

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
George W. Bush
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
July 26, 2010

Smith: Thank you for doing this. Before you were president, there was a long-running relationship here. I heard President Ford talk with real admiration about your grandfather. And then, of course, when your dad went into Congress in '66 – which, by the way, was a brilliant campaign. The best political slogan I've ever heard was 'Labels are for cans'. A lot of people might dust that off today. Anyway, clearly Ford saw him as a comer. Your folks were in China and your dad was brought back to the CIA. And there was a perception - not that the president was responsible - but because of the political climate at the time, that he was being deep-sixed in terms of his own political future.

The reason I ask is because Nelson Rockefeller went to his grave convinced that all that was Don Rumsfeld's doing. Did it make it awkward when you decided to bring Rumsfeld into the cabinet?

Bush: Very interesting question. It made it awkward for some of the people who liked to gossip about that. Actually, it didn't make it awkward for them; it gave them gist for the gossip. But, no, I made my decision on what I thought was best for my administration, not based upon some kind of history between Dad and Rumsfeld. I've never really known whether that was true - that being that Don Rumsfeld engineered the situation where George Bush, in order to get confirmed as the CIA, had to renounce his basic right as a citizen, which is that he would not seek the vice presidency. I don't know if that's true or not. It didn't really enter into my mind.

I ended up with relationships with people that had poor relationships with my dad, like [John] Connally, for example. I got to know Connally in a different light. They may have bent over backwards to be nice to the son after having had animosity with the father. I don't know. But I picked Don Rumsfeld because I thought he'd help transform the military. That was the primary focus of what I wanted my defense secretary to do. I thought we needed a

military that was different from the Cold War structure and Rumsfeld had written about that and would be good at it. But, no, it didn't prove awkward. It may have for Dad, but he wouldn't have told me and he never reflected any awkwardness. And, generally, my mother can't contain herself and would've expressed herself openly had there been a problem.

Smith: Let me go back. You, of course, ran for Congress in '78.

Bush: I did.

Smith: But before that, didn't you work in the Ford campaign in '76?

Bush: I did. What had happened was I had gotten out of Harvard Business School in '75 and went to Midland, Texas, where I was raised, to stake my claim. You know, all business was revved up after the oil embargo and I scratched an entrepreneurial itch. I got out there and Jimmy Allison, who is the publisher of the *Midland Reporter Telegram* and the campaign manager of my dad's '66 campaign, the campaign manager of Ed Gurney's '68 campaign and the campaign manager of Winton Blunt's '72 campaign for Senator of Alabama, had taken over the newspaper from his dad. I think it was John Tower who asked him to help him in this state, so he asked, "Would you mind running West Texas for us?"

Smith: Now, was this the fall campaign or the primary?

Bush: No, it was the primary.

Smith: Oh, that was tough.

Bush: Yeah. See, I was a volunteer. I was in the oil business. And it was clear to them from the beginning that Ford had no chance in West Texas. I mean, Ronald Reagan was, you know, riding a wave out there. I can remember helping set up an event in Lubbock, Texas for Gerald Ford and he came out there and there were a handful of people that came to see him. We got zero delegates. As a matter of fact, Gerald Ford got zero delegates statewide in the state of Texas.

Smith: Right. And there's the famous incident where, was it the tamale...?

Bush: He ate the husk on the tamale down there in San Antonio. That didn't help either but - tamale or no tamale - Ronald Reagan had created a political tsunami and just crushed President Ford in Texas.

Smith: Was that part of a Republican Party that, even then, was in the throes of change?

Bush: Yeah, absolutely. So, I had run for Congress in '78 and I got beat by Ken Hance, who's a conservative Democrat. All those conservative Democrats who had forever voted for the Democratic Party switched to Reagan in '80 and forever since, that district has been solid Republican. So, basically, what Ronald Reagan did was that he had the charisma and the ability to take people that were inclined to be Republicans and convert them to the Republican Party.

Smith: He infamously staged a comeback in the primaries in North Carolina with the issue of the Panama Canal treaties. Was that something that really resonated down here?

