

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Birge Watkins
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: Thank you very much for doing this.

Watkins: My pleasure, Richard.

Smith: You have Grand Rapids roots.

Watkins: Right. Yes.

Smith: Tell us about your story before the Ford White House.

Watkins: How I ended up there? Well, we grew up with the Seidmans. My parents and Bill and Sally Seidman were very close. My parents are Bob and Betty Watkins. We spent summers together at Lake Michigan. We'd go to their house frequently on Sundays for skiing in the day and hamburgers at night. They had a big indoor pool and we'd swim. They'd come to our place occasionally. And we spent our Christmas days together. I just knew Bill very well.

Smith: Bill strikes me as something of a renaissance man, a man of remarkably diverse interests.

Watkins: Right, very eclectic and even somewhat eccentric as well, but in a good way.

Smith: Yeah? How so?

Watkins: He liked art and he liked making mobiles. He was always organizing things. He organized Thornapple Slopes which was a ski area on his farm with rope tows. We all learned to ski there so it was great fun. He did a lot of gardening. You would not think of him as a gardener and he wasn't a very good one, but he did a lot of it.

Smith: He was an enthusiast.

Watkins: Yeah, he had more property in Grand Rapids. He thought about developing it. That's when I started working with him, but he ended up giving it away to

the state of Michigan for a cross-country skiing park. So he liked that. He was always starting television stations and he'd get everybody involved. My parents did a lot of things with him on the business side as well as the social side. Fourth of July, he would be the one who'd collect money from the other parents and go buy fireworks. And he would have lobsters and clams sent in from Maine to Lake Michigan. Just a wild man.

Smith: He struck me as someone who lived every day of his life.

Watkins: I would say so, yes. He had a lot of activities.

Smith: And Sally, they were a real partnership?

Watkins: Yes, they were very close. Sally ran the household with the six kids. Sally was a very excellent athlete and loved the arts, and she did a lot of different things in her own right, but basically she held down the fort, which was a challenge.

Smith: Now, he was instrumental clearly in the creation of Grand Valley State University, which I guess is 50 years ago.

Watkins: Yes, actually this year it's coming up.

Smith: How does he come into the Ford picture?

Watkins: Well, knew Ford somewhat, but not real well, from Grand Rapids. Phil Buchen, of course, was very close to Ford. You know, they were law partners. Phil Buchen lived right down the street from us.

Smith: Really?

Watkins: He was a very good friend of my dad's.

Smith: Tell us what your memories about Phil Buchen are.

Watkins: I thought he was this wonderful, stately, distinguished guy who was very friendly and easy-going. You could sit and talk with him. But you know he

was handicapped, he had the polio, which was a curiosity. But he was a very well respected lawyer around town and he was really involved with the start of Grand Valley, too. My dad was on that organizing committee and so were all kinds of people in the community. Bill was the one who would always pull people together. He was very good at that.

Smith: Catalyst.

Watkins: Yeah, catalyst. Put them all together. Sometimes he'd bring them out to his house. He had this big dining room table and Sally would make hamburgers. They'd have this meeting and things would get organized. That's about the way it worked.

Smith: So when did your path first cross with Gerald Ford?

Watkins: Well, he was our congressman, so we always knew who he was as kids. Actually, his house was about two blocks from mine, I think. Was it Rosewood Street? We were on Cambridge Boulevard which was literally two blocks away. But he never lived there. It was a rental place. It was his congressional district home.

Smith: Now, was this East Grand Rapids?

Watkins: East Grand Rapids, yeah.

Smith: Okay.

Watkins: In fact, Bill Seidman's house, when he was a child, was also right down the street from ours. So it was all in a very similar area.

Jerry Ford used to come to my high school about every two years to give a little talk and that was always interesting. I would think about skipping the assembly just like high school kids do. Little did we know he would become president. So that was how we got to know him a little bit. When he first became vice president I flew down to Washington with Bill and some other people and they had a reception up at the Capitol Hill Club. I think that's the

first time I ever really met him. It was funny, because they took pictures and I never knew what happened to those pictures. One day when I was working at the White House, somebody in the photo office said, "I think I found those pictures. It looks like you only the hair is longer." Turns out it was, so they dug up the old photo.

Smith: Now, why were you on that trip to Washington?

