

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Gary Walters
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: Obviously, thank you for doing this.

Walters: Certainly.

Smith: Tell us a little bit about your life before you ever crossed paths with Gerald Ford.

Walters: Well, I was a person who grew up in the Washington area. My father knew Washington pretty well because he worked for the bus line in Washington. He was one of the original people who set up, was instrumental with, the tour industry in Washington by the buses because the people that owned the bus line got the idea that they could get children, school groups in. My father was one of the original bus drivers and had to learn about the history of Washington. And I had an uncle who actually sprayed the lawn for bugs back in the '50s. So the history of myself in the Washington area is, this is where I grew up. I had an intimate knowledge of some of the historical deals of Washington, because of my father's involvement. But the only time I went to the White House was as a tourist, as most people do; never figuring that I'd be inside the gates in any form. After I graduated from college I was in the military, volunteered for the military, came out, became aware of the Secret Services expansion to take over the White House Police, and I applied.

Smith: When did that happen?

Walters: That was in 1970 – '69, '70.

Smith: Was it in anyway an outgrowth of the Kennedy assassination?

Walters: Actually, it was an outgrowth of some of the activities that were concerning the Secret Service and the Congress as it dealt with foreign missions. What they wanted to do, what the Congress did in fact, was pass a bill that put the Secret Service in charge of the foreign missions in Washington; also as an

overseer of the uniform division, which was the old White House Police. And those two were being merged into a group called the Executive Protective Service. They were going from the old White House Police, which was probably not more than 150 men at that point, and they were going to have cars and be responsible for the foreign missions within Washington and just out in the suburbs where there were a few missions. So it was an outgrowth of the late '69, early '70s.

Smith: Now, let me ask you, before that - the White House Police – were they limited to onsite?

Walters: Inside the gate.

Smith: They didn't travel?

Walters: The original White House Police were responsible for the grounds and the facility that was the White House and the Executive Office Building.

Smith: Okay.

Walters: They literally were an organization created back in Lincoln's administration. From the Metropolitan Police – a derivative of the Metropolitan Police - they became the White House Police Force. They had their own chief who was there and answered really to the chief of staff of the president as far as security for the building. And then they interacted with the Secret Service. In this 1969 law, it took that entity and made it the Executive Protective Service, which made it the uniform division of the Secret Service and combined it with the responsibility for protecting the foreign missions. Then, of course, since the bombing in Beirut and the Reagan administration that force around the White House was kind of expanded outside of the gate to include the sidewalks and the immediate vicinity of the White House. Some of the other responsibilities that are an integral part of the Secret Service – and most people think of the Secret Service with the agents walking around – but in the uniform division the people are at the gates and the uniforms are there and have been there, as I said, the original outgrowth of the White House Police. So I became a member of that force in August, 1970.

Smith: Now, that was an eventful time.

Walters: Tremendously eventful time.

Smith: With the Vietnam War protests that were taking place.

Walters: Yes.

Smith: And the general instability of the period.

Walters: Yes. A very difficult time for the White House Police because there were always people immediately in the vicinity of the fence, principally on Pennsylvania Avenue except where the press were. The press came and went through the northwest gate and that's on Pennsylvania Avenue. So the protestors, a pretty savvy group, were there in Lafayette Park. Pennsylvania Avenue, of course, was open to the traffic at that time, so there was always concern among Police Park Service and the Secret Service about keeping Pennsylvania Avenue – that the protestors didn't block the avenue.

Smith: I'd heard the Johnson girls – I guess it probably would be Lucy – from her bedroom she could hear the protestors shouting, "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?"

Walters: Oh, yeah. There were people at work right directly across the street from the White House who would beat a drum. That's when that started in the Vietnam War era. And it continued on up to today from time to time, with people that are protesting against the war and the drum beat goes on – literally. And you can hear it, you definitely can hear it. I remember being told that President Nixon, at night, even though his bedroom was on the other side of the house, could hear it, because it was so clear.

So as I became a member of the White House, I actually ended up breaking my leg playing some football with Secret Service trainers, and couldn't, when I graduated, go out and stand post on the North Portico of the White House on crutches in uniform. That wouldn't work. So they put me inside in a place called the control center, which was a place that controlled all the cameras, the access requests – people wanting to come into the White House for

appointments. All that was controlled, the alarms throughout the buildings, fire alarms and so forth.

Smith: You may or may not know, we've just about finished for the White House Historical Association a video-taped oral history with all the surviving social secretaries. Talked to a dozen and they all have wonderful stories to tell. There are some things, obviously, that are constant, but I'll never forget, one of the second Mrs. Bush's social secretaries talked about a day she was inside – this was post-9/11 – and a bus bringing a group of elderly women for a reception had somehow managed to dislodge the gate. So they were kind of going berserk about that.

Well, they went inside and I guess there was almost a fight going on in the ladies room over who was going to get their picture taken. She was trying to explain to them and no one was listening to her. And Mrs. Bush was coming down the stairs and her cell phone goes off, and it's the gate. They had just arrested one of the elderly ladies from the bus who it turns out had two outstanding felonies on her record. That just struck me as surreal on so many levels. But I suspect maybe it's all in a day's work.

Walters: Well, I remember the incident, actually. Actually, what happened was the bus tried to get through the gate and it hit the gate cap post and turned it and broke a corner of it off. That had happened a couple of different times, a number of times with large trucks trying to make the turn to come in. One of the truck drivers at one point, got out and was very upset. The Secret Service was checking him out and they found a handgun that he carried because he was a long distance hauler. Of course, they arrested him because in the District of Columbia, you can't have weapons. So those incidents occur. I'm very aware of them.

I got into this control center group because of the leg. As it turned out, I ended up being in there for five years. During the course of that five years I held different positions in that office, because as I said, we were responsible for all the people that entered the complex, no matter where they came in. We had to get the information on them, check them out, and say they were okay or not to come in. Alarms were throughout the buildings, fire alarms and everything.

So I became intimately involved in all those things that were that office's responsibility. And in doing so, I became very familiar with the Usher's office, with Rex Scouten, who was the chief usher, Nelson Pierce, who was his assistant at that time, and some of the other ushers that were in there. Well, as it turned out, two of the ushers, one of them passed away, another one, Stewart Stout, left, retired, and there was a position open in the Usher's Office. Nelson Pierce called me on the telephone and said, "You know, we've gotten to know you; would you be interested in applying for this position?" Well, the opportunity to be involved with the family, as opposed to just the security aspect of the White House, was quite intriguing and obviously, I leapt at the opportunity. Luckily I had just finished college at night school with a business degree and Rex Scouten had just lost the accountant at the National Parks Service who was taking care of the accounts for the Executive Residence. The Executive Residence has its own budget – at least it did at the time. It wasn't co-mingled with the rest of the Office of the President. And it was monitored by the National Park Service.

So I was in the right place, at the right time, applied for the position and Rex selected me for the position and I moved into the Usher's Office on Leap Day, February 29, 1976. And that began my stay at the White House. Ten years later Rex retired and suggested me as his replacement to the President and Mrs. Reagan. So I was appointed the Chief Usher in '86 and then retired in 2007.

Smith: Let me ask you, was there a sense during Watergate that you were under siege?

Walters: Oh, yes. Absolutely. Not only from the protestors, because at that time, having left the war, having kind of put that a little bit behind us because the President had the returning POWs – President Nixon had the returning POWs dinner out on the South Lawn and it just poured rain. Unbelievable. This wonderful, joyous occasion, it just absolutely poured rain. So that was kind of put on the backburner, still smoldering, obviously. There were still discussions going on in France with the size of the table probably still at that time. That was kind of put behind us, but then we got into this whole

Watergate issue and I actually was tangentially involved a little bit in the presidential papers and documents because, well, I was still a police officer. I was one of six or seven police officers that were responsible for the keys to where the tapes were stored.

Smith: We've talked to a lot of folks and the name Fred Buzhardt keeps coming up.

Walters: Who is that?

Smith: Fred Buzhardt was the guy who listened to the tapes. He was originally, I think, from South Carolina; he had been Mel Laird's counsel over at the Pentagon, and he was the guy on behalf of the President who listened to the tapes.

