

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**Bill Timmons**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
**September 11, 2009**

Smith: Thank you so much for doing this, we appreciate it.

Timmons: Thank you for coming by.

Smith: Professionally you started in this town with Bill Brock. Was it in the mid-  
'60s?

Timmons: No. In 1955 I came here to go to college, but I had to work. I went to school at night at Georgetown and I got a job on the Hill for Senator Alexander Wiley from Wisconsin. So from '55 to '62, I was in the Senate as a staffer. Then I went back to Chattanooga and was campaign manager for Bill Brock, who is a contemporary and long time friend of mine. He asked me to come back to Washington in January of '63 as his assistant.

Smith: So you were really in on the beginnings of what we would call the modern Southern Republican Party.

Timmons: Yes, I think so. And Brock was one of those, of course.

Smith: How difficult was it to elect a Republican in 1962?

Timmons: Incredibly difficult. Brock was the first Republican to represent our district in forty-two years at the time. And the only way that he won, really, was that they had a Democratic primary and the losing side in the primary decided to plague on the party's nominee and supported Brock. A lot of great stories from those days, but he stayed in the House until he went to the Senate, and served one term in the Senate. But, yeah, there was a lot of movement in the South rejecting the Democratic philosophy and moving to the Republican side. But it was a hard choice for a lot of people whose parents has been Democrats and brothers and sisters were Democrats and sort of ostracized them.

Smith: Well, let's face it, memories of the war in some places – when they talked about the war, they talked about the Civil War, not World War II.

Timmons: One of my grandfathers was still alive when I was young and got involved in Republican politics. I visited him on the porch one summer night, probably a year before he died. He had been a Democratic ward heeler, a surgeon, had served in the state legislature. He was a union guy, too, very active in all of that; a tax collector. I mean, he was really, for a Southern ward heeler he was the epitome of it. And I was Republican. I sat on the porch with him and he said, "Bill, I wish I had some money in my estate so that I could write you out of my will." And he would have; he wasn't joking. So, yeah, it was heavily Democrat, although I must say it was a conservative Democratic area in the South by and large with the \_\_\_\_\_.

Smith: Would he have been, for example, a strong Roosevelt supporter?

Timmons: Yes, very strong.

Smith: You could begin to understand. Today you look at the New Deal coalition and you think this makes no sense, until you get to the personal level and you talk to people like your grandfather. Then you begin to understand how all of these unwieldy, seemingly opposed pieces hung together.

Timmons: Well, the TVA, Tennessee Valley Authority, was really instrumental in the economy of the valley in eastern Tennessee and down through there. Roosevelt obviously got all the credit for that, as he should have, and my people felt that jobs were important. And it was cheap electricity, and so forth. So that was running through people's minds for Roosevelt.

Smith: We've talked to Senator Brock. He obviously had a really tough re-election fight in '64, as a lot of Republicans did. He'd been a strong Goldwater supporter. Were you at the convention?

Timmons: For Goldwater?

Smith: In San Francisco?

Timmons: Yes, I was a floor whip.

Smith: You were?

Timmons: Yeah.

Smith: I have to ask you because my book opens with the Tuesday night when Rockefeller spoke and almost taunted the crowd and the crowd lustily responded. What do you remember of that?

Timmons: Of the speech?

Smith: Well, yes, and the mood. How divided was the party?

Timmons: Well, the party wasn't particularly divided because all the delegates there were Goldwater delegates by and large, except for some in New England, and so forth. Scranton was the opposition candidate and emotions were pretty high because of what they thought was the Rockefeller wing of the party controlling everything for years. And they now had the ascendancy for the conservative movement. And so it was pretty bitter. But there were not a lot of Rockefeller/Scranton delegates there. In fact, one of my jobs was to lock the door to the convention hall so that busloads of students that Rockefeller/Scranton had bussed in to try to storm the floor, couldn't get in. I was standing there with Fred LaRue, I guess, and we'd locked the door and wouldn't let them in. They were out there, hundreds of them, screaming and shouting and trying to get in. There was also a lot of falsification of passes. We found a lot of them had the same number and everything. You'd lick your finger and it would smudge the ink, you know. So there was a lot of that going on, and that all kind of came together as things that made Goldwater delegates upset.

Smith: You get the sense that if he hadn't existed you would almost have had to invent him. He was the perfect foil.

Timmons: That's right.

Smith: For where you wanted to take the party.

Timmons: That's right. And there was nobody else, really. Evidence the fact that he took Bill Miller, a nobody, as his running mate. What did that add? So you would have to invent somebody.

Smith: Obviously things don't go well in November, but you hang on, come back. And there is this effort to reinvent the rump that remains in the House of Representatives, including finding new leadership. What was the problem with Charlie Halleck? Or was it a combination of post-Goldwater, and people just wanting a fresh face?

Timmons: We're talking about Gerald Ford in this interview, so Ford had become the conference chairman in '63 and Brock had been one of the Young Turks supporting that effort for new leadership. Because Brock represented at the time – he was 32 or something – and a lot of other young people. Rumsfeld was another.

Smith: Charlie Goodell, Bob Dole.

Timmons: Goodell, Dole, and on and on, I can't remember all of them. But there's core group of young people who wanted new leadership. And they supported Ford in '63, and then in '65. The natural progression was that Charlie Halleck had to go because he represented the old view. I don't think it was liberal/conservative, it was more leadership potential.

Smith: And generational?

Timmons: And generational.

Smith: Let me ask you a big question. The older I get, the more it seems to me that generational politics trumps almost everything else.

Timmons: Yeah. It's very, very important. Philosophy in a lot of people is immensely important obviously, because you've got fringe groups on both ends. But generational politics is extremely important. You see it in Obama, who appealed to young people and turned them out to vote and McCain was seen as the old guard. So generational politics do matter.

- Smith: It would help to nail down something because there has been talk over the years that there was a possibility of Mel Laird being a candidate for that job. And of course in the end, it went to Ford. Does that ring a bell?
- Timmons: Well, I remember Laird, who I guess became conference chairman after Ford became leader, and I don't recall that there was an actual challenge to Ford. Because the two became very close all the way through their professional lives. But there could have been. Laird was ambitious, and of course, so was Ford. So, I just don't recall that specifically.
- Smith: But your sense is that the Ford election in '65 was as much as anything else, a generational desire for change among the freshmen?
- Timmons: Oh, yes. In fact, they called them Young Turks; the group around there – Jack McDonnell, and all of them. But an interesting side bit to this was that when Ford was running for leader, he wanted to dump Les Arends as the whip. Arends was Halleck's whip. Kind of an older generation guy and Ford wanted to dump him in favor, I think, of Laird or somebody – probably Laird. And Arends, - I, of course, wasn't there but I'm told - said, "Jerry, don't do this. I'll win and you will be embarrassed." Well, Ford tried and Les won and had to serve with Ford. They got along great because everybody gets along with Ford at the time. But he tried to dump Arends, the whip, and Arends beat him.
- Smith: That's interesting.
- Timmons: There a little humility there, I guess.
- Smith: It's also been suggested that you had the *Ev and Charlie Show*, which became the *Ev and Jerry Show*, and that at least some folks, particularly the Young Turks, looked at Dirksen and they saw an old lion who was sometimes too friendly with the Johnson White House. That Ev would go down and cut his deals over a couple of drinks with the President. And they wanted someone speaking for House Republicans who was perhaps a little bit less amenable to the administration. Does that ring a bell?
- Timmons: Well, it could be, I don't recall that specifically, but it makes sense. Knowing the attitude of the Republicans in the Congress, that made a lot of sense.

However, I guess Hugh Scott replaced Ev Dirksen, which didn't accomplish much in that regard either – as far as generational politics go.

Smith: That's true. And it's hard to believe today – today's Republican Party would not choose Hugh Scott.

Timmons: You're right.

Smith: They might not nominate Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania. Tell us briefly, because everyone waxes nostalgic about then as opposed to now. I mean, up on the Hill in terms of just the basic civility that existed, how were things different in those days. And what was the role of the Republican leader in pushing a program when you didn't have a whole lot of troops?

Timmons: Yeah, well it was a kind of accommodation and I think that Leader Ford had to find ways to accommodate the Democrats without compromising his principles and the party's principles. And therefore, he was seen rather as a pacifier in the fights that could have happened. [There was] so much more civil dialogue in those days and discussion. President Nixon had great support among Southern Democrats – Joe Wagoner and the group, and Ford was involved in all of that, of course, by dealing with those Southerners to try and get a majority on certain issues. But everybody could sit down and talk. There weren't the kind of strong feelings that people have today – party politics.