Watkins: Well, it goes back to how this all started. After college, I went to Alma College in Michigan and I really didn't quite know what I was going to do with myself like so many kids. But I knew Bill always did interesting things and I figured, "Heck, I should go talk to him." So I did. I went up to the house and I remember sitting by the fireplace and he said, "Well, what are you interested in doing?" I said, "Well, maybe land development" et cetera, et cetera. He said, "Well, let me think about this. Let's have some dinner." And so the three of us had dinner, Bill, Sally, and me, and after dinner, he said, "I've got this project. It's those 400 acres I was telling you about. I'm thinking about developing it. What do you think about working with me on that?" And I said, "Sure." And he said, "You're going to be my partner." I said, "Well, that's cool. Partner with Bill Seidman." So we worked on that for awhile and then he ended up giving that away to the state, so it didn't make a dime.

Next his father had died and Bill had a little more money and he said, "I want to buy a ranch in New Mexico. I've been doing some looking. Why don't you go out there and look around in Colorado and New Mexico? I'll give you my son's van and some money and while you're there, check out the ski areas, because I want it near a nice ski area." And I'm going, "Oh, that's a tough assignment." So, out I went, skiing.

Smith: So, has Bill always been a skier?

Watkins: Yeah, he's pretty good. He learned to ski at Dartmouth when he was in college, so that's where he started out. He was not a great skier, but he loved

to ski. So I was running around looking at ranches in New Mexico and he and Sally came out for a visit to look at a few. Meanwhile, he had started working for Ford as vice president.

Smith: And what was the nature of his professional function with Ford at that point?

Watkins: Well, I think it started out, and I really wasn't closely involved, but Bob Hartmann was there and he was more of a speechwriter than a manager. It was a much bigger office than a congressional office and needed organizing. I think it was Phil Buchen that recommended to Jerry Ford that they get Bill Seidman in. He's the kind of guy that likes to organize things. It turns out that really was the case. So Bill came to Washington.

So, we'd been looking at ranches and all of a sudden Jerry Ford becomes president. Bill says, "Why don't you come down to Washington? We'll talk about a few of these ranches you've found. I'll give you a tour of the White House." You know, fun stuff. "Sally's going to fly down with Rich DeVos. Why don't you go with them?" So I said, "Sure." This is one of those stories you just go. Rich DeVos sends a Rolls Royce over to pick us up in the morning at Seidman's house. It was to the airport, hop on a private jet, blast to Washington, and a limousine to Seidman's house. That was on a Friday morning. That evening, Jerry terHorst came over for dinner. It was a couple of days after he had resigned. So it had been in the paper. It was pretty amazing. Bill goes out in this backyard of his house and had this little Hibachi and cooks burgers. And it was fun to see that. That was a Friday.

Smith: Let me ask you something because there has always been a debate concerning the exact motive or motives, maybe cluster of motives surrounding terHorst's decision. Obviously the public reason given was the pardon. There are a number of people with whom we've spoken who claim from personal knowledge that it's more complicated than that - that, in fact, terHorst found the job overwhelming and not to his liking.

Watkins: I don't know that personally. That there may be some truth to that, too. It was probably a combination of things.

Smith: I'm wondering. This was right after his resignation. Do you remember at all -

Watkins: Yeah, it seems like Bill said something at one time or another that was "all of a sudden you're thrust into a very visible, big-league job." There may be some truth to that. I don't know for sure, though.

Smith: Did you know terHorst?

Watkins: No, that was the first time I ever met him. Anyway, so the next morning, Bill says, "Come down to the White House and I'll give you a tour." This was Saturday morning, he went in early, "Come on down about ten." So I go down there and get through security and go up to his office in the Old Executive Office Building. And he says, "I have some bad news. I can't give you a tour of the White House. I've got a meeting with the President." I said, "That's a pretty good excuse." And Bill, in his usual fashion, says, "You see that pile of papers on my desk over there? Why don't you start sorting them out and then drafting answers?" I went, "Well, okay."

So I sat down and looked, and they're all from the chairmen of the board from this or that and all had to do with the economy. Bill was the Assistant to the President for Economic Affairs. The Chairman of Chrysler had written. And I said, "Okay" and I started drafting responses and I remember some of the words were like 'Apparently your letter was lost in the shuffle.' We used that a lot. And, so, anyway, I never did get my White House tour, but he said, "Why don't you stick around for a couple of weeks and work on the Conference on Inflation?" "Yeah, sure. Why not?" So that started and it was quite an experience.

