

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Helen Thomas
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: Obviously, I'd love to talk to you about August of 1974, but, did you have any contact with Congressman Ford before he became vice president?

Thomas: No, not really. Only to the extent that he would come to the White House in the Nixon era, and would brief us on meetings - brief us to let us know what had happened. Yes, from that aspect, yes. But I really didn't know him.

Smith: Were you surprised when he was nominated to be vice president, or was it really, as we understand it, that basically Congress said, this is the one guy who we'll confirm?

Thomas: I can't remember whether I was surprised, but I understood that he would be part of the club, and that I think that he would do the right thing for them.

Smith: What was different about Congress in those days? Because we hear about this bipartisanship and the civility, and yet that wasn't exactly an era of good feeling – in the 60s and 70s.

Thomas: Well, I think everybody liked President Ford, or Congressman Ford, or whatever. They liked him. They didn't feel that he was venal as some of the others later became. And as much as he fought for his own party, he still wasn't mean spirited, so I think that everyone liked him, Jerry. You really did have a feeling that he was not so partisan and vindictive.

Smith: Was it a different culture on Capitol Hill in those days? Let me give you one example: in those days you had two parties that each had a liberal wing and conservative wing.

Thomas: That's true.

Smith: Which meant, presumably, that you had to – even within your own caucus – you had to have some experience in dealing with people with whom you were ideologically in disagreement. Which was good preparation.

Thomas: I think there was much more of a sense of politics as the art of compromise. You definitely had that feeling that, except for maybe the southerners on the issues of civil rights and so forth, who were really off the deep end - Bill Bole(?), and so forth. But I think definitely you had the sense of... Bipartisanship was carried to the hilt later on with Reagan and so forth. I mean, that bipartisanship-partisanship.

Smith: When did you first decide that Richard Nixon was going to have to resign?

Thomas: In October, '73. My office was sending me with Henry Kissinger for the next flare up in the Middle East, and Kissinger was going there as a mediator. And even though he denied he had any role or any plan, of course he did. We went to Israel, we went to Saudi Arabia, and so forth, and Kissinger in his usual candid, credible way, told us no, he had no plan or anything. When we left Israel all the Israel radio had the whole plan laid out, so, it caught up with him.

But it was a great opportunity to cover a story and go to the Middle East, but I told all my friends I couldn't say no to my boss to take a trip like that. But I said, I want to be here, because Nixon is going to have to resign. I wasn't so intuitive it was all laid out really. So I really didn't want to go, and then I thought: well, Kissinger has to accept the resignation under our... at least I'll be part of act. And the first thing, I got on the plane with Kissinger and I said, "Is Nixon going to resign?" He said, "What? What are you saying?" in his lovely accent. You could never mistake this man. But anyway, so I definitely had the feeling that he was finished.

Smith: It's funny, your timing is perfect because, of course, it was in October when Agnew resigned, and then came the Saturday Night Massacre. And this trip was after the Saturday Night Massacre.

Thomas: That's right.

Smith: What are your memories of the Saturday Night Massacre? Did it feel like a Constitutional crisis was enveloping the country?

- Thomas: Yes, it did. And it was a Saturday night and everybody was off to different banquets and so forth, and it struck the whole town. It was shocking. I think you have to call it trauma. It was a political, traumatic moment. Might be also moments of courage when you had people standing up against it.
- Smith: Maybe you could take a minute – for people who didn't live through Watergate, for whom it's just in a textbook, and they don't know what it was all about – can you encapsulate what the offense was or offenses that go by the name of Watergate?
- Thomas: Well, I think you had great moments of courage in terms of Cox turning down business, and then, of course, Nixon had his friends who were willing to take over the Justice Department, but you definitely felt an emptiness, a tragedy. All of these things, because it wasn't us. These things don't happen in America. I really think that it showed how bereft Nixon was, and how he was on the ropes.
- Smith: And how did he look at that time? How did he conduct himself?
- Thomas: He began to look like dead man walking. You could tell that he was very, very upset and I was with him when he had gone to the hospital. We were covering him there, and then when he came back in the Rose Garden. He had a real flare up of, what did he say...
- Smith: Wasn't he in the hospital when the tapes were revealed? Remember, one of his trips to the hospital...
- Thomas: That's when he realized that...
- Smith: That the taping system was revealed.
- Thomas: But when he came back to the Rose Garden, he said something very classic, that he wasn't going to wallow in Watergate and so forth. But we knew how upset he was and the whole family, and he said this to reporters and the cameramen, because those were the only ones in the Rose Garden. I think everyone knew that it was almost over by this time.
- Smith: And could you see that with the family's behavior at the time?