Walters: That may have been prior to my involvement, or concurrent. That name, for some reason, just doesn't ring a bell. But when I was involved, the tapes, for all the craziness of the places that they could possibly be, were kept underneath the stairwell, across from the cafeteria in the Executive Office Building. There was a small closet there right underneath the stairs, and we had the keys. You had to go get the keys. What happened was, the courts and the legal teams that were involved would request to hear certain portions of certain tapes. And then we had to go in – we were given written instructions by the White House counsel as to which tapes - we would go in and get the particular number and dated tape; keep it in our possession, and take it up to where the Secret Service _____.

The technical security division had set up a tape player, and the counsels, both the White House counsel and the counsel for either the courts or the various plaintiffs, would sit and listen to the tapes that were placed in the tape play by the technician, who was the Secret Service officer. I would stand and watch this whole process and make sure that nothing went wrong, and at the conclusion of the playing of those tapes, the tape would be taken out of the player by the technician, handed to me, and I would take it back downstairs and put it in the appropriate place.

Smith: Do you remember the controversy, almost immediately following President Nixon's departure? We talked to Benton Becker who was the guy that

President Ford sent out to San Clemente to talk to President Nixon. And Becker has always been the one who claimed credit for preventing the shipment of tapes and papers. That they were, at one point, being loaded onto a truck, to leave the complex and his intervention at the highest levels supposedly prevented that. Does any of that ring a bell?

Walters: I know about some of that tangentially, but I wasn't involved in it in any way. I know that also there was the one office which was called Presidential Papers, where everything went into a cage and we also had those six or seven officers. We had to once again receive the request from the courts and from White House counsel. And the lawyers could go into the cage, which we opened up, sit at a table, look at the documents, not make copies because they couldn't take any copying machine or have the pieces copied initially, or they couldn't make notes. All they could do was read them.

As the process went on later, it got to the point where they could go in and then we had to physically watch them – that they could take notes of what they read. Then later, we actually had a document reader – I shouldn't say document reader – it was a Xerox machine, for want of a better name, that was brought into the room, and then we had certain pages that we could reproduce and give to them and let them take out. It was a very complicated process, as you well know, over a number of months that that went on. But, at that point, I became a sergeant in promotion process, went out of the direct connection with tapes and papers and everything and out of the control center into other duties for about five months before I shifted over to the Usher's Office. So I kind of lost a little bit of contact with that. And, of course, that was during the time when President Ford took over.

Smith: What are your memories of August 8th and 9th of '74?

Walters: Sadness, dread. Nobody knew exactly what was coming.

Smith: Can you describe the scene? There were people outside the gates...

Walters: At that point there were people outside the gates constantly. And I'm not talking about the normal. Twenty-four hours a day there are people outside the White House gates, walking around, taking pictures, there are flashes

going off all the time and everything. But these were large, larger groups of people – anywhere from organized groups to people that would just spontaneously come at various times, depending on what the news cycle was at the time. But surrounding those particular days, I was still with the Secret Service, so there was a sense of dread. What's happening next? Are people going to come to the gates? Are people going to try and climb over the fences? There was this whole sense of we don't know what's going to be occurring.

Smith: You're clearly in uncharted waters, nothing like this has ever happened in American history.

Walters: Yes, and the word came down that the President was going to resign. He was in his Executive Office Building office, which he used as his working office as opposed to the Oval Office. The word came to us in the control center that the President didn't want to see anybody. And we thought, okay. No, the President doesn't want to *see* anybody. I thought that was quite bizarre, but it was coming from the West Wing; I'm not sure who the communication was put through by. But the police officer that was standing outside - there was a post whenever the President was in the Executive Office Building - who was standing outside on the porch which was down this long flight of steps from West Executive Avenue up to the steps - was told to stand like a squirrel on the opposite side of a tree as the President walked by, literally keep him on the opposite side, so that he didn't see him when he went past. There was a little bit of a laugh there – that he didn't, literally, want to be in the presence of people, because he didn't want to cut through the West Wing.

He went up the steps across in front of the West Wing, and at that time the press weren't allowed on the North grounds, so there wasn't a press contingent there. In fact, we were told to seal the West Wing. When the word went out that that was supposed to occur, the police officer who was in that room went around and pulled the blinds shut and locked the door that the press had, normally where the old swimming pool was that went out onto the trades entrance there on the west side. Immediately, we got calls from the fire department because the press were calling and saying they were locked in a

room that was unsafe for fire; the studio executives were calling and why is the press locked up? We just fended those off and the President eventually just walked across - it couldn't have taken more than about fifteen minutes – and went over into the West Wing, bypassed the West Wing by walking down that trades entrance in front of the White House and went in through the ground floor by the doctor's office and then his normal route upstairs by the elevator.

So there was this kind of bizarre goings on around the notification, and then of course, the President's statement to the staff in the East Room. I remember that. My wife was actually in the room at that time. She used to work in the East Wing in the Visitor's Office, that's where we met. So she was in the room, and of course there was a great deal of sadness from the staff, and then the next day with the President's departing via helicopter with his V sign.

Smith: One of the truly emotional recurring, almost set pieces, in White House history, is ordinarily on Inauguration Day when the departing family takes their private leave of the staff. I guess, for good reasons, there have never been cameras.

Walters: The White House photographer is there.

Smith: Okay. I'm told it can get pretty emotional.

Walters: It gets very emotional. It is the most emotional day in my life at the White House. I have obviously had the opportunity to do it a number of times with different presidents. For eight years you have lived with the family, growing up if there are children, like Chelsea, watched them grow. Had gotten to know other family members. That staff, the residence staff, is the only staff that's behind the curtain that the Secret Service sets up around the presidency. They stand outside the doors, the residence staff is behind those doors in a personal, one on one relationship with the president and the first lady and their family and guests. So it is tremendously difficult.

Smith: Did the Nixons go through that on the morning of August 9th?

Walters: You'd have to ask Rex about that. I'm really not sure there was a formal gathering. I know that President Nixon and Mrs. Nixon talked to a lot of the staff members because they told me of their occurrences, but I don't specifically remember a gathering the way we normally had on Inaugural morning. I had the opportunity, in fact, I don't think anybody else did it, but I started it when I got there and as the chief usher, I took the flag that was flying over the White House on Inaugural morning, and I would take it down and save it for four or eight years. Then the flag, on the day the President was going to leave office - we made a case out of original, with some limited amount of timbers, the original White House wood in the carpenter's shop. In fact, that's some of the wood right there that my medallions are in of all the presidents I've served.

We took that wood and made a box, a case and presented the flag that flew over the White House on the day he took office and the flag that flew over the White House on the last morning that he was in office, and would present that to the president. And they didn't expect it because very seldom that's talked about, or if they knew about it, it's forgotten. And it's a very emotional time for them. It's a beginning and an end. For the staff it's a beginning and an end. But always for the staff, it's this is the end, but it's also the beginning within four hours, because a whole new staff is coming.

Smith: I'm taking it out of sequence, but I assume the first time you went through that ritual was with the Fords.

Walters: When they left.

Smith: When the Fords left. What was that day like?

Walters: Rex Scouten was the chief usher, and he was very close to the Ford family. And I was one of the actors at that time, I was not a direct participant and I hadn't been there as long, obviously, as the rest of the staff. I'd only been there a little over a year and a half. So I was kind of watching, and to be honest, I was probably more concerned about what was going to happen in the afternoon with the change of administration - seeing one family move out and another family moved in. So at that point, I was kind of monitoring what was

going on as opposed as being directly involved. But President and Mrs. Ford were so wonderful. I mean, they were so down to earth and genuinely liked everybody that was around them. And of course, Susan, having been a young woman growing up there, matured there. It was parting with good friends - more than a formal exchange of pleasantries or something like that. And it was my first one so I was kind of standing in the back monitoring all this. And trying to get my hands around what was coming next.

Smith: Sure. Let's go back. You, I guess, would have probably been still downstairs when the two assassination attempts took place. What do you remember of that?

Walters: Yes.

Smith: On the face of it, it's the most unlikely - why would anyone take a shot at Jerry Ford?

Walters: And twice within a short period of time. It was unbelievable. First the association with Charley Manson, which just didn't make any sense at all.

