

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**Larry Buendorf**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
**June 22, 2010**

Smith: Thank you so much for doing this. How did your lives, professional, personal, intersect?

Buendorf: Well, I was a naval officer and when I got out of the Navy and was looking for a job somebody said, "You ought to go into the Secret Service or the FBI."

Smith: And this was when?

Buendorf: This was back in the 70s. And I threw my hat in both rings; got accepted by both of them on the same day, and took the Secret Service job. I started out in Chicago in 1970.

Smith: And those were tumultuous times.

Buendorf: Pretty much.

Smith: With student radicals and campus unrest.

Buendorf: Well, yeah, there were a lot of demonstrations. So, my beat was in the Chicago office initially, but because I was a little bit older coming out of the military, they sent me to the president's detail in D.C. So, I got the last part of Nixon.

Smith: Is that the most prestigious assignment in the Secret Service?

Buendorf: Naturally, I would think so.

Smith: But, to an outsider?

Buendorf: It is. For a career pattern, it's really good to have the president's detail behind you. When I went there, I had the last part of Nixon, all of Ford, and about half of Carter. From there I was transferred to Denver, back to criminal work. But because I'd headed up President Ford's ski team, I was assigned to the

western slope area and so when any protectee came into Colorado, I would be assigned to go up and ski. I put a lot of miles on the skis my few years.

After a little over four years in Denver, I was promoted as the agent in charge of Nebraska and Iowa. I went to Omaha. They told me it was a promotion and I went along with it. So, I spent just one year in Omaha. I had a call from our assistant director who said, "President Ford's having a little trouble with his detail out there. They're not doing the job the way they should and we know that you had a good rapport with him. We'd like to have you take over that detail." I said, "Well, I just got to the fields and I really kind of like the criminal work. I have my own office and it really feels good." So they said, "Okay." The next day, I got the call basically saying, "You know, you could leave Omaha and your next office could be the assistant agent in charge of New York." I go, "You know, maybe it's a good idea that I take over the Ford detail." And it was the right move.

I went out to California in 1983, took over President and Mrs. Ford's detail and just loved it. They were both special people in my heart and I managed to put the detail in good order.

Smith: Again, I don't want to point fingers on this, but it's interesting that there was some level of dissatisfaction.

Buendorf: Some of the things?

Smith: Yeah, what are the kinds of things that would lead a former president into express some dissatisfaction?

Buendorf: A former president's detail can test everyone to really focus on what their job is all about, and if you get lackadaisical in really doing your job and you don't pay due respect to the person that you are responsible for, it can become a vacation type detail. And when the detail, in President Ford's case, was seven months in Palm Springs, five months in Vail, you begin to believe that you belong in the country club atmosphere. And you work hard at driving through the agents that, first of all, you've got to maintain what you're trained to do. You have to keep our reputation within the Secret Service at the highest level. and you only do that by doing your job the right way and doing it without

thinking that you belong in that type of atmosphere. Maybe some could afford it, maybe some couldn't. But they didn't want to leave, they wanted to stay there because it was not a bad deal. So, there was some fine tuning that had to be done. You had to remind them that, as I was reminded, your next assignment could be New York City. So, you want to make sure that you're minding your Ps and Qs.

Smith: Let me ask you about that unique relationship. You're omnipresent, you're responsible, ultimately, for their safety. I would think in some ways you're almost treated like members of the family. Yet I assume excessive familiarity is also something you want to avoid. How do you strike that balance? And is that something that is in some ways redefined with each presidential family?

Buendorf: Well, it is. You know, I got very close to the family after going through Sacramento, both with President and Mrs. Ford. But at the same time, you have a professional responsibility to maintain that fine line. There are times that I went from Palm Springs to New York City in the limo, to L.A., from L.A. to New York City, board meetings, back to the airport, fly back to L.A. and drive back to Palm Springs and never say a word and I sat right next to him all the time. It was just the matter of giving him the space. If he wanted to talk to me, I would talk, but I wasn't going to sit there and hold a discussion about world events, because, first of all, I just wouldn't do that.

