Smith: Thank you so much for doing this. How did your path cross that of Gerald Ford?

Penny: Well, David Kennerly is the prime reason I ended up working for President Ford. There was a young man named Jerry McGee who was at Ogilvy & Mather at that time who called me and said, “Would you want to do some library footage for the new President, in case he wants to run for the office?”

Smith: What is library footage?

Penny: It means to travel around with the new President. Just stock footage so that if there was stuff on him where people would say, “I can make commercials from his presidency.” And as you and I both know, the circumstances of him becoming president were the most unusual in the history of the country. I had my contacts in Washington and having been there previously in ’64, I called up and I spoke with several of my friends, both at the agency and at the Department of Defense and they said, “Don, this is perfect. You get down there and if you can be of any help, we’ll let you know. Just tell us when you are coming.”

So I went down there and one of my handlers at the agency suggested that “be of whatever help you can to them, you obviously have background with __________. You know the people in town.” I had met Howard Baker and Bob Dole early on and was writing humor for a number of people like Sam Nunn and guys on both sides. Bill Bradley, whatever. And as luck would have it, when I went to see the President the first time in the residence, everybody is taking pictures of him and I and three or four people from my production company and so forth. I just jokingly said, “Sir, would you mind if I sat on your lap while we took this shot?” And Jerry Ford, as you know, I used to tease him by saying, “You sound just like Tommy Smothers, ‘Well, I’m from the Midwest and I don’t pretend to be a ________.’” Anyway, I sat on his
lap and I have the photographs. I have wonderful pictures and it was an immediate click. I said facetiously after this, “You know, it was like Pinocchio and Jiminy Cricket, you and me. Or Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear.”

Smith: Why do you think that was? Was it opposites attracting?

Penny: I just liked the guy a lot. He sensed that. He said, “You know, I appreciate – you’re like me in a way.” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “I can sense that you’re a sweet kid.” I said, “Yes, I grew up in Brooklyn pretty much on the streets playing stickball.” And he said, “Well, I grew up in Grand Rapids and I prefer street kids to academics.” He said, “I think maybe I’d like to talk to you about making speeches because I’m real comfortable talking to you, or anybody, one on one; but I’ve got to tell you something, Don, when I walk out into a theater, I’m never quite who I want to be.” I said, “Well, that’s pretty normal, most people don’t need applause. And the last thing they want to do is get out in front of a crowd and be sort of like sorted out and made an individual. I understand that.”

This man had genuine humility. He was, as I said facetiously, the difference between actors and congressmen is wardrobe. The egos are understandably large. Jerry Ford possessed a great talent to listen. I watched him with people, men and women. And I sensed immediately, within minutes, they trusted him and he put them at ease. Now as a director working with professional actors, the first thing you say to them is, “Don’t act, just react.” Jerry Ford was the best reactor because rather than jumping in, he’d listen to you and hear you out.

Smith: What about him - as the relationship began to develop - what was it? I assume there must have been some things about him that diverge from the public image. For lack of a better word, the Washington label, the stereotype that everyone gets tagged with. Did you ever sense - am I’m seeing a guy that I’m seeing in the media portrait?

Penny: Actually, I knew him to be always Jerry Ford. I never saw him, ever, ever put on any air. I remember his naiveté when I first started working with him and he was making a speech and [droning speech pattern], and said, “Sir, you are
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what we refer to as a humfer.” [Ford] “What’s that?” “That’s a guy who hums and talks at the same time.” [Ford] “What?” I said, “Let me explain. You are from the Midwest and you have a tonal thing...Words have colors and when you learn how to use those colors in verbiage...” [Ford] “I don’t understand what you’re saying.” I said, “Okay, sir. Say ‘screw you!’” [Ford] “Why?” I said, “Just say it with anger.” [Ford] “Screw you.” “There’s no anger there. These words have meaning, they are important. There’s passion. What you are lacking right now is that emotion. And I know you do it purposely because you want to be perceived as very calm, and that ain’t what attracts people. And so if I can suggest to you that you need to learn how to take a written piece and turn it into a spoken piece, which means you have to be an actor.” [Ford] “Oh, God, I’ll never be an actor.” I said, “I already know that. That’s why I came up with the line that we’re going to give you a charisma bypass.” And he looked at me at one point and he said, “Oh, so I’m an old warhorse, can you make me a better one?” I said, “You’re doing that already.”

I was never more proud in my life than when he went into that old [Senate] chamber years later and did a twenty minute speech and was terrific – because he listened and he learned from a guy who knew how to get a performance out of an individual, whether it be an actor or a CEO.

Smith: That’s part of this larger narrative. Almost, a trajectory. It seems one way of looking at Ford’s two and a half years is as someone who came into the office in many ways unprepared, and with a certain set of life experiences and a skill set developed to a high degree on Capitol Hill. And then he had to learn how to be president. And it’s just not being an executive, but it’s all of the theater that goes with the office.

Penny: He never learned how to assume the mantel. I remember when I first saw him with Kissinger, and Kissinger said, “Well, Jerry, in this situation the president would do this and do that,” and after three or four times I said to him – well I didn’t like Kissinger, I thought Kissinger to be full of shit and being in the Kissinger business, primarily. And Ford, “Well, well you know he’s very important.” I said, “Yeah, I know, I know how important he is. He got the
Nobel Prize after having killed 30,000 people in Cambodia. Bullshit. You ask me, being from Brooklyn, okay?” And three or four weeks later I was in the room with David Kennerly and Kissinger said, “Well, Jerry, in this situation,” and Ford, knocking his pipe against, said, “Uh, Henry, I’m the President,” same naivety, [Kissinger] “But I never meant anything.” But he put him away.

Jerry had that worth, truth and sincerity, and you can’t beat that. George Burns was asked by Johnny Carson when he did the Sunshine Boys, he said, “Well, you were always a standup comedian, now you’re an actor.” “But what’s the difference?” He said, “Well, being an actor means you really have to relate to truth, and once you learn how to fake that, you got it made.” Jerry Ford never learned how to fake anything and that was a great strength for me in terms of working with him and making him feel words in the heart as well as coming out of his medulla. I said, “You know, you’re a lot smarter than you look and sound.”

Smith: That brings up another question; tell me about your sense of his intelligence.

Penny: Oh, very smart guy. I used to like to tease him because, as I said, when he was sitting down, making a speech and they were shooting him, there was a dullness. Then he got up, he’d rolled up sleeves - he was a handsome guy - and he started really talking and so forth, and we weren’t shooting him. I said, “Whoa whoa, stop. Mr. President, you’re energy is one hundred percent better when you are standing up and speaking, like you’re a football coach.” [Ford] “Well, I am a football coach.” I said, “I know, sir, I’m trying to say that when you get up…” [Ford] “Okay, so what do you want me do?” I said, “Just get up and let it come out.” He was immediately one hundred percent better.