Smith: Describe the purpose of that.

Watkins: The Conference on Inflation? Well, remember the economic times were not dissimilar to today. It was stagflation and things were in pretty bad shape. It

was just bringing together all the great minds, all the economists, business leaders, labor leaders, into one forum with people from the Senate, House, and the Executive Branch. It was quite a collection of folks over the course of two days or so.

Smith: And right in the middle came Mrs. Ford's hospitalization.

Watkins: Was that right? I had no idea. Wow.

Smith: Yeah, because he went up to Bethesda and came back to the conference I think maybe the second day or something. It was a Saturday when she had her operation.

Watkins: I forgot about that. Good point.

So anyway, they had me working on the Conference. And I'll never forget that they had a big reception at the White House and you'd go in there and just go, "What am I doing here? This is just an amazing Who's Who." So I finally did get my White House tour that way. And then Bill said, "We've got some follow-up work to do. Why don't you stick around a couple more weeks?" And Sally said, "You're going to need more clothes." She took me out to Britches and got me a suit. Of course my parents paid her back. And then one day we're driving home and Bill says, "Ah, hell, why don't we just put you on the payroll." So that's how it all started.

Smith: What was Bill's job?

Watkins: Assistant to the President for Economic Affairs and head of that Economic Policy Board. I think if you really look at the Economic Policy Board, they really structured it very well. There was excellent participation from the relevant departments and the people within the White House staff that were key to coming up with economic decisions.

Smith: And again, for people who don't know, my understanding is that was a brand new organization.

Watkins: Yeah, it was a new organization, basically a new model. It was built on small former models. But that was a lot different. Bill's role was that of honest broker. I'm picking up words from Roger Porter because I worked with Roger. But it was designed in a way that all the options would be on the table and they would go through those options, discuss the pros and cons and then you'd come up with a recommendation for the President, if it was an issue they wanted to elevate it to the President. Sometimes it was a Treasury Department issue that would affect other departments, so they could decide it right there. And a lot of it hinged on the President not letting people do end runs through the back door with, "You've got to do this for my department" or "This is what I want you to do. Please do it." I think President Ford was good about laying down the law that, "I want everybody to be involved in this if I'm going to make the right decision." So, that's probably one of his real strengths.

Smith: One senses that he wanted to hear as many viewpoints as possible argued out, if necessary, in front of him.

Watkins: Yes, or even argued out before it got to him. Just as long as they come up with good, clear cut options, so the pros and cons are presented. I think there are some other presidential models - you'd know a lot better than I do - that "Let's let them fight it out. I'll listen to different opinions." They'll come in different doors. With President Ford it was more, "You all come and get together, and in an honest and fair way come up with your options and your recommendations. We'll do it that way." It avoided the under the table, back door approach to presidential decisionmaking.

Smith: Now, that said, there's some strong personalities and strong temperaments on this because I remember talking to Bill, to pick one obvious example, the whole business about "bailing out New York." And one sensed that you had, for lack of a better word, the sort of doctrinaire conservatives, Simon, Greenspan, in particular, on one side and Bill, this is the part where he made

his alliance with Rockefeller. How would you describe Bill's politics and, for lack of a better word, his economic politics?

Watkins: I describe him as quite conservative, too, maybe a little more of a realist at the same time. The economic education I got primarily came from Simon, Seidman, and Greenspan, just sitting in the background and listening here and there.

Smith: And how would you describe each of them?

Watkins: Well, Simon was challenging – we actually became real good friends later, but the first time I met him, he yelled at me. Roger Porter and I were sitting in a conference room over in the old Executive Office Building on a Saturday morning. We were in the staff chairs and Simon was like sitting where I am, running the meeting and Roger and I were whispering to each other and he stands up, comes over, and starts yelling at us for being too loud. And I'm going, "Oh, this is cool." All I can remember is that he had penny loafers on. But then I got to know him, ironically, through Susan Mercandetti and through Bill Seidman. Susan's good friend was Mary Simon, his daughter. I can tell you a few off-color stories or two about that as well, but anyways.

Smith: But in public, Simon had the reputation for being pretty intimidating.

Watkins: Yes.

Smith: Formidable.

Watkins: Yeah, he came across as a pretty tough, strong guy. He had those big thick glasses and would look at you intently.

