

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Greg Willard
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: Tell us about how your paths crossed with Gerald Ford's.

Willard: Early in 1975, I sent in an application to be a summer intern at the White House. And low and behold, I got a telephone call late one night and then received a big packet of materials saying I had a position. So in April or May, 1975, I came to Washington to work that summer as an intern at the White House.

Smith: And what prompted that? I mean, did you know people? Did you have sponsors? How did you go from where you were to being part of the program?

Willard: No. I didn't have sponsors. I was a political science and history major and always had an interest in government. I'm not certain how I came to learn about the possibility of a summer internship at the White House, but that was the only Washington internship I sought. And, fortunately, I got it.

Smith: And you were where?

Willard: Started in the press office.

Smith: I'm sorry, home was...?

Willard: Oh, home was Pittsfield, Illinois, a small town in west-central Illinois, about seventy miles west of Springfield. It was at the end of my junior year in college. I'd been studying at Oxford University and the London School of Economics that preceding year and was getting ready to finish up my undergraduate degree at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. I was notified that spring of 1975 that I'd be an intern at the White House.

Smith: Tell me about your experience as an intern.

Willard: As you'll recall - you and I were fellow interns, Richard - it was a wonderful summer, especially in my case for a small-town boy from the Midwest. It was a very heady experience.

Smith: Was that your first time in D.C.?

Willard: Second time. The first time had been shortly before I arrived. I'd met Warren Rustand, who at the time was the President's Appointments Secretary. So, Warren had me come over to the White House, which was during my first visit to Washington. Then I came back shortly after that and started the summer with our intern group.

The work was terrific. There may have been some among us that didn't do quite as much work – perhaps. But I started in the News Summary Office with John Hoornstra. It's hard to believe in this day of Google Alerts and Politico columns that back then we needed to gather and summarize the prior day's news. We prepared a news summary every morning.

I then moved over to Bill Baroody's Office of Public Liaison. The office's White House Conferences conducted around the country were terrific.

Smith: And that was an innovation of that office. It was an innovation before Ford's presidency.

Willard: Brand new, and there were several different components within the public liaison office. And one of the components was what was called the White House Conferences Office. Every six to eight weeks, there would be a day-long conference with Cabinet and agency heads, culminating in the afternoon with an appearance by President Ford. He would give remarks for ten to twelve minutes, and then he would take Q & A from the floor for the better part of an hour. It was a wonderful institution. I don't know if it's been replicated since.

Smith: And who would be attending?

Willard: Community leaders, business leaders from the local host city or region. Bill Baroody, Jeff Eaves, and John Shlaes oversaw the White House Conference operation. The attendees were a very wide cross-section of community or regional leaders, including labor and business leaders. The conferences didn't have a political tone. They had much more of a policy tone.

Smith: The criticism has been made over the years that the administration from the top down was slow to accept the possibility of a Reagan challenge, and perhaps simultaneously, to take seriously how formidable a candidate Ronald Reagan might be. What's your take on that?

Jim Baker told us a wonderful story, maybe unintentionally revealing. At the height of the campaign leading up to the Texas primary, Reagan is obviously in this for the long haul. It was right at the time when Kissinger decided he was going to Africa. Baker, who agreed with the policy, questioned the politics of the timing and, still worse, the fact that not only was Kissinger going on a trip that could theoretically be postponed until after the Texas primary, but that he was going to further promote this trip in advance through a White House press conference and so on.

Baker was griping about this and was finally told, "Look, if you feel that strongly about it, make an appointment to see the President." And he did. He went in the Oval Office and Ford was there with his pipe undisturbed, seemingly, by this latest tempest in the teapot. Baker is trying to convey the likely cost of this in political terms. And Ford responds, "Well, Jim, I really appreciate your viewpoint. Glad you came by, but I'm sure the enlightened Republicans of Texas will understand what we're trying to do." And Baker said, "Mr. President, you don't understand, on this issue, there aren't any enlightened Republicans in Texas."

And that's a long way of introducing this subject, I'm trying to get a sense of how much of this was inexperience - the fact he'd never been through tough campaigns before. And how much of it was just a disinclination to have his presidency consumed by politics so soon, and right after a presidency that had been destroyed by politics?

Willard: I'll try to break that down into pieces. Let me say first, I wasn't a senior Oval Office or campaign advisor, as were Cheney and Baker and those folks.

Smith: Sure.

Willard: On the first part of your question about the Reagan challenge, my recollection is that in the summer of '75 and into the fall, I don't remember it being significantly, if at all, on the radar screen. I'm sure it was out there, but I don't remember it being anywhere as a front and center topic. And then, obviously, the crescendo began in late '75 and into '76.

In terms of why he reacted as he did, I guess I would - given my personal perspective and now looking back, because I came to know him much more after we left Washington - it was almost visceral with him that he was not going to allow those political considerations to control his presidential decisions - much as there was a part of his being, that competitive part of his being that would want to. The visceral part to him was manifest: "Nope, I'm not going to take the politically expedient route. I'm going to rely on Henry and Brent's policy judgments. The other advisers' political judgments and advice are spot on; But I'm going to implement the other policy." And, with the display of that familiar crooked left index finger of his, that was the end of the discussion. But, again, that perspective is one that's not contemporaneous with those discussions at the time, but knowing him more closely afterwards and looking back now.

Smith: You know, there're all sorts of ways at looking at his presidency. One, it seems to me, is to follow the trajectory of someone who, while not unlearning the unique set of skills that made him so successful on the Hill, had to learn a whole different set of skills as an executive and, above all, as a communicator and public advocate. And he was always very frank about it. In fact, he said, "If I had to do it over again, I would've spent more time on being educated on communications." He grew into the office; allegedly, one of the things he said at the time of his loss [to Jimmy Carter] was that it really hurt because he thought he'd just mastered the place when he lost it. I'm wondering if part of that mastery was his relationship with Kissinger. The one thing he said the night Nixon resigned - when he [Ford] came out of the house in Alexandria - was to reassure the country that Henry's not going anywhere. And yet, a year later, he had decided - nothing against Kissinger - but no one person should have both hats. Clearly, he had developed a degree of confidence himself

where he was perfectly comfortable around Kissinger with his somewhat mercurial, occasionally volcanic temperament. He had no difficulty working with someone as temperamental as Kissinger. And there were others, but intellectually, he had long since found his footing.

Willard: Part of it was he was a wonderful listener. Listening carefully came naturally to him.

Smith: Do you know where it came from?

Willard: You can draw a straight line from a little boy growing up in Grand Rapids, through his years in the House and then his presidency. I'm not certain where it originated, but listening was easy for him. Combine that with the core decency he showed to everyone with whom he dealt, whether it was a senior Cabinet secretary, such as Secretary Kissinger, or someone on the domestic residence staff, he would listen. He would always listen and engage and connect.

Smith: Which also, by the way, was a great skill for a congressman.

Willard: Phenomenally important.

Smith: Whether on the campaign trail, in a committee room, or climbing the ladder towards the Speakership.

Willard: To be sure. But from the standpoint of the presidency, he came to the office with an advantage – perhaps more so than some of his predecessors – of being able to listen to disparate advice. He quickly moved into the role and became quite comfortable in the presidential power - the component Article II power of “the decider.” That he had these disparate advisors, and whether it was his original - the ill-fated bicycle wheel management structure - or otherwise, he came to be very comfortable with the role of decider.

Even he would've admitted that it was that third leg – the communicator skills needed in the Oval Office – which was much different than the skills needed to communicate to the constituents of the 5th District in Western Michigan. He evolved into that role. Whether he evolved too late or not enough, we'll leave that to others to decide.

Smith: Did the Reagan challenge ultimately make him a better candidate?

Willard: Absolutely; both in his communications and speech-making, and in the process of presidential campaigning. He learned, early in the general presidential campaign, the difference between that level of campaigning and his primary fight with Reagan. Whether it was folks like Red Cavaney and Terry O'Donnell advising him, educating him, on what is involved in a presidential campaign, eventually, as the saying goes, he got it. Of course, there were exceptions. One in particular we still chuckle about. He decided on the last day of the 1976 Republican Convention that he and Senator Dole just *had* to go to Russell, Kansas and have a big campaign kick off - the *next* day! Dick Cheney and Red called Richard Wennekamp, Andy Stern, and me into the White House staff office at the hotel and sheepishly told us that, per a direct order of the President, we had to do the impossible for three advance guys – get ourselves out to Russell, organize a huge rally, make sure there were thousands of excited attendees on hand - and do it all in 24 hours. We somehow managed to pull it off – just amazing. On their arrival the next day, the President and Dole were ecstatic, and Dick and Red were beaming with “*you have got to be kidding me*” looks. We all still laugh about it. It was one of the biggest and best events of the entire campaign. He came to understand the extraordinary demands of the campaign on himself and his staff, particularly on Red and our advance office group.

