

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
John Carlson
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Carlson: Over the years, I've had the opportunity and the privilege to work with some of the most fascinating and dynamic people in the world. And without a doubt, the person who has impressed me most in all those years was Gerald R. Ford. He was a wonderful, gracious, humble, warm human being. I feel so fortunate to be a small, small part of the Ford administration; a guy like me to be associating with a president, especially Gerald Ford. I had the opportunity to get to know him, of course, on a public basis in meetings and so forth, but I felt very fortunate that I got to know him also, you might say, behind the scenes. I can go into a few of those things.

Smith: Sure.

Carlson: It was really special. But, first of all, every day, we would meet with the President about 10 o'clock every morning; Dick Cheney, Ron Nessen, the press secretary, and we would update the President on what issues were coming up that day. I would get to the White House about 6:15 in the morning and Helen Thomas would arrive about 6:30. Others would come in around 7:00 or so and I would mingle through the pressroom and talk to people and sit down and chat and have coffee.

Smith: So, let's establish, you were on the press staff.

Carlson: I was deputy press secretary.

Smith: Deputy press secretary working under Nessen.

Carlson: Right. And so I would try to get a feel of what their hot button was that day, what was of interest to them, what kind of questions they were to be asking at the press briefing and so forth. So we met with the President at 10 o'clock. He would've already had his NSC briefing, his National Security briefing, but we'd just mention to him, "Today we're going to announce this," "We're going to mention this," and so forth. Once in awhile, we'd ask him for

guidance, but usually we'd be advising him about what was going on in the press that day. And the enjoyable times when that briefing would take 20, 30 minutes or so, and then we'd get ready to leave. Then oftentimes, we might chat about football, a Monday night football game, the University of Michigan, informally, and that was always, always a joy.

But the way I really got to know the President was probably through tennis. President Ford was a great athlete. I think some people know that; most do not. But he was great and he loved to play tennis. I was kind of the intermediary for outside people to play tennis. Within the White House, Roger Porter was, without a doubt, the greatest tennis player, super tennis player and was quite often his partner if it wasn't Bill Seidman. But I would do things, play tennis, whenever he would call. I'd get a call like on a Saturday morning from the usher or somebody saying, "Could you meet the President for tennis this afternoon?" Of course, we'd drop anything to play tennis with the President. But I would get things like, George H. W. Bush would call me from Beijing, China, and he would say, "I'm going to be back in DC in about ten days. Can you get a match for us with the President?" And, of course, President Ford always loved to play tennis, especially with George Bush.

Smith: Really? Was there a chemistry there?

Carlson: Yeah, real chemistry. But one time I remember so well, Roger Porter was the President's partner. George Bush was my partner and Bush hit a volley at the net, missed the President's ear by an inch. Hard, you know, you don't play that hard against the President. Bush did. And a little while later in the same match, he hit an overhead smash. Creamed the President in the leg. We stopped for a second and President Ford said, "George, your tennis game is improving. Did you do anything in Beijing besides play tennis?" And it was great. So he had a great camaraderie. Jimmy Baker was at Commerce in those days. He would come over. He'd call and he'd say, "Can you get us on the courts this week with the President?" That was always fun. Different things like the Swedish Ambassador to the United States, Willy Wachtmeister, great guy, loved to play tennis. These guys would just give

anything to come over and play on the courts with the President; some congressmen and so forth.

So I became that intermediary to help the outside get in. Of course, if the President didn't want to play with somebody, he would say no, but I don't think that ever happened. He'd always say, "I'd love to." He was always so gracious and so warm on these things. We'd go to Vail, Colorado and play tennis in the bubble, in the snow, 20 degrees.

I remember one time, this guy walked up to the courts. We were playing and I saw this guy walk up and I said first of all, "How could this guy even get in here?" Secret Service was all around. We're changing sides and the guy walked up and introduced himself. He said, "My name is Howard Head. Mr. President, I've always admired you..." and so forth. We chatted for a couple of seconds and he said, "I want you to see my latest racket and I want to give this to you as a gift." And, of course, you know he developed the Prince racket, the oversized racket. That was back in 1975. He also gave me one and I laughed at it to myself. I mean, this big fat racket with a short handle. Of course, that became the way of the future.

Howard had developed the Head skis, the metal skis, the first ones, so he was way ahead of his time. I became friends with him. I met people, so many different people, great people, over the years through the President. I remember playing tennis with Don Rumsfeld and the President in Palm Springs, 95, 99 degree weather. Rumsfeld would come out and play in a wetsuit and President Ford said, "Is that healthy? Is that safe?" And Rummy would say, "I've only got 45 minutes. I've got to get a good workout in." And so, those were fun times.

But I would also do things like, when we were in Vail, Colorado, either Ron Nessen or I, quite often I, because I got up so early, would go over and brief the President at 6:30 in the morning where he was staying at the Bass House in Vail and update him on what was going on with the press, the overnight stories. He would always have his National Security briefing, but this was on domestic matters, political issues and so forth. We're sitting at this kitchen

table; Mrs. Ford would come down in her bathrobe, have coffee, sit at the table, and it was just very informal, so relaxed, it was just wonderful.

Then, the President would say, "Betty, where do you want to go tonight for dinner?" And it might be Pepi's, for example. And so he'd say, "John, Pepi's it is." So I'd go back and advise Dick Cheney and the Secret Service, etc. They'd make arrangements that night, 8 o'clock at Pepi's, and we'd organize it so the President was in the corner. They'd never block off the restaurant, but he'd be in the corner with about 8 people and then we'd have a buffer of staff tables. I had about six or eight dear friends, half of them had condos in Vail, and others would always come to Vail when we were there, because they enjoyed it so much, seeing the press and the Brokaw's and Cronkite's and stuff. And so I'd make reservations for them to be another buffer at the restaurant that night. The Secret Service really appreciated that because they knew, we knew who everybody was in that area of the restaurant. So I really got kind of an inside look at the Fords in those days.