Smith: And I take you saw both sides?

Watkins: Yeah, I really learned to like him and like I said, we became pretty good friends, but it was because I was introduced on the social side as well as knowing him from running around the White House. I remember one time I ran into the Roosevelt Room looking for Seidman. I'm just cruising along -

some rush job - and there's President Ford and Bill Simon talking. And I run right in and I said, "Oh, excuse me!" I didn't know what to say, so I said, "Did you see Bill Seidman?" And I think it was Simon who said, "I think he's in the other room, there. No problem." Like just old buddies, just easy, but a little intimidating stepping in front of him and the President.

And Greenspan, he was a lot younger then as head of the Council of Economic Advisors, although he had the strong philosophies.

Smith: Almost libertarian.

Watkins: Yeah, at that time, I don't remember him being quite soft spoken. He was younger than Simon and Seidman.

Smith: Yeah.

He told us he brought Ann Rand in to the White House and introduced her to the President. Wouldn't you have loved to have been a fly on the wall?

Watkins: Yeah, the only one better than that was Raquel Welch, when she came over.

Smith: Tell us.

Watkins: Oh, she came in for March of Dimes or something like that to see the President. Everybody in the Old Executive Office Building, whether it was Seidman or Simon, made it a point to get over there around the same time. She was in the waiting room in the White House and had lots of company. Those are some things that happened.

Smith: Recreate for us the discussions that would go on in this group where you had these strong-willed people; people with clearly delineated philosophies. I mean, how did it work?

Watkins: Well, I think Roger Porter deserves a lot of credit. He was older than I was, but he was still very young. He would go out and pull things from the different departments, whatever issue it was. Say, it was international trade,

you'd want Commerce and State and whoever else, say, the Department of Agriculture. Bill and Roger make sure those all got into that options paper. It gave them something to look at, in advance of their meeting.

Smith: And Roger's role was?

Watkins: He was the executive secretary on the Economic Policy Board.

Smith: Okay.

Watkins: I went to very few of those meetings. It was usually only Roger and Bill from our office, and occasionally Bill Gorog, later on, who became Bill's deputy, but that was a year or so into it, maybe nine months into it. That was intentional because Bill Seidman didn't want to give the perception that he had a large staff. He wanted one or two people, Roger being the guy who did all the paperwork, so it wasn't like we were trying to create some sort of dynasty within the White House.

Smith: One way of looking at the Ford presidency is tracing the trajectory of someone who, on day one, was very much a man of Congress and who learned over two and a half years the difference between the congressional mindset and the executive mindset. Woven into that is this notion that, well, he was surrounded by all these Grand Rapids people - as if he had to outgrow that. What's your response to that?

Watkins: Well, there was a Grand Rapids crowd and I remember there were a few people that didn't last very long for one reason or another. It might've been good. Maybe they left on their own, but I think he liked having a few local people with Grand Rapids roots around, too. I think having Seidman and Buchen around was quite comforting in a way. I mean, these are guys that he trusted. I wouldn't say more trust, because he knew other people from the Hill and he'd been in Washington for many, many years.

Smith: But you stop and think, also, here's someone who comes into this office under unique circumstances with no transition. He's got a staff on day one that were

all Nixon people. And one of the stories we've been told multiple times is of the swearing in, followed by a reception, and then, I guess, there was something down in the dining room and you could see the Nixon people kind of peel off. It does raise this question of how did he balance continuity and change; being fair to the vast majority of Nixon people that had nothing to do with Watergate, with the political reality of giving the country something fresh?

Watkins: I can't really answer that because I was so new myself. You got the sense, though, that it wasn't like they were trying to throw all the Nixon people out because a lot of them certainly stayed.

Smith: Did you sense any tensions between the groups?

Watkins: No, not really. I think if there was any, it was probably at a really high level within the White House. But there were quite a few people on Bill Broody's staff or in the scheduling office who stayed and that was fine. Everybody got along well. Had a great time.

Smith: Was Haig still around when you were on?

Watkins: No.

Smith: Was Rumsfeld in charge?

Watkins: Yeah.

Smith: How would you describe Rumsfeld in those days?

