

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**David Mathews**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
**June 1, 2009**

Smith: The first thing I want to ask you: you obviously had a very impressive career before you ever joined the Ford camp. When did you stop being the youngest person in the room?

Mathews: I don't know; time took care of that. I think it was more significant that I didn't come from Washington. Yet even though I didn't have a Washington background, I had experiences that served me well when I got to D.C.

For instance, I lived through the desegregation crisis. George Wallace was the governor of our state when the University of Alabama desegregated. I was at Columbia working on a PhD in history and came back to the university in the summer of 1963 to help with desegregation. The governor's stand in the schoolhouse door was political theater. African American students were already in the dormitories and preparing to go to class. I became President a few years later, and a university that had served part of the state had a chance to be the university for all of the state. The challenge was no longer just ending segregation; it was fostering integration, which was a different. When I came to Washington, however, the focus was still on desegregation in a very acrimonious, political controversy.

I also had some experience in trying to reform health care. Alabama had very good medical care available in the medical school at the University of Alabama in Birmingham; yet 60 miles away, we had third-world health statistics. So I worked with the legislature to begin a College of Community Health Sciences in Tuscaloosa, which focused on rural areas.

In addition, I was familiar with working with elected officials because before coming to HEW I had served as the university's liaison with the state assembly, and my grandfather and great-grandfather had both served in the legislature.

There was also a long history in social work at the university that helped me in Washington. And my wife's relatives had been very much involved in social services. Her cousin, Loula Dunn, came to Washington during the Roosevelt administration to head the

Emergency Relief Administration. That was a useful connection. In addition, the university had done a lot of work with the disabled, and what I learned from those programs served me well.

I was pleased to be associated with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare because it represented the compassion of the American people.

Smith: Interesting. It traditionally has been seen as a political graveyard.

Mathews: Yeah, but if you look at the people who developed HEW, particularly Nelson Rockefeller, they made a contribution by bringing the federal programs that served people to one department, which provided opportunities for coordination and mutual reinforcement. The department also reflected some of the enduring values of America. It was, for example, the agency for administering the social compact between generations: the tradition of one generation caring for another.

Smith: I wonder what kind of institutional history there was. I mean, for example, were there people who remembered Mrs. Hobby?

Mathews: Not if she had her way. She didn't seem to dwell on her experiences as the first Secretary. Mrs. Hobby went back to Texas and her newspaper. Other past secretaries often stayed in touch and shared what they could with their successors. Consequently, the department has had an institutional memory, particularly of people like Nelson Rockefeller, who was well respected. Some of his furniture was still around. There were also distinguished veterans, such as Wilbur Cohen and Arthur Flemming, who, like Nelson, were very helpful to me. All were truly public servants.

Smith: Did you know George Wallace?

Mathews: Oh yes.

Smith: What was your relationship with him? And did you see him change; did you see him evolve?

Mathews: As a young legislator, he served with my grandfather, although I have few memories of that era. I knew him best for his stand in the schoolhouse door at the university in 1963. He said he was carrying out a promise he made to perpetuate school segregation. I also

knew a lot of people who went to school with Wallace, including Frank Johnson, whose rulings as a federal judge checked the governor and brought about desegregation. In addition, I had ties to other progressive southern governors. In the 1960s, these governors were part of a network of educators and civic leaders in the South that included Jimmy Carter, Terry Sanford, and LeRoy Collins. Some of them remembered George from his student days when he was so liberal he was thought to be “pinko.” They saw Wallace’s about-face as opportunistic.

When Wallace first ran for governor in 1958, he said he wasn’t fit to serve if he couldn’t treat all citizens equally. Yet after being defeated by John Patterson, he later went on to pledge “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”

My personal encounters with Wallace came when the university assigned me to work with the state legislature. We clashed over a proposed speaker-ban bill like one North Carolina had passed to keep Communists off the campuses. The real targets of the bill were civil rights leaders who were accused of being associated with the Communist Party. Of course, the universities were opposed to the bill, and my job was to try to stop it in committee. I found a committee member who was the father of a classmate; he was sympathetic to our position, and his vote helped prevent the bill from coming to vote on the floor.

The University’s president at the time, Frank Rose, took a very courageous stand opposing the bill, and Wallace wasn’t happy with its defeat. I was outside George’s waiting room some time after that. When he heard my voice, he came out of his office to talk about the speaker-ban bill. He said in effect, “I’m going to help you. I’m going to give you a Confederate flag and a pole to fly it.” And he put money for both in the appropriations bill. Our response was that we already had a real Confederate flag in the archives, which had flown when Union troops burned the university in 1865. We didn’t need to prove anything to anybody. So, we were on opposite sides on most, but not all, issues.

Wallace didn’t oppose my efforts to get funding for the College of Community Health Sciences. And we also received funding for another college dealing with environment and energy. Alabama is an energy-rich, mineral-rich state, so there wasn’t significant opposition. Later on, after Wallace was shot and in terrible pain, he would call at night to talk to people. Sometimes he would call me; he’d talk to me about old times, or if I wasn’t there, he’d talk to my wife, Mary, and if she wasn’t there, he’d talk to the kids. I went by

to see him after he'd won his last race for governor; sitting in a wheelchair, he could recite every ballot box in Alabama and the tremendous number of black votes he had received. By then, Wallace had confessed to making a mistake in supporting segregation, and the black electorate had supported him.

Did you see where Wallace's daughter came out for Barack Obama, even campaigned for him?

Smith: No, I didn't. Isn't that something? Talk about the new South.

When I look at HEW during the Ford years, you had more than your share of hot potato issues. Let's back up. How did you get the job?