Smith: Nelson Rockefeller, who was probably never closer to becoming president than the day Squeaky Fromme... and the story is they were telling him what had happened, that she was a member of the Manson gang. And Rockefeller said, "What's a Manson gang?" Tells you something about the isolating effects of wealth and power.

Walters: And then I really don't think there was a whole lot with the Sarah Jane Moore - in this day and age, every hair on her head would have been examined. I don't think it was at that time. It just happened, and to be honest with you, I don't even remember her background as to what brought her to that point.

Smith: And both of them now released from jail.

Walters: Yeah. But from our standpoint back at the White House, because I was Secret Service with the uniform division, it was like, "Oh, my God!" What everybody had talked about was brought to the table, and luckily a misfire and a person who was standing next to the individual had an opportunity to deflect any motion, and the Secret Service took the appropriate actions. It was kind of

a teaching point that was going on at that time, but there was also the pause that said, "Wow, that was close."

Smith: Were there any changes instituted?

Walters: Absolutely. I was just going to get to that. That, to me, was a major change in the White House. Up to that point, when the President was fired on within a month or so, it was forty-five days, something like, the presidents would get up and start to do their daily thing in the morning. Late morning they would go to some local hotel and talk to a group and then motorcade back to the White House and that evening or that afternoon, they very likely would go out and do the same thing all over again. The Secret Service was questioning the exposure of the president out all the time, whether it be during the motorcade in transit with the fact that the approximate time of the president leaving the White House was known and the approximate time of getting to the venue would be known, as well as the return. So there was the exposure issue.

Very few of the hotels in Washington had underground facilities where they could get in, so the president was physically exposed as President Reagan was. So there was a great concern on behalf of the Secret Service. The White House staff, and this is speculation on my part, but I think it's well-founded, was also concerned about the amount of time that this in transit took. So the combination of the two working together, there was a look at what could be done at the White House. How could the White House be changed into a venue where the president could go from his Oval Office to the White House, some hundred yards away, talk to a group that had been cleared, that was surely not going to expose the president to danger, speak to that group in a White House controlled environ, the amount of press that were there were controlled by the White House, not by another entity. The space was defined, so you could only have a certain number of people, and then the president could leave that room and go back and be in the office in what would have normally taken if he had gone out, an hour and a half or so, in twenty-five, thirty-five minutes. That freed up an awful lot of time that the staff could use for other things for the president to get involved in, so they were yeah, this looks good.

The Secret Service was happy about it because they controlled the environment. It also happened that coming into that next year – 1976, the Bicentennial, there were already a number of activities planned for the White House. So that was kind of a trial period. Could the White House handle both physically and according to the presidential desires for their guests, because now these people come to the White House, are guests of the president coming to their house, how would that be handled?

Smith: This is fascinating because this also obviously leads us into the whole Rose Garden strategy. I mean, whether intended or not, maybe one of the unintended consequences was that for political reasons, those around Ford thought he campaigned better from the Rose Garden than he did often out on the road.

Walters: Well, I think that was used as an excuse, certainly to keep the President there, as opposed to going on the road – the two assassination attempts. But from the Executive Residence point of view, it was really the moment at which, as far as I'm concerned, the moment at which I saw the White House go from strictly the president's house, the home of the president, where social activities were held to a catering entity. The residence staff was called up then to become a catering – instead of the First Lady, as Mrs. Ford had, she'd invite the ladies groups in and they would have tea out on the South Grounds or in the East Gardens. The President would have small groups over. We'd have State Dinners, obviously. But there was an opportunity to have that social intimacy at the White House. And as far as I'm concerning, at that point that started to be lost.

Smith: That's fascinating.

Walters: And then, of course, in the following administration, in the Carter administration, we had a huge expansion of that when President Carter was pushing the turnover of the Panama Canal. Community groups from around the country were brought in in small groups and there would be two or three states per visit and there would be briefings in the East Room, and we'd start early in the afternoon. Then there would be a sit down buffet dinner sometimes for the participants; question and answer with different defense

department, commerce, all the different agencies. So that began a road of the White House transferring to, as well as the home of the president, became a catering operation, which expanded through the years.

Smith: And presumably the Reagan assassination attempt would have only accelerated that process.

Walters: Well, by that time it had gone to the point where it couldn't go any larger. By that time we'd done tents in the South Grounds, and that had become kind of a regular fixture. We'd done 1976 with the heads of state coming from around the world. We put a tent over the Rose Garden and actually did, for the whole summer of '76, three and sometimes four heads of state a month from May right straight through to September. And we had to put air conditioning in the tent. There's a million stories about tents.

Smith: Let me come to that in a minute. Can we go back for a moment, because you mentioned about Mrs. Ford having friends in for tea. Clearly, to the extent that it is a family residence, presumably each family has rooms that they particular like. My sense is the Fords – and maybe everyone does sooner or later – but the Fords discovered the Solarium early on. Is there something about the Solarium that makes it special for all White House residents?

Walters: There are many things about the Solarium. The White House is a formal house. I mean, built that way and certainly for the first hundred years of the United States one of the largest houses, if not the largest house in the United States for the first hundred years of the country. The ceilings are high, the windows are large; therefore, huge draperies and massive furniture pieces and everything. The third floor, built in the Thirties - lower ceilings, more residential. President and Mrs. Ford had come from Alexandria, where they had a very nice home, but certainly in a more social context. They had friends over and everything. It's hard to find that in the White House. To this day, it's hard to find this in the White House.

Every family struggles. I'm sure Mrs. Obama is going through that right now. Struggle as to how take those formal spaces and convert them into...every First Lady who has written a book talks about it – trying to make the White

House a home. Well, the third floor is a series of smaller rooms, lower ceilings and at the apex of all that, up a ramp, is the Solarium – the Sun Room. Well, who isn't drawn to a sun room? Glass on three sides, a relatively modest room in the White House, 22 feet by 18 feet, kind of an odd, octagon type shape; a door that went out on the promenade that's around the third floor.

Smith: Ike used to grill steaks out there.

Walters: Absolutely. And President Reagan sat out there and recuperated. I had my greatest scare of my time in the Usher's Office. We found out that right behind where President Reagan sat was a bee's nest and we knew he was allergic to bees. But we didn't know about it until after he'd already said. We had to hustle out there and take care of the bees quick. But the Solarium is a place that you can be drawn to easily. You can speak as we're speaking here and be heard around the room. The families can gather people. The third floor usually is not a place where families have their children stay. They are usually down closer on the second floor. The third floor is, other than in the Carter administration – they had their two sons and their wives lived there, but whenever they have friends there that may exceed the capacity of the two guestrooms downstairs, the Lincoln and the Queen's bedrooms, they are upstairs. Well, if they are going to gather with their guests, do they have the guests come down or do they go up to a place where they can be more comfortable. And the Solarium in all the years that I've had an opportunity to be there has had informal furniture in it as opposed to the antiques that are present on the second floor or the first floor, and to some case, the third floor. But it's much more comfortable. It's a place, the only place in the White House where I think you'd kick off your shoes and the ladies did frequently, and stick their feet up in the corners of the chair and sit on their legs.

Smith: It's a real family room.

Walters: It is a family room and that's why people are drawn to it. It's got an incredible view looking south to the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial and day or night, you see the planes coming in and out of the airport. All the presidents, I think, that have written about being at the White House talk

about being able to watch the planes come in at National Airport, hearing the people down on the ellipse south of the White House playing softball and football. And saw that as a genuine connection to the American people, as opposed to the bubble they were in. And of course, that's also true of the Truman Balcony, which President Truman was beaten up badly for putting in. But all the families have enjoyed the Truman Balcony.

Smith: It's funny because President Ford used to talk about being the lowliest member of the House Public Works Committee, and he was given a tour of the White House by Harry Truman. First president he ever met. Ford was always a fiscal conservative, but Truman persuaded him they needed the money, and of course, in later years, he was very glad that they put the balcony on the house. Because, I guess like every first family, they fell in love with it.

Walters: Well, President Ford was also involved in the restoration of the exterior of the White House before he moved in. Because, as vice president, he was in charge of – with the Senate committee – had responsibility for the stone that had been taken over the west front of the Capitol when the Capitol had been expanded. And that was the same stone that was quarried to build the White House. So when we made the initial request to start the stone restoration on the White House, we found out once we took the paint off that there were numerous stones that were damaged so badly they needed to be replaced. We went to the architect of the Capitol, and the committee that oversaw that included the vice president.

