

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Don Wilson
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: Thanks for doing this. How did your path cross that of Gerald Ford?

Wilson: Well, it was interesting. I was at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Smith: You were another Midwesterner?. Was Wisconsin home?

Wilson: No, I'm from Kansas, born and bred in Kansas. Started my whole career at the Kansas Historical Society and then went to the Eisenhower Presidential Library. That's how I got with the National Archives in '68.

Smith: Is it safe to say that the Eisenhower Library had a bit of a reputation as a training ground within the agency?

Wilson: Yes, that's true, which was kind of unusual given the fact of the location and the administration, which I won't go into detail. But I think part of it was because, when LBJ set up the Johnson Library, he had to kind of give a little due to every other presidential library in order to get what he wanted. And, so, there was a big staffing input in the late '60s.

Smith: Was that the golden age?

Wilson: That was kind of the golden age, yes. So, I was from Abilene and was at the State Historical Society finishing my dissertation. It was kind of an interesting opportunity. Because of some family problems and my father's death and everything, they recruited me to go back out there as a historian.

Smith: Go back out to the Eisenhower?

Wilson: Back to Abilene and to join the Eisenhower staff, which I did. I spent nine years there and gradually became Deputy Director of the library.

Smith: Now, had the President passed away at that point?

Wilson: A month before, but I had met him on other occasions and really got to be close with Mamie and David.

Smith: Maybe closer than Steven Ambrose.

Wilson: Maybe, certainly a more balanced view. So, it was going home for me and worked out pretty well. I was Acting Director for a couple of years while the Director was on leave, so I had a good basis for administration work. It was kind of an unusual period where, you know, of course, you go to get a Ph.D. in the 60s and think you're going to teach. Public history was an emerging field at that point.

Smith: Looked down upon by some academics?

Wilson: Looked down upon by quite a few, but it was a great opportunity for me, personally, because there was no competition up there, having the degree and some experience in the archives world. It kind of put me on a quick path, which probably ended up my being such a young Archivist [of the U.S.]. Nevertheless, it was good training ground and, in fact, it was kind of the golden age of training period. The GSA would send all their people [for management training]. For example, I got to spend a summer at the Truman Library. I did a lot of training courses – anything you could imagine for leadership and management activities.

Smith: I noticed - correct me if I'm wrong - part of that golden age included the fact that those libraries, the older libraries had, as a dedicated member of the staff, an oral historian.

Wilson: That's correct. Mack Byrd was the [Eisenhower Library's] oral historian at the time, who was a rather senior scholar, but once Columbia kind of closed down, the library took over a lot of that oral history. And we did quite a few. I was involved in some of that early planning and activities.

Smith: You said you became close to Mamie and David.

Wilson: Yes.

Smith: There's a stereotype of Mamie. Tell us something about Mamie that might surprise people.

Wilson: A very warm person. She was a character in her own right. I don't think she ever got out of bed before eleven in the morning.

Smith: And loved soap operas.

Wilson: And loved soap operas and she liked to have her evening cocktail. But there was a travel issue. She had a problem with her inner ear. She would often come out there and spend long weekends and was very faithful to the library in its early years. The funniest stories, though, evolved around her Secret Service which she considered her children. They'd have to tuck her in at night and everything else.

Smith: I've heard rumors that they were not above fixing her dishwasher - that they were domestics as well as agents.

Wilson: Absolutely, and she regarded them as domestics and chauffeurs and other things, and most of them were with her for the whole time. It wasn't like they rotated like they do today.

Smith: I assume that's just the outgrowth of a military wife.

Wilson: I think so.

Smith: I mean, you have a staff.

Wilson: Absolutely, and they took it that way. They loved her. It was a very warm relationship. David was an interesting personality because he was working on his grandfather's biography at the time. He was a strong researcher, a very dedicated researcher. He would come out for two or three weeks at a time and do research. I can remember he would love to bring his kitten along and he'd ride and his hands were all scratched up from being in the car with the cat. Because we're contemporaries, I kind of became his keeper when he was in town, so I'd take him to the country club to play golf. We timed it one year so he came out for the member-guest golf tournament. He'd never played in a tournament in his life. He'd always played with his father-in-law, whom he called Mr. Nixon.

