Smith: How did your paths first cross with Gerald Ford?

Baab: My first contact with President Ford began in June of 1988, which I think would have been just prior to his 75th birthday. And the occasion was the annual meeting for the Board of Trustees of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation, and it was the start for me – I was en route to nearly twenty years of service as the treasurer of the Foundation. So that’s how I got my start.

Smith: Presumably you are uniquely qualified to testify to the fact to whatever else changed, Gerald Ford remained very much a fiscal conservative.

Baab: Oh, that’s true. When I took over as the treasurer I had the background of my predecessor telling me that sitting in on all the meetings of investments for the Foundation, it was very much bonds. He didn’t want to get into stocks, very risky. There was a very high percentage of bonds versus stocks when the Foundation first started. So he was conservative in his investments, but he was also conservative in his spending. For years we have operated with a spending policy that says we will not spend beyond these parameters, and from time to time those perimeters get changed. But President Ford was always very much involved with setting those perimeters and always wanted to hear that we are living within the limits that we had previously set up as a board.

Smith: Do you think maybe being a child of the Depression had something to do with shaping his fiscal outlook?

Baab: I wouldn’t be surprised. I think if I had lived through it, it would have shaped me. I’ve heard stories from fathers and fathers-in-law of what it was like. And just hearing that secondhand, I think it would be very much an influence.
Smith: And I think it is also safe to say that notwithstanding that attitude, or maybe reflecting that, no one really then had an idea of having an endowment. It started off with a very modest endowment.

Baab: It was very modest. It was under five million dollars. It might have been a million or something. It really wasn’t much at all. I don’t think the start of the Foundation, from what I understand, was ever conceived in terms of what it is today. I think it was a learning process.

Smith: Was he part of that learning process?

Baab: Oh, yes. President Ford – my contact, as I said earlier, started at age 75, but I will tell you that all my contacts with him in public meetings, whether it’s the Foundation, Board of Trustees, or the Investment Committee, or one on one conversations dealing with my treasurer’s reports, I always found him to be very much…

Smith: Was he open to new ideas? Within these core convictions that he had, did his attitude evolve in terms of, for example, what the Foundation would do, what it would need.

Baab: The point I was going to make is that even though over that span of time, he had those core convictions. What impressed me the most was how alert he stayed. That’s the point I was going to make - that you can have these core convictions, and they led him. He had his values, he had his core convictions, but the point that surprised me is that I met him at age 75, and he was bright, sharp, well into his eighties.

Smith: Inquisitive.

Baab: Yes.

Smith: I remember sitting at a table and you put a column of figures in front of him, and it’s as if the years peeled away and he was back on the House Appropriations Committee. A column of numbers jumped off the page.

Baab: We would go over the treasurer’s reports with questions. Invariably, he had good questions. I was surprised at the depth of those questions. There are
people who probably have keener minds with financial backgrounds, maybe than he did, but I was also surprised when I’d give him a report that he would get right to the heart of the questions that I thought needed to be asked. He didn’t have wasteful questions; they were very thoughtful; showed a very strong command of the material.

Smith: He also did his homework.

Baab: He did his homework.

Smith: I don’t know what prompted it, maybe it was with you, but he was asking about Morningstar. He was sort of trying to get some comparative opinions about investment opportunities and mutual funds and so forth and so on. And one sensed that he was very comfortable talking about money.

Baab: Oh, yes.

Smith: I suppose he’d been doing it for most of his professional life.

Baab: Yeah. I think the fact, what you said earlier, the work on the Appropriations bills and the federal budget, he was comfortable with numbers. He didn’t have a fear of asking a dumb question. Some people might have that fear, especially when they are in a room of experts, maybe so-called experts. They might be reluctant, they might not understand something, but they don’t want to ask it for fear that they might look dumb or don’t understand it. He never had that fear. He was very confident.

Smith: That goes to the notion of someone totally comfortable in their own skin.
How did he change over the fifteen years?

Baab: Fifteen or eighteen years that I worked with him? Interestingly, I found him to be the same at the end of that period as I did at the beginning. And I know that there are few people at his advanced age that could have a command of what he did. I was so impressed with that. It wasn’t just the financial part. You would appreciate this: when we went to the annual board of trustees meeting, typically in Washington, we would begin before the executive committee and full board meeting later in the afternoon, we’d start with a luncheon at the
National Press Club. And we’d present the Foundation’s Journalisms prizes to some very deserving recipients. That would be done.