Obviously, I think before that, even when he was a representative, he had some involvement and they agreed to allow the White House to use that old stone which was kept at a National Park Service facility at Rock Creek Park. And so we were able to go and use that old, originally quarried stone in the 1790s and brought it to the White House for the restoration of the White House. So President Ford was involved before he probably ever had any idea that he was going to be vice president or president.

Smith: What kind of interaction did you have or did you see that he had with the staff?

Walters: Very informal with the staff; wanted very quickly after he moved into the White House – he and Mrs. Ford both – to get to know the names of each and every butler, maid, the people that they came daily in contact with. And from time to time, obviously the maintenance people who they didn't see every day, but occasionally. The President made it his personal responsibility to get their names and become familiar with what they did. He interacted with them the way you'd interact with anybody else coming to your house. If you needed a plumber, you got the plumber in and you'd talk with him – where are you from?

Smith: There is a story, and I'm sure there are variations on this, but it must have been one of the butlers who – I think it was a Saturday afternoon and the President was watching football, as was his want.

Walters: Probably Michigan State.

Smith: And he said, "Come on in and watch the game." He [the butler] didn't want to be ungracious, but he also had to be professional. But the President made it very clear that he wanted him to come in and watch the game.

Walters: That does not surprise me at all. He would enjoy involving people in conversation. I know the first time I was introduced directly to the President was by Rex Scouten after Rex had already offered me the job. It was the night of a State Dinner. In fact, it was a white tie dinner. I'd never had tails on before; this was my first occasion for that. Rex had me stand adjacent to the elevator to close at evening. Of course, Mrs. Ford being a previous dancer, had the evenings go a little longer than other First Ladies have, and danced.

Smith: That's true?

Walters: Oh, very much so. We used to change the State Dining Room after the dinner. When the guests moved from the State Dining Room to the East Room, we would spend the next twenty-five, thirty minutes taking everything out of the State Dining Room. And I'm talking about everything, including the carpet, and put a small stage in and put a dance band in – in twenty-five minutes. And then, instead of dancing out in the foyer in a formal kind of context, people would literally come back in the Cabaret Room, which they had just eaten

dinner in. A lot of people wanted to know – they didn't realize that it had changed. They wanted to know, "How'd I get here?" because it was an entirely different room as far as they were concerned. But that would go late into the night and very early the next morning.

But I was standing adjacent to Rex Scouten, and I had been there since four o'clock the previous morning – and this was pushing two o'clock the next morning, and he introduced me to the President. The President came around the corner and he said, "Mr. President, I'd like to introduce you to the new usher, Gary Walters." The President put his arm around me, said, "Well, welcome aboard. Where you from?" It was like he'd known me or wanted to get to know me immediately, and not just as somebody that he was going to come in contact with tangentially. And so we're standing there having a conversation for about three or four minutes, and finally the President put his head around the corner and looked to see if Mrs. Ford was coming. As Mrs. Ford came around, he put his arm around her and said, "I want you to meet the new usher." He introduced me to Mrs. Ford and she welcomed me and then they proceeded on the elevator and went upstairs.

Smith: Did they seem to be comfortable there? Because, obviously, they'd never expected to live there.

Walters: Yes. By this time and of course they'd been there a period when I came into the Usher's Office. They'd been there for a while, so yes, they had become comfortable. I don't know what it was like initially in the first days. I do know that he made the White House staff comfortable along with the police and everybody else that was involved. Because I think it was the week after he was in office, he threw a picnic on the South Grounds for all the Secret Service, for the White House staff who had stayed on transitioning from Nixon to Ford; for the Parks Service, for the groundskeepers, everybody. He came out and spoke to everybody and thanked everybody who was involved in the White House for the trying days that had come leading up to his becoming president, and for the week, or two weeks, or whatever it was, in the ensuing time. I mean he, at that point, made the staff comfortable. And as I said earlier, it is hard to find people that were any friendlier.

Smith: There are stories, of course, of them early on going over to talk to the telephone operators to thank them for what they did. There is a wonderful story – of course they lived in Alexandria for the first week.

Walters: Giving Mrs. Nixon time to get things cleared out.

Smith: Sure, exactly.

Walters: Rex is the one that knows all about that. I can tell you a great story about my first direct interaction with President Ford. When I went into the Usher's Office there was usually a period of six weeks of orientation, learning what went on, how you interact with the different entities. Of course, I'd been there for a number of years so obviously I knew the Secret Service element, the security element – how to get people in and out and how to move people. But I had to learn the operation of the residence and how things go and how to protect the family's privacy and who could come and who could go. So there's a learning period.

Well, the Usher's Office has the chief usher and three assistant ushers. Those three assistant ushers work on a rotating basis. One comes in early in the morning, is relieved at two o'clock in the afternoon and then stays there until after the family is finished with them for the night, and then a little longer just to close things out, in case there are any late messages or anything coming over. And then the third person has off.

I'd worked some of the rotating schedule, but we're there. The President goes to Camp David, we're still there sitting in the chair. So I went through the six week training period, and I was feeling pretty comfortable. So Rex, the chief usher at the time said, "Okay, this Sunday you will start on your own without having to be under a learning circumstance." So I'm sitting there on a Sunday morning, the phone rang. I picked up the phone and answered, "Usher's Office, Gary Walters, may I help you?" "Yeah, Gary, this is the President." And he was reluctant to say the President. But he said, "This is the President." I didn't know whether to stand up or salute. I started to get up and my knees hit the desk, and I said, "Yes, sir, how can I help you?" And he said, "Well, I don't have any hot water in my shower."

Immediately things are flying through my mind – oh my God, the President of the United States has no hot water, and I’m thinking, is he going to get upset? I said, “Mr. President, although the plumbers aren’t here, our engineers are here twenty-four hours a day. I’ll be more than glad to come up at your convenience, if so, right now, and see if we can repair it and get the hot water.” “Nooooo, there’s no problem – I haven’t had any hot water for two weeks.” And I’m thinking to myself, “Oh my God, he hasn’t had any hot water for two weeks.” He said, “It hasn’t been a problem, I’ve just been going down the hall and using Mrs. Ford’s shower.” I said, “Well, Mr. President,” knowing what his schedule was, he was going out to church. I said, “Mr. President, if it’s alright with you, then when you go to church, I’ll have the fellows come up and see if we can fix it for you.” He said, “Don’t worry about it, it’s no big deal. If the plumbers are going to be back on tomorrow, just have them fix it.” I said, “Certainly, Mr. President, but I’ll see if we can’t get it fixed while you’re gone.” He said, “Fine, I’ll talk to you later, goodbye,” and he hung up the phone.

I think at that point perspiration was coming off my forehead and I call the engineers and say, “President has...” and the old sage down in the engineering shop, one of the fellows that was there, he said, “Don’t worry about it Mr. Walters. We can take care of it.” So the President and Mrs. Ford – I escorted them out and they got in the limousine and off they went to church. I knew they were going to be gone probably fifty, fifty-five minutes. I went up with them immediately to the President’s shower. The old sage from the engineers office walks in and he reaches over and puts his hand next to the what they refer to as a mixing valve, where they twisted it from cold to hot. And he pounded on it with his fist. And he said, “That should fix it,” and sure enough, out comes the steaming hot water. I said, “Is this a trick that people are playing on me?” He said, “Well, from time to time with the hard water in Washington, there’s a spring in there and it builds up calcium and it won’t allow the valve to work all the way. So all you’ve got to do is loosen it up.” And I’m thinking, here the President has been for two weeks without hot water and all it took was a pounded fist on the valve mechanism and it straightened it out. But that was President Ford.

Smith: Can you imagine Lyndon Johnson waiting two weeks for his shower to be fixed?

Walters: No, oh jeez. Well, Rex Scouten tells a story about the water pressure wasn't high enough. And there's a wonderful story that the plumber and Rex tell about that. Rex wanted to check it out before the President had an opportunity to use it before he came back from Texas. He said he turned it on and it pinned him against the wall of the backside of the shower, it was so hard. He said, "I don't know how anybody – you had to have leather skin to use the shower." But President Johnson came back and evidently liked it. Thought it was the greatest thing because they put an extra water tank in and pressure hoses and all kinds of things.

