

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Jon Nunn
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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- Smith: First thing, and most obvious, I guess, is, how and when did your paths, in a professional way first cross?
- Nunn: Well, I was first involved in the Ford campaign in 1976. I worked for the Kent County Republican Committee then, and I was part of a group which has become known as Scatter Blitzers. We went out to Kansas City for the convention, but prior to the convention we flew or drove to four or five states, with upwards of sixty to a hundred people and campaigned on President Ford's behalf. So when the opportunity became available, we went out to Kansas City and campaigned there for him as well.
- Smith: When you went out, were you confident that he had the nomination, or was it still, in fact, somewhat up in the air?
- Nunn: Oh, it was still very much up in the air, especially during convention with the Reagan delegates and the Reagans themselves. [I] remember the Reagans coming to the convention late, holding up the proceedings, with either the intentional or unintentional consequence of it not making prime time out on the East Coast. So, even as a young man, I was very aware of the politics being played at the national convention level.
- Smith: Was there bitterness at that convention?
- Nunn: I think there was bitterness on the part of his supporters. I can't speak for President Ford and the rest of his staff – they always seemed upbeat. I worked in the administrative office there during the convention. But I think there was disappointment on the part, especially of young people – that this was their first engagement in a national political race, and for somebody that they felt very strongly about because of the relationship.
- Smith: Have you always been interested in politics?

Nunn: Pretty much so.

Smith: And it survived Watergate?

Nunn: Yes. Certainly.

Smith: I suppose it helps when you have a hometown boy who is in the White House.

Nunn: And when you have somebody that's as admirable and as respectable as he was. I think there was never any doubt within our community, those people that knew him even in his Congressional days, of what he really stood for and what he represented in terms of West Michigan values and in terms of our personal kinds of values. What was right, what was fair, what was good. That translated throughout his years in office, Congressional and presidential. But even after that, the way he looked at, as he'd say to me often, politics, in general - how much politics had changed because of the disrespect. That you can be disagreeable without being disrespectful.

Smith: Tell us something about him that might surprise people, generally.

Nunn: I'll go back to Grand Rapids. Even after leaving the White House, even after moving to California and Vail, how much he still cared about knowing what was going on in Grand Rapids. He took the *Grand Rapids Press*. But every trip home here that he'd make when I was traveling with him, if I was upstairs in the suite with him, he'd be grilling me on, "What's this new building over here?", "What's going on with so and so?", "What have you heard about so and so?" So, to him, this was always home, even though he didn't live here permanently after he retired, this was always home in his heart. Frequently we'd end up taking routes that weren't planned. He drove the agents nuts. I'd be in the room and he'd say, "Let's drive by the house that I grew up in," or, "Let's drive by South High School." The agents were very accommodating, of course, but that was just his curiosity. That was his true interest in Grand Rapids.

Smith: It was almost like he was still a Congressman. That level of interest.

Nunn: And he followed politics here locally. He knew what was going on. He had a keen interest in his community.

Smith: So then, how did you become more formally associated?

Nunn: After losing the election and after moving to California, he started making periodic visits back to Grand Rapids.

Smith: By the way, let me interrupt for a second because we talked to a couple of people about this. I take it there were locals who resented the fact that he didn't come back here – that he went to California.

Nunn: I think there were some comments, if I remember, letters to the editor, and there were comments in general. But, I think it's very understandable why he did – a lot to do with Mrs. Ford's health and it being easier for her. But if you look at the history, some of which I've provided you, of the number of trips he made back to Grand Rapids since I started being involved in those trips, about 1982, there's well over, I think, eighty plus trips, if not more. It's really interesting.

Smith: And was there a kind of a routine - a set routine to these trips? Were there things that you could, almost like clockwork, count on happening? Did he stay at the same place?

Nunn: Stayed at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel, always stayed up on the twelfth floor suite, which became known as the President and Mrs. Ford's Suite. One thing that was always routine was there was always butter-pecan ice cream in the freezer for him. Unless Mrs. Ford was here, and even then sometimes, he'd always say, "I'll bet there is a little ice cream in the fridge, isn't there Jon?" And so before he would make his phone call, that was routine – every night, if I was the only person traveling with him, if Lee wasn't here, or some other staff person, or Mrs. Ford, I'd usually be the first person to see him in the morning and the last person at night. And when we got back to the suite, I'd get his ice cream ready, and before I'd leave, I'd kind of review what we were going to do tomorrow, but he'd always say, "Get my bride on the phone. Get Mrs. Ford on the phone." He'd refer to her as many different things, but always endearing, obviously a lot of affection. So that was very routine for him.

Smith: When she was here with him, did she frown upon ice cream, or did she watch his diet?

Nunn: Mrs. Ford watched his diet, yes. But he was very conscientious about his diet. President Ford was not somebody who snacked a lot between meals. He believed in having a big breakfast, a very hearty breakfast. He got up very early, he wouldn't go to bed until quite late, considering his days. Rarely was he back in the suite before eleven o'clock at night and then he'd be making phone calls to her, watching the news. And then he'd ask for a wakeup call of like six-thirty the next morning. The papers were always requested to be outside his door, and I'd order his breakfast. He was conscientious about what he ate, and very healthy. He stopped eating eggs in the mid-80s and that was for health reasons, I think. He would eat oatmeal, fresh fruit, toast – buttered, prunes – so I think he was very conscientious. He didn't snack between meals.

Smith: Multiple newspapers?

Nunn: Multiple newspapers – anything we could get our hands on.

Smith: He loved newspapers, didn't he?

Nunn: He sure did. Well, I think he felt it was – he was obviously interested – but he felt it was kind of, in part, his responsibility as a leader to be aware of what issues were going on. And I think that was very admirable of him.

Smith: Were there friends that he would stop in – obviously, at the beginning there was still family around here – would he visit old friends, family members?

Nunn: He always wanted to see his brother – both brothers when the younger one was alive.

Smith: That would be Dick and Jim.

Nunn: Frequently, if there was time permitting, there would be a family dinner or family and friends out at Kent. He liked going out to Kent Country Club, where he had been a member. He'd always stop in to the bar area, and there is a gentleman that had been there for forty years, I can't remember his name,

but he'd always stop and say hello to him. He was everyone's friend. It was Jerry.