Smith: It’s interesting, the people who saw it, and I, unfortunately never did. But up until the end, almost every year he would find a way to get back to Ann Arbor before the big game with Ohio State. He invariably would go out and give a pep talk to the team. And people who have seen it, who have no reason to exaggerate, say literally, it was night and day. The image of Ford speaking, and then you have a football coach, in effect. And it was passionate, and it was eloquent and it was moving and the kids were blown away. But it was literally, two Fords.
Penny: My wife is a Buckeye, not just a Buckeye. You know those people in the Midwest are abnormal when it comes to… I believe that the Lord never intended for more than ten people to be in one place at one time. When you have 100,000 people screaming bloody murder – and I said, “Americans have learned how to do war, we call it football and we don’t have too many fatalities.” But the point was, when Susan, my wife, said, “Mr. President, you know, I’m a Buckeye.” There was a pause, and he said, “Susan, there aren’t more courageous, wonderful ballplayers than the kids from Ohio State. I happen to be a Wolverine, and I want to tell you something. When those twenty-two boys get out there and play, they are all Americans. Of course, I pretend like I’m…but the bottom line is, I’m just as proud as punch of all them.” I just thought, wow.

Smith: You talk about a naïveté. I’ve often thought, here’s a guy who had spent twenty-five years in Washington, and you don’t get to be where he got without some ambition and a lot of insight, etc, etc. Yet here’s a guy who goes into his first press conference as President, having totally convinced himself that the reporters were going to want to talk about Greece and Cyprus and inflation, and everything except what they all wanted to talk about, which was Richard Nixon. And my sense is it was that experience and his anger, partly at himself for how he handled the questions, that was a tipping point. Two weeks later came the pardon. Is it naïveté? Is it that stubbornness; is it that ability to convince yourself of something? Is it the Eagle Scout that believes the best in everyone? What combination of qualities takes a politician who spent a quarter of a century in Washington and takes that set of expectations into the lions den three weeks into his presidency?

Penny: I asked him in front of Kissinger – we were having a meeting about speeches he was going to be making. And I said cold - we were given permission to ask questions - “Mr. President, why did you pardon Nixon?” And Kissinger almost said, “Well, I don’t think we should…” And President Ford said, “Don, when I came into this office, the first question people were asking me each day was, ‘What are we going to do about Nixon?’ And I finally called Phil Buchen and I said, ‘Phil pardon him.’ And Phil said, ‘Jerry, on what basis?’ On the basis I’m pardoning him. I’m the President. Pardon him. I can’t
do this job if people keep coming in here and telling me what are we going to do. The bottom line is, I don’t want to hurt the man’s feelings. He’s been hurt enough. He’s paid the price. He’s the only president who’s resigned in office. Please pardon him.” Phil Buchen was confined to a chair, he wheeled out and that was it.

Afterwards, I said to the President, “If you say what you just said to me to the media, to anybody, they’ll know you are telling the truth. There’s no deal.” And he said something I’ll never forget about this thing, “I didn’t want to hurt him anymore Don, I didn’t want to hurt him anymore.” And I knew; I was in tears. I thought what humanity. You see, that’s the first thing. People perceived him as a politician. He wasn’t. Jerry Ford was a naval officer, football player and one hell of a human being. His feelings changed. He said, “You know, when I was a youngster I was an isolationist. I thought Lindberg knew what he was talking about. I figured the last thing we wanted to do is go back to Europe and fight another war. Of course, I was as wrong as everybody else who perceived that we didn’t belong over there. Well, we didn’t have any choice, we never did. Did we handle it well? Hell, no.”

What pleased me about him was, yes, he was naïve, but he was not only intelligent, he was educated. I could talk with him about history, because that’s my thing, and at one point I said to him, “The speech you are going to give today to the tank corps – Ft. Campbell, Kentucky – had a couple of errors in it, sir.” [Ford] “What do you mean?” I said, “Well, whoever wrote this speech didn’t really…” [Ford] “What are you talking about?” He said, “Come to lunch and we’ll talk about it.” I walked into a couple of guys in the Pentagon, “Okay, Don, what’s the problem.” I said, “Well, the opening of this speech is when our troops went to fight with French and the British in World War I.” “So?” I said, “We never fought with the French and the British. General Pershing said to Marshall __________, we’ll do it on our own, and then went to ________ and blew the hell out of those bastards and that was the war.” And he said, “Okay. What else?” I said, “Well, the second paragraph says in the great tank offenses in World War I.” “What’s wrong with that?” “There weren’t any. There was the Battle of Cambrai in 1916 where the Brits sent over 200 tanks and the Germans shredded them and
killed everybody. I wouldn’t call that a tank offense because some of guys you are going to be talking to are probably either there or know about that.” “Okay.” I felt like Woody Allen with all these stars and everything. And afterwards he had a big laugh; he said, “I’m glad you did what you did because it helped me.” Relating to his naiveté, he always played it very cool. When he had the big fight with Schlesinger and fired him.

Smith: Was that just bad chemistry?

Penny: No, it was a thing called arrogance on the part of Mr. Schlesinger, who obviously - and this is the other thing, when I would sit in some of these meetings. After that I would say, “Mr. President, I don’t know if I should be in these meetings.” He said, “You’re my writer, Kennerly’s my photographer. I want the pictures and I want the input that you’ll get from these things, because, Don, you said it to me correct, you’re not from politics and you don’t care about politics. You’re from the entertainment world and the communications world. I need you to know as much as you can know before you put stuff on paper.” And we had writers like Pat Butler, who is a wonderful writer, who as a youngster got fired every day because I kept talking to him and Bob Hartmann, was his name…

Smith: Tell us about Bob Hartmann.

Penny: Whoaaaa, Bob Hartmann.

Smith: Clearly a polarizing figure.

Penny: We became friends through Cary Grant, as a matter of fact, at the convention, after many, many months of difficulty. When I first went to the White House, Hartmann called me and said, “Get over here.” He said, “You’ll report to me.” I said, “Bob, are you a comedy writer?” “No,” he said. I said, “I don’t report to you, Bob. And I don’t work for the White House.” I wasn’t, at that point; I was working for the Campaign to Elect. Hartmann was a bully and a prick.

Smith: And a drunk.

Penny: Ford said to me, “You need to talk to Bob before noon.” I said, “Why’s that?” He said, “Because he drinks.” I went to Brent Scowcroft and I said, “Brent…”
And he said, “Don we all have the problem,” and Rummy said to me, “Oh, I’m so glad you’re here!” I said, “Wait, wait. Don’t put me in the middle,” which is what they did. So Hartmann and I had a major confrontation where it almost came to blows. John Osborne called me and he said, “I heard you and Hartmann had it out.” I said, “No, we had it in.” Doug Smith, who is one of Hartmann’s fellows, called me to say that Hartmann is very upset and, “If I were you, I’d listen to everything he had to say.” I said, “I’d be happy to do that, but anybody who pushes me around – see I’m from Brooklyn – I don’t ______ somebody, I’ll punch him in the mouth.”

