

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
David Gergen
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
October 8, 2010

Smith: We often ask people to tell us something surprising about Gerald Ford, something that might surprise people.

Gergen: I'll tell you what surprised me. It was that he was a lot brighter than what I'd been told. And just a smart man, more informed and more talented. And I think one of the biggest mistakes we made on the White House staff was to underestimate his (George W. Bush's) - underestimate his talents and capacity. I have written about the fact that I found it agonizing to go through the speech preparation process in the Ford White House, and I'm happy to talk all about that. But it was as if we were writing speeches for *See Jane Run*. Everything was reduced to single syllables because he would stumble over them; simple declarative sentences.

We thought, and to some degree in our arrogance, this is what suited him best, because otherwise he might stumble. But after he left office, I got a call from his team one day saying President Ford has a speech he needs to give and he's got a draft and he'd like you to look over it. "Can we fax it to you? He'd like to call you at home tonight and talk about it." I said, sure. And I got it and it was a very complex speech. It was beautifully written, but very complex; lots of three or four syllable words, and I thought somebody has written an elegant speech, but it's not Ford. And what he wants me to do is to "dumb it down," to put it into simpler language. Something that he would feel comfortable with. And so when he called me that night, he just said, "Well, how did you like the speech?" And I said, "Well, Mr. President, it's a wonderful speech. Really elegant, but it's not quite you. Did you want me to work on it or whatever?" And I could hear him chuckling in the background, he had a pipe. And I talked a little bit more and I talked myself further and further out on a limb. And finally he said, "Well, I just wanted to..." He said, "For a long, long, time, I've never had the space in my life to write my own speech. This is the first time I've done it for a long time, but I wanted you to read it." And I

said, “Oh, my God.” But my biggest sensation was, we totally misunderstood just how capable this man was, that he could have given some of the most impressive speeches and oratory. That he really was a thoughtful and deep person. It was like so much of Jerry Ford that he was so self-effacing. He was so humble, but he would never correct you. On the other hand, he did not want you sort of belittling him.

Smith: Was that the problem with Jim Schlesinger?

Gergen: I was just going to say... Jim Schlesinger is one of the brightest people I have ever met in public life. The man has candle power far surpassing that of almost anybody else. But as defense secretary, when he started lecturing President Ford about how the appropriation process worked on Capitol Hill, and Ford had spent years doing this himself and being master of it, I think frankly the President was pissed off. And he fired him. He just didn't want to have to put up with that guff. But you could see that. We did have some inklings, and early on when I first came there – I'd been there in the White House at the end of the Nixon days, and I stayed on for part of the early Ford period. Then they flushed me out, with every good reason. They wanted to get the Nixon people out of there.

Smith: That's a huge question – that period. Rumsfeld told him to basically clean house.

Gergen: Right.

Smith: He was reluctant to do that for a number of reason. Stepping back, how did the meshing go? How did the Nixon holdovers deal with the Ford incomers?

Gergen: It was not an easy transition. There continued to be an arrogance and smugness on the part of the some of the Nixon people; and yet the scandal had engulfed us. For those of us who worked in the Nixon administration – I was a young kid at the time, and I thought it was like playing for the Chicago Black Sox. I thought we were finished in baseball, in effect. I thought none of

us would ever come back and we would be written off. But when President Ford arrived, as nice as he was, he had only a small coterie of people around him, and they were very mixed in their attitudes toward the Nixon people. Almost to a person, they didn't like the Nixon people. By definition, they wanted to do everything different. If Nixon had walked on the left side of the road, they wanted to walk on the right side of the road. They didn't want a Haldeman around, they didn't want a strong chief of staff, all the things that are obvious.

Smith: And was Hartmann the personification of that?

Gergen: Hartmann was the personification of that, and Bob, I think mellowed some in the years since, but he did see us as the Pretorian guard – that's what he wrote about later on. He very much wanted to be protective of Jerry Ford. I happened to think he was right, his instinct that wanted to protect Jerry Ford was right.

Smith: From himself?

Gergen: I think he wanted to protect him from the Nixonians. I think he wanted to preserve the Ford that he knew as the man of integrity and not get splashed out. Because, you know we had all these questions then about the pardon and everything else that arose very quickly.

Smith: Is there a thin line between being protective and being possessive?