Smith: Really?

Wilson: M-hmm. Always Mr. Nixon. So, he said he really didn't know anything about competitive golf because, if they didn't like the shot, they just took another. So, when we went out to play - I can remember the first tournament - we went out and he got up and hit a booming drive, just a beautiful shot. Of course, a little crowd had gathered and somebody said, "Terrific shot," and David just turned around and said, "Well, it should be. My grandfather spent a million dollars to have me be able to make that shot." But, he was a delightful person to have around. We spent a considerable amount of time together and he did very good research. His grandmother, though, was always upset that he didn't take the bar.

Smith: Really?

Wilson: And would tell him that every time she saw him.

Smith: Do you think the Eisenhower connection either prepared you for or in some ways recommended you to President Ford?

Wilson: Yes. I believe that's certainly the case. It was interesting. In that selection process, President Ford made it very clear he wanted a professional historian to lead the library. Partly that was driven by the University of Michigan saying, "We want your library here, but we want somebody that's qualified to be on the faculty and that can be part of the cadre there and be an adjunct to the University." Interesting thing. He set up David Matthews as the chairman of the search committee and David, of course, was the young Ph.D., former president of the University of Alabama, the bright, shining star on the watch.

Smith: It's amazing. We interviewed him a year ago and he still looks young.

Wilson: He's amazing. David and I got to be very good friends and had a close relationship, but I wasn't sure I wanted that. The Archives was pushing this. David Matthews, you know, urged me to send in a resume. I can recall David telling me that they said, "This is the one we want to look at." So, I received a phone call to go to New York to the Astoria. Astoria?

Smith: The Waldorf?

Wilson: The Waldorf. And, I mean, I'm 34-years old, 35, and I'd never been to New York.

Smith: Really? You are a Midwesterner.

Wilson: Yeah, I was a Midwesterner. I went east to college to graduate school in Cincinnati. That was east. And, so, I got on a plane, but I wasn't sure I wanted to do this.

Smith: Was it in part because of the bifurcated nature of the institution?

Wilson: No, that didn't bother me. A two-year presidency, you know. They [the National Archives] really pressed me hard to take the Nixon project on and I refused that because I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in litigation. So, I wasn't sure what the motivation was, but I was kind of the candidate for the Archives at the time. So, I agreed to go. I was so nervous. I mean, I'm staying at the Howard Johnson in downtown New York City. I go over there and get there a little bit early and David Matthews and President Ford were meeting and having coffee. Fortunately, the Secret Service outside the door were like Mamie's, they were characters. They put me at ease. They started telling jokes, they were kidding me, and I relaxed, and by the time I got in there, I was very comfortable.

And, I say this about President Ford, he immediately put you at ease. There was something about him, maybe it was the Midwestern part of him. At the same time, there was always a reserve with him. You know, it was an interesting combination. He could make you feel very comfortable in any meeting setting and any kind of thing, but I never got very close. It was seven years with him and I really wasn't close like I was later with George H. W. Bush - became part of the family. But it was a very cordial meeting. David asked very good questions, and I think in some ways I was interviewing them as much as I was being interviewed, because I had to be convinced that I really wanted to do this and take this on. And he convinced me. He said, "I'm committed to making this a first-rate presidential library. I will be

involved. I will be engaged, even though I live in California and Colorado. Whatever you need, I will be available to be called upon.” And just the ideas that he threw out. One thing, I think President Ford was always underestimated for his intellect in terms of creative ideas and looking to the future, not looking to the past. That always struck me. So, it was very cordial.

Smith: Did he explain why this institution, uniquely, was in two cities?

Wilson: No, he wasn't defensive about it at all. He said, "I really feel strongly that Grand Rapids is my home and that's where the museum portion should be." And, of course, at this point, the library's already been built and the museum was nearing completion. So, I'm coming in not to design or plan the building. I'm coming in to be the first director. So, it was a case of not really having to explain all that much. It wasn't an issue in those days. It became an issue after.

Smith: Won't it be ironic if the system evolves to the point where foundations build museums and the archival portions are in D.C.

Wilson: Are centralized.

Smith: Yeah.