Bush: Absolutely. President Ford made a tough decision and it irritated a lot of people. Occasionally a hot button issue will arise that triggers a protectionist or nativist impulse and this was clearly one. We're witnessing the same thing now with the immigration debate and it was first manifested during my presidency on Dubai ports, which was a case of Port Management Company from a foreign country that was good at what they did, and yet the renewal of a contract triggered this populist uprising and it became a sovereignty issue.

Smith: I assume in today's media climate, it's a lot easier to push that hot button and get it out there than it was back then.

Bush: It is much easier because of the blogs and the 24-hour news cycles. On the other hand, the Panama Canal Treaty was really hot and I remember John Tower supported President Ford on the vote and was vilified. Plus, his support of Gerald Ford over Ronald Reagan really made it difficult for him.

Smith: I'll tell you a Connally story from that year. At the time of Connally's indictment, the milk fund or whatever that he was indicted for, he went up to

the White House to see the President about something. And aides told Ford, “You can’t do this. You can’t talk to him because he’s being indicted.” And Ford, being Ford said, “Look, in our country, you’re innocent until proven guilty. Of course I’ll see him.” So, he saw him. Fine.

So, later on, in the Texas primary, the Ford people approach Connally who was staying neutral. Later still, he sees himself as a running mate for Ford and comes to the White House. Dave Kennerly tells this story. Kennerly said to him, “God, if I was President to the United States, I wouldn’t see that bastard after what he did.” And Ford said, “Well, it’s a good thing you’re not president.” So, it all leads to Kansas City and the vice presidency is up in the air. Connally wants to come to see the President for another visit and Ford agrees to see him. Kennerly says, “God, I hope you’re not considering that s-o-b” and Ford looks at him and says, “Do you think I’ve forgotten what he didn’t do in Texas?” Behind the genial exterior was a tough guy.

Bush: Absolutely. Look, I didn’t know President Ford very well. I was of a different generation, but when I was with him, one, I was impressed by his stature. The big guy. Secondly, I was impressed by his gentle nature. There was no kind of bully to Gerald Ford, but you could tell beneath the veneer of kind of a friendly fellow that there was an inner strength and that impressed me.

Smith: Did he campaign for you in ’78?

Bush: Nobody did in ’78. It’s interesting. The ’78 primary was a pretty tough primary, because I was accused of being shipped by the Rockefellers to buy up all the farmland. This was during the American Agricultural Movement. There was big time unrest in the agricultural sector and a lot of the district is farming. Ronald Reagan actually endorsed my opponent in the ’78 primary and a lot of people speculated it might’ve been that some of his political advisors were saying that this is a chance to wound Bush, Sr. At any rate, Reagan called me the day after the primary and congratulated me and asked if I wanted his help. I had made the determination that I was going to seek nobody’s outside help, my dad’s, Reagan’s, or Ford’s because I wanted to

show people I could stand on my own two feet. So, no, he never campaigned because he wasn't asked.

Smith: Was that campaign a valuable experience?

Bush: Oh, it was great. Really good for a lot of reasons. One, it taught me that you can run and lose and life goes on. Secondly, it enabled me to understand what it means to get defined, how you have to define yourself as opposed to get defined by an opponent. I got "out-country'd" in a country district and I vowed that that would never happen again. And, thirdly, it really helped cement my marriage, because Laura and I had just gotten married. We got married in November of '77, so we spent our real first year of marriage in politics and it gave her a glimpse of politics and it gave me a glimpse of a fabulous woman on the campaign trail.

Smith: She took to it naturally?

Bush: Yes, she's good. One reason why is she has zero political ambitions for me or herself, for that matter, so she was a very natural campaigner. People took to her more quickly than they took to me out in West Texas. I still had a little Ivy League veneer on. She was born and raised in Midland and the fact that she was reluctant to be on the campaign trail appealed to a lot of people, particularly women who could relate.

Smith: Sure. In '80, you go to Detroit.

Bush: Yeah.