And the bottom line is, I said to Bob Hartmann in modesty, “Bob, what I want you to know is that I’ll be happy to talk with you, because you are a good speechwriter.” He was, he wrote good speeches, and I said, “But your perception – you’re smarter than I – is wrong. For example, Bob, how much money have you got?” He said, “Well, I’ve got a lot of money. I’m very wealthy and I earned every penny of it.” I said, “Now, let me tell you something. I don’t need you, I don’t even need Jerry Ford, but I think he needs me, so I want you to step back and shut the fuck up.” [Hartmann] “Well, you don’t have to use that kind of language.” I said, “Yeah, I do. Because you see, in language, there aren’t dirty words – there are dirty people, but the word is strong and I’ve been trying to tell Jerry Ford how to use those kind of words with passion, without saying the word.”

Smith: What does it tell you though, about Ford’s – on one hand I guess you could say loyalty – but you could also say judgment; that he was willing to adapt the presidency to Bob Hartmann’s peccadilloes.

Penny: That’s exactly what he said to me, “Don, I’ve known him a long time, he’s a good man.” And I said, “Mr. President, he’s a good man and a fine writer, but he’s a bad boss. He’s not a competent leader, and the problem with him is that you’ve got him in your mouth and you’ve got to make a decision - either him or me. And he’s been with you for thirty years, so I don’t have much of a chance there, except that I know what I’m doing in that area and he doesn’t. You make the decision.”
And at the convention, when he made the speech, I took Bob’s authored speech and we rehearsed it and he did it real well. Cary Grant came in the room and said, “Hello, Don. How are you?” Both Hartmann and the President said, “How do you know him?” And Jerry answered, “Well, Don was second unit on *Operation Petticoat* and we’re old friends,” and so forth. Well, I saw a new respect come from Hartmann and I saw Jerry Ford giggling, saying, “Oh, that’s nice.” At which point, Hartmann, to his credit, said to me, “You did a hell of a job on the rehearsal.”

**Smith:** It is universally regarded as, if not the best speech Ford ever gave, the best performance Ford ever gave.

**Penny:** Hellooo…

**Smith:** And what did you have to go through to get there?

**Penny:** Oh we fought like cats and dogs. It was Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear. He would go, “Ohhhwww,” And I would say, “Naaaa, naaaa, don’t do that, don’t do that.” [Ford] “Well, if I want to do that, I’ll do that.” On the second debate, when he said, “Poland is not under the influence…” Brent Scowcroft and Dick Cheney put on Bob Barrett’s army uniform, which was twice my size, as a joke. Ford looks up, he says, “Okay, I’m laughing. What is it you really want?” I said, “Sir, I know…” and these two guys are pushing me, Cheney and Brent – these are two giant guys, and I said, “Mr. President, I know what you meant to say, what you meant to say was that in their hearts and minds, the Polish people, like all human beings, are free. But sir, if you go to Poland, on any given streetcar you’ll see a T34 tank with a Russian soldier in it. They are under the domination of the Soviets.” “Well,” Ford said, “I am not going to change what I said.” I said, “Sir, remember the line, ‘I am not a Lincoln, I’m a Ford’? Well, it’s about time you started thinking about trading up. And if Mr. Lincoln were here with me he’d say, ‘Jerry, listen to him.’” Because I had something going, too, which is the truth. And to answer your question, this is one smart guy. And if he didn’t believe it, Mrs. Ford would say, “He’s right.” And I did that any number of times when she talked about things that he felt embarrassed about. Like abortion or whatever.
Smith: Was that just because where he came from, in his generation, in his family values, you just didn’t talk about those things?

Penny: He knew and felt exactly the way she did.

Smith: Really?

Penny: Oh, yeah. Jerry Ford, I said, “Sometimes you are very liberal.” [Ford] “I am?” I said, “Oh, yeah. You have this wonderful open mind and I see, for example, being from Brooklyn, a Jewish kid, and you once asked me, ‘Why are Jews so funny?’ and my answer was, well, it’s hard to kill us when you’re laughing.” He said, “Yeah, you people are real smart.” I said, “We’re not any smarter than anybody else, but we keep looking over our shoulder because over the past 5,000 years a lot of folks have wanted to do us in because we’re a perfect target, and we ain’t the only ones. Looking all over the world and what they did to certain people and countries in Europe. They would have wiped them out because they were minorities.” I keep having to refer to the fact that his native intellect was massive. Jerry Ford grew up in a hard way. The woman who took him out when he was just a tiny little infant from being around a man who was abusing her. She had enormous courage and he inherited that.

Smith: Did he ever talk about that?

Penny: Once or twice to me. That’s how close we got.

Smith: I was going to say, that was sort of a sacred memory.

Penny: Twice he said, “I never talked to anybody in my life about it. How come I’m talking to you?” I said, “I don’t know, but I’m honored and hope you know you can trust me with what you’re saying.” And even as we speak now, I would never want to do anything. But to his credit he said, “Don, you know, I grew up not much better than an orphan. And when I was a kid a teacher in school said, ‘There is somebody who wants to see you down at the drugstore.’ And I went down there and it was my father, my real father. And he gave me five dollars and I never saw him again and I was pretty angry about it.” I got that pretty clear. And he said, “Jerry Ford, my dad, my stepdad, he was a good man and he gave me trust.” And you know when people come from a broken
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home, they don’t trust. Kids don’t trust. I’ve had many friends who grew up
and said to me, it’s always been a great thing, “Why am I talking to you
now?” And I said, “I don’t know. I’ve just got to tell you all my life I’ve had
the great privilege of having somebody say, ‘I trust you.’” There is just no
greater compliment.

Smith: Well, of course. You mentioned anger. He had a temper.

Penny: Wow. He threw a ___________ once. Scared the shit out of me. He said,
“Well, you know…” I said, “Sir.” He said, “Well, okay, I’m sorry.” I said,
“It’s okay.”

Smith: What did you do to prompt it?

Penny: The very thing you asked me about, I kept saying, “Say it again. Say it again.”
[Ford] “No.” I said, “Say it again.” Finally I said, “You can throw the desk at
me, it ain’t going to change anything.” He said, “God damn, you’re the most
stubborn little bastard I ever…” I said, “No, sir, you’re the most stubborn, big
bastard.” And somebody wrote an article saying, “Big Jerry Ford needed little
Don Penny.” And I took that as a great compliment. As I said before, at one
point he said to me, “You’re my conscience.” I said, “Sir, that’s not true.
You’re your conscience. I’m just, if you will, just picking at you, saying,
‘come on, stop.’”

Smith: I take it there was some part of him that instinctively rebelled against
practicing because it seemed artificial?

