things done. The show horses got the press and so on. But Jerry Ford was definitely a workhorse, not a show horse.
- Smith: The Agnew resignation, did it take you by surprise?
- Archer: Actually, it did. It did not take some other people in the party in Texas by surprise who had become convinced early on that his ethics left a lot to be desired.
- Smith: That's fascinating, because one of the interviews we did was with Jerry Jones who, at that point, this is in the spring of '73, Haldeman and Ehrlichman are still on the White House staff, and Jones has just been reorganizing the White House personnel office for Haldeman. He gets a call from Haldeman. Again, this had to have been March, April of '73. He wants to know how many people worked directly for the vice president. And Jerry did some figuring and he said, "Well, I guess around 50." He said, "Good. I want undated letters of resignation from every one of them," which led Jones in retrospect to believe that they knew long before the *Wall Street Journal* ran its story that summer about Agnew's problems, which ultimately led in October to his resignation. But the people around the president, including presumably the president, were tipped off to something that could very well turn out badly. It came as news to you?
- Archer: Oh, absolutely. I was just not plugged in to that sort of thing. And I found, too, that as far as any ethical behavior was concerned by another member, I was generally about the last to know because I had my attention fixed on the legislative matter I was working with and I didn't pay an awful lot of attention to that sort of thing.
- Smith: Do you remember how you found out about the Watergate break-in?
- Archer: I don't. You know, that's amazing, but I don't. But, actually, it was not that momentous a revelation when it was first announced. It was like some sort of petty kid prank kind of thing and did not take on the magnitude, and actually did not, until Nixon really got involved in it. I kind of dismissed it when I

first heard it. I said, "This is ridiculous. What in the world would they hope to gain by this?" And I think it could have been squelched very quickly if Nixon had handled it differently. In fact, I and several other Republicans went to the White House and urged the President to turn the FBI loose, find out who had broken the law, and let them pay the price, whatever it was, and go on. But, little did we know that he was already involved in the cover-up.

Smith: What was his reaction?

Archer: Well, I didn't actually talk to him personally, so I didn't get any reaction. All we knew was that our suggestion was not accepted.

Smith: Were you surprised by the tapes?

Archer: Yes, I was.

Smith: Both by their existence and their content?

Archer: Well, yes, more by the fact that they existed. I found it hard to believe that that was going on, although Johnson really started it as we know now, and Nixon just continued it. I don't know what I would've advised him on that, but I know a lot of people said, "Why didn't he just destroy the tapes?" I guess, to his credit, he was not willing to do that.

Smith: What was the mood in the House Republican caucus as these events unfolded, say, up to and including the Agnew resignation? Did you all feel you were in some sort of runaway train? What was it like?

Archer: Well, it was very demoralizing and certainly when the Watergate situation began to unfold, it was very, very depressing. Every time that I would go back home, there would be a TV camera at the airport wanting me to explain certain things about what was going on of which I had no knowledge. But it was like I was a part of it and that was the way most members were treated. So, it was terribly stifling and it also created the image with the American people that, "Well, if they're up there, they're probably crooks, too."

- Smith: And Ford's role, it must have been an awkward one in some ways. On one level, [he was] the White House's man and yet he was the caucus' man and he was his own man. How did he handle that?
- Archer: Well, I'm not privy to any personal discussions with him about that. He seemed to just sort of ride along in his usual way which was unflappable and doing what he believed was the right thing to do. It had to tear him up.
- Smith: There is an element of the Boy Scout in Ford. I mean, he was an Eagle Scout after all. And I think he was genuinely shocked that Nixon lied to him. I think that, in the end, is what happened.
- Archer: Well, yes, he had to be. He really had to be, and I think Nixon shocked an awful lot of people because you can think whatever you wanted to about Richard Nixon, but I would never, even though he had been demeaned by the media and everything else, I never would've thought that he had been doing what he was doing. It just surprised me and most everybody else.
- Smith: Particularly with your constituents, with conservatives, whether the language on the tapes was almost as much of a problem as the activities that it described.
- Archer: It's hard to separate it, Richard. I mean, it was a whole very, very unacceptable ball of wax that he was covering up a violation of the law, although be it a relatively minor one in its actual essence. And he made it into a major issue and then his language just seemed so inappropriate, particularly for a president in the White House.
- Smith: I guess what I'm getting at is, did it become progressively harder to defend?
- Archer: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely, because I didn't want to believe it at first and until the smoking gun tape finally came out, I was basically defending Nixon, and then it became impossible after that. And so, the rest of it is pretty much history.
- Smith: When Agnew resigns, there's a vice presidential vacancy to fill. Was there an organized campaign? I'm not saying at Ford's instigation.