Smith: And there's this crazy, still murky, never fully explained effort that some people literally think to this day was kind of a feint, almost a head trip by the Reagan people to send out the message that, "We're moderate. We're willing to reach out to the moderates." A number of people have told us it was really a Kissinger and Greenspan effort to get back in the game, that they were using Ford. It never would've happened, partly because Mrs. Ford, I don't think, ever would've gone along with it. But stories have been written that suggest your dad was basically on the verge of leaving town, that he thought that this was a done deal.

Bush: Well, I wasn't there. Interestingly enough, I got notified about President Reagan's selection of my dad in a restaurant in New York. So, we hustled over the next morning to Detroit from New York. So, I wasn't there. I think the report that he pretty well considered himself out of the mix was true. You know, I can't imagine a worse set up than a co-presidency. And there is no doubt in my mind that, when it all came down to it, that President Reagan would not have allowed that to happen. It was a figment of somebody's bad imagination.

Smith: The phrase was Walter Cronkite's.

Bush: Really?

Smith: Yeah.

Bush: But, splitting duties... I mean, the president assigns duties. The president doesn't split duties. You can imagine a White House in which there had been a predetermined assignation of duties. Then, immediately, you'd have two camps in the White House. There needs to be one camp and that's a camp that is loyal to the country and willing to work for a president, including a vice presidential staff that is obviously loyal to the vice president, but that also understands who makes the decisions and that's the president. Period.

Smith: In 2000, the day of your acceptance speech, there were people who were in that room who have marveled: here you are, a few hours away from the biggest speech of your life and, first of all, that you're thoughtful enough to go over to the hospital to see Ford. They've talked about how you went in there very relaxed, very jovial, with no sign of pressure in terms of what was going on. What do you remember of that visit? How did you learn about his illness?

Bush: I would guess that Karl Rove said, "The President is ill and I think you ought to go over there." Secondly, by the time you're getting ready to give a speech, at least the way I do things, I had gone over that speech innumerable times and the truth of the matter is you want your mind off of the speech or off of the event. It's like debate day. You don't want to be sitting around kind of thinking about what the question is going to be and grinding through

the potential answers in your mind. You want to get your mind off the subject. You've worked, you've prepared, you're ready to go, and so going to the hospital to see President Ford was therapeutic in some ways. It kind of got your mind off yourself. I can't remember all the details of the event, but somehow I remember the big guy was in his pajamas. Laura went with me, if I recall correctly, so I'm glad we went. It was a small gesture.

Smith: Well, it really meant a lot to him. It really was a tonic.

Bush: It was a tonic for me, too. When you think of somebody else, it tends to cause a person not to be so self-absorbed that you fret and agonize.

Smith: Well, and he'd been through that. His acceptance speech was probably the most important speech he ever gave.

Bush: The interesting thing about an acceptance speech at a convention is that it's your second most visible moment. The first is when you pick your vice presidential running mate because it speaks volumes about the process. It's really your first presidential decision and it begins to describe to the American people who you are and what kind of president you'd be. The second is your convention speech because it's the first time most people actually see you speaking to them as to what your priorities would be and what your hopes are for the country.

Smith: Let me ask you, because that segues very neatly into the selection of Dick Cheney. One of the things that's fascinating about the whole trajectory of history – and you'd know a whole lot better than I would – are all these people who say, "What's happened to Dick Cheney?" I've often thought one of the things that happened to Dick Cheney was his experience. The irony is that Ford spent twenty-five years on Capitol Hill, and the moment he became president, he found himself in the position of defending executive prerogatives against the Watergate Babies, that whole generation of people who wanted to chip away at the presidency. They'd already passed the War Powers Act. And Cheney went through that at a young and very impressionable age. Then obviously he had the experience in Congress himself. But, I wonder if he didn't bring with him to your presidency this

very keen sensitivity about the vulnerability of the presidency, the fact that presidential powers are under constant assault.

Bush: Sure, they are. And the great thing about our country is that you're always arguing on the margin. Checks and balances exist, and the question is to what extent does the legislative body or the courts get to check the presidency and balance the presidency? And the president, of course, has to deal with the circumstances of the times. In my case, I needed to exert presidential authority within the Constitution; that is, my authority is under Article II as the Commander-in-Chief. In my case, I also got bolstered by congressional resolution as well.