Smith: Let me ask you: how different is it? I was talking to Walter Mondale about this. And actually even Ted Kennedy later on, when we were talking to him, when a new representative went to Washington in the mid-'60s, you found parties that were broadly liberal and broadly conservative, but also happened to have wings. So that, for example, Mondale was told – well Dole said when he went to DC, he was told, "Go spend some time with Senator Eastland." Ted Kennedy said he was told, "Spend some time with Dick Russell." And it wasn't just spend some time with the Old Bulls, but the fact is, spend some time with people who are ideologically your opposite, but are in your party.

The fact is the Republicans had a liberal wing. The Democrats obviously had a conservative wing. So that within your party, you had to learn to deal with

people who were you ideological opposite before you functioned in the larger institution. Isn't that by and large gone today?

Timmons: Yes, I think it is.

Smith: And what is the consequence of that?

Timmons: There are heated exchanges every day up on the Hill in both the Senate and the House, within the limits of the rules, on political and ideological issues. And there seems to be very little middle ground. Gerald Ford would have sought middle ground, I think. I'm not sure the current leadership cares about that.

Smith: Why was there middle ground to be found then as opposed to now?

Timmons: From the Republican point of view, there was really no choice. The numbers were overwhelmingly Democratic, and if you wanted to impact legislation in any way, you had to accommodate and compromise. And the Democrats, some of them, were willing to do that, particularly the Old Bulls. Most of the committee chairs were Southern conservatives in those days and their philosophy was not unlike some of the Republicans. So there was an opportunity to negotiate and deal, particularly on budget matters.

Now that all kind of fell apart later. But also in those days staff was very small. There was one Senate building when I came and now there are three. There were two House of Representative buildings and now there are three. Staff of four or five people, and of course a decade or so before that, there was one or two people on the staff. So it had grown some. And now, Lord knows, it's twenty or thirty. If you've got a committee, it's even more. So the staff takes a greater role now, I think, than they did in those days.

Smith: Is it safe to say - Ford certainly did, even though he had a safe district - that members were much more inclined to go home more often than is currently the case?

Timmons: Right. I think so. There are some that are afraid to go home now. But, no, I think so.

- Smith: Do they spend more time raising money now than they did then?
- Timmons: Oh, absolutely. No question. A House member starts the day he is elected to raise money for the next one, and some Senators raise money four, five years out.
- Smith: Presumably the parties have less control, less influence even, today.
- Timmons: Yes.
- Smith: It's more about media, and the media have become more confrontational. Clearly cable TV drives this, and you need a new storyline every 24 hours. So Joe Wilson's the center of attention today and tomorrow there will be someone else.
- Timmons: Yeah. They are all seeking news and creating news, in some cases. But raising money and running for re-election is paramount to most members of Congress these days, as opposed to thoughtful consideration and research on legislation. Even with the huge staffs they've got, it's hard. People made a lot out of how nobody's read these health care bills, a thousand pages. A great majority of members, both Democrat and Republican, probably will not read it by the time they vote on it. Part of the problem is that you take a paragraph in the bill and it says amendment to such and so and so, line 84, da da da. That means nothing until you go back to the original act and see what it's amending and that amends something else. So it's not just "read it though like a novel."
- Smith: It was a different Republican Party then. It seems to me Gerald Ford, in many ways, was almost the perfect representative of a party that was grounded in the Midwest. You were beginning to develop a Southern wing.
- Timmons: But a lot in New England, too. In those days you had a strong group. Massachusetts had two Republican senators, and over half the House delegation was Republican.
- Smith: Was it Ford's strength that he got along with and was trusted by everyone?
- Timmons: It's his character. I think that everybody will say is that he had sterling character. He understood people. He appreciated their positions, he had



empathy for hardships in different situations. His character, which includes personality, was just superb. Nobody that I know of, other than maybe Elizabeth Holtzman, ever questioned his character because it was really great. You could trust him, he was honest, straightforward. One word that encapsulates the whole thing is decency. He was the most decent person you'd ever meet.

Smith: And what was it with Elizabeth Holtzman?

Timmons: I think she was kind of off the reservation a lot of times. And Ford didn't like her, either, after she attacked him personally on so many things. It started way before Watergate, but Watergate kind of brought all that out.

Smith: That's interesting. It started before he was vice president?

Timmons: Yeah, I think it goes way back when she would not only talk about him and the Republican Party - she was a flame-thrower, as we would say. We just finished talking about [the first] that there was not that sort of vituperation back then. But now here's an example, and there were several others. But by and large, the Old Bulls in the House liked Gerald Ford. And under the Twenty-fifth Amendment, when he was named vice president, there were very few votes against him in the House and the Senate. Very few. And so it meant that most Democrats supported him, and they liked him.

Smith: Conservatism also, however, has changed dramatically over the last forty years. What kind of conservative was Gerald Ford?

Timmons: I think he was an economic conservative, and a liberal foreign policy person.

Smith: A product of World War II consensus?

Timmons: That's right. He always supported defense appropriations. He had little interest in social issues back then and was a strong supporter when he was in the House of President Nixon on virtually everything. The only thing I can think of that they disagreed on was Nixon wanted to use some highway money in the highway trust fund for mass transit. And Ford, coming from Michigan, opposed that vigorously. That's the only one issue that I can think of.

- Smith: How was that resolved?
- Timmons: In favor of Ford.
- Smith: Now, you say opposed. I assume that would be behind the scenes, in the discussions?
- Timmons: There were discussions, but I think it was also a public thing. It wasn't bitter or mean, it was "I disagree with the President on this," and the highway trust fund is sacrosanct and must be used for what the monies were raised for. Good logical argument. Of course, he's from an auto state, too. And Nixon was trying to find a way to move some money into mass transit for all kinds of reasons.
- Smith: It's always been said that Ford's great ambition in life was to be Speaker of the House.
- Timmons: I think that's true. I think he said that several times.
- Smith: When Nixon is elected in '68 and he makes some decent gains in Congress, although obviously they're still in a minority status. Of course Ford looked at '72 as a possible Republican landslide and was disappointed when they didn't pick up as many seats as he'd hoped. And that's when he told Betty that he would retire after '76. He said in his book that Erlichman went once to meet with he and other Republican leaders on the Hill, and didn't help matters by falling asleep in the course of the meeting. What your job was at that point? You joined the administration when?
- Timmons: After the election of '68, \_\_\_\_\_ during the transition and then moved into the White House in January of '69 with President Nixon. I was the deputy assistant. And my responsibilities were the House of Representatives. Kim Ballou was responsible for the Senate, and we worked for Bryce Harlow, who was the assistant to the President.
- Smith: Tell us about Bryce Harlow, who is a legendary figure, but I don't think people know very much about why he was so revered.

Timmons: Oh, just a super guy. He and Ford were so much alike in character and integrity. Bryce Harlow came here from Oklahoma to work on the Hill, and he worked for the House Armed Services Committee. He was a young staffer. During World War II he was assigned to the Pentagon and worked there in Legislative Affairs and then Eisenhower brought him into the White House. He was a valuable assistant there doing some congressional work, but mainly as a speechwriter. He had a tremendous vocabulary and understanding of words and how to fashion speeches. He stayed close to Eisenhower after Eisenhower left office, and he obviously knew Nixon from the Eisenhower days; so he was kind a natural person for Nixon to appeal to, to come in. And he was, at time, kind of the grey-beard of legislative affairs. But he knew every member of Congress - well not every member - but the important members of Congress. Understood how they thought, what could be expected and not expected of them. And of course he knew President Nixon well for years. So he was an ideal person to come in there.

Smith: Is it safe to say that he was one of the relatively small number of people who really enjoyed Richard Nixon's trust?

Timmons: Yes, I would say so. Nixon turned to him several times, even after Bryce left the White House, to come back in. And so did Ford. Ford liked him a lot and they were close. Everybody liked Bryce. Kind of like Ford, everybody liked Ford with very few exceptions. So he worked in very well there. He started and when I succeeded Bryce in the White House as the assistant for legislative affairs, I followed the same routine that Bryce had, which was to set up once a week an hour or hour and a half, in Republican Leader Ford's office, a gripe session. Same thing with Hugh Scott in the Senate, different day, and asked Ford to schedule people who were complaining about things so we could sit down and talk to them firsthand.

We did that once a week. I took notes and we talked to these members and tried to satisfy them the best we could. So often it required us to come back to the office and try to figure out whatever they were - bridge or dam or some policy issue or whatever. We tried to do it in ten, fifteen minute segments so we could get more people in there. That's why sometimes it was an hour and

a half. And we told Ford that we did not object if Democrats wanted to come. So occasionally word got around and Democrats would go up to Leader Ford and say they wanted an eyeball with Harlow/Timmons at the next meeting, and he would schedule it in his office.

