

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
John Knebel
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: First of all, thank you so much for doing this. Tell us a little bit about your life before you came into the Ford orbit. I sense that you had a lot of contact with him before his presidency.

Knebel: Well, I came to know President Ford when he was Minority Leader. I was minority counsel of the House Ag Committee and that was starting in January of '69 with Nixon I. He was doing a lot of fundraising for Republicans and out and about every weekend; and Bob Hartmann, who was his chief of staff and major domo, was needing a lot of support for his speechwriting that he was doing. So I became something of a supplier of fact, fiction, and fantasy, and through the next few years as I was elevated to counsel of the committee, I came to know the Minority Leader very well.

Smith: What was he like?

Knebel: I think it's almost overused, but in this case, it's a very pertinent description. He was a decent human being. He was very fair, he would listen. He always had time to say hello. I used to run into him out at Burning Tree occasionally and he never failed to stop and ask about the family. He was a genuine guy. It was an honor and delight to work with him and for him. And as time went on I was moved downtown to become general counsel to the Department of Agriculture. Upon the resignation of President Nixon he hosted a thing the next day at the White House where every presidential appointee came through the line. I had a picture made with the President – it's right there on the wall – he stopped and talked to me for probably five minutes – to the point that the Marines were in total consternation because everything was getting backed up. But in any event, it was a very memorable day.

I left the government about six months later and six months after that the undersecretary of Agriculture had a heart attack and he retired. Earl Butz went over and asked President Ford if he could bring me back as undersecretary.

President Ford said, "Well, I'd like to be part of that," and he himself made the phone call to my wife and said, "I know Jack's only been back in practice for six months, but I want you to work on him to come back to be undersecretary." And so I did and went through the confirmation process and of course, that was in December of '74, and then we went for two years as undersecretary.

Then when the President saw that he had a problem arising because of the Butz joke that was attributed to him, I was out doing a speech in Marysville, Ohio at the Grange Hall in the middle of the campaign of '76. I never shall forget this lady come up saying, "Some guy here from Washington named Knebel? Phone call." I had to go back through the crowd and on the phone is Jim Cannon who says, "The President wants to talk to you." The President got on; he said, "Jack, Earl is resigning in fifteen minutes and I'm asking you to become the secretary." He said, "Give me fifteen minutes because I want to deliver my comments about Earl in the Rose Garden." So I said, "Fine, Mr. President, I'll do the best I can." He says, "You're going to be fine."

So I went back and I gave the speech which was a campaign speech for John Ashbrook, and we got out afterwards. The theme was that Butz has just taken a little break from the campaign, he'll be back. I gave that same speech and we came out ten minutes later, we get in the car and a state trooper's taking us to the next stop and it comes over the news that President Ford had accepted Earl's resignation and Ashbrook says to me, "You should have been in theater because I would have never known he was gone." I said, "Well, the President said do it. I do it." I just had that kind of regard for him and he's been very, very good to us, and through the years we've had a lot of fine times.

Smith: Let me go back to your days in the House. People all contrast then and now. Gerald Ford was part of that - clearly a Republican partisan, someone who wanted very much to be Speaker of the House.

Knebel: That's an extraordinary point. I was appointed to West Point by Page Belcher, who was the ranking Republican in Agriculture. And back - this is before Watergate days - when the chief counsel of Agriculture from Texas - this is a Democrat - went on to be a judge on the Texas Supreme Court. Bob Pogue,

the chairman, also a Democrat, obviously, asked me to be chief counsel. He said there is no politics in Agriculture, and there really, truly wasn't. Carl Albert was the Speaker and they treated me as if there was just nothing there. It was wonderful. The rancor came in later with Watergate, which _____, there had been, it's not even a gradual deterioration, but it's just no longer the same institution. I can't imagine serving a Democratic committee as its general counsel in this day and age. So that in itself was unique.

When I went downtown to be general counsel of the department and ultimately to become secretary, Tom Foley was chairman of the House Ag Committee and Speaker. He proposed legislation to change my position as undersecretary to deputy secretary so that we have the same status as they do at State Department, when we're under international negotiations. So the House is a totally different institution.

Back then when Ford was Minority Leader you had McCormick, and then you had Tip O'Neill, as the Speaker. There was no rancor. In fact, I was probably one of the last people to have lunch with Tip O'Neill before he died. After he retired he went up to Boston. It was just a different situation then. The people with whom you dealt, it was much like an old law practice. You shook hands, you did a deal. It wasn't any more of this gotcha stuff. You didn't have the Speaker calling people Nazis because they criticize a presidential program. It was just a different day.

Smith: It's interesting you say that. There's an amazing turning point during the Ford presidency. The topic was energy policy and the decontrol, gradual, less gradual, decontrol of natural gas prices. And the President, favoring of a more market-oriented solution, the Democrats in Congress wanting to delay that as much as possible. Anyway, he finally reached a handshake deal with Speaker Albert, Mike Mansfield. They came back a week later, sheepishly, saying the deal was off. They couldn't sell it to their members. And that was post '74 with the Watergate babies.

Knebel: Right. You had the beginning of the new Congress at that point. And I always took the position that President Ford's election was lost not to Carter, but because of the pardon. And the body-politic had to cleanse itself of the last

vestige of Watergate. Whether history will prove us right or wrong on that point, I don't know. But I do know for sure that the water was poisoned. He was absolutely right in saying that we've got to get past this nightmare. We were shocked. I can never forget that Sunday morning coming home from church when he came on and made the speech. But you know what? Had we not done it, we could have really had some serious problems. And if you remember the backdrop, too, was not all that great. The other thing about his presidency, which I was very proud of, particularly in retrospect, is the fact that he wasn't afraid to veto things. He used the veto pen very effectively, and he kept fiscal discipline.

Smith: He was a real fiscal conservative.

Knebel: He knew exactly what he was about. And that came, I think, from his years on the Hill. I never will forget he and Ev Dirksen, those millions or those billions add up to real dollars after a while. And he took that to heart, and he, for that reason I think, will go up several notches as a viable and a wonderful president.

