

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Dorothy Downton
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: First of all, thank you so much for doing this.

I guess the first obvious question is what was the path that eventually crossed with Gerald Ford on Capitol Hill?

Downton: When I graduated from high school, I went to Davenport College in Grand Rapids, now Davenport University, I believe. But at that point in time, it was Davenport College. We had to do a research paper on a place we wanted to work that we didn't know anything about. I was taking a legal secretary course and I pretty much knew everything about court reporter, legal secretary, whatever. So, at that point in time, *The FBI Story* was on TV, the weekly with Efrem Zimbalist, Jr. We had watched that as a family and my younger brother said, "Why don't you write there and at least get some information?" They had women working there. "And you can do your paper and we don't have to listen to it anymore."

You know, I didn't know what to do. So I did. I wrote in and I got a lot of information from them along with an application. So my father said, "Why don't you fill it out and see what happens?" So I did and the next thing I knew, I was being investigated by the FBI to see whether or not they would consider hiring me. Well, they offered me a job in Washington, D.C. in their print division to begin with, much to the chagrin of the people at Davenport College because they already were going to place me with a law firm. So, they said, "You're not going to go work for the FBI." And I said, "Yes, I am. I'm going to Washington, D.C. I'm going to work for the FBI. And if it doesn't work out, then I'll come back." And so I did. I was very young at that point in time.

My parents took me to Washington, D.C. The FBI were fabulous to work for. I have only good things to say about that period of time. That was still with

John Edgar Hoover as the director. When my folks took me, they wanted me to at least know someone in Washington, D.C. At that point in time, my father had a friend who was a fellow pastor, and his sister, Ruth Mahder her name was, worked for Congressman Ford on Capitol Hill. He had just become Minority Leader. So we went up to Capitol Hill on Saturday and Ruth's not working that day, but we met the people on staff and what have you.

Ruth called me later. We got together and what have you, it worked out great. Well, about a month later, I had a call when I was working for the FBI from the administrative assistant, Frank Meyer, his name was. And he wanted to offer me a job as secretary to the press secretary. At that point in time, because he was Minority Leader, he needed to expand his staff. And, one thing, when you work for the FBI, you promise to stay for a year. It's an unwritten acknowledgment, but you do do that. And so I told Frank, "Oh, no, I couldn't even think about that." He said, "Well, why not?" I said, "Because I promised to stay for a year and I like my job. There's no reason for me to leave." And he said, "Well, if that's the only reason not to, I'll have Congressman Ford call J. Edgar Hoover." I said, "No! I don't want you to do that. No. I like my job. I'll stay right where I am." I said, "No, thank you."

I didn't think anything more of it until I was home at Christmas time in December and I got a call from Frank. He said, "Dorothy, when is your year up?" And I said, "In January." He said, "Okay. Now, I have another job I want you to consider," and that would be actually being one of his secretaries. He gave a lot of dictation to both Ruth Mahder and myself, but he was getting busier and busier and needed more help. I said, "Well, I'll be happy to come and talk to you about that." So when I got back to D.C. after Christmas, I went up and talked to Frank. We had a wonderful visit. I ended up staying at the FBI for one year and two days. So, I met my promise.

I started then working with Frank. And, like I say, a lot of dictation and I learned how to do a lot of the constituent letters and whatever. I started doing them, some on my own, he would give me some to answer on my own and whatever.

Smith: I assume mail was critical.

Downton: Yes, it was essential. We took every letter we got seriously, whether it was a request for a tour, or information, a social security problem, whatever. Yes, it was very serious. And Frank would dictate a lot of the letters to Ruth and myself and then we would type them up and Congressman Ford would sign them. He would take them home with him, usually at night, and sign them in the car on the way home, because he had a chauffeur as Minority Leader. So Frank would come through and pick all of our mail up from our outboxes and he'd package them up and Congressman Ford would take them home and he would read and sign them and bring them back the next morning.

Smith: Now, were the District offices and Minority office separate, or was it all in one place?

Downton: He kept us all together on Capitol Hill. He could've had a separate congressional office and minority leader office, but he decided to keep us all together. So, I believe at that point in time some of us were paid as congressional staff and some as minority leader staff. But he kept us all together. We were in H230 of the Capitol, a wonderful, wonderful office. We had the best view of Washington, D.C. You could look right down the Mall. It was beautiful. We were there for seven years and I continued doing a lot of the correspondence and whatever.

Whenever Congressman Ford would want to make a speech on the floor, he would sometimes ask Frank because he wanted to dictate to someone. So Frank would say, "Dorothy, would you take the dictation?" I said, "Sure!" You know, I was young and it didn't matter to me. I thought 'sure,' it didn't scare me. We got along very well. So I would go into his office and he would dictate whatever it might be and I would type it up and he'd take it with him to the floor. I believe that's how he got used to working with me, because of the dictation.

When Frank passed away in August of 1972 right during the election campaign, Congressman Ford came back to Washington, D.C. He had been in Grand Rapids at the time campaigning. Frank had always helped him on

the campaigns. He came back and he took the staff all together. He got us all together in his office and he said he didn't want to hire another person to run his office. We all knew what we were doing and he was going to ask his personal secretary at that point in time, Mildred Leonard, to be the administrative assistant and help run the office. He would be more actively involved in that. And he was going to ask me to be his personal secretary to take over a great deal of what Mildred had been doing. And I believe that is why he did that because he was used to working with me taking dictation and whatever. We got along very well and so there was no problem.

Smith: Tell us about Mildred.

Downton: She was a very, very dedicated lady. Very, very nice. Very strong Catholic. In fact, I believe her sister was a Sister in the Catholic church. Very, very nice lady. Worked long hours. Dedicated, loyal, kept things confidential that needed to be confidential. Just a real nice lady.

Smith: Was it difficult for her to make the transition to the White House?

Downton: I think it was in the fact that she had worked so closely with him for so very many years and then all of a sudden she was up on the third floor of the Oval Office area. She still did a lot of his personal correspondence because she knew a lot of his friends from Grand Rapids and whatever. She did a lot of the personal correspondence and she would usually see him about once a week and he would sign the personal letters and this, that, and whatever. I think that was hard for her.

I believe at that time in President Ford's view, he thought it would be easier for her because she wouldn't have all the stress of the schedule and things of that nature. She, when he was Minority Leader, completely handled the schedule. Did everything. And then, when Frank passed away, she continued to do that in addition to going through the correspondence, things like that. So she had a great deal to do when he was Minority Leader. Less so when he became vice president. That, I think, is when that started to change.

Smith: And tell us about Frank. Had he been with the Congressman a long time?

Downton: He had been with him for a long time, I understand, yes. He was a wonderful gentleman. He was from, I believe, Grand Haven, if I'm not mistaken. When he passed away, I believe his wife moved back to Grand Haven. And he was a wonderful gentleman. Very Christian Reformed. Very strong. He made sure that the young people on the staff wrote home every week. He said, "Now, you must stay in contact with your family. I want you to be sure you write home once a week. Either that or call home whenever." He was very strict in that regard. He ran a tight ship. He really did.

Smith: What were the rules? What was the climate like?

Downton: Frank did not participate in a lot of things that other administrative assistants did. At the time, the administrative assistant ran the office. That was the title and usually it was a man. And they would have groups, you know, where you would get together for lunch and things like that. He never participated in anything like that. He ate lunch at his desk. He came in probably at 7:00 in the morning. Started in on the correspondence. Made sure everything was taken care of. Everybody knew what they were doing. He'd hand out the mail and whatever. He was very aware of what Congressman Ford's schedule was. He made sure he would stay on time or whatever. He ate his lunch at his desk and he was probably there until 5:30, 6:00 every night. And usually after Congressman Ford left, then he would leave.

But he was very, very strict. He would sit in his office in shirtsleeves. He would take his jacket off and he would have his shirtsleeves rolled up and he would be going back and forth between the Congressman's office and whatever. But he was a very easy person to work for. You know, for instance, when we would take dictation, we would go over to another room so that we wouldn't be interrupted with phone calls and this or that or whatever. He was very easy to work for. But yet you knew when he asked you to do something, you did it. He was strict and he wanted you to be there on time. And you would leave on time or whatever. They were also very concerned about the safety of the staff to be sure that we didn't have any problem. If we had a car, I didn't when I first started working there, but when I got my first

car, I was absolutely thrilled. And Frank was able to get me a parking spot right in front of the Capitol building.

Now, I understand it's all barricaded off, that there's not even anything allowed there. But it was right on the bottom of those huge steps you walk up. And when I would come in the morning, the officer would move the little marker, and I'd go in and he'd put it behind my little Volkswagen and it was great. Now, I know that's not even allowed. After that, then, he was able to move me. It's all done on seniority and whatever, he was able to get me into the parking structure. And so that was great. But they were very, very concerned, he was very concerned about the safety. When I took the bus, he was concerned, "Where do you get on and at what time?"