Thomas: Yes.

Smith: Did Mrs. Nixon ever say anything to indicate that she, for example, understood the seriousness of the situation.

Thomas: You could see that she knew a lot in terms of the pain of the whole thing, and resented it, of course. But also she showed that she loved her husband. We asked her questions that probably no other First Lady would answer, because she really stuck by her husband. It must have been very painful because we didn't let up on her at all. And I'll always regret that I didn't write her a note or something to say how much I admired her. She was a real human being, a great human being, and not a Plastic Pat, as they tried to send her off. I was in a dilemma of saying, well if I write a personal note to her, as a reporter, it might compromise me. But I should have done it, and I'll regret it all my life, because she was so nice. She was a wonderful lady.

Smith: We did an interview with Lucy Winchester, her social secretary, and discovered she had a marvelous sense of humor. And occasionally a ribald sense of humor. Lucy told the story about – they'd just come back from their first trip to Europe – and someone on Haldeman's staff, thinking it was the height of sophistication, had picked up in Paris an inflatable female doll – a sex toy – and brought it back. Lucy found out about and thought it would be a riot to inflate it. She told Mrs. Nixon, who thought it would be equally funny, and it turned out the President had invited the DAR over to the White House that day – upstairs to see...so Mrs. Nixon and Lucy Winchester are walking down the west hall, walking hand in hand with this blown up doll, deciding where to put it. And they finally put it in the Queen's Bedroom. Which again, is not what you'd thought of as Pat Nixon in public.

Thomas: No, she's very bright, but she also had learned in the years of politics that the quieter you are, the better off you are.

Smith: Do you think she disliked the political life?

Thomas: She disliked the pain that she went through in 1960, and then she didn't want him to run again. She played a very low-key part in '68. She was along, but that's it. Because in 1960 they ran her as Pat for First Lady, and the rejection,

or his failure to win, she felt that very personally. So she was rejected. So that was very hard for her. And after that she went into a real solitude – almost seemed to reject everything. But I ran into her once during that in between interregnum and it was in New York City and she was taking her two daughters, young daughters to a museum on a bus. She seemed to be having the time of her life – free at last from all those things. That’s why I think she really enjoyed New York and she enjoyed the freedom from...and he runs again.

Smith: Did you have a sense of what the relationship was between Nixon and Ford. Because there are all these stories that clearly indicate that Ford wasn’t his first choice for vice president. And there are stories to the effect that he regarded Ford as his insurance policy against being impeached - that they would never go ahead and get rid of him because it would mean Jerry Ford...which was a real misreading of Congress. But, does that dovetail with what your sense was of the relationship?

Thomas: I think that the Fords were never invited to the family private quarters which was shocking. I’m sorry – the Fords were never invited to the Nixon – so you didn’t feel any closeness at all. Empathy, maybe, for everybody’s suffering, but not close.

Smith: And Ford was on a tightrope. He was in this very awkward position where, on the one hand he had to be defending the president; and on the other, he couldn’t defend him to the point of losing his own credibility. Because, no one wanted to admit it, but, let’s face it, he could find himself...

Thomas: Well, he was on the road promoting Nixon, and yet at the same time getting the truth – that it wasn’t going to hold. That Nixon was going to have to go, he was getting that word assuredly. So I think he was in a dilemma.

Smith: You think he knew before the first of August, and I don’t mean the specific of the tapes or anything like that, but the historical account has always been, Haig called him at the beginning of August, told him about the smoking gun. They realized they were never going to live in the vice president’s house and all that. All of which I think is true, but do you think that someone with his

political experience and instincts and contacts, do you think that's when he really first thought he might be president? Or he might have surmised earlier?

Thomas: I think he knew. He knew enough politics to know whether you can survive the storm or not. I think he definitely knew that Nixon couldn't hold on. I'm sure.

Smith: For people who weren't around, those last days in the Nixon presidency, what was the mood like in the White House and in this city?