Smith: In addition to the official training, I assume there's a kind of unofficial, almost tutorial that takes place with regard to each family. These are things to keep an eye out for; these are their likes, dislikes. Is that so?

Walters: It was that training period that I was talking about. For the first couple of weeks I just was kind of the tail to Rex Scouten, the chief usher. I walked around and followed him and listened to everything. Went to all the meetings and just kind of took it all in. Then the next four weeks I'd sat with the duty usher, morning, evenings, weekends, and so it was an osmosis kind of procedure where you get involved. Then eventually I started answering the phone and they'd listen to the conversation and help me along. So the principle activity of the Usher's Office is the first family. So that comes first; learning their likes, dislikes, wants, needs, anticipating those, if you can. Being there.

I made it my place, whenever the family was moving, any member of the family, and I knew they were going to be moving, I would be at the foot of the elevator when the elevator doors opened in case they wanted to express something to me. Most of the time just said, good morning, good afternoon, good evening and the conversation was at that point theirs to carry on, to stop, to continue on reading a book or whatever they were doing. So the most important responsibility of the Usher's Office is the home of the president.

The catering operation, the food and beverage operation, the tours, the house open as a public museum, those are all secondary.

So learning the family's activities and taking care of their needs so, hopefully, they don't very often have to ask for things to be done. You can anticipate what needs to be done. In fact, after my story about the shower, I initiated a weekly thump on the mixing valves in all the showers in the residence as a maintenance activity. So trying to anticipate those activities, is first and foremost in the home of the president and his family and those personal guests as opposed to the official guests that come for activities. So that was not hard to learn, because it was the primary concern.

Smith: There's a story, and of course you wouldn't have been there at the time, but when they first moved in and I guess Mrs. Ford was walking through, the second floor hall, and ran into someone on the staff, custodial staff, I guess and said, "Good morning," and there was no reply. And she went to Rex and said, "Do they not like us?" And he explained that it was just a different atmosphere under the Nixons. And I guess the word went out that this is a different tone.

Walters: At the start of a new administration, it's tough on the staff. The staff is trying to provide for the family. They're trying not to take the previous family's wants and dislikes and transpose them on the new family that has just moved in or has been there for a short period of time. So they are reluctant to do anything that would give a discomfort. I mean, that staff – I talk about them as much as I can because they are spectacular people. And they are there as servants to the presidency and not the president. And they want there to be the least amount of disruption that they can cause to the family's private life is where they want to be. President Nixon – the story that you told gives the impression that President Nixon didn't want to interact with some of the staff.

Smith: No - and I'm glad to correct that.

Walters: And that's not the case. He became intimately concerned about the families, the butlers, the staff and things. But the staff – it's one of those "Don't speak unless you're spoken to," and then you might want to be cautious about what.

And so I don't know who that person would be, but it doesn't surprise me that that would be the case. And it also doesn't surprise me that Mrs. Ford would have that kind of reaction. That she would expect people to be as friendly as she was.

Smith: And I assume it's also a different house when there are children around.

Walters: Always. Yeah. It brings a different dynamic to the house. Of course, it was hard to deal with Susan because she was not a young child. She was in high school when she came to the White House. The junior prom was held at the White House. And then the boys were in and out and they were obviously older than she and grown. So they weren't really children from that aspect.

Smith: Steve tells a story about, obviously early on, when over dinner his folks asked, "What are you doing this evening," and he said, "I just thought I'd turn in early." Well, he didn't exactly do that. He invited some friends over and they celebrated and the next morning, at breakfast or whatever, the discussion was, "Well, how was your evening?" And the President sort of pushed – I guess he'd already gotten the bill for Steve's early evening. And with it the realization that first families pay for their own food.

Walters: First families pay for all of their food, dry cleaning, anything that's personal, of their family and their personal guests. He wouldn't have had the bill that quickly. What he would have had was an inventory of what would have been taken out of the storeroom, if there had been some beverage that may have been involved, and he probably asked the butlers in the morning. The President was known to get up and go out and want to do his own bagels in the morning. That was his thing. He was going to go out and put his toast or bagels on, and of course, the butlers - that was their job. So they were trying to get there before the President and trying to gauge when he might be coming in so that they could already have it ready for him and he didn't have to worry about cutting the bagel and putting it in the toaster.

Smith: English muffins.

Walters: English muffins, that's right. That's what it was.

Smith: The English muffin story – the theory always was that he may very well have enjoyed getting up early and cooking his English muffins, but in any event, he was going to cook his English muffins because Mrs. Ford was *not* an early riser.

Walters: Well, it didn't matter what time it was, that was his desire to go in the kitchen. And of course the butlers were of a want to have the President walk in the door and have the toaster pop the English muffins up and they'd pop them on the plate and give them to him, with his preferred coverage whether it be butter or apple butter, or whatever. And I think there has always been an interaction between the butlers and the first family. They are the crown jewel, if you will, of the residence staff because they interact so closely with the family.

Smith: Are most of them African-American?

Walters: Have been up until a few years ago when we had Alfredo Sands(?), who was from Spain originally, who came. And we've had a number of other butlers that have been from other parts of the world and have been American citizens, obviously. And it wasn't until the George Herbert Walker Bush administration, that we integrated women as part-time butlers; not full-time butlers upstairs. That will happen at some point. And that was the tradition up until that point. A lot of the early ones, and you have to think about it – there were only six butlers at the White House that were full-time, and the maitre d.

A lot of them came into the White House when President Truman moved back into the White House in the '48-'52 restoration. So in '52 you brought these new people in that were relatively young, 52, 62, 72, 82, so that's thirty years – that was a career. And most of the residence staff that comes stay there for less than a year or their whole career. And the majority stays for their whole career. So it was in that late '70s, early '80s that there was a changeover because the White House had been closed down for those years '48 to '52, so you count that out to '82, thirty years and some of the people who had been at the Blair House obviously had stayed on.

Smith: And presumably one of the qualities necessary to succeed in that job would be discretion.

Walters: Not one, the *primary* consideration is discretion. You have to pull the teeth of the butlers to get them to talk. Within the last six months, Gene Allen, one of the butlers who retired shortly after I became chief usher, because he'd finished his time, and just a wonderful man, they had a little story in the paper on him. And he won't talk. He tells a few stories that are certainly not off color by any stretch of the imagination, are pretty straightforward about how the presidents would ask him about his family and everything. But there has, to my knowledge, and you could check this out, never been a tell-all story by any of the residence staff. And there are ninety-three people on the residence staff. And of that ninety-three, probably thirty-five had daily contact with the president, first lady, or their family.

Smith: Is that in part a reflection, not only on their professionalism, but of their pride?

Walters: Oh, absolutely. They carry the mantle of the presidency with them from the time they start working there until their death.

Smith: And it has nothing to do with politics?

Walters: Nope.

Smith: Totally non-partisan?

Walters: It is the pride in serving the presidency. Now a lot of those early butlers that were around the White House came from the Pullman group. When Pullman trains started to go away in the '30s and the '40s, some of them came to the White House. So they had service in their veins. And exhibited that through other people and taught other people what service was about. And that really stayed.

Smith: It's fascinating to speculate on. I mean, during the period of the civil rights revolution. The kind of cross-currents that must have been going on in that house, and yet again, I'm not aware of anyone ever really describing it.

Walters: No. The residence staff is a family in and of itself. The people that work there, when they come to work each day, they don't know how long they are going to be at work because the world situation, quite frequently, dictates. And there are a lot of long, extensive hours that that staff put in, in support of the president and the president's activities. And they spend probably – not probably because I know they did, because I did – spent more time with that group of people than they did at home with their own families. And the camaraderie, it didn't matter; old, young, black, white, Hispanic; it didn't matter. There was a job to do in support of the president and the family and that just went forward and had to be done. And the pride was, yes, you are absolutely right. It was a very prideful thing that everybody carried with them.

Smith: Tell me about the Bicentennial, because that must have been an extraordinarily concentrated set of challenges and rewards.