Penny: Oh, yeah. I said, “You know, you and Frank Sinatra have something in
common.” He said, “What’s that?” I said, “You don’t like to rehearse.” Now
when I played Jimmy Carter, I teased him, I said, “You know, Jimmy Carter’s
going to do this. [fast talking]” and you’re going to go [slow mumbling], and
listen carefully to this guy because he’s got his facts down.” Now Jimmy
Carter’s intellect was one tenth of Gerald Ford’s. Jimmy Carter was busy
parking if he wanted his car in places and making sure that nobody had this
and had that. He was an incredibly limited man in that he had serious ability,
having graduated from the Naval Academy.
I was amused when I became friends with Jody Powell, saying, “I’ve got to tell you something, he’s claiming to be a nuclear physicist. There aren’t any in the Navy uniform. Then they changed that to a nuclear engineer, there weren’t any of those either. He was aboard a U.S. submarine as a laundry and administrations officer before he took a hardship discharge to run the peanut thing, which he never did. Two guys from Plains ran the operation. As his mother said, “There’s not much there in terms of business.” And to his credit, Carter, like a number of the presidents I became familiar with, like Reagan, had what I call an intellect to a certain point, an IQ about 90, not more.

I worked for Reagan for thirty years and I was always amused by the fact that Reagan, being the actor he was, looked at his father-in-law, Loyal Davis, and did him. Loyal Davis said to Ronald Reagan, “There are five words: the budget, (and so forth). Stay with those five words, Ronnie, and if they want to talk about something else, just say, ‘Get back to it.’” And Reagan, to his credit, one day we were working on a Gridiron speech and he’s sitting there behind the Oval desk and I’m working and he looks at me and he says, “Not bad for two broken down old actors, is it?” And I looked at the President and said, “That’s funny.” And he was great.

Jim Baker and Don Regan before he left, would come in. At one point when Baker came in, he was just taking over. He said, “Mr. President, this is today’s agenda if you want to change any of these meetings and so forth…” The President said, “Well, that’s okay.” And when Baker left he said, “Why were they thinking I would know anything about agendas?” At one point he was reading and he says, “Don, what’s parity mean?” I said, “You mean parody, or parity.” He said, “P A R I T Y.” I said, “That means equality. You get six, I get six.” “Oh! God, I guess I should have known that.” I said, “Well, I’ve got to tell you something. We are all just heavily flawed, including you.” He used to say if they treated him in Hollywood the way they treat me in Washington I never would have left.

Smith: Not to get off on Reagan, but because I did the Reagan Library, it was interesting - a guy who would ask questions – of George Wile – like, “What makes the Blue Ridge Mountains blue?” Which, when you stop to think, it’s a
perfectly reasonable question. And that the guy was comfortable enough with himself to ask a question like that. History casts them as adversaries but Ford and Reagan had a lot of similar qualities.

Penny: I wrote a joke that Ford would say: “Reagan and I have a lot of similarities, we both played football. I played for Michigan and he played for Warner Brothers.” There are no retakes in the Oval Office. The jokes were easy for me. Now Reagan’s wife, Nancy, was real pissed off at me because I’d spent thirty years with him and there I was on the other side of the fence. She never forgave me for it until a certain time came later on when he was President and she said, “Don, we need your help.”

Smith: They always remember how to get hold of you when they need you. That’s bipartisan.

Penny: And the one thing that struck me, we were talking about Jerry’s naiveté; Bill Lukash came up to him at the convention. He said, “Now, Betty’s got the nerve problem __________. When you two go out there, _______ and so forth, whatever you do, don’t pull her arm up in the victory thing. Don’t pull her arm past…” [Ford] “Okay.” They went out there and Ford grabbed her arm and I saw her wince, and I said to Lukash, “God damn it.” He [Ford] went back into the dressing room and went into the bathroom and he cried. He was so upset, having forgotten. And that’s when I realized who he was. In some ways he was a little kid, his enthusiasm - he meant well - and her courage.

Smith: Did you know about her problem, however defined?

Penny: Oh, I got into trouble with her. I saw her slip a pill and take a martini and I said, “Did you just take that?” and she said, “Yeah.” I called Bill Lukash and he came up. And she said, “You ratted on me.” I said, “Yes, m’aam.” She said, “Don, why did you do that?” I said, “Betty, you can’t drink liquor and take pills. You are poisoning yourself.” “Well, why didn’t you just tell me that?” “Well, m’aam, I’ll tell you the truth, I felt that both you and Jerry Ford were drinkers.” I’m a Jewish kid from Brooklyn, _________ was all I knew about and I never wanted to drink that crap. I didn’t know what to do.
Bill Lukash and I became good friends. We worked out in the gym. And I just thought this is a great guy and we became good pals. He and Bud McFarland and I were in the gym together and we became buddies. And he also said the same thing. So you’re in show biz? And everybody was interested. Like with President Johnson, at one point he said, “Who is this actor that Lynda is going out with?” And his name was George Hamilton. And he says, “An actor? Uh huh. What is he?” I said, “He’s an actor, sir.” He asked the question, “Well, why isn’t he in Vietnam?” I said, “Why?” And he said, “Well, he’s young enough to be in the army.” Well that night George Hamilton and Lyndon Johnson had a few words and that was the end of George Hamilton. But whereas Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter and George Bush had their own peculiarities and talents, Jerry Ford was of all of them, the most natural man I have ever met. This is a man who had no pretensions, and who had great strength because he came from truth. It’s all he ever did.

Smith: You told Tom Brokaw, a wonderful story involving a tailor in Georgetown.

Penny: Saul ________________.

Smith: Yeah. Why don’t you relate that?

Penny: One day I was talking to Mrs. Ford. I said, “I don’t want to insult the President, but (whistle), he’s wearing those powder blue leisure suits with the big things and he has these shoes with socks that have clocks on them and these….Jesus Christ, Mrs. Ford.”

Smith: She was very clothes conscious.

Penny: She gave me a picture of him in shorts with a little bangs haircut. And I said, “Even then the pants were too short.” I said, “Mr. President, I’m a natty guy from Brooklyn, you know. And I’m a little disappointed in your outfits with the white belts, with the thing…” [Ford] “So?” “Well, I’ve got a friend, Ralph Lauren, in New York. I’d like to bring him down and have you look at some suits and ties.” [Ford] “Okay.” And then he forgot about it. And Saturday mornings I’d go up and have a cup of coffee and he’d be watching a game.

Smith: College football.
“This little Jewish tailor, he’s got a number on some outfits, he’s coming over from the men’s clothing store,” I’ve forgotten the name of it.

Smith: Britches?

Penny: Britches. I’d gone over there and Saul had fixed suits for me and we’d become good buddies. “Okay, fine.” I went to Saul and I said, “Saul, I’d like you to come to the White House and fix up…” He said, “No, I don’t think so.” I said, “Saul, it’s not like the camps. You’ll get in, you’ll get out. I promise you.” He shows up; Ralph Lauren had sent down a bunch of suits and the manager of Britches had brought all the stuff over, the President is looking at all these suits. He said, “Don, how much does this suit cost?” I said, “I don’t know, sir. Four or five hundred dollars.” [Ford] “Five hundred dollars? My first house didn’t cost five hundred dollars.” I said, “Mr. President, you have to….” And Mrs. Ford said, “Jerry, just shut up. Just shut up.”

