

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**Frank Ursomarso**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
**September 23, 2010**

Smith: Thanks so much for doing this. We really appreciate it. Tell us a little bit about your background.

Ursomarso: I was an advance man for President Nixon. Two people I went to college with worked in the White House. One was Fred Fielding, who later became famous as the legal counsel to Reagan and Bush. And the other one was Sally Brinkerhoff, who I went to school with and she was working in the advance office. So, she said, "Why don't you volunteer and help us?" So, I volunteered doing trips for Julie and Trisha and the president.

Smith: We were talking to one of your colleagues yesterday who volunteered the observation that Julie was the 'good' daughter.

Ursomarso: Julie was great.

Smith: People have always said Julie was the best campaigner in the family.

Ursomarso: Yes, in fact, I wish she had run for governor of Pennsylvania or some office, but she never wanted to do that, so she never did. Anyway, at that time, Red (Cavaney) was in the advance office and so I got to know Red. And then Richard Nixon resigned and President Ford came into office. I had one more trip that I was doing as a volunteer, but now it became a Jerry Ford trip.

Smith: You had not, for example, worked on any of the vice presidential trips?

Ursomarso: I did some, but not very many.

Smith: Okay.

Ursomarso: So, Don Rumsfeld became chief of staff at that point and I said to Don, "If you want me to, I'll come in full-time." And he said, "Yeah, that'd be great. Come in." So, I joined full-time and then Red became the chief of advance. Of course, I was in there with Bob Goodwin and some other people.

Smith: Let me ask you a question, because it sounds like you'd be in a good position to comment on this. Clearly, one of the challenges that the new president faced was meshing a White House staff that was still overwhelmingly Nixon people with his own people from the Hill and others, like Rumsfeld, who were brought in from the outside.

Ursomarso: Sure.

Smith: How much strain was there between the old crowd, for lack of a better word, and the newcomers?

Ursomarso: I would say there was considerable stress. And, I think it was caused in part by the fact that the Nixon people had been trained a certain way and operated in a certain culture. President Ford's beliefs and his culture were different.

Smith: How so?

Ursomarso: Well, he did not believe that anyone should be impolite or heavy-handed, that anyone should do anything that was not proper, and he was very interested in being a more open president. He didn't want to be protected in a cocoon. He wanted to be non-imperial. So, the old group was in one culture. I had not been a full-time Nixon person, so when I came in, I was a Jerry Ford person. So, I listened to him and I listened to Don and tried to get a sense of what the President wanted and listened to the President himself because he would tell you.

Smith: We've been told that, among other things, he made it very clear that he did not want local people inconvenienced or for lack of a better word, stomped on as sometimes can happen with Big Foot coming out of Washington.

Ursomarso: Well, sure. Absolutely. The problem was, though, that many of the Nixon people had the experience and the background, so when you looked for somebody new to replace a Nixon person, you might've come up with another Nixon person. And that was a problem. And there was quite a bit of tension between Bob Hartmann, the speechwriting operation—

Smith: We've talked to a number of people about Bob. Clearly, he was a polarizing figure. I'm wondering, to begin with, if there's a very thin line between being protective and being possessive. He had always seen himself, understandably, as protective of Jerry Ford, sometimes protecting Jerry Ford from his own instincts... whether that shaded over into a kind of possessiveness that didn't translate from the Hill to the White House.

Ursomarso: Well, you've summed it up exactly as I see it in my mind. You have the feeling that staff people for congressmen may not necessarily be presidential staff people. And Bob Hartmann wasn't warm and fuzzy. He wasn't grumpy, but he was just—

Smith: We've heard 'gruff'.

Ursomarso: Gruff is a good word. I'll give you one example. When we were on the road, we would have to be up at a certain time to be at the motorcade, let's say, at 8 a.m. So, we'd get to the motorcade and everybody's there including the President, but Hartmann is not. So, the President would say, "Go find him" and the motorcade would wait while I would go find him. And, of course, he might've overslept. But then I learned that I had to go before and get him up and make sure he was up and ready to go because it wasn't fair to keep the President waiting. And then he said to me, "I appreciate that you've taken an interest in me." And the President was happier because, you know, we could go. So, he was a friend of the President. They had a relationship which I think was good. He wasn't afraid to speak to the President and tell him his mind, which I value. I think that's a virtue.

Smith: And maybe that answers my next question because, as you know, it got to the point where Ford, in effect, had dueling speechwriting operations.

Ursomarso: Right.

Smith: Which, on the face of it, doesn't make a lot of sense organizationally. It raises the question: what was it about that relationship that caused the president of the United States to, in effect, tolerate the situation? Can you be too nice to be a president?

Ursomarso: Well, the President was nice, but he was very strong-willed and very stubborn when he needed to be. I guess the best example I think you've spoken about was the speech when Nixon resigned, and whether to include the words "our long national nightmare has ended." And Hartmann was the one who said to the President, "No, you have to put this in here because this isn't more than reality and this is what you need to say." So, he would stand there and speak to the President, tell him his mind, and hold his ground, which, as you know and I've seen and you probably have, when people go into the Oval Office of the president, they melt. I mean, they just turn into pabulum and they don't present their views and won't hold their ground, which can be a very difficult situation. But Hartmann wasn't that way. Jack Marsh wasn't that way. Of course, Don Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney. I have some pictures of Dick Cheney and the President going at it pretty hard over certain issues.

Smith: Talk about stubborn – we're jumping out of sequence, but that's the nature of the beast here – but the famous incident following the Polish gaffe and the efforts made by numerous people, including Cheney, over the better part of a week to get the President to back down.

Ursomarso: Correct.

Smith: And Cheney, among others, has told about all but being tossed out of the office.

Ursomarso: Oh, yeah, but he argued the case. But that is an example of the President's stubbornness. In his mind, he knew what he thought he had said and he couldn't connect up what was happening with the press and their interpretation. That period of time I remember distinctly. We wasted some days and we lost our momentum in the campaign as a result of that. When he came out of the debate and was getting into the car, I think Dick talked to him and, right at that point, he was indicating that we had a problem, but the President wasn't focused on that the way he should've been.

Smith: And you wonder whether he was feeling good about getting through the thing. And then, of course, Kissinger pours kerosene on the fire by telling him what a brilliant job he did, playing the courtier.

Ursomarso: Right. I don't know if you've interviewed the political consultant.

Smith: Stu Spencer?

Ursomarso: Stu Spencer.

Smith: We spent six hours with Stu Spencer.

Ursomarso: Well, Stu was a very astute political person and he quickly would get in. And if he'd listen to Stu, who was there with Dick – we were all there, Red was there – and hadn't turned himself around, I think it would've had a more positive impact than that.

Smith: Do you remember where you were? Were you out there for the debate?

Ursomarso: Yes. I was the advance man for all the debates.

Smith: Did you know instantly when you heard it that you had a problem?

Ursomarso: Yeah, I was in the holding room where there was a television screen. We were there.

Smith: Was Brent Scowcroft part of that group?

Ursomarso: Yes.

Smith: Because Brent talks about how he knew instantly.

Ursomarso: Yeah, he knew. We knew when he got to the car, when he was going, an instant antenna had gone up.

Smith: If you go back and look at the tape, the amazing thing is that Max Frankel gave the President three chances to pull back.

Ursomarso: He did. To his credit.

Smith: Very generous.

Ursomarso: Pretty generous. But that then just reinforces, when the President was stubborn and he got his mind set, it was difficult to change his mind.

Smith: Did you ever see his temper?

Ursomarso: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Smith: What would cause it?

Ursomarso: Well, there were two times that I saw it. During the campaign, he would stand on the back of the train and make a speech. It was the last speech of the day - it must've been about 7:30 or 8 o'clock at night, its dark, and there's like 10 people at the back of the train listening - and he's up there giving this speech. So, I went over to the steps and I pulled his cuff indicating to stop and he kicked me. I mean, you know, he was an old football player. You know he wasn't fooling around. And he didn't have any voice, he couldn't talk anymore, nobody was there, it was dark, the press had finally gone, and he was still at it. So, that was one manifestation of his temper.

Smith: Was that late in the campaign?

Ursomarso: That was the last few days of the campaign.

Smith: Okay.

Ursomarso: The other thing he would do is he would bite on his pipe and you could see his jaw move. He wouldn't necessarily say something, but his demeanor would change. He'd bite on the pipe and sit there and you knew he was steaming. And, oftentimes, that would happen when other people were present, not staff people, but guests or when we were in some meeting or something and so you had to figure out what was bothering him and try and find a route to a solution, if there was one.