Walters: Certainly, with all the heads of state coming. Of course, the Congress set up that the Capitol was going to be the shining light on the Bicentennial celebration. Well, that very quickly changed to the White House with the heads of state coming and the state dinners and the putting up of the tent to cover the Rose Garden. Extraordinary to have the Queen come.

Smith: Of course there are more stories about that dinner. The famous incident with the Marine band – and I was told after that, that the band never played without its musical agenda being carefully checked out.

Walters: You'll have to talk to the social secretaries about that.

Smith: I think it's safe to say, without spilling any beans, that that was one of the stories we heard.

Walters: Certainly that was just a 'one of those things' that seems so minor, and there are so many details that are being handled...

Smith: Did you know, when the band struck up...

Walters: *Muskrat Love*.

Smith: *Muskrat Love* and *The Lady is a Tramp*.

Walters: Yup. Captain and Tennille.

Smith: Remember what Maria Down said? Maria said that Susan picked the music.

Smith: Oh, I didn't remember that.

Walters: Well, see, that was something obviously the social secretary did with the First Lady and other staff, whoever. But as soon as I heard it, I thought, "I know this is a hit song, but this just does not seem the right venue." So there are incidents that occur like that, but there are so many details associated with that.

One of my most vivid memories of that period of time: Rex Scouten and Maria Downs, there was going to be this dinner and I don't remember right now which head of state was coming. It was in the Rose Garden. And there was a tornado warning in Washington. Of course, we're outside in a tent. A tornado. These things don't appear to fit together very well.

So, I walked from the Usher's Office, just inside the North Portico and I was going to the East Wing. I went down the steps, outside of the East Room, down the steps to the ground floor and went through the corridor because I was going to the East Wing. I had some activity that I was going to be dealing with in the East Wing, and it may have been with the social secretary's office. And as I rounded the corner into what some people call the East Garden Room, which has a set of doors that open up into the East Garden Room, there was Rex Scouten, the chief usher, and Maria Downs, the social secretary, both with their backs to me having a very quiet conversation. And they had their hands up on the mullions of the window and they are just standing there silhouetted against the outside, and these unbelievable black clouds in the distance. And it was just one of those private moments of the chief usher and the social secretary commiserating about what should we say, not allow some of the people to attend a dinner and bring the dinner inside, which we weren't prepared to do, or leave it go that this storm was going to pass by.

Of course it did, and we went ahead and had the dinner outside. But that's one of those moments that have always stayed with me. It was a very poignant moment that encapsulated all the details, everything that these two people

went through to make this one event proper for the United States, for the President, for the head of state that was coming to visit, and it was all going to be possibly washed away by a simple storm.

Smith: There's a story – Dick Cheney semi-confirmed it – but I don't remember the original source. Of course, this was also at the peak of that pre-convention campaign. It has been said that it's probably a good thing that Her Majesty didn't see the guest list because a substantial portion of it were delegates and their spouses and their families. Let's face it, one of the advantages of being an incumbent president is, you have some nice perks to offer to people. Was there a sense the campaign was interwoven with these events?

Walters: Luckily the chief usher and Usher's Office doesn't get involved in the guest list. It's strictly the purview of the social secretary and her interaction with the staff. But it happens all the time, at least fifty percent of the guest list is people that have some kind of business involvement with the foreign country that's being hosted, or some Congressional committee that's involved. That's part of what these events were for. Certainly they were a celebration of the United States and the visiting head of state from a certain country, but they are also business meetings. And they went a long way. Social affairs, yes; but also business affairs.

Smith: Had Emperor Hirohito's visit taken place before you came on board?

Walters: I was there because that was a big luncheon in the East Room, where they did a big horseshoe table. I remember that very distinctly. I was there then. All the pomp and circumstance and all the gold that was used; we brought out gold from every place in the house to cover the table for that event. White table cloths.

Smith: The horseshoe – you associate the horseshoe with the Eisenhower era. Wasn't it Mrs. Kennedy who broke it up into smaller tables?

Walters: Smaller tables – ten person tables, yeah.

Smith: Does the horseshoe come back from time to time?

Walters: Yeah. Quite frequently. Because it lends itself – first of all, everybody is sitting at the same table. In the East Room it allowed us to get people on both sides of the table all the way around, and it gave a different formal atmosphere. It was a luncheon, not a dinner. So it gave a different atmosphere to that event. And being in the East Room, the largest room in the White House, it allowed us to get a lot more people at that table by putting it in that form.

Smith: Heads of state are almost swallowed up in the formality. There's a human being inside this office who is trying to connect with other human beings I'm trying to get a sense of the humanizing events and personalities that are otherwise very stylized and in some ways remote.

Walters: Of course, the state dinner is the most formal event the United States has. The arrival ceremony is also the most formal military that the government has. So there's a lot of effort that goes into those. I think from my seeing what each president and first lady do, it's almost by rote. This is a formal event and you go from point A to point B and then you do this and then you go to point C. So the formality overtakes the formal and the social aspect of having this event; really overtakes the humanity that's involved.

I think the one that probably did the best job of that that I saw initially was Mrs. Reagan. When she came into office, she wanted the state dinners to be an intimate affair, the lights were turned down lower, and she always invited personal friends. She changed that considerably. And of course the Fords were just absolutely inundated. They didn't have a chance to – I mean, the Bicentennial year, like I said, we were doing three, four a month and sometimes multiple in a week of these formal events.

The President, of course, had had an opportunity earlier in the day to sit down one on one with the head of state, head of government, and have an informal or formal conversation and gotten to know them. But usually the First Lady hadn't had that same opportunity. Sometimes they have a brief coffee, but there always were other people involved or something. The first few are tough, I think, on all the presidents and first ladies. But after that, then they have shown their form. And that's where the social secretaries – I'm sure in

your discussions with them – in trying to develop what that form is going to be.

Smith: Do you have in terms of your own experience any entertainers in that period that stand out in memory? We know, for example, that the Fords developed a very close friendship with Pearl Bailey, who became almost a member of the family.

Walters: I think that the notoriety and the availability of the kind of talent that the White House opens allows the families to make some acquaintances over and above what they may have had a opportunity before that - with President Ford, obviously having been in Congress and in the vice president for an opportunity. But the White House opens a little bit – the doors open a little wider and if they have an opportunity to sit down and directly interact with the entertainers, some of them can become quite close to them. And all of them try to pick entertainers that are of their style. I mean, if they like, or maybe if they don't like, opera, you're probably not going to see an opera star perform at the White House. So they are of that genre.

Smith: Did the Fords have distinct tastes that you can recall?

Walters: Not that I can recall, because, once again, at that point I wasn't the chief usher, and I was still in my learning process. I know that Maria Downs was very close to Mrs. Ford and they were very close in choosing a lot of those. Maria has stayed a close friend through these years. I think she really captured Mrs. Ford's desires and wants and dislikes.

Smith: Let me ask you something, it may be sensitive. Were you aware of her - however one describes it - difficulties, problems?

Walters: You mean with the alcohol and the pills?

Smith: Yeah, more I guess the pills.

Walters: Actually, this fits right in with the butlers. Obviously the butlers knew about it, because they were the ones providing the drinks, and whether they knew about – well, I think everybody pretty well knew about the difficulty she had with her back and the pain pills and everything; the combination of the two.

You never heard anything from any of those people. It was Mrs. Ford, after the family intervention, coming forward that everything broke on the scene. And you still didn't hear any conversation from the residence staff – those people that knew the difficulties, because it's so personal. And was I aware of it? Yes. Was I aware of the extent of it? No. But the butlers had to be and they didn't tell me. I don't think they told Rex Scouten, who was the chief usher at the time. That was what family did.

Smith: It also must be awkward - you get into a campaign, the result of which determines whether they will continue to inhabit the house. Partisanship aside, it must be at least something of an emotional rollercoaster. Rex told us a wonderful story about election night in '76, where he was upstairs and it was two o'clock and it wasn't over, but it wasn't looking good. And the President decided, look, we're not going to know for sure, I'm going to turn in. And he goes across the hall and Rex followed him and wanted to say something consoling without conceding. Anyway, to make a long story short, he says, "You know, Mr. President, you've spent your life in service to this country, in uniform in the war and all those years on Capitol Hill and during this incredibly difficult period these last couple of years. No one deserves to win more than you do. But you know, Mr. President, maybe it's just time for you to take a well-earned vacation." And Ford looked at him and said, "I don't think so."