Smith: They loved Vail, didn't they?

Carlson: Oh, wonderful. And President Ford was such a fabulous skier. I'd get done with him at 7:15, and at 7:30, he'd be off to the slopes. He would tell me who he wanted to ski with the next few days and we'd have it planned. One time, the Olympic ski team was there training. He went and skied with them. The guys told me and they weren't kidding, I mean privately, they never saw a fellow at age 60 plus be such a strong skier, such a great athlete. And so, different people would ski with him and we'd set it up. It was really great times.

Smith: And I also take it that they were beloved in Vail. That people in Vail really held them in the highest regard.

Carlson: Absolutely, the same thing in Palm Springs. They just were revered wherever they went and still are to this day, of course. Just to give you a couple things on how gracious the President was to me. Walter Cronkite joined our campaign. We were on like a 13-day campaign swing in 1976 and Cronkite said he had wanted to interview the President. He was the evening news. He

was God in those days. He went to Dick Cheney and Cheney says, "Talk to Nessen and Carlson." Well, I guess he talked to Ron Nessen and Ron said, "No, I don't think so." Cronkite came to me and said, "I just want to have a voiceover with the President. Just show me sitting with the President talking and I can show it on the evening news." Barbara Walters had just become the anchorwoman on the ABC evening news. And he said, "The ratings are tough right now. Just let me do that. Just one camera, voiceover." I talked to Ron Nessen and Cheney and I said, "What have we got to lose?" Cheney's such a great guy, he said, "It's up to you guys." Nessen said, "I don't favor it, but if you want to do it, Carlson, go ahead."

So I talked to Cronkite, I said, "Okay, just a couple minutes, chit chat, voiceover, and so forth". He said, "Absolutely." I advised the President, "Cronkite's going to be coming here in about 15 minutes. No questions, just chat about the weather. No voice, no sound." We walked in with the camera man. The sound man stayed outside. We walked in chitchatted for about 10, 15, 20 seconds, then Cronkite says, "Mr. President, you wouldn't mind if I asked a couple of questions on the record, would you?" And the cameraman pulled out the mike. And I was really, really upset. President Ford said, "John, don't worry about it. It's okay." And I said, "That's not the deal, Walter. That isn't what we agreed to." He said, "John, I just..". And President Ford said, "John, don't worry about it." Cronkite asked a couple of questions. They were mundane questions, the President did a wonderful job. We got outside. I was really upset with Cronkite.

The next day or the next opportunity I had to talk to the President, I said, "I'm so sorry that happened." He said, "John, it was fine. Don't worry." He made me feel good. It was wonderful. And another thing after he left office, I'll never forget this; I had just moved to Houston, Texas. This is like a year later. We're buying airlines, acquiring airlines. The President was coming to town to give a major speech and they were having a private reception for him at the Petroleum Club which is the elite of Houston. All the big CEO's were going to be there, about 20 or 30, before the big speech. And somehow I got invited to it and I'd just arrived in Houston. And so, the reception was like at 6 o'clock before the 6:30 major reception. I walked in this room – beautiful -,

you know, kind of in awe and there was the President talking to 15 or 20 top CEO's, most from Houston and I kind of stood there because I didn't know if I should go to the bar, should I walk up to the group, or whatever. President Ford saw me across the room. He waved, he said, "John, come here." He walked halfway across the room, left the group, put his arm around me, brought me back to the group and introduced me, "You all know John Carlson, my valued staff member."

What a great way for me to get introduced to Houston. It was fabulous and I felt, I mean, I could never buy that kind of introduction to Houston and it was so warm and they thought I was really important there in Houston then. It was truly wonderful. Another thing I did that I felt so very fortunate, they have an event called VANG, the Vietnamese-American National Gala. Every two years or so, they have this black tie event, six-seven hundred people. At each gala, they name the outstanding honorary Vietnamese-American. A couple of years ago, it was Gerald R. Ford. Mrs. Ford was going to go and accept the award and Susan called me like a week beforehand and she said, "My mother doesn't feel like making the trip. She's kind of frail. Would you go receive the award for my dad for my mother?" I said, "I'd be honored to do it."

I got up there that night. They asked me to say a few words after I accepted the award for President Ford. There's at least six or seven hundred people, the mayor, several congressmen, and all these Vietnamese and I talked about the fact how President Ford took office and shortly thereafter, we had the fall of Saigon and against many of his advisors and many in Congress, he immediately signed an Executive Order allowing about 200,000 refugees, Vietnamese refugees, to enter the United States. A lot of people said, "No, it's going to cause a bad precedent" and all this. And he said, "They're our allies." And I was telling this to the audience. He said, "They were our allies and we're going to stick up for them now."

I went with President Ford and Mrs. Ford, as I told the audience that night, up to San Francisco and Pan Am had, they called it 'Operation Baby Lift', bringing back hundreds and hundreds of orphaned babies from Vietnam.

They went up the ramp, Mrs. Ford and the President carried off the first babies, the first orphans from Vietnam. No press, no coverage, nothing. It was just wonderful. And I said, "President Ford, with no publicity, he did this because he felt he needed to do it, he wanted to do it." The audience was crying, sobbing. I mentioned how a few months later, we went to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas to walk through and give support to the Vietnamese refugee camp there. We walked through these tents. There are doctors and lawyers and educators in these tents, living there. It was an unbelievable experience.