Gergen: Yes. And I don't think you can see quite where the line is. But he had been there for Ford, he was his guy, and every president I know has got someone who is sort of protective of the boss. But Hartmann had outsized influence, and he was also erratic, so you never knew quite where you stood with him. You couldn't go in and have a conversation because he was very hard to approach. And I think it was quite clear that President Ford, having been thrust into these circumstances, didn't have the kind of team you'd normally have coming into the presidency. He had a congressional team; he had a

House congressional team. That's a very mixed bag and the President of the United States needs the best that he can get. President Ford knew he needed some help; and so he, I thought, was more welcoming, personally, and more respectful and more to do well by. (?)But the team was not.

For example, I had been head of the Nixon speechwriting team at the end. It was a speechwriting and research team. It was unclear what my future was. I assumed that over time we would all be asked to leave, but it would be a graceful exit of some sort. Al Haig was still there as chief of staff and I got a call from Haig one morning saying they just put the word out that there is a new head of the speechwriting team – Paul Tice – you've been replaced. He said, "I tried to stop it. I tried to do it in a more dignified way, but they just sort of basically cut off their head." And he was really angry because they bypassed him to do it, Hartmann had bypassed him.

Smith: One senses that Hartmann and Haig were put on the planet to piss each other off. We talked to Haig before he died, and the thing that got him red-faced with anger, thirty five years later, was Hartmann.

Gergen: Well, it was possible to hate Bob Hartmann. He engendered that. But, by the way, he also enjoyed – it's one of these things like Franklin Roosevelt in '36 – "I relish my enemies." So he didn't suffer people because they didn't like him very much. I got tossed out on my ass, but then they came back to me and said, "Well, would you like to work for Paul Tice?" And I said, "Not on your life, I'm not doing that. I'm out of here." But there was a lot of stuff like that that went on that was messy.

Smith: But you were the mainstay – there were literally rival speechwriting teams, organizations. What does it say about the President? His loyalty to Bob Hartmann notwithstanding. Can someone be too loyal? Can you be too nice? Tolerating Hartmann and all that, professionally, let alone personally. How can this system – if you want to dignify it as such – work?

Gergen: Not well. It was tricky. That's why eventually he had to have a chief of staff, and that's why eventually, when Dick Cheney came in, he needed to have more power. He couldn't make the place work; it was riven with tensions and rivalries. I'll give you an example: the State of the Union Address in 1976. I had just come back, I think, in the fall of '75, I had just been a short time. And Cheney was running things. Rummy had gone to Defense by then. It was Rummy and Cheney together who had invited me to come back to the White House. They needed help on communications and one thing and another, and I got a fancy title.

But when it came to doing the State of the Union speech, there was a very strong view among Dick Cheney and his top lieutenants – I was one of those – that this needed to be a very thematic speech. Bob Teeter, a pollster, was urging that, to be very thematic, not be a laundry list. And then Hartmann came up with the first draft, he was tasked with doing the draft and working with the President. And it turned out to be a total laundry list, which is exactly what the bulk of the people around the President didn't want. So I was tasked, over Hartmann's objections, but with the President's approval, I was tasked along with Alan Greenspan to write an alternative, which we did. And it was very thematic. And then we had a showdown meeting in the Oval Office, I think, early of an evening, and there were like sixteen of us in the room in a big circle. We had these two different drafts. Everybody read the two drafts. We had a big discussion about the merits and demerits of each draft. Hartmann was "Urff, urff," and so finally....

Smith: At least he was sober.

Gergen: Yeah. And finally the President said, "Okay, I need each one of you to vote individually. I'm going to go around the circle and ask each one of you which one you prefer." The vote was fourteen to two in favor of the Greenspan/Gergen draft. The two votes against were Hartmann and Jerry Ford. And guess which speech he gave.

Smith: Lincolnesque.

Gergen: Lincolnesque. Five votes against, Lincoln says, "I want to do it the other way. The ayes have it."

Smith: But that raises a question. One way of seeing the Ford presidency is a trajectory, over two and a half years, of outgrowing the congressional mindset.