Watkins: I thought he was a pretty impressive guy. I guess you could say a cool guy. He was always pretty nice. If you would see him in the hallways, he would always say 'hello.' Bill used to say they had some problems with Rumsfeld, but overall, he said he was a very well organized guy and very competent. I always thought he was a good speaker. He would come and talk every now and then and it was kind of motivational. I don't know if it was him or

somebody else that said, “We’re all dispensable and it’s a privilege to be here,” I took that to heart.

And Cheney was fun, too.

Smith: Was there a difference between the two in how they ran things?

Watkins: Cheney and Rumsfeld?

Smith: Yeah.

Watkins: I think when Cheney came on board a lot of it had to do with age. He was very young. He was a very competent guy, but Rumsfeld was with his peers and Cheney was all of a sudden working with senior guys like Seidman, Greenspan and Simon. I think there was probably a little less tension in the air, in some respects, things went smoother just because of that.

Smith: What was your exposure to the president himself?

Watkins: Oh, I’ve got a good story. Just in general, I’d see him in the hallway occasionally. I’d say, “Hello, Mr. President.” And he’d go this way and I’d go mine. He knew I was from Grand Rapids because of Seidman and Buchen and he knew my name, but I don’t think he put my name and my face together.

This is my favorite Washington, D.C. story. A young guy named Jeff Krolik worked for Nelson Rockefeller. I don’t know if you’ve ever talked to him, but you should some time. He lives out in California now. But Jeff and I were housemates. So he works for Rockefeller and I work for Seidman and we got wind that the Rockefellers were going to take the Fords to the National Theater to see *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, a wild tap-dancing, Harlem-based musical. So Jeff and I said, “Well, we’ve got these little Secret Service pins. Why don’t we get some dates and we’ll take them over to the National Theater and we’ll get there early. We’ll stay out in the lobby and when the President and Vice President come in, we’ll introduce our dates to the

President and Vice President of the United States?” You know, this would be cool!

So, sure enough, we did that. We get there and we're waiting in the lobby and in come the Rockefellers and the Fords and we all said 'hello'; we introduced our dates, just like we'd planned; and they go in and down the aisle. So we said, "Well, we'd better go find our seats". So we go down the other aisle and – excuse my language – but I go, "Holy shit." They put us right in front of the Rockefellers and the Fords and this is in the orchestra section. It's not like we're hidden off in a box somewhere. And it was just before the show started and my date's going, "Should I slide down in my seat?"

At the intermission, it was a lot of fun. We all started talking about Harlem and Betty Ford said, "I used to hang out up there." Jeff had gone to Dartmouth, so he and Rockefeller had plenty to talk about. Of course he was working for Rockefeller. We all got chatting and we forgot we were talking to the President and Vice President and their wives and that the rest of the theater is looking at us. And later we thought, "Wow."

Smith: But they enjoyed the show.

Watkins: Yeah, the show was great. We all loved that. And afterwards, we were shaking a little bit. We felt like we should've asked them to go to the Old Ebbitt for an omelet like you used to do in those days. Of course we were hoping they'd invite us over to their place. That was a pretty incredible night.

And then another story is that we're out in that White House tennis court, actually two stories - quick ones. Everybody used to sneak out there. Bill Seidman used to say - I did his scheduling among other things - and he said, "If anybody calls, don't interrupt me unless it's a cabinet secretary or the President or something very urgent." I said, "Okay." And he said, "Tell them I'll be in the Greens Conference Room." That was code for the tennis court. I was out there another time. We were playing tennis and all of sudden a presidential helicopter comes in, bringing President Ford back from

somewhere he'd gone and we thought, "Oh, we're in trouble now." You could see him looking at us and we thought, "Uh oh, we're outta here." Anyways, that was a good story.

Smith: But he, unlike some presidents, didn't decide who used the tennis court.

Watkins: No, not until the next president. And Bill Seidman always claimed that that was his doing. Bill told Hamilton Jordan that the key to Power in the White House was who controlled the tennis courts. After that, President Carter decided he'd control it.

And then I remember the Kansas City convention was a lot of fun.

Smith: Now, you say a lot of fun, but it was also bitter.

Watkins: Yeah.

Smith: You literally did not know going in?