Mathews: I have absolutely no idea. I had met Ford during the Bicentennial. The university was one of the first to have a Bicentennial program. Ford recognized that, and the White House asked if I'd come up for an award. (I was serving on the National Advisory Council for the American Revolution Bicentennial.) Other than that, I didn't give much thought to Washington until I got a call from somebody with the White House who wanted to know if I was interested in HEW. I have a good friend by the same name as the caller (Walker), and I thought someone was pulling my leg. I didn't take the call seriously until the White House called again. President Ford later said that calling me was his idea. He had inherited a lot of people from past administrations, and I assumed he wanted some who were his own choices.

Smith: Did you have a job interview with the President, or what was the process?

Mathews: After meeting Ford, I interviewed with the chief counsel and other staff. The time was short; Cap Weinberger was determined to get back to California, and President Ford wanted to complete his Cabinet.

Smith: Did you talk to Weinberger at all about the issues?

Mathews: Yeah, I talked to Cap about many things; he gave me good advice, and he was always on tap if I needed to talk to him.

Smith: What were the most pressing issues when you arrived?

Mathews: Well, they fell into two categories, those issues that came from broad political trends, and those that came from specific policy controversies. In 1975, one of the most significant trends was that Americans were losing confidence in government. Pundits at the time thought maybe Vietnam and Watergate were to blame, but the lack of confidence persisted into the 1990s and beyond. In fact, contemporary polls show real hesitation about trusting government.

The other thing that was happening, as you know, was that we were dealing with what has been called “the new American political system.” We’ve always had interest groups, but the groups that related to HEW had become much better organized. Their members had taken positions on the staffs from Congress, as well as within the bureaucracy. Their heightened influence added to a shift in power away from the President and elected officials to the bureaucracy and the courts.

The tone of politics was also changing, becoming more moralistic and less pragmatic. Everything was a right. The civil rights movement had been a success, and other groups contended that they, too, were championing rights. But if everything becomes a right, which is absolute, how is the government, with its limited resources, to set priorities? There are no priorities when it comes to rights. Yet, if you’re in the government and there is an issue about whether the complaints of Mexican Americans or African Americans should be a priority for OCR’s compliance staff, the administration is in an impossible bind.

Going back to the loss of confidence, I would add that citizens were not only losing confidence, but also losing voice. These feelings may have had something to do with a shift in focus from the general interest to a focus on particular interests. Consequently, a large number of Americans were increasingly of the opinion that “folks like me” don’t count. Special interests aren’t bad, and every conceivable group was available to represent every conceivable interest. They were well organized and effective. Still, people didn’t feel like the political system represented them as a whole. Personally, we usually integrate our interests, but interest groups aren’t integrated; to be effective politically, each one is like a dedicated missile aimed at one specific target.

Smith: That's interesting because one of the organizational innovations of the Ford presidency, which is with us today, was the Office of Public Liaison—clearly designed to address these group aspirations.

Mathews: That was helpful. And particular interests don't necessarily conflict with the interests of all. It was a problem of balance. The more influential organized interest groups became, the more the balance tipped away from the less organized citizenry and the interest of the public as a whole. That same shift has occurred in the legal system; for instance, a community playground closes because it can't afford the insurance to protect against personal injury.

The influence of organized interest groups was enhanced by increased reliance on regulations. The administrative state operates through regulations, which aren't made through open debate the way laws are made. Furthermore, the legislation that the department had to implement through regulations was often very general; in some cases, only a few sentences added to in a bill. And this addition may have been passed without debate, which made the intent difficult to interpret. Consequently, the "taking powers" of the state, as Oliver Wendell Holmes put it, grew as regulations multiplied. I thought this raised a serious question: who would regulate the regulators?

In addition, as you know, there has always been an issue about the right balance between state and federal power. We benefit in many ways from a strong federal system, but in the 1970s, the balance had shifted decidedly in favor of Washington, as the federal advisory committee on government noted in the 1980s. This trend had implications for the department because many of its programs depended on effective state and local government. The department also depended on viable communities. For example, as Margaret Mead pointed out in health, whether or not you get well has a lot to do with the networks of nurture in a community. Roughly put, if you have the same problem I have, and more than six or seven people care that you get well but fewer care that I do, you're likely to get well and I'm not.

This shift in balance of power away from local jurisdictions compromised that wonderful American invention of allowing sovereignty within sovereignty. Not allowing for divided sovereignty has plagued other countries, and in the United States, we have to rebalance power constantly.

These were the broad trends that were in the environment in which the department had to operate. In that environment, there were also specific policy issues that arose out of crises. The integration crisis is an example.

Smith: Let me interrupt just because I remember—I'm in Boston. Tell us about Boston.

Mathews: Oh, yes, I was about to mention Boston.

Smith: Tell us about Boston and the administration's response.

Mathews: Well, the federal judge there, Arthur Garrity, issued a desegregation order that followed the 1973 decision in the *Keyes* case. This put the court up against a very formidable and adversarial Boston School Committee or board. Violence erupted when the judge's ruling required busing children from a low-income Irish neighborhood to a distant, low-income African American neighborhood.

Smith: South Boston and Roxbury.

Mathews: Yeah, South Boston and Roxbury. The two had clashed in 1968, following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. And before then, in the 1950s, the Irish neighborhood felt it suffered from federal housing policies. So there was a tinderbox in the city, and the federal judge's ruling supplied the spark. Initially, President Ford refused a request from state officials to send in the federal marshals. He said that maintaining safety was a local responsibility. But by the next year, the Justice Department sent federal marshals, and the Federal Community Relations Service was there. At HEW, we provided funding to ease the transition through the Emergency School Aid Program.

