

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Frank Carlucci
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: First of all, thank you for letting us take a few minutes to talk. This will wind up in the Ford Library archives. We will get you a transcript to review.

You said you came to DC in 1956.

Carlucci: Right.

Smith: A very different town?

Carlucci: Yes, indeed. My first apartment was over in Anacostia and none of that had been built up. The area around the Navy Yard was practically jungle. And there was no Kennedy Center. It was a very, very different place.

Smith: Dwight Eisenhower's in the White House?

Carlucci: Yes, he was. He was in the White House and John Foster Dulles was Secretary of State.

Smith: And you were in the Foreign Service?

Carlucci: Yes, I had taken the Foreign Service exam and came in at the bottom of the Foreign Service.

Smith: What does that mean?

Carlucci: It means that you start off as a vice counsel or a third secretary, depending on whether you're assigned to an embassy or a consulate and you start to work your way up the ladder and hopefully to the top.

Smith: The top being...?

Carlucci: Well, the top being today career ambassador. I'm not sure I made that. It's unclear. I think I was a career minister when I retired.

Smith: What were some of the positions you held along the way?

Carlucci: Well, overseas, I served in South Africa, the Congo, Zanzibar, Brazil and Portugal, the latter as ambassador. I also served in some seven different departments of government.

Smith: Now, let me ask you about Portugal. Was Salazar still alive?

Carlucci: No, I was in Portugal during the Ford administration.

Smith: Which is when the revolution occurred?

Carlucci: Well, what happened is that Henry Kissinger was Secretary of State and he didn't like his ambassador to Portugal. He thought he was too soft on the Communists. The Communists had virtually taken over the country. The President was a Communist sympathizer, the Prime Minister was an out and out Communist and the ambassador, at least in Henry's eyes, was weak. So he fired him and for reasons that are still unclear to me, I was plucked out of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and shot over to Portugal out of a cannon.

Smith: Really?

Carlucci: And had to cope with the, as they say, then Communist regime. And gradually we worked our way out of that through the electoral process. Henry and I had some differences.

Smith: How did Kissinger formulate and/or communicate policy?

Carlucci: It was very much ad hominem. I mean, Henry was the towering figure in the State Department and he made it quite clear that Portugal could not stay in NATO if it was a Communist country. He called Mario Soares a Kerensky to his face and his theory was that Portugal should be isolated. My analysis of the situation convinced me that Portugal could be retrieved from the Communist hands and that we needed to push for elections and the democratic parties, particularly the Socialists, would win the election. Henry and I had several exchanges on this score, some of them quite heated.

Smith: Face to face?

Carlucci: Oh, yes. Yes, I told him that the his statements were pushing Portugal into the arms of the Communists. And he said, "Well, if you're so damned smart, you make the statements." And I said, "I will." It was that kind of dialogue. I did have a conversation with Don Rumsfeld, following which Henry told me that the President wanted to see me. Following which we reached an agreement to give my option an opportunity. Thereafter was very supportive.

Smith: Now, Rumsfeld at that point was still chief of staff?

Carlucci: Right.

Smith: And had you known Rumsfeld?

Carlucci: Oh, yes. We went to college together.

Smith: I'm just trying to get the sequence of events. You and Kissinger have a fundamental disagreement, it sounds like. Did you bring that to Rumsfeld's attention? Did he contact you?

Carlucci: I brought it to Rumsfeld's attention made no commitments and didn't say what he was going to do. But in my next meeting with Kissinger, Kissinger told me that the President had asked to see me, so I assumed that was a result of my conversation with Don Rumsfeld.

Smith: Tell me about your meeting with the President.

Carlucci: I didn't meet with him. I told Henry that since he and I had agreed, there was no need for me to meet with the President.

Smith: Did you ever have any word from the President concerning your performance? Your ideas? The situation generally in Portugal? Was this all channeled through Kissinger?

Carlucci: It was all channeled through Kissinger. I saw a press quote years later, when a coup attempt took place in Portugal, President Ford commented to somebody on his staff that he thought that it's a good thing that we have a good ambassador in Lisbon. So I had known Jerry Ford for some time.

Smith: How did you first know him?

Carlucci: When he was in the Congress.

Smith: Was this before he was Minority Leader?

Carlucci: Basically, it was when he was Minority Leader. I remember we had a meeting when I was in OMB and I think he was chairman or ranking on the agriculture committee. I wanted to do something with the food stamp program, reduce it, and I called on him. I think that was our first meeting. That would've been way back in 1972.