Gergen: I felt that he became much more comfortable in the office. I mean, we all remember that this was not the office he sought. He wanted to be Speaker. He always was a creature of the House; he loved the House of Representatives; he loved the people; he was one of these people who was a grand bipartisan – a partisan - but a grand bipartisan. And that was the institution he assumed. He was so much himself there. Usually for the presidency, you have to go through a lot of psychological preparation, as well as intellectual preparation. It is a very different job from anything else in the United States. It is a unique position. Most people spend a lifetime trying to get there. It's a slippery pole, as we all know, and it takes an extraordinary amount of ego to get there. And you have to do a lot of crazy things to get there in terms of the craziness of the American campaign.

And so Ford hadn't gone through any of that, and he brought a congressional mindset, but he was serious about the nation's problems, but he didn't know quite how to go about solving them. And he didn't quite know how to *be* president. He'd never played that role before. One of the things that saved him, and why I think he was a much better president, especially in the rearview mirror of history, was not only his integrity, which was, I think, enormous, but he also was so self-effacing. He was so accepting of who he was that he was extremely comfortable to have people around – in fact, wanted to have people around – who was better than he was in what they did. So he was extremely comfortable with talented people like a Kissinger. And he was extremely comfortable with a Greenspan and others.

Smith: The Cabinet he put together was pretty impressive.

Gergen: I think if you look at it, by the time he left office, he had assembled one of the best Cabinets around. I think if you look back over history, the Ed Levis of the world – were just really high quality people at the Justice Department. And he drew other people like that – Bill Coleman and there are so many others that went on to serve the public for years later. But he had to grow into the presidency itself. I saw a dramatic change when the campaign – and through the spring primaries of '76 – remember I came back late '75, left in '74, came back in '75 – through the campaign's early primaries, we were sort of in a mess. Once Reagan got his voice and started whipping us, it got rough and tumble. And Dick hadn't been given the controls.

Finally, Dick not only won his confidence, but the President realized I've got to have a strong chief of staff to make this work. And he gave Dick a lot more authority. And Dick Cheney, in those days, was a very substantial, and I think, terrific chief of staff. I had parted company with _____ later on that was a whole different story in the George W. years. But I had a lot of respect for Dick Cheney in those years. There were a number of us who thought he'd be a great national candidate one day. Because we'd worked with him and at the age of thirty-five he was terrific.

Smith: Let me make sure I understand, in terms of acceding him power - was it that Rumsfeld had had that power and Cheney wasn't initially given the same kind of authority?

Gergen: No, I think it was that Rumsfeld had – one had less power than Haldeman did, less power than Haig did. Ford really did believe in the Spokes of the Wheel concept. But when Cheney came in, because he was young, and he wasn't Rumsfeld, he even had less power than Rumsfeld. When this was all over and we were already to depart, there was a farewell party for Cheney. We gave him a – Terry O'Donnell brought it, I think – it was a old bicycle tire, and it was all gnarled up and broken and spokes were coming out. But this was a

theory that we had – the Spokes of the Wheel concept – and it didn't work. Boy, Cheney got that up and rolling. There was a pretty darn good team those last months. We were coming from thirty points back.

Smith: A number of people have said the atmosphere in the White House was different working under Rumsfeld than under Cheney. Specifically, Dorothy Downton, the President's personal secretary - Rumsfeld tried to get her fired. Didn't happen.

Gergen: I'll tell you when I got into a really, really awkward situation. When I had left the Nixon White House, I went to work for Bill Simon, who was treasury secretary. Tough, no-nonsense, very conservative. And he and I got along very well together, and I became very close to him, and worked for him for a year. And when we were there, and I can't quite remember when it was, but when Dick was trying to run things early on, there was a movement outside the White House by a number of Ford friends – I think it was Charlie Bartlett, the former journalist, who was behind a lot of this.

Smith: The old Kennedy friend.

Gergen: Yes, the old Kennedy friend, who went to Bill Simon and said you really ought to be chief of staff, because they need somebody to take charge there. We're going to lose the White House now if we're not careful, and so forth and so on. And they had long conversations and they came to me to – and I was working for Dick and believed in Dick, but I also thought he had too little authority. And they had a letter from their group that they wanted to get to the President, and asked me if I would give it to him. This was very awkward for me because I wanted to be loyal to Dick Cheney, I believed in him, and yet I also knew this thing was not working. And Bill Simon was a friend of mine. So I eventually did get to the President, and I think I talked to Dick about it because he knew I'd been involved and I think he was – I can't remember the exact circumstances – but it was just really hard because I was in a dilemma. I didn't know quite what to do with it. But I didn't want to be sponsoring Bill

Simon - as much as I liked Bill Simon, I didn't want to sponsor him. But I also know the place needed to be shaken up. And I was so pleased when we made that shift and Dick really moved in. I think the place really humped them because we had a president who had really grown into the job, we had a staff that was clicking, we had people who liked each other. By and large, it was the most congenial White House staff – I've been on four White House staffs, and I have to tell you – I think it was the most congenial staff. You didn't have to keep your back to the wall. After we got past the Hartmann chapter...