Wilson: Yeah, and I wouldn't be surprised if that isn't the model. In fact, with the new law or requirement, I think they're driving it to that. Or the endowment requirement that's 60% now. Incredible. I mean, we struggled with the 20%, [at the George H.W. Bush Library] really negotiated very hard.

Smith: One of the things, of course, about that time in his life and thereafter, he took a lot of heat for 'commercializing' the former presidency. And I don't know if he ever talked about that with you. The component that almost got left out was that he had to raise the money to build the museum in particular. And those were dollar amounts that he had never dealt with, certainly in his political career.

Wilson: Absolutely. We had examples of pledges being made on the back of golf score cards. He worked very hard at it and I think this was like many presidents, you've got to put them in the context of their times. This was not an unusual thing. He was a fairly young man when he left office.

Smith: Without money.

Wilson: Without money. Never had an opportunity to make any money. Certainly didn't have a big campaign chest to carry into a retirement package. So, I never felt he was that defensive about it and I never challenged him about it either. I thought he always handled it very appropriately from my perspective as library director at the time. So, at any rate, they did offer me the position and I came away very convinced that this would be a good, fresh opportunity.

Smith: Were you more impressed with him than you expected to be?

Wilson: Yes. That was my first meeting with him and that respect and that admiration continued to grow the more I dealt with him. A remarkable man in many ways.

Smith: What do you think the public didn't know?

Wilson: The public didn't know that this man had a great mind and steel trap memory. I loved to tell the story about my third year there. We were going over the budget for the next year and I proposed this budget and made some alterations and he said, "Don, two years ago, this was the number that you used here and now you're projecting here." He said, "That's fine, but can you give me a little more explanation of it?" You know, I had to fumble through my papers to go back and look at those numbers and review it.

Smith: Was that the old appropriator at work? The Appropriations Committee?

Wilson: I think it was the Armed Services.

Smith: Armed Services?

Wilson: Yeah. I think that he had a way with these numbers and an ability to recall. The other remarkable thing about him in my tenure with him was that he

really was reluctant to look back. He was always wanting to look forward. And I can recall specifically one time I mentioned that we ought to do a conference, a symposium, on the 25th Amendment and succession. And he looked at me a minute and he said, “Don, good idea, but wait until I’m gone. We don’t need to do that while I’m living.”

Smith: Really?

Wilson: He said, “I want to look at current events. I want to look at how we can impact current activities in the political scene.” And that’s where I think you had the evolution of the *Jimmy & Jerry Show*.

Smith: Did that begin during your tenure?

Wilson: Yes.

Smith: I shouldn’t editorialize –I think one of the things that is left out contextually, for example, of Tom DeFrank’s book and some of the interviews that were done at the time of his passing - it’s easy to go back to 1980 and find all kinds of things he said in public. But the fact is, over a period of time, that changed. One of the things they had in common was that Ronald Reagan ran against both of them.

Wilson: I think that’s right, but I think more than that, Richard, the former presidency is a small select fraternity and they share so many experiences. One of the most poignant times that I had at the library, was the first time President Carter came to the library to do this joint program with President Ford. And, he took him through the museum and they went into the Oval Office area. I was taking them through, guided them into the room and they were chatting away and all of a sudden, there was this silence. To me, it seemed like ten minutes, but I’m sure it was about two minutes. Neither one said a thing. Neither man said a word to each other, just looked at the Oval Office. And I looked back and there were tears in both of their eyes. It was so moving to me and I didn’t say anything. I just walked out and we went on with the tour. So, I just felt like that was a bonding moment.

Smith: It's a great story. In advance of that, was there any trepidation? I don't mean on his part, but maybe on yours?

Wilson: Yeah, mine. Sure.

Smith: How was this going to go?

Wilson: How was this going to go? And, even after - I think I'm editorializing a little bit - I was a little bit shocked at Carter's presentation at the University of Michigan when he was alluding to the fact that Ford and he could solve the Mid East problems. I think the bond there was the fact that they were closer on foreign policy, that there wasn't a lot of distance there. They could agree on a lot of the things and a lot of the domestic [differences] had taken a back seat by then with the Reagan era. So, I don't think there was any kind of tug of war there philosophically. They were both looking kind of outward and into the future. But I'm still amazed at the personality difference and how well they got along, because, in my opinion, President Ford had no ego and President Carter does.