Smith: It was during the Nixon presidency?

Carlucci: The Nixon presidency, yes.

Smith: Okay, he would've been Minority Leader. What was your impression?

Carlucci: Very favorable. He listened. He understood the issues. And he gave a very tempered and sensible response. I can't remember the details but I liked him instantly.

Smith: Now, he was on Appropriations for many years.

Carlucci: He really understood the intricacies of government. I can remember one time, Cap and I went over to protest a budget decision and we sat down with Ford alone. And he ran through the government program better than I could, even though I had served in OMB. He really was very sophisticated in terms of how the government operated.

Smith: Isn't it a shame in some ways that that didn't communicate itself to the general public?

Carlucci: It is because he was masterful. He made his own decisions. He didn't have a lot of staff around him briefing him. He just dominated the subject.

Smith: Let me ask you because you were there while Watergate was unfolding. The people who weren't around Washington then, in the last months of the Nixon presidency - what was the mood like within the government?

Carlucci: Very depressing. I can remember I was out at Aspen at one of their courses. I was Undersecretary of HEW and I called Cap Weinberger or he called me, I

can't remember who initiated it. And we discussed whether the appropriate thing was to resign. And I can remember Cap saying, "Well, this won't last much longer in any event, so it's probably best not to resign." But we were thinking of that as a possibility.

Smith: Was he disillusioned?

Carlucci: Cap?

Smith: Yeah.

Carlucci: Yeah, I think he was. Cap was a person of good spirits and absolute loyalty to the Commander in Chief, but I think in this case, he was disillusioned.

Smith: It's interesting, because, I think there's a little bit of the Boy Scout in Ford. And I think the thing that shocked him was the language on the tapes, and the fact that Nixon lied to him.

Carlucci: Well, that's what hit me. I was at the particular Cabinet meeting where he lied to his Cabinet and I thought that was just outrageous.

Smith: About what?

Carlucci: About Watergate and whether he knew about it. I was very impressed with Nixon. I had known him as a foreign service officer. I had been director of OEO. I'd been deputy director of OMB. I thought he was brilliant and quite effective, although as you know, his language was very coarse and he would fire for effect. He'd say, "Go run a tape on those bastards." And if you knew him well enough, you'd say, "Well, we don't need to do that."

Smith: One theory of how the Watergate break-in happened is that Haldeman knew him inside out, knew when to disregard orders. But a Colson, let alone a Liddy, would've saluted and done whatever they were told.

Carlucci: There's an interesting book by Bud Krogh that he just wrote a couple months ago that recounts his mental process in dealing with Nixon's orders. And he now says he was completely wrong. But when he received an order from the President, he automatically thought that when it came from the President, it was legal.

Smith: Do you think John Mitchell took secrets with him to the grave?

Carlucci: Possibly. I wasn't that close to the Watergate episode to make a real judgment on that.

Smith: At the time of Nixon's resignation, Ford's swearing in, do you remember where you were?

Carlucci: Well, I think I had just come back from Aspen and I was in Washington with Cap when that took place.

Smith: Weinberger didn't stay on terribly long, did he, into the Ford Administration? Several months? A year?

Carlucci: It was a couple of years.

Smith: Was it?

Carlucci: Yeah, it was David Mathews that took over when Cap left. But he stayed on for awhile.

Smith: And did they get along fine?

Carlucci: Ford and Cap?

Smith: Yeah.

Carlucci: Oh, yeah, very well. But it was hard not to get along with Jerry Ford.

Smith: You know, we hear that. What was it about Ford that --?

Carlucci: Well, let me tell you a story about the man. When I was undersecretary of HEW, Cap was on travel, and a bill had reached the President's desk, it was a social services bill. And I was summoned over to brief the President - just basically Jerry Ford and me. I don't think anybody else was in the room. And he said, "Frank, what about this bill?" And I said, "Mr. President it's a bad bill. Let me tell you why it's a bad bill." And I went through it piece by piece and I said, "But I must tell you, if you veto it, you'll be overridden in a minute." He said, "Well, that doesn't concern me. If it's a bad bill, I must

veto it.” And he vetoed it and he was overridden in a minute. An extraordinary man.

Smith: Guts.

Carlucci: Yeah, a lot of guts.

Smith: And he was a real fiscal conservative, wasn't he?

