

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Hank Meijer
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
May 14, 2010

Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this.

Meijer: My pleasure.

Smith: Two areas I really want to focus on: some of your own contacts with the President, of course, but also, you are a real scholar of the period and culture that produced him. Tell us about Western Michigan and what defined it, made it distinct politically, culturally, fifty years ago.

Meijer: I have to step back and say, as I think about it, it's almost difficult to disentangle President Ford from Grand Rapids. I mean, you drive in on the highway and you see the G.R. Ford Freeway. Well, G.R., Grand Rapids, for someone of my generation, growing up in the Fifties and Sixties, he was a continuous presence and almost a definer of what Grand Rapids felt like. Earnest, plainspoken; I almost want to say bland in the sense of not a colorful personality, not exciting around the edges. Solid and so reliable that I feel like I'm defining an ideal childhood and how much President Ford was both a product of that same environment and part of that ideal childhood. He was an ever present figure at every little parade and Red Flannel parade in Cedar Springs, and from my own perspective as a kid whose father had business around the community. I was often a little kid at the Red Flannel parade, or the Fourth of July at Michigan Ave parade, or whatever it might have been. I think for a lot of people, he also represented the federal government to Grand Rapids. This is an area that maybe because of President Ford's particular approach, is not filled with government pork. There is very little federal presence here in terms of bases or facilities of any kind.

Smith: By the way, isn't it ironic that the most visible example should be the Calder sculpture? Which seems so out of character with the Gerald Ford that you've described, and that I know to be true.

Meijer: It's perfect. And the Calder – what is Calder Plaza – is officially Vandenberg Plaza because it had been planned with a monument in his honor that was displaced. I think it might have been a fountain, but it is Vandenberg Center to this day. But it's been totally supplanted by this wonderful piece of contemporary art, which of course, came in part because of the good offices of President Ford.

Smith: Actually that's a perfect way to set this all up. It also suggests – he was a guy with a basically safe seat – and yet, as you say, he was here as much as he was, even as he was rising in influence, clout, whatever you want to call it in Washington. Because by the mid-Fifties, for example, he had been drafted by the Old Bulls to be on this CIA oversight effort – oversight of all the intelligence agencies, which is revealing in and of itself.

Meijer: Indeed.

Smith: Tells you something about what the establishment thought about this promising young guy. What does it tell you about him that he was here as much as he was, when he didn't have to be?

Meijer: And this in an age when congressmen were still raising their families in Washington. So it wasn't the jet back to the district every weekend pattern, except for him, in many cases, it must have been. Because it felt like he was a ubiquitous presence. Now, maybe that was simply because of his longevity, because there is no sense of perpetual campaign. There was just a sense of Jerry being there; being around; being a willing participant in every Rotary Club event and civic function that came our way.

Smith: Do you remember when you first met him, or really were aware of his presence?

Meijer: No, because I was always aware of his presence. For some of us, and Richard, I think you may have had a similar experience, my great year of great political awakening was 1966, and that was the year of Romney, Scranton, Percy, that great wave of moderately progressive Republicans. Jerry pre-dated that and wasn't a part of, wasn't identified with that. He was so stolid as a

representative that you didn't see him as part of any great wave. So it was sort of – when did he displace Halleck?

Smith: '65.

Meijer: Okay, so in a sense he was a precursor - or he was seen by others as part of that wave. But I don't have a first memory because I can say I was probably five or six in the late Fifties and saw him at a parade greeting my parents. I probably went with my dad to a Rotary luncheon or something and saw him over those years.

Smith: Let me back up because I'd love to paint in the background. We have been talking to a number of people and have some wonderful stories, sort of laugh out loud stories in some cases, about the influence of the Dutch Reformed or the culture - political and otherwise. But it was interesting, because Werner yesterday took pains to distinguish between their influence and that of, for example, many in the religious right today. Which is a valuable insight. But in their case, it was more a kind of insular, almost cocooned, culture within a culture. Which did not translate into anti-Catholicism, for example.