Smith: I was going to say – it seems like the mirror image of the original.

Gergen: Yes. And things had fallen into place and people sort of knew who they were. After a while, even though I'd been replaced by Paul Tice, for example, he and I became very respectful of each other and I wanted to see him succeed. He was a sweetheart of a guy.

Smith: By the way, do you know what job Hartmann was going to have in the second Ford administration?

Gergen: No.

Smith: Ambassador to Ireland.

Gergen: Oh, wow. The *US News*, in the *Whispers* column had me replacing Cheney in the second term, and I don't believe for a second that was true. But you never knew quite what was going to happen there. But I did think there was a loyalty factor to Jerry Ford. People just liked him. The Ford Alumni Group were named, I think, the strongest of all the former president alumni groups that I'm aware of. The Nixon alumni group went on, but it was sort of like, we're not going to go down, we're in the _____ together. And the Ford group really came together because they liked Jerry Ford and came back every June for his birthday.

Smith: Do you think the Reagan challenge made Ford a better candidate?

Gergen: Yes, I do.

Smith: Was that offset at all by undercutting...

Gergen: There is no question that the Reagan challenge strengthened the internal White House workings and put some more starch into the President because he knew he was going to have to fight for the job. But it also left him thirty points back, and with a Republican base that was divided. And he had to drop Nelson Rockefeller as a part of that challenge. And I think that was one of the hardest things he ever did, let's put it that way.

Smith: Did you see evidence of an unhappy vice president?

Gergen: Of Nelson Rockefeller? I didn't know him well. I just knew some of his team, they were very much like a third body altogether. I mean, you had the Nixon people, you had the Ford people, and you had the Rockefeller people. Some of them _____, Joe Canzari went on to serve Reagan, I think, admirably. But they were sort of seen off to the side. I think Dick Parsons was floating around that group, as well. But it was almost an independent organ.

Smith: Did you see Ford's temper?

Gergen: I saw his stubbornness. I never saw him throw his glasses across the room or anything like that. But he was one of the most stubborn men I ever met.

Smith: We all know about the Polish gaffe, which I guess took almost a week for him to take back.

Gergen: It took several days. We couldn't convince him. Well, he was living in a bubble up there. He made the statement. We saw the polls change. Right after the debate was over people said he won the debate. And then the media started replaying the Polish thing and by noon the next day - Bob Teeter was polling them hourly - we'd lost the debate and we knew we had to reverse it. He was out with his traveling team, Dick Cheney was back in Washington, and everywhere he went he was greeted by these enthusiastic crowds. So, the

view from the plane was, hey, they love us out here. You guys are just using polls, it's just New York, you live in a different world. We're here in the real world.

Finally it got so bad Cheney had to fly out to Air Force One and pierce the bubble and say, "We've got to deal with this." Do it for the best of intentions, but you've got to reverse it. And he did. But it took several days. It cost us. I don't think it cost the election, but it cost us. I'll tell you what it did was, we were coming up in the polls and it was stalled. We started up again, but there isn't any question, if we had never stalled it could be he'd caught Carter altogether. I'm not so sure.

Smith: Doug Bailey describes it better than anyone... what the strategy was in '76. Which is basically: if the election were about Ford he would lose. You had to make it about Carter. So it was about engendering doubt in this unknown commodity.

Gergen: Hard to do.

Smith: Yea.

Gergen: Because the narrative about Ford had been told in such a way it was very hard to overcome; stumbling, doesn't understand, doesn't know, the pardon, all the rest, the economy haywire. We had a bad economic situation.

Smith: I've often thought that while everyone focuses on the pardon as "the reason," the fact is, you had basically caught up, and then the weekend before – Greenspan refers to it as "the pause" – there were economic numbers that came out that suggested this rocket recovery had stalled out. And I've often wondered if there was a critical mass of people who were prepared to vote for Ford, but when the slightest sort of infraction came along they said, "Well, I don't really want to commit to four more years of this."