Thomas: It was darkness at noon. It was inevitable. As inexorable as a Greek tragedy. Nothing he could do could put Humpty-Dumpty back together again. He was holding different – his people, the PR people, were doing the best they could in every way. They were having sessions with reporters and so forth.

Smith: Really? Was he, himself, available?

Thomas: Not in that respect.

Smith: What was the message they were trying to communicate to you? That it was business as usual and he was going to just keep on being president?

Thomas: That's what his message was. He was not going to...President Clinton was asked outright whether he was going to resign when this Monica Lewinski thing came up, but no one asked Nixon that. But it was there like a dark cloud. It was, as I say, it was like going to a Greek tragedy and you know that everything was going to be doomed at the end.

Smith: For example: the tape, the smoking gun tape. Did that take the press by surprise? Was there any advance notice – any leaks, any reporting that indicated that there was, in fact, in these tapes something that might terminate the Nixon presidency?

Thomas: Well, you began to get the idea that something was terribly wrong. Nothing parsed. And the *Post*, by this time, had eighteen reporters on the story. So did the *New York Times*. It was relentless. Every day you picked up another paper and steps that showed that there was no way out. It was closing in on him.

Smith: And the night that he resigned. Do you remember when you heard that he was actually going to go? During the day, or did you know before? It was a Thursday night that he made the speech to the country, Thursday night, the 8th of August.

Thomas: I was on some sort of program in Virginia and I was rushing back for the speech. I came in through another gateway, not the usual northwest gate, but the back of the White House. I was running and I ran into President Nixon, who had come across from his office in the EOB, and he looked pretty haggard. I said, "Good luck, Mr. President." By this time I knew it was fatal. And he said to me, "If you've ever prayed before, pray for me." And then I went into the press office and then he claimed that everything was in the transcript and so forth, and it was doomsday the night before we knew.

Smith: So then you have a new president. Take us through that rollercoaster. On the morning of the 9th, when first you have Nixon's farewell, and then two hours later you have, in the same room, you reboot the country. Were you in the White House for the Nixon farewell?

Thomas: Yes. And I was in the East Room for both things. "Our long national nightmare..."

Smith: Describe those.

Thomas: I thought that it was so poignant with Nixon delivering his swansong and his wife standing next to him, and the girls, tears coming down their faces when he...and he didn't even mention Pat. Everybody noticed that. He talked about his sacred mother and so forth. So, I didn't fault him for that because how can think of everything, and there she is with you.

Smith: He said afterwards that he couldn't have gotten through it if he had mentioned Pat.

Thomas: I believe that. I think that's true. And then, of course, he quoted Teddy Roosevelt, "Pick yourself up, dust yourself off..." and a lot of presidents have quoted that, too, including this one. Dusting yourself off. But the whole front row of the staffers were crying. It was tremendous in history.

- Smith: Did you think: there has never been a day before like this in American history, and hopefully there will never another?
- Thomas: That's right. The same thing. And, of course, there had never been a day like Kennedy's assassination, and LBJ being sworn in on Air Force One. So these things do happen, and you've got to be ready for the big shock.
- Smith: The mood, I assume, was very different a couple of hours later? Obviously, it still must have been very somber, the mood in the East Room when...
- Thomas: I didn't see any jubilation or anything. But solemnity and very somber in the sense that you felt very sorry for the Nixons waving goodbye and so forth. Really realizing what they must be feeling, and then the Fords saw them to the South Lawn. I don't think you had any great sense of exuberation.
- Smith: Mrs. Ford said it was the worst day of her life, afterwards. I think on multiple levels, because they were friends, they'd been friends, but also because I don't think...
- Thomas: Ford always looked like he was going to cry. He had that kind of face that...
- Smith: And, also, I don't think she wanted to move into the White House. I don't think she wanted to be First Lady.
- Thomas: No. We went to pick them up the next day at his home and he was doing his own English muffins, and toasting it. It was the one colorful piece we had on him - makes his own breakfast.
- Smith: I think anyone knowing Mrs. Ford - he'd probably been making his own breakfast for years. I don't think he did it for your benefit.
- Thomas: It was the same routine. That's right. Everyone liked President Ford, the man. Not just a nice guy, but a regular guy. And he wasn't the new guy on the block. We had seen him so much, and we knew him. He was Jerry to most people.
- Smith: Was there a different atmosphere in the press room after that - just in terms of the relationship with the...