Watkins: Oh, no, it was rough, the delegate count and all that, but I wasn't involved in that. I helped Bill on the platform committee and then there really wasn't much for the two of us to do after that. So – this is another tennis strategy. We're staying at the same hotel with the president, so we reserve the court. Bill said, "You reserve it and I'll reserve it and we'll get it for a couple of hours a day every day." That was another power play. I had guys like Bill Simon come up and, "Can I join you guys for tennis this afternoon?" I remember one time I played with Simon, Gary Brown, a congressman from Michigan, and Jerry Ford's brother, I think it was Jim. And here I am, it's my court, and I had these guys. When you're serving - I was a pretty good tennis player in those days, and I had Bill Simon in my sights. You think about when he was mean, and then serve and just blast him. So there's good times.

Smith: Did you detect philosophical and/or personal differences between, for example, Simon and Rockefeller? I mean, you had the New York City bail out.

- Watkins: I just wasn't that close to that. I remember the issue very well, but I wasn't close to the way those two interacted.
- Smith: But Bill did form an alliance with Rockefeller.
- Watkins: They got along very well and it was not just that – Bill served on a committee that Rockefeller headed up? Was it energy?
- Smith: He had one big Rockefeller grand plan.
- Watkins: Yep, grand plan.
- Smith: The Energy Independence Corporation.
- Watkins: Yeah, and Bill was a part of that and I remember he just said, "I really enjoyed working with Rockefeller." And Rockefeller was just such a great guy – I really liked him, too. I didn't know him well, but Jeff Krohk said Rockefeller would say, "Hey Jeff, how's your friend Dirge?" That happened more than once. He seemed like just a great guy and very warm and friendly. One time on a Saturday morning, I'm talking to my mother in Grand Rapids and they were looking at the offices we were going to give up and I said, "Mom, the Vice President just walked in." He said, "Hi, how are ya? Well, say hello to your mother." But no, Bill and Rockefeller just hit it off personality-wise and there may have been some issues they didn't agree on, but it really wasn't a problem.
- But Simon and Seidman was a situation where a lot of people thought it would be a tense almost unworkable relationship. But they sat down very early on and talked. They found out that they had a lot in common personally and socially. They were able to work very well that whole time period and became very good friends.
- Smith: So you didn't see Rockefeller's unhappiness as vice president?
- Watkins: Not so much with Simon. You know, there were always the Rumsfeld stories and things like that.

Smith: I haven't talked with Jeff Krolik.

Watkins: Did you know Dick Krolik by chance?

Smith: No.

Watkins: He did work for Rockefeller. I think worked for Time Warner, but it was Time back in those days. Jeff's dad was very close to Rockefeller, so Jeff started working with him from a very young age. He was probably three or four years younger than I am.

Smith: Really?

Watkins: Yeah.

Smith: Did he retell the Rumsfeld story?

Watkins: Seidman?

Smith: Either Seidman or Jeff.

Watkins: No, mostly what I heard about Rumsfeld, of course, was from Seidman. And you've probably heard all those stories ten times over again.

Smith: Was it just chemistry?

Watkins: No, I don't think they disliked each other, it was just Rumsfeld had his way of doing things. And, you know, if you're chief of staff, you're entitled to talk to the President directly, obviously, and sometimes that blew over into the policy arena with the Economic Policy Board. Don's over here doing what he wanted to do and then there was some of his more grand schemes to be the vice president.

Smith: That was gossiped about?

Watkins: Yeah, that was not unknown.

Smith: Nelson went to his grave believing that Rumsfeld did him in.

- Watkins: Yeah, and I remember the stories, because of Governor Ray Shafer from Pennsylvania.
- Smith: Right.
- Watkins: He was counselor to Nelson Rockefeller and I got to know him pretty well after the administration. In between Seidman, Shafer, and all these stories about Rumsfeld angling for the next vice presidential slot. After doing Rockefeller in, and with Rockefeller's New York delegation and Shafer's Pennsylvania delegation, that was not going to happen. That was it. You are not going to take over the vice presidency. Now, all this is secondhand, of course.
- Smith: Is that from Shafer?
- Watkins: Mainly from Seidman, but Shafer talked that way, too. You know they saw some scheming going on.
- Smith: Did you have any contact with Mrs. Ford?
- Watkins: Not much. I saw the kids or most of them at the last Ford dinner here in town. And it was fun to see Jack. You know, we'd had some adventures together back in those days.
- Smith: Tell us about Jack.
- Watkins: Well, Jack...you know.
- Smith: No, I mean.
- Watkins: Well, at the Ford dinner, he said, "Hey, come on". We hadn't seen each other in many years and I have all these Jack Ford stories. He said, "I'm married now. Don't tell anybody." I just see him as kind of - he got around, back in those days. I remember some friends had rented a house in Annapolis on the Severn River and Jack came down. Susan Mercandetti and a friend of hers came in from Boston, a very attractive young lady. They hit it off and the

next thing you know, Jack and the friend headed back to the White House. That must be a real treat. You meet some guy and find out he's the president's son and he takes you back home to meet the parents.