Smith: Is that balance offset by the cost of the Reagan challenge? I mean, on balance, if Reagan had not run, would Ford have come as close?

Willard: Would he have carried Texas in the general election? Would he have carried New York? Perhaps. My personal feeling has always been because the margin with Carter was so narrow; I've always attributed it to the pardon. Take a snapshot of the body politic in November of 1976 and then pull out the pardon from that equation. Admittedly, what the country would have been like had it just been through a Nixon prosecution is a difficult assumption. But if you assume out the pardon from a 1976 scenario, it would have had a much larger impact on the outcome than the Reagan challenge.

Smith: So, after the intern summer, did you stay on? Did you come back?

Willard: Came back after I finished college. During the summer, I'd made friends with folks in the Advance Office through the Office of Public Liaison. They began to ask me to go out and do advance work for the President that fall. I finished my degree and joined the White House staff full-time in the Advance Office. I continued in the Advance Office in 1976 through January 20, 1977 as a White House Staff Assistant. Then on Inauguration Day, Bob Barrett and I, and Joy Chiles and Annie Grier left with the Fords and moved to California. I spent 1977 in Rancho Mirage and Vail with them. After that I got a law degree and then began a career as an attorney.

Smith: And was there any doubt after the election that that's where they were going to wind up? Had they given thought to that?

Willard: No. I think it was made very quickly. I remember having a conversation with him, right after I'd been asked to move to California, in Dorothy Downton's office. She had an office just off the Oval Office, across from the pantry. One of my responsibilities during the transition was transporting all the Fords' personal property from the White House Residence out to Palm Springs. So I was in working with Dorothy one day, and President Ford came in. Now that you ask the question, I remember thinking at the time, "Gosh, I wonder if they had thought, maybe back when he was in Congress and had decided not to run again, were they going to retire to Western Michigan or Palm Springs?" I have a clear sense that very early after the election Palm Springs was it.

Smith: What was his mood? We've heard from a number of people that it took him awhile to bounce back.

Willard: Yes. I'll give you a snapshot from Election Night that's a great illustration. During the campaign, I spent several weeks with Steve Ford. He decided to tour the western states in a Winnebago and asked his dad to assign me to help. We'd campaign in his Winnebago for several days, and then we'd split off and campaign elsewhere, including with his dad. The campaign developed increasing enthusiasm - almost confidence - as the gap with Governor Carter shrank. Election Night captured all the mood swings of the entire campaign.

Steve and I arrived at Washington National Airport the afternoon of Election Day after our last flight of the campaign. We proceeded with his Secret Service detail to the White House, where we were met at the Diplomatic Entrance by Susan Ford. The three of us visited for awhile, and then around 5:00, Susan and Steve went upstairs to the Residence. I called a friend for a ride and planned to watch the election returns that night with some of my fellow White House staff members.

A little after 5:00, as I was waiting to leave, the President walked into the main hallway and went into Dr. Lukash's office. When he came out of the doctor's office, he walked over to where I was standing. His voice was a mess; he could only manage a hoarse whisper. He joked that his timing to end the campaign was right on the mark since his voice "didn't have another speech, much less a full campaign day in it." I told him Steve was already upstairs, and we were glad to be home. He said, "That was a huge job you had with that campaign of his. I want you to know how much I appreciate what you did." I told him I thoroughly enjoyed it, and joked that Steve still hadn't succeeded in making a cowboy out of me. The President chuckled and whispered, "You get home and get some rest. We've got a busy month ahead." I said, "Thank you, Mr. President. Let's bring home a winner tonight!" He gave me a slap on the back and headed off.

At about 8:45 p.m., I was with some fellow White House staff members and received a phone call from a White House operator. She immediately put the call through to the Residence, and Steve came on the line. He said that he and the First Family were watching the election returns with some friends and wanted to know if I would come over and join them.

I arrived at the Usher's Office at 9:15, and Rex Scouten took me up to the second floor of the Residence. Present were the President and First Family, Joe Garigiola and his family, Senator and Mrs. Dole, Leon Parma, Bob Barrett, Dick Cheney, David Kennerly, and Kevin Kennedy, along with some other friends of President and Mrs. Ford. Many of those friends left shortly after I arrived. During the evening, additional White House staff members and other

guests would come upstairs. Dick Cheney and David Kennerly were in and out several times. Periodically, Ron Nessen would update voting results. A Newsweek photographer came up at one point to take photographs of the family. The family and guests milled about among three rooms on the second floor - - the family room off the President and First Lady's bedroom, the President's exercise room, and the main center hall. Each room had a large television set tuned to one of the networks.

Governor Carter had taken a large early lead in the South and was well ahead in the electoral vote. Nevertheless, the President and First Family were in good spirits. While waiting for the next round of returns, we all recounted funny stories from our many campaign travels. In general, at this point in the evening, the mood was anxious, but hopeful. We moved from room to room trying to keep up with the latest results from each of the three networks. The President, Steve, Kevin, Leon Parma and I spent a lot of time watching the returns in the main hall.

We used my copy of a Time magazine electoral map all night for comparisons between Time's state by state predictions and the networks' projections. The President constantly asked us for comparisons between the magazine's predictions and the networks' calls. Then, several returns from western states began to come in solidly for the President, and spirits in the room rose. By 11:00 p.m., real optimism seemed to be developing.

At one point, a loud cheer went up from down the hall in the exercise room, and the President joked, "We're watching the wrong channel!" Joe Garigiola was the evening's cheerleader, shouting "Go Big Blue" as the President's states was marked in blue on the networks' electoral maps. Garigiola clapped his hands and said, "Don't worry, Prez, they got four in the top of the first, but we're going to pull it out!!" Periodically, the President would step into an adjacent room to speak on the phone with Dick Cheney. Pearl Bailey arrived and added further bounce to the evening. She and Mrs. Ford watched the returns with the group in the exercise room for quite awhile.

As midnight passed, the optimism continued to grow, although Senator Dole observed quietly, “We just aren’t going to be able to pull it off.” Given what seemed to be the positive trends, I was puzzled at his comment. Everyone kept an eye on New York’s returns, which at that point had the President in a slight lead. Soon, though, Carter drew even in New York, and the mood became much more tense. A little after 1:00 a.m., New York was declared for Carter.

Although the President continued to be positive (“We’re still in this thing!”), concern was apparent on his face. The returns from Pennsylvania and Texas looked unfavorable, and we figured he needed to carry at least one of those states to have a shot at winning the Electoral College vote.

Around 1:40 a.m., the President said he wanted to call John Connally to get a report on Texas. When he returned to his chair after the call, he whispered to Steve and me that the report from Connally was not optimistic. Senator Jacob Javits came upstairs and met with the President privately for a few minutes across the hallway.

At 2:05 a.m., Carter was declared the winner in Texas. Garagiola sighed, “I just can’t believe this. I can’t believe it.” The President looked at the screen with Texas now in red and said, “That one hurts; that one really hurts.” North Dakota then came in for the President, and spirits brightened a little. A few minutes later, the President turned to us, punched his left fist into his right hand, and said, “It’s still a helluva ballgame!” He remarked how disappointed he was at the loss in Missouri and the additional defeat there of incumbent Republican Governor Kit Bond.

By 2:40 a.m., the race appeared to be moving to razor thin. The talk turned to a specific Electoral College scenario -- if the President could carry both Hawaii and Ohio, he still could win. Carter had a 4,000 vote lead in Hawaii at the time, but many votes were still out. The President passed the Time magazine electoral map back to me and shook his head, “Louisiana, Missouri and Delaware ... Ugh!”

Shortly after 3:00 a.m., Dick Cheney and Bob Teeter came upstairs and went into the dining room with the President. A few minutes later, the President walked over and asked Steve and me to gather the group into the west living room. The President stood at the west end of the room; Steve was on his left, and I was on his right. As the rest of the group gathered, everyone seemed prepared for bad news. The President must have sensed the same thing because he quickly smiled and said, “No, this isn’t a concession speech. I think Bob Teeter has some interesting information for us.” Teeter explained that the returns in Hawaii were not complete in that votes cast before noon were counted first, after which the afternoon ballots were counted. He also indicated that the President’s chances in Wisconsin still looked good, even though the networks had already projected it for Carter. The President then said it would be morning before any definitive results would be in, so he was “going to bed for awhile.” He said goodnight to everyone. Before going to bed, he talked briefly on the phone with Dick Cheney. At the same time, the few remaining guests started leaving. By 3:25 a.m., most of them had left.