Smith: Congressman Ford travelled a lot because of his Minority Leader position. When he was in the office, did he see constituents?

Downton: If he was in his office and a family would come to visit, yes, he would. Yes. The gal who took care of the tours and things of that nature was Anne Kamstra. She was from Grand Rapids. So when someone would come in, she would immediately identify where they lived and what they did and whatever. She was very, very good at helping them. And she was the receptionist and so if he was in, yes, and he was available, she would introduce them and they would go into the office and they would have a photo taken. We had a little Polaroid camera. He would be either sitting at his desk and they would be around him, or he would be standing by the window and they would be around him and she would take the photo.

He would take the time, yes. He felt if someone took the time to come see him and he was there, he wanted to see them. It may have only been five minutes, but yes, he enjoyed that.

Smith: For all the travel and demands of the job, probably more than the congressman of today, he still tried to get home.

Downton: He did, yes. He went home quite often. And, well, he had to campaign every other year. And when he would go home, they had, I guess you would call it, an old motor home or a bus that Frank would drive and they would go from

spot to spot, every little town. They didn't just go to Grand Rapids, they would go wherever they needed to. At one point in time, he had part of Ottawa county, which is where I lived, and he would go through every little town and invite people to come. They would do this regularly, spend days doing this. And any problems they had, veteran problems, social security problems, whatever, "Please come and talk to me." And then he would pass it along to someone in Washington who would work on it and whatever. He was home a lot. He did. He spent a good deal of time in the 5th District.

Smith: And you knew that his great ambition was to be Speaker of the House?

Downton: Yes, yes. Exactly. Yes, and I always felt bad that he was not Speaker of the House. He would've been a tremendous Speaker, I believe.

Smith: How did he get along with John McCormick?

Downton: Oh, he got along very well with John McCormick. He was such a nice gentleman. And he would give the impression of being very stern because he was this tall, handsome gentleman and he could give the impression of being quite stern, but he wasn't. He was very, very polite, even to us. I had mentioned when President Nixon was inaugurated and he made his ceremonial visit to Capitol Hill, Speaker McCormick invited our staff over as Minority Leader staff to meet President Nixon and have a photo taken and whatever.

He arranged everything for us. He was a very, very nice gentleman. I think Minority Leader Ford got along with him very, very well. I do believe. He also got along very well with Hale Boggs.

Smith: Tell us about that relationship.

Downton: They seemed to just hit it off very well. They actually did the China trip together and Frank went along. Frank went along on that China trip that Hale Boggs and Congressman Ford did. I believe Hale Boggs was Majority Leader at that time, if I'm not mistaken, and President Ford was Minority Leader. And, at that point in time, they were breaking history, by making this tour through China. And Frank had gone along as did Hale Boggs' administrative

assistant. But Frank took cassettes along and he dictated things that they did and saw and whatever. So when he came back, I transcribed those. I spent several days doing that project, but it was fascinating to see what they did and how things went there. It was very, very nice. But they got along very well, him and Hale Boggs.

Smith: Everyone talks about how different it was then than it is now. And you do sense that there was more social interaction? That, for one thing, members tended to bring their families with them to Washington. That's no longer necessarily the case.

Downton: Right.

Smith: Hale Boggs and President Ford would debate at the National Press Club and the story goes they would ride down together to the Press Club and decide what they were going to debate. Get down there and have their debate. Go have lunch and go back to work. You wouldn't imagine that happening today.

Downton: I don't think nowadays, no. I think the rapport is different now. In those days, and we're talking, what, 30 years ago perhaps, I think that they realized that they could get along even if they disagree. He had some very strong friendships with people on the other side of the aisle and they would disagree on policy, but they would still be very close friends. And I think that was one of his strong points that he could compromise. When he was Minority Leader, he could talk to some of the people on the Republican side and say, "Come on, now, we've got to give a little here." And he did a lot behind the scenes that I don't think people realized how much he really did to promote agenda and this, that, and whatever to help move things along. He really was quite a very good facilitator in that regard.

Smith: Really?

Downton: Yeah.

Smith: He was really fiscally conservative.

Downton: Oh, yes.

Smith: Pro-civil rights?

Downton: Yes, he was.

Smith: The party of Lincoln.

Downton: Yes, absolutely.

Smith: What was your sense of his relationship with LBJ?

Downton: I think that was rather tense, myself. I don't think that you would consider that necessarily a warm friendship. He did ask him to be on the Warren Commission, which he took very seriously. He was, I believe, the youngest person on the Warren Commission and he took that very seriously. He really did. It was very nice of President Johnson to ask him to do that. But I don't believe there was a strong friendship, or I don't think there ever could have been. I think President Johnson was just such a different type of personality. It just didn't click. It just was like it just didn't work.

Smith: You know, he made the famous cracks about Ford's intelligence.

Downton: Playing football and all that. Yeah.

Smith: Yeah. Was that out there? How did the Congressman deal with that?

Downton: Well, he handled it better than we did, because we, as his staff, would take it personally. And he would say, "Oh, no, don't worry about that." And he handled anything like that very well. He had really thick skin for that, much more so than we did. Like I said, we took it very personally. When he was president and he would have some of these very unfavorable editorial cartoons, he would not take offense. In fact, every once in awhile, he would have the artist autograph it. And he would have it framed and we would hang it my office. And he would chuckle at it when he would come in and look at it. He had a wonderful ability to hear criticism and to not be personally affected by it.

Smith: It's quite a gift.

Downton: I could not do that. I would take it personally. And I didn't like that at all, but he handled it very well. He was very even-tempered, I think, in that regard. I'm sure it hurt, but he didn't show it. He could handle that very well. I admired him for that.

Smith: And there was Everett Dirksen. They were very different.

Downton: They were very different. And I think Everett Dirksen was so outspoken and so out in front of everybody and in everyone's face and I think when they started doing their Ev and Jerry commentaries, I think everyone thought, "Oh, well, Everett Dirksen's going to take this over and nobody's going to listen to what Jerry Ford has to say." Well, after awhile, they did listen to what Jerry Ford had to say because he would let Mr. Dirksen go on and say and rant and rave and say whatever he had to say, and then he would very calmly say whatever he wanted to say and what the House members were thinking and whatever. And it came across just fine. I think the longer he did that, the better he got at it. And he let Everett Dirksen have the spotlight and he didn't mind. That also was a very rare gift.

Smith: Very rare.

Downton: Yes.

Smith: Especially in Washington.

Downton: Yes.

Smith: Did you get to know Mrs. Ford at all during this time?

Downton: Yes, not so much at that point in time. I got to know her more later. But as time went on, she would come into the office if they were going to an event that evening. The chauffeur would pick her up and then come and pick him up. Sometimes she would come into the office and whatever. As I say, I got to know her more later when we were in the White House. And then obviously when he was former president, I had more interaction there. But at that point in time, as I said, she would come into the office. I would talk to her on the phone every once in awhile if she needed something, what have you. But at that point in time, when he was Congressman and Minority

Leader, she was pretty much with him in the evening and things like that. She did not have her own staff at that point in time. When he became vice president, I believe, is when she actually got someone to start to help her with her schedule and things like that. And then obviously in the White House she had her own staff.

Smith: And we've heard, I think from the kids themselves, it was not unusual for him on weekends that he would come into work.

Downton: Oh, yes. Yes.

Smith: And they'd hang out in Statuary Hall.

Downton: I used to say as long as the mail was delivered, he was there to see what was in the mail. And this happened in California, too. I worked on Saturday. Mail is delivered on Saturday. You have to see what's in the mail. He was the type of person who I finally decided he cannot relax until he's done with his work. He was very orderly, very disciplined. He read his newspapers. Loved to read the newspaper. He'd read his magazines. He wanted to see what came in the mail. He wanted to stay current. He didn't like being behind.

And so mail was delivered on Saturdays, so why wouldn't we be there to look at it? So when we were in the Capitol Building as Minority Leader, when I joined the staff in '67, we worked every third Saturday. Frank had it arranged so that we didn't work every Saturday. He was here every Saturday, but there were two or three of us there every Saturday. We'd get the mail and this, that, or whatever. And, yes, if he was in town, he was there, too, and sign mail and look at mail, whatever it might be. And, yes, the kids would come along and they could roam. In those days, you could roam around the Capitol. You could look at all the history and all the beautiful statues and whatever. You could learn an awful lot. What a wonderful place to roam. Now, I don't think you can do that anymore.

Smith: Penny Circle tells a funny story. At the time of the anthrax scare following 9/11, the postal service finally said, we're not delivering the mail on Saturday.

And he couldn't understand why they weren't delivering the mail on Saturday.

Downton: No, no, I'm sure.