Smith: It has been suggested that in some ways - and this is often the case - his great strengths in some ways mirrored a weakness. For example, I only heard him speak disparagingly of two people. One was John Dean and one was Gordon Liddy. And the worst he could say was, "He's a bad man." That's as bad as it got. He was genuinely shocked by the thought that Richard Nixon lied to him. Like many others, he was genuinely shocked when he heard the language on the tapes. There was sort of an Eagle Scout quality about Ford.

The first press conference, the one that I think was pivotal in bringing the pardon about when it happened. Late in August of '74 he has a press conference in the East Room and he goes in believing - in retrospect somewhat naively - that people would talk about Cyprus and Greece and Turkey and inflation and everything except what they all wanted to talk about, which was Richard Nixon.

Knebel: Right.

Smith: Now, it's a very fine line because on the one hand, it's that very decency – I'm not using Eagle Scout in any way as a pejorative, it's all of those qualities that made him, in some ways, the perfect person to lance the boil. But at the same time, was he not suspicious enough, I guess is what I'm saying, for a modern president?

Knebel: Well, that's an interesting thought. I can tell you that up until a week before Nixon's resignation, he was scheduled to go to Hawaii to speak to the American Bar Association. And Bill Castleman, as counsel in the vice president's office, had invited several of us to go along; I as general counsel of Agriculture because I was to be president-elect of the Federal Bar Association. So we got a call the night before Nixon resigned to say the trip is off, but don't unpack. In other words, don't say anything about you're not going.

But I just think that he's one of those people who had abiding faith in the people he was working with. A lot of us believed, up until the very end, I know I had a difficulty with Butz because the general counsel of the department has a Constitutional responsibility to explain the infirmity of a president – the Twenty-sixth Amendment – and we'd had discussions and we were all to go into to see our Cabinet officers. And I can tell you that I got tossed out of Butz's office three times in the morning before he finally agreed to hear the Constitutional situation of possible disability of President Nixon. This was within a few days of the resignation.

If there was a broad sweeping indictment, believe me, a lot of people would have been caught up in this same disbelief. A lot of people believed what they wanted to believe. You've got to remember that at this point in time you didn't have the Howard Baker question, "What did he know and when did he know it?" But rather you had really partisan political stuff coming out; the tapes had been discovered, there was a lot of pieces that didn't really fit completely together. Certainly there was a lot of smoke and I think people kind of put as much stock in it as they wanted to. And naïve? Well, perhaps, in retrospect. But we're all 20/20 historians.

- Smith: Compared to the alternative, in a town full of cynicism, maybe a little eagerness to believe the best of people is not a bad trait.
- Knebel: And I think that was an inherent trait of President Ford. He gave everybody the benefit of the doubt. He used to have a very, very good outlook on those types of things. I can remember a few things on the House floor when they'd pull legislation and at the last minute when they'd scheduled a bill and they'd gotten votes and they'd gotten the rules through the Rules Committee and Carl Albert played the game somewhat differently. Carl being an Oklahoman, I could go over and talk to him and we always got the stuff done for Agriculture because it was meaningful to him and his constituency. So I didn't have that problem, but a lot of the other type of legislation did.
- Smith: Explain what you meant pulling the thing on the floor, what are you referring to?
- Knebel: Well, in terms of debate, that's the key of what a Minority Leader does. He's got to decide who he wants to use in the debate and for what purposes. This is the strategy of the House, the well of the House is something – again, I think, it's been gravely distorted under the last few years.
- Smith: It was not only a different House, but it was clearly a different Republican Party. The center of gravity was the Midwest. Obviously, you had some Southerners whose numbers were growing, but probably more moderate to liberal Northeasterners.
- Knebel: Well, it's interesting, you are absolutely right. The Democratic members from the House, both the House and Senate, were really our best Republicans, in many regards, from a legislative strategy standpoint. And I never shall forget when Bob Pogue called me over and said, "Jack, I want you to be chief counsel. There's no politics in Agriculture. We just have to keep the big city boys' food stamps in check until we get the farm bill done." And it was just that simple.
- Smith: Was that the trade off?
- Knebel: Absolutely.

Smith: I mean, you got urban votes through food stamps?

Knebel: Absolutely. That's how it worked.

Smith: And presumably, less ideological. Clearly a case could always be made and was made by some, in terms of significantly reducing the role of the federal government, whether it's price supports or whatever. But one senses that that really wasn't a significant possibility. That there was a consensus about the role of the federal government.

Knebel: In 1970 we were getting ready to rewrite the Ag Act of '70, which was a price support bill, and I shall never forget a delegation of Southern members with peanut farmer interests came in and talked to Secretary Butz and said, "Just give us one more time around." You've still got the peanut program going today. But the one thing we did in '70 and '74 was to change that legislation so that if it was clearing the market, there were no subsidies paid. And I had the unique distinction in 1976 of sending my annual report to the President, which is required by law, being the only report filed since the first New Deal that had not paid any price supports that year. And that was because of the prosperity and the country had come back in '76; and as we said, the barns and the fences were painted and the market was going great. We were selling grain to Russia.

Smith: Yet the rationale always extended for his selection of Bob Dole for the vice presidency was he had this real problem in the farm belt.

Knebel: Well, go back to Kansas City and that selection. There were three finalists in that vice presidential selection. And I shall never forget Bryce Harlow was in the room. We were all upstairs in the Crown Center Hotel, with the President. And Bryce Harlow said his poll showed that Ann Armstrong from Texas, the country wasn't ready for a vice president, female. Howard Baker from Tennessee didn't help the agriculture side as much as Dole did. And that decision was made.

Smith: Now, this was one of the meetings that went on in terms of choosing a running mate?

Knebel: After the nomination.

Smith: After the nomination?

Knebel: That's right, that night. There were several of us and we were told that the President just wanted to spend some time with, I think it was Bryce and Bob Hartmann, and I don't know if Dick Cheney was in that or not. He probably well could have been. But we all left. There was kind of a reception. The other sidebar negotiation that was going on at the time was, of course, Reagan, would he, wouldn't he, no, yes?

Smith: Something which is still being debated.

Knebel: Yes, it is. And my wife was at the convention and she was very good friends with John Sears' wife, and Sears, of course, was Reagan's campaign manager. The two girls got together and got Mrs. Reagan and Mrs. Ford to a luncheon, which is as close as anything ever happened.