Smith: What were the things that bothered him? We were talking to Mary Fisher. She remembered one day, for some reason they were leaving without the

newspapers, the local papers, something as minor as that. But he was a newspaper addict.

Ursomarso: He was. Well, if he was tired, he could be not on an event keel. On the campaign trail, I would water down his drinks. I mean, I would make sure he didn't get a strong drink so that he could make the speech that he had to make and sit through the dinner. And he would get mad.

Smith: He knew it'd been watered down?

Ursomarso: Yeah, he did. He'd say to me, "Get me a real drink."

Smith: That's interesting you say that. Is it fair to say everyone drank a lot more then?

Ursomarso: Oh, absolutely. Reporters, political people, everybody. They smoked and they drank. Now, Jerry Ford liked to play cards, so at Thunderbird, he would play golf and then they would go in the locker room and he would play cards with Leon Parma and that crowd. So, they played cards, they drank a little more, and they smoked.

Smith: What did he drink?

Ursomarso: He'd drink a martini. That was a good drink for him. Sometimes, he'd drink a gin and tonic if it was hot.

Smith: I know you were on the other end of it, but we talked to someone about Bob Dole. Hal Bruno was in the room with Bob Dole after the vice presidential debate and a call comes through. It's the President and he's had a couple pops, is how I'll put it. His voice is just a little slurry and he's telling Bob what a great job he did and so on. And Bob Dole thanked him and as soon as he hung up, he said, "I wonder what debate he watched."

Ursomarso: I think the drinking was for relaxation. Now, I remember one time, Air Force One landed in San Diego and the door came open and I was standing at the bottom. It wasn't a crowd scene. It was what we call the official off-stage. He comes down the ramp and his fly is open. And I walked up and I said,

“Mr. President, how are you?” He said, “Oh, I’m fine.” And I said, “Your fly is open.” I knew what had happened. He’d been on the plane and, like you would do before you get off the plane, you go to the bathroom. Then, somebody probably distracted him and he got off. So, he would do funny things like that.

Smith: Did he thank you for it?

Ursomarso: Well, he kind of gave me, you know, the look.

Smith: Describe his sense of humor.

Ursomarso: Great. Just great. Loved to listen to a joke, tell a joke, and laugh. The other day, I said to Jack Ford, “You know, I miss your father’s laugh because he would just let loose.” His voice was a little higher pitched, as you know, and I could just hear him in all these different hotels and holding rooms and on the airplane. And he was a very easy laugher. He was enjoying himself. He enjoyed himself. He enjoyed people.

Smith: He liked people.

Ursomarso: He did. He did. We would set these crowd scenes up and we would have it set so maybe he was supposed to do this much and he would want to do the whole line, just like with the Rangerettes. He didn’t want to say ‘hi’ to one, he wanted to say ‘hi’ to them all.

Smith: Now that you’ve mentioned it, tell us the story about the Rangerettes. This was, I assume, at the time of the Texas primary?

Ursomarso: Yes, this was in Texas during the campaign. In Texas, there’s a town called Tyler and Tyler and an adjoining town, Kilgore, have Rangerettes, who are like cheerleaders but they’re dressed up in cowboy outfits with short skirts and cowboy hats. So, he was going to Tyler Junior College to give a speech - a pretty good speech, as I recall - and, after that, he went outside. I had the Rangerettes lined up in the sun and gave him a cowboy hat to wear, which he put right on. And he started going down the line and the first Rangerette

kissed him. He kind of looks around and he went down the whole line and kissed, I would say, fifty Rangerettes and he had lipstick all over his face.

Smith: This was not in the schedule?

Ursomarso: No. And the girls were delighted. I mean, they loved it. It wasn't him kissing them, they were kissing him. And he looked great, this big, tall guy and the girls looked great and he was walking around with them. So, then we go to the helicopter and he turns to Terry and he says, "Terry, I've got to do something. I'm in trouble." We said, "Well, what?" He said, "Well, when I get back, Betty's going to see that and she's going to be mad." So, we said, "Well, we'll order up some flowers and when you go to the White House, you can give her some flowers and maybe she won't be so mad." He said, "Okay. Okay, I'll do that." But, he would get into it. We would create these events like the one with someone playing Abraham Lincoln for the train. He would love to do things like that. Loved children.

Smith: Stunts.

Ursomarso: Yeah. I have one picture when an elephant attacked him. There was a movie star named Connors.

Smith: Chuck Connors.

Ursomarso: Chuck Connors the rifleman.

Smith: Yes.

Ursomarso: So the picture is him, Connors, and an elephant. Well, the elephant trunk starts attacking the president and he's beating back the elephant and laughing.

Smith: How appropriate considering what he was going through with the primary challenge.

Ursomarso: Yes. He would get into these things.

- Smith: Let me ask you a question and I realize its pure conjecture. There's still a debate over whether the Reagan challenge ironically wound up making the President a better candidate.
- Ursomarso: I understand. Well, go back to New Hampshire. Reagan was a candidate in New Hampshire. Red sent me up to New Hampshire because we would do the events, but when we'd do pre-advances, we would do surveys. So, I went up to New Hampshire and went to two or three Reagan speeches and listened to them and tried to extract out what exactly was happening so I could come back and they could craft our counter measures or what we were going to do in New Hampshire. We worked on that pretty hard.
- Smith: So, this would pass for opp research?
- Ursomarso: Yeah, opposition research. This would be what you did in those days. You'd go out – I didn't do anything bad or illegal, I just was sitting in the audience and I would listen to him make the speeches. And the President won New Hampshire.
- Smith: It was very close.
- Ursomarso: Yeah.
- Smith: In retrospect, do you think that the White House was slow to realize, first of all, that Reagan was serious about running, and, secondly, how formidable a challenger he might be?
- Ursomarso: I think, as a general statement, candidates are slow to understand the significance of their competitor's strengths. We just saw that with Mike Castle and Christine O'Donnell. Now, the other piece you have is, because you're president in the White House, you have a double insulating bar, so you've got double insulation. It's like R-18 insulation and so that is a factor. To give you an idea of the isolation of a president, when he went to Helsinki - we had this forty nation conference - and we were standing there and I said, "Mr. President, do you want a mint?" And, at that time, there were like little plastic things that held mints and you had to flip the top. I gave it to him and

he looked at it. And he had no idea how to open it because he had not been in the store, had not driven a car; he had no contact with everyday reality. So, you take that small incident and you move it up and now you have a situation where it's difficult for a president to maintain contact. But he had a secret weapon; he had Betty Ford and he had young children.

Smith: Tell me about their influence.

Ursomarso: Well, they were people who were not staff or their friends, so to speak, on his side, who could speak as they wished. And they did. And, I take that to be something that was a definite asset.

Smith: Did you see examples of that? Mrs. Ford famously said, for example, in the *60 Minutes* interview when Morley Safer said, creeping around the subject, "Do you ever tell him, 'Honey, you weren't very good today?'" She said, "Oh, all the time."

Ursomarso: I think that the relationship they had was a good one. I heard her say things to him like you're talking about. I heard her make suggestions on issues that were contrary to what you would think, but, as you know, there was a problem for a period of time in terms of her being overmedicated.

Smith: Was this something you were aware of at the time?

Ursomarso: Oh, yeah, absolutely. I have a picture there of his doctor - I don't know if you've interviewed Dr. Lukash or did he pass?

Smith: He did.

Ursomarso: He was his physician and I think he took care of the President and Mrs. Ford. I'm not a physician, but I know when a person is on the ball or not. And I think she had a period of time when there was too much medication in her. The other thing would happen was, they, as a couple, wouldn't always communicate essential information between each other. So, you had Mrs. Ford who, in effect, had her own staff in the East Wing. We're over there in the West Wing. And I made the assumption that things were occurring in terms of conversation which did not occur and then she would sometimes say,

“What’s going on? What are we doing?” And I’d say, “Well, didn’t he tell you?” And she’d say, “No.”

Smith: Talking about opposites attracting. He was the most punctual of men and she was never on time for anything in her life. We’ve heard all sorts of wonderful stories in the family about how everyone worked around Mrs. Ford. There’s Mrs. Ford time and everyone else’s time.

Ursomarso: She was ready when she was ready.

Smith: Yeah.

Ursomarso: That’s kind of what it was.

Smith: Was it a kind of perfectionism?

Ursomarso: No. She was a dancer; she was interested in the arts. Those aren’t precision crafts in the sense of a businessman. She wasn’t used to a schedule in the sense that she had to be at a certain spot at a certain time. He was trained in the sense that business and politics train you to be that way. And I think many successful executives or politicians have the same problem because the wife just doesn’t understand. The other thing is that much of their social life was work. I mean, their time was taken up doing political events, doing White House events, big dinners. It sounds like it’s glamorous, and it is. It sounds like its glorious, but you’ve got to show and you just can’t say, “Well, I’m going to stay home tonight and read a book or be alone.”