Smith: What was the reaction to the Fords?

Carlson: Oh, unbelievable. First of all, to have a President come down there, but having a President who just allowed them all in the United States rather than having them be subject to imprisonment or murdered, you know, slaughtered in Vietnam. Hundreds, literally hundreds of people came up to me that night after that ceremony and the older people said, "We knew about President Ford," and "Thank you so much." The younger people didn't know quite these things. They'd heard President Ford was a great guy, but they didn't understand all this. One fellow came up to me, we're all crying. I mean, this is unbelievable. His name was Dat Nguyen, big good-looking guy. And I said, "You look like a football player." And the guy with him said, "He was an all-American at Texas A&M. He'd played with the Dallas Cowboys, wide-receiver for 7 years, and now he's coaching the Dallas Cowboys." And Dat Nguyen and I talked. And he said, "I was born at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas in 1975 when you toured the camp." And he says, "I don't remember from the stories I've been told whether I was born before that or after that, so you saw my mother with either me in her arms or me in her belly." And we talked about all these things. Unbelievable, unbelievable.

Smith: You know, in 2000 he came back to Grand Rapids. We had gotten the staircase from the top of the embassy in Saigon and there'd been a real controversy over it. Kissinger said, "Oh, my God, why would you want to do that? Why would you want to remind people of that horrible humiliation?" And Ford, who had a lot more vision than I think he was often credited with

said, "First of all, Henry, it is part of history. We can't forget it." But secondly, he looked at that staircase and he saw it, not as a symbol of military defeat, but as a symbol of the desire for freedom - every bit as much as that piece of the Berlin wall sitting out in front of the museum. And he came back to Grand Rapids and dedicated that. We had a large Vietnamese-American community in West Michigan and there were probably three or four hundred people there. It was bittersweet, but it was also very poignant. I don't know of another President who would've done that, called attention, in effect, to what was really the low point of his presidency, although immediately followed by one of the moral high points. Because, as you say, everyone wanted to pull the plug and he was adamant that that would be another surrender.

Carlson: Maybe just two other things to mention. We had a press briefing every day at 11 o'clock, 11:30, and one of the last things to do after the press briefing was to get away from the press. I'd go work out every day and would run or lift weights or work in the gym and so forth. My code name then got to be in the White House - we all had radio names - was "Weightlifter". So, one day Rumsfeld and Cheney mentioned to me that the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports was kind of concerned and upset. They didn't have anybody they could really talk to on a regular basis in the White House, they needed somebody to be their liaison. So Rummy and Dick said, "Carlson, you like this stuff. Why don't you just add this to your duties and talk to them." So I got involved in that. They really hadn't had much interaction with the White House.

From that point on, any time I would ask the President to make a statement, to sign something, "If you're going to give a speech, talk about the high obesity in the United States in the kids," kids getting better nutrition, getting away from the television, exercise, all this. He did everything anytime we asked him. I'd be playing tennis with him and we'd be finishing and he'd say, "How's the Council doing? Do they need anything from me?" It was wonderful. He was great.

One last point I'd love to mention; I guess it was 1975, on the budget. I'll never forget this. The budget was 1,000 pages long or whatever it is. I had to put together a fact sheet of about ten or fifteen pages for the press corps. I literally worked on it for weeks and then the night before the briefing the next day, I worked all night, literally, with Jim Lynn and Paul O'Neill, the director and deputy director of OMB, to make sure all the facts were right and all this kind of stuff. The next day was the briefing and the person who did the briefing on the budget was President Ford. Everyone, the press corps, and the OMB said they'd never seen a President ever know a budget, not just superficially, but line items in each department. He could go into depth on these things. And I really felt kind of bad because the press corps would say to me, "Unbelievable what the President did," but they didn't write it. You know, because no President could ever, had ever, I'm sure even until today, doesn't know the inner workings of the budget as President Ford did back in those days.

Smith: Is that, do you think, a product of his years on the Appropriations Committee?

Carlson: Absolutely. I think he knew the budget before he even got to the White House. He knew the process. But anyway, he was a phenomenal person and for me to be part of that time, it was unbelievable.

Smith: Let me back up a little bit. You'd been in the Nixon White House?

Carlson: Yes.

Smith: How did that come about?

Carlson: Well, I know you don't have time for all this.

Smith: No, we've got plenty!

Carlson: I ran a U.S. Senate campaign in Washington State and I was written up in the *Wall Street Journal* in part of a large article, some little squib "the youngest campaign manager of one of the best organized campaigns in the United States, 24-years old," or something "was John Carlson in Washington State." Haldeman, Erlichman, or somebody there saw that. And when the Nixon team came to Washington State for 18 hours when he was running for

President, they called me and said, “We understand you’ve got this state pretty well organized. Could you help us organize those 18 hours when we’re going to be in Seattle?”

Of course, Erlichman was from Seattle, so I did a couple things that surprised him. First of all, we had a little welcoming ceremony at Boeing Field when they arrived. When they got downtown to the Olympic Hotel, fabulous, I had thousands of people there going crazy when Nixon came in. I had suggested to Erlichman that once the President arrives, go out, walk around the block, and get some fresh air. Of course, as you know, when the President moves, he’s got a press pool. Well, Nixon came out. They did exactly what I asked them to do. Went around the corner and when they went around the corner, there was a bus stop with about six or eight people there. They went crazy for Nixon. “Let me have a picture with you,” “Kiss my baby,” “Please run, we need you,” and all this. I’d said go in this café. They went into the café and people went crazy for him.