Smith: Was it difficult at all to be in public, to go to a restaurant, just because in the best sense of the word – what you just said – but then the autograph seekers and the celebrity hounds. Let's face it, they follow in the wake.

Nunn: Sure. If I was making arrangements, and depending on the restaurant, the hotel staff or the restaurant staff were always very cooperative. I'd talk to them about that so that he would be able to enjoy himself when he was out. Periodically, somebody would come up and approach him, and I'd be watching from afar and if I thought it was going to be a problem or something, or an inappropriate time, what I would try to do usually, is just intercede in the situation and ask the person if they would give it to me and I would get it signed and get it back to them at an appropriate time. That's usually how I tried to handle things.

Smith: Ann Arbor – tell us about the visits there, which were frequent.

Nunn: Which were frequent. Well, that was like going home for him again, also. We'd be riding in from the airport, and he'd be reminiscing about fraternity row, about working in the cafeteria, about his days on the football team there. He truly loved – Ann Arbor was his second home. Grand Rapids was his first, but Ann Arbor was truly his second. Regardless of what activity we were there for, whether it was on the schedule, free schedule or not, there would be a trip to see the football team. And that was usually, I'm sure for him, for me or for anybody, other staff that was traveling with him, the highlight of the whole trip.

Smith: Tell me, because I've been told by others who were there, when he got up to give a pep talk, he was eloquent, forceful, powerful, more so than in conventional speechmaking. It was almost like flipping a switch. There was something about that place and those players.

Nunn: Exactly. You could just see the inspiration that the players had. I was fortunate to be in those rooms or on the field with him, and there was a hush, there wasn't one sound and every players eyes were glued on him and every

word he said. And he followed U of M football. He knew every game. He could reference the past three or four games and what this particular quarterback did. And he frequently asked Lloyd Carr, “Where’s so and so?”, and have the young man stand up and talk to him about his play. He always had to throw in a little history of himself about when they played football with no helmets, or pigskin helmets kind of thing, to get a chuckle. But it was a transformation when he went in. It was just different. And he would never leave the field or the room without personally greeting and shaking the hands of every player as they filed by.

Smith: It must have been a thrill for the kids.

Nunn: Oh, it was tremendous. And I remember once, I want to think it was Mike Ford or Steve Ford, was in town, and I suggested, not that they wouldn’t have done it already, but suggested, “You really need to see this,” and Penny came along and they were just in awe afterwards. It really brought tears to your eyes to see the charisma and his really heartfelt devotion to that institution and the game of football.

Smith: And by all accounts, he had a very special relationship with Bo Schembechler?

Nunn: Yes.

Smith: It’s interesting because when we interviewed Peter Pocklington earlier this year, [he said] the President did a pep talk every year for the Edmonton Oilers. Peter brought the whole team down to California once a year and the President would meet with them. He obviously could have been a motivational speaker – at least where athletes were concerned.

Nunn: Well, an interesting story, not University of Michigan, but Notre Dame. He was invited down there to receive their Sports Blazer Award. I don’t remember the particular title of it. Marty Allen went along. But it was a really big event. I believe they were playing Brown University and up to that point Notre Dame had not won a game, or maybe they’d only won one out of five, I can’t remember. President Ford addressed the team and I remember that morning there was a breakfast. He went back to the suite because Michigan,

Michigan State was playing and he watched that for a while before he headed over to the stadium. He sat up in the president's box and I think it was with Father Malloy, and Notre Dame ended up winning the game and Father Malloy gave him great credit and asked if he'd come back on a periodic basis to just give that same pep talk to the team.

Smith: Well, as I recall, I think they went on to have a very successful season.

Nunn: Yes. But he was very particular when it came to football games and whether he was watching them at home, which I wasn't present when he was doing that, but if I was with him when we were out of town, Notre Dame, or whatever, he'd always ask that I make sure that I surrounded him with people that would not talk to him during the game. And not even during the game, but in between plays. I mean, he was focused on that game and he wasn't there to chit chat and to socialize. He was there for the game.

Smith: The retirement of his jersey – that must have been a very emotional moment for everyone.

Nunn: It was, it was obviously at the big house. He had talked to the team. I believe it was the day before. And I remember the retirement came at half-time. The whole family was there. We were on the far side of the stadium and had to come through the main tunnel where the players come in, and I'd only once before experienced being on the floor of a field – of a stadium when it was full, and that was in Notre Dame – but this is a much larger stadium. This is *the* stadium in the country as far as President Ford is concerned. And so we put President and Mrs. Ford on a golf cart because it was a very long way around the field and they couldn't walk across the field. And the minute they entered, and the crowd saw them, all the way around the field, the cheers and roars and the applause was just thunderous. It was unbelievable. I think it probably was, of all the trips I was able to participate in, one of the highlights, and I know it was for him. It was just a great ceremony, very meaningful.

Smith: Speaking of meaningful ceremonies, I remember vividly the dedication of the staircase – the Saigon Embassy staircase. Which, to this day, I suspect Henry Kissinger is still scratching his head over why in the world would you want to

include that, or to remind people of that. And of course, I saw it from the angle – there were 150 members of the Vietnamese community from West Michigan. It was a very bitter-sweet occasion. What was it like for him?

Nunn: Well, I think it was very emotional. But I think it was very reinforcing for him and the decision he made. If you remember, at that time, many in the Congress and many in the military were advocating the withdrawal of our troops and our troops only. President Ford was adamant that we do everything we could, as a government, to help as many of our allies as possible escape and not be left behind. And so when he issued that evacuation order for eighteen hours, they continued to evacuate as many – all the American troops, but as many of the Vietnamese allies of ours.

The day before, you and he had made a tour of the exhibit here, and the History Channel wanted to do an interview of him about that time in history and about that evacuation. I was in the room, in the back of the room with the videographer and the interviewer, and the person interviewing President Ford happened to be Vietnamese. He asked President Ford a series of questions and to document the history on that. President Ford did, and told the pros and the cons and that he felt strongly and still does to this day that that was the very right decision. When he finished that statement, the gentleman said, “Mr. Ford, I was one of those that you evacuated.” It was so emotional I had to leave the room at that point. And I know it brought tears to President Ford’s eye.

Smith: The ninetieth birthday celebration – both the White House and here in Grand Rapids. Tell us about the White House event.