But, at the same time, there's a respect that he has for you and a respect that you have for him. There are times when you need to be close. You know, on a golf course, he had a bad set of knees before he had them operated on, and sometimes he would get in the little bunker at the Bob Hope Classic or something and a lot of people were around and you knew he was going to have trouble. So that's when I would ease up to him to "talk," but really basically letting him lean on me as we're going up the hill and never create any attention to the fact that he might have needed somebody to put a hand on. Because he did not like someone to reach out and assist noticeably.

Smith: A proud man.

- Buendorf: A very proud man, very proud, and rightfully so. He knows when the cameras are running and he doesn't like to make an error. He wants every shot to be the best shot ever.
- Smith: In regards to the Chevy Chase imitations and how the media fostered the image that it did - as that something that bothered him?
- Buendorf: He went along with that, but I think deep down that he wanted people to understand what an athlete he really was. As I said, I headed up his ski team. The media were always on him because he paid attention to others around him. He'd be looking at the people yelling at him or waving 'hi' or whatever and not paying attention to what he's doing. That was my job. My job was to make sure that he didn't trip over his own skis or let the chair hit him, whatever. But the media would be all over it if they'd catch him falling down or something. I told him one day, "You know, you ought to bring the media up here on the mountain and let them see you ski." And we did and there were an awful lot of media and snow and he never fell. So, we sent the message clearly.
- Smith: That puts a whole new twist on it. He was obviously enough of a celebrity that, even while he was on the slopes he didn't have the luxury of concentrating because there were so many people trying to get his attention.
- Buendorf: It usually came at the lift lines. When he entered the lift line, he'd be looking and waving and everything. The line keeps moving and people are in front of you and on the side, so he'd get distracted. That's when you are kind of doing the nudging and the "This way, Mr. President." And always respectful, never make it noticeable, just a kind of guiding.
- Smith: Is it something that every agent has to learn - that kind of virtual invisibility? Is it harder for some than it is for others?
- Buendorf: I think probably some find it a little difficult because cameras seem to be attractive and they want to be seen by Mom and Dad back home and be on the front page. But 90% of the time - and probably higher than that - they're out there working. They're doing the job the way they should be doing it and you just can't get distracted. You've got to be focused all the time.

Smith: We talked to Rex Scouten who told us one fascinating thing. Of course, Rex had been Vice President Nixon's agent and became really close. In fact, the family in California had a room for him whenever he was out there. But he said, "One day on the plane, sort of out of the blue, but obviously something he had been thinking about, Nixon started pounding his fist and he said, 'You know, I'm just not tough enough. I've got to make myself tougher.'" A fascinating window into this man who, by his own acknowledgment, once famously said, "I'm an introvert in an extrovert's profession." Tell us something about Richard Nixon that might surprise people.

Buendorf: Well, you know, Bebe Rebozo was a very good friend of his and I was a boot(?) agent. I went out to California several times when they flew out there and he liked to have that private time where he didn't want anybody else in the limo with him. They'd go take a drive and we'd all follow along behind him. We'd stop at a sandwich place or something and he'd pick up a sandwich. You've probably heard of stories. But he'd take a swim in the ocean. I was one of the assigned swimmers that would go out as shark bait, go further out than the President and swim along.

Smith: Was he shy?

Buendorf: Very shy. He would greet you, he'd acknowledge that you were there, but you could see that he was pretty much focused on a lot of other things as a president probably should be. Some presidents acknowledge their agents all the time; others are tied up with other things. You find a former president tends to be quite close. He knows all of the agents' names and he knows their families, a little bit about their families. That usually comes from staff. The staff fills him in. Penny was very good at keeping him apprised of who's who and what they do and who their family is.

Smith: As Watergate began to unfold with all of this unprecedented history going on, and you're in the middle of it, was there speculation? Were there discussions?