Well, okay. Before Saul came over the President is watching a ballgame. I said, “Mr. President?” [Ford] “Yeah, Don?” “I just want to tell you that Saul is from the camps,” and I did the whole thing. “______________________, I’m watching a ballgame.” Saul comes in and shakes hands and he’s afraid to look. They go into the bedroom of the residence, and Saul is fixing the pants and so forth. I’m watching TV with Kennerly and Mrs. Ford is making us a grilled cheese sandwich. I look in this thing and I see these two guys in there and I see them. Ford is talking to Saul and I see Saul get up and I see the men embrace. Saul puts his arm…the President. Kennerly and Mrs. Ford do a ________________, so she must have known something. The two guys come out, both guy’s eyes are red. I walk in, Kennerly and I and two Secret Service guys are walking Saul back to the car in the West Wing. I said, “Saul, what the hell happened?” He said, “I was fixing his pants and he said to me, ‘Don told me about Auschwitz and the camps and so forth.’” And he repeated everything I ever said that I thought he hadn’t heard a word of. That was Jerry Ford. So I take him to the car and go back up and he’s watching the game again. It’s Saturday morning. I said, “Mr. President?” [Ford] “What?” “Can I?” [Ford] “What?” “I just want to tell you I think you are a terrific guy and I
love you.” He said, “Don, I think you’re a terrific guy, too, and I love you. Now can I watch the ballgame?” “Yes, sir.” Jesus Christ on earth.

Smith: That also goes to another topic that we’ll talk about a little bit more. He was the least self-dramatizing of presidents.

Penny: Oh, jeez, could he be blurry. I said, “Mr. President, don’t you care…?” [Ford] “No.” “Aren’t you?” [Ford] “No.” “What do you care about? I just want this.” For example, one day during the Bicentennial I said, “You know, I think we should give Robert E. Lee his citizenship back.” He said, “What?” I said, “Well, you know, after the Civil War some fifty-sixty thousand Confederate officers signed an amnesty that we’ll never fight again. And to his credit, Robert E. Lee signed it, too. But a congressman pigeonholed it and it was never…Jack Marsh, Jim Cannon. Jim Cannon from Brooklyn is going to get Robert E. Lee his citizenship back? Okay, that’s great. And we went down there with this piece of paper and put it at Washington _______. Dean Percy and I went in and put it up there and there were twelve flags on – not even on, what do you call it? Flagpoles. On branches because the Confederates didn’t have any flagpoles at the end. And the sarcophagus was then at the Washington ______ before they moved it. And Ford said, “How did you know about…?” I said, “Sir, I can read and I majored in college in history. And my mother’s family is from Atlanta, Georgia, and they were there in 1845 before the Civil War. One of the few Jewish families in Atlanta, and my ancestors had a company that made kitchen tables, wood tables.” Gate City Table Company, which still exists. They now make it out of Formica and stuff like that. So he said, “Oh, so you know about the Civil War?” I said, “Yes, I do.” And we talked about the fact that he and I had been born not that long after World War I. I was never more impressed with a human being in my life, or such simplicity, and I was so taken with the fact that men and women in his company would sense it.

Smith: How important was Mrs. Ford?

Penny: She was and is the mainstay of his life. In the second debate at William and Mary, I think it was, I was exhausted. I was very tired. I was sort of sitting in
a chair rehearsing, working with him, and I must have fallen asleep. The next thing I knew, the President picked me up out of chair and put me in the bed and Mrs. Ford was at the door. I got up and she said, “He loves you more than he loves me.” And he looked at her and he said, “What?” I said, “No, he loves you most.”

She said to me one time, she said, “When we first started dating he’d been with everybody in Washington and here’s a guy who was handsome as he could be; and we started going out.” And obviously, he’s all man. And I said, “No.” He was scared to death of marriage because of what he’d been through as a kid. He was not a trusting person in terms of a marriage. He had not seen a good one. And he married her. She was herself a woman who was a veteran in that she married a man older than herself who was in a wheelchair. From what I understand, she took care of him. She had a great love for him; she truly, really loved him. And he would say, “Oh, Betty.” At one point we went to a State Dinner and the singer was a young Mexican girl.

Smith: Vicki Carr.

Penny: Vicki Carr. We were dancing, Vicki and I. Vicki’s husband at the time, was Danny Moss, a friend of mine and the manager of a business. And I was dancing with Mrs. Ford, the President was dancing with Vicki Carr and she innocently said to him, “What’s your favorite Mexican dish?” And he said, “You are.” And Mrs. Ford’s hand grabbed my hand and so forth. She walked me over and she said, “This is Don Penny, our best dancer.” As she was going away I heard her say, “You are….” And I thought, oh jeez. And he said to me the next day, “You got me in a lot of trouble.” I said, “I didn’t do anything,” and that story has been retold many times in different ways, but that’s what happened.

My mother and dad met them, Rosie and Max, I took them up to the residence and Mrs. Ford – because my dad was sort of like a New York cab driver, knew everything. Never in doubt, always knew. And after they left, Betty and Jerry were sitting there and they said it must have been tough being Max’s son. I said, “Yeah, it was tough. My father knew everything.” Because he said, “Jerry….” And I thought Jesus Christ; he’s the President of the United
States. At one point when she went to the hospital he was just so beaten up. He talked to me about that because like a lot of guys, he didn’t know how to handle it. He can handle anything.

Smith: This was the breast cancer surgery?

Penny: They had a sincere and great love and you could see the man when he was with her. Same thing I felt with Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter. They related to the women.

Smith: People have often paid tribute to her courage and her candor in making it possible, really, for women to discuss what had been kept in the closet. But, in fact, he also, by his reaction had an enormous impact on how men responded to this.

Penny: And to his credit, I said to him, “You know, I’m a metrosexual, sir.” He said, “What’s that?” I said, “It’s a guy who’s in touch with his feminine side, who’s not an asshole. And isn’t a macho jerk and the testosterone does not flow. I listen.” [Ford] “Oh, well, I’m very aware of women.” I said, “Yeah, I laughed when Kennerly said you were in Texas and all these great looking…he said, ‘Does this get you turned on?’ I said, you know, I’m older but I’m not dead, David.”

Smith: What was the relationship with Kennerly? Was Kennerly almost a member of the family?

Penny: Oh, yeah. The President loved David. How could you not?

Smith: Was part of it because he could play the smartass?

Penny: Which he did brilliantly.

Smith: The irreverence?

Penny: David Kennerly is a remarkable person. I got to know him and I said, “Jesus, if you had any humility, you could be president,” because it’s true. Ford listened to David. David had been in Vietnam and was a pretty savvy young fellow. He was in his twenties when I met David, I remember with the Mayaguez situation, David said to him to him - he had all these four-star
generals, he said - “Wait a minute, how many of you guys in this room have been in Vietnam?” And nobody had. He said, “I think this is the work of a local commander. I don’t think this is the Cambodian government.” He was right. And Ford, to his credit – I wasn’t there – but he said, “How many people are we going to lose? And I guess it was General ___________, I’m not sure which one it was, said, “We could lose forty-fifty guys.” “How many guys we getting?” He said, “Forty-fifty guys.” So we’re killing a lot of boys to get _____________.