Meijer: Nor did it translate into being a part of the governing class of the community. Jerry was part of that mainstream Protestant tradition dating from before the waves of Dutch immigration came in. And the Dutch immigrants tended, at least originally, to be more blue collar, and even as they were upwardly mobile, they remained quite insular. And so they would support a good, sound Republican, but they weren't further right to be chafing under good moderate Republican rule, nor were they influential in the party. This was what Jerry with his Episcopal membership was – and East Grand Rapids is not filled with Dutch surnames in the way that other parts of the Southside of Grand Rapids are.

Smith: That's interesting because it does fly in the face of the outside notion of West Michigan as monolithic; even in Ford's coalition, it was a coalition, which tells you something about his appeal, and also about his ability to juggle. Who was Frank McKay?

Meijer: Frank McKay –the easy description being Republican Kingmaker. He was for a while state treasurer, controlled many Republicans in the state legislature to the point that people wanting state contracts knew to talk to Frank. He was the fixer, either taking a fee or a bribe from whoever he could. When my dad and grandfather built one of their first stores in Grand Rapids, and they had a handful of supermarkets and were financially rather shaky, somebody told them to talk to Frank McKay and he could get them a loan from one of the local banks. And they did, and he got them a loan. Years later the banker said, “Well, if you’d just come to us directly, we’d have given you the loan.” But they were small town people who didn’t know whether that would work, and so Frank ended up for his Bal Harbor resort in Florida coming in and loading up on steaks every year before he went south, as his fee for arranging financing for that store. And many people thought he owned part of the company. But Frank McKay was the ugly face of party politics in the region and in the state.

Smith: So his influence extended beyond Grand Rapids?

Meijer: Oh, very much throughout the state of Michigan. Yes. He was a statewide figure in the party.

Smith: Was there an ideological component to it, or was it simply a boss who delivered services and extracted his price?

Meijer: Classical boss. Yes.

Smith: And Vandenberg was a foe? Or where did Vandenberg fit in?

Meijer: Vandenberg went so quickly from the newspaper, where he somewhat predated McKay’s greatest years of influence, to Washington when McKay was wielding his greatest influence in the Thirties and Forties, that Vandenberg never had a lot of contact with him. So it was probably an uneasy relationship, but they weren’t relying on each other.

Smith: Did Vandenberg distance himself, in a sense, from Republican Party politics in the state?

- Meijer: Yes. His own precinct failed to vote for him in 1934 and he'd had very little contact with the state party after he went to Washington. He did cursory stuff at the gubernatorial level, but had never as an elected official been intimately involved in state politics.
- Smith: What was his appeal to the electorate, given what we think we know in retrospect about him, in terms of personality and approach? Particularly given what seems to be a kind of transformation that occurred?
- Meijer: Like Ford, he was scrupulously honest so there was never any question on the integrity side. This is a guy who liked to drink, but he went outside the three mile limit during Prohibition to do it. He was a terribly hard worker, very diligent, and so even though he had some small claim to fame as a bit of a blowhard orator in his later years, he did his homework, and early on, when between his appointment and his first election, just a matter of a few months, introduced legislation calling for reapportionment based on the 1920 census. There had been no reapportionment since 1910. It had been held up in Congress because the South didn't want to give up seats; they would be losing to the industrial Midwest and to the West. Michigan stood to gain seats, and Vandenberg really pushed for that. When Hoover came in, in tandem with Vandenberg's first election, California interests were very, very much interested in that as well. And Vandenberg pushed through reapportionment, gaining Michigan additional congressional seats. Well, that won him support throughout the state.
- He, I think, saved and built up Selfridge Field over in Detroit. He did some Detroit area high profile things that played well there. And, at a time when there was, at least in some quarters in the Midwest, some concern about the pace of change in the New Deal and the federal government's accelerating accumulation of power, Vandenberg picked his battles wisely and picked high profile ones to oppose. Went along with the New Deal when it made sense, and really finessed that with the voters back here. At the same time that he was responsible for the creation of FDIC, which, even though Roosevelt laid great claim to his own thereafter, was indisputably a cornerstone of the economic recovery and of the salvation of the banking system. So he was

hanging on through the New Deal years, and then as the Republicans were so decimated in – he was elected in '28, so in subsequent elections when the majority slipped into minority and then into tiny minority in '32, '34, Vandenberg survived in '34.

Smith: Was that his toughest race? '34?