Thomas: Yes. We thought a big cloud had been lifted because it was darkness at noon for six months. It was sad when he left us all in – he didn't, but whatever or whoever saw to it, so that he could take his last walk around the grounds. We were locked in the press room. We couldn't come, we couldn't go, we were detained, we thought there was another coupe de tat or something.

Smith: Was that on the morning of the 9th - the morning of the departure?

Thomas: No, I'm not sure.

Smith: Tell me about Jerry terHorst. Who was he?

Thomas: He was the greatest press secretary the White House has ever known, in my White House.

Smith: For not very long though, was it?

Thomas: He was honest and he had the highest integrity when he left because there are certain things, certain press secretaries, when they leave their jobs, they go right to kiss and tell books. But their moment of greatness is not at a time when it should be which is, you can't, you're not going to do this. You're not going to say this. You're not going to tolerate something that goes against your sense of honesty and integrity. I always say in my speeches that Jerry terHorst was the best. He lasted one day almost – just a few days.

Smith: What made him the best?

Thomas: Because he resigned when his own integrity had been really assaulted, he felt. A couple of reporters, one for the *Miami News*, and I think the *New York Times*, had come to him on Friday and told him that they understood that President Ford had sent an emissary to San Clemente to pardon, to issue a pardon for President Nixon. Well, Jerry went to Phil Buchen, who was counsel, and Buchen denied it, and I guess he was told to keep it totally secret. Anyway, so Jerry came out and told the reporters, "Nothing to it." Didn't say preposterous as they always used to say, but something to that.

And then, I guess, the next day, it was Saturday and he was told the whole thing and told the truth, and he decided to resign. But he felt, personally, that

he had lied to reporters and that just absolutely went against the grain. But he stayed in office until that Sunday, but he quit by the end of the day. And I remember that Sunday, I was wire service so you're always on the body watch, and President Ford decided to go to church – St. John's across Lafayette Park at eight o'clock mass or service. So we usually go into the church when he's in, but this time we didn't and we were waiting outside and President Ford came out of the church and I said, "Mr. President, what are you doing for the rest of the day?" Because we wanted to go home and sleep. And he said, "Well, I'm going to have an announcement pretty soon." So the AP man and I raced across Lafayette Park and went toward the press room in the White House and told, I can't even remember saying it, but I was told that I told my office that President Nixon was going to resign.

Smith: Was going to be pardoned?

Thomas: Was going to be pardoned, yeah, I'm sorry. There was something in Ford's voice and whatever. And I said, "It's not official or anything else, but I'm saying this." So, sure enough, in an hour or so, around ten o'clock I think it was, we went into the Oval Office as a pool of reporters and President Ford announced the pardon. Full and complete and whatever the wording was, pardon of Nixon. Well, you know we ran out of the press office, but he didn't have TV on. They just brought in the still photographers, which was – I don't blame them in that respect. Of course a lot of America would have been sleeping at that time. But anyway, it was...

Smith: And what was the reaction?

Thomas: My reaction?

Smith: And those around you. Yours and the country's.

Thomas: I wasn't too shocked.

Smith: Did the timing surprise you?

Thomas: Yes, the timing did, because I thought one month – because it indicated a deal. I mean, you definitely had this feeling that Nixon was given a pass. And I'm sure he was and we weren't aware, but I was positive that the family had

been calling – the Nixon family had been calling President Ford. And Nixon was also very, very worried. We understood that he was maybe having to go to district jail or something, and it was a horrifying thought. So, I think that a lot in the country didn't agree with the pardon at all. It isn't that they wanted revenge, it's just that I think they felt that an ordinary, so-called, criminal would have gotten less.

Smith: What do you say to the argument that, say Ford hadn't pardoned Nixon, and – well, you had to have been there because he talked about the first press conference. I think it was the 28th of August – it was right at the end of August, and he went in there, I think maybe naively, because he could be naïve sometimes. Didn't he have this, almost sense of, innocence about him.

Thomas: You always felt he was innocent of everything. And you always felt that his staff were the ones that were more diabolical.