Smith: Great idea. Had that ever been done before?

Timmons: No, not to my knowledge. And so I think I was \_\_\_\_\_ about it. So on one of those occasions, because of some policy issue, we brought Erlichman. Not just us, but John Erlichman to sit in and listen to what was going on. Allegedly he dozed off or closed his eyes or something during one of those sessions. The legislative office, I often think, is really situated not at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue or at the Capitol, but on 8<sup>th</sup> Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, halfway between the two great bodies, suffering the slings and arrows from both directions.

Smith: You know, that's classic because there is this notion out there - when people use the shorthand, they speak about the Nixon White House. Well, I don't know what the Nixon White House means, or any White House for that matter. But nevertheless, the notion is taken hold that presumably, beginning with the President on down, those immediately around him, had an attitude bordering on contempt for "the Congress." What's your response to that?

Timmons: I think that's true. I think that certainly with President Nixon it was true.

Smith: Was it based in part on his own experience there?

Timmons: I think so. He was an outsider all the time. He would sit on the House Un-American Activities, and the Senate for what – two years, I guess. But he knew the mindset up there and figured that they were all against him and against any changes, and therefore, the heck with them. He would go his own way. Talk to the American people, try to get something done. He was the first president in 140 years to come into the White House without control of Congress. And people don't recognize what problems that presents a president. And of course, Ford inherited that. The current president, Obama, has absolute control in both bodies, what a luxury that would be for a president in the White House. We didn't have that, Nixon nor Ford, so it was

very, very difficult to work with Congress. While Ford was a creature of Congress, I think later, after he'd been in the Executive Branch for a while, he began to say, hey, these guys are not serious, they're acting politically as opposed to the public interest.

Smith: Given that attitude toward Congress generally, how did that effect the kind of working relationship with the Republican leadership in the House? If Gerald Ford is a man of the House, and his friend the President, who has very different attitudes perhaps, toward the body, how did that work?

Timmons: Very, very difficult in both the Nixon administration – I was only in the Ford administration for a few months, but we tried to set up as many one on one or small group meetings as we possibly could. And Ford was eager to do that, of course, and would go back to the Hill on occasions. Nixon didn't like to go back to the Hill, but he did agree to - and I think people don't understand this - a lot more meetings than one would expect of him. One on one, small group meetings, breakfasts, lunches, dinners, we always invited members of Congress to State Dinners. We got kind of a quota and we worked through Ford and Scott on who to invite. So it gave them a little more stroke. They could dole it out and call a member and say, "I've arranged for you to..." And we tried to build up the leaders that way.

We talked to them about proposals that were coming before they hit the press and before they hit Congress. If it was a statement to the Speaker and the President Pro Tem of the Senate, we would try to give leaders a 24 hour notice, talk to them. State of the Union Address, I went up when I had the House responsibility with Ford, and actually had a draft of his State of the Union speech, and we sat together and he went over it and he made some good suggestions – change agriculture to farm, you know, things that you can understand. So we did that frequently, again, to build up the rapport with the leaders in the House and the Senate.

Smith: Now, presumably that was easier in the House because Nixon and Ford had had a longstanding relationship.

Timmons: Yes.

- Smith: It is reputed that Hugh Scott had a reputation for leaking. Was the Nixon-Scott relationship more problematic than the Nixon-Ford relationship?
- Timmons: Oh, yeah. The Nixon-Scott relationship deteriorated, I think, with each day. It was not healthy.
- Smith: What contributed to that?
- Timmons: Well, I think the leaks and the fact that Scott would criticize the administration publicly, where Ford would do it privately.
- Smith: What would he say in private? What kinds of things would he find fault with, or how would he communicate that?
- Timmons: He would say that the President must understand the role of Congress here, and he cannot come forward with this kind of thing, he's got to change it, or wait until next year. We've got too much on our plate. I mean, those kinds of advices that he gave the President directly, and less frequently, about what he is picking up from his members. Not his own views necessarily, but what his leadership group thinks. So he would always give us advice on that. We didn't always take it. But it was always good, I think, what Ford suggested we do regarding pushing different pieces of legislation and how to handle different issues. And I don't think Scott participated in that regard.
- Smith: There are those out there who suggest Nixon's contempt – strong word – for Congress extended to Ford. You didn't see that at all?
- Timmons: No, no. He was very fond of Gerald Ford. And Nixon, of course is a whole different subject, but he had some imperfections and one of them I think was criticizing everybody, his family, and his staff. If somebody tried to analyze all that they'd come up with some kind of reasonable conclusion. I can't, but he would get over it. Talking about Nixon now. After a meeting I'd bring in someone and he'd say, "Bill, stay back," and somebody would escort the member out of the office and he'd come over and use his finger and punch me – I've probably still got bruises there – "Tell me the purpose of that meeting! What did that accomplish? I don't understand why I had to meet with them." And on and on and on. My stock answer was, "Mr. President, that's money in

the bank. That's an investment that will come back and reward you." Which was partly true, but it also got me off the hook and saved my chest from more bruises. Ford never did that. He would have people in and he would puff his pipe and he would enjoy that sort of discussion, I think, because they had a different kind of rapport.

Smith: Nixon famously said that he was an introvert in an extrovert's profession. And I've often thought that the extraordinary thing about the Nixon presidency is not how it ended, but that it happened at all. I wrote a book on Tom Dewey once, and in some ways there are parallels between them.

Timmons: Right.

Smith: Did Nixon enjoy being president?

Timmons: I think he did. I think you wouldn't understand that by meeting with him or talking to him or listening to him or looking at his stuff, but I think he really did. And he worked all the time. I mean, he was a workaholic. He'd go to Camp David or he'd go to Key Biscayne or he'd go to other places and he would always take a big bag full of work. He would go over them, writing notes in the margins and calling people from afar. I got more than one call from San Clemente or Key Biscayne, saying, "What do you mean by this?" And I'm sitting at home with no notes or anything and at some kind of disadvantage.

But he worked very hard and I think someone who didn't enjoy the job would not have done that. They would have taken a pass on some of that stuff. And he enjoyed the prestige of the job and the history of the job. He was well-read on protocol and what the office of the presidency means. When he finally resigned, he used that as one of his excuses, which I think was legitimate from his point of view – that he didn't want to diminish any more the Office of the President of the United States.

Smith: It's been suggested that one of the keys to understanding this very complex man is that he was kind of a closet intellectual, who didn't want people to know that about him.

- Timmons: That's right, he criticized the New England elite, but in fact, he was one himself, in a way. But while he criticized so many people, I can't remember him ever criticizing Gerald Ford. He criticized me, Kissinger, Haldeman, Erlichman, and he would push people around. But Ford, he had great respect for him, and as far as I know, never criticized him openly. He did talk about how House Republicans ought to get together more and so forth. He didn't blame Ford.
- Smith: Let me ask you about the Justice Douglas "impeachment." I know there is still debate over whether, in fact, Ford was really trying to impeach him or what he was doing. First of all, you have the Abe Fortas situation in 1969, and then of course, you had the Haynesworth and Carswell nominations that went down in flames. Is all of that related to this or would that have happened in your opinion if none of those things had happened?
- Timmons: I really don't know the background on that. Ford later on, I think, kissed and made up. Maybe in some way, \_\_\_\_\_ into the White House or something in his declining years. But that was quite bitter at the time.
- Smith: Did you ever have any discussions with Ford about it?
- Timmons: No, I can't recall. Maybe I did, but it was thirty-five years ago, so I just can't remember. But it did come up in Ford's confirmation hearing in the House. Maybe the chairman, Peter Rodino brought it up. Ford answered it some way. But I think he pulled out some papers that had some naked women or something.
- Smith: I think he had the magazine.
- Timmons: The magazine of some sort, yeah. And that caused a problem because they said he shouldn't have done that. I think he admitted later it was a mistake, not as criticism of the Justice, but using props like that.
- Smith: It did make the case, though, pretty effective.
- Timmons: Oh yes.



Smith: We come to '72 and the President obviously wins the landslide victory and you don't pick up that many seats in the House. Did you know, or was it common knowledge, that one result of that would be Ford's retirement, sooner rather than later?

Timmons: No, I didn't know about it. I had always assumed he would stay there and become Speaker one day when lightning struck.

Smith: Do you remember where you were when you heard about Watergate, if we define Watergate as the break in?