Buendorf: I was such a new agent at that time that I was pretty far removed from the day-to-day close in activities that the agent in charge and the assistant agent in

charge would do. They'd probably have a better feel for how he was reacting to everything and how it all began to come down. You'd hear a lot of rumors about who on the staff was a hard-nose and who wasn't.

Smith: Did you have any contact with Gerald Ford while he was vice president?

Buendorf: Limited, just limited. I mean, I was not on his detail. I was strictly on the President's detail and when he came over, then, of course, then we picked him up.

Smith: How did you learn that there was going to be a resignation?

Buendorf: That day. That day.

Smith: Were you told by your superiors?

Buendorf: Yeah, the agent in charge came out with a notice. It was quite a shocking thing. I don't know if you talked to Steve Bull.

Smith: No.

Buendorf: Steve was the appointment secretary for President Nixon.

Smith: Right.

Buendorf: And subsequently came to the U.S. Olympic committee, worked in our D.C. area as a liaison, and is now retired. But he was right there putting people in and out of the Oval Office and had a pretty good idea of what was going on. You might want to talk to him.

Smith: Is he in the D.C. area?

Buendorf: He's in the D.C. area. I'll get that.

Smith: So, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August, when you have President Nixon's farewell in the East Room followed a couple hours by the swearing in. Were you present for both of those?

Buendorf: I wasn't present then.

Smith: Okay.

When did you first encounter, then President Ford?

Buendorf: Probably the next day when he was sitting in the office and my shift came on. Business as usual; you protect the President. You don't know what his last name is.

Smith: No introductions?

Buendorf: No, he knows you're out there. He deals with the agent in charge and some of the shift leaders on occasion, but usually when you're brand new, you're not at that front. You're outside, south grounds, Rose Garden, entrance to the Oval Office, and then back around again.

Smith: That said, though, there must have been kind of a palpable change of mood around the place.

Buendorf: Well, there was. I sensed a lot of turmoil and most of it was coming from the media side of the house, so there were a lot of requests for press conferences. The head of media was Ron—

Smith: Ron Nessen. Originally there was Jerry terHorst who resigned.

Buendorf: Right. And then Ron came over. So, it was a pretty busy time, but you had a lot of people coming and going. Again, I was not the agent in charge, so I could stand afar and watch it.

Smith: Did you ever have any contact with Bob Hartman?

Buendorf: No. You'd see him come and go, but no.

Smith: When the pardon came, was it a surprise?

Buendorf: Yeah, but, you know, the question had come up oftentimes for President Ford when he gave speeches and you could almost invariably hear "Why did you pardon him?" And he had a very good answer; he had other things on his desk. And at that time, a great deal of it all referred to Nixon, and he said it was time to get on with running the country and "I put that aside" and said, "Let's get on with running the country." So, he stands pretty firm that it was the right decision and I agree with him. Of course, when you're with the

President as long as I was, from 1983 to 1993, he tends to influence your thinking in one way or another.

Smith: Gerald Ford lived long enough to know the country had basically come around. And then of course, the Kennedys gave him the Profile in Courage award. I heard him say, "For all these years, everyone asked the same question." After that award was announced, he said, "They don't ask the question anymore."

Buendorf: He was so good at fielding these questions anyhow. The man was so well-read. We'd get in that limo to go to L.A. and there'd be a stack of newspapers beside him that was two feet high and he'd read those papers like a machine. The backseat of that car would be full of read papers.

Smith: He worked very hard at staying abreast of whatever was going on.

Buendorf: Oh, yes. Absolutely. He could pick that phone up and make calls and talk about any subject that was out there in the media and talk well about it.

Smith: Your great brush with history occurred in California in '75. Was it an accident that you were where you were at that point, or was that a natural progression over the previous year?

Buendorf: Well, at that time, I had been moved as one of the leaders on the shift, so when he came out of the hotel in Sacramento and decided to walk instead of ride the limo which was right outside, my position was right at his shoulder.