Nunn: Well, the White House event was just phenomenal. It was another highlight, I think, for him, and it was a highlight for the family. The entire family attended. I believe it was in the East Room. It was a beautiful event. We spent a couple of days in D.C. The event in Grand Rapids, the homecoming – the one in D.C., I believe was July 16th, his birthday is actually on July 14th. Two weeks later, he came to Grand Rapids and Susan accompanied him. There were between seven and eight thousand people on the lawn at the Ford Museum to celebrate his birthday. Again, it was great homecoming for him.

Smith: Of course, the house he always regarded as home in D.C. was at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue. So in addition to the White House dinner, I think you said he had actually visited Capitol Hill that day or the day before.

Nunn: The day before. He wanted to make a visit up to the Hill, and the Hill wanted him to make a visit up there. So first he went to Speaker Hastert's office. Then he walked clear across to Congress, which is quite a hike, over to the Senate for Senator Frist. And then our plan was that he make his way onto the floor of the Congress. Well, to do so, he wanted to go through the Congressional Cloakroom.

There happened to be an eighty-some year old woman who he wanted to greet, who started working in the cloakroom with her father when she was thirteen years old. So, again, I think it's little things like that, that show a lot about the personality of this person who's been with kings and queens and leaders and millionaires, and captains of industry. But he still remembered lesser known people in his life that were very, very important to him.

So, after he greeted her, our Congressman, the district congressman, was from President Ford's district from Grand Rapids, Vern Ehlers, took him onto the floor of House, from the side, in the back, unannounced, and they slowly started making their way as members were making speeches and mingling around the floor. As more and more people started paying attention and noticing, all of a sudden the entire Congress started coming towards him, embracing him, many old friends. They broke into chorus singing, *Happy Birthday*, Mr. President. From what I understand, it was totally unprecedented and singing was forbidden in the House. Very emotional for him, very, very emotional.

Smith: Must have been. That must have been a homecoming, too.

Nunn: Oh, certainly. The House of Representatives and his years there – his many friendships there.

Smith: The Reagan funeral in 2004, that must have been doubly emotional in the sense that they were of a similar age. Obviously, they had been rivals and adversaries and all that, but that had been pretty much forgotten and relegated

to the past. But I wonder if he sat there in the midst of all this pageantry sort of as a preview of coming attractions.

Nunn: I know that Mrs. Ford was there with him and I did that trip with him. They commented a couple of times in the suite in Willard about some of the ironies of people they had recently lost, as friends or acquaintances. I think there was definitely a reflection between themselves on the immediacy in the sense of their mortality. They took everything in really good stride, but I think it was very hard, even though as you say, there were some rivalries and some past bitternesses there, possibly. But it was, I think, a very emotional thing for him to be there under those circumstances, in a sense to recognize that this was an actual mirror of what was going to happen for him and/or Mrs. Ford someday.

I remember the motorcade going up to the cathedral and I was just overwhelmed on the number of other motorcades. I guess I hadn't really ever experienced that or anticipated it. But within like a thirteen or fifteen block radius, all the streets were shut off, and there were motorcades stacked on motorcades, stacked on motorcades. I remember we took a different entrance into the cathedral, because at the main entrance, there were at least thirty or forty steps, and at that point his knees were bothering a little bit. So we took a side entrance, and I referred to it, and I remember Mrs. Ford winked at me or something, and I said, "We're just doing the side entrance, or ramp entrance." I'd never refer to it (handicap) as anything other than we're just taking the ramp entrance, because we had a holding room there. I explained to him that we'd go to hold until the others arrived and he and Mrs. Ford would then walk out.

Smith: Did you see him in the presence of his fellow presidents?

Nunn: Yes, I walked President and Mrs. Ford, along with the lead agent, up to the section where all the former presidents were seated high ranking officials. They were all very happy to see him and Mrs. Ford, especially the Carters. They always seemed to have a very good relationship, especially considering the '76 campaign. It always amazed me, but again, it shouldn't have because it's a reflection of the kind of person that President Ford was. But, obviously, President Carter defeated him, but it didn't take long for them to become, I

think, friends in a lesser capacity, but then over time, friends in a very close capacity.

Smith: They really enjoyed each other's company, didn't they?

Nunn: Yes. I think they had a lot of respect for each other – a great deal of respect. And then again, that goes back to President Ford. I mean, President Ford was all about respect. Another one that they were very close to was Lady Bird Johnson.

Smith: Which again, I think might surprise some people.

Nunn: But it doesn't, again, when you reflect back on President Ford. Tip O'Neill was one of his and Mrs. Ford's very, very best friends. They were challenging rivals in the Congress. But they would go out afterwards and play a game of golf and have dinner together. So there was always that mutual respect for the other person and the other person's right to have a different opinion. That they – both he and Mrs. Ford – expressed on many occasions.

Smith: How much do you think she influenced his politics? And I say that in this sense: when he was in the White House, he was considered the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge, but long before he died, he was almost marooned. I mean, the party had gone over here, and he and Mrs. Ford were here, and I'm not sure how much he changed, or the party changed, or what, but he was certainly in a minority within his own party. How did he feel about that? And where did that come from?

Nunn: Well, I don't know what influence she really had on his politics, especially during the White House period, because I wasn't there, but they shared very similar opinions on politics. They expressed more privately than publicly, their disappointment with the Republican Party, with some of its candidates, especially some of the potential ultra conservative candidates and nominees. They were very, very much middle of the road. They were very, very much moderates. They were very, very much pro-choice, which was not popular with a lot of the conservatives in the party.

Smith: That was his viewpoint, that wasn't something that he inherited from her? Do you think she influenced him at all? I realize it is speculative.

Nunn: Well, I think she, obviously, had some influence on him – on everything he did and thought, to some degree. But there was such mutual respect between them. But as long as I've known him, that has been their position. In fact, we were at a tribute dinner here for Rich DeVos and another community leader – boy, I think it may have been in memoriam, I can't remember. It was a huge, huge dinner, and some of the media asked if President Ford would be available for an interview. I walked over and asked him and he said sure, so we walked over to this designated area, and I thought they were just general questions about the dinner and Rich DeVos and their relationships, and the next thing I hear is the word, "choice, abortion," coming up and I thought, oh my gosh, what have we gotten ourselves into – this is going to be in *Grand Rapids* – the story of the night. Not his comments about the honorees...and that's what it ended up being. But again, he was unabashed in not wavering about things that he felt strong about, but also at the same time respecting the right for opposing points of view.