Smith: Let me ask you in a broader sense your sense of what the mood generally was when she did the famous *60 Minutes* interview. In this town, everyone always fights the last war. And particularly with the prospect of the challenge from the Right, there was an immediate, almost kneejerk reaction, “Oh, my God. What has she done?” But it didn’t take terribly long for some poll numbers and mail to come in that suggested that, “Maybe she’s on to something. Maybe she has a constituency out there that we were perhaps overlooking.” And, particularly for an administration that defined itself by the effort to be

open, to be honest - she, in some ways, came to symbolize that trait more than anyone else.

Ursomarso: I think that's right. When a person genuinely tells the truth about their beliefs, it's apparent. It's clear. So, in other words, this wasn't a political maneuver, it wasn't a subterfuge, it wasn't a concocted thing. She was simply stating her opinion. And he respected her intelligence. He respected her individuality and the fact that she stated her position, which was contrary to what a politician would've said. It became a good thing. And people see it.

Smith: Was there an initial reaction?

Ursomarso: There's always people running around throwing their hands up and saying 'Oh, my God. Why?' You have to 'Whoa. Time out. Let's see what happens.' But, I think his opinion was she was entitled to her opinion and she was entitled, in his mind, to say it.

Smith: And the same with his children?

Ursomarso: Well, the kids, sometimes he would try and beat them down a little bit, but as far as she was concerned, he wasn't going to manage her.

Smith: We all think of the Fords as the most normal family in the White House, but you stop and think, here's Jack, who's got Bianca Jagger hanging around...

Ursomarso: That was David Kennerly. I don't think it was Jack.

Smith: Well, okay. He was a virtual member of the family, right?

Ursomarso: Yeah, David. Yeah.

Smith: Yeah.

Ursomarso: Yeah. I mean, I was on Air Force One once and the phone rings. The steward comes back and says, "David, you've got a phone call." And I said, "Who is it, David?" And he says, "Bianca Jagger." I said, "What the hell is she doing calling Air Force One?" So, I wouldn't give that to Jack. I'd give that to David.

Smith: But the kids, I mean, Mike was always off—

Ursomarso: Quiet.

Smith: Quiet and doing his thing.

Ursomarso: Yeah. Great.

Smith: And Susan was a teenager growing up in the White House.

Ursomarso: She was. Pete Sorem would tell this story. Pete Sorem has passed, but he was an advance man for Mrs. Ford. I'll tell this story quickly. He had gone with Susan to a dance and his beeper goes off. He goes to the White House phone and picks it up and says, "Hello" and he said, "This is the President. Tell Susan to come home. It's almost twelve o'clock." He says, "Okay." He puts the phone down and goes out to Susan and says, "Susan, your father called and he wants you to go home now." And she said, "Well, I'm not ready." She doesn't go. So, here you have the most powerful figure in the world trying to get his daughter to come home from a dance and she says 'no'. And that's what I mean about the family bringing him down and making him stay grounded.

Smith: That's a perfect segue because, in the eulogy, I talked about how most of us, as we get older, almost unthinkingly tend to get a little more conservative. Maybe it's when we have something more to conserve, we get a little more conservative. And my sense with him was he always remained a fiscal conservative. I mean, a true blue, veto-wielding conservative. But on a lot of 'social issues' - part of it was the Party moved so far to the Right, but it wasn't just that. I don't think he just stayed where he was. I've often wondered whether it was the influence of Mrs. Ford, whether it was the influence of the kids, and/or two other things. One, because he was so involved with her in the work of the Betty Ford Center, he saw all of these good, decent, honorable people who happened to have a problem. And it was all about fixing their problem, not passing judgment on them for having a problem. And the final factor, I've often wondered, was the Reagan challenge. He talked often about the 'hard Right.' Whether that in some ways

made it easier for him to move, for lack of a better word, a little bit to the Left. It wasn't just abortion or the ERA. To this day, he's the only president who signed a gay rights petition. I mean, he took positions that you did not expect, given his profile in the White House.

Ursomarso: Well, I have the back door into that, because I was Reagan's first director of communications in 1981 and I had come through this period. And as I recall, in 1975, the unemployment rate was 9.1% and inflation was 11%. Today, it's 9.5% and inflation is zero. Jerry Ford proposed the tax cut. Didn't get exactly what he wanted, but he got the tax cut. So, the question is, was Jerry Ford a conservative? And, in my view, he was a moderate conservative.

Smith: Yeah.

Ursomarso: Ronald Reagan, on the other hand, articulated a more conservative position on certain core issues. So, how far were they separated? I don't think they were as far apart as one would think.

Smith: Right.

Ursomarso: I think, as a result of how Jerry Ford came into the presidency unelected, and hadn't had the benefit of a campaign to hone the issues, and Ronald Reagan who, on the other hand, had been campaigning for twenty years, had honed his issues down to a pretty narrow target. President Ford was trying to deal with all these other issues, you know, the gasoline, petroleum, inflation, and all the issues that were out there. He was not set at one ideology point. I credit him for having the ability to maneuver and to better understand the congressional force that was at his tail.

Smith: Plus, remember, on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1974, ideology was the last of his concerns. It was all about restoring the basic trust of the American people in their government.

Ursomarso: Yes, of the constitutional government which we have. I believe that as a president is stronger – if you have a person like Ronald Reagan pushing you, if you have a Congress which is not all yours. I think Obama today is weaker

in some respects than if he had one of the Houses controlled by the opposite party as Richard Nixon had. So, I think your point is correct. If you have a force which is pushing you and forcing you to define who you are with the voters and define your issues, that's helpful. It isn't helpful when you lose.

Smith: Exactly. One of the things that has come out of this project is that Ford wasn't the kind of guy to actively nurse a grudge.

Ursomarso: No.

Smith: But, clearly, not very far below the surface, and you didn't have to scratch very deep - there was a resentment about what he thought Reagan didn't do for him in the fall campaign in '76.

Ursomarso: Well, he said he would help and he really didn't. He just laid back. Now, I don't think that was a calculated maneuver. I think that Mrs. Reagan didn't have the desire to push and so she held him back.

Smith: Stan Anderson, who ran the convention, told us the night of the acceptance speech that the President sent him up to the Reagan box to get the Reagans to come down. And, before he could finish the sentence, he heard her say, "Don't do it, Ronnie." I mean, clearly, there were bruised feelings at that point; I'm sure, on both sides.

Ursomarso: There always are. I mean, I remember having dinner with George Bush, the father, after he'd lost the election and he was just absolutely upset and agitated. And I said, "Gee whiz, can't you just get past it?" He said, "No, I can't get past it." So, it is very deeply felt.

Smith: And, in fact, in the case of President Ford, there are a number of people who told us it took him a while to bounce back.

Ursomarso: It did.

Smith: Did you see that?

Ursomarso: Yes, because after he left office, I did a couple of trips and I remember one time going up to the room to get him and he had his jacket off and he was

laying on the sofa in this room. He was just laying back. And I said, “Are you ready to go?” And he said, “Not really. I’m not ready to go.” And I said, “What’s the matter?” And he said, “Geez, I’m just kind of not feeling up to it.” And I said, “I can understand that because of what you’ve went through, but you’re a past president. You still have people who like you and they’re expecting to see you, so let’s go down.” And he said, “Yeah, yeah, you’re right. I shouldn’t be feeling sorry for myself.”

Smith: That’s something.

Ursomarso: He said that and he knew. I mean, he was intelligent. He knew he was going through a phase. I think, also, he went through phases - he felt his children’s issues and problems. He so cared for his children that when they were having things, it impacted him as a father.

Smith: It’s fascinating you say that, because I’ve often wondered if there wasn’t some unspoken kind of guilt. He’d been away so much when they were growing up. Just the nature of the work. He wasn’t unlike a number of other executives in that generation.

Ursomarso: Well, I was that way. I left my kids and my wife and went out and did politics. There are people who do that. I don’t know if he regretted that. I mean, isn’t there this story – I wasn’t there when he was getting married – that he left his wedding reception to go give a speech? I think he did. No, it was his rehearsal dinner and he left to go give a speech. I think that’s correct. But I don’t think that he was regretful. One of the things that Red may tell you and I noticed was every week he wanted to do something. He wanted to go someplace. He had to have an event and I remember one time Red and I were talking with him and we said, “We don’t have anything on the schedule.” And he said, “Well, why not?” And he sort of gave Red a little bit of a thing and said, “No, I want events every week. I want to go.” So, in his mind, that was part of who he was as a politician and he had to go out and do those things. The concept of leaving your wife home to take the kids in my generation, that was okay.