Gergen: I think that's right. And you've got to remember there was a romance about Carter. He wasn't Nixon, he wasn't Ford, he wasn't an insider; and that was

working powerfully in his direction. And he did seem like a – there was something almost Obamaesque about the Carter campaign. It was well choreographed.

Smith: By the election, did you think you were going to win?

Gergen: No. I didn't think we were. In fact, I'd say that in my heart of hearts, as much as I wanted Ford to win, I thought from the country's point of view, maybe the time had come for a change, and new people. Get some fresh blood in, and all of us probably ought to take a rest. You do begin to realize after eight years of any administration that things wind down a lot. People were tired and the country needed some kind of lift. I didn't realize what we were coming into. I'll tell you what it really did, it revived the Republican Party. The out years were particularly productive for Republicans in terms of going back to the drawing board intellectually and refreshing and coming up with a whole series of ideas that Reagan could run with four years later. It prepared the table for Reagan. If Ford had won, there would have been no Reagan.

Smith: That's true. I don't know if you saw him after the election, because a number of people have said to us in varying degrees, it took him a while to bounce back.

Gergen: It did take him a while to bounce back. And he was angry at Carter. He didn't like Carter.

Smith: The line we've heard is, he said to people, "I can't believe I lost to a peanut farmer."

Gergen: Well, he was. They finally, I think, put aside their differences, on that flight to Sadat's funeral during the Reagan years.

Smith: That's right. I've often wondered whether one of the things that brought them together was Ronald Reagan, and the fact that they'd both run against Reagan.

- Gergen: That's right. The word was, they were flying back, I think they spent a lot of time together talking and they were sort of aligned when they got back. And Ford thought that Carter had gone from chicken shit to chicken salad. But Nixon had gone to _____, or Nixon was isolated off or something.
- Smith: Nixon went on to conduct his own royal progress to the Middle East.
- Gergen: Yeah, they were there together. I have a picture of all of us just before we left on that trip, Ford, Carter, Reagan and Nixon. I know there are four presidents in that picture. And they let staff people jump in for some shots. A lot of fun.
- Smith: Did you have any contact with Mrs. Ford?
- Gergen: Had very little contact with Mrs. Ford. I had continuing contact with him. I went to the dinners. He called me about some things, and I wrote a piece about him which he was really pleased about when the Kennedy Library gave him the annual award for courage. From the Kennedys for his pardon. I wrote a piece in the *New York Times*, he wrote me a note, he called me; we talked from time to time and I saw him in various places. I went out when they opened the Ford Policy Institute at the university – I saw him there. He asked me to come out and speak. I really was drawn to the man as a human being.
- Smith: Don't you think that time was good to him? Poor Lyndon Johnson, who died the day before the Vietnam Peace Agreement, such as it was – and yet Ford lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking. The Kennedy Profiles in Courage Award *was* the imprimatur. He said to me, everywhere I've gone for twenty years, people have asked the same question. Since then they don't ask the question any more.
- Gergen: Is that right?
- Smith: Yeah. It had that much impact.
- Gergen: Well, it was. I always thought it was a courageous thing to do; I just thought it was hap handed in the way it was presented.

Smith: But you talk about in later years, the contacts that you had with him.

Gergen: I can't remember exactly, but there were just notes that would come and an occasional phone call, or I'd see him somewhere.

Smith: In my eulogy I talked about the fact that most of us as we get older become more conservative. With him, it seemed the opposite. Whether he was reacting to the Reagan takeover of the party.

Gergen: It was partly that, I think it was probably Betty. Betty is a very modern sort of woman who has evolved over time. The two people I've seen the most adaptive like that have been Jerry Ford and George Schultz. George Schultz has gone through an extraordinary evolution in thinking. And you see he is very green, he's very much for getting these prison laws in regard to drugs that he thinks is crazy, and destabilizing Mexico. He's for a zero nuclear world – I just have a lot of respect for people who continue to grow and think. Bob Dole is one of those. But I thought Ford aged extremely well. And I also felt that his tenure in office looked better and better. You go back to the Richard Peeves' apology to him in the *American Heritage*. It is really quite remarkable. I really did feel that captured what happened – that there were a lot of people, especially in the press, who had misjudged him.