Timmons: Oh, yeah, I remember exactly. I was Nixon's convention manager in '68. When the other candidates were Reagan and Rockefeller in my \_\_\_\_\_, and then in '72 I was convention manager again, although I was on the White House staff. In those days you could get away with doing stuff like that under the pretext that the President was going to be there and he was entitled to have some advance work. Truth of the matter is, I was convention manager and we were having a meeting over at the Committee to Re-Elect the President. I guess it was a Saturday in the morning, which I had called to talk about convention mechanics mostly – hotel rooms and buses and transportation tickets and the rules committee and so forth.

While Nixon didn't have an opponent really, it seems to me John Ashbrook or somebody may have said he wanted to be president. It was really a free ride. And then somebody came in the door and said, "Have you guys heard that the Democratic National Committee was broken into last night?" I said, "No, I hadn't heard about that. Thank you." The guy left. So what? Why would anybody break into the Democratic National Committee, trying to steal something probably? And if it had been McGovern's office, that would create some more signals, I think. The Democratic National Committee? So we went on about our business and it was only later that we found out all the...

Smith: Over the years and to this day, there are people who say, "He couldn't have been responsible for this because it was so stupid." And one thing about Richard Nixon, he wasn't politically stupid.

Timmons: Well, I don't think anybody, even John Dean, has ever alleged that Nixon knew about it beforehand. The cover up is different, but the break in... Woodward and Bernstein accused me on the front page of the *Washington Post* of being one of those that received the illegal fruits of the break in. I protested and had Ziegler go out in the press office and deny it. Didn't know anything about it. But then McGovern picked that up and used it in campaign ads with my name and teleprompter receiving the goods, as it were. Because Woodward and Bernstein must be right, they always have sixteen sources and they are wonderful and so forth. So I protested. And so I call the general counsel to the President and I said, "I want to sue these guys. This is not fair that I've been slammed here and surely by now they know that I wasn't involved in this thing." "Oh, no, you can't do that. \_\_\_\_\_ you have no \_\_\_\_\_, you have depositions, and it would be a big issue. It will just fan the fires. This will blow over. You can't sue." The counsel was, of course, John Dean. His advice might have been right, but in later years, I've harbored some suspicions that maybe he had...so that's how I heard about the Watergate. And quite frankly, even then, didn't think it was a big issue. Didn't foresee the kinds of things that would happen.

Smith: Well, who could? It's interesting, I only heard Gerald Ford disparage two people in all the time I knew him.

Timmons: Is one sitting across the table from you?

Smith: Oh no. One was Gordon Liddy, and the other was John Dean. And in both cases the worst he could say about them was, "He's a bad man." That was as bad as it got.

Timmons: I agree with him in both cases, but I would add some more to the list.

Smith: Understood. Maybe a little more colorful language, too. There's a sense that at some point, what goes by the umbrella name of Watergate, in effect paralyzes the Nixon White House. Is that an exaggeration? When did it become a crisis as opposed to a distraction?

Timmons: Probably sometime in '73. I'm not sure. And it took the form of members of Congress not even considering Nixon legislation, not listening to us on issues

and ramifications of what would happen if they passed this or that. And at some point, it seems to me, late '73, that that kind of set in.

Smith: That would have obviously complicated Ford's job. Did you have a sense - was he trying to be a good soldier during that period, was he trying to warn you off?

Timmons: He was a good soldier, all the time, a very good soldier. He felt, like the rest of us, that this was politically inspired by the Nixon opponents, the Democrats in the Congress; and that it was wrong and while it was stupid for people to break in the Watergate, that the President was not involved. That's what everybody inside thought at the time, including Ford.

Smith: We talked to Jerry Jones. At that point Haldeman and Erlichman were still there, so early '73, or before April of '73. And he [Jones] was in the personnel office at that point, sort of reorganizing it for Haldeman. He got a call from Haldeman one day, who said, "How many people work for the Vice President?" And Jerry did some mental arithmetic and said, "Maybe around fifty." And Haldeman said, "I want undated letters of resignation from everyone." Now, Jones sort of looked back and wondered...

Timmons: This was for the Vice President's office?

Smith: Yes.

Timmons: Because we got the same thing from Haldeman for the regular White House staff, too, earlier.

Smith: Okay, earlier.

Timmons: Because everyone was complaining. They said they thought we won the election in '72, and here we're being asked to submit letters of resignation. So they got around to the Vice President a little later apparently.

Smith: Well, Jerry wondered if they didn't know - and now we know, of course, that this investigation in Maryland had been going on I guess for some time before Elliott Richardson took it over. Whether in fact, those around the President were aware that the Vice President might have a problem. In other words,

before the story appeared, I think it was in the *Wall Street Journal* that broke the Agnew story, did you know?

Timmons: No, I had no idea.

Smith: So it came as news to you?

Timmons: I was shocked. Just shocked. The President and Agnew, as it turned out, didn't get along very well, it was not a close bond. But we tried to brief him up on legislative activities so he could function as the President of the Senate. [I] just had no idea and was disappointed.

Smith: The selection of Ford as vice president, there's a lot of stories around that; that the President, if he'd had his druthers would have liked to have put John Connally in that office. What was it about Connally that so appealed to the President?

Timmons: I think his take-charge sort of attitude. He was aggressive.

Smith: Self-assured, positive, typical sort of personality when one thinks about a big Texan.

Timmons: A Lyndon Johnson sort of thing. That he's right all the time and nobody dared challenge him. So soon after Congress confirmed him as Secretary of the Treasury, President Nixon asked me to ask him over to a leadership meeting, a Republican leadership meeting we were going to have with House and Senate leaders which we had regularly, like every other week; and asked Connally to be prepared to talk about something – I can't remember what it was, but I said, "Yes, sir." I went back to my office and I called Secretary Connally and I said, "I just came from the President and he would like for you to come over to a Republican leadership meeting next Tuesday and speak about (something)." I didn't ask him if it was alright, I told him what the President wanted. He said, "Bill, you know I like you, but tell the President that if he wants me to come over there, he should call me." Uhhhhh, so I said, "Oh boy, I'm going to get canned right now." And I walked back into the President and said, "Mr. President, I hate to tell you but..." and related the

story. And he laughed and he said, "Don't worry about it, Bill, I understand. I'll call John." Boy, I got out of there quickly while I still had my hide.

The problem with Connally is that (?) didn't only push around by Haldeman or Erlichman, by and large, because they had a lot of stories about the Berlin Wall and Ziegler, Haldeman, Erlichman, here, here, here, and he didn't want it to be known or seen that he was kowtowing to staff. He was Secretary of Treasury and he and the President had a personal relationship and they will talk it over. And he came to the Cabinet meetings...

Smith: And Nixon admired that. The selection process for a replacement for Agnew - how would you describe that? Was there consultation with members of Congress?

Timmons: Not in my case.

Smith: Of course it happened very fast.

Timmons: Oh, it was three days, I think. Two or three days, and I supported Gerald Ford, of course, because I knew him so well and had worked with him perhaps closer than Nixon because of the nature of my job. But also, I thought he would be easily confirmed and Connally could not be confirmed easily, probably not at all, but not easily. George Bush was another one that was bandied about some and he had been the Republican National Committee chairman and I wasn't sure that he could be easily confirmed. I would have been happy with any of them, frankly, from my personal perspective. But Ford was easily confirmed.

I felt that he and Nixon had a good relationship and he'd been so supportive of virtually everything that Nixon proposed to the Congress that he would have been my choice. I think we received a number of calls and letters from member of Congress for Ford. I didn't go out and solicit them and didn't sit down and ask them what they thought. I knew what they would say, generally. There was some opposition to Connally coming in on the telephone or in the mail.

Smith: Bob Byrd famously said that there would be blood on the floor if you attempt to nominate Connally.

Timmons: Bear in mind this was before emails and computers and cell phones. This was the old-fashioned landline telephone and loose leaf books on your desk. What a difference technology has made. So we were all very pleased with Ford. In fact, in the White House Pat Buchanan had circulated a little memo that supported Ford. Maybe the President had asked him to poll people, I can't remember. I had signed up for Ford, I think there was a list, 'What do you Think?' So we were all happy. He got into an awkward position for Hugh Scott. I don't think he expected it, but still people would say, "Well, one leader got it and the other didn't."

Smith: This is a cynical town and over the years there has been a cynical notion that Nixon, in effect, looked upon Ford as his insurance. The idea being that with Jerry Ford here, they'll never impeach me.

Timmons: Nah, I don't think so. I've heard that and \_\_\_\_\_ would be the next person in line and so forth. I just don't believe that.

Smith: The vice presidency is always a difficult job. And it's interesting, one reason why Ford really tried to bend over backwards to be understanding of Rockefeller, who had a very difficult vice presidency, was his own experience. Ford didn't like the job. And it went beyond the unique circumstances of that time. What was the attitude of folks in the White House toward the Vice President who was, let's face it, out of town a lot and who presumably, at least in the eyes of some, was not sufficiently outspoken or vocal enough in his defense of the President? Was it a damned if you do, damned if you don't kind of situation?