Smith: They went to convention after convention, and you wonder, every four years he felt a little bit more out of touch with "mainstream" of the party as it was developing in the 80s and the 90s and beyond.

Nunn: I think part of that was his loyalty to people. His loyalty to the party, his loyalty to people. In his case, his loyalty to the Bushes.

Smith: That's true. There was a very close relationship with that family, wasn't there? Between the Fords and the Bushes.

Nunn: Right. And I think that, I'm not so sure had it not been for Herbert Walker, that he would have gone to the last convention. I don't think he shared a lot of the views with the current Bushy – that's just my speculation - of this administration.

Smith: It must have been somewhat awkward for him to have so many of his old alumni in really critical positions, and obviously their performance was

criticized and the subject of much controversy. One sensed that the personal relationships never suffered.

Nunn: Right.

Smith: Certainly with people like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, but you wonder whether some of the political judgments were called into question.

Nunn: Well, some of the Op-Ed pieces that he submitted, that were critical of certain administration policies, and one that he and Jimmy Carter jointly submitted, I believe, and I don't remember the specific issues. But, again, he was not afraid to express his opinion and say what he thought was right.

Smith: Did you ever hear him talk about Nixon?

Nunn: Not really.

Smith: One sensed that he – if it was anyone else, we'd say, how could you be that naïve? – but in his case, I think it was very sincere. He was genuinely shocked that Nixon lied to him. That just wouldn't occur to him.

Nunn: Well, I think that goes back again to his personality and his character traits, that because of his honesty, his straightforwardness, he expects that and expected that in everyone else. And I think he was truly shocked and hugely disappointed.

Smith: I only heard him, personally, criticize two people. And the worst thing he could say was "That's a *bad* man." One was Gordon Liddy, and one was John Dean. Were there others?

Nunn: There were others I know whose opinions he didn't agree with, or the way they went about doing things. Mrs. Ford was equally expressive, I think, at times.

Smith: Tell me about her sense of humor.

Nunn: Oh, she had a great sense of humor, and she always liked poking fun at him. And he just took it in great stride. It was wonderful to see. One of the things – and I'm blessed in so many ways, opportunities I've had, events I've attended

– but was really having an inside glimpse of them and what they really stood for, and I think few people, most people assume, but few people really get a glimpse and know how truly in love they were every day of their life. Every day.

Smith: How did that manifest itself?

Nunn: Just in the way they would refer to each other, in their courtesies toward each other, and the fact that, to ask me to get his bride on the phone, well, she's been his bride for many years ago. You could see it in the way they looked at each other – in the way they cared about each other. It was unbelievable.

Smith: Do you think he felt any degree of guilt that, in the early years, when he was climbing the ladder in the House, ambitious, on the road a lot, and really, the burden of raising the kids fell on her. Whether some of her problems were grounded – who knows? Do you think he sort of consciously made an effort to make up for that in the later years when they were together maybe more than they had been earlier? When he was with the kids more?

Nunn: I can't really comment on that, again in the sense that I really did not know them that well then. But to see the affection they had for each other, even though he may have not been around as much, he was out doing speaking engagements and that. That's nothing that was just manifested or re-manifested. I think it always was there.

Smith: And he loved to campaign.

Nunn: Loved to campaign.

Smith: When you start to think, in 1976, the Reagan challenge, and it can be argued both ways – there is a school of thought that it made him a better candidate. There is a school of thought that, yeah, maybe it made him a better candidate, but in the end, it undermined his position. And yet, by 1980, he was out there campaigning as hard for Ronald Reagan as he had for himself. And he just loved campaigning, didn't he?

- Nunn: Well, there were many that wished that Ronald Reagan had been out there campaigning as hard for him in '76 as he did for Ronald Reagan. But, yes, he loved people.
- Smith: Was he interested in people?
- Nunn: He was truly interested in people. He came back to Grand Rapids several times campaigning. Appeared here a week before the election with Ronald Reagan. Appeared here a week before the election with George Bush – actually was a surprise guest at the rally with Lee Greenwood.
- Smith: This is where Dole began his final hundred hours. Remember him, President Bush and David Brinkley were here?
- Nunn: Yes. The big, final, hundred hour rally, the bus tour.
- Smith: What did he enjoy about campaigning?
- Nunn: I think it was just the opportunity to get out and be with people. And support a cause he believed in. I think he became very selective. I know he did as he got older in terms of which campaigns he would accept the invitation from and which ones he wouldn't. Some of that may have been because of the politics, and some of it, I think, to some degree, as he was getting older, he was slowing down and the staff and Mrs. Ford were telling him he had to slow down.
- Smith: My sense was, it seemed like his health was really almost phenomenal, right up until around his ninetieth birthday. Which was also right about the time when, in effect, he couldn't travel. And I thought, when his doctors deprived him of travel, that it was like part of his life was over.
- Nunn: I think that one of the biggest disappointments for him, and for anybody that had the opportunity to know him, to work for him, was the fact that he could not go back to Ann Arbor that final time, for the dedication of the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy. That meant a lot to him. That legacy, every time there was a trip that I was with him on to Ann Arbor, again, it was his second home, he loved to walk around campus. He'd say let's not take the motorcade, let's walk.