Carlucci: Oh, yeah.

Smith: I mean he was a traditional fiscal conservative.

Carlucci: As you said, he was a bit of a Boy Scout. And he was as straight as an arrow. And no question that he saved our country from great difficulty and that his decision to pardon Nixon was courageous and probably cost him the presidency.

Smith: There's a parallel between what you described as his willingness to veto a bill, even though he knew it'd be overridden, and it might in the short-term cost him politically, with the much larger decision to pardon Nixon.

Carlucci: It's the same thing. He was a person of principle.

Smith: What was the problem with Ford and Jim Schlesinger? Was it just personal chemistry?

Carlucci: I don't know because I was on the domestic side. Well, I was in Portugal during that period and my contact with Jim was limited to courtesy calls when I'd come back on consultation. I do remember one Cabinet meeting before I went to Portugal when I was undersecretary and Cap was away and I attended in his place. And seeing Jim Schlesinger talk to the President in what appeared to me to be a condescending tone. And I thought, "My goodness. How long is that going to last?" But I have no inside information.

Smith: To be fair to Schlesinger, was that typical?

Carlucci: That's Jim!

Smith: Is he just professorial?

Carlucci: He talks to everybody that way. He talks to me that way. He's a lot smarter than the rest of us.

Smith: And doesn't hide the fact.

Carlucci: That's right.

Smith: Okay, that explains it. Did you have a sense of the Kissinger-Ford relationship?

Carlucci: No, other than that one observation. I was not involved in the Defense Department at the time, so I had no sense of the relationship.

Smith: And then, of course, Kissinger loses one of his hats. I mean, Brent Scowcroft is made national security advisor. As someone who's held that job, I know what Ford's rationale for splitting the job up was, how would you explain - is it a good idea to have two people hold those separate jobs? Or can it work with one person holding those two jobs?

Carlucci: I think it's a mistake to have one person in the two jobs.

Smith: Explain.

Carlucci: I think Henry, in retrospect, concedes that.

Smith: Really.

Carlucci: And that's why Scowcroft became national security advisor. They're different functions. It's been written in a couple of books, including George Schultz's book. George and I had some difficulties when I was national security advisor and he was secretary. He in essence took the view that the national security advisor shouldn't chair meetings, shouldn't meet foreign ambassadors and shouldn't travel. And I said that I did not sign up to be an executive secretary and said, "George, I'm just not going to pay any attention to that."

There was a certain amount of tension though George concludes in his book that I ended up being okay. But he said that he had some difficulty with the concept. There was always that tension. I think it's by and large a healthy

tension. At one point, George told the President he'd resign. And I went to the President and said to Ronald Reagan, "What do you want me to do?" And he said, "I don't want George to resign." So we tried to work it out and indeed we did.

But there's always some tension between the national security advisor and the secretary of state. But I think the President needs that tension in that they're different jobs. Secretary of State is out front, he's the public representative of the administration on public policy. The national security advisor is a coordinator, he shouldn't be running programs. He should be presenting policy choices to the President and seeing that the President's choice is implemented. That's a very different function than secretary of state, so I think they should be separate.

Smith: Well that dovetails with Ford's rationale. I mean, he had to reassure Kissinger that it was nothing personal, he wasn't being demoted. But Ford believed very strongly that they were two separate functions and that they complemented one another.

Carlucci: I agree with that.

Smith: I'm curious. When you were in Portugal, was General Franco still alive in Spain or did he die while you were there? He died in November '75.

Carlucci: He died while I was there. Portugal set the example for Spain. If Portugal hadn't gone democratic, it's really questionable whether Spain would've. And Spain set the pace for Latin America.

Smith: In terms of the evolution away from dictatorship to democracy?

Carlucci: Absolutely.

Smith: That's interesting. Do you give Franco any credit at all for in effect creating an environment where that peaceful evolution was possible?

Carlucci: I'm not enough of an expert on Spain to answer that question, honestly. I certainly give the king a lot of credit. Most Spaniards do. Whether Franco deserves some of the credit is over my pay grade.

Smith: I'd be interested because, even thirty years later, Spaniards are still adjusting, rewriting their history, redefining the meaning of the dictatorship. How do the Portuguese today deal with both the Salazar period and the Communist sequel?