Smith: And it got to the point where, literally, a couple staffers would put on these outlandish spaceman-type outfits and work going through the mail.

Downton: I believe it.

Smith: And, you know, it's Saturday and it's mail duty.

Downton: I believe it. When I was in California, I was there until November of 1980, and if he was there, I worked every Saturday. Not all day, but until noon, one o'clock, whatever it might be, until we went through the mail to see if anything was there, whatever, he was there. He'd often go play golf in the afternoon or something like that. But if he was out of town on Saturday and came back Saturday night or whatever, then I would usually stop on the way home from church on Sunday and see him after church on Sunday morning. Then he would go on and play golf or whatever. He always wanted to know what's going on, what's in the mail. He didn't want to miss anything and he wanted to stay current. He didn't like getting way behind.

Smith: Very disciplined man, wasn't he?

Downton: Oh, very disciplined, yes. Yes, very disciplined. Very much so, yes. As I say, he couldn't relax, I don't think, until he was done with his routine, his reading the newspapers, the magazines, the mail, signing the mail. You know, doing whatever it is he felt he needed to do. I think that was his comfort zone. I really do. He loved it.

Smith: Now, the relationship with Richard Nixon must have evolved over time. Obviously they'd been friends. They'd been colleagues.

Downton: I believe they started the same year.

Smith: I think two years apart.

Downton: Two years apart?

Smith: Yes.

Downton: Okay. Was Nixon first?

Smith: Yes.

Downton: Okay. Alright.

Smith: But it must have gotten complicated over time.

Downton: I think it did get very complicated. I think I enjoyed the period of when he was vice president because he travelled. Well, Nixon hardly left the White House. And he travelled a great deal. In fact, Mr. Ford was a great baseball fan. He loved the Detroit Tigers, as did I at that point in time. He threw out the first ball for the baseball season when he was vice president, and it happened to be in Cincinnati. It was the game when Henry Aaron tied the baseball homerun record at that point in time. He was going to fly to the game and that's one of the few times that I went with him on a trip. He invited my husband and myself, Dave and myself, to go with him to that opening day game because he knew I liked baseball. And then he gave me the bat he got from the Cincinnati Reds. He gave me that bat. He says, "Here, I think you should have this."

We had a wonderful time. We didn't stay for the whole game. We saw Henry Aaron hit his homerun and then we left, but we had a wonderful time. There had been a hurricane or tornado, I think, somewhere in the area, Pennsylvania or Ohio, and we flew over that in the airplane so we could see that from the air and report back to the president on what he had seen as damage and this, that, and whatever. Cincinnati was fine. There was no problem there, but there was in the path that we took when we went there. I remember seeing that. That was one of the few times I travelled with him and that was fun. We had a good time at that game.

Smith: Was he more relaxed out of the office?

Downton: He was, yes. Yes, he was. He enjoyed his sports, I know. He liked the Tigers, he followed the Detroit Tigers. And, of course, Michigan football. He would watch every game if he could and whatever. Follow that very

carefully. Oftentimes, if I would be there on a Saturday afternoon, he'd have the game on TV. He'd be watching whatever was on TV. Things like that. He loved that a great deal. But when he was vice president, he was gone a lot. Like I said, Nixon hardly ever left the White House. So he was gone. He went. He was out there doing what needed to be done publicly.

I think he did a very good job. I think, served Nixon very well. I'm not sure that everyone would've been as aware of the situation as President Ford was. He was very in tune to what was going on to the point of excusing himself from a cabinet meeting when they started talking about whatever was happening and this, that, and whatever and he felt he shouldn't be there to participate in the discussion. I think he was very in tune to what was going on and I think he did his best to, I don't want to use protect the president, but to let the president do whatever he needed to do in his own time.

Smith: When Watergate first occurred, what was the sense in the office?

Downton: Well, I think at first nobody thought anything of it. It seemed like just such an insignificant, stupid thing. And it was like, "Well, why is everybody making such a big deal about this?" And then the consensus was, "Well, why did they have to do some stupid thing like that?" There was no reason to do this. I mean, it was not a close election. And, "Why in the world did they have to do this?" That's, I think, what everybody thought. "How stupid" and "Why would somebody want to do this?" It was just ridiculous and that's why we couldn't understand why.

Smith: Did you sense his attitude changing? I mean, clearly people found out more and more and then, in particular, when the tapes were released, some of the transcripts of the tapes, a lot of people were shocked with Nixon's language.

Downton: Oh, yes. Yes.

Smith: Did you get a sense of how the Congressman and then the vice president was handling all of this?

Downton: I think, I noticed it more of him when he was vice president, but I think he, as far as I saw, became quieter. He didn't say anything. He just listened and

watched what was going on. He didn't say anything. He was very, very, I don't want to say withdrawn, but he just didn't say anything.

Smith: That's interesting, because he was in an almost impossible spot.

Downton: Oh, he was in a very, very awkward spot. He was in an extremely awkward spot. And I don't think people realized how awkward it was for him, because he did not want to be vice president. He wanted to be Speaker of the House. And that took away any chance of him being Speaker of the House. Here he was now vice president to an increasingly unpopular president and, as you say, he is seeing all and hearing all of these things that are being released in transcripts and tapes and whatever. He did, he became quieter. He didn't say very much. I think he realized, "Well, okay, I'm going to have to do what I have to do."

Smith: Do you remember anything that would indicate before he actually became president that he expected that to happen?

Downton: Honestly, no. The only clue I had was, I think, perhaps two days before Nixon resigned. He went on TV at night and gave a speech that he was going to resign the next day. I think two days before that Vice President Ford called me in the office. He said, "Dorothy, do you know where the Bible is that I used when I was sworn in as vice president?" I said, "Yes, I know where it is." He said, "Well, where is it?" I said, "I have it in my safe" because we had a safe in the office where I kept things of that nature, actually. He said, "Good. Are you sure it's there?" I said, "Yeah, it's there." And he said, "Why don't you go and get it? Why don't you bring it to me?" And I said, "Okay." And so I went out and got it and brought it in. And he said, "Oh, great. Good." I said, "Do you want me to put it back?" He said, "No, why don't I hold onto it?" I said, "Okay." And he just looked at me and I looked at him and smiled and he said, "Thanks for keeping it for me. I'm glad you know where it was. I appreciate that." I said, "You're welcome."

And I think he may have asked me if I remembered what he had it open to when he was sworn in as vice president. I don't recall now what it was, but it may have been his favorite proverb, Trust in the Lord. I'm not sure, but I

think he may have asked me that at the time, because I believe his son Mike picked out the passage, if I'm not mistaken, for vice president. And, so when I handed it to him and I think he asked me that at the time and then I specifically said, "Would you want me to put it back?" He said, "No, why don't I hold onto it." And, so I don't know if he left it in the office. I think he took it home with him.

Smith: It sounds like it was one of those times where what you didn't say was a kind of communication.

Downton: Yes. Exactly. Yeah, because at that point in time, like I say, we just looked at each other and smiled and I go, "Okay."

Smith: Did people in the office - I mean, it's human nature - obviously, you're going to speculate what's going to happen and what's going to happen to you.

Downton: Absolutely.

Smith: Was there much of that? And, did he try to damp that down?

Downton: If any of that was going on, he would not have approved. He would not have liked that. I think everybody just kept doing their job and kept quiet. And especially, at that time as vice president, he had a bit of a larger staff than the staff of Minority Leader and Congressman. Now we're the staff of the vice president. He had a lot of a staff, so he did not have as much contact with each person any longer, to know each one by name and whatever. We were on the second floor, I believe, of the Old Executive Office Building. At that point in time that's what it was called. I think now it's called a different name. We had a wonderful suite of offices. It was great. I really enjoyed that period because it was almost easier for us. He travelled a lot. I'd see him when he came back, you know. We did what we needed to do and whatever. It was a, I don't want to say, relaxing period of time, but it was not as stressful, obviously, as when he became president.

Smith: Let me to go back to the beginning of the vice presidency. Spiro Agnew resigns, which must have come as something of a shock because it's the first

time it happened. And then, in very short order, he's nominated. Now, what are your recollections of that period?

Downton: Well, that is very interesting because at that point in time, that week when Agnew resigned and Nixon was going to appoint the first vice president of that amendment, the 25th amendment, I believe, Dave and I were home here in Michigan. Dave was meeting my parents and asking permission to get married. And so we were not in Washington, D.C. at that time. But, believe it or not, and you will believe this, on Friday night Nixon was on TV to announce his vice president. Dave and I had come back. Dave had to work on Saturday and so did I. I had to work that Saturday; it was my Saturday. And so Friday evening we were at Dave's sister's home in Bowie, Maryland and letting them know how things went with my folks and this, that, and the other - our wedding plans and whatever. So we turn the TV on and listening to this.