Walters: I was working that night, and Rex came downstairs after that and he said, "It looks like it's lost." And of course, that was the first time that I had been there and I had this wave of emotion wash over me. The first president that I'd served was not going to be there much longer. And my first feeling, and I think it was universal for the staff, was, this good man should have had a term of his own, an elected term of his own. Because we all, universally, just liked the President and the First Lady and it would have been fitting for him to have an elected term and not an appointed term.

Smith: There have been a number of people who've suggested that it took him a little while to bounce back. That he wasn't quite his normal self. Did you sense that in the immediate aftermath of the election?

Walters: It was a shock. He expected to win. I think the First Lady did, too. And there was a 'is this real?' kind of feeling that kind of permeated the two of them. I had an opportunity, obviously, to be with them one on one on different...but I never spoke about the political things because I hadn't been there long enough to voice any kind of opinion or any comments at that point. But you could sense that. There was a sense of disappointment, and I could be wrong, but I think Mrs. Ford recovered quicker than the President did. She was ready to move on to the next phase of her life. Was Colorado where they were going? Was California where they were going? That came back very quickly with her. It took him a little longer. And the staff was also just very down. I think in the years that I was there, that was probably the time that I saw hurt in the eyes of the staff that the Fords weren't going to be there. Certainly some of the other presidents that I served eight years, so we knew after the second election they were going to be leaving on a particular day. But there was real hurt that he didn't have an opportunity to get elected.

Smith: Which testifies to the affection in which they were held.

Walters: Oh, absolutely. I think so, yeah. But that relationship is a very close one and some of the staff takes it more to heart than others. Once again, being the new guy on the block, my immediate thought was, "Oh my God, there's going to be a new president in two and a half months and am I going to have a job? What is a transition all about?" We had, obviously with Rex's guidance, started following those snippets that we could to get an idea of what the Carters were like from the summer when he was nominated, so that you have something in the back of your mind about the family members. We'd clip out articles from newspapers and magazines that said, "This is Jean Stapleton, the President's sister, and this is Billy Carter and he lives here." Those kinds of things we'd start collecting, just in case that person was going to be elected president. And that of course, stepped up once the election was over, in trying to collect information and you start making those transitions. It's not an easy time – transition.

Smith: There's a story in one of the memoirs, I guess, where I think he [President Ford] was actually a little worried about her. That he had made arrangements,

I think Bob Hope was involved and other folks. Anyway they had gone out to dinner or some event, and came back into the residence and, unknown to her, he had brought a number of their friends together and it turned into a celebration.

Walters: I just don't have any recollection of that. But it would make sense that he would do that because usually a lot of people forget about – an election happens in early November, and December is the busiest month at the White House because it's the holiday season. And it starts immediately after Thanksgiving.

Smith: And she loved Christmas.

Walters: They had all the people in and then all the activity that was associated with it and the opportunity to share. Decorations – how the house was going to be decorated for Christmas. I think she would have liked to have had the opportunity to have another couple Christmases because the first year was kind of thrown on her. The second year there was some thought they would get into it, but then they weren't there for the continuation of that. So the month of December is taken up - actually from Thanksgiving right to New Year's Eve - is taken up with the holiday affairs. And then the family usually goes away between Christmas and New Year's and then you come back and it's January the third; and you've got seventeen days. So normally in that period the families usually have those major supporters, their friends, and they have them in for a kind of last activity at the White House. And President Ford had a number of those, as did Mrs. Ford with friends and family and supporters through the years. So I don't have a specific recollection, but that doesn't surprise me.

Smith: I assume like all families – well not all, some more than others, I guess – that they enjoyed Camp David.

Walters: Oh, I think everybody enjoyed Camp David.

Smith: Is it just because it's a chance to get out of the bubble?

Walters: First and foremost, it's not formal. Camp David can never be associated with formal. There are individual little cabins, they are rustic, back from the '30s and the work projects administration, when it was literally a work camp. And of course they've been updated through the years and everything. They are very nice, but the rooms are relatively small.

Smith: Homey.

Walters: Oh, absolutely. And they can get out and the people - they interact. The military are different than the White House staff, the residence staff are the little more formal. They are military who can become more comfortable more quickly in a less formal atmosphere. And the opportunity to be out and not have the Secret Service closed in around you and the facilities that are there. They have everything they could possibly want, and if it's not there, they can have it brought in because it's a big enough compound that they don't have to worry about that. I know at the start of the Carter administration, there was some thought to give up Camp David as they did with the ship and various things.

Smith: Ironic in light of such later events.

Walters: And that is exactly where I was going. Rex Scouten, I know I did, I'm sure the other ushers did who interacted, said, "Mr. President, before you make that decision, go there. Experience it first." And, of course, that's his claim to glory. If there's anything that's outstanding it's the Camp David Accords. And everything that went on. And to think back now, that they came within a very short period of time of closing Camp David as a presidential retreat and turning it back over as a military post. And eventually it obviously would have been abandoned, probably turned over to the Park Service as a Park Facility, maybe a historic site. But the fact is, that it is a glorious setting, and every president since President Carter certainly has used Camp David to some great advantage. But the Fords, I know, enjoyed it immensely. They were used to being outside.

Smith: Do you think he got a bum rap about being clumsy?

Walters: Oh! Goodness gracious! I've told everybody that I've ever had an opportunity to answer that question. He is probably the most athletic president that's ever been at the White House. And the fact that he bumped his head or slipped and fell down the steps, I mean, who hasn't done that? In fact, the problem was that he did it in front of the press. And the fact that he went out and swam, the swimming pool put in by the swimming pool institute and a bunch of friends that got together and put the outdoor swimming pool in and the fact that he went there daily and swam. And every president since then has enjoyed that pool immensely.

Smith: I was going to ask you.

Walters: Immensely.

Smith: It gets lots of use?

Walters: Absolutely. And I just always laugh when people say that. President Ford was always bumbling and stumbling – you've got to be kidding me.

Smith: There is a story which is so telling. In Vienna, first of all, it was raining and he had an umbrella and he had Mrs. Ford's arm. And he slipped and fell and they got the picture. Of course, all the people around him were railing against the photographers. Ford says, "Well, of course they took the picture. If they hadn't they would have lost their jobs."

Walters: But the fact that he was getting out of the helicopter and bumped his head. He was a tall man. He forgot to duck, give him a break.

Smith: A couple of things and we'll let you go. Obviously you saw him on a number of occasions, but I'm thinking of two in particular. One of which was the 200th Anniversary of the first occupant of the White House, you had all the former presidents and first ladies there that night and I had the privilege of writing his remarks for that event. What do you remember about that?

Walters: You're talking about the dinner?

Smith: Yeah, the dinner for the 200th Anniversary.

Walters: Well, the first thing I think about – and this is really off the subject – but that was the first night we were going to have the Clinton china. Mrs. Clinton, late in the administration had decided to get a full set of china. And that night she was hoping – and that was in December, December 3rd or something, sometime early in December –

Smith: And right at the peak of the whole dispute over the 2000 election...

Walters: And they hadn't decided yet who the new president was going to be. And so all we got was enough base plates and service plates for the head table where the presidents and the first ladies were seated. I was invited to that dinner as a guest. First time I'd ever been invited as a guest because I was always working. Of course my mind was going, "What's going on, how is this going?" because I wasn't in charge. I wasn't used to not being in charge at these major dinners. It was going fine and President Ford got up with those wonderful remarks and talked about the staff and the relationship and tears came to my eyes.

I was sitting next to Hugh Sidey's wife, and she looked at me and she said, "That hit home." I said, "It did." It really did because it spoke to the relationship that over a period of time, a relatively short period of time, that President Ford and Mrs. Ford developed with the staff. And so that's my memories of that occasion.

Smith: And then I assume you are probably working when the Bushes very generously – had his 90th birthday party at the White House. In 2006 they had a birthday party for him.

Walters: Yes, absolutely. In fact, I have the photograph in the other room of all of them there assembled. In fact, can I take a second? [leaves to retrieve photo]

Smith: Now, what event was this?