Then President Ford would be asked to make some brief comments, and then he would open the lectern and just say, “Okay, questions. What questions would you like to ask?” And I was always impressed that he could handle those questions, not only at age 75, but when he was 85 and 87, 88, he had not lost the ability to keep up with current events. He was able to handle the questions regardless of sensitivity. I was impressed that – I can’t recall ever, Richard – a time when he refused to answer a question. Either because he didn’t know the material, wasn’t current on it, or for some other reasons – too sensitive to talk about. He didn’t duck a question. He typically would hear the question, pause a couple seconds just to gather his thoughts, and he’d come out with the answer. And I can remember when he did that how I would sit there and listen to some of those questions and certainly I didn’t have his perspective of what all he had been through, but he impressed the daylights out of me that, here he was, that elderly in his life and still able to talk about any subject the press brought up.

Smith: It’s curious you say that because one of the things he really worked at, and I think prided himself on, was keeping abreast of current events. You’d get on a plane and everyone knew you didn’t bother him until he’d read all of his newspapers. And all of his newspapers, and there were several that he read every day. That was part of this self-education, maybe keeping young, but keeping current, at least.

Baab: I had the privilege with my wife to attend a dinner at his home one evening.

Smith: In Rancho Mirage?

Baab: Yes, Rancho Mirage. And I know that’s not unique to me, many others have done that, but we sat there, the six of us – two couples plus the Fords, and just talked about world events. Talked about what’s going on. No matter what remote part of the world, he was on top of it. And you could tell as he related things that he was in touch with the leaders of these countries. Yet, it wasn’t just, “I read this in the newspaper.” But he had ongoing contact with people
who he had met and people would call him to bounce things off of him. They considered him a source. I thought that was really insightful.

Smith: That’s interesting. Did you ever see him at a football game?

Baab: No, did not do that.

Smith: Or watching a football game?

Baab: No, I never had that privilege; I would liked to have done that. One of the things that first made us hit it off with each other was when he found out I was a University of Michigan grad. I’ve got the rings and the M watches and all that stuff. And that was always something, no matter what we were talking about; we always had that to talk about. It was something he had great joy and pleasure in talking about.

Smith: That’s interesting. And I felt that found expression in splitting this facility – the fact that he had dual obligations, in a sense. This was home and that was a second home.

Baab: Yeah. He loved to come back and go to football games when he could. And he loved to watch it on TV and talk to the people.

Smith: We had a great conversation with Lloyd Carr the other day, in which he described the pep talks that he would give every year – often before the Ohio game, if he could arrange it.

This place – tell me a little bit more, sort of institutionally – how you would describe the evolution, both of the Foundation and its mission over the twenty years that you were involved. How did he, first of all, set the tone or define the mission?

Baab: He wanted the museum and the library both to be something that was living. He didn’t want it to be a monument to himself. That was not said for effect. That was [said] in small groups. He would just make it clear, “I don’t want that. I want this to be of education to the people who will come to see it.” And anytime we talked about doing something, that was a key thing guiding him in his decision making. Will this edify the presidency and will it edify
democracy and the presidency and what all goes on in this country? A great love for the country, doing what’s right for the country – he wanted all of that to come through, not what he, as an individual, did to make it great. He obviously has a great legacy of things he helped to make. But there was no personal aggrandizement, if I can say that.

Smith: Although you weren’t probably part of the process then, maybe a little distance is even more valuable – Fred offered land outside of downtown and the decision, I think, made with the President’s strong involvement was to put it downtown. And it was almost a leap of faith at the time to put it here. Is it a catalyst for what’s happened since?

Baab: Was it a part of it? Oh, absolutely. How many cities in America can claim to have a presidential museum? That’s very distinctive. There are fewer of those, I’m sure, that there are professional sports teams which so many organizations like to point to – well, this city has this professional sports team – how does that compare to what this country is all about? I know it’s a popular thing, but Grand Rapids isn’t large enough to support a professional sports team. But to have a presidential museum, I think is something very unique, very special. Something you can be proud of when you come to Grand Rapids, and to Ann Arbor for the university to have that presidential library.

Smith: Those who knew him knew he spent a lifetime, mostly successfully, controlling a temper. Did you ever see his temper?

Baab: In all candor, I have heard about his temper, but in all honesty, I never saw it once. Sometimes there would be a situation in a meeting and I would say, “Oh I wonder if this will be the tip of iceberg. I’ll start to see it here.” I never saw it. Doesn’t mean it wasn’t there, based on what other people tell me. But I cannot say that I ever saw it firsthand.