Archer: Ford did not, to my knowledge, instigate any campaign to become vice president. There was clearly a need for someone who would be acceptable to the Democrats, but somebody who still was a solid Republican. And when they began to look around, it was pretty clear there was really only one person that fit that mold and that was Jerry Ford. And again, as we've talked about his relationship with the Democrats in the House, I remember sitting on the floor the day that he was actually nominated and when he spoke there was acceptance across the chamber. It was the Democrats and the Republicans saying, "This is the right choice. This is the right person." They knew that the country needed that and they got what they were looking for.

Smith: During his vice presidency, he was out of town a lot, which was interesting. I mean, again, talk about being in an awkward position, defending the president and yet not becoming so close to the president as to impair his presidential effectiveness down the road. But presumably, he was here quite a bit, too. Did you see him during that period?

Archer: I do not recall seeing him. And it may be that he came to one or more of the Chowder & Marching Club get-togethers on Wednesday evenings, but I just don't remember.

Smith: You mentioned the smoking gun tape. Was that when you realized in your own mind that the Nixon presidency was over?

Archer: Sure. Absolutely. Until then, I was not prepared to vote for impeachment, but after that I knew that I had no choice.

Smith: Did you see Ford at all during that period or was it after he took the oath of office?

Archer: I did not. I did not see him that I can remember.

Smith: For people who weren't around then, that first week in August of 1974, when the transition occurred with the only president ever to resign in American history, what was the mood like in this town?

Archer: Well, I think everybody knows the mood was extremely down. There was concern about what the capabilities of our government were. There was just a



depressing pall that was over the whole country. I think there were some people who were greatly relieved to see Nixon go. And from the standpoint of the Republicans, I think probably the majority felt relieved that they didn't have to go through an impeachment process.

Smith: Of course, you had to go through the pardon process.

Archer: Yes.

Smith: Before the pardon occurred, had there been discussion among your colleagues about what to do with Richard Nixon? Or any contact with the White House?

Archer: I don't think so. I don't remember that there was and I think it came as pretty much of a surprise when Ford pardoned Nixon.

Smith: And an unpleasant surprise?

Archer: I don't think so. I think in my mind and the other Republicans that I'd talked to, they sensed that he did the right thing for the country even though it created some real negativity for him. But that it now pushed this aside and we could move forward with not be encumbered with the past.

Smith: Of course, you had a safe district. You could be statesmanlike.

Archer: Yes.

Smith: There are a lot of Republicans that lost their seats in '74 and they may have lost it without the pardon, but over the years—

Archer: I don't think the pardon had much to do with the loss of Republican seats in '74. It was just that the brand "Republican" because of what Nixon had done was so negative that it just was hard to overcome. That was my worst election, too, in '74. I only got 79% of the vote.

Smith: It will come as no surprise that Mel Laird had a plan to do other than what President Ford did on the pardon. That he was telling the president, "Don't rush into this. Wait until I get back." His plan was to put together a bipartisan delegation, members from both houses, to go down to the White House and, in effect, to petition the president to consider a pardon.

Archer: Oh, did he? I didn't know that. I know Mel pretty well and I've had a lot of talks with him, but he never told me that.