Meanwhile, as we were driving home, we heard Hugh Scott, I believe, say, "Well, I don't know who's going to be vice president, but it's not going to be Jerry Ford or me." And Jerry was standing right next to him at that point in time. And so, I'm thinking, "Oh, okay." So, I wasn't too worried at all. And then here we are watching the TV that night and I was flabbergasted, because, like I say, that took away any possibility of him being Speaker of the House. But I can also see where he wouldn't say 'no.' I mean, if the president asks you to do something, you do it. And I don't know that he was his first choice. I don't think he was. I'm quite positive he wasn't.

Smith: John Connally was his first choice.

Downton: Yes, that's what I understand. But apparently he was talked out of that by his staff and whatever. I don't know if that hurt him at all to think that he was not his first choice. Probably not. I think he just realized, "Well, if I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it the best I can do."

Smith: Well, apparently the people who had a lot to do with it were Carl Albert and Mike Mansfield who went down to the White House and told the president, "The one person we can confirm quickly is Jerry Ford."

Downton: Right. And I think that is because of the high regard they had for him being able to work with, like I said, both sides of the aisle. He had very, very close friends on the other side of the aisle and that didn't matter to him. And I think that remained. He had some extremely close friends such as Tip O'Neill and whatever. And I think they gave President Nixon very good advice. I don't know that John Connally would've been approved. It would've been a long, drawn out affair and we don't need that.

Smith: Tell us about a very important person in this story and also, frankly, a very polarizing person in this story. And that's Bob Hartmann. When did he arrive? What was his role and the relationship that he had?

Downton: Actually, Bob Hartmann joined the staff when he was Minority Leader. The press secretary was a gentleman by the name of Paul Miltich. He was Minority Leader before he needed a press secretary. Nice gentleman. He did a lot, wrote a lot of the speeches and whatever. Several years later, as Mr. Ford got more into the Minority Leader position, Bob Hartmann joined the staff. He then started doing a few of the speeches, some of the press releases. He was doing a lot of work behind the scenes with the leadership and whatever being sure that everybody knew what was going on and whatever. He dealt a lot with the congressmen, the minority staff, let's say.

When President Ford became vice president, Bob Hartmann became chief of staff and he was the type of person who knew what he wanted to do and he would do it no matter whose feelings would be hurt. He could be very brusque. I always got along with him very well. His secretary, he had two secretaries, Neta Messersmith and Gail Raiman. I got along with both of them very well. They were very close friends. I got along with Bob Hartmann very well. I never had a run-in with him. I never had a disagreement with him. I knew where he was coming from and he knew what I did. And I think he respected me for what I did for President Ford. But he did rub a lot of people the wrong way.

Smith: Even his critics acknowledge his loyalty.

Downton: Yes.

Smith: I mean, in fact, almost a fault. There was a sense that people become almost possessive.

Downton: Yes. Yes.

Smith: And I wonder if that was part of that dynamic. That Hartmann, from his own perspective, had every reason to believe that he played a unique role and was totally loyal to the president. But that can almost block your vision in some ways.

Downton: Yeah. But I think what happened was I think he enjoyed the period of vice president, when Ford was vice president. Because he was chief of staff. He had an excellent assistant, Frank Pagnotta, who could do anything. I mean, you could ask him the silliest question and he would know where to get the answer. He was very good at getting things done. And, so, he had a very good person underneath him. Mr. Hartmann was not exactly a detail person, but Frank was. And so, therefore, that worked out great. His strength, and I always thought this, was his speechwriting. He wrote the speech that President Ford gave both when he became vice president and president. And I think those are outstanding speeches. I think he did an excellent, excellent job.

I think when President Ford became president, I think Mr. Hartmann was sort of put in a box, not by President Ford, but by others and he resented it and I would've as well, if I were him. But I think he had a hard time getting out of that box and I think that hurt him a great deal. He was an excellent speechwriter. He, I think, was brilliant in how he could use the words that President Ford was so familiar with and down to earth, you know, and talk to people normally and not talk above their heads and whatever. They got along very well.

I think President Ford knew how to handle Mr. Hartmann. I think he realized how valuable he was. He did not want to hurt his feelings, because I remember at one point when he was president and it was time for the State of the Union message, there were different versions of the State of the Union message. One was Mr. Hartmann's and one was the other folks' and

President Ford's right in the middle of the staff conflict. He had asked me, he said, "Dorothy, are you doing anything tonight?" I said, "Well, no." He said, "Well, would you mind coming back to the White House after dinner?" And I said, "No." And he said, "I'm going to give you some dictation and I'm going to ask you to stay and do it and then you can come in late tomorrow." I said, "Well, do you mind if Dave comes with me?" because we only lived four blocks from the White House and I was going to walk back and forth. So I said, "Do you mind if Dave came with me?" He said, "No. No, not at all."

So, we met back at the White House, like 8:30, 9:00 at night, and he had these two versions of the speech and he took parts of one and the other and put it together as what he wanted to say and he dictated it to me. He went back to the residence when he was done. Then I stayed and typed it up and put it on his desk so it was there. Actually, I put in our drawer. He had a drawer in the credenza right behind him. It was my drawer and everyone knew that was my spot. So if I had something for him, I would put it in there. If he had something for me, he would put it in there. So I put it in there so he could have it first thing when he came in in the morning.

I understand that's when he called the people together the next morning and said, "This is what I'm going to give." And handed it to them and let them do it into the version for the large text and whatever that they use. And so, that was an awkward time. That was very awkward. That was difficult for him because he didn't necessarily like confrontations on his staff. And that was bothersome to him.

Smith: Well, a waste of time, obviously.

Downton: Oh, absolutely a waste of time.

Smith: He's got more important things to do.

Downton: Exactly. Exactly.

Smith: That raises the larger question because there is almost a trajectory of his presidency. I mean, you could tell it in a lot of ways, but one thematic

approach, piecing together from what a lot of people have said is, he went into the office never having been an executive.

Downton: Right.

Smith: And, of course, originally he thought the spokes in the wheel, that in some ways he could transplant a congressional office organization to the West Wing. And that didn't work for a number of reasons. But in a larger sense, a story of his presidency is his learning to be president, which is a unique job.

Downton: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: Your memories of the 9th of August; were you in the East Room?

Downton: Mhmm. Yes, we were. In fact Dave and I and, actually, I believe, Bob Hartmann's secretaries Neta and Gail and I believe we were sitting right behind the Ford children in the East Room. We were not there for Nixon's farewell or anything like that, but, yes, we were there for the swearing in. We were still in the vice president's office, so we came over and we were there. I must say, I enjoyed that because it was one of the few times that we were seated and we're not standing somewhere in the background or wherever.

But it was very, very nice and we knew how historic this was. I had every confidence that he would do a very good job just being a normal, down-to-earth person. Not the airs and graces and whatever. I thought this was going to be a very good progression. This was going to be good, you know. He's going to handle this. We went back to the VP office and I think it was later in that day that I got word that he wanted to see me, you know, to see whatever it was or whatever. We went over to the West Wing because we had to see what the situation was. The awkward thing was that, and this was very true, and I can see it from both sides, but of course I'm looking at it from my side, the Nixon people did not want us to stay there. They did not like us. They didn't even like us as the vice president's staff. We were considered beneath them because we were normal folks, so to speak, and we came from the Hill and they had this adversarial relationship with the Hill.

Smith: And from Grand Rapids.

Downton: Oh, yes, and in Grand Rapids. We were in the boondocks. And we obviously resented that because we were proud of where we came from. We were proud of his 5th District and how well he represented it. And we were proud of Michigan.

Smith: Were there, and I don't mean names, but was there an incident or did people say things?

Downton: I think it was more an attitude. I mean, as I say, the vice presidential staff grew and so we were getting more and more people on our staff and in just walking around the Old Executive Office Building. We never went to the White House. We were always in the Old Executive Office Building in the vice president's office. Just walking around and just seeing the atmosphere and the attitude. It was oppressive in some regard because they did not want us there. They did not like us. At one point in time, they referred to us as the "Drug Fair people", the lower-crust working people. You know, I was like, "Oh, come on, there's nothing wrong with us!" You know, we had been on Capitol Hill, we knew what we were doing, but we weren't in their mindset.

Smith: This leads us into this larger question. We talked to a number of other people. One was Leon Parma, who was sort of shuffled into the East Room for the ceremony and he vividly recalls afterwards there was a receiving line and I think there were people invited down to the State Dining Room for the reception. And he said you could watch Nixon people peel off.

Downton: Yes. Yes.

Smith: And you can understand.