Those of us who remained - Mrs. Ford, Mike, his wife Gayle, Steve, Susan, Pearl Bailey, Kevin Kennedy, and I – went into the large main hall and continued to watch the returns on NBC.

At around 3:30-3:40 a.m., John Chancellor announced that Jimmy Carter would be the 39th President of the United States.

Silence. No one said a word. There were no tears, no sighs of disappointment - just several minutes of complete silence amidst the television chatter of the NBC correspondents. Finally, Mrs. Ford looked over and said, “Do we dare wake him?” Mike Ford and I both replied in unison, “No; let him sleep.” Soon Jimmy Carter appeared on television, and Mrs. Ford smiled at the television screen and chuckled, “Governor, you have no idea what you’re in for in here.”

The mood was mixed. The group was obviously very disappointed. But as everyone began to talk about the past two-plus years and about the campaign,

there was an undercurrent in their comments of pride mixed with a sense of relief.

It's one of those moments -- what do you say at a moment like this? -- here's the First Lady, whose husband has just lost the election - good gracious! So, there was not much said for several minutes, and then Mrs. Ford chuckled and said, "You know, I had the funniest thing happen to me during a campaign trip I made in October." And Susan laughed and said, "Well, Mom, I had a similar thing happen to me!" Soon, it was this cacophony of everyone telling stories of funny things along the campaign trail.

We all sat around for nearly an hour reminiscing and, yes, laughing loudly at hilarious campaign stories. At some point, Mrs. Ford changed into her nightgown and robe and rejoined us. She had all of us in hysterics as she told more of her own funny campaign stories.

Finally at 4:30 a.m., we decided to call it a night. Steve and I walked Pearl Bailey down to her car on the South Lawn and returned to the Second Floor where we managed to roust Susan, who'd fallen asleep on the floor. Kevin had gone on up to the third floor. Mrs. Ford was standing in the archway between the west living room and the main hall, and Mike, Gayle, Steve, and Susan walked over to say goodnight to her. I moved to the side of the room near the elevator. As the children returned towards the elevator, Mrs. Ford looked over, and I nodded, "Good night, Mrs. Ford."

I must have appeared as disappointed as I felt. Mrs. Ford walked over to where I was standing. I shook my head, "I'm so sorry; I just don't know what to say. I really thought he was going to pull it out." She took hold of my hands - quite firmly - and replied, "Now listen! We're going to leave here in January with no regrets and many wonderful memories. And remember, when we leave, we'll have our heads up with lots of pride." She gave me a hug and said, "Thank you for all your hard work." I managed only a feeble whisper, amidst several tears, "It was an honor, Mrs. Ford." She turned and walked to the bedroom. I went up

to the third floor with the family where a bed had been prepared for me in the Solarium.

I understand the next morning Bob Barrett told President Ford the results. And when I saw the President upstairs in the Residence that morning, he'd obviously been told, and he was really, really disappointed. Not morose, but, yes, it hurt. It hurt.

Smith: One senses, given his competitive nature, that some of his disenchantment was directed at himself. A couple of people told us that, for awhile after that, he would mutter, "I can't believe I lost to a peanut farmer."

Willard: I never heard that, but he may have internalized it more. I was always struck by how gracious he was to the staff and the campaign folks over at the President Ford Committee. You never had a scintilla of, "Well, if the campaign would've been run a little better" or "If we'd have done this a little better." I don't know, but it may have been because he was internalizing it as much as anything.

Smith: Tell me about Mrs. Ford back then.

Willard: In the White House period, particularly during the campaign, she was a rock. Just very, very firm in terms of her campaign activities. Occasionally, I'd go out on trips with her. Pete Sorum was the person in our White House Advance Office who was assigned to Mrs. Ford. But occasionally, one or two of us would go out with her on a trip. She always was gracious – inestimably gracious. But strong. Very strong. Whether it was dealing with the staff, dealing with her schedule, or dealing with events, she knew what she wanted to do, and we did it.

Smith: Did you see any evidence of a "problem," however defined?

Willard: During the White House?

Smith: Yeah.

Willard: No. No. Never. But that changed once we were in California. Soon after we arrived out there, I realized something was wrong – there's a "problem". But in

the White House, from the Spring of '75 to January of '77, I can't recall a single instance where I said, "That's odd"; never sensed that at all.

Smith: And, talk about opposites attracting... He was the most self-disciplined of people.

Willard: You think!

Smith: And punctuality is not a quality I automatically associate - for all of her wonderful qualities - that was left out of the mix. And I'm wondering whether it's not a form of perfectionism. You know, she wanted to look her absolute best wherever she was going to be, but there's also a surprising amount of stage fright. She's not comfortable giving speeches. She gets butterflies before going on, which may very well be the mark of a true pro. Or maybe she's just late. Maybe it's something as simple as that.

Willard: Or a combination. She was a perfectionist in so, so many things. A lot of that goes back to her dance and the precision of dance. And she carried that over into her public persona in particular. So, when she would do an event, she wanted it to be spot on – perfect. I remember when she filled in for the President on a trip to Iowa, to Des Moines, back in 1976, at the last minute. I think it was during the crisis in Lebanon, and he just couldn't come. So Mrs. Ford came in his place. I remember it was so important to her when she arrived that everything be perfect and that she not fail to do what needed to be done and should be done. So, if you carry that back to your example about speaking, that's not her forte – public address, public speaking – my sense was not so much that she didn't like it (because she did it well), but it didn't come naturally to her. You combine that with her real drive to perfection, and it was tough. It was tough for her.

Smith: Of course, there is also this school of thought that here's a woman, who, after all, had been a performer in her early days, had been on stage, was not unfamiliar with audiences, and who found, once she got over the initial shock, that she rather enjoyed life in the White House; enjoyed the platform that it afforded her. In many ways, people thought she blossomed as First Lady. Not

least of all, probably because she also saw more of her husband, who was physically there. Did he feel guilty at all about those years when, like a lot of men of his generation, he was climbing the ladder and a lot of the burdens, particularly of child-rearing, fell to her?

Willard: Yes. Did he feel guilty? Yes. After we left the White House, I'd travel with him always, and we'd usually sit up late at night talking. He never would say, "Gosh, I sure feel guilty being gone all those years." But he would talk about those years, especially after he became Minority Leader, and the travel demands. And he would talk about how long he was gone. But it was in the context of the family, not in the context of, "Well, I was a loyal trooper for the Party." It was in the context of, "Yeah, two hundred plus days a year back in those days I was away from Betty and the kids." I don't think one can come to any conclusion other than he regretted it and that, he felt – pick your descriptive phrase – guilt...felt badly...whatever.

Smith: Did he try to make up for it?

Willard: In later years, perhaps. I don't know that you ever can make up for it. But I think in later years, he spent a lot more time certainly with the children, and then with the grandkids. The joy that those grandkids brought to him and Mrs. Ford - - and to Mrs. Ford still today. So, I don't know that it was somehow attempting to make up for it, but he clearly wanted to make sure and experience and share in the joy of those relationships in his later years.

Smith: One senses that the transition was easier for her. I mean, she had houses to think about, a lot of domestic concerns. They were going to a place that presumably would be good for her health. You know, it's a whole new life. She probably thought she was getting her husband back. She hadn't run for office, you know.

Willard: That was one element. I also think that, during the Election Day to Inauguration Day period, there was a fair amount of - not necessarily trepidation on her part - but, "Wow, what are we getting into?" Yes, she'd see her husband a lot more, but they didn't have a large cadre of close friends in Rancho Mirage. They had

acquaintances, but not close friends. Certainly not, for example, the Lilian Fisher type of relationship or even some of the other close friends of Mrs. Ford's. We'd talk with Mrs. Ford during that period in the White House and ask - "Should these things go to the Laguna Niguel warehouse?" "Or to Deware house," the home they were going to rent in Thunderbird Heights. "Or should this go to a government storage facility", until they built their new house? And I recall a fair amount of comments from her along the lines, "My, my, this is going to be quite a change." But I don't think she feared it or ever thought "Maybe we're doing the wrong thing; maybe we should just go back to Grand Rapids." Never heard any of that.

Smith: They were starting over, in some ways.

Willard: Oh, absolutely. This was the end of twenty-eight years when Alexandria and the White House were home. And then suddenly they were going, not back to Western Michigan, but to a rented home in Thunderbird Heights in Rancho Mirage, California.

Smith: Was she surprised to find that he was away as much as he was after they got out there?