Smith: But he went into this press conference believing that people would want to talk about inflation and the economy and the Middle East, and that's not what you wanted to talk about, was it?

Thomas: No.

Smith: What did you want to talk about?

Thomas: And he didn't want to tell the truth, that he felt sorry for Nixon. I think that was it.

Smith: His recollection of that press conference was that it was taken up with questions about Richard Nixon. Nixon's papers, and Nixon's...

Thomas: Absolutely. We were totally dominated by it. I asked him whether he was going to go the judicial route, or whether he was going to pardon him. And I got this very fuzzy answer.

Smith: He left that press conference angry. And I think it was anger partly at the press corps for obsessing about Nixon, and maybe a little bit of anger directed at himself for naively believing that it wouldn't be about Nixon.

Thomas: That it wouldn't be, yeah.

Smith: But, that said. If he hadn't pardoned Nixon, the other side of the coin is, that preoccupation would have continued. The country's obsession with Nixon and supposedly Jaworski was telling him that it could be up to two years before a trial began, assuming you could get a fair trial in the District of Columbia, etc., etc.

In retrospect, do you think the pardon was necessary? Lots of people, obviously changed their mind from their initial reaction. What would have been the consequences of not pardoning Nixon, of letting the legal process play itself out?

Thomas: I think it would have hung over the White House, no question about it. And I didn't agree with the pardon at the time, but time is a great healer. I think everybody softens their attitude in terms of, was it right or was it wrong? Life goes on and you pass on. I thought that he moved too fast and he left a question mark in the minds of most of the public that the fix was in. That there was a deal, which he had to deny often, early and often.

Smith: You know when he said when the Kennedy Library gave him the Profiles in Courage Award, he said, after – he'd been answering that question for twenty-five years. He said, "No one asked the question anymore." Because it was the Kennedy's, in effect, putting the seal of approval on what he had done. It just transformed the atmosphere.

Thomas: We never got the whole truth. The American people never get the truth. Every commission that has investigated, like the Kennedy assassination, everything else – the people involved in these commissions, they go a certain point, they learn a certain truth and they refuse to make it public. Certainly on 9/11, I mean there are so many questions. The president was warned, almost to the moment, in the sense of who's going to do 9/11 and he didn't act on anything. And everything else. And Oswald.

Smith: Did you ever talk with Ford about the Warren Commission?

Thomas: No, and I wish I had. I wish I had because I think that nobody wanted to step up to the plate. Because I think maybe they think they are saving the country

– I don't think that. I think, to leave all these question marks in history, especially when they come close to the truth and they step away...

Smith: What would be an alternative theory that you think at least is plausible? Do you think the Cuban connection, or the Mafia connection, or some combination of the two?

Thomas: Either of those, but they should have laid it on the line. I think that history is painful, but I think that we should not be denied. Because that's always my question: "why?"

Smith: So you think that we, even now, don't have the full story of what happened leading up to the Kennedy assassination?

Thomas: I don't think we have the full story at all. I think Oswald did it, but I think there were forces...for example: Ruby. Why would Ruby be tipped off that Oswald was going to come through the police library in Dallas, the exact timing, have a loaded gun, sandwiches for the police – bribing them with a sandwich – and shoot him. They say the alleged excuse was he felt sorry for Jackie. Give me a break! He was in custody, going in for his first major interrogation. No, doesn't parse. Not that anything makes sense.

Smith: Speaking of assassination attempts, of course there were two on President Ford. Were you present for either of those? The two assassination attempts on Ford in California?

Thomas: I was there on one.

Smith: The first one was in Sacramento, at the state capital.

Thomas: I wasn't in Sacramento.

Smith: And then in San Francisco.

Thomas: Yeah, San Francisco. That was shocking. I thought nobody would want to assassinate President Ford. He's a nice guy, he hadn't hurt anybody. No, it was a shock. These were real aberrations – it's like Hinkley – just out of the blue, for no reason that makes sense. No logic. It wasn't revenge or anything that you could really...