But, you know – I want to go back to one of the things – I came in there late '75. And going through the budget process and being in the room with him as he made decisions about the budget, came to the conclusion that he understands the federal appropriations process and the budget and the Congress better than almost anybody I've seen. He's really good at this. He knew the numbers, he knew what the programs were, he knew what the first weapons systems were – he knew all this stuff and he knew a lot about the rest of the budgeting. So it was in that January/February when he presented his budget. Typically what a president does is send the budget up to Capitol Hill. It's a big thick document and then he may come out and make a few sentences and then leave and have a press conference for the press that is

conducted by his budget director. The only person who had ever done that himself, the only president who had ever done that was Harry Truman. He did it himself, he briefed on his own budget. He is the only person who had the mastery of the budget. And so after hearing this for a while I went to Cheney and some others, Jim Jones, Jim Cavanaugh, and others, Jerry Jones and Terry O'Donnell and recommended strongly that Ford do his own briefing and surprise people. It was going to be a complete surprise.

He was terrific. And for a while then he really convinced a lot of journalists – this guy is smarter than we thought he was about the innards of government. Now he may not be the wise man or the strategist that Richard Nixon was, or the master of the process that Lyndon Johnson was, but he certainly can hold his own here. And it made a difference. All I would add to that is that we didn't fully appreciate that inside, especially on the speeches.

Smith: I always say he is the least self-dramatizing of presidents. In an age where so much of the presidency is theater - that he really never was comfortable with.

Gergen: I agree. He would do it, but it was his _____. He was a guy who was part of a club, got things done on Capitol Hill, did it well, liked his constituents and had a good life.

Smith: Were you surprised by the degree of reaction when he died? He'd been out of the public eye for a while.

Gergen: I was surprised because I hadn't realized just how much warmth there was. I think there was a nostalgia about what he represented. He was a World War II representative, and he did represent those values. I think we miss that generation a lot. Almost everybody I've ever worked with in that World War II generation who has died has gone out with flags flying.

Smith: I remember you once saying that you had come to the conclusion that military service, if not essential, was hugely beneficial to a president.

Gergen: I do believe that. We had seven presidents in a row from Kennedy through Bush, Sr., who were the World War II presidents - as you know better than I - who all wore a military uniform. And I think it made a big difference. And, of course, before that Eisenhower and Truman. FDR had not, but he'd been very involved as assistant secretary of the navy. And I think that service in military uniform while young shaped the political culture of that generation and made it much more civic in nature. One of the reasons why I am now such a proponent, and went down to the Ford Institute when it was opened and tried to do all these other things - I'm a very big proponent of service, national service. Not everybody, but having both military service and domestic, civic service like Teach for America, I think make a huge difference for this next generation. I think that one of the big failings of people who came of age in the Sixties and Seventies was the fact that so few served. And it was so divisive and there were such deep resentments about it.

Smith: I just sent this essay off to *Time* on the Kennedy/Obama parallel. And there are surface parallels, but the huge, huge difference, it seems to me, is: Kennedy takes office 28 years after FDR begins his revolution in the course of which, because of the Depression and the war, there is fostered a collective sense of thinking. A solidarity born of shared trauma. And a trust in government, and a rallying around the president, culminating in the Bay of Pigs and so forth. Obama kicks off his presidency 28 years to the day after Reagan pronounces government more a problem than problem solver. And the Reagan consensus has not gone away.

Gergen: But there is no sense of national cohesion.

Smith: Exactly.

Gergen: And there is no sense of "we're all in this together."

Smith: Exactly, it's "what's in it for me?"

Gergen: So I've been extolling the new generation because I think it's a great hope. I have to tell you, I was shaken a little bit when I went to see *Social Network* and this portrayal of Mark Zuckerberg may be unfair, but I came out and I found a lot of young people around here think, "Well, Mark Zuckerberg did what you have to do to succeed in life." He was a visionary? "Oh, yeah. He had to run over a few people, but, so what? He looked pretty good." And I came out and thought he was a jerk.

Smith: What I find astonishing is, just a couple of years after Wall Street – its greed and excess – almost took us all over the abyss, that so much populist anger is directed at Washington instead of the crooks on Wall Street.

Gergen: Yes, I was just with an investment crowd two days ago and made that point. I said, "It's astonishing to me, but people like Rob Portman, who is running out in Ohio, who has this investment background, and worked for George W. is fifteen points ahead." What's going on here? I don't see this being directed at Wall Street right now. I do see it directed as way too much government. And I think Obama, somehow, has taken all that anger and channeled it on himself.