Willard: Oh my, yes! I remember those early weeks. Bob Barrett and I, and the two secretaries, Joy Chiles and Annie Grier - now Annie Willard. And Lee Simmons came out with us. We were subsequently joined by Dorothy Downton and Carolyn Poremka.

Smith: And where was your office initially?

Willard: The office of the former President of the United States was a "magnificent" kitchenette bungalow on the Thunderbird Country Club grounds with two bedrooms and sort of living room-kitchenette - that was it! So Bob Barrett and I had one room and Annie and Joy had the other. And we dispensed the former president's business in this little kitchenette on the Thunderbird Country Club grounds - pretty funny, looking back at it now. And he and Mrs. Ford rented a home from Emily Deware up on the hill just on the other side of Highway 111. After a few weeks, we rented a home on Sand Dune Road, the Priest house,

which is about three doors up from where the current office is on Sand Dune Road, and the Priest House then became his and our office.

Smith: Was that Ivy Baker Priest?

Willard: It was Pat Priest and her sister – I forget her sister's name. But Pat was the blonde straight actress on the *Munsters*. So we converted her house into an office, and the President had an office there.

I remember those early weeks, commenting to Bob and Annie and Joy, how lonely it was for the Fords. Just so lonely. There were telephones and all, but it was so lonely from a personal standpoint for them. They just didn't have a lot of close friends there in the desert. They had people who would come down, particularly Leon Parma – a long-time very close friend. But Leon lived in La Jolla, near San Diego. In those early days, I remember thinking how lonely this was for them.

When we first left the White House, we didn't leave on Inauguration Day directly for Rancho Mirage. Instead, we flew on Air Force One to Monterrey, California, and he played in the Bing Crosby Pro-Am Golf Tournament. He was there for three or four days, and then came down to Rancho Mirage. By then their things from the White House had arrived. So at least there was some sense of home, albeit in a strange house.

The first few weeks he didn't travel that much. We maybe did a few trips, but not a lot. We took a trip in February to New York and saw *A Chorus Line*. It was probably within a month of the Inauguration. And I remember walking into the Shubert Theater with them. The start of the show had been delayed for them, and it was just pandemonium when our group walked in. Standing ovation for them – loud cheers! And I remember the look on the Fords' faces at that moment, and then later that night when we got back to the UN Plaza Hotel. What an impact that reception had on them.

Erik: Did the theater announce them?

Willard: Yes. Before we arrived, the theater said they were delaying the start of the show because of special guests. It was pretty apparent in the theater – front and center there were four seats and three seats behind them that were unfilled. We arrived and were seated - President and Mrs. Ford and Annie Grier and I, and then three Secret Service agents behind us. We went backstage afterwards, and Mrs. Ford was just ebullient.

Shortly after that trip, he began to travel.

Smith: They enjoyed the show?

Willard: Oh, they enjoyed the show! Just thoroughly enjoyed the show.

Smith: Among those who knew them well, it is an article of faith that she had a somewhat more ribald sense of humor than he did. And things would often have to be explained to him...

Willard: There's a song in *A Chorus Line* – I remember it now as vividly as when we were sitting there that evening, when you hear the character sing, "Tits and Ass." I remember looking immediately to my left. Mrs. Ford was sitting next to me, and then the President and then Annie on his other side. And Mrs. Ford laughed heartily at the lyrics. And then the President, after a pause, laughed very hard. It was quite a moment. Both thoroughly enjoyed themselves, including when we went backstage afterwards.

Shortly after that he started traveling again -- a lot.

Smith: He needed that, didn't he?

Willard: He did. I can't explain it. But shortly after that trip to New York he cranked up the travel. We went to New Haven, Connecticut and spent – gosh, we were probably out there three or four days. He stayed in a Yale residence college. I forget the name of the college, but we stayed right there in the residence hall. And he took meals with the undergrads, and he gave lectures. And, of course, we went to his alma mater – the law school. He gave a couple of lectures. And he absolutely thrived on that. And then he went and played in a golf tournament.

And then he gave a speech on the War Powers Act at the University of Kentucky. There was a whole panoply of events, and he clearly thrived on it.

Smith: He took heat for “commercializing” the ex-presidency. And I’m wondering – without dismissing it altogether – there is some element of context because you never got any awareness of all the charity work he was doing, or the campus visits that he was making, or even the suggestion that he could be doing constructive work on boards. Somehow the fact that you would go on a board was deemed inappropriate. He turned down a whole lot more offers than he accepted.

Willard: Right.

Smith: Was he sensitive about that?

Willard: I don’t think so at the time; the criticism began to come later. That first year, I don’t think he received that much criticism.

Part of the difficulty was that there wasn’t exactly a template on how to be a former president. If you go back a few presidents at the time – Nixon, Johnson, Eisenhower – they lived relatively private, quiet lives. President Ford was sixty-three years old, very active, swam several miles a day. So here was this very active, engaged former president. What should he do? What should he not do? How should he comport himself? That first year he signed the agreement with NBC to do some specials. He signed the contract to do his autobiography. But that first year there were not as many of the corporate speaking engagements as there were in the late ‘70s, early ‘80s. In those subsequent years, he got a fair amount of criticism. But, ironically, as you point out, as he moved into that period, the amount of charity work he was doing just exploded.

Smith: A lot of people also don’t stop to realize – one of the things that maybe bonded him and Jimmy Carter – was that each of them were shocked to realize, after losing an election, that they were expected to raise millions of dollars to build a library.

Willard: Right. And, in his case, the library/museum arrangement was bifurcated. When we left the White House, he had already donated his papers to the University of Michigan. He'd signed the deed in late December of '76, officially deeding his papers to the library in Ann Arbor.

Right before Mrs. Ford's hospitalization – in April of '77 – we went to Grand Rapids – I think for Easter. And while there we met with Dick, Jim, and Tom Ford and some community leaders looking at sites for a possible presidential museum. And I remember going down to the riverfront, pretty close to where the museum is today. It was really desolate. There were old warehouses, nothing like the spectacular riverfront today. And the question quickly came up – would the Michigan legislature help with some of the costs? I remember the President fund-raising with Benno Schmidt who was engaged by the President to help him raise the millions of additional dollars that it was going to take. But there was a very clear sense at the time that the President was going to have to raise a lot of money because he was going to have two facilities – a library and a museum, each in a separate city.

Smith: And that was long before anyone really thought about the need for an endowment.

Willard: Never thought about it. And again – this was a few months after we had left Washington. And it was just a sense on his part of – well, we need to raise a lot of money to build these buildings - period. I don't think the 'e' word, endowment – was discussed. I don't remember it ever being discussed. But that Easter visit to Grand Rapids was the first time I recall their having the sense that there was going to be a bifurcation of the library and museum and the cost of that. At the time, I think it was simply, "Okay, fine: library Ann Arbor; museum Grand Rapids." No one ever took a step back and said, "Well, gosh, none of the other libraries does it this way." And, of course, none has done it since or probably ever will.

Smith: And even more, no one ever took a step back and says, "This is great now. Twenty years from now will this work?"

Willard: There was discussion in the early to mid-2000s. I remember having lunch with him in 2004 or 2005, there at his home in Rancho Mirage. And towards the end of lunch, he said, “I need to ask your advice on something.” And he had Penny bring over a correspondence file. There was correspondence from folks in Michigan about the prospect of moving the library from Ann Arbor to Grand Rapids and the costs attendant to that and to join the two. And that never went anywhere.

Smith: Did he have an opinion?

Willard: During that conversation, I gave him my initial reaction – which was – that’s a lot of money because you’d have to build a whole new facility. At the time I also said, “And I don’t think...unless the university is a part of the facility in Grand Rapids...I can’t fathom that the university would ever agree to participate in that.” He was, at that point, (hearkening back to the earlier part of this oral history conversation), he was in the listening mode. In subsequent conversations with him, he made it pretty clear to me that he did not support merging the two. We didn’t go into all his reasons. He may have sent a letter at some point towards the end of his life saying – “I don’t think this is a good idea – at least for now.”

Smith: Were you surprised by the intervention?

Willard: Yes. Shocked. Just shocked. That April ’77 trip to which I referred, I knew then – we all knew at that point – something was wrong – very wrong. It’s so remarkable to look back with benefit of hindsight and say, “For goodness sakes, why couldn’t we realize that?” And my wife, Annie, spent hours and hours with Mrs. Ford in California and traveled with her. And Annie was as surprised as I was at the diagnosis.

Smith: Really?

Willard: Yes.

Smith: I guess I should be more explicit. The intervention is a response to a situation. The situation, presumably, must have been obvious enough, chronic enough, acute enough, to warrant the intervention.