Smith: I assume you must have been in the meeting, part of the discussion - because I know there was some disagreement - over the idea of bringing the staircase from the embassy here.

Baab: Yes. I was not involved in that meeting. I’d be happy to share that with you, but no, I was not a part of that.
Smith: Okay. Did you see his sense of humor?

Baab: Oh, yes, I did. In fact, I thought I saw probably a greater sense of humor from him say, even at the National Press Club deliveries because, he was not a sitting president anymore and more relaxed about it. Probably don’t have to be as concerned that tomorrow’s headlines in the Washington paper and New York Times is going to say, “President Ford said the following.” Not as high a profile. So he could laugh, I thought, easier probably than when he was president. He could relax more. I always found he was willing to poke fun at himself; a lot of people can’t do that. That, to me, always elevates people when they can poke fun at themselves.

Smith: Did you hear him talk about Ronald Reagan or Jimmy Carter or any of his contemporaries?

Baab: No. I can’t say. I know a lot of what’s been written, but I never heard him say, if there was a discussion brought up for instance when we had the re-dedication here of the museum. At the exhibits we had President Carter here for that, and other dignitaries. I only remember positive comments from him. And I suspect some of that – probably you know this better than I do – I suspect that after you get out of office, things look different. You put them more in perspective and appreciate maybe why an adversary did what he or she did.

Smith: And my sense is that he was a very positive person, generally. One thing I noticed whenever I was around him - most pols love to gossip - he didn’t gossip. In fact, it was interesting, I noticed a couple of times when people were doing that, he would subtly change the topic of conversation. He wasn’t speculating about other people or their motives or their misfortunes. It wasn’t part of him.

Baab: I never saw that part of him.

Smith: What does it say that year after year after year that people would come as they do and volunteer their services as they did? What is it about the man himself and what he inspired?
Baab: Well, I can tell you personally, it was a sense of great pride to be asked to be treasurer, and I told him that, “I assure you that I will do all I can as treasurer of the museum and the library. I won’t ever cause you to be embarrassed. I want you do to take comfort in the knowledge that we will make sure that we’re doing the right things, we won’t be hiding things, it will all be out in the open and there will be no ______________.” And he appreciated that. That’s what’s I’m about and I didn’t say it to make him pleased, I just wanted him to understand where I was coming from – that I was going to be a protective watch dog to be sure nothing was happening that would put him in a bad light and his legacy. And he was appreciative of that. And the reason I said that and felt that was, I knew people regarded him as a figure of high integrity. That word might even be considered overused by some people. We’ve heard the integrity a bazillion times – but it fits. And to not use it, you’d have to create a new word, because it’s really what’s he was about.

Smith: And I’ve often thought, in some ways, as a kind of decency is almost used as a condescending term.

Baab: Yeah.

Smith: As if it was sort of a substitute for sophistication.

Baab: If you weren’t up here on some - I don’t know if it would be an intellectual level, or what someone might be considering a high thing - to admire, decency doesn’t seem to rate up there as high with people. And it should.

Smith: Right. What is it about Grand Rapids, do you think, that defined him, or that he took with him wherever he went? What is it about this community that’s distinguishing?

Baab: I think the community reinforces the hard work ethic, which he had. You didn’t get to places of accomplishment by doing things half heartedly, cheating your way to get there, finding ways to achieve what you want without just doing it through hard work. I think the community reflects that and he came out of that type of an environment.
Smith: One of the meetings in the later years, I think, maybe was the next to last, or maybe it was the last one, I’m not sure – was held out in Rancho Mirage. The annual meeting was actually out there to accommodate them – or was it in Vail?

Baab: That was before me, I think.

Smith: No, this was toward the very end.

Baab: Okay.

Smith: It may have been the last one, where Mrs. Ford received the Ford prize and he announced, tongue in cheek, that he was Deep Throat. This was when all the revelations were coming.

Baab: In Rancho Mirage – oh I thought you were talking about Colorado.

Smith: Yeah. Do you remember that?

Baab: Oh, yes. That I remember.

Smith: And when he got up and announced that he was Deep Throat, did it take people a moment to realize it was a joke?

Baab: I recognized right away that it was humor. That was a great meeting.

Smith: What about that night stands out in your memory? Did you have a sense that it might be the last?