Smith: During the convention?

Knebel: During the convention.

Smith: Really?

Knebel: Yeah.

Smith: Tell us about that.

Knebel: You'd have to get her to tell you. She probably wouldn't say too much. But it did happen.

Smith: Perfectly civil?

Knebel: Oh, absolutely. Very much so.

Smith: One thing on the House, because there are stories that – again, going back to what you said – Ford and Hale Boggs would have debates at the Press Club; they would drive down together and decide what they were going to debate that day; then get up and have their debate; and then go have a drink and have lunch and go back to work. You can't imagine that happening today.

Knebel: Well, back then Tommy was working for the Joint Economic Committee, I was working for the Ag Committee, and we used to have lunch as often as not. The same type of thing. The first time you went to the Hill and you went to work on a committee, you usually got a call from somebody like Jim Eastland to come over and have a sit down at five o'clock. And the only question was, "Do you want ice or not?" And that was how it was. I'll never forget when I first became general counsel downtown, I got a call from Eastland's staff, Sam Thompson. He said, "The Senator would sure like to see you again and congratulate you on your appointment." I said, "Yeah?" He said, "Five o'clock in his hideaway." I said, "Okay." We go up and sit down and he said, "Now, Jack, you know, Sunflower County, Mississippi has been declared a disaster area for the last thirteen years and so has number one (?) disaster declaration comes right in early January." And I said, "I'm well aware of that Senator." He said, "You're not going to break a record, are you?" I said, "I'll have to look at it, but we'll certainly look at it closely." And that's how it was. Allen Ellender had his eightieth birthday, Lady Bird Johnson was up in his office and broke up a conference on the food stamp bill and Ellender had a great big pot of jambalaya and the staff ladled it out and Lady Bird... and it was a big thing. But Lyndon would show up occasionally. It was just a different era.

Smith: What changed it?

Knebel: Boy, if I knew that I'd be a handicapper. Even in retrospect it was a gradual erosion. I attribute most to post-Watergate election. Lack of trust. Breakdown. It's just hard to say.

Smith: Well, let me throw out a couple of possibilities because you are absolutely right. I think that the Vietnam War and Watergate rubbed a lot of things raw. It certainly planted seeds of distrust toward government, generally. But then the media culture is an enormous factor. With the rise of cable TV, and the internet, both of which have many positive values, but both of which also can be used to exacerbate conflict because conflict sells, it sells dog food and it moves the radio dial. Whatever you think of the health care plan, for example, it's a classic example of the media whipping up a controversy and then

exploiting it for ratings. Plus the gerrymandering of House districts. I mean, let's face it, if you look at the number of truly competitive districts today...

Knebel: A handful.

Smith: Compared to forty years ago.

Knebel: It used to be twenty-five percent right?

Smith: Yeah, which means basically, you win a primary, which means you play to your base, which means the middle of the road. Hell, there are political consultants who deny the existence of a middle of the road. I talked to President Ford about this – forty years ago the prevailing political culture was, you went there, you fought for your principles, you went at it, hammer and tongs until six o'clock, but at the end of the day, people expected you to get something done. And the political incentives were there to write legislation; to find a consensus.

Knebel: Well, you know something that has always struck me? A personal example: when I was on the Ag Committee, there were fourteen people on the staff, four minority, ten majority. I was recently invited back there. There's a hundred and sixteen or a hundred and twenty on the staff now. We wrote more legislation than they do now. The members were more involved; they knew more. I have never been so shocked as to hear the likes of Henry Waxman saying, "I haven't read that 1,000 page bill."

Before, we used to have tutorials every week for the Ag analysts on the staffs, for the AAs and for the members. I can never forget, Tony _____, Pat Roberts. Tony worked for Bernie Sisk, Pat worked for Bob Dole, or Keith Sebelius in the House and then after Bob went to the Senate, Keith came to the House. They used to come every Friday afternoon and we would explain, section by section, each bill, what was amended, what had happened in committee that week, so that they would know, and they were better able to better represent their members. And the members had more interest.

Tom Foley used to sit on the corner of my desk when he was chairman of the committee, and he wanted to know everything in there. And he did. A great

legislator. But I don't think that's there today. Maybe there is too much money, maybe it costs too much to get elected and they get in and their first deal is - I know Butz got in trouble for it one time, he said, "The first thing a senator does, he finds his desk in the Senate and declares for president." And you know, there's some truth in that. There's a modicum of truth in the way it operates today. It's just a different institution.

Smith: Going back to '76, what was the perception of weakness in the agricultural belt that, in fact, mandated Bob Dole's function?

Knebel: Quite the contrary. I think it was really a reflection of the strength in grain sales at the time and that the country – and you've got to remember, California is the third largest agricultural country in the world. Reagan had beaten Ford in the primary in early June; in the meantime we lost a counter movement against Jerry Brown's Prop 13. Jerry was the governor at the time and Caesar Chavez wanted to go on. We got the Farm Bureau going on that thing and if we hadn't had the strong agricultural presence on the ticket, I don't know that we would have. It turned out with California – I think Carter won it by a fraction, I don't recall. But it was a much closer election than it would have, could have, should have been in that regard.

Smith: Tell us about Earl Butz.

Knebel: Earl Butz was an extraordinary human being. I didn't replace him, I succeeded him. I was his general counsel, I was his undersecretary, I was his deputy secretary. I was, I guess like a son. I sat with him the night before he resigned. Hubert Humphrey came down the hall from their apartment house. Now there's a good example of the bipartisanship, of how that works. Hubert came down and we all sat there and had a drink. The press was like jackals gathered below at his apartment house.

Smith: Was it like a wake?

Knebel: Yeah, bunch of lights and stuff. So we all went out through the laundry then and Hubert said to me, "You want to sleep at my place tonight?" And I said, "No, no, I'll go home." Hubert made a speech for me for my confirmation as undersecretary. And I guess the contrast, the comparison of what it is today –

if you can imagine John Kerry making a speech for somebody being appointed by a Republican. It just wouldn't happen.

Smith: I think it was in October of '76, when Humphrey is in the hospital and the President went to visit him. And the story is that Humphrey said, with a grin, "You're getting some votes out of the Humphrey household."