Meijer: Yes, it was his toughest race and he was the only Republican senator from an industrial state who was returned that year. He and Alf Landon were the two Republicans who most visibly bucked the trend that wiped out senators and governors around the country. And so his profile within the party, just in terms of the sheer numbers, quickly went forward. Locally he'd been the newspaper editor for twenty years and had that kind of intimate relationship with the town that comes from being in that role for that length of time. And so he had been sort of booster and honest mirror of the community for a long time. So people felt - even if he as a personality could be a little aloof and a little prickly - he was such a known quantity that people here were comfortable with him. He did things – the national park at Isle Royal - did things early in his tenure on a statewide basis that quickly won him support as a credible figure. And the Democrats in Michigan – it also had been a historically Republican state before the New Deal. And so when the Democrats couldn't get Frank Murphy to come back and run against him, they didn't have anybody else real strong.

Smith: When did he first see himself as presidential material?

Meijer: As with so many political egos, I'm sure much earlier than any of us would be aware. But there is first public awareness of him as a dark horse in 1936. So he is re-elected in '34, and simply by virtue of that re-election, he's one of the few people standing.

Smith: Was he seen as a potential running mate with Landon?

Meijer: Landon wanted him. He was Landon's first choice and he evaded that. And so Landon picked Knox after that. Yes, he was seen as the preferred running mate for Landon.

Smith: What relationship – personal and/or political – existed between Vandenberg and whatever tradition he represents, and Gerald Ford?

Meijer: You would know more about this than I do, but it's a wonderful image to think of Ford being in that gallery in Philadelphia in 1940, cheering for Wendell Willkie. And this is the case where I think Ford had grown up with a general respect for Vandenberg. I don't have any evidence of teenage years interaction when Ford was coming of age and still living in Grand Rapids.

Smith: His dad - had he been politically active? Was there a time you can trace his involvement in local Republican politics?

Meijer: President Ford?

Smith: Or his father.

Meijer: His father, of course, had been part of that front with Dr. Ver Meulen and other people fighting the Frank McKay machine. But this is, of course, after Vandenberg is in Washington. So, if I recall from the Vandenberg materials, there may be a Gerald Ford, Sr. letter or two of just friendly, general supporter constituent correspondence, but not a close tie. And Vandenberg would have gone to Washington when President Ford was sixteen years old, I believe, and so there would have been – there was no contact prior to that that I'm aware of. And so then President Ford was gone from Grand Rapids most of the years after that.

Smith: Sure.

Meijer: So you've got the great image of, in 1939, prior to the outbreak of World War II, Vandenberg was viewed as one of the leading contenders and he was sort of the, maybe *the* leading contender in the eyes of much of the Republican establishment and of contemporary journalists – talking about reporters. He was kind of every editor's choice, partly because he was one of them. He'd been an editor for so long, he was one of the founders of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. So that was his world and they were very comfortable with him, so he was sort of the...

Smith: Inside choice.

Meijer: Yes, today we always say the inside the beltway choice, which, of course, nurtured his aspirations far beyond what might have been realistic outside the beltway. He was an inside the beltway choice, but he was also one of the leading isolationist figures of the time. So he's gaining his profile to a considerable degree because he is leading the fight against the repeal of the arms embargo. That position becomes discredited after the Nazis invade Poland in September of 1939, and so Vandenberg still has a very high profile but his whole...

Smith: Too high a profile in this case?

Meijer: Exactly. He's too much identified with that movement. So then he goes into the Wisconsin primary and Dewey beats him. Dewey is much better organized. And you're going to remember this stuff better than I am, if I can _____ '40 and '44. Dewey beats him; so he goes into the convention with the Michigan delegation pledged to him and a few others, but with a small chunk of votes. And then, of course, we all know that Wendell Willkie totally overran everybody and probably would have liked Vandenberg as his running mate. There is the story that Vandenberg tells of Willkie wanting to talk to him about a place on the ticket. Vandenberg says, "Well, I'll flip you for it." And of course, Willkie had other designs. But Ford there, identifying with the bold reformist, charismatic Willkie, rather than with Vandenberg.

Smith: Even though Ford himself, at this point, belongs to America First at Yale.