Carlucci: The Portuguese are very proud, justifiably so, of their move to a democratic system. Here is a tiny country that had a vast empire. Divested itself of that empire; overthrew a fascist dictatorship; went to the brink of Communism well it was all but taken over by the Communists; went to the brink of civil war; drew back and installed a fully functioning democracy which has survived to this day. All in the space of two years with very little bloodshed. It's a remarkable achievement and it's a case where the credit is due to the people themselves. They did it. So they're justifiably proud of what they did.

Smith: The Angola situation, were you consulted at all? Hadn't Angola been a Portuguese colony?

Carlucci: Yes, and I had some dealings with the Portuguese on Angola, particularly the resettlement of the Portuguese refugees who fled Angola. There was quite a number of them. And it was a difficult issue for Portugal to resettle them and we provided the air lift for them so I was involved to that extent.

Smith: And I believe it was in Angola where Congress actually voted to cut off funding for US support of anti-Communist forces.

Carlucci: That was the Tunney amendment. It was Tunney and there was one other senator in the Midwest, I can't remember his name, but there were two of them that pushed through that amendment.

Smith: Was that part of a broader post-Vietnam reaction?

Carlucci: Reaction against covert action of any kind.

Smith: Of all the messes Ford had to clean up the CIA, or at least forge a new identity in some ways for the agency. There was the Church Committee investigating. There were obviously a lot of stories appearing in the press about past abuses by the agency. How would you characterize that? Was it inevitable?

Carlucci: It was very damaging. Just like some of the things that are being done today are very damaging.

Smith: You see a parallel?

Carlucci: Oh, yes. Damaging to the morale because people say, "If we obey orders and we're going to be investigated by some subsequent administration, why should we take any risks?" And the Church Committee led to the phrase, I'm not sure who exactly coined it, 'rogue elephant.' If you read the Church Committee hearings, you'll find out that the CIA was anything but a 'rogue elephant.' The actions that people are critical of, the toothpaste for Lumumba and cigars for Castro, were basically ordered from the top level of the administration and the CIA was simply ordered to implement them. And the case for the poisoned toothpaste for Lumumba - the CIA man in Leopoldville - I was there at the time working with him. He simply put the toothpaste in a safe and forgot about it. He wouldn't carry out that order.

So it's a serious mistake to blame the CIA personnel for implementing what an administration orders them to do, particularly if they get opinions from the Justice Department that say it's legal.

Smith: '76 is the Reagan challenge to Ford. You were in Portugal and out of politics?

Carlucci: I was totally uninvolved.

Smith: When did you come back?

Carlucci: I didn't come back from Portugal until the Carter administration when I was made deputy director of Central Intelligence.

Smith: Did you see Ford at all in his later years?

Carlucci: I saw him at social occasions. There was an annual dinner that they had in Washington where I saw him. I think I saw him once on a train; he was traveling with Frank Zarb. But it was sporadic contact.

Smith: Let me ask you maybe an awkward question. Obviously there was a very intense fight between Reagan and Ford in '76 and there was some speculation

briefly that Ford might challenge Reagan in '80. As someone who was in the Reagan administration at very high level positions, did you have any sense about the relationship that existed or did not exist? We've gotten conflicting reports as to whether there were some lingering hard feelings... whether Ford was kind of a non-person.

Carlucci: I can honestly say I never heard Ronald Reagan even speak of Jerry Ford. When it looked like we were going to get into serious negotiations with the then Soviet Union, Howard Baker said to me, "Frank, you'd better prepare President Reagan." And knowing Ronald Reagan absorbed the spoken word better than the written word, I asked him if I could bring some people in and he said, "Who are you thinking of?" And I said, "Well, how about Kissinger?" He said 'no.' "How about Brzezinski?" He said 'yes.' And it occurred to me, I said, "How about Richard Nixon?" He said, "By all means, bring him in first." And we smuggled Richard Nixon into the White House. I've got a picture of it downstairs. And he and Reagan and Howard Baker and I spent an hour together discussing the Soviet Union. Reagan felt a companionship with Nixon, but he wouldn't have said, "Bring Ford in." And it just wouldn't have occurred to me to suggest it either. It just wasn't that kind of relationship.

Smith: Yeah. How do you think President Ford should be remembered?

Carlucci: By a grateful nation for the courageous act he took in saving our country. Our country was in deep trouble and to have a man of his integrity and courage step up to a non-elected presidency and make the decisions he made is a blessing for all of us. I think he should be remembered with great respect and reverence.

Smith: That's perfect. Can't do better than that.

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