- Smith: Would he be recognized?
- Nunn: Well, when you're traveling with a group of like six or eight people around you and they're all in suits, it's pretty hard to go unnoticed.
- Smith: But what I'm thinking are the kids – the undergraduates...
- Nunn: A lot of them, no. Or they'd pass and then you'd see their heads turn around or they would lean over to each other. But if someone said "Hi" or made eye contact he'd always say, "Hi, how are you?" "Back to the dedication of the School of Public Policy – I think it was a huge disappointment for him. That's one thing I wish that he could have done. I think we all wish that he could have. That would have meant a lot to him.
- Smith: Now, he was there for the ceremony announcing the name, and he was there for the groundbreaking. So he was very much a part of – and his good friend Sandy Weill – that was a very special relationship, wasn't it?
- Nunn: Yes. They were very, very close. He was there for the dedication of the building which has Mr. Weill's name on it, as well. I believe that was one of the last times he was in Ann Arbor. But he was really looking forward to that building being built.
- Smith: I'm just looking through this list, which is phenomenal, that you've prepared of all his trips that you have worked, and there is really a cluster, I notice, in '98 and '99, and I remember a lot of these. But we did some great conferences at the library and he would be very actively involved in those. I remember, we did the CIA conference, we did the Women in Politics conference, among others, and he always seemed to be – not only a participant – but very much a roll up his sleeves and learn. He was very much a part of the discussion that was going on. It wasn't about him – it was about, even then, what he could learn, say about the CIA. In fact, he and George Tenet became friendly after that. So when we did the next big conference for the 25th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, we wanted to open a lot of papers. And, of course, the National Security apparatus didn't want to open a lot of papers. So he wrote to George Tenet, went to the top, and Tenet, to his credit, leaned on those beneath him and we were able to open 25,000 pages that day. But I will never forget, what

other president would have a conference observing the low point of his presidency? Show up to share those memories? I'll never forget as long as I live, him and Eugene McCarthy, sitting together – it was just a pretty incongruous sight. But my sense was, he really enjoyed those programs.

Nunn: I think it was part of his continual learning process. President Ford never stopped learning. As I mentioned earlier, he devoured newspapers, all day long, when there'd be downtime, in the motorcade if he hadn't read this particular paper, and he'd read it from cover to cover. He was always very current on every issue, and he wanted to remain current. And I think that, in addition to his active schedule, it kept him as healthy and kept him as young and vibrant as he was, right up to the end. But believing you're right, the inability in the last couple of years to travel, I think had an effect on his overall slowing down. But he was always mentally sharp; he was always interested in learning and being current.

Smith: I remember he came back here to light the Christmas tree, remember? I think he came to a couple, as long as he was physically up to it, he'd come here to light the Christmas tree.

Nunn: You have to like Grand Rapids to come back here in December, right?

Smith: Which is pretty impressive. But then that year, 1999, which was the 25th anniversary of the inauguration, were you on the trip where he got the Medal of Freedom at the White House?

Nunn: In the Congress? The Congressional...the Medal of Freedom? No.

Smith: That year was like the trifecta – he got the Congressional Gold Medal, he got the Medal of Freedom, and something else.

Nunn: I did the Congressional Gold Medal, not the other one.

Smith: That was the year we had Alan Greenspan and Justice Stevens and Billy Graham. And he came back for all three.

Nunn: And the Gifford's. Kathy Lee and Frank Gifford.

Smith: Yes, his good friends from Vail. What do you remember about those events?

- Nunn: You know, there are so many incredible events that I've been able to participate in, but that was a very special one because I had never met Reverend Billy Graham. Out of all the people I've met through President Ford, I've never been more impressed with anyone. It was just overwhelming. Probably one of the most personally emotional experiences I've ever had. What truly a wonderful, wonderful man.
- Smith: What were the two of them like together?
- Nunn: Oh – very close. Very respectful of each other. They've known each other, obviously, along with Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Graham, since the White House. Just great, great respect. And it was fun to see kind of the mixture to add Kathy Lee Gifford and her husband, who are also very good friends of Reverend Graham. Kathy Lee is a huge admirer of Rev. Graham and of President Ford, and they were both here in tribute to President Ford. It was an incredible ceremony, as you remember.
- Smith: And I know there were people who thought, what an incongruous pairing, but in fact, as you know, they were all friends.
- Nunn: Very, very close. And I did not know, I had never even watched the *Regis and Kathy Lee Show*, so I knew her by name, but she is a very, very spiritual person. She's very devout in her religion and her respect for President Ford and Rev. Graham. That was nice to find out, and that then put the whole relationships together between the three of them.
- Smith: And Justice Stevens – I remember asking the President, “When was the last time you saw Justice Stevens?” and he said, “When I appointed him.” And I guess all those years that it had been Justice Stevens' dream of playing golf with the man who put him on the Court. And that day they got to do it.
- Nunn: They got to play golf. Well, you hosted the conference here also with Madeleine Albright – and all the former secretaries of state. And a lot of that has to do with your genius, obviously, Richard. But it also has to do with the fact that when you are doing something on behalf of President Ford, or at the suggestion or the request of President Ford, again, partisan politics are just put aside. It's out of respect for the man that they come together.

- Smith: I found, to my astonishment, over and over again, when I would approach people, I would find out that he had never asked them for anything. This was the first time anyone ever asked them, and they were, in most cases, delighted to be asked. And the fact that he would be here himself, well, that was frosting on the cake.
- Nunn: I don't think he liked imposing on people. He felt he was imposing on people, when, in fact...
- Smith: Is that because he got imposed on so often? Let's face it, he got asked. I assume there were people, we don't have to name names, I'm sure there were people in the community who presumed just a little bit on their real or imagined relationship to ask for favors.
- Nunn: He had a lot of good friends in the community. [smile]
- Smith: Did he get sick of signing autographs?
- Nunn: Yes. He didn't really mind, but the concern was, once he signed one going through a crowd, suddenly I would see people grabbing napkins or packs of matches, or whatever, and so, part of my responsibility was to try to see that in advance, see somebody coming and just politely walk over and say that he wasn't going to sign any autographs today. I'd offer them a card with the address of the office out in Beaver Creek, or California, they could send it in. In some cases, even if it was somebody that was a good friend of his, it was just much easier for me to say, would you give it to me and I'll take it upstairs, I'll make sure he signs it, and I'll get it back to you in an hour, or at the dinner tonight, or whatever. He always tried to be accommodating, especially to those people he knew were trying to take care of him – police officers, hotel staff.
- I remember one time one of the agents asked if I would have him sign a baseball. He hated signing baseballs. The reason being, he said to me one time when I asked him the first time, he said, "I never played baseball. Why do they want me to sign a baseball?" So, he signed it. I told him it was for the agent, but that's kind of a cute side story.

Smith: Were you in Philadelphia at the convention in 2000?

Nunn: Yes.

Smith: What do you remember about that, because it must have been frightening.