Meijer: Well, and of course, that's that whole America First Yale thing. America First has got to be one of the most misunderstood organizations in its origins, with Sargent Shriver and Kingman Brewster. I mean, the founder of it, Robert Stewart, did you ever interview him?

Smith: Yeah. Once.

Meijer: I did, too. And none of these guys were anti-Semitic flame throwers. They were students opposed to the war.

Smith: Idealists, presumably having learned the lessons of the first war.

Meijer: Which weighed so heavily and played itself out in so many ways for all these folks. So, how do you reconcile Ford between America First and We Want Willkie?

Smith: I don't. I don't know enough, except that Ford becomes representative of a party that is in its gut and its heart and maybe its head, more inclined to America First, but is literally swept off its feet by this phenomenon. This Obama-like phenomenon.

Meijer: To what extent was Eisenhower Willkie-Lite?

Smith: And you project what you want to believe. And early on Willkie was pretty malleable. You could define Willkie as pretty much whatever you wanted him to be.

Meijer: And he was running a little bit to the right of Roosevelt. He was going along with Roosevelt in terms of aid to the Allies.

Smith: But also, if you're a young Republican who has suffered through – you've crossed the desert of the last eight years, Hoover represents something, and Landon was futility personified, and then all of a sudden... again, I don't mean to keep coming back, but I mean there is this Obama-like – that's the parallel, in some ways.

Meijer: He's one of these generational figures. Teddy Roosevelt clearly was.

Smith: Transcends, reinvents, is a whole new face, and you invest your emotions even more than your hopes. And who knows? I would have loved to have been sitting next to Ford in the galleries.

Meijer: He was a grad student, he was in his mid-twenties.

Smith: Of course.

Meijer: But what is interesting for Ford is, he would have seen Vandenberg as this sort of exemplar of his hometown ideals, but someone who, projected onto a national or international stage, was tired stuff. And philosophically suspect in terms of isolationism.

- Smith: Un-electable for all of those reasons.
- Meijer: Yeah.
- Smith: Someone made a very convincing case. He said how Ford said to him, I think, during and after the presidency, how he never felt he got credit for being the rebel that he was. And you know, if you strip away the stereotype - and it's Charlie Halleck, Charlie Hoeven before that, obviously the '48 campaign, and maybe going back to '40. Maybe this was all part of young Jerry Ford. And let's face it, the old cliché about a good mind having the capacity to entertain opposing viewpoints - America First as an organization of young idealists - then maybe it's not such a reach to look at Wendell Willkie who personifies youthful idealism and logic be damned.
- Meijer: And wasn't going to get us into the war quite as aggressively, perhaps, as Roosevelt was.
- Smith: The older I get, the more I'm convinced that the single biggest factor in politics is not ideological, but generational. And this illustrates it to a T. What Wendell Willkie is, is a modernizer. And to someone in Jerry Ford's position at Yale, modernizing the Republican Party, however you define that in policy terms, would have been awfully appealing.
- Meijer: Absolutely.
- Smith: And presumably Arthur Vandenberg would not have been the man to do that. Estimable as he was.
- Meijer: Vandenberg's later ability, like you say, to balance those conflicting positions, is what won him his admiration. He was more colorful than Jerry Ford in his early Senate career than Jerry might have been in his House career, but represented some of that same Midwestern stuff. Like Jerry, both were having to work toward leadership positions with what was at that time, both wings of their party. And that centrism from a historical perspective is too easily boring and stereotyped. But it means that they were both working awfully hard to get along with the Tafts over here, and in Vandenberg's time, with Borah and

Norris, and in Jerry Ford's time, I don't who would be comparable – Goodell or the Eastern folks. And at the same time, Taft and that family.

Smith: Remember the old cliché about Americans being philosophically conservative and operationally liberal. You can almost say that Ford, at least at one point in his career, is philosophically something of a liberal and operationally much more of a regular.

Meijer: Yes. But was he philosophically a rebel?

Smith: Well, instinctively, maybe. Certainly the kid shouting “We Want Willkie!” The veteran taking on Jonkman; and even the sort of established figure taking on the establishment in '62 and '64, '63 and '65. We've been told by a very good source that he was approached in '58 when Halleck took on Joe Martin. He was approached then about running, and he said he didn't want to do it. He was biding his time.