Smith: That's an interesting observation. In another way, they had a lot of shared values. I mean, in some ways, a small town in Georgia and West Michigan are not as far removed as might appear.

Wilson: I think Grand Rapids is a little different than Plains, but yeah, the rural values. And I think you had this Dutch Reform kind of reserve and this Southern Baptist kind of religious parallels there. Because both were fairly conservative religious values.

Smith: Yes.

Wilson: And I think that probably played into it a little bit as well, but it was a true friendship and one that maintained itself over the years. Not with some of the other former presidents. Not in the same way.

Smith: Clearly, Jimmy Carter has always been a party of one, and I'm sure there were other former presidents who scratched their heads and wondered, "How can Jerry Ford have this—?"

Wilson: Yeah, I worked for a couple of them. But I think this was an amazing ability of President Ford's and I think a lot of it had to do with the fact that he never displayed any ego. I mean, I'm amazed to this day that Henry Kissinger and President Ford were such great friends and it was a mutual admiration. It wasn't just friendship, it was a mutual admiration. There are not many people who can say that about Henry Kissinger.

Smith: As you say this, it occurs to me that there's ego and then there's a particular kind of self-confidence which is sufficiently confident in itself it doesn't require the trappings of ego.

Wilson: No, and he was very comfortable with himself. And I think he was comfortable with this and I think that was never more apparent than in the ability for him to pardon Richard Nixon. He took such heat over that and such vilification out there, particularly in the media. That brings to mind another story; one of the poignant moments of my career there. That was when Fred Friendly was visiting. Fred Friendly, of course, the president of CBS News, had started this series on the Constitution and we were there to do a program on the Constitution. I was taking him through the museum and we came on the Nixon pardon letter which was [on display] there. And, again, we had this moment of silence and thoughtfulness as he stared at that letter. And Fred turned to me and said, "Don, you know, I thought he was dead wrong." This was thirteen years after the event. He said, "Now, I know he was right." And I thought that coming from the top of [a major] news media - that showed me how much self-confidence he had to have in himself to make that decision.

Smith: Time was good to Gerald Ford. I mean, he could've been self-confident as anyone, but it still had to have been a source of considerable gratification to know that over time people had moved in his direction.

Wilson: And I think you and I both agree, Richard, that it really came forth at his funerals.

Smith: And before that the Profiles in Courage Award, which caps the whole story.

- Wilson: I couldn't agree more. He was a person I've always admired tremendously. Now, his involvement as the library went on through the formative years I arrived there, to the day the museum was dedicated - we set it up and I had to make the two work, the going back and forth. And I can't tell you how many trips I made back and forth.
- Smith: Did you come to have second thoughts, not about the job, but about the physical arrangement?
- Wilson: I had second thoughts about the distances, yeah. It was hard to administer a library and museum 120 miles apart. Some of that was the fact that, as we entered, we left the golden age of presidential libraries for the austere age. There was not a lot of staff. You had to have people you could really depend on in both places to carry out the kind of programming you wanted to see done. I felt my first obligation - my first duty - was to incorporate the library into the University of Michigan and I think we did that pretty successfully. We had a lot of help from faculty and we had a lot of help from the administration. [President] Shapiro was excellent and others. But, again, we were almost separated from the university by being on the North Campus, so the partnership with the Bentley Library became more and more important as we went through that era. Of course, that eventually paid great dividends for me when Bob Warner became the archivist of the United States. He was the former director of the Bentley Library.
- Smith: Was there ever consideration given to actually having the library incorporated in the university library system, in effect, turning out the federal NARA oversight? Was that envisioned as a down the road possibility?
- Wilson: No, never in my tenure there and I was there '81 to '87. In '85, I of course moved to Grand Rapids because we lost the museum curator - director and I felt the library was in solid hands and the museum needed to be incorporated more with all the things that were going on in Grand Rapids at the time of the new museum and Amway and Grand Valley State moving down. There was a lot of hands-on needed, so I spent the last two years over there. There again, it was a lot of back and forth and it never failed that the weather changed at

Lansing. When it was summer, it started raining. If it was winter, it started hailing, sleet or snowing. So it was always a challenge.