Nunn: I was actually working on the convention staff for Bush Family and Friends. I was working logistics for members of the immediate family, and Calvin McDowell was doing the advance on that trip for President and Mrs. Ford. Penny, of course, was there. As well as Norma, I believe with Mrs. Ford. The day the Fords were to attend convention I'd been invited to be their guest and to travel to convention with them. Penny had asked that I come along with the staff as part of the staff entourage.

The Fords were not aware I was traveling with them. When we arrived at the convention center the Fords saw me and came over. Mrs. Ford gave me a hug, and shook my hand and said what a nice surprise. And I said, "I'm your guest whether you knew it or not." And they said, "Well, that's great," and they then thanked Penny for thinking to include me. We went into the Green Room with them and then we went out. I was assisting Calvin on some of the logistics. I went up in the presidential box to see where they were sitting. As the convention started, he came out with Mrs. Ford. He was doing a number of interviews, and finally those were cut off and he went up into the box.

I had the schedule with me, and he originally was scheduled to leave after a certain point in a certain speech. Well, typical President Ford, he didn't want to be discourteous, I think, to anyone. I remember, Penny and I were in the tunnel and I walked out on the floor below him, trying to get his attention because I usually had pretty good eye language, or body language with him, I could tell, having been...

Smith: Did you have signals prearranged?

Nunn: I had some signals, even as far as if we were in a crowd, if I'd tap his elbow he'd know it was me. I would be like an opportunity either like, we're ready to go, or do you want to get out of this situation? Also our eye communication was pretty good. Back to the convention, I was starting to get concerned

because it was really, really hot in the convention hall. I could see he was very, very uncomfortable. I kept thinking, I wanted to get his attention to see “Do you want to go?”, but it would have been awkward, to some degree, because he’s in the middle of the box, seated next to the Bushes.

So, finally convention broke and he came down the stairs with Mrs. Ford. He was noticeably shaking a little bit, and he was noticeably uncomfortable and hot. We took him right to the Green Room where Calvin had the unfortunate task of telling him that his motorcade wasn’t [ready]. He wanted to go right then and there. He knew he wasn’t feeling well, it was obvious, his color and everything. Calvin had the unenviable job of telling him that Mrs. Reagan’s motorcade was scheduled before his. Which I don’t think set too well at that point in time, especially just because he was not feeling well.

Calvin instructed the staff to immediately board the motorcade we would all go with him at once – we immediately went and got in our cars in position in the motorcade so that when the golf cart brought him out, we were immediately ready to depart. When we got back to the hotel, I remember going up to the floor where their suites and the staff offices were located. Sitting in the office there, I knew something was wrong. Then I remember Penny coming out of the room and coming down to the office. She said, “Jon, we’re going to have to take him to the hospital.” That was just - for the entire staff - just unbelievable. After they left for the hospital, I remember we went downstairs and sat in a bar. We were just waiting. Penny, of course, because of that very, very special relationship, was very visibly upset. I remember her pacing, and I remember the phone ringing, and her walking over to the door of the lounge and looking at us. I think I was with Norma. It was just an awful experience to go through thinking, he might die right at that point in time. Fortunately he didn’t and he survived, but it was a very, very dark period for all of us who knew him and loved him.

Smith: It must have thrown a bit of a pall over the convention, too.

Nunn: Yeah.

Smith: I know Governor Bush visited him in the hospital. I think Larry King would have if he could have gotten a camera into the room.

How was he with the media?

Nunn: Oh, I think he was very, very fair with the media.

Smith: Very accessible?

Nunn: Very, very accessible. Had a lot of respect for them, and I think, as a result, they had a lot of respect for him as well. I know locally here, Rick Albin, who is one of our locals reporters did a lengthy interview with President Ford. President Ford was very, very impressed. He had not known Rick before, but he said he could have been right up there with any of the nationals – he said he was very impressed with this local talent. So I made sure that Rick knew that, which was a huge compliment to him.

But it was funny, we were doing a press conference on one trip and Lee was here with him. Peter Secchia was involved in some way, and I knew what our schedule was and I said - normally, if you were the press person, you'd just say, "Ladies and gentlemen, one more question" – well, I knew President Ford well enough, so I think we told Peter that day, I said, "Peter, we really, really have to get going." Peter stepped forward and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, one more question." President Ford responded, "Come on, Peter, we can take a little more time." It was like he pretty much knew when he wanted to conclude things.

Let me tell you about the Reagan funeral. Interesting thing is, Penny called me two days before the Reagan funeral. She and I had been talking about it and scheduling. I used to help with scheduling a lot, helped Judy. I think I was even doing some scheduling on that, and she calls me, actually the day before, I think it was, and said, "Jon, I don't know what I'm thinking. President and Mrs. Ford can't make this trip alone. Lee can't help. You have to go to Washington with them and be there with them." I said to her, "I mean this is a great honor, but it's literally like tomorrow." She said, "I know. Can you do it?" And I said, "Of course I can do it."

So I got thrown into the thick of things. Got there the next morning. The agents picked me up and briefed me and then went out to the airport for the arrival. Later that afternoon I met up with a liaison from the White House.

The White House had assigned a liaison officer to each of the former presidents' families, and traveling staff. Ours met with me and went over all the protocol and itinerary for the funeral I was reviewing the seating for the next day, and when he told me the seating arrangements, I thought, this is very, very strange, because they had President Ford and Mrs. Ford in the row behind President Clinton.

I called Penny and I said, "It's my understanding, according to MDW protocol," - and I actually got on the phone with Mike Wagner[MDW], who was in a awkward position. He knew either the Bush White House, or Mrs. Reagan, was making the call. If I remember the seating correctly, it was the president, the vice president, President and Mrs. Clinton in the first row. Second row was former President Bush, President and Mrs. Carter, President and Mrs. Ford. I knew that was not according to protocol, I didn't know who was calling the shots. I wasn't at a staff level to make that kind of decision, but I knew, at least myself and Penny, were totally aware that was not right, according to protocol and the MDW knew it wasn't as well.

The next day before we left for the funeral, I briefed them about what we're going to be doing. Who's going to be there greeting them - things that they probably know, but just to refresh their memory. And I went over the seating, and I remember President Ford saying, "Why are we seated behind the Clintons?" I had to scramble to try to come up with some explanation. And Mrs. Ford just says, "It's probably the order of presidencies." She looked to get me off the hook, but she knew and he knew. Again, never being a presumptuous individual, but he knew - why would that be the order of seating?