Willard: Right, but what I mean is sitting here, in 2011, and looking back to 1977 and then the intervention was in '78, looking back at '77, how ignorant we, as a society, were about alcoholism and chemical dependency.

We flew back to Rancho Mirage from that April of '77 trip to Grand Rapids I mentioned. We were on a military aircraft and stopped in Oklahoma City to refuel. I'd gone up front during the flight and noticed Mrs. Ford's hands while she was sitting with the President. She was clasping her hands very hard like this [indicating one hand firmly clenched over the other hand]. We arrived in California, and I remember being shocked when she unclasped her hands. She had a huge bruised welt right here [where her hands were clasped].

That evening President Ford called me and said with a very concerned tone, "Can you come down to the house?" I lived up in Palm Springs, so I rushed down to Rancho Mirage. Mrs. Ford was there, obviously in a lot of pain. And she said, "I can't live like this anymore; the pain - I can't." We talked about it. She said, "I know the risks. I want to reconsider the possibility of surgery."

So I contacted Dr. Lukash, who had been the White House physician, and he made arrangements. And within the next day or so, she went over to Eisenhower Medical Center and had a myelogram. I don't know if they still do it today, with the new MRIs and CTs. But they injected dye into her spine and took x-rays or CTs. Late that afternoon after the myelogram, it was pretty apparent that something wasn't right. She was not well. And the doctor said, "Well, we're going to admit her. She is having a reaction to the myelogram. And that happens in about 5% of the cases."

At that moment, I wasn't particularly worried. But by the evening her condition became very critical. I stayed that entire week in the hospital suite with her – never left; slept each night in the anteroom in her suite.

The President came over the first evening, and we talked to the doctors. They were reassuring, but there were some things not quite right. Well, it got worse. And the second day and the third day and the fourth day. And she was very, very ill. We went downstairs to radiology one evening, and they did scans of her brain, fearing that maybe her breast cancer had metastasized. Again, as we think back, her breast cancer was in the Fall of 1974; so this was less than three years since her cancer diagnosis. There was a fear that maybe what she was experiencing was related to the cancer. Fortunately, it wasn't. She remained hospitalized for a couple of days and then went home. And she was in a really difficult strait for two or three weeks after that. And no one at the time – none of the physicians – no one made a diagnosis other than a very serious adverse reaction to the myelogram. The consensus of the medical folks was that she simply had had this bad reaction to the myelogram.

Looking back today, with the benefit of thirty-plus years of hindsight, she was going through withdrawal. Nobody realized it. No one ever connected the dots. None of the physicians did, none of the family did, and none of us who were around them did. Not one single person said, "Maybe there's something more going on here."

Smith: Including her?

Willard: Including her. So then fast forward the following year when Susan and the President and the family intervened and she went to Long Beach. I remember when it came out, the headline "Betty Ford admitted for alcoholism." I remember calling Susan and Steve in shock. I said, "Alcoholism? How can that be? I've traveled with your mother. I shared hotel suites with her; we'd stay up telling funny stories and gossiping. I never saw her slamming down drinks."

But, again, the understanding of that disease in 1977, 1978 and today - ironically, I think it's fair to say, Betty Ford is the reason the knowledge base today is what it is, as distinguished from what it was in 1977-78.

Smith: Is it also possible that she was, I suppose like lots of people, perhaps especially from that era - kind of a quiet, almost a lonely drinker. You stop and think, she

left Washington for this new life; the kids were really grown up by then so they were out; and he turned out to be on the road as much as before. She didn't have a cadre of friends. And just the combination of loneliness, and maybe disappointment – it was a particularly vulnerable environment.

Willard: But those who were around her during the day, including Joy and Annie and Bob, I don't recall there was ever a sense of "gosh, Mrs. Ford's really..." And the countless times I would be around her at all hours, literally, I cannot remember any time during the day that Mrs. Ford had a drink during the day - never. She had her pain medicine. But my understanding of alcoholism in those days and my sort of mental image – at the time – of alcoholism was this bottle in the brown paper bag.

Well, now we know differently.

Smith: Do you think the kids, and particularly Susan, were maybe more attuned to what was going on than he was? Let me put it another way. Do you think there was some denial at work that wasn't the case with the kids?

Willard: Maybe. And the reason I hedge is that after her hospitalization in April, 1977, there was a sense among all of us, even the President, that she was struggling. It would manifest itself to us in different ways. We were very aware of it, but didn't know what "it" was. There was the Bolshoi television appearance.

Smith: Which is painful to watch.

Willard: It's just remarkable, looking back, that no one ever connected the dots. I think much of it (and that's why I hedge my answer a little bit) was not so much denial on his part, but that he and the rest of us had a growing sense that something was wrong – really wrong. He was also distracted with his huge travel commitments. He'd say, "Well, Greg, we've got to focus on this upcoming eight day trip, and Betty doesn't want to go (or can't join up with us.)" But the undercurrent – the reason she didn't want to go, or couldn't – he and I both knew it was more than her back pain.

Smith: Yes. Was travel an issue? Was she welcomed to travel?

Willard: Yes. She was always welcomed; she just wouldn't go with us. There was a trip in May that had been scheduled for quite awhile. Lady Bird Johnson had invited them to the ranch for three days. And Mrs. Ford couldn't go, just wasn't up to it. So the President and I went. Lee Simmons also went.

Smith: There's a real friendship there, wasn't there? Between Lady Bird and the Fords?

Willard: It was wonderful. Mrs. Ford wasn't along, but it was a remarkable trip. Both President Ford and Mrs. Johnson, particularly Mrs. Johnson, had a wonderful time. I was just a staff person, but she included me in everything. I remember one morning she brought in a number of the ranch hands, and we sat around the living room and had coffee. And then after they left, Lady Bird would talk with President Ford about every topic imaginable. I remember early one afternoon she came upstairs and knocked on his door. We had just finished lunch. He and I had adjacent rooms there at the house. She knocked, "Mr. President? I'm going to go out for a walk and wanted to know if you and Mr. Willard would like to join me." He said, "I'd love that." And so the three of us soon headed outside.

We walked down the gravel road in front of the house, trailed by the Secret Service agents - hers and his. Mrs. Johnson and President Ford chatted about all manner of things. She loved explaining to us all about the wildflowers and history of the countryside. And then all of a sudden, we turned towards the river and walked to President Johnson's grave. Mrs. Johnson and President Ford stood there and reminisced for quite awhile about President Johnson. That trip to the ranch was a wonderful visit for him. There clearly was a special relationship between the Fords and Johnsons. And it continued with their kids. Susan stays in close touch with Lynda and Luci. It's a wonderful friendship.

Smith: I remember at the time of the Philadelphia convention in 2000, where he had that mild stroke. I'll never forget, within twenty minutes of the news breaking I got two calls. The first was from Julie and the second was from Tricia. And one sensed that that relationship existed. Can you talk about Nixon? One senses the pardon had to have altered that relationship in a permanent way.

Willard: It did. When we first got out to Rancho Mirage in 1977, ironically, we were only about ninety-five miles from San Clemente. They corresponded briefly; they weren't regular correspondents. But I do know they corresponded. I don't think they spoke by phone.

Interestingly, in March, the Fords went to Vail for a three or four day weekend, and I stayed back in California. Annie Grier [now Willard], one of the secretaries in the Rancho Mirage office, had worked for President Nixon on his White House staff. So she decided to go up that weekend to visit her friends Diane Sawyer and Frank Gannon, with whom she'd worked in the Nixon White House. When Annie got up there, she called and said, "Why don't you come on up and visit?" So I did. And that was the first time I'd met Nixon. It was during his David Frost interviews.

I met with Nixon twice on that visit. The first was a casual conversation the first day, and then the next visit was a longer discussion with him. On Saturday, Jack Brennan, Nixon's chief of staff called and said, "Greg, why don't you and Annie come over and have coffee with the President." We drove over to the office and visited President Nixon for quite awhile. President Nixon, of course, asked me what I currently was doing. I told him of my position as President Ford's personal aide. It was interesting; at no point during the conversation did he say, "How are President and Mrs. Ford?" or "How are Jerry and Betty?" or, even as I'm leaving, "Please give my best to Jerry and Betty." Nothing. And when I subsequently told President Ford that I'd been to San Clemente and visited with President Nixon, I didn't get from President Ford, "Tell me how the President is doing"; or "how's he doing." Nothing.

President Ford and I subsequently watched the first Frost-Nixon interview on television at Trammel Crow's house. After the broadcast, we immediately went upstairs; he was very upset by what he'd watched – very troubled.