Meijer: Thinking about parallels again, talking about Vandenberg's ego. No question. Loved to be flattered; but he really didn't hunger for the presidency in any way, shape or form. It was just like, hey, why not be? But the other part of it – I'm not going to knock myself out in Vermont and New Hampshire.

Smith: It's the equivalent of Mondale saying I don't want to spend the next two years in Holiday Inns.

Meijer: Exactly. President Ford always said what he really aspired to was to be Speaker of the House. Vandenberg, I would think, his comfortable thing would have been President pro tempore of the Senate, which he finally was in '46. But it was a senatorial ego.

Smith: Which is the easiest to caricature.

Meijer: Oh, exactly. But it is - we have to remind ourselves - different than that sort of vaulting ambition that says, “I'm going to be president.” And neither Ford nor Vandenberg had that. Ford must have had an ego, but it was better checked than most politicians.

- Smith: Lee Hamilton said something very interesting when we talked to him. He talked about Ford as being very ambitious, but smart enough to keep it under wraps, which is unusual in Washington.
- Meijer: Yeah.
- Smith: And we've been cautioned – the notion of Ford as guileless doesn't mean he was without ambition or calculation.
- Meijer: Yeah.
- Smith: You don't get where he got with...
- Meijer: You don't challenge Bart Jonkman. It partly was ideological and partly was the modernizing impulse; but you also have an ambition of a young guy on the go.
- Smith: Knowing what you know about the culture of West Michigan at that time, does it make sense to you there is this notion that the President delayed formally proposing to Mrs. Ford, and certainly delayed the marriage, until after the primary, without telling her why. And it has been suggested that in this political culture divorce was *verboden*. And it could very well have been a political negative for this upstart candidate who is taking on an entrenched incumbent, to further saddle himself with the reputation of marrying a divorced woman.
- Meijer: I think it is totally plausible. Obviously, it's pure speculation, but when you are a first time candidate, you are running on your vita. In his case, you've got a war record, but you're not running on any kind of job experience, and so what you've got is resume.
- Smith: And character.
- Meijer: Right. But more broadly speaking, and to have that as a key piece of your biography, if you could wait until after the primary, seems like that makes sense.
- Smith: What does it tell you about Ford that he took on Jonkman in '48; and did Vandenberg involve himself in any way in that race?

Meijer: As I understand it from President Ford, Ford went to Vandenberg and said, "I want to challenge Bart Jonkman. Will you endorse me or will you support me?" And, as I'm understanding it, again from President Ford, Vandenberg said, "I will quietly support you." Jonkman was a long time incumbent and a fairly near neighbor of Vandenberg's. He lived right down the block or around the corner. And so Vandenberg was not going to openly support Ford to challenge his incumbency, even though Jonkman had been the classic Taftite isolationist who was a pain in the neck to Vandenberg, as Vandenberg had evolved so far. So Ford felt like, "I've got Vandenberg's support," but it wasn't publicized during the campaign. It was the kind of thing Ford would have been able to share with other people, but not an open letter in the *Herald* or to the press.

Smith: It's a little unusual for an incumbent senator to, in effect, oppose someone of his own party. Was that consistent with Vandenberg's prior conduct?

Meijer: I'm not aware of any parallels with it. But at that point, in '48, Vandenberg is absolutely at the peak of his popularity and influence. In the eyes of the country and in his own eyes, he would have risen so far beyond what he would have seen Jonkman's very naïve, outmoded, world view, that he would be all for seeing him replaced by a bright young guy who seemed to look at the world the same way he did, whose father had been not a close friend, but a supporter. Yeah, this is just what you would like. In fact, President Ford was saying, when he arrived in Washington in late fall of '48 for the first time?

Smith: Or January of '49.

Meijer: January of '49. Vandenberg's birthday is in March then, so March of '49 Arthur and Hazel invited Jerry and Betty to dinner. I think they had dinner at the Shoreham. It happened to be Vandenberg's birthday and Ford was very touched by that. He mentioned that a couple of times and that it was a kind of warm social embrace. It was just the four of them and it happened to be the Senator's birthday, and that meant a lot to President Ford. So clearly Vandenberg was very sympathetic, quietly encouraging in '48. He's also so involved internationally that he's not here at all. But very welcoming when Ford gets to Washington.