Smith: Yeah.

Ursomarso: It wasn't like today where the wife works. That's what you did. Your wife stayed back there and handled it.

Smith: Sure. Before we move on, I want to nail one thing down. In asking whether Reagan made him a better candidate, specifically, someone who had never run outside of a safe district, imbued with the values and the style, if you will, of West Michigan, forced to become a better communicator. Did Reagan's challenge force Ford to become a better speaker, to devote time and energy to things he hadn't done in the past?

Ursomarso: Well, did you interview before he passed Bill Caruthers? Did you ever get to him?

Smith: No.

Ursomarso: Bill Caruthers was, for lack of a better word, what was called the president's television advisor. It was Bill Caruthers and a man named Mark Goode. I think both have passed. And they were out of Hollywood. They had originally worked for Nixon and they were high-powered television people. I mean, they knew lighting and they knew this and they knew that. But they also knew how to present yourself. So, I believe that Bill and Mark worked with the President on some issues of clothing, some physical appearance issues.

Smith: Mrs. Ford said he was so proud of the fact that he had suits that were older than his kids.

Ursomarso: Yeah, he did. He had terrible sports coats that were just like pants and the things you used to wear. So, they worked with him. Now, you go back to this battle among the speechwriters - that was a battle not only on issues, but it was a battle on style, it was a battle on presentation. In the advance office, one of the things that we had to do is present him in the best light that we could. So, that meant did we have to rehearse a speech, did we have to rehearse for the debates, did we have to define the words a little better. We

all worked on that to the extent we could, so that was part of what we did to make him look as good as he can. I believe he did grow. I believe he developed. He realized that he wasn't a congressman anymore, that he wasn't going to events with twenty-five people. I mean, we put thousands and thousands of people in and he knew he had to perform to a standard. So, I believe that I saw him grow.

Smith: That raises a larger question about the Ford presidency. There's lots of ways of looking at it, but it seems one reasonable way is the trajectory of someone, not unlearning his congressional skills - keeping the best of those - because that's who he was, but learning to be an executive.

Ursomarso: Right. See, he didn't have that training. A congressman doesn't have that because you're not directing. Now, I will say that it's fortunate that he had Don Rumsfeld, who was a very good executive. Dick Cheney was a very good executive. He had some people around him. Red was one. Terry O'Donnell. Jack Marsh.

Smith: We've been told that Rumsfeld was his coach in many ways.

Ursomarso: He was. They had a relationship going back to when they were in the Congress together, which was a very good relationship because they had gone through some political wars. They understood each other. My relationship with Don Rumsfeld, I believe, has led me to conclude that he is an honorable man. People say, "Well, he only had himself." I don't believe that. When he was working for the President, he came in there and I believe he did his darnedest to make sure that the President looked and acted and made the decisions that he should have made in a timely way. So, I give him more respect than some of these commentators.

The same with Dick Cheney. One example would be, someone would come up to the President and say, "Can you come and visit?" or "Can I do something?" And he instinctively said 'yes' when he should've said 'no,' because he was trained. Oftentimes, Terry and I and Red would try to get in between him or keep people a little bit distant so they wouldn't hit him

because he would always say 'yes' and then we had to undo it. And then he stopped that after awhile. He grew. He realized that he couldn't do that anymore. He didn't have the time and there were other things he should be doing. So, he learned that. He learned how to give a better speech.

You've probably seen the speeches that were on the half of a page. They never typed the speech down the whole page. Terry would carry this book with the speech in it and there was only half. So, he learned to look up and not to read to the bottom of the page. He learned to look up. He learned not to have a drink before he was going to give a speech. You know, all those things, he did.

Smith: Presumably, one of the first lessons you learn, maybe painfully, is that every single word that comes out of a president's mouth matters in a way that's not true with a House Minority Leader.

Ursomarso: That's right. That's exactly right, because you have the press pool that's right at your throat and they're there all the time.

Smith: But he got along with reporters.

Ursomarso: He did. He loved them! His instinct would be to go over and talk to them and we would have to say, "No, no, no, no. This is a campaign. We're moving." He would want to go and talk. In Palm Springs, we had some cocktail parties around the pool and we would invite all the press over. He'd be scheduled to be there for maybe forty minutes and he'd stay there. Walter Cronkite was there and all these reporters and he would just have a hell of a time. Enjoy himself and talk to everybody. That's who he was. There was no 'I'm better than you' or any of that with them. The other thing he liked was, you know, he'd gone to the University of Michigan and Bo Schembechler was the coach and he liked to go to the locker room and liked to go see the rehearsals and then he'd talk to the players.

Smith: It's funny. I never saw it, but we've talked to a number of people who did it became almost an annual event, usually close to the Ohio game. But he'd find a way to be back in Ann Arbor and invariably give a pep talk. And it was

like a different person speaking. He was eloquent and persuasive - just a whole different level of discourse.

Ursomarso: Yeah, I think that because he had a higher-pitched voice, I think that was a factor because, when you listened to him, he was up higher than some of the other public figures. But, in terms of his persuasive ability to tell a story or to tell a joke, I think he was more than adequate, much more.

Smith: Did you see any of the incidents that bothered him (or didn't bother him) - you know, the caricature that Chevy Chase produced?

Ursomarso: Well, I was the advance man for the Salzburg trip and I was standing right there at the bottom. He came all the way down the steps. There were three steps left and he fell on three bottom steps because, when he came, he came right at the military aide and me, and the military aide got him. He didn't fall down the whole steps, but if you look at the news reels and you listen to the stories, it looks like he came out the door and fell down all the steps. Of course, you know what he said when we asked him what happened. He said, "Well, Jerry, didn't you see it?" And he said, "Well, Betty pushed me." That's what he said. So, he had a sense of humor about it. In actuality, what happened was the heel came off his shoe, it separated from his shoe, and caused him to slip because it was raining.

Smith: Plus, he's holding an umbrella.

Ursomarso: He's holding an umbrella for her.

Smith: Over her.

Ursomarso: Correct. Which was what he was trying to do and he wasn't balanced, but as the old football player, when he fell, he rolled with it. He didn't stiffen up or anything. He wasn't hurt.

Smith: There's a wonderful sequel to that. There were some quick to blame the photographers. And the classic Ford response was, "Of course they took the picture. They would've lost their job if they hadn't."

Ursomarso: Yeah. So, his sense of humor was intact on the thing. No president that I've worked for watches where he walks. They all don't look and they have a tendency to misstep. That's why the president's movements are choreographed down to the foot. And, if you go back to the library, you'll see diagrams that are in the files there where we've diagramed every step that the president's going to take and, in some cases, built ramps if we had to because they don't look. Nixon was that way. Ford was that way. Reagan was that way. All the ones that I've been close to were that way.

Smith: When he got up, was he embarrassed?

Ursomarso: Well, you know, he's there, but he had to make this speech and he got up and did it. It didn't faze him. So, I don't think that the criticism was correct. Now, the other side is, he then had other missteps that he took, but they were for lack of attention. He was thinking about something else and he would stumble or he would fall. In the case of the assassination attempt in Sacramento, if you watch the video, you'll see we immediately began a run. I mean, a sprint.

Smith: Let's walk through that. That morning, as I understand it, it was sort of an almost impromptu decision. It was a beautiful day.

Ursomarso: No, no. I was the advance man. It wasn't impromptu. I had sent in to the advance office a chart just like I'm talking about which said he was going to walk through the park.

Smith: From the hotel?

Ursomarso: From the hotel. I'd sent it in for approval. What happened was, I said, "If it's a nice day and if things are looking good, let's go through the park. That takes us back to that desire to be a more open president and be with the people." And, so, I sent the chart in for Red and Dick Cheney and everybody to approve it. And they didn't come back and say, "Don't do it." So, that morning, when he was finished - I think we had a morning meeting - I said to the president, "Mr. President, do you want to go through the park or do you want to go in the car?" And he said, "No, hey, I'd like to walk." He said,

“That would be more fun.” And I said, “Well, there’s some people out there. Let me get with the Secret Service.” Larry Buendorf was the lead agent and they had put up some barrels and ropes, so we walked. It was my idea and it didn’t turn out as well. Anyway, he was enthusiastic for it and we did it.

Smith: Walk us through that scene. Were you part of that group?

Ursomarso: Well, we started to walk and we’re going through this park which is in front of the capitol. It’s like a grassy area.