Timmons: I think so. I think Ford was out campaigning for lots of people and doing lots of things, and he was not in the attack dog mode that Spiro Agnew was. And so there was the difference in operations style. He was quiet, self-confident, but not aggressive, and I think in light of being burned by the previous vice president, that extended over a little bit into Ford's vice presidency. The fact

that, well, we've been burned by this; we'll kind of let him just do his Constitutional duty presiding over the Senate and a few other things.

Now I made a point of going over to see him at least once a week to brief him on legislative affairs, particularly on issues that may be coming up in the Senate where he would have to break a tie. He didn't have any, but I made a point of doing that when he was vice president. Almost every week when he was in town, and Bob Hartmann sat in on those, and I think Dick Burris sat in on those. I didn't do that for Agnew. He didn't ask for it and I didn't do it, but with Ford I did, because I thought he'd be interested and it might be helpful in some cases.

Smith: Did he ask you about Watergate?

Timmons: He never did. I think I was the first person to hold over - to be named to the Ford White House, as I recall. Not because of me, but because of continuity of the legislative agenda and the fact that members would call and have somebody to complain to other than the new president. And he had said at that time when I went in to talk to him - I said, "I should leave because they are going to kill you, just keep badgering you until you get rid of all the Nixon people. And I'm happy to go. I have three children, have twenty-two years in the government, I have no savings, I've got to look after the family." He said he understood that, but wanted me to stay. And also he said that people would think that Ford was getting rid of people who were in the Nixon White House that had no relationship to Watergate.

He was very sensitive. This was the integrity of the guy and the decency of the guy. He was looking out not only in my situation, but the Cabinet and other people. He wasn't going to fire them because they didn't have anything to do with Watergate and they shouldn't be punished and ostracized for something they had nothing to do with and no control over. It's amazing to think that President Nixon, I think, under similar circumstances would have probably canned everybody he \_\_\_\_\_ without that. But that shows to me the decency. So I agreed to stay on through the legislative session, which, this was August and they had a break and then had elections.

- Smith: Let me just clear up one thing. Was there a moment in your own mind when President Nixon's survival became politically impossible? Was it when the Supreme Court ruled on the tapes? Was it when the so-called smoking gun tape was released? Or was it a more gradual dawning?
- Timmons: It was a gradual realization that the support wasn't there, was eroding fast. The House Judiciary Committee - on their Articles of Impeachment where he had strong Republican support and three or four Southern Democrats. And we were taking pretty careful nose counts on those things. So indirectly, it was the effect of releasing the tapes and the transcripts and the smoking gun and so forth, when people jumped ship. Even Republicans said, "I can support the Articles of Impeachment." And then we shipped it to the Senate to see what a trial would show if he were impeached by the House and that started to erode too, because of dripping out every day. We would go up and say, "That's the end of it. Don't worry about it. We'll regroup." The next day, poof, something else. Just awful. And so I guess in the summer of '74 you could sense the erosion of support for the President. And that effected, of course, legislation.
- Smith: Was there any informal or formal, for lack of a better word, advice seeking with the Vice President, who after all knew as well as anyone the House, in terms of how to wage this battle? Were there any kind of consultations in terms of individual members?
- Timmons: I don't know who talked to him, if anybody talked to him. I would hope they did, but I don't know that. I was not party to the discussion. How do you handle the Peter Rodino committee and the articles and so forth? And lawyers were pretty much in control of this then. Haig was intimately involved in it all, too. And we were all deliberately kept in the dark. We found out about these things when they were released publicly, most of them.
- Smith: Mel Laird has a fascinating story. Laird, who came back in somewhat reluctantly to the White House, said that about a month after he was there he got a call from Fred Buzhardt. It seems like all roads lead back to Fred Buzhardt when it comes to the tapes. And I guess Fred Buzhardt had been his counsel at the Pentagon.



- Timmons: Yes, I think so. And the President only allowed Fred to listen to the tapes there for a while.
- Smith: Buzhardt tipped off Laird, which I'd never known, and that's why oral history is invaluable. He tipped off Laird, he said, "Be careful what you say, I've been listening to the tapes. He's in it up to his neck." That's Laird's characterization. At which point Laird had to sort of debate with himself, do I leave, do I go? He stayed a while. Then when we saw Haig, I'd always assumed Haig had listened to, at the very least, the smoking gun tape. He said, "No, I never listened to any tapes." He said, "Fred Buzhardt gave me some very good advice. Which is, 'Don't ever be alone in a room with a tape.'" And I assume that's a reference to the eighteen and a half minute gap. So it does seem like Buzhardt is behind the scenes, and a much larger player in all of this than a lot of accounts have suggested. It's also suggested by some that Al Haig, whatever his other flaws, was something of an unsung hero in trying to bring about a dignified, Constitutional conclusion to this.
- Timmons: Yes, I think that's true. And I think he did an admirable job. He, of course, will tell you he did, too. But that doesn't detract from the fact that he held it together for a while. I think Gerald Ford appreciated that, although he brought Rummy in, but he had to do that. For Haig, it was time for him to go.
- Smith: Now there is a famous meeting, and maybe there was more than one. But there is a famous meeting, at the end that the President had with his corporal's guard of loyalists. I think there were some Southern Democrats in that room and other folks. Were you there for that?
- Timmons: I set it up.
- Smith: Was it at the very end?
- Timmons: The night before he resigned, yes. August 3<sup>rd</sup>, or whatever it was. And he went on television, but he didn't actually resign the next day. But that night he went on television, after he'd met with his loyalists. Well, once we heard that he was going to resign...
- Smith: How did you hear that?

Timmons: I guess Haig told me. My office was right next to Haig's and Kissinger's and a few feet down from the Oval Office. So we talked a lot in the corridors and bathroom and went in each other's office. Then I told Haig that I thought that, "We should first get the leaders down here to meet with President Nixon privately and he can tell them. And then he may want to have his best friends come down. See what he thinks." I didn't talk to him. Haig talked to him and said, "Yes, he thinks it's a good idea, bring down the bipartisan leaders and he'll meet them in his Executive Office Building office at 5:30 (or something). And at 6:30 we'll have his friends down to meet in the Cabinet Room. And here are people he wants you to include." I saluted, contacted the leaders, had them come down. They came to my office first, several wanted a good glass of Scotch whiskey, which I provided, and then we walked from the West Wing over through to the Executive Office Building and met with President Nixon. I stayed there while he told them what was happening and it was kind of a glum, dreary sort of thing. Then I walked out with them. There were thousands of people outside the gates shouting and screaming. Speaker Albert turned to me and said, "I hope the President knows, and you tell him, that I had no part of any of this." I said, "Yes, sir."

They left, just in time for me to go over and check the acceptances to the evening event, Democrats and Republicans, best friends. And I got to putting some more chairs around and so forth and they came in and sat down. At the appointed time the President came in and sat down and told them what he was going to do the next day and he said, "I hope I haven't let you down," and we've been good friends and so forth. Very nice little speech. I looked around the room and everybody was crying – these Old Bulls – I mean, at that time they were sixty, seventy years old, tough, who would do anything to get ahead and they were bawling. Gee whiz.

Then the President tried to get up. We put so many chairs in you couldn't get his chair out, so I jumped up and pulled his chair out for him so he could get out. He wasn't crying, but everybody else was. And then he walked into the Oval Office and I told them that I had set up in the theater a television screen since they wouldn't have the time to get back to the Hill or their homes, anybody who wanted to go over there could see the speech on television and

have refreshments. And about half decided to go see the television and about half went home. But the President maintained his composure.

After that I don't know how he could have gone on television. He did a good job on television, but wow, it was so emotional. I wouldn't want to strike a match in that Cabinet room because of the intensity of feeling and so forth for him. Ironically, some of them would have voted against him to save their own skins or whatever reason. They didn't have a chance unless they were on the Judiciary Committee. I always told the President he would never be impeached, and he wasn't. So that was that bipartisan thing. Ford was obviously there, and Les Arends was there, and somewhere I've surely maintained a list. In fact somebody, I think John Rhodes, published the list somewhere – in the *Congressional Record* or something.

Smith: But the President, you said, maintained his composure throughout?

Timmons: Now, some people have said that because he had trouble getting out of his chair, that he was drunk or emotionally upset. It wasn't the case. We had pushed so many chairs together he couldn't get out, and I pulled the chair out for him and he was able to go on.

Smith: The next morning, were you in the East Room?

Timmons: Yes.

Smith: What was that like?