Downton: Oh, yes, you can, but the funny thing is they didn't want to leave. I mean, they didn't want us there, and they didn't want to leave but yet they weren't exactly fond of President Ford. And so what was going to happen? I mean, you got to give this a chance. And they didn't want to do that. And President Ford graciously offered for many of them to stay in their present positions or whatever, but it was very awkward. It was not an easy transition at all. But then, this was the first time this had happened so we were breaking new ground. And we got through it. We probably as the vice president's staff got

closer. Because it was we're no longer the Minority Leader's staff, no longer the vice president's staff, now he was now the president. And we probably got even closer and whatever. And we worked through it. But it was not an easy time. And it was not an easy time for the country. I mean, everyone didn't know what was going to happen. But I think President Ford handled it beautifully. And we were all very proud of how he handled that period.

Smith: It's very interesting because one of the first things he does is he brought in the Congressional Black Caucus and George Meany. Understanding the power of the symbolism of inviting people who had not been in the White House for a while.

Downton: Exactly. They had been shunned. And he also got rid of the tapes. There was no taping of his conversations and that wasn't necessary.

Smith: The story that there was so many microphones in the Oval Office, they didn't find one for a week or something like that.

Downton: I just find that incredible. I really do. But, no, that was all gotten rid of and whatever. That wasn't necessary.

Smith: Do you have a sense of what the relationship was with Al Haig during that period?

Downton: I think he got along with him well, but I think he also realized this was not going to be a long term relationship, which I think Al Haig would've enjoyed. He would've wanted to stay. But I think he finally realized this wasn't going to work.

Smith: It's interesting because Haig, when we interviewed him, sort of put the onus on Hartmann.

Downton: Oh, did he? That's interesting.

Smith: And he went to the president complaining seriously about Hartmann. And, the president, as Al repeats it, says, "Al, you're going to have to let me do it my way."

- Downton: Exactly. No, he would not like that. He did not like those types of confrontations.
- Smith: And Haig, sort of excitable, said, "Well, that answers my question. You don't want me to stay." Which, you know, judging from things we saw later in Haig's career, it's not terribly surprising.
- Downton: No, it's not. No, it's not.
- Smith: But you could also have said that chemistry would not have lasted very long.
- Downton: No, not at all. No. In fact when you speak of chemistry, the chemistry was better when Cheney was chief of staff than when Rumsfeld was.
- Smith: Really?
- Downton: Uh-huh. From what I could see, yes.
- Smith: What was the difference between the two?
- Downton: Well, at that time, Rumsfeld was very hands-on, and very much in every office and whatever, and very much in control. And Cheney, when he took over, I believe Rumsfeld was secretary of defense and then Dick Cheney became the chief of staff. And it was just more relaxed. He was open to listen to everybody and whatever. It was just a much calmer feeling, I think. It was a better relationship for everybody, I think, including Mr. Hartmann and John Marsh and all and Phil Buchen and, I mean, everything was much calmer. There wasn't this, I don't want to use the word sense of urgency, but there wasn't this "Why's Big Brother watching me?" or anything like that. It wasn't this fear of Rumsfeld always watching everybody and everything and having his finger on everything.
- Smith: And yet, it's amazing because Rumsfeld is a bureaucratic master. And the funny thing you hear from so many people is he never left fingerprints. He had his fingers in everything, but he never left fingerprints.
- Downton: Yes, he had other people.
- Smith: Yes. Yes, inside the bubble

Downton: Right. Exactly. He was a master. There's no doubt about that. And I don't mean that against him, but, I mean, it was more cohesive, I think, when he became secretary of defense. And Dick Cheney, everybody now, I mean, I hear people about mention Dick Cheney and whatever. He was a great guy. I got along with him great, he and his wife. And when he came to California several times when I was still with former President Ford, he was not at that point in time the Dick Cheney that most people think now. I think the White House did very well with him as chief of staff. And I think everyone was comfortable. They knew what they were doing. I think they had a good set up, but it took a while to get that in place. It did take a while. The transition was difficult.

Smith: Do you remember, he became President on the 8th. There was a trip to Chicago, a VFW Convention, and the amnesty program which took a lot of people by surprise.

Downton: Oh, yes. Yes.

Smith: Then on the 8th of September, there was a pardon. What do you remember about the discussion? Was there a point, where there was an on-going discussion about pardoning Nixon? Or was that something developed only at the end? How do you recall?

Downton: From what I understand, I had not heard any discussions about it or any talks about it. I heard about it on Sunday night on the news, just as everyone else did.

Smith: Really. So you had no idea?

Downton: No, I had no idea that that's what he was going to do. I believe he dealt with a few people on that and having negotiations and whatever. I always thought at the time, what disappointed me was Jerry terHorst was his press secretary. Nice guy, great guy. And I was disappointed in his reaction. I understand where he was coming from, but I wish he wouldn't have left, because I think he would've done a very good job as press secretary. I really do.

- Smith: There is a school of thought that that wasn't the only reason that he left. That the job was overwhelming and that he really hadn't anticipated just what the demands of that job would be.
- Downton: Exactly. Exactly. But it came about – like his resignation letter. He got that and I thought, “Oh, this is not a good thing.” I understand where President Ford was coming from. He totally thought that this would put an end to it and the sooner the better. I think perhaps, looking back, of course anybody can look back, I think perhaps it would've been better if Nixon would have been formally charged, or something of that nature and then done the pardon. But to do the blanket pardon for whatever could be out there, I think that really upset some people. I really do. Unfortunately, I think some people did not forget that. He really did think, honestly, that this is the way to get this thing over with and get Nixon out of here and not talk about it and not have it be the source of conversation and whatever. That was in his soul, I think. And bless him for doing that, but I think it probably would've been better received if he would've waited a little bit.
- Smith: And remember, Nixon almost died that fall from phlebitis.
- Downton: That's right.
- Smith: And if Ford had done it then, maybe there at least would have been some degree of civility.
- Downton: Right.
- Smith: Exactly.
- Downton: But, like I said, we can look back at that, and it's easy to do, but at the time he sincerely felt, “Let's get this over with.”
- Smith: And he was lucky enough to live long enough to realize that most people would come around to his way of thinking.
- Downton: Yes, in fact even, I don't mean to say even, but even Ted Kennedy, when he got the award, the Profile in Courage award, acknowledged that was the right thing to do at the right time. And that was a huge acknowledgement coming

from the Kennedy family. And I have to give him a lot of credit for doing that because it is true. It did get it over with and whatever, but it also set him up for a lot of people who were very, very upset. I think perhaps he did not realize the depth of - I don't know if I should say the word hatred, but maybe it is hatred - that people felt towards Nixon and how he had let people down and they weren't going to forget that. They wanted something more, I think. And that's too bad. That's sad. But, what's done is done, and I just think now people do realize that really was the courageous thing to do.

Smith: He also had to pick a vice president.

Downton: Yes.

Smith: Were there others considered besides Nelson Rockefeller?

Downton: Yes, there were. I believe there were at that time.

Smith: George H. W. Bush was supposed to be one of the names.

Downton: When he ran for election and Rockefeller stepped aside, there was a whole other discussion of who it would be. Howard Baker was mentioned, he was senator from Tennessee, I believe, if I'm not mistaken. And actually, at election time, Ronald Reagan was mentioned, too, as his running mate. Even though they had the very contentious primary battle, there were people who wanted Reagan to be his running mate. There was a lot going on there.

Smith: Did you have much contact with Rockefeller during his vice presidency?

Downton: I met him, yes. I didn't actually sit down and visit with him or anything like that, but I would see him, shake hands with him, whatever. Wonderful gentleman. I know, like we had talked earlier today, he didn't want to be vice president, but he did it. And he did a good job. He did. He was, I think, very good at that point in time for President Ford. They'd meet weekly, at least weekly. They'd keep each other up to date and whatever. He changed the seal of the vice president. Did you know that? Yeah, he did. He was a neat guy. I really had a lot of respect for Nelson Rockefeller. And then when it was time for the election run and he stepped aside, I had a lot of respect again for him.

- Smith: Did you see any change at all in the relationship between the two men?
- Downton: No, I didn't. I thought they complemented each other in that regard. I thought they did a good job.
- Smith: Mrs. Ford's breast cancer surgery - that must have caused a shock.
- Downton: Yes, yes, it did. It did a great deal. That was a Saturday and I did not work that Saturday. President Ford was going to have a meeting, I believe.
- Smith: It was the inflation summit.
- Downton: Yes, he actually told me on Friday, he said, "Don't bother to come in tomorrow because I'm going to be busy." I had no idea that they were also going to be going to the hospital. But he said, "Don't bother to come in tomorrow, because I'm going to be busy all day, so enjoy your day." In fact, I think Dave and I took a trip into Williamsburg, if I'm not mistaken, just got out and went for a little drive. And we heard on the radio then about her surgery. And, thankfully, it worked out well. I admire her greatly for how she handled it and how open she was. Actually, Happy Rockefeller then, as a result, had, I believe, a double mastectomy, if I'm not mistaken. I believe that she really set the standard for being able to talk about breast cancer. And I also have had a mastectomy.
- Smith: Can you describe - I think people today don't appreciate just how closeted a subject it was.
- Downton: Oh no, it was just not spoken at all. It was something you'd talk about very privately with your best friend, but hardly even with your husband. You just wouldn't do it. And the fact that Mrs. Ford was so very open and even had a picture taken in the hospital in her robe and whatever, throwing a football. And whether he got mad at her...because he didn't want her to do that.
- Smith: Yes, because it was too much strain?
- Downton: Yeah, because it was. But I'm not sure which arm she used, but I mean it was because, like, "Don't show off. That's not a good idea. You don't need to do that." But I think that was her way of saying, hey, it was going to be alright.