They were all my staff, all my campaign people I had planted along the way. Nobody knew that. So when they got back after the campaign stop in Seattle, they said, “When we win White House, you’ve got to come back and join us.” I said, “Sure. Sure.” Of course, they won and then they offered me jobs over the years and they didn’t sound right. And, first of all, I said, “Who would ever want to work in government and who would want to work in Washington, D.C.? I’m a businessman.” But what happened was, pretty much exactly as I’m saying it now.

In 1971, I guess it was, George Schultz was giving a speech someplace in Indonesia. He’d been gone for a week from Washington, D.C. He said something along the lines that “Richard Nixon will never impose wage and price controls.” An hour later in Washington, D.C., they announce the imposition of wage and price controls. They called me and said, “We need someone to sit in our 7:30 senior staff meeting every morning and then go out and call the Cabinet officers and tell them what the theme is for the day, what the issue is for the day. We want to get a common thread through every Cabinet officer. If it’s a transportation bill, the Defense Department should

know that, the health guy that, education should know that. Everyone should know what's going on that day" and so forth. I said, "That sounds pretty interesting." So I came back and that was my first job in the Nixon White House.

Smith: When Watergate happened - let's define it as the 'break-in' - what were you doing at that point?

Carlson: I was assistant press secretary.

Smith: You were?

Carlson: Uh huh.

Smith: Working for Ziegler?

Carlson: Exactly.

Smith: What was Ziegler like?

Carlson: Pretty pompous, pretty arrogant. But he had a tough, tough job. It's the toughest job there is. But it wasn't easy.

Smith: When did the bunker mentality set in? Or had it already existed?

Carlson: I think it was there.

Smith: Yeah.

Carlson: And I think, you know, even Ron Ziegler didn't see the President on a regular basis there at some point, and it was not easy. Very difficult times.

Smith: Was there a time when you began to think this might in fact end? Well, you had Agnew's resignation. Did that come as a shock?

Carlson: Absolutely. I had no idea that he was taking money and doing all this stuff from his Maryland days. That was a shocker. I guess the real shocker was when Haldeman and Erlichman resigned. That seemed like the beginning of the end and you knew something really serious was happening. One night, I was told to go down and meet two distinguished guests who were coming in secretly through the south entrance of the West Wing, not through the main

entrance. It was Hugh Scott and Howard Baker, and they were coming in privately to see the President in the residence to tell him that they could not hold impeachment off. I had no idea why I was bringing them, but I heard it later, I was told, that's the message that they brought to the President. Of course, I'd go to Key Biscayne with the President. I'd go to San Clemente with the President and they got to be more tense with the press every trip.

Smith: Richard Nixon once famously said of himself that he was an introvert in an extrovert's profession. Rex Scouten told us, because Rex had been in the Secret Service and he had been the sole Secret Service agent with then Vice President Nixon, became very close to the Nixon family and thought the world of Nixon. Rex is very circumspect, but he felt that the Nixon he knew then was different from the Nixon in the White House. But he said something extraordinary. He said they'd be on a plane; just the two of them, and out of nowhere, Nixon would sort of pound his fist on the arm rest and say, "You know, I'm not tough enough. I've just got to make myself tougher," which is a remarkable thing when you stop to think about it. I suspect people will be trying to analyze Nixon for as long as –

Carlson: Well, he was a brilliant guy. I would go to state dinners, not as an invited guest always, usually not as an invited guest, but I would go to 'take care of the press.' They would come in and do certain things, so I would go and would always want to be there when Nixon would give the toast. For example, the Shah of Iran, he would go on, Nixon, for 15-20 minutes, the background of Iran and Persia and that part of the world and the Pahlavi family and all this stuff without one single note. And the press would be so impressed. And I would see Nixon - for example, we would have little parties in San Clemente and he would sit there and point and he says, "That room up there is where I met with Brezhnev and we'd meet all day and try and negotiate something and make no headway. At 11 o'clock at night, Manola" or the –

Smith: The valet?

Carlson: "The valet would come and knock on my door at 11 o'clock at night and say, 'Mr. Brezhnev wants to chat if it's okay with you.'" And Nixon said, "We

accomplished more at midnight than we would all day.” And stuff like that was just tremendous.

Smith: Did you ever see him genuinely relaxed?

Carlson: I didn't really get that close to Nixon. I would go down and I'd see him in San Clemente and I'd see him in Key Biscayne. So, I would see him with Bebe Rebozo, Bob Abplanalp. I'd see him in those situations, but I wasn't close enough to interact with him.

Smith: When Ford becomes vice president, he's obviously in a very difficult situation. He's walking a tightrope, and one way he does it is to get out of town a lot. And there are people who have told us that there were, not surprisingly, Nixon loyalists in the White House who found some fault with the Vice President for not being sufficiently outspoken in his defense of the President. Did that tension exist that you were aware of?

Carlson: I never saw that. I always thought from day one that President Ford, and Vice President Ford was wonderful. And, of course, it's interesting, if you go back to the first Nixon administration, when Nixon won in '72, he asked for everyone's resignation. Do you remember that? And 90 percent of the people were basically let go. And supposedly ten or fifteen percent were on the must-keep list. Ten or fifteen percent “We'll find you jobs out in the administration, some place out in departments.” Everyone else was let go. And the guys who were all let go were saying, “I could've stayed if I wanted to, but...”