Baab: Yeah, there was that possibility. I can’t remember what the presentation was, but there was a presentation near the end of the meeting and it involved President Ford. And I thought that physically he might be winding down to a point where it could be. I started to sense that. As high accolades as I gave earlier to his tremendous memory and all, in the last year or two I finally started to see this happen. But you’re right, the Rancho Mirage meeting – there was an indication that there could be.

Smith: Were you here for his 90th birthday?

Baab: Yes.
Smith: What was that like? The whole community sort of took part?

Baab: Yes.

Smith: It was a big event.

Baab: Yes. All the things to do with President Ford here, even his funeral, everything – I think people have been surprised at the turnout that a lot of people who didn’t know him, know about him, and it wasn’t just a bunch of old cronies that knew him that turned out. There were people with no known previous connection with him that turned out for him.

Smith: That’s interesting. Were you surprised by the outpouring at the time of his death? Not only here, but nationwide – in terms of the media coverage and the response that it seemed to generate?

Baab: Yeah, I was probably proportionately even more surprised here because we’re smaller. And I figure that in a place like Washington, it’s the thing to do. You do that sort of thing and people turn out because it’s the thing to do. Whereas here people didn’t turn out because it was the thing to do, it was an expression of real appreciation and love for the man. So much was written. People who were interviewed for comments about him; of what he had done for them personally. Personal stories about what he’d done. And you’d say, man, that guy’s too busy, how did he find time to do all of that? I know when my own father died there was an obituary in the paper – no big deal. But I got a letter, not a sympathy card, but I got a wonderful letter from President Ford expressing his sympathy on what had happened, and it was in own words, it wasn’t Hallmark giving him the words. He had his own words of what he wanted to say about that and how important fathers are.

Smith: And he would have a unique perspective.

Baab: Yes, he would.

Smith: Good and bad.

Baab: Good and bad. The first two years weren’t so good, but he had great perspective after that.
Smith:  Did you hear him talk about his early days or family situation?

Baab:  No, I didn’t hear him do that. But that kind of thing he did for me, I know he did for other people. I got many letters from him over the years, thanking me for things I had done that I just felt like I had done in the course of my duty, so to speak. But he was a grateful man, very grateful.

Smith:  Was that meeting out in Rancho Mirage, was that the last time you saw him?

Baab:  I don’t believe so. I’m fuzzy as to when it was, but I don’t think that was. I’d have to check on it.

Smith:  In terms of discussing investment policy or finances generally, how many people were involved. Was this the executive committee debating the policy?

Baab:  We had some of the very well-known names of Grand Rapids sitting in there on the investment committee giving advice. These are some of the real pillars of the community here, and they were giving advice when we were pushing to move into greater investment in stocks as opposed to bonds, and President Ford was resistant to that. It took some of these stalwarts in the community to give their own experiences from their own foundations to say well, here, we’ve done this and here’s what our results have been.

Smith:  And was Fred Meijer the chief proponent, at least initially of taking a more…

Baab:  Aggressive stance in that investment policy, yes. Yes, he was.

Smith:  And the President was persuaded? Or reluctantly persuaded?

Baab:  Never to the point of as high a percentage as what these gentlemen and ladies would have liked. They would have liked more. One of the things about President Ford that always impressed me was that he was a good listener. At least when I was around him, he listened well. And so he would listen to these people, but he wasn’t a pushover, not a pushover at all. He listened, digested it, but in the end he didn’t go as far as they wanted to go, to his credit. It could have been easy for him to say, “Well, you are all into this more than I am with your corporations.” He still went by his own personal feelings.
Yeah, he was a good listener. I think you can see that when you see what he surrounded himself with in the Cabinet and the White House staff. If you look at what happened to those people after his administration disbanded and what those people went on to do, you have to be a good listener to put people in who’ve got minds of their own, who want to do things - to be able to put them into those positions of responsibility and not be threatened.

Smith: No, it’s a good point. Did you have any contact, or more than passing contact, with Mrs. Ford?

Baab: Not nearly as much. But my contact with her, whether it was sitting with her at a luncheon table or dinner table, whether it was a public event dinner table or at her home, she was extremely gracious; very down to earth. Those people didn’t have a bone in their body that pushed their own aggrandizement. They were very humble.

Smith: She has a sense of humor.

Baab: Yes.

Smith: Which I think could needle him at times, and he enjoyed being needled. It was that kind of comfortable back and forth. How do you think he should be remembered?