Everybody left and I understand that Ford sat there with his head hanging and he said, “David was going to tell me. This is not an easy job, is it?” It was then that I think he first realized what he was about in that job. And at one point he looked up from something he was reading and he said to me, “Don, I can do this job.” I figured, oh God. I had this vision of like eight years in the White House – I said, “Noooo ____.” But his humility, as you said, when I first met him, he took the job because they gave it to me.

Smith: Did they wait too long to take Reagan seriously? One gets a sense that the campaign was very slow in getting off the ground.

Penny: When I got there I realized that the campaign was being run poorly. Grey Advertising and a couple of guys come out twice a week. And I said to David, “David, these guys, the drags are terrible.” I brought back Jim Jordon who was one of the guys from BBD&O, and Charlie Welsh who was my good buddy, who was the head of Wells, Rich, Green. Then they hired two fellows whose names escape me, to do the campaign.

Smith: There was Bailey-Deardorff.

Penny: Bailey-Deardorff was hired. It was too little, too late. I raised some money in New York for him, but he was tight. And to answer your question, if we’d had another four months we would have won.

Smith: Where were you on election night?

Penny: I have a photograph of me and President Ford. I was up in the residence with him. We walked into the bedroom and it was a November night and there was
the Washington Monument and I was really upset. The first thing I said, I looked up at him, “You don’t look anything like it.” He said, “What?” I said, “It’s a joke, sir. The Washington Monument.” He said, “Don, you know, we have a lot of work to do yet.” And Mrs. Ford came in and there I was with the Fords, my ex-wife was there, Charlie Walsh and Susan. I have the photographs. I was crying and I said, “I’m so sorry.” He said, “It’s okay, it’s okay.” And that was the measure of the man. That hurt him deeply.

Smith: It took him a while to bounce back?

Penny: Oh, yeah. It was a terrible experience.

Smith: We’re told the next day, and for some time thereafter that he was angry at himself, and he said, “I can’t believe I lost to a peanut farmer.”

Penny: He didn’t like Jimmy Carter. And that’s why I was surprised when they became friends. He said, “Don, I misjudged him.” See, that’s the thing I liked about him. When he was wrong about something he said he was wrong. Oh he was so much fun. We got in the elevator and ____ went burrrrr and all the Secret Service guys would break up and laugh and then the doors would open and it’s a lot of ______________ and so forth. He said, “Oh, don’t do that. It gets me __________.” One time we were in the elevator and Kennerly was saying, “You know, you have to do the radio thing,” and he lost his temper. “God damn, David, I know I…..!” And he looked at me because I was ______, and he said, “Well, you know I knew….” I said, “Okay.” But I laughed because Kennerly was shriveled up and was hiding in the corner and Ford was really upset. He was a big fellow. He had a temper.

Smith: The public didn’t see that very often, did it?

Penny: Well, he made sure they didn’t. It was part of his makeup. Again, he wouldn’t talk about the abortion stuff, because he’s like, a guy. Guys, for the most part - I’m part of a caregiver’s thing now that my ex-wife has cancer – guys sit there and don’t talk; the women talk. And the lady who is the counselor said simply, “You’re talking about it?” And I said, “Yeah, because I’m feeling.” I do counseling over at the VA with a bunch of guys, Richard, who are in their seventies – black men, for the most part, with a sixth grade education, who
havent got a nickel to go get a cup of coffee. Thats how old I am – I speak of a nickel cup of coffee. Now its a dollar-fifty. But I sit there and the anger in these guys, the frustration, there’s a lot of testosterone going around in that room. President Ford is basically a very shy man.

Smith: Really?

Penny: Oh, yeah.

Smith: What makes you say that?

Penny: Id see him do a brilliant job of being outgoing when he was cringing. Saul ________________ was a good example. Afterwards, Mrs. Ford said to me, “The President wants you to invite Saul and his wife to the Israeli State Dinner.” “What?” “Yeah, invite him.” So I went to Saul and I said, “Now you’re going to go to the dinner. Now, the first thing, when he comes down the stairs and goes by, don’t grab the jacket and give it a whatever.” And he laughed and he said, “Don, a State Dinner.” We’re standing there and (music begins) he comes down and so forth, and Saul, and his wife’s name is Esther, history right there? Okay. And after the dinner we went into the hall and went to the Marine Commandant, and said, “Do you know Hava Nagila?” He said, “Sure.” Now that opening thing is eight guys can walk in with the Israeli flag, Star of David, all look like my Uncle Al, and Rabin and so forth, playing Hatikva, the national anthem. And, of course, we were all in tears.

Here’s Saul and Esther – they were in the camps. Now they are in the White House with the President of the United States. Anyway, the Marine Commandant starts playing, and I get in the middle of the floor and I’m dancing doing the __________ with Rabin and Saul, the three of us. Ford comes over and he grabs me, “How do know how to do that?” I said, “I’m Jewish.” He said, “Funny, you don’t look it.” The place just broke up.

At the end of the evening, if you remember Yankee Doodle Dandy with George M.? I tapped down the stairs with it, I called my daughter who was then eleven years old and said, “You wouldn’t believe tonight.” And Ford went upstairs and I went up and had a drink with him, and he was very touched. He said, “You know, there weren’t a lot of Jewish people in Grand
Rapids.” I said, “I understand.” He said, “We had Jewish people, but to ask you a big question, I met so many different people here,” which leads me to the best Gerald Ford story I’ve got. Which was when Giscard D’Estaing was coming.

Smith: Which would seem to be temperamental opposites.

Penny: Exactly. But the President and I were rehearsing a speech and he says, “And I want to welcome the French president, Mr. Justin…” I said, “Hold it. What did you say?” He said, “Justin ….” I said, “You mean Giscard D’Estaing?” He said, “I said that.” I said, “Sir, you didn’t even come close. And do me a favor. See, remember when we were in Iowa and you said, ‘It’s great to be here in Iowa…Ohio,’?” I said, “Sir, just say it’s great to be here because you fluff a lot and people don’t like it when you say it’s great to be in Ohio and we’re in Iowa. And here, sir, you’re really going to blow this whole thing with Giscard D’Estaing.” [Ford] “No I won’t.” I said, “Yes, you will.” [Ford] “No I won’t.” “Yes, you will.” [Ford] “NO I WON’T.” “Okay. Okay. Can I just tell you how to do it?” (Ford sighs) “It’s four names.” [Ford] “Four names?” “Ja Scarred Des Tang, Ja Scarred Des Tang,” then I did him, I did the speech. “It’s a pleasure to welcome Mr. Ja Scarred De here, Des Tang…I got it…and it’s a pleasure to welcome Just Scarred…” “Close, try again.” [Ford] “Jess Scarreed Des Tang. Giscard D’Estaing.” “You got it!” And I said to myself, I know he’s going to blow it. He got up and I’m standing in the back, _____________ He said, “I want to welcome Mr. Justin Garston to….” Jesus Christ, because everyone was saying, “What did he say?” Frenchman gets up, to his great credit, he says, “Monsieur President, I want to tell you how much I admire the fact that you are the first politician to pronounce my name correctly.” And Gerald R. Ford looks over at me and he goes….everyone is saying, “What the hell is going on?” That’s Gerald R. Ford. He was never impressed with himself for a minute. And when he did something he thought was good, he went, “Hey!” Like whoa, like a football player would say, I scored! I scored!