Smith: He’s on his way to see Governor Brown?

Ursomarso: No, he’s on his way to make a speech before the legislature and see the governor, which were the couple of events that were going on. So, as we’re going to the park, Larry saw this woman out of the corner of his eye. She had a red hood on. I saw her because I was right beside him. And then she came up with a gun.

Smith: Did you ever see the gun?

Ursomarso: I saw the gun.

Smith: You did?

Ursomarso: I saw the gun. Yeah. And Larry quickly reached over to grab the gun and this piece of skin got between, I think, the hammer and where the bullet would be. But instantly the Secret Service yells “Gun!” As soon as they yell “Gun!” they almost picked the President up and everybody and we just ran. Well, he’s running faster than anybody, the President is. I mean, he’s gone and we’re going. Then we got away and we slowed down.

Smith: Did he know?

Ursomarso: He knew something was up. I don’t think he saw the gun. I don’t know. I don’t think he did, but he saw her.

Smith: He saw her?

Ursomarso: He saw her. Well, he had to see her because she was kind of goofy. She had this red thing on her head or this red dress and everything. She just stood out.

Smith: Do you know if they ever shook hands?

Ursomarso: Well, we were shaking hands. He never got to her.

Smith: Okay.

Ursomarso: He never quite got to her because we kind of jumped and ran. So, we ran into the capitol and we went to the holding room. In the holding room was Don Rumsfeld, me, - I think I have a couple pictures - Ron Nessen, and the President. And we said, "Gee whiz, that wasn't very nice." And Don said, "Mr. President, are you okay? Are you shaken?" And the President said, "No, I think I'm okay. Nothing happened to me. I'd just like to freshen up for a minute." So, I think we gave him some water and let him wash his hands or maybe even go to the bathroom or something. I don't know. And so I said, "Don, I'm sorry. I didn't mean for that to happen." He said, "No, don't think about it. It wasn't your fault. You were trying to do what we wanted to do." And I said, "Well, I appreciate that." And Larry even came back and stood post. He just recovered and I guess some other agents hauled her away. I saw him come back and standing post. I said, "Larry, are you okay?" He said, "Well, my hand's all bloody." He showed me his hand, it was bandaged. And then the President went in and gave his speech. He went through the thing.

Smith: And never mentioned what had happened.

Ursomarso: No, he went through all those events. Then we got on Air Force One. I have a picture where he and I are sitting at the table on Air Force One having a drink and he's telling them his feelings on what happened and what he saw. And we're discussing the day as it went and he was fine. He was like it was something that happened and, like in football, there was a play and it wasn't a good play and he got up and went 'What's the next play?'

Smith: Presumably, he thanked Buendorf.

- Ursomarso: He did. He did thank him. I mean, he knew that Larry had reached out and got the lady. He thanked everybody.
- Smith: He always struck me - and it's a hugely admirable trait in every profession but politics - as the least self-dramatizing of men. I mean, the theater of politics was not his *métier*. He was who he was and he wouldn't pretend to be something else.
- Ursomarso: Right. The way I think about it is there are big ego presidents. Lyndon Johnson was big ego. He overpromised. Obama's big ego. The big ego presidents overpromise and under deliver. Jerry Ford under promised, in my opinion, and over delivered. Because he didn't have that big ego to feed.
- Smith: Then again, part of the modern presidency, call it public persuasion - there's a theatrical element. Classic example: he clearly practiced and practiced the acceptance speech. He understood the theater of that. Do you think he got more comfortable with that aspect of the presidency, the public performance part of it?
- Ursomarso: Yeah. I remember, the first State of the Union message that he delivered.
- Smith: When he famously said, "the state of the union is not good."
- Ursomarso: Right.
- Smith: Something no one will ever repeat.
- Ursomarso: He understood completely the role of the president, what that speech meant, what the role of the congressional audience played, the national audience. He knew the difference between speaking to a local audience and a national audience. He understood it because he wouldn't have said some of the things, I think, that he said in those speeches had he been talking to you or me or some other group. So, he clearly understood who he was speaking to. One of the initiatives that the presidents do and several have done and President Ford did is they try and go over the press and speak to the people. He understood that concept. He understood that if he had his message filtered through the press all the time, then he wasn't getting through. So a lot of these events that

we did, these crowd events, some foreign trips, we were “speaking over” and he understood that.

Smith: You mention foreign trips, so I have to ask you about the trip to Japan. Here’s history being made. Visiting our wartime enemy and meeting with the emperor and laying the groundwork for the first ever visit by a Japanese emperor to the United States. But, let’s face it; the only thing that people were interested in was the length of his pants.

Ursomarso: And that was an unfortunate mistake because, typically, the stewards deal with his clothing. He thought he had a suit of clothes which in reality he didn’t have. I mean, the clothing issue with President Ford is a whole subject.

Smith: Tell us about it.

Ursomarso: Well, he had sport coats and pants and shirts and a conglomeration of things that he wore. I think back in the 70s, weren’t we coming out of that disco phase with all those—?

Smith: Leisure suits.

Ursomarso: Leisure suits and everything else.

Smith: White belt, white buckles.

Ursomarso: Right, right. Now, I was on that trip to Japan. I went on that trip. I have some pictures there that I can show you. But he grew out of that; he finally got out of those clothes. Now, where those pants came from, I don’t quite understand how that could happen. But it happened.

Smith: Did anyone’s head roll? I mean, what was the consequence of that?

Ursomarso: No, I don’t think anybody’s head rolled. I mean, among us, it was funny in a sense. Didn’t seem to bother him as much as it should, but those kinds of things happen, I guess. I don’t know how. That would be Bob Barrett. You’d have to ask him because the military aide supervises the stewards. They’re military people. The people that run the White House mess are military. We’re civilian staff people, so that was in between our bailiwicks.

- Smith: Are there other foreign trips that sort of stand out?
- Ursomarso: Well, let's see. We did Japan, which was a lot of fun in many respects. We did Helsinki, which was the forty nation event. That was a monster event because there were forty heads of state that had to arrive at one location. And I said, "You know, if one of these agents starts firing his gun, this is over," because the agents were piled deep and security and heads of state and everything. I said, "This is chaos. We're going to go somewhere else." So we went underneath and came in down in the garage. I remember it wasn't where you wanted to be with too many people with guns. He did well on that trip. In fact, that trip was where he toasted with Brezhnev and I got the glasses and sent them to the library. I kept those two glasses. Of course, that was Kissinger and the President on the whole issue.
- Smith: And, remember, this is a classic example where he took a lot of heat at the time and, thirty years later, it's seen in an entirely different light.
- Ursomarso: He was right where he should've been. Now, he took that up because, I think, Nixon was SALT One. This was SALT Two coming in from a different phase, and they had some serious negotiations. We stayed in the ambassador's residence and we used the dining room for the negotiations and I was able to hear what they were doing. And they did very well. The Russians were pushing him around.
- Smith: He'd spent twenty-five years in the House Appropriations Committee, the Armed Services Committee, which apparently is the backdrop to the problem he had with Schlesinger. I mean, the chemistry was not—
- Ursomarso: Well, Schlesinger was a pure, unadulterated egomaniac. He didn't deserve to be in the same room with the President. It's a shame.
- Smith: Yeah. Condescending?
- Ursomarso: Yeah, he was condescending, he was surly, and he thought he was intellectually superior. All the things you can conjure up, he was just the

wrong man in the wrong position. President Ford did not suffer fools gladly, if you want to put it that way.

Smith: Especially fools who thought they were smarter than he was.

Ursomarso: Yeah, and that was the other thing, because, you know, people say he wasn't intelligent. He graduated from Yale Law School. He was as intelligent as anybody. Intelligence is made up of a different number of components. And President Ford could see through you. If you were not telling the truth and if you were not acting properly, or trying to throw your weight around, he didn't like that. That wasn't his style.

Smith: People talk about the Eagle Scout, and there's almost a little bit of condescension in that. He persuaded me, for example, he was genuinely shocked - not Claude Reins in Casablanca shocked v genuinely shocked that Richard Nixon lied to him.

Ursomarso: Well, sure.

Smith: And I think he would be shocked anyone would lie to him.

Ursomarso: Well, sure. The nation was shocked.

Smith: It wasn't in his vocabulary.

Ursomarso: Yeah. When you say he didn't hold a grudge, I think that is correct. He did not hold a grudge and he did not believe that people would be devious and that people would lie and that people would do things which just were not proper.