You know, I've heard all that stuff about Dick Cheney and "What happened to Dick Cheney?", "Dick Cheney has changed." Dick Cheney did not change from the moment I asked him to be vice president to the day we left office. Dick Cheney was an experienced, solid advisor who did not panic when times got tough and who did not express displeasure behind the president's back. The presidential nominee must do two things when you pick a vice president. One, assure the American people that if the worst happens your nominee can be president. Dick Cheney passed that test. He had the experience necessary to be president. And, secondly, the president picks a vice president to shore up his own weaknesses. I was a governor from Texas. I had visited Washington. I never had had Washington experience. Dick Cheney had been secretary of defense, chief of staff, and a member of the United States Congress. He had excelled in all three positions and there's no doubt in my mind he was a great pick.

The problem is, during the presidency, I made some very controversial decisions. I authorized within the law the ability for our intelligence services to use enhanced interrogations techniques to get information from cold-blooded killers to protect our country. Dick Cheney supported that decision and rather than blame the president, a lot of the chattering class would rather blame the vice president. I thought that criticism of Dick Cheney was very unfair.

Smith: Is it helpful to have a vice president who clearly does not have presidential aspirations of his own?

Bush: It's an interesting question. I think so; at least in my case it was, because I had a controversial presidency. I made a lot of very difficult decisions and, had my vice president been positioning himself or herself for a run for the presidency, some of the decisions would've been undermined by the leakage that would've come out of the vice president's office. I think of the surge, for example. One of the problems with the president in making a tough decision like sending more troops in when everybody wanted you to pull out is you need as much unanimity in the government as possible in order to make the idea saleable. In this case, had there been any dissent, the Congress would've exploited it and made it much harder for me to get the appropriations bills through. This would've been in '06. Right about in '06, somebody as a vice president would have been beginning to position and that would've been a hard position for somebody running for president to have assumed at the time. It made it a lot easier in many ways to have a vice president who wasn't seeking the presidency.

Smith: Do you think he had this particular sensitivity to the inherent hostility of Congress toward the Executive? I mean, was he any more or less sensitive to that than you think?

Bush: I don't think so. I think Dick, one, was very respectful of Congress. He loved the institution of the House and he would often talk about his experiences as a congressman. No, I think, like myself, he reacted to the horror of 9/11. We were charged with the task of protecting the homeland in a very uncertain environment. We were getting daily intelligence reports that talked about all kinds of attacks. It is hard for people to remember what that period after 9/11 was like, but it was a period of a lot of anguish and a lot of doubt and uncertainty. And then it was followed by a period of finger pointing. You did not connect the dots. You must connect the dots. We started connecting the dots and then all of a sudden the dialogue became "Why are you connecting the dots?"

I never felt like Dick's advice was excessive and I always felt it was important. But every time I made a decision - and he'd disagree with a lot of the decisions I made, well, not a lot, but a fair number - he would say, "Yes, sir, Mr. President." His classic line was "That's why you get paid the big bucks." I mean, for example, when I agreed with Secretary Rumsfeld that I needed new eyes on the ground in Iraq and decided that Bob Gates would become the secretary of defense, I informed Vice President Cheney and he disagreed with the decision [to accept Rumsfeld's resignation] and I fully understood. But, he also understood it was my call to make and he knew I thought long and hard about it.

Smith: It's a speculative question, but was that affected, do you think, by his long-standing relationship with Don Rumsfeld?

Bush: No question. No question. He and Don Rumsfeld are close friends and he also thought he was doing a fine job, but, you know, it's the president's decision to make and Dick knew that. He could express himself very plainly and I appreciated that. And, also, one of the things that a president needs is there to be some creative tension. In other words, you don't want everybody sitting around the table and saying, "Oh, okay, let's go tell the boys", "Looking beautiful today." What you want is somebody saying "This is what I think" and somebody else saying, "This is what I think" and have them hash it out and Dick Cheney was good at that, but he did it in a way that wasn't personal or full of animus. Of course, I was never in a lot of those meetings. I mean, occasionally, there would be flare ups in my presence. I was told, of course, by my national security advisor, for example, when there is a tension in a National Security meeting - what went on. And, you know, people would take strong positions and that's what a president wants. And Dick was good at that.