Smith: He really thought of Ann Arbor as a second home, didn't he?

Wilson: Yes.

Smith: I mean, the university had a much larger place in his heart than mere nostalgia.

Wilson: Right. And I think that showed with the fact that he agreed to help with the capital campaign for the university, which didn't help the library a lot. It kind of hurt the library, in fact, but he felt so strongly about his experience at the University of Michigan. Interestingly, you didn't get that same feeling of Yale. I mean, he was proud of Yale and proud to be a graduate of Yale, but it was the undergraduate years at Ann Arbor that I think made the indelible impression on his life and went with him all his life.

Smith: I only heard speak disparagingly of two people.

Wilson: I bet I can guess one.

Smith: One was Gordon Liddy and the other was John Dean.

Wilson: No, I didn't guess it. I had another one.

Smith: What was your experience?

Wilson: Mine was with Secretary Schlesinger.

Smith: Ah, yes. Was it just chemistry?

Wilson: Chemistry, because there was never anybody I suggested for a program or suggested to bring to speak or anything else except Secretary Schlesinger [where he objected]. And I think it was that they just clashed. I don't know what it was.

Smith: We've talked to a number of people who suggested that the polite word is 'professorial.' Another word is 'condescending.'

- Wilson: Yeah, and it surprises me a little bit because you had a lot of other people around him who could be a lot more professorial than that. And, it was interesting because there was never anybody in Congress that he ever [spoke about negatively to me].
- Smith: Maybe it wasn't simply that Ford thought he was being condescended to. But having spent as many years as he did on the Armed Services Committee, he particularly resented being condescended to on a subject that he knew.
- Wilson: Yes, I think that's probably right. I never met the man. Obviously, he never participated in any of the library events.
- Smith: We're trying to get him to sit down for an interview.
- Wilson: It'd be interesting. I think there's probably an untold story there that may go back to the congressional days a little bit. I don't know.
- Smith: When I said my sense is that he hated to fire people, Henry told us, "Not Schlesinger. He didn't hate firing Schlesinger."
- Wilson: Rocky relationship. But that's the only one that I ever [heard] of the cabinet, of the congressional - I guess I never had a really good conversation with him on Dean or the other one.
- Smith: His relationship with the university - while you were there he agreed to be a part of this big fundraising effort?
- Wilson: Yes, and that caused some controversy. I guess more internally than externally.
- Smith: Internal in the university?
- Wilson: No, more I think—
- Smith: In the Foundation?
- Wilson: In the Foundation. Yeah. I mean, there were some raised eyebrows. Nobody would ever come out and verbally criticize, but there was a "I wish he hadn't

have done that,” “That’s too bad because that really makes it more difficult for us.”

Smith: He was a true fiscal conservative.

Wilson: Yes. Yes, he was involved in every discussion of endowments, every discussion of finances. And as I told the story about the budget, I mean, I would sit down with him every year and we’d go through the budget item by item. I didn’t work with many people like that, although, I’ve got to say George H. W. Bush was a little bit that way.

Smith: Really?

Wilson: Yeah, very detailed oriented.

Smith: Probably none of them at the beginning can imagine over time that the endowment needs to grow to the point that they have, what with Washington cutting back. And if you want to do any kind of substantial programming, you’ve got to turn to the Foundation.

Wilson: Yes. As long as I was on that Foundation side of it, I fought that tooth and nail. I thought there were some areas where that was legitimate. But I thought and still believe there are core issues at a presidential library that the government is responsible for - for the Archives to be maintaining. That’s why they’re created. If not, then they need to change the mission and focus. As you say, there may be that coming down the pike - where their whole concept [of Presidential Libraries] has changed.

Smith: Did you have any contact with Mrs. Ford?