Smith: That raises a different kind of question. I'll give you a specific example. Here's someone who spent twenty-five years in Washington, knows the city inside out, knows how things operate, and has certainly come up against any number of devious people. At his first press conference as president on August 28<sup>th</sup>, he sincerely believes that the press is going to want to talk about Cypress and Turkey and inflation and all of these things that he's trying to deal with. In fact, the only thing they wanted to talk about was Richard Nixon

and his tapes and his papers and his legal prospects. And I've often thought that press conference was the tipping point. I think there would've been a pardon, but I think Ford came out of that press conference angry, mostly at himself, because he didn't handle it well. But I also think he came out angry that 'Is this what I'm going to have to deal with?' And I think it crystallized emotions that were already there. The pardon came ten days later. Is it naïve to believe what he believed or is it just the optimist in him?

Ursomarso: I don't know. The only thing that I could say is, if you go back and look at the history of his family, his being adopted - I mean, he was a person who had confronted adversity, emotional adversity, several times. And he never turned sour. He didn't get nasty. He didn't get mean. He didn't get upset with people. Personally, he might have disagreed with their position, but he was an upbeat, sunny person. His personality was sunny. He got strength from people. I remember when I would put him in the crowds and I'd go along the line with him, he would get stronger.

Smith: And that's a mark of a true extrovert.

Ursomarso: Yeah.

Smith: The opposite of Richard Nixon.

Ursomarso: Correct. The opposite. He took strength and, as I say, he grew and became stronger as the controversies confronted him. And, the other thing was, he knew, being in the Congress, he'd never get 100%. He knew he wasn't going to get a full loaf. He knew he could ask for it, but he knew he had to negotiate back to positions that were going to be less. That was the case with the tax cut bill because the Democrats put in provisions which he didn't agree with and he either had to take the bill as a whole and eat their provision or veto it.

Smith: There was such a period of change going on with the Watergate Babies in '74. Carl Albert and Mike Mansfield and he had a handshake deal. It wasn't easy to get to, but they got to it, about the pace of decontrolling natural gas prices, part of the energy policy. And they came back sort of shame-facedly a week later and told him they couldn't sell the deal to their caucuses. That's a new

day in Congress. And the great irony, here's a guy who was a child of the House, who always regarded that as his true home in Washington, who had spent two and a half years in many ways fending off congressional encroachments on the executive...

Ursomarso: Right. He began a period of change in the relationship between the president and the Congress which Nixon precipitated, because, now the imperial president was gone. Now the president had to be something more. Just because he was president didn't mean he was going to get his way. Now, the problem in that story you tell is that President Ford was a handshake guy. If you shook hands and agreed, that was it. So, now, that whole culture of handshake, keeping your word, now is beginning to erode. And so he was transitioning out of that and, for him, I don't think it was as easy as we would expect.

Smith: I only heard him twice speak disparagingly of anyone and the worst he could come up with was "He's a bad man." That was the worst epithet he could come up with. One was Gordon Liddy and one was John Dean, which is interesting in itself. Did you ever hear him speak—?

Ursomarso: I'm trying to think if I heard him. Under his breath, a couple of times, I heard him say "that son-of-a-bitch" but it wasn't that directed necessarily at the person as what the person was asking him to do, if you follow me. Because there were people who would keep shooting at him and they wouldn't quit and he would get mad and say, "Tell that God damn..." That kind of thing.

Smith: With Ike, Ann Whitman, his secretary, used to say, "Watch out. It's a brown suit day." You know, you stayed away from the President if it was a brown suit day. Whereas Penny Circle used to say it was a three "God damn it" day or a four "God damn it" day.

Ursomarso: Yeah, he'd get to that because people would just not give up. No, it wasn't his style to vent and get to feeling very negative about people and verbalize it. He didn't curse. If you listen to the Nixon tapes, Nixon cursed repeatedly, time and time again. Ford wasn't that way. He would on the golf course - I

remember when he hit the ball and hit the guy in the head and he cursed a little there. But his natural style of speaking was not that way. He just wasn't that kind of person. You would think that, being a football player and the locker room deal, he would, but he wasn't. He wasn't. He was very careful. People around him did worse than he did and that would bother him sometimes.

Smith: Really?

Ursomarso: Yeah, he'd say, "Shut up, guys." I heard him say, "Shut up. Be quiet." He would get aggravated when you would have one group and then another group was talking over here in the corner. Of course, on the road, we had a lot of situations where there were small groups of people. It wasn't like being in the White House. When you're on the road, it's different, because you're out there. But, no, he was a sunny, bright guy.

Smith: He didn't like gossip?

Ursomarso: No, he didn't want to hear rumors.

Smith: And he didn't like bickering.

Ursomarso: Didn't like bickering. No. Did not like bickering. He liked to look at nice women. He would get a chuckle out of that and when we were on the road on the train - we had women who were flight attendants be the conductors on the train, you know, to keep everybody happy. And afterwards he would like to have his picture taken with all the girls. He loved that. Mrs. Ford didn't like the fact he liked it.

Smith: Was that the famous Vickie Carr incident?

Ursomarso: Yeah, the Vickie Carr thing. When he looked at her too long. But he didn't have any vices like we talked about with Jack Kennedy that I ever detected and I was in situations, seeing things that, if anything was going on, I think I would've known about it. The other thing I wanted to say - you were talking about his ethics. The CIA horrors, all those things that he stopped, I think was another indicator of the character of the man because he found out what

was going on. He didn't like a lot of it and he said, "No, it's going to stop." So, he would sign the findings and he would take great care in what people were doing. Unlike Ronald Reagan who had problems with Iran Contra and some other presidents. I don't think Jerry Ford would've stood for that and I don't think the staff around him would've stood for that.

Smith: It's interesting that you mention that, because, of what became known as the Halloween Surprise, the big three shuffle where Schlesinger was eliminated and Bill Colby was as well. We've been told by people who were there, Colby went in like a gentleman. And the President offered him an ambassadorship and he said 'no, thank you.' But it was a very gentlemanly thing. That was not apparently carried over when the President and Schlesinger were together. One sensed that Colby was a little bit of a fall guy for the agency.

Ursomarso: Well, it's very hard to tell because, even today, the direction that the president gives determines the amount of swag room that you have. And every director and every staff person has a certain amount of swag. You have to know your man and you have to know where you're in bounds and where you're out.

Smith: Sure. For example, that's one area where you would imagine there really would be a discernable difference between the Nixon and Ford administrations.

Ursomarso: I don't believe the Ford administration people, would've pushed the envelope as hard as Nixon did in certain cases. President Ford could give you maneuvering room, and he did give people maneuvering room. But in certain respects, you had to know when to stop.

Smith: Also, he was clearly comfortable surrounding himself with people who had, not only stellar IQs, but larger-than-life egos. And he put together one of the most impressive cabinets in memory.

Ursomarso: He did. One of the biggest egos was Henry Kissinger, of course. We were on a trip and he was unhappy and he said, "You're fired." I said, "No, Mr. Secretary, you can't fire me." He said, "Why not?" I said, "Because I work

for the President. I don't work for you." So, you had people like that who had these big egos. What I believe President Ford did is he could listen to people. There's a difference between talking and listening and I saw many meetings where he sat there and he listened and he really listened. He wasn't thinking about something else or he wasn't, you know, looking at his notes or waiting to get out of there. He would sit there and he could listen. Well, that's kind of unique, particularly here in Washington. And he could go off and think.

I remember, we had time we called 'staff time.' Staff time was the President was not face-to-face with anybody. He was on his own and he could have some time. President Ford used it. He didn't just, you know, constantly need people around him to flatter his ego. He could sit there. He could read things. Comprehend documents. I mean, sometimes I felt like taking the briefing books away from him because the guy would have a whole day and you'd be dead on your ass and I'm a young guy and I'm dead and he's trying to read these books and get his homework done.

Smith: We're all used to thinking of Bill Clinton as this kind of human tornado. But Ford had amazing energy. I mean, stamina and energy. They're not necessarily the same thing.

Ursomarso: Well, he had the ability to make a comeback. In other words, he'd go along through one series of things and you sort of have a little lull, but then he could come back when everybody else was going down. I don't know how he did that. He was in good physical shape.

Smith: He took care of himself.

Ursomarso: He took care of himself. He didn't have any ailments like diabetes and wasn't on any drugs, so he was more healthy, mentally and physically. I think that was to his advantage. He liked to play golf. I mean, he liked to be outside. He liked to breathe fresh air.

Smith: And probably being an optimist is good for your health in a lot of ways.