Smith: It is implicit in everything we've been talking about, but give us a capsule description of what you did and the things you did, and was there anyone else doing it? My sense is that there was a very small...

Nunn: It was a small group that worked together. I was never on paid staff. I was always reimbursed for my travel, and that's the way I wanted it. I had my other full time job, and each of my jobs, when I was the executive director for eleven years of the Kent County Republican Committee, when I went to work for Dick and Betsy DeVos, when I went to work subsequently, for Grand Action, it's always been with the understanding that I need the flexibility to be able to do things on behalf of the Fords. That was because of my great respect for them, and the joy of working with the staff.

So as an example: a trip to Grand Rapids is scheduled, or there's something going on at the museum. I begin working on the initial schedule, sketching it out, time-wise, adding in events, dress codes, particulars for each event. Then I submit the initial schedule back to Judi Risk, who is the scheduler in California. Both of us work jointly and collaboratively. If it was a trip to Ann Arbor, then Judy and I worked via phone until I got there. Then, depending on the trip, Lee Simmons or Dick Garbarino might be traveling with President Ford.

My role was significantly different when nobody was traveling with him, because I was not only doing advance work, but was really also serving as personal assistant, making sure that he was taken care of, that his accommodations were correct, that those newspapers were there, that he had the assortment of soft drinks that he wanted. Make sure he has butter-pecan ice cream in the refrigerator. And then travel with him from event to event, and again, brief him before we leave, "we're going to be doing this," or if there is a schedule change, working in that capacity. There would be times when both he and Mrs. Ford traveled together, then it would be more likely that there would be a travel assistant with both of them. There was always a travel assistant with Mrs. Ford. I would serve just more as the liaison and advance capacity.

Smith: Tell me about his relationship with the Secret Service – both of them, for that matter – the relationship that exists.

Nunn: They were very respectful of the Secret Service, and in the Service there is a lot of turnover. I don't know what it is – eight years or something – and they

usually shift on eight or ten years, so he'd known a number of agent...I, over ten years have known at least four of his lead agents, if not five. But he's always had a very good relationship with the agents. He's never in any way been abusive to them and he's never really taken advantage of them, in any way.

I remember there was a *60 Minutes* article, they must have been following President Ford, and it was a trip to Grand Rapids that I was doing with him, and they were trying to make the case how former presidents have all this extra staff and Secret Service. And, in fact, the Secret Service does more than just protect them. That they assist in carrying their luggage and on and on. As an example of agents carrying bags, they showed a clip of, who else but me, walking next to President Ford, carrying his briefcase and his overcoat. So they had to do a retraction the following Sunday because Mike Wallace actually called and spoke with me and I had to explain to him that I was not a member of the Secret Service, that I was an advance person and a traveling staff.

Smith: Did that feel good?

Nunn: Yes. It was kind of a get back at them a little bit, because anyone that knows President Ford, knows that he would not do anything that was out of line – that was inappropriate. That's just not him.

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

Nunn: I think the last time I saw him was a combination of a funeral planning meeting and a Ford Foundation dinner in Palm Springs with Vice President Cheney.

Smith: Was that the dinner where he announced that he was Deep Throat?

Nunn: Yes.

Smith: Tell the story.

Nunn: You can fill that in. I believe that was the last time that I ever saw President and Mrs. Ford. I remember there was a Foundation board meeting that next

morning, and it had been a long night due to the Ford Foundation Dinner. President Ford, even though he was always conscious of his health, he liked a good time, he liked a party. He liked people around him. He didn't drink, he hasn't drank since the mid-80s, the last I knew, but he liked people – and especially those Foundation dinners where there were so many people from his former administration, so many close friends that he truly cared about.

During the Foundation meeting I had stepped into the room. I was waiting for Mrs. Ford to arrive because she was arriving a little bit later, and Marty was speaking and Penny was in the back of the room, and I was standing with his lead agent. Marty, all of a sudden stopped the meeting and introduced the back of the room, indicating who we were – just for many of the board members that didn't know us. They had seen me around, a lot of them, on many occasions. Marty welcomed Penny, the agent, and then Marty affectionately referred to me, and he said, "This is Jon Nunn, he takes care of President Ford, similar to Lee when Lee's not around, but he's also become like part of the family." President Ford shook his head in acknowledgement. That was a great honor.

I remember then going out and Mrs. Ford had arrived, the agents told me, so I went out to escort her. I remember, especially, how particularly beautiful she looked that day. I mean, she always looked nice, but in my memory, I don't think I've ever seen her look more beautiful. What she was wearing – it was just perfect for her. And she's so gracious, she came in and then we went to a luncheon next door. Prior to that President Ford had, and you were there, Richard...

Smith: I wasn't there.

Nunn: At that?

Smith: No.

Nunn: Oh, okay. Prior to the end of the meeting, President Ford had to stand up and sit down a couple of times. It was obviously challenging. There was a plaque that was presented to him, and he rose, started responding to the tribute, but it was apparent that he became disoriented. I remember looking over at Penny,

our eyes connected and just like in terror, “what is happening?” It was obvious to everybody on the board, and he then sat down . There was a rule that he was never supposed to stand up too quickly. Mrs. Ford would tell him, and this is kind of a point of humor: Mrs. Ford would say, “Now, what are you supposed to do?” And he would say, “Count to ten.” She would say, “Okay.” And he’d say, “Ten,” and stand right up.

But on this particular day, at that event, it was obvious that there was something going on. That he had become a little bit disoriented, there was dizziness involved, and so I remember staying behind with him in the room. Everybody went to the dining room and then he was pretty good. I took him over there, but it was just sometimes that, I think a blood pressure thing or something – getting up and getting down. But that was very difficult, I think, for everybody around that day.

Smith: Including, I suspect, himself. He was a proud man, immaculate, great natural athlete, really took care of himself, and the indignities of aging which eventually affect everyone, it must have been a trial.