Smith: He didn't? Because I wondered whether that something he's polished a little bit in his own mind over the years since or whether in fact it was originated as he indicated at the time. The question is, and obviously this is speculative, given the mood of the country and the political mood of this town, how realistically could Ford have "prepared" the country for the pardon? I mean, the first trial balloon, it seems to me, would've been shot down before it got beyond the trees.

Archer: I would tend to agree with you. I think that would have been so inflammatory that you would've had people just putting out rhetoric that was radioactive.

Smith: Wasn't Richard Nixon radioactive at that point?

Archer: Oh, yes. Yes. Absolutely.

Smith: Including among Republicans?

Archer: Yes.

Smith: Maybe especially among the Republicans.

Archer: Yes, he had become totally negative to Republicans, politically, and that's why what Ford did was the right thing, I think, for the future of the country. But it was interesting, because Mel was talking to me a little bit later and he said Ford counseled with him, now whether or not he would say this, but he did tell me this, counsel with him on almost every major decision he made before he did it. And this was the one decision that he did not discuss with Laird. And Laird said, "I was driving to the golf course on Sunday and I was going to play golf with Ford and I heard it on the radio and I nearly drove off the road, I was so shocked. And when I got on the first tee, I said, 'Jerry, you have made the biggest political mistake of your life! Now, let's go on and play golf.'" That's the way he described it to me. I don't know whether he told you that or not.

Smith: Yeah, that's consistent.

Archer: In any event, he and Ford really were close over the years.

Smith: There's another Laird story that we'd love to have your reaction to. Jumping ahead to the spring of '75 and the fall of South Vietnam. Laird, of course, who was the architect of Vietnamization obviously has an emotional investment in the success of the policy. He has, for lack of a better word, convinced himself that Ford didn't fight hard enough and that if he'd really, really tried, he could've gotten the, whatever, 700 million dollars out of Congress to prop up the South Vietnamese. And again, he was there, I wasn't, but it sounds unrealistic given the mood of the country and the Congress, particularly after the '74 elections.

Basically people wanted to pull the plug. Is there anything that our President could've said that would persuade a majority of Congress to vote for additional military funds for the South Vietnamese?

Archer: Probably not. I guess we'll never know, but it would've been a real uphill battle to get a majority of votes to do that. I remember those years pretty well because the Vietnam War was just really bad on this country and bad on young people. I saw it in my district and work through the district. Young people lost confidence in the United States and didn't have much hope for their future. We don't need to have a long discussion about the war because that's all history, but I know I had stuck with Nixon all the way through and his efforts to try get us out with some degree of success. I took a lot of criticism even back in my district for that. That, "We ought to get the heck out of there and just turn it over to the Vietnamese and forget about it."

I would not take that position until finally we had mined the Port of Hai Phong, which in my view should have been done much earlier, but that's neither here nor there. And we had begun to bomb some of stuff that had been off-limits before. And then, we were so desperate to have a peace agreement that Nixon had sent Kissinger over there to offer a billion dollars to the North Vietnamese if they would just sign a peace agreement. He was in Hanoi talking to them and attempting to get them to agree to that, and we had our mine sweepers pulling the mines out of the Port of Hai Phong at the same

time to show what good guys we were, and “Won’t you please sign a peace agreement?”

And they came with a 100 million dollar appropriation request to bomb the North Vietnamese in Cambodia and I thought, “I can’t believe they’re doing this. You’re stroking the head of the octopus in Hanoi and yet you’re talking about cutting off its tentacles in Cambodia.” I voted with the Democrats to cut off the funding and I think that passed by only two votes. And I became persona non grata within the Republican Party for having done that. But I’m convinced it was one of the best votes I ever made. It made absolutely no sense to take that added risk for our bombers and to spend that extra money and to think we were doing any good at all. So that was a watershed moment for me in my political life as a Republican in the Congress. But I just don’t remember much about Ford’s situation at that time.