Smith: Did he grow in office?

Penny: He was who he was.
Smith: Did Reagan make him a better candidate?

Penny: No, it made him a worse candidate.

Smith: Really?

Penny: He was very intimidated by Ronald Reagan.

Smith: But the notion that Reagan forced him to become a better speaker and to do all of this.

Penny: Oh, in that sense, being a football player, he realized, “I’ve got to play a much better game here.” And he was __________, and in that case, he would pay real attention. And to his credit, Hartmann was a real value. The only thing that Hartmann’s problem was, he was very angry at guys like Rummy and Dick who he perceived as enemies. Because, in fact, he had been with Ford for thirty years. And to his credit, he was a Navy captain; I was a lieutenant commander at the time, but…

Smith: Is it safe to say he was possessive of Ford. Not only protective, but in some ways – understandably – possessive.

Penny: In my heart, I believe that Bob Hartmann thought he was a smarter man than Gerald Ford. And you know what? He may have been. But his main problem, I used to call him the Snow Toad, (croaking). And of course, humor is a major weapon and I used it because Bob Hartmann was a terrific target. And whenever he’d attack me, I would turn it around and put it right back at him. And I said to him, “You want to do comedy with me, pal? Okay. We’ll check our wits at the door, but be aware of something. I’m going to get you.”

We were going up a bunch of stairs to an airplane thing and he had said something really mean to John Osborne, “Heck, Penny’s not even a writer.” And I said, “You know, you’d better stop putting me down, because you’re putting down the President.” He said, “His latest new thing is a comic from Hollywood,” and he said, “Well, you little son of a bitch.” And I said, “Pal, if you want to take this out…” and Dick Cheney grabbed me, took me into the men’s room, hysterically laughing, and I got two arms over Cheney and I said, “Let me go back I’ll kill the son of a bitch.” And he said, “You could.”
But at that point I realized that Hartmann had intellect, there’s no doubt about it. He could write. And as you say, he did it for thirty years and at one point he says, “He’s mine!”

Smith: Yeah, that’s what I mean.

Penny: And finally I said to him, “Bob, Jerry Ford was a football coach and you were his coach, weren’t you?” That’s when I got through to him. He said, “Jesus Christ, yes.” That’s when we stopped talking to each other. Bob Orben, who was the head comedy writer and so forth, who was a terrific guy, not really funny to me, he was writing whiz-bang jokes and whatever. But he was there before I got there and I related to him. He was a nice man.

Smith: But I understood that it got so bad at one point that there was the Hartmann speechwriting team and then there was this sub rosa speechwriting team, which included Gergen at one point. And the President was willing to tolerate this. We’ll find a way to make it work.

Penny: See, that was the thing about him. I think he saw us as a football team. Defense, offense, and at one point he flattered me tremendously, he said, “Penny, remember what you are.” “What do you mean?” He said, “You’re a quarterback.” I said, “You think so?” He said, “Absolutely. You’re calling plays here. And I’m going to block for you. And that’s when he said, ‘You’ll stand in as director of communications because Bob Reno (whatever his name was) is out.’” Before Gergen took over I would do what I had to do each day and it was then I realized this man has a real sense of teamwork.

Smith: For the last nine years I’ve been working on a biography of Nelson Rockefeller.

Penny: Oh boy, another pal.

Smith: And I was going to ask you if you had any interaction with Rocky?

Penny: I met Rockefeller when I was thirteen years old when I was the hat check boy at the 21 Club. My uncle, Jerry Burns, was one of the owners of the club, and it was Burns and – I’m trying to think of the other family – Kreindler, who owned 21. I was Donny, the boy who took the coats. I was going to Dwight
Prep School in New York, and so the Rockefellers were nice people and started 21. People don’t know it, but Nelson Rockefeller was in college with Jack Kreindler and they had a place called the Black Cat during prohibition, where they did their thing. The Rockefellers sold Kreindler and Burns three brownstones on Fiftieth Street. Then they realized they’d made a mistake because they were going to build – this was 1930 – and they gave them ten grand for the three brownstones, where they built 21 brands and whatever.

Rockefeller and I had an experience many years later. I’m walking around late at night in the EOB, and you know, the walls are ____________ I would go (horn sound), and I’m walking around, going to ______ and walking past the Vice President’s office and there he is in shirt sleeves at two o’clock in the morning. And he says, “What the hell are you doing?” I said, “Marching, sir.” And I realized…and he looks at me and says, “Um, I know you. Donny at 21. I’ll be God damn, what are you doing here?” I said, “Well, I grew up, sir, somewhat.” He said, “No, obviously you didn’t.”

So the next morning Ford is calling me, he’s laughing and he’s saying, “Rockefeller called up and said you got a kid in here named Don Schneider, who I know as Don Penny, but I knew him when he was at 21,” and so forth and so one. Ford calls me and says, “You’ve got to stop marching.”

Smith: He was not a happy vice president.

Penny: No. He realized he had made some big mistakes in his life, and being a politician was really…his brother who ran Chase…

Smith: David.

Penny: David was another guy I was friends with. I had an account with Chase for twenty years as a PR working with Tom LeBreck(?), who is the president. Carlson was one of those guys I was a little concerned about because he’s smart, I wasn’t sure, being an interloper, whether I had credibility with what I felt was the middle management guys – like John, because John had a tough way to go. He had Ron Nessen – in itself an effort – and he’d been there I guess for the previous guy, I’m not sure. Anyway, where were we?
Smith: About Nelson.

Penny: Anyway, his conclusion to me was, Gene – I’m trying to think of his last name – the guy from Chase with whom I worked with very closely. Gene…

Smith: Champion?

Penny: No. Gene…grey-haired guy, I’ll think of his name. And he was the guy working with and for Rocky. But he was an incredible gentleman, and so was Happy, and they treated me and Susan, my lady, then, not my wife, but became my wife, very well. He was a terrific guy. He had a lot of anger. He was real pissed off. And of course, Ford tried everything he could…and it didn’t work too well.

Smith: And he went to his grave convinced that Don Rumsfeld did him in. Because remember, look what happened: George Bush got deep-sixed at the CIA, Rumsfeld got a Cabinet slot, his guy got the chief of staff job, and Rockefeller was dumped.