Smith: You remember he also hung around with Bianca Jagger and Andy Warhol.

Watkins: Yeah, that's right; he had that colorful crowd there for awhile.

Smith: Where did that come from?

Watkins: I don't know.

Smith: It doesn't sound like West Michigan.

Watkins: I don't know. I was too naïve to realize, but I probably could've picked up the phone and called some Hollywood little starlet and said, "Hey, you want to come to the Fourth of July at the White House?" It might've worked.

Smith: And then Kennerly was virtually a member of the family.

Watkins: Yeah, he was running all over the place. Do you know Paula Ahalt? Did you ever meet her? She was Kennerly's girlfriend. She worked in the photo shop. She was a neat, girl and became a real good friend of mine later. As I said, David had the run of the place.

Smith: What do you remember about the Kansas City convention? Our sense is there was a lot of blood on the floor.

Watkins: I just remember it was so tense there towards the end, when they were counting delegates. But again, Seidman and I weren't really involved with that part. It was the week before when we spent a lot of time on the platform committee.

Smith: Remember, there was a real issue - the Ford people had to decide whether to sort of roll over and let the Reagan folks have their way with the foreign policy plank.

Watkins: That's right.

Smith: And the wonderful story that Tom Korologos tells, because of course, Kissinger immediately threatened to resign. And Tom said, "Henry if you're going to do it, do it now. We need the votes."

I mean, just inside the platform committee, was there a lot of animosity, between the two sides?

Watkins: I remember a lot of debate, but it didn't seem hostile. It seemed reasonable.

Smith: Civilized.

Watkins: Civilized. Sometimes people were fairly firm but again, not over the top. Even though it was very tough, I think people remembered we were still in the same party and we've got to win this thing. It was either going to be Reagan-Ford, I do remember that getting a little tense from time to time.

Smith: And the campaign itself, were you still at the White House?

Watkins: Well, yes. Bill originally housed me on the Council of Economic Policy, but I was really his assistant. And once we got into campaign gear, I moved over to the White House because I could be more political that way, and a lot of the senior staff was doing political activities at that point. This is where I got the big Staff Assistant to the President title for three or four months. It was a nice way to end up. We were really just doing some intense scheduling, getting Bill out and around the country.

I worked with Margaret Tutwiler who was over at the Republican National Committee and she was our liaison for Bill. I got to work with Margaret a lot and got to know her pretty well. We had Bill going all over the place. In fact, Bill, the whole couple of years there, was considered the one with the busiest schedule of any cabinet secretary or senior staff member. It was just "go" all the time. I had to learn how to cancel events with groups where he was going to give a speech and to make sure that we had a substitute available all the

time. Sid Jones from Treasury we used him a lot and Jim Baker. James A. Baker III, was at Commerce Department and I called him up and said, "Do you mind going to Youngstown, Ohio in two days?" He said 'yes' all the time. He was great.

Smith: What was he like in those days?

Watkins: Well, he seemed like a very impressive, interesting guy. I got the sense he was probably going someplace somewhere down the road. No one ever thought he'd end up where he did, which he did was huge. But he was a very good guy. Wonderful guy. And very nice, too. I was glad I got to know him. So every time he sees me, he remembers me, probably because I was bossing him around.

Smith: Do you remember where you were on election night?

Watkins: I went out to Grand Rapids on the trip.

Smith: You were on that last swing?

Watkins: Yeah, I remember President Ford voted at East Grand Rapids High School and that was impressive. I went to that high school, too, as did Bill Seidman much earlier.

Smith: Were you at the airport where they unveiled the mural and he sort of broke down?

Watkins: No, because that was... on his way in? I think it was on the way in, I don't think it was on the way out. But I remember going to the airport with him in the motorcade and all that. As a matter of fact, I have a picture of me shaking hands with him on his way back to the plane. I flew back commercial and I got back in at eight or nine and by then the handwriting was on the wall.