Knebel: Right. You were asking about Butz, and Butz used to josh with Hubert. He said, "The only way to keep the Metrodome up is they have to have Hubert come over every week and talk in there for fifteen minutes and he can keep the Metrodome up for two weeks." But the fact is that Butz knew these guys and he could deal with them. We used to go up and see Herman Talmadge every Tuesday morning at 6:30 to go over what it was that the department needed and what his committee was doing on the Senate Ag Committee. Earl was very shrewd. He knew that after about ten o'clock in the morning, you weren't going to get any of Herman's good time, because there just wasn't any. And it was very interesting the way he could deal.

I saw him get crosswise one time when Ed Muskie, during the Nixon impoundments – do you remember the impoundments of the federal funds? We had some FAA money and it had been impounded. Muskie had a hearing as to why it was impounded and I, of course as general counsel, had rendered an opinion that it was wise and sufficient exercise of legal judgment to do that. And so we went up and Muskie, as he was want to do, was ranting and raving and TV cameras were running and his ears turned red and his face turned red and it was probably unfortunate, but it was shortly after William Loeb had chastised Muskie's wife – the *Manchester Union Leader*. Butz says, "You know, I wouldn't cry over it, Senator."

But he did have a way of getting crosswise with his vocabulary from time to time. In fact, I'll never forget his dear wife Mary Emma said, "Earl lives by the tongue and he's going to die by the tongue." And she was very prophetic on that, it turned out. God rest his soul, she was right.

Smith: What were his strengths?

Knebel: I tell you, I had three bosses in government, Tom Kleppe, when I was at Small Business Administration off of the Hill, Earl Butz at Agriculture, and President Ford. And they all had the same common denominator – strength. You never had to question anything they told you. Everything that anyone of them ever said to me was always right on. And believe me, when you are somebody’s counsel, it’s nice to know you are getting it straight. And that was always the case with President Ford, with Earl Butz and with Tom Kleppe.

Smith: We’ll get back to Butz, but tell us about Tom Kleppe.

Knebel: Kleppe was a remarkable guy. He was on the House Ag Committee, ran for the Senate. Nixon appointed him to be administrator of Small Business Administration and I went down with Tom to be his general counsel. I left the House Ag Committee to be his general counsel. Tom had been mayor of Bismarck at a very young age, made a fortune. He invented Glass Wax, marketed Glass Wax. Tremendous guy. He was in the House, they had two seats, he and Mark Andrews. I think by the ’70 census they’d lost a seat, so that’s when Tom ran for the Senate. He ultimately ended up as Ford’s secretary of interior. Ironically, he read me my oath of office as secretary. Delightful person.

I, along with President Bush, Sr., served as his pallbearer a year ago February. Very great competitor. I used to play tennis with he and George Bush, Sr. and they were fierce games. Phil Rupee from Michigan was always in that game. I was counsel so he could just pull me out and say, “Let’s go,” and we’d go. The interesting thing about all those guys is that they all had more money than God, and I don’t think any one of them every bought a can of tennis balls.

Smith: You can tell the rich. They are different from the rest of us.

Knebel: Kleppe, in particular, self-educated person and very driven. But, as I say, he shared that trait with President Ford and Earl Butz and just a very, very straight, honest person.

Smith: And all workaholics? I don’t mean that as a pejorative.

- Knebel: Not in the sense that hours were the big deal. Kleppe was a neat-desk guy, in there early in the morning, out early in the afternoon. Didn't go to a bunch of socializing. Butz was pretty much the same way.
- Smith: Tell me, because these guys were "conservatives," and that's a term that's come to be redefined in a number of ways; post-Reagan and post-Gingrich, and as we speak. What kind of conservatives were they? Not least of all in their attitude toward the federal government?
- Knebel: Well, I think that the common thread of all those fellows for whom I worked, and I think I'd put Dick Cheney in this, too. Many of us just didn't think the government had to do everything. And didn't want government to do everything. It wasn't that they were anti-government, it was just that the old story was: it's a liberal if you throw it a lifeline and it's too far and the liberal forgets why he threw the lifeline. But it's a conservative if it's thrown out there and it's not far enough and you've got to swim halfway to get there. That's probably something of a bad cliché, but I just don't think that anybody with whom I've been associated in government - and that's why it's so different today - really ever felt that government was the panacea. The Southern chairman, Bob Pogue, I remember those fellows railing against the start of the food stamp program. "We don't need to do that."
- Smith: You don't think race was a factor?
- Knebel: Oh, clearly it was subliminally, but there were a lot of ways that were ingrained in Eastland, Talmadge, Ellender, Spencer(?) Holland.
- Smith: Boy, there is a name I haven't heard.
- Knebel: That were just different than George Akin of Vermont. Jerry Ford. Now that's maybe a divide. I don't know if it's a distinguishing divide, or how you do that.
- Smith: Well, it brings up a fascinating thing. I remember we talked to Walter Mondale about this. We talked to Ted Kennedy about this. The fact is, forty years ago, when you first arrived in town, a member of either body, you found yourself in an institution where there were two parties that actually had wings.

There is no doubt the Republicans were more conservative, the Democrats were more liberal, but that's not to say that there was a totally conservative and a totally liberal party. So for example, Bob Dole says, he was told by his predecessor, when you go to Senate, "Spend some time with Senator Eastland."

Knebel: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Ted Kennedy said he was told, "Spend some time with Dick Russell."

Knebel: Russell Long of Louisiana. Sure.

Smith: But the fact is, within your caucus, if you were going to get something done, you first of all had to master the art of working with people who were not your ideological twins. Who represented a fairly diverse set of viewpoints within the party. And in some ways that was preparation for success in the larger body. That diversity is largely missing today.

Knebel: Well, we had George McGovern on the Senate Ag Committee and we were doing the conference on food stamps. George asked, as a point of personal privilege, if the conference could not meet on the next day, which was Saturday morning. And Al Ellender says, "Well, we've got to get this done before Christmas," and he said, "Well, I going to give away my daughter, she's getting married tomorrow." And the eyes kind of rolled, and the big thing was that everybody wanted to roll McGovern. But you know, he pushed back and we said, "Okay, we'll start at noon." And McGovern came in with his top hat and tails and sat in the conference Saturday afternoon. But I don't know if that would happen today. Maybe it would, perhaps. But it goes to show you how they bent backwards more.