Penny: It’s unfair to accuse Don of doing anything like that. I had a couple run-ins with Don. A very close friend of mine was an acting army secretary, Les Brownlee and deserving of the job, as opposed to the man Harvey who got the job who didn’t know a God damn thing about it. And as you and I both know, a lot of guys got jobs they shouldn’t have had and they took them instead of saying, I’ll stand in front of instead of behind this guy. He knew what he was doing. (?) And I was always impressed with the fact that John was a youngster, but he was doing exactly what he needed to do. And he was one of the few guys I thought who was not there for himself. Because the thing that bothered me the most when I came in as an interloper, so to speak, and this was a fourth rate corporation, which the White House has always been. And some of the stuff that went on, I thought, Jesus, if this was a regular company, that guy would be out on his ass.

Smith: What was the difference between how Rumsfeld ran things and how Cheney ran things?
Penny: The best joke that Cheney ever said at the dinner, when he said, “Well, there’s Don Rumsfeld, who is (whatever),” and he looks at me and he says, “There’s Dick Cheney, my assistant.” These guys, at certain points, started believing their credits. I don’t know how John feels, or he would feel, but what disturbed me the most and what Brent Scowcroft said about both. He said, “You wouldn’t recognize him, Don. They are not the guys they used to be.” I came after 9/11 to realize how really upset they were, and between you and me, scared shitless. And would you be any different? I don’t think so. And to his credit, Dick Cheney is still, if you will, trumpeting the call, which I think is not wrong. How he did it, Rummy did it? Arrogance is always as deadly as a bullet in the heart.

Smith: It must have been awkward for Ford.

Penny: Oh, Jesus Christ. When I talked to him about it – and there again, I was humbled by the fact that he talked to me. I teased him after, I said, “You are becoming very Jewish,” because it was like King David. He said, “Don, you know how I feel about them.” I said, “Sir, they’re your boys, as I am.” He said, “That’s right.” He said, “Do I agree with what’s going on? Of course not. Have I tried to say anything? Well, Don, he was aware of the fact that I knew that when the elder Bush talked to Dick he said to him, ‘I don’t want my son questioned by the media as to whether he’s talking to me, because I don’t want that.’ That’s why you are going to do the job of finding the next vice president. And when they can’t find one, you’re taking the job because I’ll talk to you, Dick. And you’ll talk to him.” And poor old Dick, dope that he is, took the job, putting himself in a rock in a hard place. And to his credit, he took it very seriously because Dick is another kid from Wyoming. I wish he was as smart as his wife. He also scared the shit out of me when he got so sick. I said to him more than once, “What do you need this for? You’ve got money. Come on, Dick. The girls are fine,” and we went through the thing with Mary when she announced. And he said, “Alright, so a liberal Jew is going to tell me what to do here?” I said, “I’m going to tell you, keep your mouth shut and act like an adult.”
Smith: It’s interesting about the Fords – as the years went by and the party moved farther and farther to the right, particularly on social issues, they became an island of sorts. It wasn’t just abortion, he is to this day, I think, the only president to sign a gay rights petition. And I wonder, did he change? Did she change him over time? Or was it a combination of the party went farther and farther to the right, and they were in some ways marooned. As I said in my eulogy, most of us get more conservative as we get older. Our sympathies narrow along with our arteries. With him, it seemed to be the exact opposite.

Penny: He made the analogy to me of Lyndon Johnson because he and I talked about Johnson. He said, “Don, when he was considered a turncoat – it was like Richard Russell – after all those years of siding with the no civil rights crap, and all of a sudden he turned on them and made it happen.” He said, “Don, I’ve learned a great deal about this job. I’ve learned through the experience I’ve had with Lyndon Johnson.” I didn’t realize Johnson treated Ford badly. And so did a lot of other people who perceived themselves to be much smarter and they weren’t. And of course, I never had the chance to say to Lyndon Johnson, “You made a mistake about Jerry Ford. First of all, you didn’t play football.” And the bottom line is, he didn’t play for Warner Brothers. We’re talking about the real deal here. I agree with you that he grew as he aged, but to answer your question as to whether she had an impact on him – no. I think he had an impact on him and he went to her and said, “I see your point.” I watched him, I know you could say he grew, but become more experienced. And you and I both know that intellect is important, but experience makes the difference.

Smith: Tell us about the last meeting you had with him.

Penny: Penny Circle said come down. He came in, he was obviously on his last legs. My daughter was there and he took her hand; I’ve got the photograph right here, and he’s holding her hand. And I saw my old friend, my dear old friend, getting ready to go. I put my arms around him and hugged him. I’ve got one picture of the way he hugged me, and that was Sunday. He said he didn’t hug anybody.
My wife and I walked into the dinner, that June dinner, he was at the other end of the hall and he was talking to Colin Powell, and he saw me. And he walked over and he picked me up off the ground and hugged me. And Susan said, “He loves you.” And I said, “Yeah, I love him, too.” He not only changed my life, it was sort of a redemption to see a man who truly cared first about his country. It’s so easy to say he was a great American, and a great patriot. He gave me myself back because I had become quite cynical, as had a lot of people, and Jerry Ford gave me – well, I once said to him, “You know, I once said it would take the President of the United States to convince me that I had any talent because my father was such a hard taskmaster.” And Gerald R. Ford said, “You are a talented boy, Don.”

Smith: Were you surprised by the outpouring when he died? Because he’d been out of the public eye for quite a while and yet, it seemed almost to build as the week went on.

Penny: People came to know, don’t you think, Richard, that this man who was given such an incredible task and punished for it, and laughed at and made to feel less than. And he hunkered down and got through it. He was not so much my hero, although he came close to being that, because I didn’t want to be him, I just wanted to be around him.

Smith: I can’t let you go without asking, did he resent the jokes? I mean, you only have to be human to…

Penny: I’m sure that when I wrote that thing for him at the dinner where Chevy Chase was there, and Bob Orben gave him the line, “I’m Gerald R. Ford and you’re not.” And I did some gags. I put some silverware in front of him, and he pulled the silverware and dropped it on Chevy Chase. He had him then. Chase was begging for mercy. We had the fake speech, he dropped it and ______ came running to get the speech. When Chase did the jokes, I was there. Ford was hysterical. He was laughing. He said, “He’s a funny guy.” I said, “Yes, sir, but he’s making you look silly.” He said, “No he’s not. He’s not, Don. It’s okay.” And all during the time that I watched him, like the time he gave Brezhnev the parka, it was an example of one smart dude. Brezhnev said, “(speaking in Russian) No, I can’t take it.” Ford says, “Oh, yeah, you can.”
And from that point on, there was no problem with the negotiations. Jerry Ford was the most natural human being I ever met. And to his credit, I think he went to his Maker feeling comfortable.

Smith: He had a good life.

Penny: He lived an important life. A lot of successes in the world, very few importants. Gerald Ford was an important. As he said, “I am a football coach.”
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