Smith: Another thing - if you remember, immediately after the fall of Saigon, Congress wanted to pull the plug, not only on the war, but on funding for resettling refugees. And they basically reneged or were about to. And Ford went to the country and put together this kind of crazy quilt coalition that had George Meany and the American Jewish Congress and others who reminded people about our tradition as an asylum for oppressed peoples - that we really had a moral obligation. It wouldn’t have happened without that effort, which, again, leads one to believe that Laird engaged in maybe a little bit of wishful thinking to believe that—

Archer: Well, I think so. I think so. But that’s a judgment call that we’ll never really know.

Smith: Let me ask you, because I assume one thing you and Gerald Ford certainly had in common was fiscal conservatism when it came to the budget and I think he vetoed 66 bills, most of them he managed to sustain. How difficult was that given the numbers you had after the ’74 election?

Archer: It was difficult because the whole complexion of the House had changed after the ’74 elections, and to try to overcome the spending proclivities, particularly for the Watergate Babies and the Democrat majority, was not easy. He did

draw the line and he was very good about that. But even though he was a political animal, and he had to be to get to where he was, he still would not let that override the thing he knew was the right thing to do. I respected him tremendously for that, and I guess there were others that respected him, too.

Smith: We had a recession and it was a deep recession at the time.

Archer: Yes.

Smith: Worst since World War II, which must have been even more politically in some ways a foolhardy/courageous, depending on your perspective, not to spend federal dollars.

Archer: Yes, yes. Absolutely.

Smith: How difficult was it, coming into '76 with the Reagan challenge in Texas? I mean, I'm not sure where you came down, but how difficult would it be for Ford against Ronald Reagan?

Archer: Well, Reagan, of course, swept Texas and controlled our delegation to our national convention.

Smith: Did that surprise you, the outcome of the primary? That the magnitude was so great?

Archer: Oh, it did, a little bit. It did. And I had taken the position early on that I was not going to get involved in any intra-party fights. There was a big split in my district when I was first elected to Congress. You had the Goldwater people and you had the Bush people, basically, in my district. And I just said, "Look, I want to work with all of you," and I had all of them working in my campaign together and I continued with that through the rest of my career. I just would not get involved in primaries.

In fact, that may have hurt me with George Bush when he ran for the presidency, because he called me and asked me to publicly endorse him and I said, "I just can't do it. I'm going to vote for you," and I did vote for him, but "I can't publicly endorse you." And the Reagan people put a lot of pressure on me and I said, "No, I'm just not going to get involved in a primary." And I

didn't. But they clearly were very, very emotional and the pressure never eased. When we went to our state convention, for example, my wife was National Committeewoman from Texas, and they said, "Well, you've got to now commit publicly to Reagan." And she and I had both said, "We'll work like heck for him for the national convention, but we're not going to commit before then." And they put down an ultimatum to her and said, "Well, you will either commit to Reagan or you will not be National Committeewoman" and they pulled her out right at the convention. So, yes, I was right in the vortex of all that, but I never got involved in it.

Smith: What were the factors that you believe led to Reagan's sweep in the Texas primary?

Archer: You know, I'm not sure. They were very well organized, number one.

Smith: Is it safe to say, they inherited, among other things, the Goldwater activists?

Archer: Yes, they did. And Reagan had come out looking so good after his GE televised address that it just sparked a lot of emotion amongst people and caused them to really want to get out and work for him. Here was somebody who offered a new approach to throw off all the things that they didn't like that had been going on in Washington.

Smith: And had star quality.

Archer: He had star quality and he was able to take advantage of what Obama used to get elected, which was change, hope and change, for those people who were strong conservatives. And they got out and they just totally outworked, they were better organized and they outworked the Ford campaign.

Smith: Which must've been a little embarrassing to Jim Baker.

Archer: Yep, a little, but I don't think a lot.

Smith: Did you go to the convention in Kansas City?