Timmons: Really sad. Just sad for most of us who were loyal. My wife was there. Some of the television clips you see nowadays, you can see us quite clearly, much younger, obviously.

Smith: More tears?

Timmons: More tears. And it was a very sad occasion and he went out and the Fords went out with them outside and onto the helicopter. So it was really a sad occasion for those of us who were loyal.

Smith: How difficult was it for the loyalists? We've been told from people who were in the room that later on comes the swearing in, and I think there was a

receiving line and a reception down in dining room. And according to more than one person, you could see the Nixon people sort of peel off, go back to their offices. Which is not difficult to understand. The question, I guess, is what's that say in a larger sense? In terms of meshing – you've already said that the President went out of his way to do the decent thing for the vast majority of Nixon people who were not involved with all these. Don Rumsfeld told us he told the President, "You should get rid of these people fast."

Timmons: Yup.

Smith: But what were the tensions, in those early days between the Nixon White House staff which remained, and the new people?

Timmons: I think there was some tension. The Ford vice presidential people, I think, probably felt slighted some over the year that he was there, and the Nixon people recognized that and sensed it and so there was some of that there. It wasn't bitter, but I think it wasn't a warm and fuzzy sort of relationship. "There's a new day coming and new people and you accept it" sort of thing.

Smith: How polarizing was Bob Hartmann?

Timmons: Very.

Smith: And what made him a polarizing figure?

Timmons: He had been with Jerry Ford for years and years and years in the Congress as his top guy; his speechwriter, very able speechwriter; and he was the person to go to for Ford. Ford had other staff, of course, but Hartmann was the king of the Hill. And when he came to the White House as vice president, he still retained that position, albeit there were others now brought in and the job changed some because it was the Executive Branch, not Legislative Branch, and there's no floor votes and a different kind of environment.

Let me say, I got along with Hartmann, both [when Ford was] on the Hill and as vice president, and even when he was president for the few months I was there. But when Gerald Ford became president, Hartmann could see his

strength eroding in relationship to Ford. Ford started with everybody welcome to come in the Oval Office.

Smith: The Spokes of the Wheel.

Timmons: Spokes of the Wheel.

Smith: Was that the congressional mindset?

Timmons: I guess, yes, it's the congressional mindset. It doesn't work in the White House. Ford finally realized that; Rumsfeld convinced him of it later. So Hartmann didn't control access like he did before and he didn't like that. And then the President had other speechwriters and Hartmann didn't like that. The nature of his personality was rather abrasive.

Smith: Was he possessive of Ford?

Timmons: Yes, very much so. And of course, that was broken with Rumsfeld. He couldn't go in to see Ford without going through Rumsfeld, and Rumsfeld didn't want to bother Ford with too many little trivial things. He let him focus on the big issues and that created a real problem for Hartmann. So, Hartmann was not well-liked by most people. But his loyalty was never in question to Ford.

Smith: Boy, you should hear Al Haig, even after all these years. He gets very excited on the subject of Bob Hartmann.

Timmons: And Rumsfeld would, too, I think, if it was raised. Interesting that Hartmann, even long after Ford left office, I think he felt slighted by Ford, I think. I talked to him once or twice and asked him about Ford. He said, "I haven't heard from him in two years," or something. I could kind of sense all that. At the funeral for Ford, nobody realized Hartmann's declined health at first. Then, it was called to our attention that he was in a wheelchair. We said, "Well, we can roll him in a wheelchair; it's no problem." So he was able to participate. The planners for the funeral were family and those very close to the family and the Fords; they had been long since detached from Hartmann, and weren't aware of his poor condition. I think he turned bitter after his White House tour. And probably blames others.

Smith: We are talking to his widow next week.

Timmons: Roberta?

Smith: Roberta, yeah. A couple quick things and we'll let you go. As you said, you were not there that long, but you were there during a very busy and historic period. The whole business of changing the mood; those first few days, bringing in the Congressional Black Caucus – what was behind that?

Timmons: Reaching out. He had pledged that he would reach out in his confirmation hearings in the House and the Senate, and that he would be a conciliator, and that he was very anxious to do that. He'd even go up to the Gym Committee – that's the people that run the House gymnasium for members. He would go up to them and he was trying to do all kinds of things to try to use his character and personality to convince them that he's different from President Nixon and that he really values their judgment and opinion. So the Congressional Black Caucus was one and a whole assembly of other issues, but he was really trying to reach out in his early days.

Smith: He understood at that point that symbolism was substance.

Timmons: Yes.

Smith: In that mood.

Timmons: In that context, that's right. And he wanted to be open. Unfortunately, people felt they could call him directly right on the telephone, doing this in the first few days.

Smith: There were a number of calls?

Timmons: Oh, yeah. And we had to intercept them, of course, through the switchboard and redirect them because we were inundated with hundreds and hundreds of telephone calls every day in the legislative office from members of Congress, their staff, either Cabinet officers, people in the administration in the White House. Pink slips...you can imagine what would happen if the President had to....

Smith: They thought he was still in Congress.

Timmons: Right. “Surely he’ll take *my* call. He may not take your call, but he’ll take *my* call.” So they were redirected and we had to explain to them. Mail was horrendous. I say there was no email in those days, but the post and the mail came in all the time on all kinds of issues. Some trivial; some important. And we had to review, as I said earlier, his speeches for any congressional impact, and statements to Congress, to write if we thought that would be well-received or not received, or have you thought about this or that? Not so much on policy, but on style and tone in our legislative office.

Smith: Were you privy to any discussion of a pardon?

Timmons: No. I was shocked. I was called, maybe by Hartmann or Haig, on Sunday – I think it was a Sunday, in fact, I’m sure it was – to get to the office immediately. I said okay. Drove down and found out that he was going to pardon the former President and we had to make telephone calls to leaders of Congress and tell them about it. There is a famous picture, I think in the *New York Times*, with Ford in my office with Hartmann and maybe Haig, I can’t remember, standing there, and I’m at my desk with the telephone. The caption was, “He is contacting members of Congress.” Well, I think a lot of people thought since they were in my office and I was on the telephone, that I had something to do with arranging the pardon, which I didn’t even know about. I think it was the right thing to do. He was sharply criticized by members of Congress and it hurt him, probably cost him the election. It’s debatable, but I think it probably did. And with the passage of time, I think most people believe it was the right thing to do.

Smith: At the time – it has been suggested – that there was a little bit of hypocrisy on the part of some members of Congress who publicly were very outspoken in their opposition to what the President was doing, but who privately took a somewhat different stance. Did you encounter any of that?

Timmons: No. There were very few people who privately said, “Good job, Jerry.” A lot of people - although not the loyalists - but a lot of people were openly critical. I’m sure there were a number of them playing both angles.

Smith: Can you come up with an alternate – I mean, I’ve tried. I’ll never forget, I once spent two and a half hours with him war gaming this, and by the end of the evening, he convinced me Mel Laird, for example, had a plan. Mel always has a plan. And Mel’s plan was he was going to bring a bipartisan, congressional delegation down to the White House, who were going to ask the President to pardon Nixon. Now, the problem with that - I mean, thirty-five years later, tell me if I’m wrong - is given the supercharged political atmosphere at that time in this town, a trial balloon would have been shot down before it got to the trees.

Timmons: Oh, yes. It was a silly idea. I never heard of it. But it was a silly idea. Congress would have gone absolutely berserk. The press would have been all over it for days and days and days. He would not have been able to do it, eventually, if this was before the fact. And I don’t know who Laird could have gotten – a bipartisan group – two people, five people? Who’s going to go down and recommend that? Gee whiz.

Smith: Well, that’s Mel.

Timmons: Yes, yes, I know.

Smith: A couple quick things. The decision to go up to the House and testify – how did that come about? Because that is – to this day – the only time in American history it’s happened.

Timmons: Yeah, I opposed it at the time.

Smith: You did?

Timmons: Yeah, and several other people did, too. He decided himself to go up there. And the problem was there was all this speculation that there was a deal cut between Nixon and Ford, and our friend, Elizabeth Holtzman and Peter Rodino and so forth were demanding answers. They never asked him to come to the Judiciary Committee, but they wanted explanations, explanations. So somebody drafted a letter that he signed which probably wasn’t as responsive as they wanted and sent it up....They said, “This is an insult to Congress. This doesn’t answer any of the questions we asked and we demand he reply in



detail.” Again, they never asked him to go up there. Some of the discussion in the White House was, how do we handle it, what do we do? Provide details? There will always be more details because you can’t cover everything. Even if it was twenty pages long, there’d be some paragraph that would require elaboration on it. And he said, “I’ll go up there and testify.”

Smith: He did?