- Smith: Was there a different mood? When the Nixons left the White House, was there just a different mood around the place?
- Thomas: Oh, yes, definitely. A big sigh of relief because we had been living with this day to day and there was a lot of obvious suffering.
- Smith: Was it more open, or relaxing, relatively speaking? How was it different? Ford was clearly someone comfortable with himself, so there wasn't this melodrama surrounding.
- Thomas: Yeah, we were more comfortable with Ford, obviously. Nixon was not a people person, except if he was addressing a crowd of three thousand. But one on one he was, "Do you like my shoes?" "Do you like my cufflinks?" Anything for no small talk.
- Smith: Or very small talk.
- Thomas: It seemed so awkward. I think he was very reserved, very shy in a way.
- Smith: Remember, he famously described himself as an introvert in an extrovert's profession.
- Thomas: Is that right?
- Smith: Which suggests self-knowledge.
- Thomas: That's right. No, he had those moments when you were never quite sure...
- Smith: And tell me about Mrs. Ford. Did you know she had a problem when she was in the White House?
- Thomas: No, I didn't know of any problem on drugs or alcohol or anything. I thought she was fabulous. Honest.
- Smith: Tell me about her.
- Thomas: Well, it's a question of what can you say after you say you're sorry? She was not afraid of the truth and I think she believed that if you told the truth, people would certainly accept it, and not pre-judge or judge. She called them as she

saw them. I loved her for that aspect. You asked her a question, she gave you the answer. It was fabulous.

Smith: But controversial in some quarters.

Thomas: She wasn't afraid to say she had been divorced, or seeing a psychiatrist, it was just normal life. And yet, for every other First Lady, it was...

A couple of reporters and I were at a tea with Mrs. Nixon and they were passing around sherry, and we saw Mrs. Nixon reach for the sherry, and then pull back. We said, "Take it, we won't write about it." It was one of those – in those days women – it was different. Betty Ford wasn't afraid of anything. Or at least you had this impression. She was so straight and honest. Ask her a question, she gave you an answer.

Smith: Of course, the famous *Sixty Minutes* interview got her in all sorts of hot water.

Thomas: I wouldn't be a bit surprised.

Smith: What if Susan had an affair, talked about marijuana. Now, in the White House, I assume, I've been told, that all the political staff sort of gasped. That they saw her at that point as a real political detriment, and it was only later, to their astonishment, that the polls came in and discovered that, except for some conservative Republicans who were probably going to vote for Reagan, anyway, that she was an asset.

Thomas: Very candid. But, I think Ford told her, "You lost me 150,000 votes."

Smith: But it didn't shut her up, did it?

Thomas: She gave an honest answer, I wouldn't be a bit surprised what she said.

Smith: Did you see much of her while they were in the White House – did she have much contact with the press?

Thomas: We did. We were allowed to cover things and she was always very kind.

Smith: Did she seem happy to you?

- Thomas: Yes. Not jumping up and down, but I think she definitely felt at home and nothing went to her head. She took us all in stride. I'm relating to how she dealt with the press.
- Smith: And the kids?
- Thomas: They were normal. They were teenage, and I'm sure they gave their family some moments – parents, I mean.
- Smith: Vietnam and the fall of Saigon. You are in the middle of that story. Tell me about the mood. First of all, there apparently was a real raging debate going on in the Oval Office about how frank we should be in acknowledging that this is the end. What is your recollection of the days surrounding it?
- Thomas: My recollection is being at Andrews Air Force Base – there's a big picture of that. We were running after Ford, and he didn't want to say. So we were trying to get a quote from him on the fall of Saigon and so forth. I said, "Why is he running away. Why doesn't he just stand here and say, "Yes, it's all over. Hurray."
- Smith: I've seen the film, there's a smile on his face. It is sort of almost a cat and mouse.
- Thomas: Yeah, that's true, but also, I think that America doesn't lose anything. And that was not a big victory, it was a total defeat and it left a lot of bad feelings, I think. It had Reagan and everyone calling it a noble cause every five minutes. I said, what noble cause? It certainly was not a noble cause and we were defeated. So the Vietnam syndrome of trying to get rid of...so I thought that President Ford felt that it was not a great honor for the country.
- Smith: He said it was the most humiliating experience of his life – to be in the Oval Office and watch.
- Thomas: He'd been in the Navy and so forth, and I think you have a different sense about what you fight for.
- Smith: What was his historical role? Was it to clean up the messes left by his predecessors?