I also sent a special assistant there, Dr. Joffre Whisenton. He was the first African American to get his doctorate at the University of Alabama, where he had been my graduate student. I believe an official from the Office of Education, Herman Goldberg, was there as well. They were looking for the kind of civic organizations that had proven helpful in other communities like Pontiac, Michigan. For example, governors like Reuben Askew of Florida, as well as Robert McNair and John West of South Carolina, had created biracial committees. These were very constructive, not necessarily in getting people to like one another, but at least in preventing the destruction of a community that was in the process of obeying the law. There were some civic organizations with similar objectives in

Boston. But battle lines had hardened there; it was an extremely difficult situation. And this is why I said earlier that Washington was still focused on desegregation.

Smith: Was there a sense that a lot of people in the South felt there was a bit of a double standard?

Mathews: Oh, yeah. Even members of Congress who weren't from the South, like Edith Green, were saying, "What's good for the goose is good for the gander." Yet many northern urban areas were ill prepared to deal with the challenges of desegregation.

Smith: And in some ways as segregated.

Mathews: Yes. De facto.

Smith: De facto segregation.

Mathews: Yeah. And President Ford's position as a member of Congress had been that he was for civil rights legislation. And at his confirmation hearing as Vice President, he said he considered de facto segregation as illegal as de jure segregation. He liked the Esch amendment, which would have prohibited school systems from transporting kids past their nearest or next nearest school.

After Boston, on the eve of the election, President Ford had to come out with his own plan for desegregation. To explain how that plan was put together, let me tell you the story about differences in the way the Justice Department and HEW went about preparing this plan. Although I saw the signs that busing wasn't working as intended, I told the President that it was probably a mistake to give the impression that there was some alternative to busing, which had been successful in certain cases. The desegregation issue had been framed in a way that made more extensive busing inevitable. As long as the government required specific ratios of black to white students, there was no way to achieve the necessary racial balance without transporting some students, usually African Americans, out of their neighborhoods.

I was pleased that when the President came out with this plan, he didn't give the impression that there was an alternative to some busing. He wanted to limit it, while acknowledging it had been useful in certain cases. The bill he proposed was a hybrid. Ed Levi and the Justice Department wrote part of it, which had to do with limiting the use of

busing, and I took what I had learned from the citizen biracial committees and tried to get them institutionalized in the form of a quasigovernmental agency.

My models for this agency, to be called the National Community and Education Committee, were the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation. The President needed a national plan, yet we had to depend on local citizens. Whatever citizens felt about desegregation, if they didn't want their city torn up as Boston had been, they had to come together. They could create the kind of organizations that could counter the people who were organizing to oppose desegregation violently. And if you were in Boston, you knew how effective the citizens rallying against desegregation were, particularly when encouraged by the school board. So, that's where we came out.

Smith: Let me ask you, because it's not unusual for there to be tensions between the White House and departments, but I'm wondering, this is also playing out against the backdrop of an impending challenge from the right in the form of Ronald Reagan.

Mathews: Yeah.

Smith: Did you ever sense how that factored into decision making at the White House?

Mathews: There was no pressure from the White House to respond to the Reagan challenge. Our principal contact was Jim Cannon, head of the Domestic Council, and he was quite professional. A good friend of mine, Doug Cater, who was in the Johnson White House said, "You'd better hope there's nobody like me in the Ford White House." President Johnson is said to have kept his departments on a short leash and depended on the White House staff. I was fortunate to have Jim, a fellow Alabamian, in Doug's role. We really weren't that different in our outlooks; he seemed to share my nonpartisan inclinations. I had grown up in a state where I didn't see a Republican until I was 30 years old. I was an independent, and never have been interested in partisan politics. Any need to respond to the Reagan challenge wasn't a consideration, not in the conversations that Jim Cannon and I had.

Smith: Bill Coleman remembers at one Cabinet meeting, he wanted to keep the administration from getting too far out in front, filing a friend of the court brief or something at some point. And of something the President said, consistent with what you said earlier, "Well, you know, Bill, I just don't think anyone should be bused beyond the nearest school." And

Coleman said, “Well, if you agree to that, then we’re both in agreement.” Does that ring a bell?

Mathews: Yeah. The discussion occurred while formulating the President’s plan for desegregation. Keep in mind that another Coleman, James Coleman, had authored two reports on the schools. The first had shown the ill effects of segregation. Nobody had to tell me about the bad effects of segregation because I had seen what it had done to the South—the energy that it had drained away from everything else. It was an injustice to everybody. And I saw what could happen to an institution, the state university, when it was free of that burden. So there was no question in my mind that we had to integrate the schools. But in his second report, Professor Coleman warned against the unintended consequences of extensive busing.

Smith: To desegregate.

Mathews: Desegregate, yes. And integrate the schools.

Smith: In a nutshell, what was the difference?

Mathews: The way I use the terms, desegregation is a legal matter. It is unconstitutional to have a law that says certain people can’t attend a public school because of their race. But integration is a far more complex social matter. It isn’t the same as homogenization; it’s about forming working relationships. Different people may have lived together in the same place for a long time, but their relationships may not be on equal terms and their interactions quite restricted. To integrate is to foster positive, respectful, pragmatic ways of dealing with one another. When you bring African American students into an all-white institution, you learn about the challenges of integration. For example, these students have to have some space that they can call their own. They may want a choir that will sing gospel music, as well as one that allows them to sing Handel. So integration is a great social challenge. I was talking with a young musician in New York, and he said, “You know, we all go to desegregated schools, but we don’t live in an integrated society. People don’t know one another.” That is a different challenge than desegregation.