Smith: Well, presumably as Minority Leader, Ford had to deal effectively with not only what passed for the right wing of his party...

Knebel: H. Allen Smith at Rules Committee – oh, boy.

Smith: But John Lindsay or Charlie Goodell – there were liberal Republicans in those days.

Knebel: Yeah.

Smith: And you think that prepared him for the presidency?

Knebel: I don't know if you ever prepare for the presidency. I think it takes the measure of the man the minute he walks in. Ford was a creature of the House; made no beans about it. He passed up the opportunity to run for the Senate, I guess. He loved what he was doing. And as you quite aptly said, his goal in life was to be Speaker. That didn't happen. I don't know, maybe it's just the basic man. A very decent human being. A lot of people said, oh he wasn't the greatest idealist, he didn't have a lot of stuff. But you've got to remember the time at which he became president, he had a very short time in which he had to make a decision as to Nixon, whether he would run, what to do with everything else on the scene, he brings Rockefeller in. I mean, this was a tough time.

Smith: No transition.

Knebel: Absolutely none. You were barely out of the era of John Dunlop and price controls. Something the other day that I had even forgotten about was the flu scare. I had totally forgotten that. When you're in there, and I guess this is the point, things are going so fast. You talk to Dick Cheney about being chief of staff and how that came about. It is amazing. It is an incredible story. But when Ford found out, or I guess when Al Haig came to him and talked about the "deal" Ford gets his trip cancelled to Hawaii and all of a sudden he's there. That's almost as severe as Lyndon Johnson reading the oath on the airplane in Dallas. These are cataclysmic and I don't believe that anything prepares you for it. I think it's the measure of the man. We've been blessed as a country. There's a theory in the House that the chairmanships of the House committees had always kind of dodged the bullet, so to speak, on avoiding people who should have been chairman.

Smith: Despite seniority.

Knebel: And I think that's kind of broken down in the past few years. The iron forge of democracy is no longer a true and prevailing story.

Smith: One way of assessing the Ford presidency is that he came into office very much a man of the House, and in a sense, had to learn to be an executive - without forsaking the contacts and the qualities that he had exercised in the House. There is a reason that we don't elect legislators to the office; for lack of a better word, the persuasive aspects of the job, the kind of broader political elements of the job. And there are people, Dick Cheney is one of them, who say - Don Rumsfeld told us - every day he [Ford] became better. He really became an executive. And in fact, the tragedy of 1976 was, just as he really mastered the job, he lost it.

Knebel: Yeah.

Smith: Could you see that, for lack of a better word, growth? Did he become more comfortable in the position?

Knebel: It's hard for me - what's the old saying - if you're not the lead dog, the scenery never changes; and when you're just a member of the Cabinet and that young fellow trying to come into something himself. I was very comfortable in my role as general counsel because I knew the statutes. When I became undersecretary I got budget responsibility and then all of a sudden I got the executive responsibility. So you've got your head down running so hard that it's very, very difficult to assess "Oh my boss is doing a good job." Far be it from me to suggest that anybody I worked for was doing a good job or bad job. I was just trying to do my job.

Smith: What were the main agricultural issues that the Ford administration dealt with?

Knebel: Well, one of the most outstanding was in '74 when the Russians had a crop failure and Dobrynin came into see Butz one night and Butz wanted me there just so he'd have a witness. I was still in general counsel at the time. And the ambassador says to Secretary Butz, "We would like to buy X tons of grain." We'd done our crop analysis and we knew what the carry forward was, and Dobrynin said, "From such and such a company." Butz said, "Fine." What he didn't tell us was he was going to buy the exact same amount of grain from all five of the major U.S. grain companies, which put us in serious short supply.

Scoop Jackson had a head, the Senate Oversight Committee, it's the only time I ever made the front page of the *Washington Post* like this, and the CEOs of the five grain companies were there. And then we went down afterwards and the President asked the companies to cut across the contracts, which they did, and that was averted. So that was a very interesting thing.

Smith: But was that portrayed as a grain embargo?

Knebel: No, the grain embargo was when the Ayatollah was trading and they cut across the grain contracts to Iran because of the Ayatollah on fuel. That was in '73. This was in '74 when the Soviets had a grain failure, a crop failure, which we knew about because of our satellites and they didn't even have as good a monitoring system as we had of them. In fact, Dobrynin, I shall never forget says, "Well, now, tell me, what is it? How bad are we?" And I never will forget Butz kind of winking at me and saying, "You want to tell him or not?" And I said, "We'll talk about that. We'll let that one on the hanger."

Smith: So the consequences of this was what, in terms of the farm belt? That you did not make as large a sale to the Soviets?

Knebel: We sold everything that we could and just kept a natural reserve going forward. As I said, the crop report that I filed, which was the ensuing year, the barns were painted, there was all new farm equipment out there, there was no carryover and everything was clearing the market so there were no payments. That was probably the central issue. We had, back in '73 under price controls, we had the Australians trying to dump meat in, in the meat in port law. So we had some issues.

Smith: Let me just ask you because there was a sense that the relationship between the President and Secretary Schlesinger involved bad chemistry - that there was, for lack of a better word, perhaps a professorial manner about Schlesinger that some took to be condescending. Now, it's interesting because we've talked to people who said, "Well, he talked to everyone like that." He wasn't just talking to the President like that, that's just the way Jim Schlesinger talks to people. Did you sense a personality issue?

Knebel: Well, I really am not close enough to have evaluated that from a personal standpoint. But bits and pieces and dribs and drabs and, like I said, when you're just doing a job, and you're trying to make sure it gets done, you don't sit around, unless you're a gadfly. And I never shall forget when Butz was secretary he used to get upset with some of our folks who waited until he left town to issue press releases in their name. It was something. So there are lessons there.

Smith: Did you ever see Ford display a temper?