- Smith: And we also get a sense that Jonkman had made the mistake of losing touch with the district – physically of not being back here as often.
- Meijer: I haven't paid attention to that. I don't know what Jonkman's style was. You could hang on as a Republican in a safe district for a long time, but he was out of touch with the temper of the times, and certainly would have looked as behind the times as Vandenberg did in 1940 when war broke out.
- Smith: You were talking to President Ford about Vandenberg; I can imagine the nice things that he would say about Vandenberg. Did he identify any weaknesses at all?
- Meijer: I couldn't get it out of him, and perhaps because it's not in President Ford's character to say that. I came away from the interview wishing for those – you realize as an interviewer – what did I fail to ask? - because I couldn't elicit that from President Ford. What he started out saying, because I was prompting him a little bit about Vandenberg's intellectual stature and how he was viewed, and President Ford said, "Well, you know he was a very bright guy. He'd been editor of the newspaper." As though that title bestowed on Vandenberg an intellectual stature that was unassailable. But that was the way he looked at it. And again, that's probably coming from youthful impressions. Then you really don't have any contact until '48. Richard Rovere wrote a story where Vandenberg was the leading candidate for president of the world – give this as inside the beltway stuff – because when Truman was in his nadir and Vandenberg had so brilliantly, apparently, pushed partisanship aside – that's when Ford is re-entering Vandenberg's world, in a sense – when they are coming together in Washington and you've got the freshmen and your hometown senator is America's senator at that point.
- Smith: A legendary figure. Yeah, exactly. Let me see, because I'm trying to get the chronology straight here. In '48 when Ford runs, he goes to see McKay early on. So McKay is still a power.
- Meijer: What does McKay say?
- Smith: Oh, there's a story where McKay keeps him waiting for four hours.

Meijer: Oh my God.

Smith: And then brushes him off. And then later on there was the incident with the hut, that was put within sight of McKay's office, or whatever it was, and he wanted it removed and they refused to remove it. But if McKay is still a power, if not *the* power, locally, this effort in which Gerald Ford, Sr. was involved to clean up Republican politics by getting rid of Frank McKay - you wonder if there is a parallel here. McKay is not going to give Gerald Ford, Jr. the time of day because his father is...

Meijer: Oh, sure. Right.

Smith: McKay's days were numbered at that point?

Meijer: My guess, and I haven't studied a lot of Michigan politics in the Forties and Fifties, my guess would be that McKay's world of influence had really shrunk, so he was probably still an important figure locally. He was an important figure in the party. He was key to Willkie's nomination. Have you read Charlie Peters' book, *Five Days in Philadelphia*?

Smith: No, I'm embarrassed to say. I've heard it's wonderful.

Meijer: Delightful book. Charlie Peters talks about McKay - one of Willkie's attributes as this reformist, not a modernist candidate and non-political guy, he didn't come in with any IOUs. And he wasn't going to compromise himself. Well, it was all very appealing, except that he made an exception in Frank McKay's case and told him that McKay could have a say in all Michigan judgeships - federal appointments in Michigan. And so with that, at a crucial time, the delegation that had been holding out for Vandenberg, but it was apparent that Vandenberg wasn't going to have a chance, McKay swung the Michigan delegation, so in 1940 he clearly had a lot of power there, to Willkie, and I don't know how many ballots that was into the fight - that was a pivotal moment.

I have a letter that I shared with Peters (because we interviewed him for the documentary) that he was glad to see, from Willkie to McKay, inviting McKay down to Rushville, Indiana to meet with him when he came back. A

lot of it could have just been political platitude, but in Peters' eyes this reflected a special relationship.

Smith: That's fascinating.

Meijer: It's safe to say McKay was totally not ideological in that respect.

Smith: You grew up and obviously had contact with Ford; and your dad is obviously pivotal in creating this institution. Were those basically after Ford left office?