Smith: And did the President understand that?

Mathews: I think so. In fact, one Saturday, in June of 1976, we convened a meeting at the White House, so the President and his staff could see the biracial committees and the things they

had learned the hard way about integration. Then members of these committees explained what they did and what the challenges were. The President understood them.

As I said, President Ford broadened his stance on school desegregation toward the end of his term in office. He refused to use his office for a Constitutional amendment to prevent busing. But it was clear from what James Coleman was reporting about the effects of busing and from what Norman Cousins was writing in the *Saturday Review* that busing was having unintended consequences. By 1976, the schools were already beginning to resegregate. Whites were moving, some—but not all—because of race. The middle class, not just whites, had been moving out of the cities since the 1950s. (Of course, the black middle class at that time was very small.) But economic class, as well as race, was a factor. And as our schools began resegregating, we needed to address a number of problems like those contributing to high dropout rates.

In response to the backlash against busing, Congress passed several anti-busing amendments, led by Senator Robert Byrd for the Democrats and by Representative Marvin Esch for the Republicans.

What made integration difficult to bring about was the tone of the political rhetoric at the time, which was aptly characterized in the title of Dan Carter's book, *The Politics of Rage*. Everybody was mad with everybody about everything just at the point that the country needed some innovation and creativity. Judge Garrity himself said, "I'm boxed in." And I thought that turning to local biracial committees locally, while no panacea, was a way to begin to get out of the box. Unfortunately, renegotiating racial relationships was stymied because the rhetoric wouldn't allow it.

This was doubly unfortunate because America is continually renegotiating race relations, sometimes with great intensity. We renegotiated them in the Constitutional Convention, and we renegotiated them again in *Plessy v. Ferguson* after years of Klan violence. Then we renegotiated them after World War II when black soldiers came home and decided they didn't want to ride in the back of buses anymore. The school desegregation crisis wasn't just about desegregating the schools; it was about renegotiating racial relationships. Fortunately, America did substantially renegotiate the relationship by the 21st century, and while the relationship is continually being renegotiated, the country has moved beyond where it was in the 1970s. This has not only happened in race relationships, but also in

gender and other relations. This renegotiation was going on in the Ford administration even though we were not able to solve the school desegregation problem.

Smith: We talked to Justice Stevens, and it's hard to believe, but he was there. He said in his confirmation hearings, no one asked him about abortion.

Mathews: Really?

Smith: Yeah, which undoubtedly makes him the last of a kind. How much of an issue was abortion?

Mathews: It wasn't as explosive an issue as it became later. Politics was just beginning to become hyperpolarized, as it is today, although you could sense the tightening of the lines. Still, politicians could differ on the floor of Congress and go to dinner together that night. There was controversy, but I don't recall the abortion issue being as ideological as it has become.

There were other divisive issues in the Ford administration—remember the brouhaha over genetic engineering? Scientists in the labs had figured out how to modify a special strain of *E. coli* so that you could change its characteristics and the way it behaved. There was a great deal of fear because a new bug has no natural enemies. Would it get out of the lab? Would it attack somebody? Nonetheless, President Ford supported going ahead with genetic research. He opted for science, and we're better off for it.

Smith: Several of your Cabinet colleagues have mentioned that their jobs, in some ways, were made easier because of the connections and the trust and the relationships that Ford brought from Capitol Hill. That he could pick up the phone and ease their labors.

Mathews: Oh, yes. He did that in the swine flu case.

Smith: Describe that, because everything old is new again.

Mathews: Yeah, there has been a lot of news about an H1N1 flu recently. A flu virus is totally unpredictable. It can change its characteristics, and it doesn't give you any advance notice. In January of 1976 there was flu outbreak in New Jersey in one of the forts.

Smith: It was Fort Dix.

Mathews: Fort Dix. And more than 200 young soldiers showed signs of having been affected by a new flu virus. A dozen or more soldiers had to be hospitalized; one died. That was a clear warning. You didn't have to remind Americans in Ford's generation of what a flu virus could do because people remembered the terrible pandemic in 1918. Still, we tend to underestimate flu. Flu kills. I mean, just in a normal season, flu will kill an estimated 36,000 people in the United States from flu-related complications. Swine flu had come in a relatively mild form in the spring of 1918, and then had hit with deadly force in the regular flu season.

In 1976, the folks at CDC did their job; they called the best scientists that they could to determine what kind of virus had caused the Fort Dix outbreak. And the department had to decide what we were going to do for the fall. It took about six months to prepare and test a vaccine. So we had to respond immediately to be prepared for a possible fall outbreak. Vaccines are prepared by injecting fertile chicken eggs with a flu virus. The eggs then form protective antigens. Fortunately, there were some roosters available that we could use to fertilize eggs. We had to take advantage of that and move ahead to prepare the vaccine and then test it. The tests went well. There were no untoward effects. And there had been none when swine flu antigens were put in the flu vaccines that had been used in the military during the 1950s and 1960s. So we had some experience with the type of vaccine we were preparing.

By August, we had the vaccines in vats, but we ran into another problem, one that required the President's intervention. The insurance companies were nervous. As you may know, insurance risks are assumed by companies around the world. If there is a risk in one country, the insurers in that country take part of the risks, and then they pass the rest along to insurers elsewhere. Still, the extent of the risk in nationwide immunization programs is considerable, and it was difficult for the U.S. insurers to find partners in other countries. You cannot inoculate on a mass scale without the risk of some injury, even though mass vaccinations are the only way you can prevent a pandemic. (You have to immunize a large enough population in order to get a herd effect.)