Knebel: No. In '76 when we went out to Vail after the convention, it was pretty relaxed. We were having sessions and they'd gone to Russell, Kansas, to Bob's hometown and then went up to Vail and we kind of retreated up there for a week or so. Susan was sixteen or eighteen at the time and she said, "Can you get some Forest Service horses so we can go on a horseback ride?" I said, "Sure." So I got on the phone and I think we had every horse that the Forest Service owned in the five-state area trucked in overnight. And we had probably twenty members of the press, a dozen Secret Service, Susan and a couple of her friends and were going to do this trail ride the next day. Secretly, we were hoping that the horses would take the press out, which they didn't do because none of them could ride. But the President got word from Susan that she had done this and he was a little irked. He calls and he says, "What the heck are you guys doing?" I said, "Mr. President, we are trying to have a good time and help Susan. She wanted to do that." He says, "Well, is that right?" And I said, "Well, horses need exercise." That's as close as I ever saw him to ever being upset on anything.

Smith: But it also is very revealing about his sense of ethics.

Knebel: And then I said, "The rangers that trailered these horses in, they need a little rest so they are going to stay overnight and we'll do this again tomorrow and then they'll take them back." He says, "Okay." But that was a measure of the guy. You know, he was so decent.

Smith: And actually, he got along with the press very well.

Knebel: Oh, he was wonderful. Some of the photography, the skiing crap – pardon me – some of the photography, bumped his head on the airplane – I was with him out in Iowa with Bob Ray when he was dedicating the Iowa State Veterinary School and he spoke to the student body. This was in October, “I’m glad to be here at Iowa,” and of course, the crowd just went crazy because we were at Iowa State. He had a couple of those.

We had a whistle stop tour during the campaign of ’76. I don’t know if you ever got into that one. The train out of Chicago – it was he and Mrs. Ford’s thirty-fifth or fortieth anniversary, so Bob Michel who was on the train went out and bought a cake for the President and Mrs. Ford. We were going to have this cake, and of course, the Secret Service disheveled the cake before we could get it through to them. But he was a grand spirit in that regard.

Smith: He loved campaigning, didn’t he?

Knebel: He really did. We had Chuck Conner from the *Rifleman*. Tom Kleppe was on that train, I was on that train, Bob Michel, Bob Madigan who later also served as secretary of agriculture, a congressman from Springfield was also on that train. We had lunch in Springfield and then we went on to St. Louis and ended there. Kit Bond was the governor at the time, about to stand for re-election and he had his own problems and didn’t make it. That was quite a thing. He really did do that.

Then a couple weeks later we had a trip – actually it was on that trip to Iowa for the dedication – we picked up the editorial board of the *Des Moines Register* and they were going to have an interview with the President going back to Chicago. So we get on and sitting up in the presidential cabin on Air Force One, the President asked me to sit in for details, and I thought for sure we had the editorial board vote and that they would endorse the President, because that the only statewide paper in the country, the only single paper on a Sunday, in any state. And they came out for Carter the next day. He was crestfallen on that. The campaign, we went through tough times. Of course, Butz was gone and he’d been a very, very, very strong speaker and I picked up his schedule and mine as well, and it was pretty hectic.

Smith: How would you characterize Ford's agricultural policies? I mean, market oriented?

Knebel: Absolutely.

Smith: And yet accepting...

Knebel: Well, you've got to remember that Michigan had been a very big dairy state. That was a very rigorous price support feature of the agriculture program. But as to grains, free market - big on export. We used to very much ballyhoo the agricultural trade surplus that we had. And it was very real.

Smith: And, difficult as it may be, describe what happened to Earl Butz.

Knebel: At the end of the convention in Kansas City he got on an airplane to fly to Los Angeles to visit his son Tom who was a divinity student. He was on an airplane - Earl worked an airplane like Hubert Humphrey did. He didn't just go to the men's room, he'd walk up and down the aisle and kind of glad handed everybody. He got about halfway up and Pat Boone stopped him. Pat Boone had been a delegate, a Republican delegate from California. Like Butz, pledged to Reagan on the first ballot. And Pat Boone, _____ in November. And Earl said, "I think we have a problem with the black vote." And he said, and I must tell you, Pat Boone sitting on the aisle, John Dean was sitting by the window, and he had been at the convention as a *Rolling Stones* reporter. He didn't say a word. He was not in the convention. Earl acknowledged John, "How are you, nice to see you," sort of thing, but was speaking strictly to Pat Boone. And he said an old alderman in Chicago told me thirty years ago, and when John Dean did his story in *Rolling Stones*, he ascribed his thoughts on the forthcoming election that a very senior Republican, perhaps summarized it best when he said why the Republicans would lose the election and he spelled it out. And that story in *Rolling Stones* went unnoticed.

It came out in August and in late September I got a phone call, I was down in Mississippi from Ron Nessen, who was the press secretary. He said, "Jack, is this Earl?" and he read me the quote. I said, "I've been with Earl for five years and I've never heard him tell a racist story in my life. Barnyard humor?"

He was the king of it. But never anything racial.” And I said, “I don’t know, but I put him on an airplane and he went to Los Angeles to visit Tom and I went to Tulsa and then I went on up to Vail.” He says, “You’d better get home.” So I caught the next plane back and sure enough, when they talked to Butz he confirmed the fact that that was his story, John Dean reported it correctly, albeit without identification, and he did not want to become a blemish on the Ford re-election campaign. So he wanted to get out. And that was an agonizing weekend we spent. Bryce Harlow was very much in counsel with the President on that. Bill Timmons, who you are going to see was in counsel on that. So Earl left and then as I recanted earlier, I told you that story when I was at Marysville, Ohio doing Earl’s speaking that day, and I got a call from the President and that was that. That was on October the 4th, my fortieth birthday.

Smith: How difficult was it for Ford to make the break with Butz? Presumably it was seen as a political necessity.

Knebel: Absolutely. He was very fond of Earl. As indeed, was Nixon. He and Nixon were very close. Earl went out and did very, very well on the speaking tour. You couldn’t have told that he wasn’t secretary. We had a party here for him, it was really pretty amusing. About two weeks after the election he was still in town and I got his chief of staff to edit all of his speeches, for what I call his ribald humor. And we made him sit in the middle of the floor down in our basement and listen to himself for forty minutes on the tape recorder. And it was just one of those great celebrations of a bad event that you ever have. And he left knowing that his staff was very close to him.