Archer: No, I did not go to the convention. They would not make me a delegate since I had not endorsed Reagan before the convention. And that was fine with me, I didn't really care. But I do remember what happened at the convention

which was not too comfortable. They put the Texas delegation right in front of the Ford box. Have you heard about this?

Smith: No.

Archer: The Ford box was at a level that was just slightly above the floor and they deliberately did this when they seated the Texas delegation. And the Texas delegates, a number of them, came with rolls of toilet paper and threw them back over into the Ford box. I mean, it wasn't very comfortable.

Smith: You know, the fascinating thing is that when people talk about, "Reagan," I often say, "Well, which Reagan are you talking about? Are you talking about the Reagan who put Dick Schweiker on his ticket in '76 because he wanted to win, or the Reagan who apparently was going to put Gerald Ford on his ticket four years later because he wanted to win?" I mean, the pragmatist in Reagan tends to get overlooked to the true believers. He was that unique combination.

Archer: No, he really was. He was incredible and somebody who came out of no political background at all. He was pretty amazing.

Smith: One effect of the Reagan presidency was to decouple conservatism from a kind of traditional fiscal responsibility to the point where people said, "Well, deficits don't matter"?

Archer: Reagan never really embraced that.

Smith: No, he didn't, but one unwitting consequence of supply-side economics, for example, was to shift the emphasis away from "Deficits *do* matter" to "Well, they don't matter as much as they used to."

Archer: The other thing, too, is in this business up here you never get completely away from politics, and politics is always pressing you to move, to do something that the people find attractive and appealing - and lowering taxes is attractive and appealing. Raising taxes is not. Spending is attractive and appealing. Cutting spending is not. And the Democrats had the spending issue that they could always use and so now the Republicans are coming up, and Jack Kemp and I talked a lot about this, with the approach that is going to

make us more popular with the people. We're going to be the tax cutters. And that was a change that happened at that time.

Smith: But there are unintended consequences of change. I mean, who would've predicted even in 1981 that almost 30 years later we would be where we are in terms of the deficits and a lot of conservatives saying, "Well, deficits don't really matter."

Archer: Well, the conservatives are beginning to come home now, though, that deficits *do* matter.

Smith: Democratic deficits matter more than Republican deficits.

Archer: I think even if you still had Bush in the White House, the conservatives would be saying, "Wait a minute. A trillion dollars? No, thank you."

Smith: A couple quick things. While Ford was in the White House, did you see him from time to time? What kind of interaction—

Archer: Well, yeah, he continued to be a member of the Chowder & Marching Club. He hosted an event every year in the White House for the members in the Chowder & Marching Club. I didn't see him much other than that, except that I was, and this was a very, very memorable moment in my life. My secretary came in one day and said, "The White House is calling and they want to know if you would like to come and have dinner with the President." And, of course, I said, "Yeah. Cancel whatever it is." And I'd forgotten how much, I think that it may have been the very same day that I was expected to go down there. And I did. Ford was president. And the White House was basically empty.

I pulled up and parked right outside the White House and went in and the staff took me up to the first floor and Ford was in the Red Room, I believe, on the first floor. And I walked in and he was sitting back just comfortably smoking his pipe, and he said, "Bill, why don't you get a drink. What would you like?" And somebody took my drink order and brought it back. Rumsfeld was there and two other congressmen had been invited; one of them was Otto Passman from Louisiana and I don't know what the connection between him



and Ford was, and the other one was from Oklahoma, both Democrats. And he said, "You know, I don't have any business to discuss with you. I just wanted to get a couple of friends in here to have dinner with me." He said, "I'm a bachelor." Betty was in the hospital with her breast cancer and he said, "I just want to have a few friends here and just put our feet up and visit a little bit." And we didn't talk about legislation.

Smith: Did he talk about her? I mean, did he talk about what she was going through?