It was August: the flu season was coming up in October, and we had a big problem with insurance. The federal government was going to have to assume some of the risk, and the issue was, how much? Once that was determined, we could negotiate with the insurers to get protection for vaccine manufacturers. But we needed legislation to move forward on

the risk the government would take. Congress, however, was hesitant. At that point, the President intervened and called his friends on the Hill to say the liability problem was serious; you've really got to do something about it. And Congress passed a tort claims bill to protect the vaccine manufacturers (except when found negligent). That is how we got the insurance problem settled; it was because of President Ford's credibility in Congress. We put the vaccines into the proper doses, and almost 50 million Americans were inoculated. Nobody knew whether that would be possible because we have a decentralized health care system. Yet the system worked reasonably well and, fortunately, swine flu did not reappear in the fall.

Smith: Was that disproportionately aimed at the very young and the very old?

Mathews: This particular flu hits the population it's not supposed to hit—the young and healthy. It was a young, otherwise healthy soldier who had died. That was alarming. And even those who were middle-aged had no protection.

We also put in place a very strong surveillance system. And we did pick up some cases of a neurological disorder called Guillain-Barré Syndrome (GBS). Guillain-Barré is not necessarily associated with vaccines. It is brought on by any number of things, including vaccines for flu and other diseases. Back then we didn't have a good gauge for judging what was the norm for cases of Guillain-Barré. But the surveillance picked up a spike in the GBS cases within a few weeks of the vaccinations. We did the prudent thing: stopped immunizations in mid-December 1976. Later, the Carter administration determined that the risk from something untoward happening with the vaccine was less than the risk of the flu. So they reintroduced the vaccines, I think it was in February of 1977, a few months after the suspension.

Smith: We talked to Vice President Cheney who remembered a meeting in the Cabinet Room with the President and Jonas Salk and Dr. Sabin—the giants in the field. Do you remember that?

Mathews: I do. This is what we did. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommended that we have a national immunization program. They said we just can't afford to take any chances with the health of the American people. I think it was the right call. But at HEW, we checked with people who were not at CDC to see if there were any dissenting views in the medical community. The White House did the same with its contacts. Then we jointly

brought together all of the independent parties, including Sabin and Salk. The reason for having them both there was that they seldom agreed about anything. If there was to be dissent, it was quite likely that it would come out at the meeting in the White House.

In the meeting, we went over the data and the recommendations and asked if there were any second thoughts. Then the President said, "I'm going to go into my office and if any of you have something to say to me, come and talk to me." Nobody came. He went on camera, announced the program, and then took the shot. I think he may have been influenced by a World War II mindset; if you're going to lead the troops, get out front. I do remember saying to him, "this is a no-win situation. If the virus is virulent and comes, we're going to be accused of not being prepared enough. If it doesn't come, we're going to be accused of squandering millions of dollars and God only knows what else. I'll be happy to make this announcement and you can stay presidential." "No, no," he said, "I've got to do it myself." Out he went.

Smith: It's revealing. Wonderful story. That raises the larger question about his style of leadership. How did Cabinet meetings operate, for example? Were they frequent? Was it more a kind of information sharing? Was there debate, general debate over policies?

Mathews: The Cabinet meetings were lively, but you have to see them in the context of the other contacts with the President. I found Ford very accessible. I have talked to Cabinet Secretaries in other administrations, and some said they seldom saw their president. We, however, had easy access. I called him on several occasions to ask about how to deal with various problems. I never was unable to pick up the phone and talk or make an appointment.

Of course, as you would imagine, there were debates in Cabinet and other meetings. These were substantive, and Ford had wonderful ways of dealing with differences. I remember we had some flap over the Social Security System in a meeting of the President and the system's three trustees: the Secretaries of Treasury, Labor, and HEW. We were disagreeing about something or other when Ford motioned to Bill Usery, the Labor Secretary, saying, "Come on with me. Let David and Bill Simon, the Secretary of Treasury, work out these differences." And we did. These sorts of meetings were quite common.

Smith: Carla Hills, among others, has regaled us with stories of friendly disagreements with OMB that would wind up in with the President, Solomon-like, hearing them . . .

Mathews: Having to decide where the money went.

Smith: Did you have a situation with that?

Mathews: I did once, right after I had arrived. The issue was whether to continue funding for medical scholarships when a shortage of physicians appeared to have been eliminated. I was concerned, however, about the lack of doctors trained to practice in rural areas and inner cities. Remember that my experience in Alabama was with developing a new way to practice medicine in rural areas. Putting one doctor alone in small communities wasn't going to work. They couldn't even keep up with the number of patients. We had to design an educational program for primary care physicians that would show them how to involve their communities because communities and their social networks can affect people's health. Today, we are quite aware of the social determinants of health. A lot of hospital admissions are connected to behaviorally related illnesses, type 2 diabetes, for example. If you want to change behavior, you can use an educational campaign or impose various sorts of prohibitions. But peer group influence and support, social scientists have shown, is more likely to bring about change. I found an ally for the kind of community-based health care that I was advocating in Margaret Mead, who had been calling attention to social indicators and community involvement for some time.

I thought we should continue scholarships to encourage students to go into community medicine. But that was not in the OMB budget. I made my case based on my experience and got the money back. That was a very pleasant victory. You didn't win many victories over OMB because they control the budget.

Smith: And the President was a fiscal conservative.

Mathews: Indeed, he was a fiscal conservative. And that meant we weren't going to be able to start any expensive programs. But I didn't find Ford draconic, and he didn't have an antagonistic attitude toward HEW. Evidently some White Houses considered HEW to be the worst of the worst.

Smith: Particularly Republican administrations.