Smith: Let's back up. He was travelling quite a bit. Did the trip have a particular purpose?

Buendorf: He was addressing the state legislature in California in Sacramento. As I seem to recall, there was something about gun control. So, we arrived the night before and stayed in a hotel right by the park in view of the capitol building. That's why when he got up and saw such a beautiful morning, he decided to walk instead of ride.

Smith: Now, would a president today have that latitude?

Buendorf: Oh, yeah, they do. If they decide they're going to stop the motorcade and get out and greet somebody, you've got to adjust quickly. And sometimes those spontaneous things are less of a threat than something that's well-planned.

Smith: So, how large would the detail physically accompanying him be?

Buendorf: There were probably ten of us right within close proximity.

Smith: And what's your job?

Buendorf: Well, mine at that time was right at his shoulder and I would've been in what they called the "number one position" in the follow-up car, closest to the President other than the shift leader, which is the first one to be right next to him. So, walking, I'm right at his shoulder, you've got the shift leader that's walking behind him. So, we're at his back.

Smith: Was there a crowd?

Buendorf: Oh, yeah, the crowd was there because they knew he was at the hotel. So they were across the park and he just bolted across the street with the media hustling and bustling. I mean, it was just chaos.

Smith: To work the crowd?

Buendorf: Yeah, and so the agents that got out in front moved the people to the side of the sidewalk, so when he walked along, he was just shaking hands. And as he was shaking hands, obviously, I was right at his shoulder making sure people didn't grab his watch or hold on too long, break a hold and whatever. So I'm looking down. Squeaky was back in the crowd, maybe one person back and she had an ankle holster on with a 45. That's a big gun to have on your ankle. So, when it came up, it came up low and I happened to be looking in that direction. I see it coming and I step in front of him, not sure what it was other than that it was coming up pretty fast, and yelled out "Gun!" When I yelled out "Gun!" I popped that 45 out of her hand. Agents hear this, they covered the President and they're gone. So now you've got this guy in a suit with this big 45 wrestling with this little girl. I got a hold of her fingers and she's screaming, the crowd is screaming, and I'm thinking I don't have a vest on, I don't know where the next shot is coming from, and that I don't think she's

alone. All of this is going on while I'm trying to control her. She turns around and I pulled her arm back and dropped her to the ground and agents and police come from the back of the crowd.

Smith: Did she say anything intelligible?

Buendorf: Well, yeah. She's screaming, "It didn't go off!" You know, "It's okay, don't be rough!"

Smith: But you had no doubt what her intent was.

Buendorf: I had it in my hand. I knew what she was doing, she was pulling back on the slide, and I hit the slide before she could chamber a round. If she'd had a round chambered, I couldn't have been there in time. It would've gone through me and the President. So, when I had her down and the agents came by, I handed the gun over to one of the agents, cuffed her and I went back to work because we were one down on the shift.

Smith: And the President went on to see Governor Brown?

Buendorf: Oh, yeah, and when he got back to the plane - you've probably heard this before - he starts getting on the plane and Mrs. Ford, who had been off doing her thing, - and he tells the story because I wasn't there, I was being interviewed by the Bureau at that time - but he said he approached the plane and Mrs. Ford goes, "So, how was your day?"

Smith: Now, was that the San Francisco story or Sacramento?

Buendorf: Sacramento.

Smith: Okay. 'How was your day?' I assume he wanted to tell her very gently. I mean, how do you answer that?

Buendorf: By then it had hit the papers and it was all over the news, because from the incident to the time he finished his address to the legislature, it was out everywhere.

Smith: What I've always found fascinating about that is, by all accounts, he never told Governor Brown what happened. Brown found out later on.

Buendorf: Yeah, that's what I heard, too.

Smith: That this had happened in his front yard and the President never mentioned it. And he was quoted somewhere as saying when someone asked him about this, "Well, I really didn't think it'd be very polite to say someone tried to shoot me outside your capitol."