Wilson: Some. It was limited and it was interesting because, in those years right after the presidency, I think there was a clear understanding [between them] that the clinic was hers, the library was his. And he was very respectful of that and she would come to events. She would come and participate, but she never was, I felt, that involved. I don’t know what your experience was, but I never got her. Now, Susan was and Michael was. Mike I had most of the contact with, I think, in terms of the family. And, of course, his [the

President's] stepbrother was quite involved because he lived there. Other than that, the family didn't participate to a great extent. But she was certainly very gracious and accommodating whenever she was on site. She would make appearances and do certain things but you could always tell there's that line that, "Okay, now I want you to do this over here and of course I'll help you with that." Never involved in active fundraising. She would be a hostess at some of the events, but she never really participated in some of the programs.

Smith: The gravesite was always part of the plan. Any references to planning?

Wilson: Oh yes. Yeah, I've served several presidents, former presidents, and, you know, we would have at least once a year a meeting on the funeral arrangements. What they wanted to do with the gravesite or how it was to be set up. Now, we were always very circumspect in those early years, where a lot of people didn't know what it was out there. We didn't really advertise it as the future gravesite or anything else. But certainly with the Army, we had to review plans, we had to do that and he would participate, and it didn't bother him.

Smith: Did you ever see his temper?

Wilson: I really didn't ever experience it myself.

Smith: Heard about it?

Wilson: I heard about it and I saw where I could see it, but always it was very business-like when I was with him. I mean, I was never in a situation where I saw that. He would express disgust or he would express, "Well, that's not the way I want to see it" or something like that. But it was never what I'd call a temper at all. Not like LBJ's legendary temper.

Smith: Sense of humor?

Wilson: Good sense of humor and a lot of people underappreciated that. A droll sense of humor. And he would love to tell stories every once in awhile and he'd sit in his office down there and he'd get in there and tell stories. And, particularly, around his confidants, Rumsfeld, Cheney. He always kidded.

You know, we even had a conference on humor in the presidency and he loved that.

Smith: And Chevy Chase showed up.

Wilson: And Chevy Chase showed up, yes. He could laugh at himself. He really could. There again, he was comfortable with himself. There was not the ego factor. And he and Chevy Chase became very close. I mean, certainly during the events, there was a good camaraderie there and there was a good sort of feeling.

Smith: He must've been very proud of that place.

Wilson: Yes. And I think particularly the museum. It was a beautiful setting on the river.

Smith: Contributing to the revitalization of Grand Rapids.

Wilson: And I think that was important to him, that he saw this as a way that helped revitalize the downtown part of Grand Rapids and give back a little to the community. Now, at the University of Michigan, it's a lovely building, but it could be any university building. I mean, it's special inside and it's a kind of special place, but it's not unique like the one in Grand Rapids. And the Grand Rapids building is a beautiful building and a beautiful setting and certainly is a key component to the downtown area of the city.

Smith: Now, you became Archivist [at the U.S.] from the Ford Library?

Wilson: Yes.

Smith: How did that happen? Was he involved?

Wilson: It was a lot easier becoming director of the Ford Library and Museum than becoming Archivist, as you recall. There were a couple of false starts. John Agresto was - my nomination was announced—

Smith: By President Reagan?

Wilson: Well, no, by the *Detroit Free Press*.

Smith: Okay.

Wilson: And that day was turned around by Don Regan and John Agresto was named. It turns out it was a battle between the California Reagan group and the White House Reagan group. And I was the candidate of the California Reagan group.

Smith: Even though you were at the Ford Library.

Wilson: Even though I was at the Ford Library, which is another story I'll tell in a minute. This was, remember, late in his second administration. This was the only agency created by Ronald Reagan during the eight years of the Reagan administration. The only federal agency created. It was a very small agency. The only significance to the close associates of Ronald Reagan was the fact they wanted to get this legislation for a presidential library through Congress without any controversy. To do that, they felt they had to have a professional historian and not a political appointee at the National Archives, who was responsible for certifying the recommendation for the legislation. So, particularly, Ed Meese and, to a certain extent, [Mike] Deaver and some others, but probably Ed Meese and even the Hoover Institute people, were kind of pushing me. Because, you know, there weren't that many academics out there that had the credentials that would be acceptable to the historical community, or the archival experience to be acceptable to the historical community, that could be nominated. Because this was the first nominee as a new agency out from under GSA - as an independent agency and presidential appointment. The Senate wanted to set a term of ten years. The House wouldn't do that, so it became serving at the pleasure of the president. But it should be a professional appointment, that would not change with the change of administrations. Kind of a judgeship, if you would. So, I was the trial balloon. Anyway, when Agresto was named ahead of me, I mean, I'm sitting out here in Grand Rapids and, "Fine." I think I have the best job in the world anyway, so it's not a heartbreaker to me.