Mathews: Yes, that's right. Yet Ford never indicated anything like that to me, or certainly I didn't feel that in dealing with Jim Cannon and the White House staff. I remember OCR, which was especially controversial. It was the lightning rod of all lightning rods for the department. Every rights-based interest group was focused on OCR. And the office had been named in numerous federal lawsuits, such as the *Adams v. Weinberger* case on discrimination against African Americans.

Smith: OCR being?

Mathews: Office of Civil Rights. In the *Adams* case, OCR was sued for not handling complaints from African Americans fast enough. There was a backlog of cases. The court said OCR must handle these cases immediately. However, as I mentioned before, when OCR shifted staff to comply, the Mexican American community then sued on the grounds that it was being neglected. That group wasn't being totally neglected, but OCR had to obey the *Adams* court order.

OCR, with limited resources, was getting bombarded by one group and then another. I recall asking for an additional 400 staff; we didn't get that many, although we did get a hefty increase of 150 positions. Still, that didn't address the fundamental problem, which was that the department was under so many different court orders that it was pulled in multiple directions. Finally, the Carter administration asked the courts to consolidate some of their orders because the department was in an impossible situation.

Smith: From its beginning, I have a sense that HEW had been viewed as an administrative challenge, a real hodgepodge of agencies and functions. What were the challenges in an administrative sense that you faced?

Mathews: HEW was, at that time, the largest department in our government. It is said to have had a budget that was larger than all but six of the budgets of other countries. So in a sense, it was the seventh largest country in the world. And what looked like a hodgepodge of programs was actually components of a fairly coherent vision for the department: compassion for those who needed help; protection for those who needed to be protected against dangerous foods and drugs; justice for those who were underserved. The department had some historical memory of that vision for putting the pieces together, although it was somewhat obscured by contemporary pressures.

Under pressure from various interests, however, the department was subject to being Balkanized. Each interest group focused on its own office in HEW, and each office tried to respond to its own constituency. This Balkanization worked against comprehensive policies. Such separation was unnatural (health, education, and welfare are interrelated), and some of the Secretaries (like John Gardner) kept the pressure on for inclusive and complementary strategies. I admired these Secretaries and, consequently, was never a fan of breaking up the department.

Smith: And that brings to mind one of the real initiatives of the Ford presidency, which was deregulation.

Mathews: Yes, right.

Smith: And how did HEW fit into that?

Mathews: We were at the center of the regulatory universe on the most sensitive subjects. We had to handle these sensitive issues case-by-case. One of the things we did in the interest of regulatory reform was, as I mentioned, to raise the question, of who regulates the regulators? We also made changes in the federal procedures to put draft regulations before the public early on. Our political system is predicated on the assumption that laws shouldn't be passed without full consideration. What is that line in Thomas More's *Utopia* about not acting on proposals until time had been allowed to reflect on them? That's a cardinal precept in our democracy. Nonetheless, as I said before, regulations, which have the same force as law, don't have to be debated openly.

We changed the federal procedures to require a notice of intent to regulate *before* a regulation could be posted in the *Federal Register*. Otherwise, in the interest of expediency, the bureaucracy would publish a draft regulation, that was, in effect, a final regulation. We were trying to change that process with an early alert, the notice of intent. We also publicized draft regulations more broadly than just in the *Federal Register*. I mean, how many people sit down and read the *Federal Register* every day? The wider publication, we hoped, would allow "just folks" to comment. The system favored organized interests, not average citizens. Interest groups tracked the regulatory hearings; they were already close to what was happening because they had former staff in the regulatory agencies and on the Hill. They were in an ideal position to influence the

regulations, which was their job. We were not trying to block their influence, but simply trying to open up the process.

Smith: One senses the thrust of the Ford presidency was economic deregulation. No one ever suggested rolling the clock back in terms of food safety and the like.

Mathews: You are right. In the final analysis, the department had to regulate, and citizens wanted some things regulated. They didn't want food safety deregulated; they didn't want their drugs deregulated. We just wanted to open the process to more voices.

Smith: Was there a wall between the 1976 campaign, the overt politics of that period, and what you were doing every day?

Mathews: There is no such thing as a wall in an election year. It just colors everything. However, electoral politics was kept at arm's length at HEW. Some Cabinet officers like Ed Levi said, "It's not appropriate for the attorney general to be out campaigning as a partisan."

Smith: Levi, I take, is a very impressive guy.

Mathews: Yes, he was. He was a solid fellow—the kind of person that you'd like to see in government. Ford came into office under unusual circumstances, and many of us who came into government then may never have come otherwise. Some of us didn't come up the usual party ranks. I am an independent, although I did some work for the Ford campaign at the end of the administration. I took exception to Ford being stereotyped as not "swift on the uptake" and remember doing a campaign ad comparing Ford to a dependable long-distance runner, someone you could count on.

Occasionally, we would get weird accusations coming out of the presidential campaign, like the charge that the swine flu initiative was a scare tactic intended to boost Ford's popularity. There wasn't any talk of the presidential campaign when making the swine flu decision. It could be that some overenthusiastic staffers thought they could use the flu campaign for political benefit. Who knows? I didn't think the flu scare was a vote getter.

Smith: Tell me about your overall impression of his intelligence.

Mathews: Ford was a very bright man. And he knew how to get things done. He had an especially keen social intelligence: the ability to read people, to know what was possible. Ford was

sensible and pragmatic. Yet America was entering an ideological age. Maybe Ford was the last true pragmatist—someone who concentrated on making the political system work. That seemed to me to be his abiding vision of government—it ought to work for people.