She handled it beautifully. I remember when I had my surgery, I was a resident here in Michigan, I was no longer with them, Mrs. Ford called me. And I thought that was just so nice. That was a neat thing to do. We had a nice conversation on the phone. And I think she has helped a lot of women in that regard. But you are so correct, it was not spoken of. I mean, maybe best girl friends, best men friends, but you would not hardly even talk to your brother about it or your father. You just wouldn't do it. And even the day she was to go to the hospital, she met with Lady Bird Johnson and her daughters and she didn't even tell them. She gave them a little tour of the family quarters and whatever and she didn't tell them. Her bag was packed right there to go to the hospital. You know, she was tremendous in that regard. A wonderful, courageous example for women.

Smith: I'll ask you one thing and get it out of the way. Were you aware at any time during the White House years that she had other problems?

Downton: A little bit. But I can understand how easily it could happen. I think the combination of the medicine she was taking and whatever, and a drink or two, I think, was very difficult. I noticed it more when we were in California, when we first moved out to California.

Smith: One explanation has always been that she thought, "Oh finally, we're going to have this normal life with my husband." And actually he was travelling again.

Downton: He was still travelling. Yes, he loved to be on the go. He enjoyed, I think, that period of time after the White House when he'd give speeches and travel. He was on several boards of directors and he took an active interest in that. He didn't just lend his name for that. He'd be gone for 5, 6 days at a time and he did fine. And, of course, she was home and that was difficult for her.

Smith: By then the kids were grown up.

Downton: Exactly.

Smith: So she was alone.

Downton: She was alone, yes. Yes. Susan got married when we were first in California, she was alone. The boys were gone and whatever. She still had a staff, you know, someone to help her with her correspondence and things like that, but it was quite different. And settling into a whole new area and whatever. And, yeah, that's difficult, too. There was no longer a lot that she could do and I think I noticed it more there. Although she continued to have, and I will always remember this, she had continued to have a problem with her neck and her back, her pinched nerve and that is painful. That was a continuing problem that I know that she has dealt with and I think that has contributed to some of the medication that she took.

Smith: Were you surprised by the intervention?

Downton: Actually, I was very glad that it happened. I remember at that point in time, I had to call Mike and be sure that he could come. And I remember at the time, I think I had to get him out of a meeting he was in. And I said to whomever I was talking, I said, "Look, I really need to talk to him. This is his dad's personal secretary. I really need to talk to him as soon as I can." So, they got him, you know, and I explained to him, I said, "Look, your dad really wants you to get here." And he did. I give him credit. He did. And they were there. And I know it was difficult, I know it was a difficult time, but they got through it and she went off to the clinic and came back stronger than ever. And then she went ahead with her Betty Ford Clinic and whatever. That's an amazing thing to do.

Smith: It truly is a remarkable story.

Downton: It is. She is a survivor of phenomenal proportions considering what she has gone through what with the cancer and the drugs and the alcohol. She is phenomenal in that regard. She is a survivor.

Smith: She tells people, the hardest thing is he's gone. "I don't know why I'm still here." And she's clearly still grieving.

Downton: Oh, yes. Yes, but there's still some things she's got to do. There's still reasons for her to be here, which is good. I talk to Lee Simmons every so often and he still checks in on her and helps and this and that and whatever.

So he pretty much keeps me up to date on what she's doing. He said the family is there quite a bit, the boys and especially Steve is nearby. So that's good.

Smith: The intervention obviously had to be planned in advance, pretty intricate in getting all the kids together and so on and keeping it a secret.

Downton: Yeah, pretty much. I don't believe she was aware of it at all.

Smith: So was that something the president was involved in?

Downton: He, I believe, and the doctor had talked about it. And then I think Susan was the spearhead and was very prominent I think in helping him, and then got the boys involved and whatever.

Smith: And I guess he stopped drinking, too, didn't he?

Downton: Yes, he did, which I give him credit for.

Smith: And, later on, there's this story he and Susan, something came up about smoking. And he quit his pipe because he was concerned about her smoking. Basically, they made a bet. And he, again, going back to the discipline of the man.

Downton: Yes. He was very disciplined and very, as I say, couldn't relax until he was done with what he needed to do. But he was also very detailed. He really was in what I did with him which was one of the reasons we got along as well as we did because we were both very detailed people. We did fine. He was very detailed, very accurate. Very aware of what was going on.

Smith: Was the fall of Saigon, was that the worst day of the presidency?

Downton: I think that would probably be a pretty good assessment. That was a low, low period. Yes, that was disappointing.

Smith: You'd seen it coming for a matter of days, if not weeks. And it was clear there was a debate. I know Kissinger wanted him to sort of go down with all flags flying and there was another camp that said you've got to separate yourself from this thing. It's a loss. Did you sense those tensions?

Downton: I didn't so much at that point in time. I learned more about it later. But you could definitely tell that there was something going on, that something that was terribly occupying his time. It was a very, very difficult time. I don't think he'll ever forget the helicopter leaving the embassy and whatever. I just don't think he would ever forget that image and what it meant. That was tough.

Smith: What was Kennerly's role?

Downton: Oh, he was everywhere. He had free access. I think there were only a couple of times when he was not welcome in the Oval Office, maybe only two or three times. But he was the type of person that you wouldn't know he was there. Like, I know some of the pictures he had taken of me with President Ford, I didn't realize he was in the office at that time doing his thing. And then he would come show me later. "Oh, Dorothy, do you like this? You can have this." Or "Here's a photo I took," and I didn't even realize he was there.

Smith: He was a bit of a smart-aleck. I say it because, not critically, I say it because it tells you something about President Ford that he wanted to have at least some of that around.

Downton: Yes, I think it was good for him because he could joke with him and I think he realized he's going to help me not take myself too seriously. And you need that, you need that to be able to do that. And Kennerly, we all called him Kennerly, no one called him David or Dave. I think President Ford did, he would call him Dave a lot. But we all called him Kennerly and he was such a character, you never knew where he'd pop up. But he was an excellent photographer.

Smith: And, remember, before the fall of Saigon, the president sent Kennerly over to Southeast Asia because he knew he'd get an honest appraisal. And he did.

Downton: Exactly. Isn't that interesting? Isn't that something?

Smith: The *Mayaguez* must have been some of the flip side of the fall of Saigon the way it turned out.

Downton: Yes, thank God. Yes, that was very tense. There were some tense moments, but he handled that beautifully and came through that very well. That was very, very good.

Smith: There's probably no such thing as a typical day, but if you could sort of distill the routine that you went through, what was your day like?

Downton: Well, I would usually get there about eight and if he was not in the Oval Office, I would go in check my drawer. We had a drawer in the credenza behind his desk where, in a lot of the photos, you could see pictures of the children and Mrs. Ford and whatever. There were two drawers in there and the one drawer was my drawer. And anything he had for me, he would put in that drawer and vice versa. If I had something for him, I would put it in there. So, if he was not in the office at that point in time, I would go in and check and see what was in my drawer and whatever. We had a system when I was in, not the office where Nell Yates was, the receptionist, and Terry O'Donnell who kept the schedule. I was not in that area. I was on the other side where there's a door that goes into a hallway and on one side is the men's room and on one side is a little kitchen where the steward could get tea, coffee or whatever. And then on the other side of that was a doorway into my office. And so that's where I was, I really had a very private office. In order to get in that office, I had to go through the little kitchen area, so I was well protected. I had bulletproof glass and everything else. So I was by myself and in a very private office.

Oftentimes, when he would come into the bathroom, he would then knock on my door and see if I had anything for him that I could briefly give him or this or that or whatever. I would always seem him at lunchtime. He would come in. We had his private study, we called it, at the end of that hallway. We created a private study for him and in there we had his album collection or his stamp collection, things like that, just to make him feel nice and comfortable. We had, for instance, when Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip came, well, then the queen gave him an autographed photo, silver frame. He had several of them from Helmut Schmidt in Germany and Anwar Sadat and whatever. He would have them in there and on his desk and whatever just to make a nice

presentation. He ate his lunch in there, read magazines, papers, and whatever. So then I'd always see him again at that point in time at lunchtime. Then he'd go back in again and do his afternoon schedule.