Baab: A great leader, confident in who he was, willing to do what was right for the country, far above anything that had an impact on him. The presidential pardon of Nixon speaks volumes – I can’t say anymore that would add to that as an indication of doing what was right for the country. That’s where his motivation would lie, and I don’t think he was concerned about his legacy and what people would say that would make him rank number one in people’s polls of the all-time greatest presidents. I think it was motivated by “When it’s done, did I do my best to be sure this country was taken care of the way it should, given what all was going on?” I think that was his motivation.

Smith: Anything else come to mind?

Baab: A very memorable time. September 11, 2001 is a date in history that all Americans will remember. They know it’s one of those few dates that people
remember where they were, what they were doing. Tragic events unfolded that day and it was meaningful to me because of the reasons that everyone else had. I was no less surprised than everybody else at the shock of what happened. But it’s meaningful to me in another way because on September 11, 2001, I had a meeting scheduled with President Ford to talk about the financial statements of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation. And we had our set up time. This was not unusual, we did this from time to time as it time pertaining to things financial.

Smith: Was that in Vail?

Baab: No, it was going to be a telephone conversation. It was a telephone conversation and so as the events of that day unfolded in that morning and we all became aware of just what an incredible event this was that was unfolding here, I started thinking, “My meeting to discuss the financial statements of the Foundation pales in comparison to what’s going on.” And I started thinking, “Surely he isn’t expecting me to call at our previously arranged time.” And so I thought, well, I’ll just run it by somebody else. So I called Marty Allen, the chairman of the Foundation and long time friend of President Ford, as you know, and I said, “Marty, here’s what I’m thinking,” and he listened to me and he says, “Yeah, John, I see where you are coming from. You’re probably right. If you don’t call him he won’t be surprised, he might be relieved.” And so I let it go.

At the time the telephone conversation was to take place and I didn’t appear, the phone rang shortly thereafter from Penny Circle, from President Ford’s office, asking, “Why didn’t you get on the phone? President Ford is wondering what happened?” And I said, “Oh, surely his plate was full.” She says, “Yeah, that’s true, but I think he wants to talk to you.” I said, “Even now?” “Yes.” So I was put through to President Ford and I apologized. I said, “I figured you would be inundated by the media for your reaction to the events of the day.” And he says, “Oh, John, you are absolutely right. The phone has been ringing off the hook. Reporters are at the door, the cameramen, they all are here.”
But then he added, “John, life goes on. Life should not come to a paralyzing standstill because of terrorists. That’s exactly what they wanted to happen.” And he says, “I will not give in to them and that sort of thinking. We carry on our lives. We don’t stop paralyzed.” And then he added, shortly thereafter, something to the effect that “Sadly, John, I firmly believe this is not the end of this. Getting through this event, figuring it all out, sorting it, punishing the guilty parties, we are going to face terrorism like this for a long time.” And that was his parting comment on that subject. And then he said, “Let’s get on with the business at hand,” and we proceeded to go into the usual discussion of the financial statements. But I was impressed, surprised, that he felt compelled to not let that stop him from doing what he was going to do that day.

Smith: That’s a great story.

Baab: Another thing that pointed out President Ford’s concern for people and showing his appreciation, a very appreciative man - when I retired from my professional career, my firm held a retirement dinner to honor the occasion. And at the end of the festivities that evening, I was just extremely surprised that a video started showing and it was President Ford making some very kind remarks about his appreciation for what all I had done for the Foundation as the treasurer and serving on the executive committee. And I was just blown away that he would do that. It was very humbling to think that he took that kind of time. But I later found out that he just didn’t do like somebody came to his home; he drove down to a recording studio and he did this video and it wasn’t to his liking. They did it, I think, three times in order to get it right. And that was important to him to do what was right.

Smith: That’s interesting, do you remember roughly when that would have been?

Baab: ’98.

Smith: Time was good to him. Poor Lyndon Johnson died the day before the Vietnam Peace Agreement was announced. President Ford lived long enough to see people come around on the pardon, and the Profiles in Courage Award.
Baab: The Profiles in Courage Award was a tremendous tribute to him. I’m sure he felt tremendously relieved that history had already started to come around and see him in the light that he had hoped he’d been seen in. Although he was a modest guy, he sort of felt like the record needs to be straight as to why we did this.

Smith: And the imprimatur of the Kennedy’s lent it a kind of legitimacy. He said, “For twenty years, everywhere I go, people have asked the same questions.” After he got that award, he said, “They don’t the questions anymore.”

Baab: Once Ted Kennedy said what he had to say – end of subject.

Smith: Yeah. It’s amazing. Well, thank you again.
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