Walters: This was his birthday party – I'm pretty sure it was. No, that wasn't, I take that back. That's not the one. Wasn't that the opening of the Library? That's what that was. The Nixon Library, I take that back. And they all gathered in front of the Oval Office desk and the picture taking, when I became aware of

it, I contacted each one of the first ladies and said, “There are a number of people who served all these presidents. Would you consider if I got the names of those individuals, and said there would be a limited number, having yourself and the president sign these and return them to the staff?” And they did and there are only twenty-two of those in existence. I was thinking about the other day – this was in the State Dining Room, when they were gathered for his birthday. They gathered in the State Dining Room and I have that photograph. Those gatherings mean so much to those of us that had an opportunity to span the different administrations.

Smith: There obviously were still people on the staff from the Ford years.

Walters: Yes, there were.

Smith: Did they have an opportunity to interact?

Walters: Interact with them? In fact, I gathered those people together. Whenever we had – while I was the chief usher – whenever we had a former president come back, I had those staff members who served that president come and stand in the hallway outside of the diplomatic reception room, so that when they arrived, they’d walk down the hallway and see these faces that they were familiar with. They appreciated it. I had a lot of them respond immediately and later in calls or letters to indicate how much that meant to them – to have those kinds of remembrances that went through. And it was a dwindling number through the years, obviously. But to have the opportunity because there is that special relationship between the residence staff and the families, to have them see people who they were familiar with and possibly, if they were going to go upstairs and have a drink with the president or beverage, to have their favorite drink without them asking for it. Little things like that made the years at the White House come back to mind.

Smith: And then the most poignant gathering of all – again, I don’t know whether it had been done before for other presidents – but on the morning of the Washington funeral. The President had decreed he didn’t want a caisson through the streets of Washington, and so when they went from the Capitol up

to the cathedral, they made a point of going by the White House. And the staff was gathered outside, which was very poignant.

Walters: Yeah, at that point I was up at the cathedral, standing in line to get in with everybody else. Julie Nixon Eisenhower was in line behind me, about thirty or forty people, and I turned around and saw her and she saw me, so we went and said hello. I left my wife standing there and I went to the front of the line and I grabbed one of the people by the cuff of the neck and I said, "Julie Nixon Eisenhower is standing back here in this line. Somebody come get her." So they went by and got her and took her. But there was Julie, standing in line with everybody else. And that's the kind of relationship that I think a lot of the families, and a lot of American people, don't see. They see this imperial presidency and these families that are kind of put up on a pedestal, but they don't see themselves that way. I didn't work for any president that saw them or their families that saw themselves that way. They were put in a position for a period of time, and after that they were Americans.

Smith: A lot of people don't realize about the ongoing relationships that exist between the families. I remember when the President had that minor stroke in Philadelphia. Within twenty minutes I got two calls, one was from Julie and one was from Tricia. And Mrs. Johnson remained very close to the Fords for as long as they were around.

Walters: In the years that I was at the White House and the families I had an opportunity to serve, Mrs. Johnson was held in such reverence by the other first ladies. It was truly amazing the way they talked about Mrs. Johnson. And when she was invited, which each one of the first ladies did, to come to the White House, everything needed to be perfect when Mrs. Johnson came. It was really wonderful to see.

Smith: And that extraordinary scene, the day Mrs. Ford went to the hospital. The day before they entertained the Johnsons at the groundbreaking for the LBJ Grove. And they had the Johnsons to tea and showed them around the family quarters. There were photos and you could see Mrs. Ford's bag is packed, sitting at the bottom of the bed, all ready to go to the hospital. And nothing was ever said.

- Walters: But that goes to show that the White House is the home, as opposed to the official entity that most people – most people say, “Today the White House said...” And I tell people, the White House doesn’t have a mouth, first of all, and usually what they are talking about, they are not talking about the residence, they are talking about the West Wing, the political aspect of the White House. I said, “You have to remember that the West Wing is still an appendage to the original building.”
- Smith: How do you think Gerald Ford should be remembered? I guess I should say, how will you remember him and how do you think he should be remembered?
- Walters: Well, I remember him, as I said earlier, just as a wonderful person to be around in any circumstance. Just a wonderful, warm individual. I think history placed him in a position that he excelled. He was thrown into a circumstance that no other president had ever been thrown into. And certainly also the vice presidency under the circumstances he became vice president. From a congressman to a vice president and then the presidency, through all those iterations he kept himself whole. He kept his family whole. And he never lost his dignity. It’s the one thing that President Ford means to me, he always held his head up, and he had right to, because of the way he acted when thrown into that historical perspective. And the way he was – I hate to use the word treated – but I can’t think of another one right now that’s proper. He is certainly seen as a transition figure of exceptional ability by historians, but at the time he wasn’t. He was ridiculed by some and as you said, some of the things that were in the bumbling and stumbling – you just couldn’t have been further from the truth. I was glad to see him get the tribute and the heartfelt depth of the tribute that he got when he passed away.
- Smith: I was wearing two hats that week. I was with ABC the first half of the week and then with the family the second half and I can tell you, media people were astonished at the extent of the response and it seemed to build as the week went on. And the number of young people in the lines and people who weren’t alive during the Ford presidency. And I think part of it was they were being introduced to him for the first time. A lot of young people were seeing these clips and contrasting it with the kind of ugliness of our politics today,

and it looked pretty good. The fact that poor LBJ who died the day before the Vietnam peace agreement was announced, Ford lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his thinking on the pardon.

Walters: I think you're right, yes. He never lost that fantastic smile. He always had that wonderful smile that he carried with him regardless of the circumstances. It's funny, when he was coming out of the theater when he was shot at and the Secret Service were pushing him into car, the shot from across the street, it's like he's got this look on his face, What is going on? The concept hadn't reached there that all this activity was because of him.

Smith: You could debate whether he was naïve or just kind of the Eagle Scout, but he literally went to his grave thinking he didn't have enemies.

Walters: I don't doubt that in the least.

Smith: Time was good to Gerald Ford.

Walters: It was. And what I liked about it, as you said, that it occurred during his lifespan. It didn't wait until he was passed on.

Smith: The Profiles in Courage Award –he said afterwards, “For twenty years, everywhere I go people ask the same question. They don't ask anymore.” It was if the imprimatur of the Kennedys dissolved this. And again, people never saw it, but there was that relationship between the Kennedys and Ford, of course, because they'd been in Congress together. And then he was on the Warren Commission. There was a relationship that people didn't know about. And in the later years it was very touching.

Walters: That's a small fraternity. There is none smaller. And the weight – I don't think people really are cognizant of the weight of the world that is placed on our president's heads since the Second World War. I mean, we're the preeminent country in the world and they carry that on their shoulders all the time. I think earlier you were talking about George Bush and the fact that he was kind of somewhat relieved – I think the weight – and I saw him change – the weight of having the safety of the American people on his shoulders was so great that it blocked out all else.

Smith: Interesting.

Walters: And I watched him change pre and post 9/11. I had opportunities to talk with he and his father, certainly a wartime president also, and the weight of our American troops on their shoulders was just incomprehensible. I saw it, talked to them about it.

Smith: I had an extraordinary experience – it was Charlie Gibson’s idea – but the President picked up on it. On January 19th, the last event on his schedule. It was never released to the media, it was for the oral histories of both libraries. I spent ninety minutes in the White House foyer interviewing the two Presidents Bush; off the record and therefore a little more candid than it might have been otherwise. It was fascinating. But I know exactly what you are saying.

Walters: It’s interesting that you talk about that in the Grand Foyer. On Inaugural Day, for 43, I was standing in the Grand Foyer, the family had come in after the parade and had gone into the State Dining Room and the President was standing pretty much by himself in the foyer. I walked out to him and I said, “Sir, is there something I can help you with?” And he said, “I’m waiting for the President.” And I looked at him and I said, “Sir, you are the President.” And he said, “No, I mean 41.” Now, up to that point I hadn’t heard that, and I don’t know whether that’s the derivation, or whether it started with the family earlier than that or not. But that’s when, obviously after that, I heard 41 or 43 all the time to distinguish between the two men.

Smith: A perfect note on which to end.

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