Meijer: Yes. President Ford went to Congress in 1948. My dad was never terribly active politically, and my folks didn't move to Grand Rapids until 1951. So, they saw him in a ceremonial way, but really not up close until my dad became involved with the committee for this museum. And then he can tell stories, which I don't think he told, of being in the men's room next to President Ford and President Ford, on two different occasions, one where President Ford is talking about "I'm going to spend my next few years working on the library and museum. That's going to be my chief activity."

Smith: Raising the money.

Meijer: "I'm embracing that as my job." And then the other one was complaining about, "had Reagan gone to Cincinnati in 1976." That we've all heard, but a difference. I don't know how realistic that was, but he certainly was hot about that.

Smith: He wasn't one to hold grudges. I think one of the problems with the DeFrank book, which in many ways is wonderful, is because of editorial decisions it leaves an impression that this was something he dwelt on.

Meijer: It wasn't in his temperament to look at things that way.

Smith: If you asked him, and he felt comfortable around you, he'd say that. He obviously felt very comfortable around your dad. But it wasn't something that defined his days. But your dad - it's sort of legendary, he offered a site on the outskirts of town for this place. We know there were a number of people who thought it was questionable to put it here at the time. Has this been at least a catalyst in the subsequent transformation of downtown?

Meijer: I think it's been *a* catalyst. I wish I could say – I don't want to over play it – it's certainly been a factor. And I think to locate here had to overcome some of the resistance of people like my dad, who grew up in a suburbanization of America mentality, where we need big parking lots. And he didn't want to see an institution of this stature constrained because people couldn't get at it.

Smith: That's why we have big parking lots.

Meijer: Right. Exactly.

Smith: Certainly when he came to town you'd see him. Did he change over time? Or did your view of him change over time?

Meijer: I didn't perceive it. I'm remembering my first sort of major involvement with the museum was I chaired or co-chaired the World War II exhibit. I don't know if you remember that. Was that before you got here?

Smith: It was before my time, but I remember the exhibit well. It was a blockbuster show.

Meijer: And I remember being there with President Ford when we opened it, and again, I get this confused with stories I've read or heard from you and family and friends. But he would wear that same overcoat, raincoat, all the time. You've heard this, too.

Smith: No, no.

Meijer: I don't know who was telling me that Betty would complain about that raincoat – maybe it was one of the kids. And he just wouldn't change it. But I had the privilege of walking through the exhibit with him, and we were looking at a model of the *Monterrey*, and he was so self-effacing in talking about his experiences. And he would say, "Yeah, yeah. I was on that deck and we had to be pretty careful because it got pretty rough out there." But how much of that is humility and how much is sort of lack of narrative intent or skill...

Smith: I always say he was the least self-dramatizing of political figures.

- Meijer: Yeah. But you could see in him a warmth of recollection, but you didn't get an expression of that.
- Smith: That's well put; an important distinction. And it's funny because he did say on more than one occasion that if he had it to do over again, he would have spent much more time mastering communications. He was well aware of that deficiency. But, of course, in one on one campaigning, he was superb.
- Meijer: Later, that would have been one of those un-modern things that he was lacking compared to the next generation of politicians.
- Smith: Yeah.
- Meijer: He must have sensed that in Kennedy as a contemporary.
- Smith: But without the slightest trace of envy. Opposites attract – two more dissimilar people, it's hard to imagine. But by all accounts, I don't want to overstate it, but they had a relaxed, casual friendship.
- Meijer: But wouldn't Jerry have been – he may have been of Grand Rapids' middle class, but he was also very much at ease with the east coast Yale establishment in a way that Nixon, obviously wasn't - if you think of the three of them.
- Smith: That's a very interesting observation.
- Meijer: He wouldn't have been insecure.
- Smith: Right. And the other thing is, I don't think it is possible to overstate the bonding experience of the war. I'm curious, for him, having gone through the Vandenberg transformation, to believe that "this time we're going to do whatever it takes not to repeat the past."
- Meijer: And as you talk about that, the people in Vandenberg's generation had the scars and the experience of World War I to react to, and they chose different ways of reacting to that. But there was no bonding experience. World War I didn't touch that many Americans as soldiers, so you didn't have them coming out of the trenches saying, "How do we do this?" You had them in all different backgrounds. And so the Ford-Kennedy-Nixon generation would not

have been...they were just coming of age after the war. They weren't in positions of influence. So somehow the Truman generation had to struggle to form a consensus that already existed for the next generation, but that also came more naturally to the next generation. I don't know how you separate those strands.