Timmons: He did himself. And some had suggested that. I can’t remember how the staff was divided, but most of us felt it would be a mistake because one, you don’t know where it would lead. It was a hostile committee, had just voted for articles of impeachment for Nixon, and while Ford had been confirmed by the House for his vice presidency, through that committee, the vote was not unanimous. And so we felt it might lead to all kinds of things that he couldn’t answer, and it would just keep the door open and cause more problems. Also, the historical precedent of it. Somebody had researched it and said that the only time that something close to it had happened was – was it Washington? I don’t know. But nobody had ever come to testify under oath and so forth. They didn’t swear him in, did they? No.

Smith: No, I don’t think they did. That technicality was preserved. It was a voluntary appearance.

Timmons: Right, a voluntary appearance. He did and did a good job, I think. Holtzman said it didn’t satisfy her and he didn’t answer the questions.

Smith: Was there anything he could have said that would have satisfied her?

Timmons: No, nothing. She was partisan, activist, and she wasn’t going to be satisfied. And there were several others like that, too, but she was the paramount one. So he went up and I guess it turned out to be a success. That died down then, the deal died down, but still the precedent was set.

Smith: You had upcoming elections.

Timmons: Yeah.

Smith: What was a horrible atmosphere to begin with, became worse.

Timmons: Oh, yeah. Well, you know, people look at what he inherited here. Inflation is double digit; unemployment is close to eight, seven and a half percent, something like that; not either/or inflation or unemployment, he had both. The economists said it was going to go much worse, predicting disaster. Watergate shifted the balance of power some to the Congress. China relations were stand stilled, the Soviet Union détente was nowhere and the Vietnam Peace Accord was coming apart. And you had a very heavily majority Democrat Congress. He inherited all that stuff to come in there. It's a wonder he survived the four months I was there. But he went on to do a good job, I think, under the circumstances.

Smith: Did you hear, when the pardon came, and particularly with the elections coming up – Bob Dole, who was in the fight of his life, for example, in Kansas. Were there complaints from the Hill?

Timmons: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Do you remember any of that?

Timmons: No, I don't remember who, but there were lots of complaints.

Smith: Like, why did he do this now?

Timmons: Yeah, why did he do it, why did he do it now? And then some other implications on that, is he going to pardon other people? Not just Nixon. And did Nixon accept the pardon? What's the rationale in that? If he wasn't guilty...you get all these little ramifications.

Smith: But try to imagine if he hadn't pardoned Nixon. That administration would have been consumed and the country would have been consumed.

Timmons: A great national nightmare, as Ford said, would have been true. It would always be there and it would deter everything positive, and the election not that year, but in two years and so forth, would have all been effected by that. And so he did the right thing.

- Smith: Remember, right before the election, he goes out to California and Nixon is at death's door. He's in the hospital and pretty clearly, the people around the President said, "Don't go visit." Was there a discussion of that?
- Timmons: No, not that I was involved in. I'm sure the advance people and whoever the chief of staff was, Haig or Rumsfeld, may have suggested he not do that. But he did. Again, we go back to the decency and the character issue. He did, and he went in and the doctors said, "Don't upset him," or something, and he went in and chatted briefly. Phlebitis, I guess; Nixon had that recurring problem. And I think Ford was happy he did that.
- Smith: What does that raise? There's a big question philosophically about the conflict in the presidential job between, in some cases, doing the decent thing, and doing the politically necessary thing. Is there a conflict?
- Timmons: Oh, yes, all the time. Every president has that in one way or another. You've got to do what is necessary for the economy, for the war effort, for poor people, for rich people, for whatever. You've got that to do what's right. And you've got to do what is morally right, which doesn't always jibe. And you've got to make a decision. And Ford made both kinds of decisions. On cargo preference, for example, which gives 20% of shipping to U.S. vessels, which the seafarers wanted very badly. And the president of the seafarers – I can't remember his name – supported Ford. Ford agonized on that, and agonized on it, because he didn't want to have to call this guy and tell him he was not going to support that. He did, finally. But every president has got these kind of issues. It's the good days when they join together, both the morality of it and the policy of it – that's great. But so often it's the other way.
- Smith: One way of telling the story of the Ford presidency, again, I realize you were only there for the first act, was of someone who came into the office, necessarily thinking like a congressman; who over time learned to think like an executive.
- Timmons: Yeah, I think Ford fits that mold. The old adage in town is that former congressmen make lousy executives in the private sector and the government. There have been a whole series of failures of people that had been in

Congress and come down to the government or somewhere else and just couldn't hack it, because it's a completely different lifestyle, work style. And Ford had the advantage of having about a year in the vice presidency and having some transition into that; and when he became president, he of course, had a lot more of issues from the executive point of view. And I think eventually he became a good executive and not so much a legislator.

Smith: And in some ways the tragedy was that just about the time he mastered the job, he lost it.

Timmons: Yeah.

Smith: And finally, the vice presidency. The story is there were three names that were seriously considered. Rockefeller, George H.W. Bush, and Don Rumsfeld.

Timmons: And when are you talking about? For what year?

Smith: When Ford chose Rockefeller. Do those three names ring a bell with you?

Timmons: Certainly Bush was in there. I don't remember Connally.

Smith: No, Rumsfeld, Bush, and Rockefeller, supposedly were the three finalists.

Timmons: It got down to, the best I can recall, to Rockefeller and Bush. I don't remember Rummy – by this time he was in Europe, I guess, NATO ambassador. Ford always liked him. There was some competition among the other two.

Smith: And were their supporters making their feelings known?

Timmons: Yeah. We got some telephone calls and Bush's people set up an office downtown here with volunteers to call members of Congress and the White House and so forth. I'm not sure he was involved, although I suspect he knew about it.

Smith: Was there any kind of organized Rockefeller...?

Timmons: Not that I could see.

- Smith: And what led the President to choose Rockefeller?
- Timmons: I guess one his confirmation. He felt he was well-liked. Two, he had a lot of experience in policy issues, domestic policy issues particularly that needed to be done. And three, I think he liked him personally. I sensed that.
- Smith: Did you see the chemistry between them?
- Timmons: Yeah, I think he did.
- Smith: Because they seemed like two very different men.
- Timmons: Oh, yeah. They were different men, but I think they got along. And Ford tried to bring him in to the policy arena a lot more. In fact, Jim Cannon, who was a Rockefeller man, was made head of domestic policy.
- Smith: There is a sense that it was a mistake for the President, again, maybe thinking like a congressman, to tell the vice president-designate, that he would, in effect, be in charge of domestic policy. And the theory has been advanced that that was Henry Kissinger's way of making sure that he stayed out of foreign policy.
- Timmons: Right.
- Smith: And then, of course, comes Rumsfeld and it just couldn't work. Plus the fact that Rockefeller was not a staff man. He'd never been number two.
- Timmons: Right. To anybody.
- Smith: Did you foresee problems?
- Timmons: No, I didn't at the time. I thought it was a good choice.
- Smith: Were there complaints from the conservatives?
- Timmons: Oh, yes, a lot of them. In fact, Rockefeller lost three or four Republican senators on his confirmation, the Twenty-fifth Amendment procedure. Goldwater, Helms, Bill Scott, I think that's probably it, and several Democrats. He was confirmed, obviously, but some of the conservatives, the most conservative members of the Senate and House did not support him.

Smith: And he had a very rocky confirmation hearing. Were you involved in that?

Timmons: Oh, yes. We had so many different issues, but boy, they really went through everything that he had and owned.

Smith: The phrase that I heard is “financial voyeurism.”

Timmons: Yeah. It went on for a long time. In fact, Ford had to get involved to try to move them along to get him confirmed.

Smith: How so?

Timmons: Well, he had a statement to Congress about it. He talked to members about it.

Smith: Of both parties?

Timmons: Probably. I can't remember, but I would think so, because the Democrats controlled the process. We were getting right up to adjournment in December, and if they got home – and this was after the new Congress comes in – and my golly. And he saw Carl Albert sitting out there so he pressed, pressed, pressed to get the confirmation done and it did just a day or two before they adjourned, I think. So he was very much interested. That was one of his priorities. And I think Rockefeller appreciated that. Rockefeller was always a gentleman about this, even when he was, I'd say, dumped. He was a gentleman the whole time. Seemed to understand the politics.

Smith: Good soldier.

Timmons: Good soldier, yup.

Smith: You have a wonderful story about your introduction to him. And the role that you would be playing in terms of managing the confirmation process.