Smith: And who was John Agresto?

Wilson: John Agresto was Bill Bennett's deputy at NEH. He was Bennett's candidate and Don Regan's candidate. At any rate, I said, "Fine" and thought it was over. Well, Senator Mathias and some others became concerned. They were captured by the historical associations and the Society of American Archivists and others and put a hold on the nomination. So, he never got the hearing stage and after a year, when Don Regan left the White House, Senator Baker came in. This was becoming an embarrassment. Here's the library legislation that needed to go up and we don't have anybody there to handle it. So I guess because I was the number two - at any rate, that's how it came about a year later. My name went forward and I think it had a lot to do with Senator Baker calling President Ford and saying, "What about Wilson?"

Smith: Did you have a chance to review the transcripts?

Wilson: I can remember when I went to ask President Ford, I said, "I've been asked if I would accept a nomination to be Archivist of the United States." And he chewed on his pipe and he looked at me and said, "Don, you'd be a great archivist. I'd hate to lose you. Now, my only question to you is, do you want to get in bed with those bastards?" Which tells volumes, but I'm not sure it's time to tell that yet.

Smith: But it does say a lot because, by now time's gone on.

Wilson: This is '87, this is ten, fifteen years.

Smith: I've always wondered whether one of the contributing factors was that he and Mrs. Ford were politically marooned long before the end of their lives. And part of it was the party went over here, and he stayed where he was. My sense was he evolved on an issue by issue basis and I assume she had something to do with it. I assume having children and then grandchildren had something to do with it. But I've always wondered if the first necessary element was carried over resentment against what he used to call the 'hard right'. Not in a purely personal way, but in a philosophical sense.

Wilson: But I think he was much more of a moderate Republican and one that we've seemed to have lost in the ensuing years. I think H. W. Bush came out of that

same school of thought and evolved. In certain issues he was over on far more of a conservative side, and on other issues, he was not. And he would bend with the needs of the country as would President Ford. What I called a pragmatic politician. And I think we've lost a lot of pragmatic politicians in the current environment. I think you have a position here, you have a position here, and there's no movement or tendency to gravitate to another position based on the needs of the time.

Smith: Did you ever see him together with Tip O'Neill?

Wilson: Yes. And I got to know Tip O'Neill better under President Bush. He was friends with all of them and they all admired him and he was to me the epitome of the pragmatic politician. I think they learned from him. I really do. I think President Ford took a lot of lessons from him and I know President Bush took a lot of lessons from Tip O'Neill.

Smith: That's interesting. So, when you got the job, how was that in terms of the relationship with President Ford. Did he, in fact, accept it?

Wilson: Oh, yes, and we worked together in terms of coming up with the new director. That's when I recommended Frank Mackaman and they went through the whole process. I think it was a good arrangement for the time being, but I think he wanted to take the library beyond what Frank's capacity was to do that. And that's not saying anything negative about Frank, but he just came out of the Everett Dirksen [Senate] and I think he never mentally left the Everett Dirksen Center concept and was trying to apply a lot more of that to the Ford Library than probably was going to be acceptable to the Foundation or President Ford in the long-term. I think in the short-term it was fine and a comfortable relationship. But I think in the long-term, they wanted to be more dynamic and that's when it went to you.

Smith: I have to tell you, I didn't have quite the friendly reaction from some Reagan folks at that point.

Wilson: And in terms of transition, no, I would go to the meetings, annual meetings, as an archivist and it was very friendly. And I was on a pretty close basis with the

Ford Foundation members as well and the family. But I think, Richard, what you brought up is a very important point in that through my seven years there, six and a half or seven years, it was always a business-like relationship. I mean, certainly friendly and certainly supportive. He never questioned, second-guessed, or challenged anything I recommended. I mean, it was a very comfortable working relationship and I could've spent my twenty years there very easily and probably some days thought I should've. But, at the same time, there was not a day to day interaction or even phone calls. It was always if I needed him, I usually went through Bob Barrett or a channel to get to him and he would respond. But it wasn't what I'd call an intimate working relationship that I had later on with H. W. [Bush]. But that's different personalities and that was a lot of different views. But certainly he ranks up there as one of the most respected men in my life, and influences in my life, because I just admired him so greatly.