Nunn: He was becoming aware of it. He’d make comments. I remember, I think it was one of the Press Club things, it was actually the last Press Club event that President Ford spoke at in D.C. And you and I were there, and Penny was there. He stumbled over a word, as I remember. He was such a perfectionist, and I know that bothered him the rest of the evening, because he brought it up to Penny and me when he got back to the suite. He said, “Gol darn it,” he said – he was just mad with himself. That was hard to see, because you know, who else, at his age, could not only accomplish everything he had, but was still accomplishing and going like he did.

Smith: And then there were the big events where I’d write something, and then Penny was my co-conspirator, and she would make sure that he would rehearse, sometimes for days. But it paid off.

Nunn: Wasn’t it the first time he had to say, megabytes, or gigabytes, or whatever? And I remember when he was giving that speech, and that was another Press Club event, I think. Penny was just like on the edge of her chair, and he got

through it and she says, “Great.” Because a lot of his computer vocabulary, and many mechanical things were totally unfamiliar to him. If we were in a hotel room and there was phone with push buttons on it, multiple lines, he had no comprehension, or to charge a credit card number to the phone – no idea how to do it.

Smith: He did learn solitaire on the computer. But that must have been about the level of his computer skills.

Nunn: I think so.

Smith: I’m sure his grandchildren were much more computer literate – but I’m sure that’s true of lots of folks of that generation.

Did he watch television?

Nunn: News and sports, that was pretty much it – and new shows. I remember Ann Cullen and I sitting up in the suite for some news program after President and Mrs. Ford got home one evening because she was highlighted. What a treat for somebody like me – here I’m sitting there eating butter-pecan ice cream with them, and they are sitting in their pajamas and Ann and I are sitting and watching TV with them – I mean, it doesn’t get much more special than that.

Smith: Were you surprised by the turnout at the funeral?

Nunn: No. This community, he always considered this community home and I think that was a reflection of how widely known that was in this community. And he maintained relationships over all the years. Again, he read the paper. I think one of the saddest responsibilities I and Marty and others had was every time a friend would pass away in Grand Rapids, having to send the obituary out to him or out to Penny.

And again, you mentioned the Reagan funeral and his recognizing his own mortality, I think that had gone on for a long time because they virtually, all of his and her contemporaries from Grand Rapids were gone. Then, with the passing of his younger brother, there were unpleasant things that we had to do just to keep him informed. But he wanted to be informed. These were people he had known from the past, and he’d always reminisce, he’d always talk

about the Red Flannel Days up in Cedar Springs. And he remembered the names, he was amazing with names.

Smith: He must have been very pleased with the impact that this museum had in terms of – as a catalyst for downtown and the whole renewal of downtown.

Nunn: He was very proud of it, and he was proud of, not only the dedication, but the re-dedication. That was a highlight, and you orchestrated that. That was a cold day, but...

Smith: Remember Mrs. Johnson sitting out there? And Caroline in here.

Nunn: And Caroline Kennedy sitting up here because she had that cold, strep throat or something.

Smith: Yeah, but what does it tell you about – you saw the people who came. Who would have expected Caroline – not many people would have expected Lady Bird.

Nunn: No. But it was the kind of respect and the Kennedy medal that he received, I wasn't there but I know from comments he made and comments others made, that probably was one of the most significant recognitions that he'd ever received. Because it was a validation that he didn't need, but it was validation that was needed – that history needed. When Ted Kennedy said, "Mr. President, you were right and I was wrong."

Smith: He said after that, "You know, after that, people stopped asking the question." Which must have been a nice – all those years, everywhere he went, people would ask him. And they stopped.

What have we left out? We've covered a lot of territory and a lot of trips.

Erik: Do you remember the time he had gotten in a day early, and he was putting on a suit and he had brought the wrong suit and [Mrs. Ford] noticed it and she said, "Well, you're not wearing that."

Nunn: No. Okay. Ann Cullen was with us on this trip and I don't think Lee, in fact, I'm pretty sure Lee wasn't on this trip. But he had put on a particular suit, and he put on some shirt that either had started fraying on the collar or something

like that. He had a separate activity, so I'm getting ready to leave the suite with him. Mrs. Ford and Ann are sitting there and Mrs. Ford says, "You're not wearing that." He says, "Well, what's wrong with it?" "You're not wearing that shirt or suit." So a minor argument started and Ann and I, and I think Erik was up there, politely just walked around the corner and I went "Whew." And I know one of the things that Mrs. Ford said to me afterward, "Just lose that suit, or I'm going to tell Lee to lose that suit the next time we pack." It was just things like that.

Smith: What was his clothes sense? I assume he was pretty frugal, I assume he kept things.

Nunn: I'd say to Lee, "This suit looks like something that I saw in photographs – from his White House days."

Smith: And he was probably proud.

Nunn: Yes, but he was always meticulous about the way he was dressed. And he meticulous about how his tie was tied. It was very – before going out in public, before going into an interview – he would always say, "How's my tie look? Make sure it's straight."

Smith: Did he talk about his parents?

Nunn: Briefly, sometimes on a visit to his boyhood home. A couple of times that he made visits there. But not to any extent.

Smith: That's great. Thank you.

INDEX

D

Dean, John
Ford's opinion of, 13

F

Ford, Betty
humor, sense of, 13–14

Ford, Gerald R.
1976 Republican Convention, 1
2000 Republican Convention, 20–21
90th birthday, 8–9
autographs, 5, 19
Billy Graham, 18
campaign style, 14–15
character traits, 13
fashion style, 29–30
first acquaintance with, 1
funeral plans, 10
health issues, 15, 20–21
Jimmy Carter, 10–11
on Justice Stevens appointment, 18
latter years, 20–21, 25–27
media, relationship with, 22
move to Rancho Mirage, 3
pep talks, 5–7
Profiles in Courage award, 29
Reagan funeral, 22–23
remembrance, 25–27
Ron Reagan funeral, 9–11
Saigon, fall of, 7–8
Secret Service relationship, 24–25
social issues, 12
speaking style, 5–7
technology, 28
traveling staff, 24–25

Ford, Gerald and Betty
relationship, 3–4, 13–14

G

Graham, Billy, 18

L

Liddy, Gordon
Ford's opinion of, 13

P

Profiles in Courage award, 29

R

Reagan, Ronald
1976 Republican Convention, 1
funeral, 9–11, 22–23

S

Saigon, fall of, 7–8
Secret Service
responsibilities of, 25

W

Weill, Sandy, 16