Smith: Was he dogged by that in later years?

Knebel: Not really. He was an academic. He went back to Perdue. We had a White House fellow named Jim Bostick, who was a black who had been student body president at Clemson, and he got up and he dispelled any notion that Earl Butz was a racist right off. I know the next morning I was up in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and the *Today* show came and interviewed and said, “What do you think of Earl Butz?” and I said, “I think he’s a patriot.” And that was the end of that. I don’t believe that ever haunted him. In fact, very

few people even recognized the source of the affliction and the fact that John Dean was in it and what a calamity it was that Dean is a *Rolling Stones* reporter, the holier than thou counsel to the President.

Smith: What are your memories of the convention in Kansas City?

Knebel: '76 convention?

Smith: Was it a bitter convention?

Knebel: It was an interesting convention. It was contentious, but not bitter. Reagan's troops were marshaled by John Sears, who was a very, very dear friend of ours, and John did a masterful job. They had beaten us two to one in North Carolina in early primaries. They beat us two to one in June in California, June 2nd. John was a great strategist and it was the first time I ever saw the religious right brought into politics. And they were very, very well marshaled and very effectively done. And very honestly, the Ford campaign was so new – we really didn't have much more than some of those House Republicans that he had gone out to speak for and they had a local staff and we could use that. But what we were running into was the phenomenal organization that the Reagan people had done.

Smith: Going into that convention, was there a degree of uncertainty?

Knebel: That's a question which could really best be answered by President Ford. I don't know that he truly wanted to run; I think he felt he should run. I know that he was comfortable as a president, and I thought he was extraordinarily able to do that job, but I'm not sure that he was comfortable as a national campaigner because there were so many handlers. There was so much stuff going on that he didn't have the day to day that he probably would have liked.

Smith: There is a wonderful story that Stu Spencer tells. And you can hear Stu saying it. It says volumes about Stu, but it says more about Ford. Early on, when things were really going badly, post-North Carolina, Stu had reluctantly agreed to come onboard to help with the campaign. And it was a very awkward position that they had these polls, the President would go out and campaign, and the numbers would go down. Stu had to find some kind of

euphemism to get him off the campaign trail. Well, the President loved to campaign.

Knebel: He did love to campaign.

Smith: So, it's a Friday afternoon, wet, rainy, dismal afternoon. There are three people in the Oval Office; the President, Dick Cheney, and Stu Spencer. And Stu is not getting anywhere. The President is not getting it, or choosing not to get his message. So finally, Stu says, "You know Mr. President, you're a great President, but you are a fucking lousy campaigner." But it's the sequel that makes the story. Because that story appeared in Witcover-Germond's book about the '76 campaign. And Stu was livid. He called Dick Cheney to chew him out and on and on and so on. And finally Dick sort of lets him run down and he says, "There was a third person in that room." And the fact that: one, he could say it to Ford and keep his job, and two, that Ford would then tell it on himself to a reporter.

Knebel: Yeah, he was very self-effacing in that regard. And I don't know that I had that many times that I was with him in such limited company that there was ever any stuff like that I saw. I remember Butz telling me when he went over to tell the President that Phil Campbell had had a heart attack and that he wanted to bring me back, that he was very animated in getting involved and got right on the phone.

Smith: Were you in Cabinet meetings?

Knebel: Oh yes.

Smith: How were they run? How did he use the Cabinet?

Knebel: Well, the first Cabinet meeting I went to, I never will forget John Warner was the Bicentennial chairman. Now Butz was out of town, I was undersecretary, and Ford looked at his watch and he said, "John, we've got a Bicentennial coming up in about eight months. Are we going to have to reset the clock? Are you going to get it done?" And John Warner kind of all blustering and all that, it was pretty funny. But there was some levity. Ed Levi, the attorney

general, used to get into it with Bill Coleman, who thought he was the attorney general.

Smith: Two very impressive minds.

Knebel: Oh, absolutely, world class and really great guys. But it was interesting and then actually when I became secretary, which was October 4th, only a month before the election, there were very few Cabinet meetings between and the time we left. But we did have one on the last day of our office. Our chairs had already been removed and we just had coffee around the Cabinet table. President Ford was wishing everybody good luck and Godspeed and Betty came in that day. It was quite something.

Smith: Was it emotional?

Knebel: Yes, yes, but not tearful. Heartfelt. I remember Carla and Rod Hills were both there, even though Rod was at the SEC, I think, Carla was HUD secretary. It was interesting. Henry Kissinger, Nelson was in fine fettle that morning.

Smith: Really? What was he like?

Knebel: Nelson was a great big bear. I ran into him in November in '77 in Tehran, I was over there on a case and he was there to bring his African art collection to lend it to the Shah. And of course, the embassy was overrun a few months later and the art collection and the Shah – all of it – were never seen again. A few months later, I guess a year later, Nelson was no longer with us. But I had dinner with him in Trahan and he was just living life.

Smith: Was he? Did he seem in good spirits?

Knebel: Oh, I never saw him when he wasn't happy.

Smith: Really? Because there were times.

Knebel: I didn't know him that well.

Smith: No, but clearly, being dumped from the ticket was a traumatic experience. But by all accounts, he was a good soldier.

Knebel: He was a marvelous soldier because this is eight months after we had left office, and he wasn't philosophical, saying, "Well, we could have run if I was in it," or anything like that. It never even came up. He was just talking about what he was going to do and all this stuff. I came away with the regard for him that I always had. Very nice guy.

Smith: There is a school that anyone who goes through the incredible emotional experience of a campaign and all your hopes are up and you close the gap and then just fall short – that it took a while for Ford to kind of regain his balance.

Knebel: First of all, the night of the election returns we were all at the White House and it was like a morgue. Nobody had a voice. I didn't have a voice, I had given as many as ten-twelve speeches a day, and the guys who were scheduling me were on the Committee to Re-Elect, Manny Mopus and Dick Ling, they'd get on the phone and call me at four o'clock, "You're going to Springfield, Illinois," and give me three more stops. I'd say, "Wait, wait." "And then you're doing eleven o'clock news in Wheeling, West Virginia." And this is how it was. "By the way, your plane is wheels up at six o'clock tomorrow at National." So basically, you'd get home at midnight. You'd come in, take a shower, get a clean shirt, go back to the airport, and that was it. And this campaign was something that I'll never forget.