Smith: Were you surprised by the amount of reaction at the time of his death?

Wilson: Yes. I was surprised and gratified because I thought he deserved every bit of it and should've received a lot of the recognition long before. But it was surprising.

Smith: Because he'd been out of the public eye for awhile.

Wilson: He had been. He was a remarkable man athletically. I mean, I would see him with his knees almost as big around as his calves before he had his knee replacements, and he was in pain for a lot of those times, but would never show it and just kept going. I mean, he was like the Energizer bunny. Tremendous energy.

Smith: It's odd. I'll never forget at the last service, when I did the final eulogy - the thing I remember is Rosalyn Carter weeping. And I thought, "Who would've thought thirty years ago that this is how the story ends."

Wilson: It's a great tribute to him.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Wilson: I think he should be remembered as a man of great courage. A man of strong leadership skills. I think he was without doubt the right man at the right time as he put it in his own words to 'heal this nation'. It had to be a horrific period for him to go through and it took a man of great courage and stamina to do that. I believe that the nation finally came to appreciate that during that time. He was a devoted civil servant. He spent twenty-five years giving. As he said, he wasn't going to run again before he became vice president. He said "I'm going to be a lobbyist and make some money. I have a family that deserves that" and for years he traveled [for the Republican Party]. He did all the party activities that needed to be done. I just think it kind of epitomizes the public servant that you'd like to think represented us in Congress.

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

Wilson: I'm trying to remember when the last time I saw him. The last time I saw him was at the dedication of the George Bush Presidential Library in '97. That was it. And we had a very nice reunion and I took him through and we had a great time. It was a good experience.

Smith: And he got along well with his fellow members of the ex-presidents club.

Wilson: He really did. I think more than any of them, he was the cement.

Smith: Facilitator?

Wilson: He was the glue that held them all together. Although, you've seen what's involved with H.W. and Clinton and that's genuine. That's not put on. Again, I'll tell you a funny story, because right after the event, as I took the former presidents through on the tour and the President said, "Don, you take them through," and he'd hang back with Scowcroft and Powell and so I'm taking them through and afterwards, he said - Bill Clinton, who was President Clinton at the time - it was a great museum. I'm really pleased. And President Bush looks over at him and says, "Bill, when you get ready to build yours, this is your man. Here's the man who fired me, basically, as Archivist. He said, "Here's your man."

Smith: I'm sure it was nothing personal.

Wilson: No, he knew what he was doing. So that afternoon after the event, after we were wrapping up, I said, "Mr. President, I really appreciate your sentiment there, but I don't think Bill Clinton is going to ask me to do anything with his library since I was fired on his watch, basically." I was urged to resign. And he just laughed. He knew exactly [what he had done]. It was his sense of humor.

Smith: It wasn't as if Clinton had a candidate to replace you, as we know.

Wilson: As we know, that was not the case. And I don't think it was Bill Clinton, in all honesty. This was Senator Glenn's staff that was bound and determined to get me out of there.

Smith: Do you worry about the future of the presidential libraries?

Wilson: I do. I'm concerned. And I'm concerned because I think it's a great institution that has served the public extremely well in educating what you like to call a 'civic minded' public that's not getting that education in the classroom. And, that's much of what I'm trying to do now in my 'retirement years' - trying to pass on a civic legacy that really is underappreciated these days in my estimation. And I worry about the future of our country if we don't understand our history better and if we don't understand what these leaders were doing within the context of their times. You've got to know the context of their times to know how great as leaders they were. And, to do that in a Smithsonian-type setting is just not going to cut it. So, I worry that because of any short-sightedness on the part of Congress that they worry about - which is not even one weapon in this modern warfare annual budget - to not maintain these cultural institutions is a disaster in the making.

Smith: Perfect!

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