Smith: Among his great frustrations in losing in 1976 was that he felt that he had just, in effect, mastered the job, when he lost it. That he had learned the difference between congressional leadership and executive leadership. That he had really grown into the office, learned how to be President.

Mathews: He held very high standards for himself. He could be disappointed with his performance. And those were dark moments for him.

Smith: Did you see him right around the time of the election?

Mathews: Yeah, off and on. Everybody was traveling right around the election. But after the election, yeah.

Smith: What was his mood right after?

Mathews: My sense of him after the election was of resilience. That he knew himself well, and he knew how to bounce back from a defeat.

Smith: Someone who was around him said the next day, and for some time thereafter, he would sort of walk around the White House saying, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.”

Mathews: I’ll tell you a story about Ford’s resilience. I have known Jimmy Carter for some time and respect him. He was part of that little group of Southern progressives I mentioned earlier—Terry Sanford, Reuben Askew, and a few college/university presidents. During the election, Ford and Carter didn’t have a lot of good things to say about one another. Nonetheless, they joined forces in 1983 to promote a stronger role for citizens, and I had the opportunity to work with both of them again. After I left office, I teamed up with the dean of public attitude research, Dan Yankelovich, to work on a concern we shared about the lack of opportunities for average citizens to understand government policies, particularly those policies that affect people’s daily lives: the education of their children, their own health, their economic security.

I came out of Washington determined to try to do something about creating a more knowledgeable and public voice. And the Kettering Foundation gave me that opportunity. I thought the country needed a Domestic Policy Association to be an equivalent of the Foreign Policy Association. Dan Yankelovich and Cyrus Vance had created an organization called Public Agenda that seemed an ideal partner for this venture. Dan had noticed in his work on public attitudes that there was a qualitative difference between first opinions and more considered judgments. He saw polls would go up and down, and then right before an election attitudes could stabilize. People had moved in making up their minds and had come to a conclusion. Opinion had changed into judgment. So to assist in this maturing of attitude, we designed citizens' briefing books that are fair in the presentation of a range of legitimate policy choices. These books help people move from first impressions to more reflective and shared judgment. This was the beginning of the National Issues Forums (NIF) books.

The first NIF book was on financing Social Security. Alan Greenspan was then heading a bipartisan commission to look at the looming deficit, and he was nice enough to let his staff work with us on this briefing book for public forums. Then we faced the question, who is going to hear the result of these forums? We talked to Fred Friendly, a great media guru who said that nobody in the press was going to be interested because the outcomes of the forums were going to be dull. So I went to Plains, Georgia, to see Jimmy Carter. I told him what we were trying, and asked him if he would cosponsor a presentation of the results of the Social Security forums at the new Ford Library. He agreed and joined Jerry Ford. I've forgotten whether this meeting was before or after the two former Presidents' flight to the Sadat funeral.

Smith: I think it was before, just before.

Mathews: Yeah, perhaps it was. [Actually, the funeral was October 19, 1981, and the meeting was February 9-10, 1983.] I recall sitting at one end of a table in the library with President Ford, while my wife, Mary, sat at the other end with President Carter. I had said to Mary, "If the conversation goes badly, just rattle the dishes." Well, it didn't; the two former Presidents had become good friends, which was nice to see. And the reports on NIF forums have become an ongoing series. In fact, all of the presidential libraries have now done these forums on the election issues.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him?

Mathews: Here, in Washington, on his 90th birthday.

Smith: Yeah.

Mathews: What I remember about that occasion, and you will, too, is that he wanted to do well and thought his speech wasn't up to his standards. For those who heard him, we thought the speech was fine, but Gerald Ford had really high, exacting standards for himself. I got that same impression from talking with his son, Mike Ford.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Mathews: In context. I think if you take Gerald Ford out of Grand Rapids, you've missed a good part of what he was all about. I'm from a small town right across the river from the community where Nelle Harper Lee lives—the place she wrote about in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I could relate to Ford because Grand Rapids was not simply a geographic location. It was home; it was a place that he had strong feelings for and a place he understood. I could explain the things that I had taken away from my own town, Grove Hill, Alabama, and he would understand what I was talking about.

Ford's unique qualities also become apparent when you see him in the context of what was happening in the 1970s in the political system.

There's a very interesting book about the 1970s, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened*. The author, Peter Carroll, shows that the decade was actually a time of great transition. Ford was well-suited for a decade of transitions because he was a president who remembered who we were and where we had been yet also had a sense of where we needed to go. For example, having experienced the integration of the armed services, his generation knew that the segregationist regimes were wrong. I'm sure you heard Ford talk about the impact of his personal experiences with his black teammate in football.

A president who can look back and forward at the same time has a perspective that visionaries are not likely to have because visionaries are prone to miss what is behind, perhaps even demonize it. And somebody who is rooted firmly in the past is going to try to hold on to that too much. So I think if you put Ford in that context, you can see what he really meant to the country.

I think Gerald Ford will also be remembered in the context of today's hyperpolarized political system. Ford was a staunch Republican, yet his partisanship didn't preclude personal friendships with Democrats. He had very good friends on the other side of the aisle. And he brought that capacity for building good working relationships with him to the White House. It was a constant as he tried to move the political system in the direction he felt it should go. Sometimes he was successful, and sometimes not. There were a lot of vetoes. Still, Ford didn't change his style; he didn't have an enemy list that I know of. I don't know that anybody could have saved us from the hyperpartisanship that we have now. But Ford helped foster bipartisanship by who he was and what he did.