Smith: It's interesting. That was very much how Ford liked it and Ford was very different from Nixon in that regard. You can't imagine Nixon inviting people in and having it out, whether it was the budget or whatever. I mean, that was very much the approach that he took. At the time of 9/11, I know that the former presidents were at the Cathedral. Did people reach out through them?

Bush: I think that, if I recall correctly, prior to going into Iraq, Condi and Hadley, if I'm not mistaken, touched base with the former presidents. I'm not sure. I know they touched base with Bill Clinton.

Smith: We'll follow up on that. Hadley, I think, was a very junior official in the Ford White House.

Bush: Right. He was. I think so. I think they did. You know, it's interesting. I was often asked "Did you consult with former presidents?" and the answer is "No". I generally called a former president when I had a request. I called my dad and Bill Clinton to ask them to help on the tsunami, but most former presidents know that the current president has got much better information than they ever would and, therefore, their advice would be superficial at best.

Smith: One thing I think, didn't King Hussein die on your watch?

Bush: No.

Smith: No. Who was it? Was it the King of Morocco?

Bush: No, no. Pope John Paul died. That was the biggest state funeral we went to.

Smith: Anyway, I know that President Ford who, at that point, was really getting on in years, I know he went at the request of the president to walk in King Hussein's procession.

Bush: That would've been Clinton.

Smith: Okay.

Bush: I did call my dad, of course, but it was really to comfort him. The roles got completely reversed during my presidency. When he was president, I agonized about what was said about him or how he was characterized. When I was president, he agonized about what was said about me and how I was characterized. He would comfort me when he was a president. I comforted him when I was the president. So I spent as much time calling him and saying, "Don't worry about it. I'm doing fine."

Smith: And did your mother just get mad?

Bush: Yes - actually, she tuned it out. She handled it the right way, which is you don't pay attention to it at all. She did what Dad should've done.

Smith: You and Mrs. Bush did something very gracious and I'm not sure it had been done before. You had a 90th birthday party for President Ford.

Bush: Yes, we did.

Smith: How did that come about?

Bush: Well, we just thought about it. I can't remember, I wonder if Dick, I don't remember the genesis. It might've been that Dick said, "You know, this is Gerald Ford's 90th birthday," and Laura grabbed on to it and said, "Let's have a party for him." It could've been. I just can't remember who suggested it. It might've been that Laura read about it and said, "Let's do it." But, anyway, it was a really wonderful occasion. I had not known the Ford family very well and we really had a wonderful time with the President and Mrs. Ford and the children. It was a neat deal. I had him into the Oval Office and we had the grand dinner there and I'm glad we did it. It was really special.

Smith: He cherished the memory. There's a wonderful story - a classic Betty Ford. After her portrait was hung in the White House, maybe a year or so later, she had some cosmetic surgery done and people asked her why and she said because she wanted to look like her picture.

Bush: She's a classy woman.

Smith: She had a tough road to hoe.

Bush: In the spotlight. That's the problem with public life is it's public and if you've got any frailties or any issues you've got to deal with, it'll be highlighted. Mrs. Ford did the country a great service by dealing with her addictions and has left a legacy of people being willing to confront life's realities.

Smith: And, even before that, the breast cancer. Thirty years ago, no one talked about it and it was a deadly silence.