Archer: No, he really didn't. He didn't dwell on that. I've forgotten, frankly, the subjects that we did talk about, but it was so personal and so comfortable. And then we went into the family dining room and we had dinner and at the end of dinner, they were just serving dessert and he said, "I've got to apologize to you. I've got to leave. I've got to go to the hospital." But it was just a very warm, personal moment.

Smith: I have to ask you. We've heard from other people who've been with him in the House that it wasn't intentional on their part, but they found themselves still calling him Jerry. Did you see that?

Archer: I did see it, but I never did after that. I called him Mr. President because I guess I am too much of a traditionalist. I'd gotten to know George Bush very well. He was my number one constituent for the entire time I was in Congress and I called him George all the way through, but after he became president, never again did I call him George.

Smith: In the '76 campaign, obviously they started out behind and they basically caught up. Why do you think in the end they didn't pull it out?

Archer: I've thought about that a lot and I believe a variety of things. I believe the pardon was a significant factor that hung around his neck even later. I think, particularly from a Texan's perspective, he was damaged by the Reagan campaign in the primary and there was a carryover from that, at least in Texas. I don't know about any of the other states. The Reagan activists just never could get into the fold and do the campaign and do the things you need to do in an election. But the other thing is, as you mentioned, the economy was terrible and we had inflation and we had unemployment and we had

stagflation and it was a perfect opportunity for somebody to come in and say, “Gosh, we’ve got to have change,” and Jimmy Carter happened to be that person. Maybe if the election had been a month later, Ford might’ve won because nobody hated Ford. There were not any big negatives as we see today in the political arena, but it was just that they were not feeling very good about their lives economically.

Smith: And, it was, as you say, the climate for an outsider. The irony is, four years later, it was another outsider, who evicted the first outsider.

Archer: Well, and the conditions were even worse then. And as good as Reagan was, and he was outstanding, I’m not sure he could’ve won except for the basic economic conditions that existed.

Smith: Did you see Ford at all? I mean, you must’ve run into him from time to time after his presidency.

Archer: At the last five-year celebration that we had of the Chowder & Marching Club, he came and attended that and I saw him. That was the last time that I saw him. That was five years ago.

Smith: When he died, I was wearing two hats. I was with ABC at the first part of the week and with the family the second part. And I can tell you a lot of folks in the media were surprised at how much public reaction there was. It almost seemed to build, as the week went on. Some of it, I think, was that there was a whole generation being introduced to him for the first time. You know, a lot of the people weren’t alive then and they liked what they saw. He seemed, by contrast with the ugliness of politics today, he seemed pretty attractive.

Archer: Well, he was just inherently a very good human being and I think that came through to people. In addition, there was not the negativity that was thrown at him. The system today with, you mentioned the cable shows and bloggers and the whole bit, the system today can demonize anybody and I think that’s very sad, but it happens over and over and over again. And, fortunately, he was not in an era where the name of the game was to demonize somebody who was your adversary or your opponent. I think that helped him a lot. But he was a beloved individual.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Archer: As someone who was dedicated to this country, trying to do the right thing, respecting everyone else and a down to earth, non-arrogant individual even though he had climbed all the way to the very top. And the fact that he was at the top was not because he had climbed over other people's backs.

Smith: That says it perfectly. Thank you so much.

## INDEX

### C

Chowder & Marching Society, 1–3

### F

Ford, Gerald R.

1976 election, 26

1976 Republican Convention, 21–23

character traits, 3–4

Chowder & Marching Society, 1–3

fall of Saigon, 18–20

as fiscal conservative, 1

Nixon pardon, 17–18, 25–26

personal stories about, 24–25

presidential style, 7–8

remembrance, 27

Speaker of House ambition, 6–7

vice president, selection as, 16

### H

House of Representatives, 11

### L

Laird, Mel, 18–19

### M

Michel, Bob, 8

### N

Nixon resignation, 16–17

### R

Reagan, Ronald

1976 Republican Convention, 21–23

### S

Saigon, fall of, 18–20

### V

Vander Jagt, Guy, 9–10

### W

Watergate, 13–15