Well, I was on the must-keep list, but I was going to leave. I didn't want to make a career out of Washington; I wasn't going to stay. But I said, “If I don't stay, if I leave and say I could've stayed, no one will believe it. No one will believe it.” And so I stayed. When President Ford came in, I was going to leave. Almost everyone left. And President Ford asked me to stay. Dick Cheney and Rumsfeld and I felt honored to stay, but I wanted to leave. I thought it would be better if I left, but I said, “No one would believe me if I said I could've stayed.” So I stayed another two and a half years, and it was wonderful; the greatest thing ever.

- Smith: That leaves a couple things. We've been told on the morning of the 9th, following the East Room, the Nixon farewell. There was the [Ford] swearing in and a receiving line and a reception. A couple of people made the observation, and again, quite understandably, that, as they put it, you could see the Nixon people sort of peel away before joining the receiving line. Was that your sense?
- Carlson: I don't recall that.
- Smith: That's a stand-in for the larger question of how did this new President mesh? Rumsfeld has said that he was very explicit to the President that you should clean house early; indeed he was critical of Ford for drawing it out as long as he did. There were others who indicated that Ford wanted to be absolutely fair to the vast majority of Nixon people who had nothing to do with Watergate and he didn't want to tar them with the broad brush of wrongdoing.
- Carlson: That's certainly how I would feel. I mean, first of all, for him to take over and all of a sudden have to put together a whole new staff is pretty difficult. And I was deputy press secretary. Ron Nessen, Jerry terHorst came in.
- Smith: Yes. Tell us about Jerry terHorst.
- Carlson: Jerry terHorst came right out of the press corps, of course. And I think it was very difficult for Jerry to all of a sudden be on the inside and having to hold back information from his colleagues. He got a lot of static from the press for joining the opposition, you might say. But I will say on the record that he didn't like the job and at 7 or 8 o'clock at night would be sitting in his office and he'd be having scotch. It wasn't good for him and he was under a lot of pressure and he used the pardon as the excuse to resign and it worked out best for everybody.
- Smith: That's interesting. You're not the first to make that observation. There was sort of a Boy Scout quality that the President had. But here's someone who's been in Washington 25 years. The first press conference was on August 28th, which turned out to be a real pivotal moment in the Ford presidency. He goes into that press conference believing that people are going to want to talk about

inflation and Cypress and Greece and Turkey and all those things that he's trying to deal with. And, of course, the only thing they wanted to talk about was Nixon and his papers and his tapes and his legal prospects. How do you explain that?

Carlson: Well, the press really disliked Nixon and I think all of a sudden to have a Boy Scout come in and they had all this venom still pent up from Nixon, and then, of course, August 28th, he hadn't pardoned Nixon yet, had he?

Smith: No.

Carlson: It was like a week or two weeks before the pardon.

Smith: That's right. And my sense is that this press conference was a catalyst.

Carlson: Beautifully put, because the feeling inside was that if we didn't get rid of this Nixon situation and the ongoing impeachment, or the ongoing problems, that it would be around his neck forever. I remember so well, Ford was a fabulous person, and you remember, President Nixon had left office and he had phlebitis, was it? He was out in a hospital in Los Angeles. We were coming to Los Angeles.

Smith: Right before the election, too.

Carlson: Exactly. And Ford told me, told us, some of the key guys that were meeting, he says, "It's time for me to go see President Nixon." And they said, "Oh, no. You can't do that." I think I was one of the leaders: "Can't do that. Can't do that. Bad image. The press will get all over that." Everybody was against it. He said, "I cannot be in Los Angeles and not see President Nixon," and went and saw him. It was great. I really, really admired President Ford for so many things, and that was one of them. He said, "I don't care what the image is, I'm going to do it."

Smith: Did the pardon come as a surprise to you?

Carlson: Yes. I knew about it about two, three days in advance. We were writing it and doing all this stuff, but it was a real shocker for me. But in hindsight, of

course, even a couple of weeks later, it seemed like the best thing to do. And even the press soon afterwards said that.

Smith: What was the immediate press reaction?

Carlson: Ford's dead. Don't even run for re-election; there was collusion before he took office – that was the big thing. The reason he got the vice presidency was that he would take care of Nixon if necessary. I don't believe – I can't say I'm certain – but I don't believe there was ever any plan or anything like that ahead of time.

Smith: And then, of course, the fact that he would go up to the Hill and testify, which had never been done.

When Mrs. Ford had her breast cancer surgery - that also was unprecedented – the degree of openness. How did you find out about that?

Carlson: Well, I certainly really wasn't close to the family, but I was closer than most, and so I started hearing some of this stuff ahead of time. But everything she did, like in drugs, I would see Mrs. Ford at 6:30, 7:00 in the morning, I'd see her at midnight in Vail and Palm Springs. Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve we'd spend with the President at the Annenberg estate. All those things and I never, ever knew she had a problem. But I think she has done so much for women in coming out for drugs and breast cancer and everything.

Smith: Can you talk about their relationship?

Carlson: Oh, it was wonderful. I don't think you'd ever find a closer couple ever, ever. And he'd even say in the White House, there was a thing certain of us had; whenever the President would move, certain people in the White House would have a bell on their phone. At 7:00 at night, it'd be twenty degrees out, the bell would ring on your phone, I'd pick it up and say, "The President is en route from the residence to the pool (swimming pool)." Two minutes later, ping, "The President's in the pool." And once in a while we'd need to talk to the President, we'd run down to the pool and say, "Mr. President, you just need to sign off on this." It worked out perfectly because he'd get his bathrobe on and he'd be swimming laps in the pool, and snow on the sides. But he

would say, "I gotta go, Betty's waiting for me and she's got everything..." just like a regular couple. Betty's waiting for me, got dinner, got to get back, and so forth.