- Bush: That's right. She was great and did a great service. The first spouse can either seize the moment and really make a difference in people's lives or kind of go "Why me?" Mrs. Ford did that and Laura did that, too.
- Smith: I'll never forget, because I've seen the letters when the Fords moved into the White House. Of course, they never expected to live there. They never wanted to live there, although, once they got there, they decided they'd like to stay. But, she mentions - typically candid Mrs. Ford - mentions somewhere that they shared the same bed. And concerned Americans wrote to protest that fact. Do you ever get over the extent to which your family, your "private life" is public property?
- Bush: I probably was the person best prepared to understand the realities of an incoming president. The huge sacrifice is that you've lost your anonymity forever. And I knew that. So, having said that, the honor of representing the country, the thrill of being the president, being in a position to be able to make history, far exceeds the inconveniences of the loss of anonymity.
- Smith: Susan was a teenager who had to adapt to Secret Service agents. Was that a challenge for your girls?
- Bush: Well, you know, they were getting ready to go to college and it was a huge challenge for them and it was a great relief for me. The Secret Service are really good and they gave our girls space. But, no question, somebody who contemplates running for president and happens to be a father or mother, has got to weigh what that means on their children. In our case, our little girls were apoplectic about me running and (they) emerged after the process as young, professional, contributing women. We're very proud of them.
- Smith: A couple of things and we'll let you go. I think the last picture of President Ford that was published coincided with your visit out there, which was around Easter, 2006. The family was very grateful - it was the best medicine. But it's interesting that that's the last picture, because they were also very sensitive. I mean, he was a proud man. You know, would never appear anywhere in a wheelchair. And that was going to be the last picture that people saw. Was that visit arranged spur of the moment?

Bush: I can't remember how it was arranged, but the truth of the matter is it made sense for me to go by there. I was in the region. I think that's the trip where I did a political event and went out to one of the Marine Corp bases, Twenty nine Palms. Went to church out there with the troops. Rode my mountain bike, as I recall. Maybe did something for Mary Bono. But it was important that I go call on the former President. I was in his neighborhood and it was easy to do and I'm glad I did it.

Smith: Were you aware that his health was at that point failing?

Bush: Yeah, of course I was. But I didn't see a failing man. When I was with him, he was in command. I mean, obviously he was older, but he wasn't bed ridden, he wasn't in a wheelchair, and he wanted to walk out on his front steps and have his picture. I thought that was great.

Smith: Do you remember what you talked about - and what you didn't talk about?

Bush: I was surprised when I read that President Ford disagreed with my decision to liberate Iraq. And one reason I was surprised was because he never brought it up. On the other hand, when I really thought about it, I wasn't that surprised because a lot of people didn't agree with my decision and I can understand that. It was a very difficult decision to make and it's hard for people to make the connection between protecting the country and dealing with a sworn enemy of the United States who everybody thought had weapons of mass destruction.

Smith: My recollection, and it's vague, was much narrower. It wasn't that he opposed the policy. And he certainly rallied around 9/11 and 'Whatever the President needs to do, he knows a lot more than I know' and all of that. I think he felt uncomfortable with the argument about weapons of mass destruction, to the extent that that was the stated rationale.

Bush: Yeah, well, he felt uncomfortable about it, particularly after we didn't find any. I felt uncomfortable about it, too, but when you're the president and everybody's saying he's got weapons of mass destruction and you give him a chance to show the world that he didn't have weapons of mass destruction - and, once again, he defied the United Nations and the demands of the free

world - the president has got to make a decision. I felt like I had made a credible case to Saddam Hussein that we're going to take him out militarily unless he honored his obligations, and couldn't imagine him thinking I was bluffing.

And, therefore, when he chose to kick the inspectors out and not show the weapons, I concluded, as did a lot of other people, that he was hiding something. Obviously, it was a huge disappointment that we did not find the weapons that everybody thought he had, but at the time you make the decision, we didn't know that. There's a lot of people who said, "Well, I wish he hadn't made the case on weapons of mass destruction," but that's because now they're able to look backwards.

Smith: Sure. And I think you said as far as you know, he never voiced criticism to the vice president or Rumsfeld.

Bush: I never heard that. As I recall, both Dick Cheney and I were surprised, but it's understandable. There were a lot of people voicing their doubts about the policy and particularly after we didn't find the weapons of mass destruction. The fundamental question is whether or not the democracy in Iraq will hold and when it does, and I think it will, what effect that will have in a part of the region that produced nineteen kids that came and killed over 3,000 citizens on our soil.