Timmons: Yeah. President Ford had to go out to the press office first and talk to the press a bit, which he handled very well. And then he [Rockefeller] came into my office, the legislative office in the West Wing of the White House, to discuss confirmation. I asked him a number of questions. We talked about the process and how it would go. We had just been through Ford's, the first person to be selected under the Twenty-fifth Amendment, and I asked him to

think about the worst thing that could come out during the confirmation hearings. “The most troublesome thing you could imagine in your background. Don’t tell me, I don’t want to know, I don’t want anybody to know, but you know and you figure the proper response and rehearse it and make sure it’s good.” And I was thinking about his marital situation, that was kind of the thing, but I didn’t think about anything else. But he said, “Bill, there is one issue that’s going to be very embarrassing to me.” And he said, “But people think I’ve got more money than I really have.” I said, “Oh?” He said, “Yeah, I’ve only got \$150 million in Manhattan property, another \$200 million in Standard Oil and \$300 million here and Argentina,” and he went through a whole bunch of multimillion dollars and said, “And you add that all up and people think I’ve got more money than I’ve really got.” I thought to myself, “Well, I should have such a problem.” And then he said, “And that poor working guy out in the street, the guy’s making \$50,000, what’s he going to think about this?” And I said to myself, “I’m making \$42,500, and the guy would think a lot about it.” So that was that story, I’ve told it several times before. It’s true. Rockefeller, of course, was honest in this. He wasn’t deceptive in any way.

Smith: Last question. I assume you were at the ’76 convention.

Timmons: I was Ford’s manager.

Smith: Yeah. Describe that convention. How bitter was it?

Timmons: You know, I always knew it was going to be very, very close - but I always thought Ford would win. I never was pessimistic about it. Looking at the delegate count, and the states in question, and Clarke Reed in Mississippi, and all that stuff. The Reagan people selected their test fight on a rule, 16-C, I think it was called, which would require the presidential candidates to name his vice president before the convention voted because Reagan had picked Schweiker early in the campaign and that was a negative for him and cost him a lot of votes.

Smith: Including Clarke Reed?

Timmons: Yes. Clarke Reed needed a lot of wining and dining and care and attention all the way through. But that really hurt in the South and particularly in Mississippi. So we had all these issues coming up and they wanted to fight on that. And we went through our vote count very carefully and I think the Ford people won that rule fight of 16-C by about 120 votes. Which was about the same number that he eventually was nominated. And so that was by and large the big fight. It wasn't on the nominating vote, it was 16-C. And they recognized that and they tried to get an emotional issue on foreign policy on the plank and that was a big fight, too. That this plank repudiated, really, the Nixon-Ford doctrine on foreign policy – bringing up Kissinger and...

Smith: Détente.

Timmons: And détente and all that, the Helsinki Accords. And the RNC rules committee had rejected it. The convention rules committee had rejected it, but it got enough votes in the convention rules to get a floor vote, so that's what the Reagan people wanted because it was not popular and they thought they could swing some votes. And so we had a big discussion on how to fight and whether to fight and we decided not to fight it. It was an embarrassment, it was silly, but who cares in the final analysis? Getting the nomination is the important thing. And Ford didn't like it either. Of course Kissinger didn't like it at all, and Rockefeller didn't like it. And they were right. But politically, why fight on that? You've won the thing on the 16-C vote; you could possibly lose this plank and that may start a stampede; so we prevailed to let it go and the heck with it. And I still think that was probably the best decision. Which leads to an interesting story my colleague Tom Korologos tells. He saw Kissinger on the floor and Kissinger is very much upset about this and said, "If you guys let this stand, I'm going to resign from the State Department." And Tom allegedly said, "Well, Henry, if you're going to resign, do it now. We need the votes."

Smith: It sounds like Tom.

Timmons: It does.

Smith: Did you have a candidate for vice president?



Timmons: No. I wasn't involved in that. I was happy with Dole, but what upset me most was the process. As convention manager, all the conventions – Nixon '68, '72, Ford in '76, I had Reagan's manager in '80, and Reagan in '84. Those were the ones I was convention manager for the candidate, not the party, and I always put together a paper on selection of vice president. Even to Nixon. Things that needed to be considered. No names, but what needs to be done; the process. Talk to this, talk to that, make the announcement here, make the announcement there, call in leaders, and all that kind of stuff. And vet the person.

Smith: Rationalize the process.

Timmons: Right. Nobody has ever followed it. Not a one and not Ford on that occasion. He had his buddies around and they talked it through.

Smith: That brings up the last question, because I have to ask you: it was even more bizarre in '80 – was the Ford-Reagan thing serious?

Timmons: Yeah, it was serious for a while there, but let me go back to Kansas City. I had worked out with John Sears, who was Reagan's manager long before the convention, that the winner of the nomination would go to the loser's hotel the night of the vote, and discuss holding the party together, and maybe even vice president. But who knew at that stage? We both agree that was good for party unity. We went back to the Goldwater thing when that all fell apart and the New England governors and Midwest governors wouldn't support Goldwater. We said we've got to overcome that. And he agreed, and we did.

So after Ford won, I called Sears and said, "Can we bring the President over to your hotel, according to the agreement?" And he said, "Well, I've got to check now. Things are pretty bad over here." And I got a \_\_\_\_\_, and I said, "Well, it's kind of important to the party." So he did call me back an hour or so later after talking to Reagan. He said, "Yes, the governor will see Ford after the convention session at the Alameda at Reagan's headquarters. But there is one condition. That Ford not offer Reagan the vice presidency." I said, "Well, I'll pass that onto President Ford and if that's a condition, he will do it."

I went into Ford's office, which was just two or three doors down and he was sitting there – they had kind of an Oval Office set up with a flag and everything – and he was smoking his pipe and Cheney was there. I said, “Well, Mr. President, I have some very bad news for you.” He said, “What's that?” “The condition is that you not offer Reagan the vice presidency.” Boy, he smiled and puffed about six puffs and he was just so happy about that because he was worried that Reagan wanted the vice presidency. And he didn't want to have him because of bad feelings through the campaign. Don't sell the Panama Canal, and all this stuff that went on, and so that was kind of bad blood there and they both performed well after that, I think.

The Ford people felt Reagan didn't campaign hard enough for him, the Reagan people sat on their schedule for three or four weeks when the Ford people wouldn't call them to schedule anything. They said, “Look we have to support candidates around the country...” They called me a couple of times and said, “Call Cheney and tell us what...” So it was kind of a mix up there. So that bad blood was there and coming to '80, I don't know actually who suggested it. I always thought it would be Bush because they ran together and normally he's got a lot of support there and couldn't win the nomination at the Detroit convention, but he had a lot of support and he'd handled a lot of issues. They didn't always agree with Reagan, voodoo economics and all that.

So, somebody had suggested they consider Ford and so we set it up in a little team of people with Ed Meese and Deaver and those people. I had brought Baker into the thing in '80 because he wasn't coming to the convention and I brought him in. However Reagan people didn't like it because he was tied to Bush and some of the problems. But, no, it was seriously considered for a while, and I will to my dying day, deny this co-presidency thing that Walter Cronkite or somebody had said and people have written about all the time. I know because I was the only one that could type, and I typed the agreement.

Smith: There was an agreement?

Timmons: Several agreements – talking points, I guess. It wasn't something they would sign but it was for both sides to look at so there was no misunderstanding on discussion. So as the discussions went on, I would revise and type the thing,

and finally, when it kind of fell apart, I took the last copy, folded it up, took Meese into the toilet in the hotel, and flushed it down the toilet with him as a witness. And I wish I had kept it now, because it would have proved my point.

There was a lot of discussion on the vice president's role, meeting with the president often, having a voice in policy, comment on policy, personnel, special attention to the Congress because after all, Ford had been there, and Ford wanted some active role in the defense department. Because that was his real love, you know, from Appropriations days. No co-presidency, and no fact that you would give up the authority of the president. These were the sort of things that were normal courtesies, you would think, but in light of the past history of the vice president, they are ignored often.

Smith: He'd had the job, unhappily. He'd seen Rockefeller.

Timmons: That's right and he wanted some understanding, as former president, content outside of government, that he would have a meaningful role. And that was what that was all about. And people said, well, Kissinger and Greenspan wanted to have jobs. Well, I'm sure they did, but that wasn't part of any paper that I typed up. And so he would have an enhanced role of historical vice president, no question about that, but it would not be a co-presidency.

Smith: That's perfect. I'm so glad to get that on the record. Because you are right, the great urban legend – and it really was – Ford being polite, I think it was Walter Cronkite used the phrase and Ford just sort of passively went along with it.

Timmons: Now some of the Reagan people who distrusted Ford put out a bunch of things that he had asked to be something that the Reagan people, in their purity, couldn't stand. But they were not people involved in the negotiation. They were kind of on the fringes, guessing.

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