Smith: Yeah.

Gergen: And I don't know why. We're going to be a long time trying to figure this one out.

Smith: Last thing: when the famous *Sixty Minutes* interview took place with Mrs. Ford, people in the White House said, "Oh my God, what has she done?" My sense is though, that before too long people began to realize that, hey, wait a second, there's another side to this, and that for an administration that's all about openness and candor and honesty, she may be a real asset.

Gergen: Betty Ford turned out to be an enormous asset, a huge political asset. And I think the President came to appreciate it. She was always an asset in his life, I do think he saw that. She was home, she was anchor, she was protection, she

was the safe haven. I saw that. I will remember to this day that when Richard Nixon resigned, we were down at the helicopter and he had that famous wave and the helicopter went off and then we sort of went back to reality. The President and Mrs. Ford were walking together back toward the White House and he reached out for her hand to walk back. And I really thought, she's important to him.

Smith: Do you know what he said to her as they walked back in?

Gergen: No.

Smith: He just whispered in her ear, "We can do it."

Gergen: That's nice. That's very nice. And so I always felt that, but I think he felt she was a bit of a loose cannon publicly.

Smith: But it turned out, that's what people...

Gergen: That's what they liked.

Smith: Authenticity.

Gergen: Right, there you go. And I think she opened the place up a little bit, especially after all the bitterness and all the anger, the incriminations of the Nixon years. I think she was very fresh.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Gergen: I buy into the notion that Jerry Ford was first and foremost, in terms of his national contribution, he did begin to heal the wounds. And we were extraordinarily fortunate to have a man of his integrity come in at the moment he did. This whole notion from Bismarck that God looks after fools and drunkards and the United States of America, I really thought that there was something almost Providential about Ford coming into office.

Smith: Is the other side of that coin that, in effect, by January of 1977, he had performed his historical mission?

Gergen: Yes. I thought he had – whatever he went on to do as president would have been more conventional and this was special – this period of needing to get to across the valley. And it was not just Watergate, it was also Vietnam. We had just come through seven or eight years where confidence in government and confidence in the public officials had plunged. The highpoint of public confidence in the presidency and government was in '66 and '67 and a decade later or so when Ford came in, it was almost demolished. And so he really did begin the rebuilding process. Didn't complete it. Actually, Reagan did a lot more later on. But I also felt that Ford was one of the last "good guys" to run the country.

Smith: David Broder said, "He was the least neurotic president."

Gergen: Yeah, and there is something for the normal Midwestern guy who shows you can do it. *Mr. Deeds Goes to Washington*.

Smith: I've often wondered, if there had been a full term, whether there might not be a kind of Trumanesque aura around Ford.

Gergen: Possibly. If he had a big comeback, what are you going to do? You sort of had a Clark Clifford type – overcome the odds and won. He wasn't as feisty as Truman, nor was he...it would have been hard to govern. He'd lost so many seats in '74. It would have been very hard to govern. Some things might have gone differently, I'm not sure we'd have seen the Iranian revolution turn out quite the way it did. There are others things would have gone differently. But I think for the period he had, the shortest presidency in the 20th century, it was an enormous contribution, and I think we should be grateful to him. But, again, go back to – I think people are so tired today of the manufactured, the gauzy, the invented, the inauthentic – to have somebody who could do that office pretty darn well and hold the country together, and be so normal and be so likeable. That's a good thing.

Smith: Do you think the kids helped in that sense?

Gergen: Yeah, I think the family helped a lot. Betty first and foremost, but the kids – it was sort of an all-American family and you wanted them to succeed. They weren't pretentious. They were thrust into it. Every president since Kennedy forward, other than Ford, has been thrusting for that office – has reached for that office. It was very different, as you know. Used to be – say an Eisenhower – you almost got drafted for it, basically got drafted. And Truman came in. But every person since has been sort of grasping for office.

Smith: Someone has described Ford as Eisenhower without the medals.

Gergen: I like that.

Smith: That same instinct for the middle of the road and the pragmatic, not ideological, approach.

Gergen: And I think what the country longs for now - I think we've had enough of the specialness – let's just get somebody who is very sensible. And I don't know whether we can find them or not.

Smith: That's perfect.

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