Smith: What do you remember from the funeral? Of course you spoke at the Cathedral.

Bush: I remember a family that was grateful to have had a father or husband like Gerald Ford. It seemed like to me that the funeral honored his decency. The family was, of course sad, but appreciative that they had been associated with that guy they loved. That's what I remember. I don't remember unspeakable sadness. I remember a celebration of life.

Smith: They were astonished at the number of people who turned out. You know, the Reagan funeral was the perfect send off for Ronald Reagan and we tried to make the Ford funeral as personal and evocative and more Truman-esque than Reagan-esque in some ways.

Bush: Right. That's interesting. I guess I'd better start thinking about my own one of these days.

Smith: I was going to say. Has anybody asked you the question yet?

Bush: The colonel of whatever he is, the colonel of death or the colonel of doom, hasn't been over yet. You know, it's interesting.

Smith: That Rose Garden, you know, at the library is awfully impressive.

Bush: Could be there. Right now, I'm planning on being planted at the Texas State Cemetery in Austin.

Smith: Really?

Bush: Yeah.

Smith: That's interesting. For whatever its worth, Richard Nixon was going to be buried in a cemetery in Whittier with his parents and I remember we had this discussion. Have you been to the Hoover site in West Branch?

Bush: No.

Smith: It's got the Library, it's got the birth place, and then 450 yards away on this gentle hill are the gravesites. Hoover gave one instruction. Nothing could ever be planted or built that would interfere with the view back to his little two-room cottage because he wanted people to realize that, in America, the condition of your birth was no limit to where you could go.

Bush: That's very interesting.

Smith: The whole story is there. So, they decided at the Nixon to do the same.

Bush: Interesting. Well, mother and dad are to be buried there at College Station at his library. We may end up buried here [in Dallas]. See, I need to see the thing first.

Smith: Yeah, it's an attraction.

Bush: A little candle lit in the corner, you know. I have no idea. I'm probably not interested, not 'probably,' I'm not interested in the big caisson, the big parade, and all that stuff.

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

Bush: Well, as a decent public servant. In other words, he brought civility to the process. He could be tough if he needed to, but he never did it in a mean-spirited kind of petty way. That he was a true public servant in the sense that he served for the right reasons. Look, one of the great presidential decisions in my judgment was the pardoning of Richard Nixon. And the reason I say 'great,' maybe there's another adjective, but it was a big decision because he set aside his own personal popularity. Presidents are often confronted with advisors who say "If you do this, you will be unpopular." A president must weigh decisions and ask the question "Is it the right thing to do?", "Is it good for America, not good for me personally?" President Ford made a decision to pardon Richard Nixon which many argued cost him the presidency, kind of the ultimate presidential sacrifice. And that is a great example for future presidents.

Smith: I was going to ask you: Do you look over your shoulder? I mean, are you aware, not only of the history of that house, but of the decisions that have been made there, and draw parallels or even inspirations?

Bush: Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, I love history. I was a history major. More importantly, I read a lot of history while I was president and, no question, at least I gained a lot of inspiration and I learned a lot about the presidency. I mean, I think of Harry Truman's decision to fight the communists in Korea. His decision to reorganize the Defense Department. His decision to set up a National Security Council. His decision on the Truman Doctrine. All those policies put him in bad stead with the public. On the other hand, he made my job easier. I think about Lincoln and his generals. I think about Ford and his pardon. No doubt that, if a president spends time analyzing other presidencies and presidential decisions you can learn a lot. I found it to be fascinating to be making history and reading history at the same time.

Smith: Perfect. That's great.

Bush: Good!

INDEX

1980 Republican Convention, 5–6

B

Bush, Laura, 5

C

Cheney, Dick, 7–10

F

Ford, Betty

as First Lady, 12–13

Ford, Gerald

1976 campaign, 2–5

1980 Republican Convention, 5–6

90th birthday, 12

character traits, 4

foreign policy, 14–15

funeral, reactions to, 15

health issues, 6–7

remembrance, 14, 17

R

Reagan, Ronald, 4–5

Rumsfeld, Donald, 1–2