Ursomarso: Yeah, I think that's part of it. Several times, when I'd give him options like the walk, he would always want to go outside as opposed to being inside. Always wanted to walk as opposed to not. And, so we did a lot of walking. In Helsinki one night, he came down and he said, "I'm going to take a walk." And I said, "Fine, we'll go take a walk." So, we went out about 10:30 at night and we're walking. The Secret Service is going along with the limo in the street and there are those steel poles that come up, they're like parking barriers. We're walking along and the limo doesn't see the pole and rams into this pole, destroys the car and the President said, "What the hell happened?" I said, "The car ran into a pole." He said, "Oh, okay, let's keep walking." So, we walked maybe five, ten blocks through Helsinki at night just because he felt like he wanted to walk. He would talk and tell stories.

Smith: I assume every president realizes they're in a bubble and there are advantages to the bubble and there are disadvantages to the bubble. And there must be, at some visceral level, the need to get outside the bubble.

Ursomarso: Right. And there were times he could, but very few. Playing golf was one where he could get outside the bubble.

Smith: Was Camp David? I mean, it's inside the bubble, but you—

Ursomarso: It wasn't an obsession with him. I don't believe it was the way it was with some other presidents. He used it. Vail he loved. He loved to go there. We would go there when the snow was on the ground and when the snow wasn't on the ground and he just loved it. I mean, he would just really relax. And he loved putting on his sweater and the winter stuff and being out there. Even when his heart was failing, he wanted to go back, as you know.

Smith: We were out there for a week, and I never did adjust to the altitude. And the thought of him at 90 swimming and going up to that swimming pool every day. You know, it got to the point where the agents were in the water with him. But it's just phenomenal.

Ursomarso: Yeah, we did a trip to Jacksonville, Florida, where I think we met Sadat. I think it was Sadat. But, anyway, when we'd go on trips, we would try and put

him in a house where there was a swimming pool. And I put him in a guy's house, Luther Coggin's house, and it had a big swimming pool. We went there and his family left. So, he's out there swimming and he banged his head on the side of the pool. You know, he's swimming his laps back and forth, but he wanted to swim. He wanted to be where he could get some exercise. The pool at Vail, he loved it. He loved to swim. It's a shame they took the pool out at the White House. He didn't have one.

Smith: Well, then they put the outside one in.

Ursomarso: Yeah, outside. It's funny. One day, when I was working for Ronald Reagan, Charlton Heston visited and I came and I said, "Charlton, did you come to walk on the water?"

Smith: That first year, say, of the Reagan presidency, you hear stories about Ford people not getting calls returned, that sort of thing. Was there any kind of carryover?

Ursomarso: Well, no, what happens is the president designates one person on his staff to be the contact of former presidents.

Smith: Okay.

Ursomarso: In the case of Reagan, who do you think he designated? David Gergen.

Smith: Oh.

Ursomarso: Well, David Gergen had been a Ford person way back. There was a relationship, he'd been a speechwriter.

Smith: And Nixon, too.

Ursomarso: Yeah, and Nixon, too. So, I didn't perceive that there really was a problem because David's job was to keep the President informed of what was going on, talk to him, handle requests, make sure everything's okay. So, to my knowledge, I don't know that President Reagan and President Ford talked that much, but David was doing all the work. So, I would think that Ford was satisfied.

Smith: And then, of course, it was in the fall of '81 with the Sadat assassination when they all came back to the White House.

Ursomarso: Yes. Well, Sadat and President Ford – and I did this stop, as I told you, to Salzburg – they got along famously. They genuinely liked each other.

Smith: Really?

Ursomarso: And they sat with their pipes. They were both pipe smokers and they talked and they talked and they smoked. They had a good time.

Smith: One of the most touching things in President Carter's eulogy, he talked about when they were leaving Camp David. They were in the helicopter, I think he was with Sadat. And the one person they called was President Ford.

Ursomarso: Yeah. Now, Mrs. Sadat still lives here in Baltimore. I saw her a couple of years ago. They were great people, whatever you want to say about their views and situation, and Ford and Sadat got along fine. They had a great meeting there in Salzburg. I think one day Barrett took the President out to play golf in Salzburg. But the foreign leaders that I was able to observe with Ford, I don't think he had problems with anybody.

Smith: Were you in the White House when the Queen was there?

Ursomarso: No, I don't remember being there with the Queen.

Smith: Of course, the Bicentennial brought all sorts of folks.

Ursomarso: Well, yeah, we did the shifts and all that stuff for the Bicentennial. He got along with Brezhnev. I saw that.

Smith: Was he a little bit of a bully?

Ursomarso: Well, he would do things that were kind of interesting, like he'd run out in the driveway and stand in front of the car. You know, he was kind of trying to put on a show. Some of it was childish, in my opinion, not very statesman-like. But the Russians were like that. They were a little bit different. In

Helsinki, he had to meet all these foreign heads of state and he did fine with all of them.

Smith: And the Pope then would've been Paul?

Ursomarso: The Pope was Paul and he went to visit the Pope and, I guess, Terry can tell you all the stories about that. But he went in to visit the pope, Scowcroft and Terry fell asleep on the bench outside the office. We'd been traveling quite a bit and they just passed out, both of them. I have a picture of them sleeping on the bench. I think they missed the Pope. Because, when you travel, you get a little tired with jet lag.

Smith: Of course, you did see him right after he left office.

Ursomarso: Yeah, I did. I did a couple of trips with him.

Smith: There was never any doubt that he was going out to Rancho Mirage. Before, of course, the plan was they were going to go back to Grand Rapids and so on.

Ursomarso: I never heard anything different than that.

Smith: Was Leonard Firestone, you think, a catalyst in that decision?

Ursomarso: Well, there were a couple of people out there. Leonard Firestone, I think, lived next door to them. There was another guy, Leon Parma, and there was Fred Wilson. Fred Wilson had a big house up on top of the hill up above Thunderbird Country Club. Ford stayed there a couple of times with him when we went out there. But, I think the driving force was Mrs. Ford, who wanted a drier climate, and I think she liked it more than anything else.

Smith: Yeah.

Ursomarso: I think that was part of it, as I understand. I never had a conversation with him that he was dying to go back to Michigan.

Smith: Well, I know when I was there, he was so good about coming back.

- Ursomarso: Well, he did. He did and, in fact, there's two pictures there of two events. One was in Traverse City, Michigan, where we had a parade and he was standing in the car with Senator Griffin, Mrs. Ford, and Mrs. Griffin. And they were going down the street on this parade route and he's actually waving to people and calling them out by name. Unbelievable. Just absolutely unbelievable.
- Smith: That's the old congressman.
- Ursomarso: And then he did that again. We went to a parade, I believe, Holland, Michigan. They have a parade where you walk in wooden shoes. They give everybody a pair of wooden shoes and he did the same thing. He called people out by name. I couldn't believe it. I mean, not just one or two, but a lot of people. "Hi, Harry! How are you doing?" He would know all these people, which I thought was astounding.
- Smith: Did you see him in his later years?
- Ursomarso: We had a meeting every year in June which I would go to. But, as time went by, he became less, as you know, able to attend.
- Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him?
- Ursomarso: The last time I saw him was when we had a meeting in Palm Springs and he got up and he said, "I'm Deep Throat."
- Smith: We made him practice.
- Ursomarso: Yeah, you made him practice. That was the last time I saw him and then he was gone. Now, unfortunately, what happened with the funeral, Red and Terry and I and others were on the group planning the formal funeral. We planned the whole thing. There were some others involved. And then Red was getting married in Hawaii. Terry O'Donnell was to go to the wedding. I was the best man. Ford passed. Terry didn't go to the wedding. I stayed with Red in Hawaii because I was his best man and I missed the funeral. I sent Thym Smith up to do the work. He was press advance man who now works for me. So, the last advance, I missed. The one I wanted to go to.

Smith: Were you surprised at how much public reaction there was at the time?

Ursomarso: I was surprised.

Smith: He'd been out of the public eye for a while.

Ursomarso: He'd been out of the public eye for a while. He had pretty much not been in the news. But there we go back to - what is America? America is normal people like Jerry Ford who have a feeling for their presidents and for their government and they can see a good person and they know a good person.

Smith: Another factor - I think there was a whole generation discovering him for the first time, seeing those grainy clips. They contrasted it with the ugliness of politics today, and he looked pretty good.

Ursomarso: Yeah, he does. He does stand up very well and I forget, I mean - at my age, I talk to people and they don't know Reagan, they don't know President Ford, they don't know Nixon.

Smith: You mention Watergate and it's a blank.

Ursomarso: It's a blank. I believe that someone sent me a poll and it was a poll taken when President Ford first came in and I believe his approval rating was 70-some percent. And then they took a poll after the funeral and he was right back up. So, he had gone here and he'd gone down and then he came right back up.