Then, when the swimming pool was built, he would take a swim before he went back to the residence. So he would go in through that little area and through the study and then go out that way to the swimming pool. So then he'd stick his head in again and say, "Anything else I need to know before I'm off?" and this, that, or whatever. So I would usually see him at least three times a day, first thing in the morning, at lunch, and before he left. When he travelled, then he would call, of course the White House switchboard could get me wherever I was. But he would call often when he was campaigning or whatever. I didn't travel with him other than, like I said, to the opening day baseball game, but I stayed there and did what I needed to do with the banking, bill-paying, whatever it might be. And he'd call for updates and this, that, and whatever, so we would talk, even in California when he was former president, when he was travelling, like I say, for four or five days at a time, he'd call several times a day.

Smith: What parts of the job did he enjoy the most?

Downton: That would be hard to say. What'd he enjoy the most? I can tell you what I think he enjoyed the most. I think he enjoyed meeting with people and listening to others' ideas and, "How can we solve this problem? What can we do to take care of this?" I think he enjoyed that give and take. He enjoyed meeting the various basketball teams, the national championship basketball teams and whatever. He enjoyed that.

Smith: Sports.

Downton: Yeah, he loved that sort of stuff. Pele or whatever, yeah, he enjoyed that. He enjoyed that. I think he very much enjoyed meeting some of the foreign dignitaries. He hit it off with some of them very well.

Smith: Who comes to mind in terms of having almost instant chemistry?

Downton: Helmut Schmidt in Germany.

- Downton: He just got along with him just great.
- Smith: And it's funny because their politics were very different.
- Downton: I know, I know. He thoroughly admired Anwar Sadat. He thought a great deal of him. I think he really thought a great deal of the man, the French president, Giscard d'Estaing.
- Smith: Giscard.
- Downton: Yes, they're also two different personalities, but they seemed to get along very well. They really did. He admired Queen Elizabeth, I know, a great deal, just admired her whole being, I think.
- Smith: And that visit was memorable in a number of ways.
- Downton: Oh, yeah. It was, it was very nice.
- Smith: There were a few SNAFUs. Could have contributed to the...
- Downton: But that makes you human, too. I think he thoroughly enjoyed the July 4 bi-centennial celebration. The pageantry, I think he really enjoyed that. I think that whole patriotism and 200th anniversary and whatever, I think that really meant a lot to him. Yeah, he enjoyed that period.
- Smith: Do you have a sense of what he enjoyed the least about the office?
- Downton: Probably the staff bickering. Probably the in-fighting. That bothered him because it was like, "This isn't necessary. You've got this job and you've got this job and don't argue. Each do your own thing." He didn't like that. He didn't like any conflict like that on his staff. I think that he just didn't like that at all. That bothered him.
- Smith: He had a temper which I think he spent a lifetime pretty successfully controlling.
- Downton: Yes.
- Smith: But not always.
- Downton: You could tell when he was angry.

Smith: How did that manifest itself?

Downton: I could usually tell looking at his face. And if I were presenting a question or whatever and I didn't get a detailed answer that I wanted, I could look at his face and think, "Okay, don't ask anything more" or "Enough's enough." Or, at one point in time, we were going through a number of his collection items. This was after the election and so we needed to decide where these things were going to go, to the Museum, to the Library, to California, wherever. And I think he was just plain getting tired, and he'd had enough of this. At this point in time, it was probably 6:30, 7:00 o'clock in the evening and he wanted to go back to the residence and I just looked at him and I could tell, okay, that's enough. Let's stop for the day because we don't need to do anything more. You could tell, I think, from his face, I could tell. Because when you work with someone that closely, you can tell their mannerisms and their look and whatever.

Smith: What about his sense of humor?

Downton: Oh, he had a very good sense of humor. And I think that's one of the reasons that he got along as well with Kennerly as he did because they had this joking type of a relationship which I think was good. But as I had indicated earlier, some of these editorial cartoons that I took offense at, he would laugh at. And he'd have me get them framed and hung in my office so he could look at them every so often. He did not mind that.

Smith: Did he wait too long in '76 to take Reagan's challenge seriously? Was there a sense that either maybe he might not run or maybe wouldn't be as formidable a foe as he turned out to be?

Downton: Well, I think that period of time may have been, in President Ford's mind, he may have been thinking back to his Minority Leader days when they always used to say that the 11th commandment was not saying anything bad about a fellow Republican. And I think he didn't realize that Reagan was as committed, that he was actually going to do this. And once it took hold, I think he realized, "Oh my, I'm being challenged in my own party." And we had to go forward, we had to get into it, but it may have been like you said a

little too late when it got going, unfortunately. I think that was tough. That hurt him. I think that hurt him. I think for a good period of time they became very strained. Because I remember once when I was still in California and Reagan was going to do some type of a commercial or an ad for the fellow who was running I think for governor at the time, and they came to President Ford's office so they could do it together, it was very strained. Very, very strained.

Smith: Just the body language?

Downton: Yes, yes. And the poor guy for governor was completely out of it. He didn't win. But it was very awkward, very strained. I think that hurt him to think that he would be so publicly challenged by someone in his own party. But he got over. He really did. There were many other times when he met with Reagan when Reagan was president and they would meet people together and whatever. He was always very cordial, very warm and whatever. I mean, he was not the type of person who held a grudge.

Smith: In November of 1976, obviously they had come from way behind. A lot of folks thought that it was a toss-up by election day. Where were you?

Downton: Actually, after he went to the residence that night, then I did go home. And so we continued watching on TV. There are still those who think that if he would've asked for a recount in Illinois, it could've been a different result. But he didn't want any part of that, which I give him credit for. He could not talk anymore, he lost his voice at that point in time. The next morning, when it was still somewhat in doubt as to what was going to happen, I was in the office and Dave came with me that day, he was in the office with me, and President Ford came walking in the office. This was I think right before their announcement. And he said, "Well, it's over." And I said, "It doesn't have to be it!" And he said, "Yes, it's over. We're going to do the announcement." He gave me a big hug, he shook Dave's hand, and said, "Thank you for all *you've* done. You helped me." He was very gracious in that regard. But it was hard. I mean, it's not easy to lose a national election, I don't care what party it is. It's not easy because you're so into it. You're so involved and there's no way you can sit back and say, "Oh, okay."

Smith: Did it take him awhile to get over it?

Downton: It did. He was quiet. He was thinking what he was going to do. I think he was quiet. I remember the day, you know how they do a formal come to the Oval Office and do a formal visit and whatever and it was the day when President Carter was going to come. I went in that morning and I had said to him, "Are you going to bring" I think I called him Mr. Carter, because he was not then president or whatever, President Elect, that was just not necessary, I said, "Are you going to bring Mr. Carter in to show him my office and your study?" And he said, "No, he's coming here to see the Oval Office and I will show him the Oval Office." I said, "Okay." I thought this is really unusual. He just really cut me off.

So I went back to my office and I said to the steward on duty, "You know Carter is coming here today for a visit." I said, "Would you have time?" - those silver frames I mentioned earlier, they get very tarnished. I said, "Would you have time today to clean up these silver frames just in case? We want everything to look real nice." He said, "Oh, sure. Sure. I'll take care of it." And he did. Everything looked great. So, maybe about 11:00 o'clock, 11:30, I heard the door open. It was opened very hard. And I heard President Ford say, "Here's the head" because, both being Navy men, that's the term they used. He said, "Here's the head and here's the pantry and here's my personal secretary." And President Ford opened the door and he stood in the door and ushered President Carter in.

So I stood up and shook his hand and he said, "Hi, I'm Jimmy Carter." And I felt like saying, "I know who you are. You don't have to do this. You're not campaigning," or whatever. But I just said, "How do you do?" and whatever. And then he said to me, "Where are you from?" And I said, "Michigan." And he said, "Oh," - you know, like that's got to be the worst state of all fifty states as far as I'm concerned. And President Ford, bless his heart, said in a very commanding voice, "You don't have to worry about her. She's going with me." And the look on President Carter's face was, "Oh, I didn't mean it that way." But it was an awkward moment, and I really appreciated him stepping up and saying what he did. He stood in that doorway and didn't

go anywhere. And when Carter came in, I showed him the photos, the things on the wall and whatever, and he got quite a kick out of that. He thought that was really nice. But President Ford definitely said, "Oh, you don't have to worry about this situation. She's not going to be here."

Smith: You wouldn't think that day that they would become good friends.

Downton: No, not at all. It was very tense. I mean, he did what he needed to do, but from the way he cut me off that morning when I asked, "No, he's coming to see the Oval Office. That's what he's going to see." It was like, this was not his nature. And so I thought, "Oh, this isn't going to play this way." I'm glad that I did ask [the steward] and all because he did show him the study and everything looked great and that was a nice gesture on his part.