Smith: The not so secret fact was that he was a stickler for punctuality, and he married a woman who was not. Classic case of opposites attracting. And yet he seemed to accept it pretty well.

Carlson: Yeah. One of the interesting times I had with the President was really completely informal. President Ford was invited up to spend a weekend in Pocantico Hills, Vice President Rockefeller's estate. I became a Socialist after going up there. President Ford took three guys with him; Dick Cheney, Red Cavaney, and me. Remember Joe Canzari Wonderful guy. We arrived at Pocantico Hills and Joe Canzari took care of us, and this is off the track, isn't it?

Smith: No, no. As I said, I've been working for nine years on a biography of Nelson Rockefeller.

Carlson: I can tell you some inside stuff if you want.

Smith: I'd love to hear it.

Carlson: But we arrive and Joe Canzari said, "What do you want to do tomorrow morning? Do you want to have breakfast and what time?" and all this. And he said, "I want to give you a tour of the estate." I said, "I'd like to work out before anything else." And he said, "Okay, we have an indoor pool, we've got an outdoor pool. Got a tennis court, got a golf range, got a bowling alley," it was unbelievable. And then he showed us around the estate. It was unbelievable. He talked about how John D. Rockefeller had moved the railroad tracks fifty miles or something, and almost no family should have that much. He earned it, I guess. Of course, he earned it. But what an experience. Things like that - of course a guy like me would never, ever be going to Pocantico Hills if it wasn't for President Ford. But it was an unbelievable weekend.

Smith: Did the White House wait too long to take the Reagan challenge seriously?

- Carlson: Boy, that's a good question. It certainly hurt the President and I tell people that I'm certainly not anti-Reagan, but I'm not pro-Reagan either because we begged Ronald Reagan to go to Texas and campaign for us in 1976. If we had won Texas, we'd have won the election. But that didn't happen. And every time we asked – they didn't say no – they just kept postponing it. But you are probably right, that's a good way to put it that we did not take the Reagan challenge seriously soon enough.
- Smith: Now, there is a school of thought that Reagan, in a perverse way, made Ford a better candidate in that Ford had never run for anything outside of his congressional district. And that thanks to people like Don [Penny] and others, he became a much better public speaker, etc. etc. On balance, s a question of opinion, was the Reagan challenge hurtful?
- Carlson: I think it was. I think having negativity in your own party on and on every day for months, as we got in the primaries, it didn't help. And I knew a lot of the guys in the Reagan campaign, on the Reagan team, and we talk about those days at this time. But again, Reagan was looking to '80. He was setting himself up – if he didn't make it in '76, he'd be the guy in '80. And of course it worked out that way. If Ford had won in '76, Reagan probably quite likely would not have been president in 1980. Ford's vice president might have been, perhaps. Who knows?
- Smith: Tell me about Ron [Nessen]. We talked with Ron at some length. Ron maybe has mellowed a little bit. He's pretty thoughtful about owning up to some of his mistakes. We've been told by a couple of people that following terHorst's resignation, Bonnie Angelo was approached about the job.
- Carlson: Hmm. I didn't know that.
- Smith: Which would have made her the first woman press secretary, but she had family commitments and so on. But it raises a question of whether a TV guy, at that point in his career, is necessarily the ideal candidate to take on that position. What did Nessen bring to the job; and what were the challenges that he faced?

Carlson: First of all, Ron was pretty close to Gerald Ford. He had got to know him, covering him as Vice President, and so that's important. Also Ron is a very, very bright guy; a very quick study; he's really good. We all had code names in the White House. Mine was Weightlifter. You didn't want to have to memorize who was what, so you had something to relate to. His nickname was, if you remember, because of press briefings you get worked up like I'm getting worked now...he got worked up and his code name was Sunburn, because his face would get flushed and so forth. But you are absolutely right. Taking a member of the press and putting them in there is difficult because the other press members resent it. Phil Jones is a very good friend. I see him twice a year. And of course, they were tremendous rivals. And Phil Jones wanted that job.

Smith: Did he?

Carlson: Yeah.

Smith: There was a sense, particularly with the Saturday Night Live business...

Carlson: I was just going to say that...

Smith: That maybe there was a little too much ego for a press secretary. That a press secretary needs to be self-effacing in ways; perhaps at that stage in his career, Ron found that difficult.

Carlson: I remember right after Saturday Night Live, Chevy Chase and all that, we were sitting in the Oval Office. The first thing in our daily briefing the President said was, "Ron, I watched Saturday Night Live. I just don't understand that type of humor." And the President was hurt by it. Another thing, I don't know if it hurt the President, I doubt it: but we were in motorcades a few weeks after Saturday Night Live. You'd have the motorcycle cops and you'd have Secret Service, and you'd have the President's car, and then you'd have press and so forth. And we were in an open van, I was with Nessen a couple of times, there would be people along the roads. The President would come by and they would applaud; we're going real slow; and then Nessen would come by and people would go crazy for Nessen. They'd just seen him on Saturday Night Live and it was remarkable. I

didn't have any idea that people even watched that show that much. And I don't think Ford even knew that kind of stuff. But I know he was not happy with Ron Nessen portraying him as a bumbling, stumbling guy.

Smith: With Nessen being on the show himself.

Carlson: Exactly.

Smith: You can look at the Ford presidency in a number of ways. One obvious trajectory is a guy who spends twenty-five years of his life on Capitol Hill, is really a man of the House, who has to learn to be an executive. In some ways outgrow some of the habits that he brought to the job. You want to keep the best of what you have, obviously, but at the same time learn to be a communicator in a way that you don't have to be on Capitol Hill. Did you see that?