Smith: The older I get the more I'm inclined to believe that ideology, although it may be important to many people, is ultimately trumped by generational politics. Go back to Grand Rapids—Ford was of a generation of conservatism, which had a healthy skepticism about the ability of government to engage in social engineering. But it was consistent skepticism. It said, I don't really want government in the boardroom, or the classroom, or the bedroom. And it evolved into a kind of social conservatism, which on the one hand said I don't trust Washington, but was perfectly willing to use government to enforce its own social agenda.

Mathews: Yeah.

Smith: And I've often thought that the Fords were almost marooned at the end of his life with the Republican Party.

Mathews: That's right. He was certainly an economic conservative, and I wouldn't disagree with you on his understanding of the limits of government. However, in terms of my dealings with him at HEW, he was moderate to progressive on social issues. Take his position on Title IX, which had to do with women's rights, including the right to have access to intercollegiate sports. He was also very helpful to us in higher education on affirmative action. If you took all of the African Americans with PhDs that institutions of higher education had promised to hire, it was something like a hundred times the population that was available. The government accepted all of the promises, yet it didn't do enough to increase the supply. So we created a program at HEW called the Graduate and Professional Opportunities Program; it identified kids early on and put them on track for academic careers that their circumstances would otherwise have precluded. Ford was very

supportive of the program; no problems with OMB. The Carter administration picked it up and succeeding administrations funded it until 1995. These are some of the reasons I would count President Ford as a moderate to progressive on social issues by today's standards

Smith: And what's the story behind Title IX?

Mathews: Well, Title IX is the Betty Ford story. I'm sure of that.

Smith: Speculate for us.

Mathews: It's just a matter of fairness. Betty was very much a champion of women's issues. You have to remember that the Fords' generation was not too different from my parents'. Competitive sports for men dominated. That was the case in my high school in the 1950s; and at the University of Alabama, men's sports certainly flourished under coaches like Paul "Bear" Bryant. If we didn't win the national championship in football, alumni thought it was a bad year. After Title IX was implemented and I returned to the university, I realized that we needed an equally good sports program for the women who wanted to participate. Although the student affairs office started the program, the athletic department took the responsibility shortly after its inception. Paul Bryant's attitude was if there were to be a sports program, it should be excellent, and his department should manage and pay for it. The women's program at Alabama continues to do exceedingly well.

The Fords had that same attitude. Of course, there have been some problems with Title IX. There will always be questions of what's fair to both men and women, and there will inevitably be disputes over the standards for compliance. Yet implementing Title IX, which wasn't just about sports, was the right thing to do.

Smith: I sense that Mrs. Ford was an influence in many ways.

Mathews: I always felt that. She was never pushy, and he never said to do something because Betty insisted. But I can't believe that she didn't have considerable influence.

Smith: Anything else?

Mathews: Two other things in the Ford administration we ought to talk about a little bit. One is fraud and abuse in welfare. Paul Light has done some very good research on public

administration. But he missed something and admitted it when he asked me about a study that he was doing for Congress on HHS. It had to do with the creation of the Office of Inspector General in HEW, which was established in the Ford administration. Remember, the courts had ruled in ways that opened the doors to welfare in the mid-1970s. Cases were mushrooming; costs were skyrocketing. The volume made the system susceptible to fraud, although I don't want to imply that all problems resulted from criminal behavior. Many problems had to do with discrepancies between what the federal government wanted and what the social service agency required.

That caveat aside, fraud was a serious problem, and we added an inspector general to the department to investigate it. Later on, in 1978, Congress passed an act authorizing the office. But it was created within the department in concert with the Ford administration's position on fiscal responsibility.

There were other innovations in the Ford administration, such as an effort to empower local committees, which we've already talked about.

The second issue has to do with the Social Security System. The system was entering a crisis because, you remember, the Nixon administration had double indexed the benefits, thinking inflation was coming. The government was making generous payouts, assuming that inflation would hit the salaries, and they would go up. Well, that didn't happen. As a result, the Social Security System was in danger of running out of money. This problem was compounded by a growing imbalance between the number of workers paying into the system and the number of citizens receiving benefits. We, the trustees of the system in the Ford administration, demonstrated that the problem was real and serious, that it wasn't a partisan ploy. Using the department's analysis, I met with Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale to demonstrate to their satisfaction that a real crisis was looming. Fortunately, the Carter administration took measures to shore up the system for a time.

There were other significant handoffs to the Carter administration, which says something about the Ford administration. The Carter administration completed some things that we had begun, and their follow-through should be acknowledged.

Smith: I've often thought—people tend to think of the Nixon-Ford administration—but in fact, Nixon is the last New Deal President in many ways.

Mathews: That's exactly right.

Smith: And Ford is much more about anticipating future developments than he is about completing old business.

Mathews: That's right. To my way of thinking, the Nixon and Johnson administrations had themes much like those in the New Deal. I think of Ford and Carter as transition presidents. They came in at a time when the presidency had been weakened, Congress was fragmented, and the interest groups were more powerful. Ford and Carter deserve to be judged by what they did that began to rebalance the system, even though the results of some of their efforts weren't evident until after they left office.

Smith: We're on the same page.

Mathews: Good. What we are saying about the connection between administrations, even when they are of different parties, reminds me of a recent book by Gareth Davies, *See Government Grow*. It deals with programs that begin in one administration but don't mature until much later. Do you know Gareth? He's at Oxford and has written one of the best histories of our welfare system that I've seen; it's neither right nor left. In the book I mentioned, Gareth wrote about Johnson and his major initiative in education, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which was related to his War on Poverty. Republicans denounced that program but later spent more on it than the Democrats had. Gareth concluded that although Americans are antistatist, they like everything the government does. Whether or not that is true, what one administration plants often flowers much later in another.

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