Smith: Do you remember the last days at the White House?

Downton: Yes.

Smith: What was that like?

Downton: I remember the last day, January 20, because I was in my office at the time clearing up, making sure I had everything that I needed to take. I was temporarily going to be in the transition office off on Lafayette Park and I wanted to be sure I had everything sent. And about 10:30 or so, 11:00 that morning, the White House telephone people came in and they needed to start changing the phones, and whatever. And so I thought, "Well, okay, this is about time." And so I gathered up everything, made sure they had everything. Dave was with me at the time to help me carry what I needed to carry out and over to the other office. And so we left the White House and went over to the transition office there off Lafayette Park and got settled in. I was there for just a few weeks before we moved to California.

Smith: A couple of things and then we'll wrap it up. You were in California you said through 1980?

Downton: I believe I left in November of 1980.

Smith: Clearly there had been this flirtation in '79, early '80 with running again. How did that evolve?

Downton: Well, what bothered me was when he came to the convention in Detroit. The Republican convention was in Detroit. And they had all of this talk about him being Reagan's running mate. You know, and I'm in California getting upset. I was like, "Oh, no!" And so he called on the telephone to check on everything and I said, "What in the world is going on? I don't like what I'm hearing." He said, "Well, what are you hearing?" I said, "That you're going to be his running mate!" And he just started laughing. He just said, "Dorothy, don't believe everything you hear." And I said, "Oh, okay. That's all I need to know."

Smith: That's good enough for you.

Downton: Yeah. That's good enough for me, yeah.

Smith: Had he thought about it? Had there been people who came to urge him to run for president?

Downton: I think there were some that did who said, "You should challenge. You should do it." But I think the more he thought about it, it was like, "No, this is not what I need to do."

Smith: Presumably Mrs. Ford might've weighed in.

Downton: Oh, yes. Yes.

Smith: She had no desire to go back into the political world.

Downton: No, no. They had served their time and done a tremendous job.

Smith: And of course this was just after the intervention and everything had taken place.

Downton: Exactly. Exactly. So she was still healing, they were both still going through that period. You know, where they needed time. And it worked out fine.

Smith: He seems to have adapted to the new life very easily. Whatever regrets he had, he seemed to have put behind him.

Downton: He did, because he kept busy. And see, I think this was his nature, too. In fact, I remember several Fridays where we're getting ready to leave and he'd say, "So, we'll see you tomorrow." And I was like, "Tomorrow's Saturday. Do we really have to come in tomorrow?" And he said, "Well, sure. There's mail." As long as he kept busy, he was fine. But he needed things to do. He needed his reading. He needed his newspapers, his magazines. One thing very nice that President Carter did do is that he did keep him updated. We got an update every week delivered by the Navy, actually, through San Diego. And we'd have to sign for them. And after he read them, we'd have to destroy them. [Either Bob Barrett or I had to destroy them].

So he was kept up to date and that was very nice. He appreciated that a great deal. And those sorts of things, I think, helped fix that relationship. They became, as you said, very good friends and that was good. He did not hold a grudge. It was not in his personality, not his temperament. That's all to his credit.

Smith: I remember, there's a story, up in Vail, he walked to the post office to pick up the mail.

Downton: I believe it. I do believe it, yes. He was incredible. I think that work ethic was instilled in him at a very young age by his parents and he couldn't break it. Why would he? It served him very well as a congressman, as Minority Leader.

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

Downton: Yes, actually, he came to the University of Michigan for the dedication of the business school that one of his friends was supporting. Several years ago, actually, it was my birthday, November 11th. I think it was in '04, and he came and Mrs. Ford came, and they were going to be there for the dedication. Lee Simmons had told me they were going to be there and he said, "Come on over and see us." So, I went over. That morning, it was an awful day, raining and whatever, but I went to the Campus Inn and they had arranged with the Secret Service to let me come up on the elevator and whatever and I met with Lee and John Nunn was there.

I visited with him and we had a nice visit. And I sat and chatted with him for maybe 15-20 minutes or so. Perfect gentleman. I took along photos to show him our house and things like that and he wanted to know what Dave was doing and I told him he was a railroad engineer. And he was astounded. I said, "He loves it! He loves it." But we had a wonderful visit, just the two of us and he asked a lot of questions. I told him I was working for the Associated Press at the time. And he says, "You are?" And I said, "Yes, but I'm not a reporter. I'm an administrative assistant." He said, "Oh, I know. That's just fine." He was in very good health and, like I say, a perfect gentleman.

Smith: Plus he loved to be back in Ann Arbor.

Downton: Oh, he loved it there. He did. It fit him like a glove. And when I got up to leave, I said, "Well, I've got to get to work and you've got things to do, so I'd better get on the road." And I still remember, he was sitting on a couch, I was on one side and he was on the other and he stood up. I said, "You don't have to get up." And he said, "I have to get up to give such a nice lady a hug." And I thought, "Oh, that's really sweet!" And that's the last time I saw him.

Smith: That's a nice memory to have. Were you surprised by the reaction when he died? I was with the media part of the week and then with the family, and I know people in the media were amazed that there was this much reaction and it seemed to build as the week went on.

Downton: Yes, indeed. The folks here that I worked with at the Detroit AP, I think they were very surprised. They were on top of everything and we had our Washington correspondent and our Lansing correspondent. They were all in Grand Rapids. I saw them all at the funeral in various spots doing their job. Our photo editor and photographer were there. We had excellent coverage. I think they were surprised at the amount of outpouring and the genuine caring that people in western Michigan showed, the fact that they were there all night long in line. I think they were astounded. I remember our Lansing correspondent say she was shocked when she saw how many people came out in January weather with children in strollers, and they were there all night

long. She was amazed. And these are hardcore news people who it takes a lot to amaze them.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Downton: I think he should be remembered as a great man who did what he needed to do for the country. Not always what he wanted to do, I mean, he really wanted to be Speaker of the House. That was not in the cards for him. But he did what he needed to do. He did what he thought was best at the time. I believe he used his best judgment. He went forward and I don't think he had second thoughts then. I think he just kept going. He was a very compassionate man. Very, very disciplined man. Very religious man.

Smith: That didn't always come across, did it?

Downton: No, that didn't always come out. It didn't, but he really was. He was very religious and I think that goes back to his mother, actually, and his stepfather. I think the upbringing in Grand Rapids, that is ingrained in you. It's a quality that I think a lot of people today are missing, unfortunately. A very well-meaning man. I don't think he had a mean bone in his body. He did what he thought was best at the time, and I hope he will be remembered in that light. He had some tough things he had to deal with and I think he did an excellent job. I was proud to be part of his staff and to be with him and to help in whatever I did. It was an honor.

Smith: And it sounds like he was a good boss.

Downton: He was a very good boss. He was strict. He was all business, but he was, he was a good boss. We would kid about working late or working on Saturday or Sunday, like I say, but we got used to it. That was part of it that was ingrained in him, and so then we did it. But, yeah, he was very detailed. I admired that a great deal. We got along well, we really did. I enjoyed it.

Smith: One last thing before I forget: Did he find it hard to fire people?

Downton: Yes. No, he was not comfortable with it. He was not comfortable, as I said earlier, with any in-fighting on the staff or any staff problems. In fact, I think that was one of the few times that Kennerly was not allowed in the Oval

Office, was when I think it was with Secretary Schlesinger and he had to ask him to hand in his resignation. I think that was one of the few times he was not allowed in the office.

Smith: And that relationship was just, again, the chemistry didn't work.

Downton: It didn't, no, it didn't jibe at all and you knew that. You knew that. You could see that from the different personalities. And that happens nowadays and you just need to move on. But he was a very caring man, I think. Very strong and determined in his own mind. He knew what he wanted to do and he did his best to do it.

Smith: He said that his greatest regret was that just as he had mastered the job, that he really learned how to be president, then he lost it.

Downton: Yes, then he was out of it. I still think that if that campaign would have lasted maybe two or three more days, I think that we could've had a different turn out. I really do. Or another week, or whatever. But if he had had three days, because he was coming on strong. He really was, he was really coming on strong. But it wasn't to be and we made the best of it.

Smith: Well, they had a pretty good life afterwards.

Downton: Yes, they did. They had a good number of years, which is really good.

Smith: And really he kept his health right up until the last couple of years.

Downton: He did. Like, when I saw him, he was great. He was moving all around on his own and not needing any help. Like I said, "You don't need to get up," from the comfortable couch, but he insisted. He said, "Yes, of course I do." So, yeah, he was very much his own person. I think he was comfortable with who he was and I think that means a lot, too.

Smith: Especially to that office.

Downton: Oh yes. Yes.

Smith: Because we all see what happens to people who aren't comfortable with themselves.

Downton: Exactly.

Smith: Dorothy, this is wonderful, really.

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