Carlson: That's a great point. There's a big difference between being a legislator and an administrator. But Rumsfeld was super. Rumsfeld came in to run the staff. And you might say Rohm Emanuel one of these days is a liaison with Capitol Hill, because he came from there. Well, Ford could talk to anybody, anytime, anywhere. So you might say Rumsfeld ran the staff day to day initially, before he went to the Defense Department, and did a great job, as did Dick Cheney. President Ford, as you say, had no administrative experience ever, probably, in his life. But he was great. I think he was able to motivate and lead just by example. He was superb.

Smith: Al Haig and Bob Hartmann may have been put on this planet to really piss each other off. Did you sense that at all?

Carlson: I saw it. Of course Bob Hartmann was a friend of the President's forever. And I was sitting in the Oval Office one day with Bob Hartmann in our meeting, and we're sitting there and Bob says to the President, "Information about me is being leaked. Negative information about me is being leaked. And the guy who is leaking it is sitting right here," pointing at Nessen. And they kind of started screaming at each other. It's the first time, the only time, I ever heard the President raise his voice. He said, "Bob, not here, not now." And he [Bob]

kept going, and the President said, “Stop it Bob, stop it.” And so it was interesting times.

Smith: But it says something about his loyalty to a guy who, to be sure, had written some very important speeches for him, but who also brought an awful lot of baggage and never quite adapted to his role in the White House as opposed to what it had been on the Hill. To the point where there were two separate speech groups that were functioning; one in the open and the other to some degree at least, sub rosa.

Carlson: Well, Bob Hartmann, I thought, knew the President inside and out. And he knew what he thought; he knew how to write for him. But sometime you need to get to a different level and you need more of a national scope. But Bob was very, very close to the President and he knew everything about his thinking.

Smith: One senses that that was a very bitter – by that point – bitter rivalry.

Carlson: With Reagan, you mean?

Smith: Yeah, the Reagan-Ford thing. Going into the convention, what was your sense?

Carlson: I think we felt pretty certain we had the nomination, but there was still that small percentage of uncertainty. I actually was playing tennis with Jimmy Baker on top of the Hyatt Hotel, or whatever hotel it was. One hundred degree weather, I think it was. He pulled an Achilles tendon and it really slowed him down. But those were tense times and I don’t even, still to this day, when they went to talk with Reagan one night, John Sears and his guys about being involved in the presidency, vice president and all that, I still don’t know the accurate story on that. And I talked to the guys who were in those meetings and I still don’t know it. Jim Cavanaugh was part of that and of course, Dick Cheney. I’d like to know the inside story some day.

Smith: When you had this whole switch, when Schlesinger was fired and Rumsfeld took his place and the vice president was dumped, and George H.W. Bush was in effect, deep-sixed at the CIA. Nelson Rockefeller went to his grave believing that Don Rumsfeld was responsible. Now, it is also true Rockefeller

could get paranoid toward the end. He saw enemies and he believed that Don Rumsfeld was his biggest enemy and that Cheney was Rumsfeld's extension. The President always maintained that, no it was his idea to do all of this. Did you have a sense that there was a problem in the Ford-Schlesinger relationship?

Carlson: Oh, there was. I forget his name now – Joe – he was his spokesperson. Joe Layton, you ever heard that name?

Smith: Yeah.

Carlson: We were getting ready to announce some major decision, pulling troops out of Lebanon, and I was called back from a tennis tournament on a Sunday or something and I came in and Rockefeller, Kissinger, and President Ford were in the Oval Office. They asked me for some things and they said we're going to announce at nine o'clock tonight we're pulling troops out of Lebanon. By the time we announce it, they will be three-fourths out. But just be prepared, like at seven o'clock, you want to advise the press that at eight o'clock they are going to have a press conference and so forth. So I started putting everything in the works – everything was secret until a certain point – and then you'd advise the press, have the press conference and so forth.

About a half an hour before we announced this, Joe Layton announced it at the Defense Department. And it was a positive thing because we were getting people out of harm's way and all this. It was a very positive thing. We were really upset that the Defense Department, Joe Layton, had announced it before the President announced it. And I said to Joe Layton, who is a pro in Washington, he was there forever, I said, "The President announces the good news, you announce the bad news. And you don't ever do that again." I don't know if you can call it a rivalry, but Schlesinger, who I don't know at all, brilliant guy, he would sit there with his pipe and he'd be thinking and he probably thought he was smarter than President Ford.

Smith: And everyone else in the room.

- Carlson: And everyone else. And Joe Layton, of course, worked for him, and so there was that feeling there wasn't real teamwork going on. That was one example that I experienced.
- Smith: And then there is the vague, I don't pretend to understand it, but at the time when Saigon was falling, there was apparently some real friction regarding the evacuation and how it was proceeding. Was it the low point of those two and a half years?
- Carlson: Yeah, it had to be. Of course, President Ford inherited Vietnam, as Richard Nixon inherited Vietnam. But you keep trying to wind it down honorably and it wasn't easy. Of course Kissinger was a hero in those days, wasn't he? He was God and so forth.
- Smith: And yet one has a sense that he wanted to go down with all flags flying and blaming Congress to the end for not funding the war. One of the things that I'd love to know the answer to is to what degree Ford agreed with Kissinger, that Congress should come up with another \$750 million, or whether knowing the Hill as well as he did, saw it as a futile gesture, although a gesture worth making. Then there was the famous speech at Tulane where, apparently Kissinger had one draft and Hartmann had another that he handed the President on the plane, which basically said the war is over as far as this country is concerned. Was there a sense of that kind of debate going on within the White House?
- Carlson: I did not experience that, really. I'm sure there were all kinds of things going behind the scenes that weren't quite so open. The only time the President ever barked at me, was, and I'll never forget this. It was in the last days of the administration before he's leaving office, and I forget if it was the *New York Times*, said they would like to have an obit interview with the President. And Nessen said, "Carlson, you ask the President, I'm not going to ask." So we got done with the regular briefing and we're getting ready to walk out and I said, "Mr. President, it's customary for major newspapers and so forth to do interviews that are held until you die. And the *New York Times* would like to make a formal request, and I'm making this request for them, to do this." And

he said, “John, I’m not ready to die. Tell that to the *New York Times*.” And, of course, Tom DeFrank then did his thing for several years, right?