But I certainly didn't have any sense at all that there was animus between Ford and Nixon - none. But, at least on President Ford's part in 1977, I think there was this sense of, "What would be appropriate?" At his core, he didn't want to

do or say anything to make Nixon feel uncomfortable. And so it was a challenging relationship. I don't know how it evolved in the '80s, and until Nixon died. But in those early days it was awkward for President Ford.

The same with Spiro Agnew. Agnew lived right across from where our office was on Sand Dune Road. Agnew's home was in an area called The Springs. It was a development in Palm Springs. I know a couple of times the President and I would be playing golf, and look over and there would be Agnew in the next fairway. Neither Agnew nor President Ford turned their carts to go speak to one another. They had to know of one another's presence, fifty feet away – you can't *not* know, particularly seeing President Ford with six or eight Secret Service agents around him. I don't recall, in that early period, them ever coming into contact in social settings out there either.

Smith: I only heard him speak disparagingly of two people and the worst he could come up with was, "He's a *bad* man." One was John Dean, and one was Gordon Liddy. One senses that from a very early age, he almost trained himself – perhaps his mother had something to do with this – perhaps the Eagle Scout – but consciously made an effort to imagine the best of people.

Willard: Always. Almost to a fault, sometimes. He'd see the best in people, which led to an exchange such as – "Well, Mr. President, there's this aspect going on here. There's a story here, sir, that's not very pretty." He'd reply along the lines, "Well, I know, but he's such a good guy, and he's done so many good things." The reply - "I understand, Mr. President, but..." – was tough for him to accept.

Smith: I saw it with Mrs. Reagan in a different sense that I think clearly redefined her role. He [Ronald Reagan] didn't have a Haldeman. And she had pretty good antenna and pretty good judgment. And I'm wondering if there was any of that dynamic with the Fords.

Willard: A little bit. When you would sit down with Mrs. Ford – and you may remember this from your experiences – she'd bluntly say, "Well, tell me what's going on." She wanted it all – the good, the bad and the ugly, including some gossip. And not in a mean way, like "I'm going to go rat this person out." But she enjoyed

knowing what's going on. He, not so much, though. He'd kind of go down that path, "Well, Mr. President, I want to let you know about this. It doesn't directly affect you, but..." Well, more likely than not, you'd be cut off. "Okay, we don't need to talk about that." But Mrs. Ford was – in my experience in those early years – was much more proactive in terms of making sure he was told. She'd say, "Jerry, now you need to think about this!"

Smith: Protecting him from himself.

Willard: I don't remember in those early years her filling that role.

Smith: Did he see himself as a prospective candidate for 1980? I know later on there was an effort to lure him into the race, but I'm wondering - in part the context in which some of these decisions commercial, were made - whether he really saw his political career as over.

Willard: Break it down. That first year, I can say almost unequivocally, no. He did not see himself as a candidate. I remember we were going to be in Houston that spring of '77. We were putting together the schedule, and he mentioned to me, "We need to leave several hours in the morning wide open," which was unusual. I said, "Sure, Mr. President," and blocked it out. I told the Secret Service that we were going to be unscheduled that whole time. And what subsequently happened that morning was, President Ford and I had a meeting in the hotel with George H. W. Bush and Jim Baker. The discussion was about George H. W. Bush running in 1980. And then about an hour later John Connally comes in. I didn't sit in on that meeting. But President Ford and I talked about it later, and he gave a download of the discussion.

I don't recall any suggestions on President Ford's part that, "Well, I'm going to have these conversations, but in the back of my mind, I might run myself." I really think, at least in that first year, that he was done with politics, consistent with the conversations he had with Mrs. Ford in 1972 - 1973 when he realized that he wasn't going to be Speaker.

Whether that changed leading up to the 1980 Detroit GOP convention with the Reagan-Ford ticket chatter - perhaps. Bob Barrett would've had those

conversations at the time and will have the best insights. But I never thought he'd ever run again – never.

In that first year after the White House, there were zero discussions, including leading up to and following his meetings with Bush and Connally, of him ever running again. He, of course, didn't make any commitments to either. But had he been contemplating re-entering, he would likely have said, "Well, this is what I discussed with George and Jim and with Connally, but we need to keep in mind what I may do." Never a whiff of that. He was done.

Smith: Did he hold a grudge against Reagan? And I don't mean in a burning sense, because he's not the sort of person who lived in the past. But you wondered. One sensed that if you scratched the surface deep enough, you would find lingering resentments, not so much of the original challenge, but the lack of campaigning in the fall.

Willard: Right. I would use a different word than grudge. And I'd bifurcate it from a personal standpoint. There was no animus from a personal standpoint. From a political standpoint, from the party perspective, I heard him discuss, on more than one occasion, his sense that although then-Governor Reagan campaigned in 1976, the number of times he uttered the phrase, "Jerry Ford" or "President Ford" was pretty limited. And I think, not a grudge, he didn't begrudge that, but....

Smith: But he's keeping score.

Willard: He remembered. And he was disappointed. But fast forward to 1980, and the two of them having some brief discussion about a Reagan-Ford ticket. But, as I said earlier, I never thought he'd do it, especially considering Mrs. Ford.

Smith: Were you surprised when the friendship with Carter developed? One senses that all the other members of the former presidents club, who found it hard to imagine being friends with Jimmy Carter, found it particularly puzzling.

Willard: Yes and no.

Yes, in that I remember how disappointed he was that he lost. I could see his disappointment in our last days in the White House. I could see it on his face. I could hear it in his voice, and Governor Carter was responsible for that. It never *ever* popped into my mind that they somehow would someday have a close relationship.

No, in that when you think about Gerald Ford and the core components of his being and his goodness – you always have to talk about his goodness – it doesn't surprise me at all that they made a link. That the similarities that the two

have, whether it's Dorothy Ford or Lillian Carter, three sons and then a daughter, both in the Navy, both not from large means. A lot of commonality that one would not at first blush ascribe to political adversaries.

Smith: And a pair of strong wives.

Willard: A pair of strong wives, in their own ways.

Smith: That friendship, by the way, extended to the wives.

Willard: Oh, to be sure. I remember in some of the more private moments during President Ford's state funeral, particularly in Grand Rapids and on the Air Force One flight from Washington to Michigan, the emotional impact on Mrs. Carter was significant and very apparent.

Smith: I will never forget. It's odd, when you are standing there, trying to get through [a eulogy], and the Fords are right in front of you, and you're trying to do your best, and you're in a kind of a fog – the thing I will always remember is at one point looking over and seeing Rosalynn Carter weeping. And I thought, who would have imagined thirty years ago that this is how the story ends? It's just so improbable.

Willard: And a similar moment occurred during planning for the funeral. I was visiting President and Mrs. Ford at their Beaver Creek home. I'd go out to Beaver Creek and Rancho Mirage and do a series of detailed planning meetings, new table-top scenarios, and on site walk-throughs with MDW and Secret Service. Sometimes, we'd also work on her plan. Then, we'd sit down and go over new

recommendations on the State Funeral plans. On this particular visit, he and I were talking about the final ceremony at Andrews Air Force Base and the last flight to Grand Rapids on Air Force One. All of a sudden he became very somber. And he began to tear up. He looked over and said, “Greg, it would mean a great deal to me if you would make certain that Jimmy and Rosalynn are on that last flight with Betty and the children.”

And in my mind, that moment and his visible emotion sum up their extraordinary friendship. We were discussing taking his remains home to Grand Rapids for the last time, and he had one request: he wanted me to be sure that Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter were on that flight.

Smith: And the scene I’ll never forget, once we were on the flight, President Carter walking up and down the aisle with the youngest Ford great-grandchild.

Willard: With Joy Berlanga.

Smith: It was just an astonishing image.

Willard: And Joy, she couldn’t have been six months old at the time, with him up and down the left side of Air Force One.

Smith: By all accounts, the Carters were astonished at the crowds, at the outpouring that they saw when they got to Grand Rapids.

Willard: We all were. People have asked a similar question about that relationship, was it genuine and all – and there are so many similar examples one can point to. And I’m sure Penny Circle over the years had dozens of similar examples of just how deep and broad that friendship was – among the four of them – not just President Carter and President Ford, but among all four of them. And, it culminated with President Carter breaking down at the end of his eulogy. That’s as heartfelt as it gets.

Smith: Were the Fords comfortable talking about their funeral planning? Or did they become more comfortable over time? How was it initially introduced?