- Thomas: I think there was a lot in the past that you had to get rid of, and there was no formula for doing it. How he faced this, what do you? How do you tell the American people it's over, but it's not a big raving victory. So I think there were touchy moments. No question. And on the resignation, the pardon, the same thing. He couldn't say, "I felt sorry President Nixon." You can't say that.
- Smith: Plus, let's face it, he had a rough economy. It was turning around by the time he left and I think one of the things he always regretted was, obviously, and one regret they don't get a second term.
- Thomas: He had a lot of touchy moments, he really did.
- Smith: Do you think the pardon, in the end, is what cost him the re-election? Or the economy?
- Thomas: I think the pardon hurt him a lot. Because, as I say, people thought – I don't know, I can't speak, I shouldn't say people thought – but I do say that a lot of people thought that a deal was made. And that rubs you the wrong way, even if it was a sympathetic move. Things were not going well. I think that President Ford made a big mistake when he said he was going to do the same thing that Nixon had done in terms of the domestic policy and everything else. And people said, "What is this?"
- Smith: Of course, eventually, he got himself a cabinet of his own with some very good people. A lot of people look at that cabinet, once it was remade, and they say, if nothing else, here's a guy who is secure enough in himself to surround himself with some high power egos and intellects.
- Thomas: That's true. But I don't think people really knew him. He didn't have time enough, and he should have had Jerry terHorst and not some of the successors. I don't think they understood him, but Jerry did. And he would have helped him help everybody. He'd been a newsman twenty-nine years for Michigan and Washington, and so would have known how to handle things. I think that constant Ford falling...

Smith: The story that no one ever knew. When he fell down those steps in Vienna, in the rain, he was holding the umbrella for Mrs. Ford and he slipped and everything, and falls. And the people around him, the sycophants, were all berating the press and the photographers for taking the picture. And he said, "Of course they took the picture. If they hadn't they would have lost their job."

Thomas: That shows you how honest a man he is. Very good.

Smith: I don't think Lyndon Johnson would have said that.

Thomas: No.

Smith: You saw him after he left office. You saw him on a number of occasions. I know you were out at a conference that we did out in Ann Arbor.

Thomas: Yes, he was very nice. We were like old friends, then. In fact, I saw him at the convention before he collapsed and he gave me a big hug and he seemed in good spirits and seemed to be fine.

Smith: He actually liked reporters.

Thomas: Because he teased them a lot, too. I think he did like reporters. Because we liked him – he knew that. There was a feedback there. You couldn't dislike President Ford.

Smith: It is no accident there was a journalist among the eulogists at the cathedral. It was originally going to be Hugh Sidey and then he died. So it was Tom Brokaw.

Thomas: Oh, that's how it happened.

Smith: Yeah. Were you surprised at all by the reaction – that there was as much reaction when he died. You'd see these streets lined with a lot of young people who weren't even alive when he was in the White House.

Thomas: I think there was definitely a sense of loss because he behaved – he didn't overstep the line in any way and he was very respectful, and I remember once

calling him about President Bush, because I was very unhappy with the moves that he was making.

Smith: Bush '43? The current President Bush?

Thomas: Bush '43, yes. Especially the curbing of civil rights and torture, secret prisons. Well, I called President Ford, but it wasn't on that subject, except that I got into it. And he got very angry with me because he knew I was trying to lead him down the garden path, you know. He felt very personally angry that I would even touch on such subjects and try to diminish him in the eyes of President Bush. So our encounter was not very happy, but I thought I would be very remiss if I didn't question him on these moves – the things that were happening to the country.

Smith: Do you think it was difficult for him having Rumsfeld and Cheney and O'Neill – his people?

Thomas: They were his people, but he loved them. He really thought they were stalwart and just very good. Cheney had his respect and so forth. I think that they were different then. It's unbelievable. Cheney, very, very quiet. He'd move around – you never had any sense about him at all until he became a Congressman and voted against Head Start six times. I thought, "Who is this man? I can't believe it." And then of course, when he went into the White House, he was really diabolical. Operated behind the scenes. He was right hand in glove with the neo-conservatives on all things.

Smith: And Gerald Ford was no neo-conservative.

Thomas: No, not at all. And he certainly was a man you could deal with in a bipartisan way and many things. I think he put the country first.

Smith: That's the perfect note on which to end.

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