Smith: This may be unfair, but I would be interested in your sense of the book, because there are people who believe that Ford was, in some ways, exploited. There are other people who believe that Ford knew exactly what he was doing. Do you have a sense?

Carlson: Are you talking about Tom DeFrank’s book?

Smith: Yeah. He clearly had great faith in Tom, a great trust in Tom.

Carlson: I thought it was pretty darn good. I thought Tom did a great job and I didn’t know that was going on. I saw Tom all the time and I didn’t realize he was having those conversations every few months with the President. No, I thought it was a pretty good book, and I don’t think President Ford would have done anything he didn’t want to do.

Smith: Did you have much contact with the kids?

Carlson: Not a lot, no. One of the nice things, when President Ford died, I got a call from the family and they said, “You’re going to get an invitation to go back to Washington, D.C. for the big funeral at the National Cathedral. But if you’d like, we’d like to have you come over and be part of the smaller ceremonies here for a couple of days in Palm Springs. So my wife and I went over to Palm Springs and it was wonderful. It really was so much more intimate.

Smith: Were you surprised by the public outpouring?

Carlson: Oh, it was just wonderful, just fabulous, wasn’t it? I honestly think Gerald Ford was one of the finest human beings you could ever be around, and he never got the credit. One of my biggest disappointments in life is that we didn’t do a better job against Jimmy Carter in the 1976 campaign. The question is, “How could we lose to that guy?” It’s just so, so sad. But of course with the Nixon pardon, the economy, Vietnam, it was very, very difficult.

Smith: And who would have predicted, at that point, that years later they would become good friends. Which tells you something about Ford, in particular.

Carlson: Ford, he could become friends, he was so easy to get along with and so gracious.

Smith: You were over at St. Margaret's and the public was coming in droves.

Carlson: Yeah. They lined up until midnight, didn't they? And of course, Jack Ford and the family took turns in greeting the people as they came through. But they had a private one for us, I think, first, which was really, really nice. But it was just overwhelming.

Smith: Did you see him much after he left office?

Carlson: Not a lot, no. I'd come over to Palm Springs once in a while. Of course, we'd see him once a year at the June functions. I'd see him at business things, and of course I lived in Houston, different business things he'd be at. I don't even know how he remembered our names unless somebody briefed him ahead of time, which probably could be. But he was fabulous, he was wonderful.

Smith: Where were you on election night '76?

Carlson: With the President.

Smith: You were at the White House?

Carlson: I was in Grand Rapids.

Smith: That's where he almost broke down with the mural at the airport, talking about his parents.

Carlson: I just was shocked that we lost that election. But looking back now I can see all the negative factors that figured into it.

Smith: Did you think you'd caught up?

Carlson: Yeah.

Smith: You did?

Carlson: Yeah, and I think that maybe, and of course you don't know this stuff, if we'd had another week we would have won.

Smith: Sure.

Carlson: But, who knows? It was a tough campaign.

Smith: We've been told it took him a while to bounce back.

Carlson: I don't know.

Smith: The day after, he'd lost his voice, Mrs. Ford read the statement; but we were also told he was telling people that he would help them out with jobs – he was thinking of their welfare, their future. Typical?

Carlson: Typical. I think it would have been so nice for the President to have his own four-year term; to be elected to his own four-year term, I think it would have given us all more confidence and given him more confidence and then see what he could do in four years. Of course, now he is known as the only unelected president, which isn't really fair because he took over in very, very difficult times. I lived with the Cronkite's and the Brokaw's, and those guys privately said so many great things, would sit in Palm Springs and chat at night. But they didn't convey that in their newscasts and so forth.

Smith: How do you think Ford should be remembered?

Carlson: Well, I think people should realize he took over at a very, very difficult time. He assumed the presidency during the most difficult time, maybe, in our country. And he restored honesty and integrity to the presidency and he did it in a very humble way. I just don't think enough people really got to know him those two and a half years. There is so much controversy from the Nixon pardon that carried over; then we started the campaign; then Reagan was challenging him. It was never easy during those times.

INDEX

C

Cronkite, Walter, 4–5

F

Ford, Gerald R.

- 1976 Republican Convention, 21
- budget briefing, 9
- character traits, 1
- funeral, reactions to, 24–25
- Nixon pardon, 15–16
- personal stories about, 1–4, 23–24
- press corps, 4–5
- Reagan challenge, 17–18
- remembrance, 26
- transition to White House, 14
- Vail/Beaver Creek, Colorado, 3–4

H

Hartmann, Bob, 20–21

Head, Howard, 3

L

Lebanon, 22–23

N

Nessen, Ron

- as press secretary, 18
- Saturday Night Live, 19

O

Operation Baby Lift, 6–7

R

Rumsfeld, Donald, 20

S

Schlesinger, James, 21–22

V

Vail/Beaver Creek, Colorado, 3–4

Vietnamese refugees, 6–8