Willard: May, 1977 was the first meeting President Ford and I had regarding his State Funeral Plan. A civilian from the Military District of Washington came out to Rancho Mirage. We met in the conference room with the President. I remember thinking at the time, "This may be the oddest meeting I've ever participated in. The President is 63, walks eighteen holes of golf and swims each day – why are we talking about his funeral?" We went ahead and developed some very basic ideas and a funeral plan template. That template evolved by about 1986 (Penny and Bob Barrett may know better) into a simple seven page outline that was then put on the shelf. I understand in the 1990s you were able to move it forward; your memo about a funeral plan was terrific.

I became re-involved in 2003 when Steve Ford asked me to breakfast in Washington. It was after the President's 2000 stroke, and he was still doing pretty well. At that point, the whole funeral plan was still a 12-page outline comprised mostly of lists of which military units would be assigned to what ceremony; pretty sparse. Steve said, "We really need to get serious about this while Dad is still in ok health." And so - from 2003 to the President's death on December 26, 2006 - I became very involved in planning the funeral and then oversaw its conduct. It turned out to be an enormous undertaking - pretty much full-time for those three years; hundreds of meetings around the country, 33,000 e-mails, thousands of documents, 23 separate invitation lists, security checklists, contracts, conference calls and meetings with Mike Wagner and MDW, Secret Service, White House staff, Blair House, law enforcement, National Guard, U.S. House and Senate, clergy, hundreds of annotated diagrams and seating charts, all the printed materials and tributes, meetings and teleconferences with the Fords and the family, and, of course, planning and overseeing the very private arrangements for his Remains upon Demise. The final plan was 587 pages. Our entire funeral file has more than 2 terabytes of data.

In the early stages of the planning, President Ford would occasionally push back. I don't know whether emotionally he didn't want to talk about it, or, more likely, it was his way of saying, "I want to make sure there's not too much pomp."

Early on I said to him at a group planning meeting in Rancho Mirage, “Mr. President, two things are going to happen when you die. The sun is going to rise in the east the next morning, and the American people are going to pay tribute to your service to the Nation. Now you may not like the second of those, but it’s going to happen. You can contribute, you can give your thoughts, you can participate in the planning, or, instead, you can choose not to do so. But it is going to happen, whether you want it to or not - period.” He paused and smiled, “Well, I guess when you put it that way...” Over the course of our three years preparing his funeral plan, it wasn’t so much a reluctance, as an uncomfortableness sometimes, with what otherwise would be the pomp of a state funeral. A significant consideration was also the effect he knew his death would have on Mrs. Ford, the children and the grandchildren.

Smith: Was there an inherent – for lack of a better word – tension between marrying those two strains? One of the things that I think came to define that week in a way that had more of an emotional impact than the sheer pomp would have, was the extent to which it felt like a family funeral.

Willard: Well, I’m glad to hear you say that because that’s exactly what our hope was with the entire funeral plan.

Smith: Really?

Willard: Absolutely. I insisted that the family be the focus. One of the earliest meetings I had was with the military and Secret Service in Washington - huge meeting. I explained the two stages we were going to utilize to develop the funeral plan: in the first stage we would develop a plan for Mrs. Ford and the family; then, the second stage would incorporate all the military traditions and protocol. I pointedly said that the plan’s three priorities would be: family, family, and family -- in that order! I described it this way: what we’re going to do is first prepare a funeral plan for what Mrs. Ford and the children and the grandchildren will need to say goodbye. Once we’ve defined that, once we’ve developed that – and not before – we will then overlay all of the traditions, the rituals, the protocol. But it will always be, at the core, about Mrs. Ford and the children saying goodbye to her husband and their dad.

You're right; there could have been a tension. But I can count on one hand the times when there actually was. And every single time an issue like that would come up, Mike Wagner and I resolved it; no problems - none. I'll give you an example - planning the repose at St. Margaret's Church. The Remains were to be brought there the first time - when "the casket goes public" is the phrase they use. Mike and I spent hours and hours planning every detail of that first repose. Upon arrival at St. Margaret's, there first would be private time, a private prayer service with just Mrs. Ford and the family. Military tradition said that four military personnel must stand vigil at the corners of the casket. But that meant Mrs. Ford and the children would be looking at the casket through or around uniforms. I said, "That's not going to work. Family, family, family." By this point in the funeral planning, Mike, whose title is Chief of State Funeral Planning at the Military District of Washington, had become the lead MDW coordinator for us. In this instance, Mike studied the military protocols and concluded: if the Officer In Charge stood alone at the head of President Ford's casket during the family time, that would be sufficient to sustain the military "vigil." The other military personnel could leave. So we did it that way. The family's needs were met, and protocol and military traditions were also observed. With Mike, we were always able to resolve the most difficult and sensitive matters in the funeral plans. He's extraordinary.

Sure, there's a possibility of tension between family emotions and needs, and protocol and tradition for a state funeral. But Mike and I, with MDW General Guy Swan's steadfast support, always found solutions - always. A real tribute to Mike and General Swan - two remarkable men, just remarkable.

Smith: And I recall vividly, his expressed desire not to have a caisson.

Willard: Yes. And ironic because what came out of that desire was an alternative - and very touching - part of the funeral. He didn't want a horse-drawn caisson, so his casket was to be borne by a hearse from Andrews Air Force Base to the Capitol. So, we developed a new idea for him to consider: have the hearse come over Memorial Bridge, around the Lincoln Memorial, up Seventeenth Street, and

then pause at the World War II Memorial in a moment of mutual tribute to President Ford and his World War II comrades.

I remember sitting in the den with him late one morning at the house in Rancho Mirage. He was in the blue chair there in the den. We were going over my latest updates and recommendations on the plan, and I began to describe the World War II pause recommendation to him. In his last visit to Washington in 2004 after a Foundation dinner when Dick Cheney and Don Rumsfeld had received the Foundation's medal in Statuary Hall, the Secret Service had driven him in his limo into the World War II Memorial, and he spent some time there. He was very moved by it. He was so proud of his Navy service. So when I talked to him about the recommendation for a ceremonial pause at the Memorial – not just as an alternative to the horse-drawn caisson, but as part of telling the story of Gerald Ford to the American people - he became very emotional. “I can't tell you how much that would mean to me.”

The phrase I used to describe our planning was “Thematic Mosaic” – a series of tributes (a mosaic) that would comprise his overall state funeral. I explained it: “We'll have eight days of tributes. There will be this piece of his life represented here, and this piece there, and that piece there. And at the end of the eight days, I want the Ford grandchildren to be able to step back and look at that eight day mosaic and say, ‘That was my grandpa.’” Whether it was the World War II Memorial pause, having the casket borne up the House of Representative steps and later out the Senate steps, lying in repose outside both chambers, or the individuals he selected as eulogists and pallbearers – all of those were part of telling the story of Gerald Ford in the context of a state funeral mosaic.

Smith: Any surprises that week?

Willard: A couple in particular. One was during the first Arrival Ceremony at the Capitol. We had twenty honorary pallbearers in DC, many of whom were older and several of whom had heart conditions. We didn't dare risk having them climb up the forty-eight steep steps behind the casket. So, during the planning, we said that the Honorary Pallbearers would be at the foot of the stairs. The

casket would be borne up the steps, and the pallbearers would then be brought under and taken up the elevator. The plan was that as the casket passed by Mrs.

Ford and her official military escort, General Guy Swan, at the top of the steps, the two of them would move in behind the casket, and then the children and grandchildren would follow them in. And then I was to move in behind the family, and we'd proceed inside the Capitol.

So that night it all unfolded just as planned, or so I thought! The casket passed by, the family followed, and, just as I started to lean forward to follow, I looked left, and there was Alan Greenspan! For a moment I thought, "Oh, dear God, Alan is lost; he's supposed to be going in the elevator under the stairs with the Honorary Pallbearers!" I leaned a little further forward, and there were Brent Scowcroft, Henry Kissinger, Dick Cheney - all of the Honorary Pallbearers walking together up the steps! Vice President Cheney came up beside me and said with a twinkle in his eye, "Didn't expect to see us, did you, Greg?" I smiled, "No, Mr. Vice President; I sure didn't." He replied softly, "We wanted to walk him in."

That was a surprise, and a wonderful surprise. The other, well, several others – the first, we talked about the crowds, especially in Alexandria.

Smith: On that day that we went up to the Cathedral, I was wearing my ABC hat, so I did not get to be in the motorcade, but I was told by a number of people, including colleagues at ABC, that although you had dispensed with the formal procession, a surprising number of people had turned out just to say goodbye.