Smith: It's safe to say that Gerald Ford was a true fiscal conservative.

Meijer: Well, certainly that veto pen was a brilliant thing.

Smith: Your dad was pivotal in adopting a somewhat more imaginative investment strategy for the organization.

Meijer: Yes, that's right.

Smith: And I do wonder, Ford as a child of the Depression was wedded to this "we invest in bonds almost exclusively."

Meijer: But so was my dad, but he was accustomed to take certain risks. And that's where at some point, President Ford - in much the same way that someone is an editor, or somebody is that or that - "Well, somebody is successful in business," so I guess I could do that. But again, just not insisting on your own way.

Smith: I found it fascinating that as he got older, he didn't become more conservative. On the contrary, he became in many ways more open, more tolerant, more accepting. Part of it, I think, was that the party just moved so far to the right. I wonder how much of it was Mrs. Ford's influence. Am I imagining things? When he was in office he was seen as the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge. And then, of course, came Reagan, and conservatism itself was redefined, and the social issues became the litmus test. I wonder if there is a kind of Midwest conservative: stolid, figures of integrity, who looked upon abortion or a sexual preference - those weren't political issues. Those were things you didn't talk about. For a long time he didn't talk about the broken family he came from.

Meijer: Right, and probably postponed the marriage, or engagement.

- Smith: But he actually learned to be more comfortable with those things late in life, which is intriguing. And, of course, he had teenage children – all of these factors.
- Meijer: And he'd been in Washington for a long time, for good or ill, but typically that would move you to the center, I would think. Now how much – and this is very far afield – but how much is that the same journey of mainstream Protestantism? That in your childhood, things would not have been talked about and would not have happened; whether it's Episcopal, or Congregational or Methodist, or whatever it might be – these were generally forces of conservatism, if they were forces of anything in the teens or Twenties, and they would be viewed as very progressive today.
- Smith: That's interesting. But he could get very outspoken about his concerns about what the right wing was doing to the party. And how much of that was residual resentment of Reagan.
- Meijer: But he upset Halleck by appealing to the east coast country club Republicans with whom some of us have great sympathy. That he'd been there all along, and how much of his perceived conservatism was trying to play to the party, versus playing to Grand Rapids or reflecting Grand Rapids? I don't think that that's an automatic characteristic of his background.
- Smith: What all this would suggest is that he's a more complex figure, both publicly and I think personally. I think he was a very private person. There's a sense that he may very well have taken any number of things with him to the grave.
- Meijer: But superficially, talking about his thrift, to some extent, and to the extent as you are keenly aware that the Foundation and the legacy is sort of a family business, it was very interesting - if you were working on the statue for the Rotunda, and we were looking at competing proposals - Steve shared with us that one of them was much more expensive than the other – a higher profile artist, even though we really didn't like his proposal better – we're delighted with the course we chose. But Steve said, "Dad would never go along with that." Like, don't even think about taking it, it costs twice as much as the

other candidates. I don't imagine there are other presidential museums exercising that particular judgment.

Smith: I always found it fascinating that the Foundation, when they decided to redo the museum, did a fundraising campaign in secret. It was never public.

Meijer: It hasn't figured out how to engage the community. And that's a fundamental need of the institution and how to serve the Grand Rapids/Washington/Ann Arbor axis. That's been a real trip.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him?

Meijer: I believe it was at the last Ford Foundation dinner that he attended. And that was the occasion where he was a little bit slurred in his speech, and hearing about it the next day from whoever I spoke with, about how bad he felt about that. Much worse than the reality was.

Smith: He said, "That's the last speech I'm giving."

Meijer: There's a sense of finality about that. Yeah. And already coming from California made it a much more arduous prospect than if you had chosen to stay in Washington or someplace close by. But knowing that the return was a difficult journey, anyway, and if I'm not able to return and function as I think I need to – that had to be hard for him.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction at the time of his death?

Meijer: Yes, in the sense of taking a narrow Grand Rapids view, you don't understand how hungry the country and the world are to pay tribute to someone who represents something that we took for granted. And that made it more precious.

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