Smith: Did you think at the end you might have actually pulled it out?

Knebel: You know, it was pretty interesting because, and Jimmy Carter fired me several times as secretary. He didn't want no lawyer, he wanted a peanut farmer to be secretary. And this was big in the South. So I was doing a lot of speaking down there. I'll tell you what it was - it was in Terra Haute, Indiana. I was campaigning for a new congressman named Dan Quayle, a guy who was running for Congress. And Miss Lillian, President Carter's mother, she got into his speech about firing me and the press asked me about it. And I said, "Well, the last time I checked, she's not running for anything, except to get him out of town." I don't know if they would have pulled it off. Another week, another ten days, I've heard a lot of conjecture both ways. Sometimes those things tend to close and they never quite get there. They are kind of like your belt after a big dinner.

Smith: Do you think the pardon in the end was the biggest factor? Or is that symbolic?

Knebel: Yeah, as I say, I think it was symptomatic that the body-politic had to cleanse itself of the last vestige of Watergate. And that's how I've always attributed it. Was Carter ready for the presidency? Again, it takes the measure of the man. History will read what it is.

Smith: A couple of things and we'll let you go. Tell us about Bob Hartmann.

Knebel: SOB.

Smith: Yeah.

Knebel: Same old Bob.

Smith: He was a polarizing figure, wasn't he?

Knebel: I don't know if anybody was at the other end of the pole. Bob wrote probably the greatest phrase, this national nightmare... but the interesting thing about Bob, and I always respected him for it, his total devotion to Jerry Ford. He was the perfect loyal person. Jack Marsh came along, Dick Cheney came along, Rummy had been in the House with the President, but Bob had been his staff and he was his staff. And he was an extension of the President. He was kind of the rough personality side that you never saw in Ford coming out. In some respects, I don't know if Bob ever smiled at me and said, "Gee, thanks for all the stuff you've given me," when I was doing stuff for him. (Hartmann clearing throat) "I'll show it to the old man." And I'd see Ford and he'd say, "Hey, thanks a lot; that was good stuff."

Smith: Where does loyalty shade over into a kind of possessiveness that may not be healthy?

Knebel: I think you have to look at the flip side of that and ask yourself, if you saw something inherently wrong that your senior is doing, are you so blinded that you can't either withdraw or speak to him in private, or do you just roll with it? And then that's not loyalty, that's subsuming your personality.

Smith: Right. And I take it to be implicit in what you say, that Hartmann did not hesitate to frankly confront his boss.

Knebel: Oh, he shut the door and ranted and raved and just the same way that he would – he treated the President with a great deal of deference and respect, but also knew his role, and his role was to counsel. And he did extraordinarily well.

Smith: You obviously saw the President in later years.

Knebel: Oh yes, in Colorado, in California a couple of times. And when he came back here for his dinners.

Smith: They loved Colorado, didn't they?

Knebel: You know the interesting thing about that last Cabinet meeting I mentioned to you? In '76 he told me, well, actually, it was before that, in '74, when I came back in to be undersecretary, he said, "You know, I've got my eye on a piece of property at Beaver Creek." And I said, "Let me see if I can get the environmental impact statement through the Forest Service so that we'll have it for you." And when we went to the last Cabinet meeting, I had a roll of papers under my arm and I gave him the environmental impact statement for Beaver Creek. And he said, "You are a man of your word."

Smith: Clearly they loved it, and by all accounts, they were adored.

Knebel: They actually were.

Smith: They were more than the first citizens.

Knebel: Yeah, Marty Head, who is a very dear friend of ours from Aspen, has been on several different community boards where the President served. She would be a person who could speak to that directly. I haven't spent enough time up there to be able to say.

Smith: Is she in Vail?

Knebel: Yes.

Smith: Great. We'll make a note of that.

Knebel: Marty Head who was married to the fellow who – Head – Marty Head.
Remember the Head tennis racquet?

Smith: Oh sure.

Knebel: Head skis. That's Marty. She has a skiing house there on the slopes. So make sure you go in the winter.

Smith: And before I forget. Is John Sears still downtown? How would we get hold of him?

Knebel: I haven't seen or heard from John. I know his wife, his former wife, is up in New Hampshire because he always speaks to her on her birthday. And their kids were contemporaries of our kids and everything.

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

Knebel: Yes, it was when he came in for his last dinner here, and told us, as he and Betty stood in the reception line, they had kind of bar-height chairs, that this was going to be his last trip.

Smith: Was that the dinner in Statuary Hall?

Knebel: Yes, it was. And they gave Rumsfeld and Cheney the Presidential Medals.

Smith: Was it gratifying to see, with the passage of time – I think of Senator Kennedy, the Profiles in Courage Award that the Kennedy Library bestowed on him was in some ways a transforming event. He used to say, "For twenty years, everywhere I go, people asked the same question. They don't ask anymore." It's almost as if that crystallized this larger movement where American public opinion, if you can speak of such an enormous and diverse thing, accepted not only his rationale for the pardon, but the political courage that he displayed. Poor Lyndon Johnson, who died days before the Vietnam peace agreement. Gerald Ford lived long enough to see that shift.

Knebel: I like the theory, but in point of fact, I'm not sure that enough people understand the history to really make it viable. Here's why: if you look at the people today, they are talking about having an education program for the kids who don't even know what 9/11 was. What percentage of our electorate voted

for JFK in 1960? The country, and again, you eluded to it earlier, C-SPAN, 24 hour cable news, what is the story today? It's not history. And I'm a person who doesn't believe in reading these chronicles of today because there is so much kind of verbiage in them that's just acrimonious and doesn't really tell a story. I think your theory is going to be well accepted as historians really begin to write about the period that we were in. Jim Cannon got it right in his book. Of course, I would hope he would. But it's going to take some more passage of time. I think passage of time will treat Ford well. I really do.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Knebel: Well, I've always characterized him as a good and decent human being. I supposed, who well served his country, both in the House and as president. He got us through a very tough time and he was a grateful man.

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