Smith: What was the mood? Did you think you'd caught up?

Watkins: Yeah, we knew we were catching up. I was always worried and a couple of the younger staffers and I used to talk and we'd say, "You know, President Ford clearly has a wonderful track record." Way back even before his presidency, he did a lot of pretty impressive things that I think younger people were beginning to recognize. But the one thing we were trying to get - and I remember telling Seidman - Jimmy Carter was always talking about 'vision.' He had all these visions of the future. And Jerry Ford really wasn't talking that way. We conveyed to Seidman and others that, "We need to think about the future here. It's not just running on your record, but where we are going." And Jimmy Carter was pretty effective with that. It didn't turn out so well, but...

Smith: What was Bill's response?

Watkins: Well, I can't remember. I don't think we were disregarded because we were young staffers, but we felt this was just something that younger people will align with and the kind of message they'd want to hear. But that last couple of weeks was exciting; you saw the polls changing favorably.

I remember the night when there was the big gaffe with the Polish comment. We were sitting in the Executive Office Building and went "Oh, no." You knew what he meant, but we were just afraid the rest of the country didn't quite recognize that. He was right and we knew what he meant, but we knew that it was going to be taken wrong.

Smith: He was also stubborn.

Watkins: Yeah.

Smith: It took a week to revise.

Watkins: Oh, that could've been easily corrected because he was right, but it was just a matter of how you say it.

Smith: Did you see that stubbornness? Because, you know, it was part of his make up. And a temper, which he spent a lifetime controlling.

Watkins: I never saw him lose his temper, fortunately. I knew he was tough, though. I don't think anybody thought he was a pushover or anything like that. You knew he was that tough football player, a little quieter, but you knew he had that inner strength and you didn't mess with that.

Smith: Did you see him after the presidency?

Watkins: Not much, no. I saw him in Washington once just sitting at an event and got a quick 'hello' and that was about it.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Watkins: I think he was one of our greatest presidents, but for different reasons than others. Part of it was his integrity and his straight-forward honesty, and likeability as well. But I think he held that office and managed that office in a way that was really top of the line. It wasn't like he was fighting World War II or the Civil War or something like that which a lot of other presidents became famous for. He was one of our greatest presidents at kind of a quiet time. I mean, there was plenty going on, Vietnam and the economy. Everybody's got something going on, but I think he was just so solid. Right now I think people would love to have a president like that again.

Smith: Do you remember your reaction or your friends' reaction to the Nixon pardon?

Watkins: Yeah, there wasn't a lot of love for Nixon and I think a lot of people thought it was a deal, kind of cooked up in advance. I think it took awhile for people to understand.

Smith: Did that include folks back in Grand Rapids?

Watkins: Yeah, a lot of them. I think it took them awhile to realize that you really didn't want that hanging over your head if you're the president. It wasn't just

compassion to Richard Nixon. It was "Get him out of here. We can't deal with this."

Smith: "I've got a country to run."

Watkins: Exactly. So I think people bought into that over time. Maybe not everybody still.

Smith: But in a lot of ways, time was good to him. He lived long enough to see the country come around to his way of thinking.

Watkins: Oh, absolutely. By the time you went to the funeral at the National Cathedral, you could see that everybody loved him at that point. So, yes, he ended well.

Smith: I was going to say, were you surprised at the amount of public reaction when he died, because he'd been out of the public eye for awhile. I think right then the country really, really needed to feel good about itself.

Watkins: Yes. And I think they could reflect back and say here was a man who kind of brought the country together. The Vietnam War, he quietly ended it. It really was a big deal, but the way he managed it, it wasn't like we lost the war, it just got over. So I think in the history books, he was looking very, very good to people. And just such a wonderful guy, too.

Smith: Who else should we talk to?

Watkins: Oh, Susan Mercandetti. H.P. Goldfield. Do you know H.P. Goldfield?

Smith: No.

Watkins: There are a lot of younger people: I'll come up with a list.

Smith: That'd be dynamite. Erik's collecting names.

Watkins: Yeah, I talked to Marty Allen about this, too, and said, "You know, there were a lot of young people who were on that staff." The senior staff and the Cabinet are fading away quickly.

Smith: Yeah, we just missed Jim Lynn, which is a real shame. He passed away about a month ago.

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