Smith: Time was good to him. Contrast it with poor Lyndon Johnson who died the day before the Vietnam peace agreement was out. Ford lived long enough to know that on the pardon most people had come around to his way of thinking. And even those who didn't respected him and the motives behind the action.

Ursomarso: Time was good. The only issue that sticks in my mind is that there were people who accused him of making a deal beforehand. And I don't think that's true. I don't think he would do something like that.

Smith: There were also critics, people who thought he commercialized the ex-presidency by being on boards and so on. Of course, they didn't know that,

one, he didn't have any money when he left office. And, two, he had to raise what must've seemed to him like a God awful amount of money to build the library and the museum.

Ursomarso: Right. And Ronald Reagan, who's taken a million dollars per speech... I remember when the administration was coming to the end and Don Rumsfeld was Secretary of Defense. I went over to see him. I said, 'Don, we're done. We're leaving.' He said, "Yeah, I think so" and he put his foot up on his desk and he had a hole in his shoe. I said, "What are you going to do now?" He said, "Well, I'm dead broke. I've got to find a way to make some money." And I said to myself, "Here's a guy who gave it everything he had, didn't make any money, had a hole in his shoe. And Jerry Ford was the same way." He gave it everything he had.

Smith: There's a wonderful story someone told us. In the first 48 hours of his presidency, he said to someone apologetically, "Do you know when I get my first paycheck?" He had kids in school and he literally was living paycheck to paycheck.

Ursomarso: Yeah, I can believe. When we went to Vail, we were going out to where Breckenridge is and he said, "You ought to buy that over there." He was talking about 500 acres that was for sale for nothing. I said, "Mr. President, I don't have any money." He said, "Well, I don't have any money, either." And then that real estate turned out to be worth, you know, hundreds of millions of dollars and turned into what is now Breckenridge. And he was looking at it.

Smith: He had an eye for business.

Ursomarso: He did. I being in the automobile business and he being from Michigan, we had something in common that we could talk about. He was very interested in real estate - whether it was a golf course or a piece of real estate, he would look.

Oh, I wanted to tell you one story about John Wayne. The President gave a speech at Pepperdine and John Wayne was on the podium with him. After the

speech, John Wayne said to the President, "Can you give me a ride down the Pacific Coast Highway?" The President said, "Yes." So, John Wayne and the president are in the car going down the Pacific Coast Highway towards L.A. Terry's in the pilot car behind and I'm in the front police car and my radio comes up and Terry says, "We're going to stop at the next gas station." I said, "What?" He said, "We're going to stop at the next gas station." I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, John Wayne wants to get out." I said, "Okay." So, I pulled the motorcade over - this is like forty cars - into this gas station. John Wayne gets out and is standing at the gas pump and we pull away. I called Terry and I said, "Terry, what was that all about?" and he said, "He only lives a couple of blocks away. He wanted to get out and walk home." You asked when was the last time I saw Jerry Ford - that's the last time I saw John Wayne.

Smith: But he got along fine with celebrities like that?

Ursomarso: During the campaign, we had a lot of celebrities that came on board, as you know, and he was fine.

Smith: Pearl Bailey clearly had a unique role. What was the origin of that?

Ursomarso: She sang once at the White House, I think. Or somehow he got to know her.

Smith: We're told that she and Mrs. Ford had a very close relationship.

Ursomarso: That may be the case. But we were picking up movie stars left and right. We were picking up Olympic athletes.

Smith: I'm sure there were jocks he must've been thrilled to meet.

Ursomarso: Jocks. We picked up players. And he would like them to ride in the car with him. Some presidents didn't want anybody in the car, but Jerry Ford did. The famous one was that Fred Biebel who broke his fingers when the Ford's limo was hit. Remember that?

Smith: No.

- Ursomarso: They were in Connecticut and they were at a political event and some guy ran a stop sign and ran into the limo. Of course, they didn't have their seatbelts on and Fred Beibel who was the state chairman got a broken finger in the thing. But he always would want people in the car with him.
- Smith: Gregarious?
- Ursomarso: Yeah, he would rather have somebody.
- Smith: You can't imagine Richard Nixon wanting to have company.
- Ursomarso: No, he didn't. He didn't.
- Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?
- Ursomarso: Well, you have stated it better than I have. He saved the country that was in a constitutional crisis. He's a patriot for that one thing. I was working for President Reagan the day he was shot and, as you know, chaos and all that. There was a time where there couldn't be a constitutional crisis unless good people stepped forward and adhered to the constitution. And, in our history, that has happened and Jerry Ford knew what his job was, he stepped into it, he handled himself in a dignified and proper manner. I don't know what more you could ask. And people, particularly, presidents are defined, not by many, many acts, but sometimes by only one.
- Smith: That's true.
- Ursomarso: And the other part of it is that some presidents are identified by only one slogan or one line that exemplifies what their whole administration was about. The New Frontier or however you're going to define it. So, Jerry Ford was defined by that, but there wasn't a slogan other than Watergate which has a negative connotation. He got caught up in a bad wave in a backwater and he swam out.
- Smith: What was it like to be around the White House when Saigon was falling?

- Ursomarso: The White House is a funny place because great events are occurring and there is not a lot of commotion in many cases. There aren't people running around. There aren't people yelling.
- Smith: It's not like *The West Wing*.
- Ursomarso: No. They aren't screaming. The president has his office and then has the Situation Room where discussions can occur. But when people go into those meetings and they come out, they couldn't talk about anything. So, the place where you get the impact, in my opinion, is outside at the events. Reagan at the Berlin wall. John Kennedy in Berlin.
- Smith: On the speech Ford gave in Tulane where he basically said as far as the United States is concerned, the war is over?
- Ursomarso: Yeah, you get the impact when the public reacts to the events or something occurs that brings it home to you. A demonstration. When Obama went to Paris and that big crowd showed up, that's where you see that something's happening here. What is going on? But, in the White House itself, other than David Kennerly running around taking pictures—
- Smith: What does that tell you? Because Kennerly is a unique player in this story. Almost a surrogate son. A resident smartass. And someone who will absolutely give it to you with the bark off.
- Ursomarso: Right. The President sent him to Saigon.
- Smith: And isn't that revealing?
- Ursomarso: Yeah, that he wanted someone – well, David wanted to go, but the President let him and sent him on the trip. There are, in the White House what I call 'countervailing forces.' There are people within the White House who, in spite of whatever position they hold, play a different role. And so David was theoretically the White House photographer, but he wasn't. He was more than that.
- Smith: Yeah.

Ursomarso: Bob Barrett, for awhile, filled that role. There are people where there's more there than you can see. Well, the only way you can see it is to be on the inside of the envelope and look at it. Otherwise, you have no idea what's going on. Now, Ford, to his credit, allowed those people to excess. And he enjoyed them. I mean, some of the stuff that David Kennerly and Barrett said, you wouldn't say to a president. But they did. And he allowed that to occur, which gets us back again to his character. He was a man of character. He was content. He didn't have any ego to massage every day. He knew what he was. He knew what he wanted to do. And he was happy.

Smith: Yeah.

Ursomarso: The guy was happy. Just look at his desk, you see his pipes were lined up and his papers were there. He was loving it.

Smith: Were you around him at all at the time of Mrs. Ford's breast cancer surgery?

Ursomarso: I was, but I was not as close then, before. That was a big thing for anybody.

Smith: People have often talked, understandably, about the example that she set and how many lives she may have saved. He also set an example, in effect, for how a husband should behave.

Ursomarso: Absolutely. And as I say, they say it's the Betty Ford Center, but for all practical purposes, it's both of their centers, because they worked on that together.

Smith: There are stories of their annual alumni weekend, and he could be found grilling hotdogs, the soldier in the ranks.

Ursomarso: Yeah, on the Fourth of July, we had fireworks on the White House lawn and he would have all the people in. I think he was more a family guy in his mind. Maybe in actuality, he didn't do all the things, but I think he was. I loved the guy. He was just a great person to be around. He was a very nice, kind person.

Smith: David Broder said he was the least neurotic president of his lifetime. And then he said something really interesting. He said, "You know, Jerry Ford actually was the president who we say we want and we only realized after the fact that we were losing."

Ursomarso: Yeah, see, he didn't run. He didn't have that burning ego and so he was different. I think he was a valuable person, not only for what we're talking about, but also as a prelude to what happened later in terms of Ronald Reagan, in terms of the things that occurred. You can go back and look at Jerry Ford; he was trying to solve those same problems that we're trying to solve today.

Smith: Perfect.

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