Willard: Remarkable crowds. Another memorable moment occurred later that same afternoon. It actually began Saturday while we were enroute from California to Washington on Air Force One. As we lifted off from the Palm Springs Airport, I suddenly realized that thirty years ago almost to the day I'd come to California with him on Air Force One, and now I was accompanying him on Air Force One back to Washington -- for the last time. That realization hit me like a bolt. I lost it; very difficult moment. I quickly got back to work finalizing plans for the ceremonies that evening in DC. A short while later, I casually said to Major

Mark Thompson, President Bush's military aide, "Would you check our flight path from Andrews to Grand Rapids next week? And if we're going to be anywhere near Ann Arbor, if you could just let me know, I'll point it out to Mrs. Ford." That's all I said. The following Tuesday afternoon, after the service at National Cathedral, we boarded Air Force One at Andrews and took off for Michigan. We weren't even to altitude when Major Thompson came back and said, "Mr. Willard, in about an hour we're going to go into a steep dive." I replied, "Major, there are lots of things I'd like to be told on Air Force One – that's not one of them!" He smiled and then told me what Colonel Mark Tillman, the presidential pilot, had arranged. So, over southeast Detroit we started going down, as you will remember. We told Mrs. Ford and the family and the other passengers what was about to happen. We leveled out over Willow Run, Michigan at 800 feet altitude. The aircraft went full flaps down, doing barely 190 knots. Air Force One then flew directly over the University of Michigan football stadium and then gracefully toggled its wings from side to side to say goodbye. It was a moment I'll never forget.

There were many wonderful moments that perhaps you could call a surprise: the reactions of the crowds when the children and the grandchildren went over – either to the lying in state in the Rotunda, or to the public repose in California and Michigan – and the effects that had on the thousands of people with whom the family interacted - what a wonderful part of the eight days that was.

Another wonderful moment involved Mrs. Ford. Most people don't know that she was very sick that week. Very sick; horrible bronchial infection. And it became a real question whether she was going to be able to make it to all the services and ceremonies. Tradition is that Air Force One is provided to move the remains to the final resting place. Then, a different, smaller military aircraft returns the widow home. So, we were scheduled to return from Grand Rapids to Rancho Mirage in a C-32 aircraft. On Monday afternoon, January 1, we were at Blair House, and Mrs. Ford was receiving the ambassadors from the countries he visited as President. Randy Bumgardner, Manager of Blair House, came in and said I had a call on a Blair House phone from Joe Hagin, President Bush's

Deputy Chief of Staff. Randy is an extraordinary person who made certain everything at Blair House was perfect for Mrs. Ford – and it was. Joe said,

“Greg, I’m on a speakerphone on Air Force One with President Bush and General Tubb in the President’s office.” General Tubb was the President’s physician who’d been attending Mrs. Ford in Washington. And Joe said, “The President and General Tubb think Mrs. Ford would be much more comfortable going back to California on Air Force One. If it’s okay with her, we’re going to have this aircraft take her home to California.” Now, President Bush didn’t have to do that. It wasn’t a surprise as much as another of his many wonderful and compassionate kindnesses that week.

A very funny moment occurred later that afternoon at Blair House. All of the former Presidents, First Ladies, and First Family members came to Blair House to pay their respects to Mrs. Ford. Randy Bumgardner had set up a lovely table with a condolence book for all of them to sign. Many of them took their time and wrote notes. At one point, Hillary Clinton was seated writing her note in the book. President Carter was standing behind her patiently waiting to sign the book. Happy Rockefeller suddenly walked by and saw him waiting his turn. She turned to him and said crisply, “Well, you better get ready – *you’re* next.” President Carter froze! From the shocked expression on his face it was apparent he thought Mrs. Rockefeller was somehow prophesying that his State Funeral was next – and not that he was merely next in the condolence book line. David Kennerly and I were nearby and doubled over laughing.

There was another humorous moment at Blair House. President Bush ’43 and Laura came over to pay their respects. I took them up to the second floor library – just the two of them – to meet with Mrs. Ford. Sometime later, his father, President Bush ’41 and Barbara and the Ford children came in. There’s a great photograph of the two Presidents on the left sofa and Barbara Bush sitting in a wing chair with Laura Bush sitting perched on the arm of the chair. I remember chuckling to one of the Ford children, “There are six billion people on the planet, and we’re looking in that chair at the only one who can make the First Lady of the United States sit on the arm of a

chair!” Barbara Bush with her daughter-in-law – the First Lady - sitting contentedly on the arm.

Smith: That walk down the Cathedral aisle must have been...

Willard: It was tough. Mike Wagner and I had developed five scenarios for Mrs. Ford to get her to her seat. She made the final decision. The scenarios ranged from: I would assist her in a wheelchair all the way down a side aisle to the front of the Cathedral and then President Bush would meet us and escort her around the front pew to her seat; or I'd take her in a wheelchair to the cross-aisle, and then he'd seat her; or she'd walk the entire way with President Bush. And so the moment came. Everyone else was seated. It was time for her to be seated. President Bush and I were with her in the Cathedral Narthex. The three of us paused, and I said, “Mrs. Ford, whatever you would like to do in terms of getting to your seat, you and I went over the options last night.” She got that resolute Betty Ford look and said firmly, “Greg, I can do this!” and turned, “Mr. President, if you please.” She took his arm, the ushers opened the main Cathedral doors, and the two of them made that long walk. I was shadowing down the right aisle. She went the whole way - no problem. Amazing.

Smith: Bess Abel, Mrs. Johnson's great aide and friend, told me later, “You know, it sounds like she still has dancer's legs.” It took another woman to notice.

Willard: Indeed. And, given how ill she was that day, it took enormous courage.

Smith: Well, there was a whole generation who were discovering him for the first time through these old clips and they were comparing and contrasting that with the ugliness of current politics. And he looked awfully good.

Willard: Very good. The funeral, and its thematic mosaic, let Americans young and old consider him in a broader historical context. Mrs. Ford and the family were able to say their final goodbyes, and - exactly as we'd planned - state funeral protocol and traditions were carried out completely. Peggy Noonan later wrote,

“[President] Ford's was the most human of presidential funerals. Maybe because the Fords wanted so little done, so insisted on modesty, all that was done was genuine, and sincere, and -- perfect.”

And so it was; a finer description of his funeral there will never be.

Smith: Do you remember your last visit with him?

Willard: I do; 2006. I was in Rancho Mirage for several days working on the funeral plan and a number of personal legal matters I was handling for President and Mrs. Ford.

The last morning I walked over to the house around ten. The President's health was declining, but he wasn't yet bedridden. Mrs. Ford was at the dining room table. I told her goodbye, and asked if the President was around. She said he'd gone back to take a nap, so I asked her to tell him goodbye for me. All of a sudden we heard the click of his cane. He came around the corner with a bathrobe on and smiled, "Where are you going!?" I reminded him, "Well, Mr. President, my flight leaves at 12:30." He said, "Oh, just put some swimming trunks on and come into the pool. The damn doctors told me I can't swim, but that doesn't mean I can't walk!" We both laughed. It turns out he'd started getting in the pool and walking around just to get some exercise. He thanked me for all the work on the funeral plan, tousled the side of my head, and said, "Well, hurry back!" I gave him a hug and said goodbye.

That was the last time I saw him.

The last time we spoke was early November, 2006. By then, his health had declined significantly; very frail. I had an evening conference call with Mrs. Ford and the family about my meetings at the Pentagon earlier that day with the Navy and Secretary Rumsfeld's staff to plan the January, 2007 Naming Ceremony for the CVN-78 aircraft carrier as the *USS Gerald R. Ford*. President Ford had previously been told about the decision on the carrier's name. During the conference call, he suddenly came on the line. He was so excited to hear about the Naming Ceremony plans and Susan's duties as Ship's Sponsor. At the end of the call, he thanked me, asked to give his best to Annie, and then said, "Come visit, Greg." I replied, "Good night, Mr. President. I'll see you soon."

That was the last time I spoke to him. He died the next month.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Willard: I hope he's remembered for the person he was. People talk a lot about his character and all those component elements of his being. I think he's best remembered by that core goodness – “good-ness” – because it permeated everything he did. Whether it was in relationships with friends and colleagues, his presidency, vice presidency, his service in Congress, Navy, Yale Law School, University of Michigan, and then all the way back to growing up in Grand Rapids, there was always a core goodness. And the phrase, “He was a *good* man,” almost sounds trite. But it's not trite as to him; it's very real. When one remembers Gerald Ford in that context - that he was *a good man* - and then examines what that meant over the course of his 93 years, that's a wonderful, wonderful legacy.

If that “good-ness” of Gerald Ford can be remembered, and if its manifestations in his public life can be honored and hopefully emulated, we will have known – and been honored – by a life well-lived.

Smith: Perfect.

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