Buendorf: Well, it came down so fast that she was not on our radar screen anywhere. The family, the Manson family, wasn't part of an intelligence group, if you will, that was on the watch list. So I'm pretty sure it was a spontaneous thing on her part. She's now been released. I guess a life term doesn't mean you get life.

Smith: How do you feel about that?

Buendorf: Well, I think I'd be more interested in how President Ford felt about it.

Smith: When I saw *The Today Show* interview with Sarah Jane Moore, I thought it was bizarre that no one was asking about the Ford family. It was all about Sarah Jane Moore.

Buendorf: I agree. They had a lot of media at the time at the incident and they get a lot of media later in their life. It had a definite effect on the Ford family. The kids were happy, if you will, about the outcome, but you could tell there was a lot of concern. Susan, I think, was probably at the top of the list of being most concerned.

Smith: It's personal, but how did he thank you?

Buendorf: It was personal. He took me aside.

Smith: I mean, how do you thank someone for saving your life?

Buendorf: He brought it up many times in his speech when he'd talk and he'd mention me by name. So, I mean, I got my thanks out of that. For me, it was about being confronted with something and doing the right thing. If I had missed, then I'd be the buffoon.

- Smith: But think of it. You still hear about these agents in Dallas who all these years later, fairly or not, blame themselves or feel some kind of guilt. You were able to do what they couldn't do.
- Buendorf: Well, it's the right place at the right time. I mean, you go and look back at the Kennedy assassination and is there guilt with a lot of those agents? Yeah, I think so, because they weren't in the right place at the right time. They reacted after the fact.
- Smith: You said there were about ten people in that detail. Could anyone else have done what you did?
- Buendorf: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.
- Smith: But, I mean, were they in the position to see it?
- Buendorf: Oh, they were not in the position.
- Smith: That's what I mean.
- Buendorf: Yeah, we would've been too late. I was the only one that close that could've reached her. The other one on the other side of him had already passed. The one behind him could only grab him and move him out of the way.
- Smith: Did you see the gun before you saw her face?
- Buendorf: Oh, yes. All I saw was the hand coming up, so it wasn't until I broke through the crowd with her hand in mine that I realized who it was. I didn't know if it was a kid or what.
- Smith: With all of these happy, smiling people wanting to shake hands and so on - she wasn't pretending to be, in effect, one of them? I mean, she didn't have her hand out to shake hands?
- Buendorf: She was hooded. She had a dress with a hood on and so if we'd had enough time to scan the crowd as we're going through, an agent would've noticed that hood and would've had somebody take a look because that's a little unusual - to be hooded.
- Smith: And it was a fairly warm day.

- Buendorf: Yeah, it was typical California, typical for Sacramento. But it was one of those things that, given time, someone might have spotted that earlier as a suspicious person in the park.
- Smith: Then, of course, a month later, history almost repeats itself.
- Buendorf: Yes. I had dropped off to testify in Sacramento or I would've been up in San Francisco.
- Smith: Which of the two were the more serious?
- Buendorf: Well, when you get rounds off, that obviously changes the whole scenario.
- Smith: And it was someone in the crowd who deflected her?
- Buendorf: It was a Marine that was out in the crowd that grabbed her and pulled the gun away from her.
- Smith: In effect played the role that you had played in Sacramento.
- Buendorf: Yeah.
- Smith: What was his reaction? And, what was Mrs. Ford's?
- Buendorf: Well, you know, they're a very unique couple. They were. And she was the one who could really pull his chain every now and then. And she'd get in the car sometimes and give him the business. I'd get up in the front and kind of see him and he'd always go, "Buendorf, what're you laughing at?" "Oh, nothing. I was just talking to the driver." "Yeah, yeah." He knew.
- Smith: She has a sharp sense of humor.
- Buendorf: Oh, boy, she could. And he'd snort a little bit, but he knew he'd been had. So, they had a lot of fun together. He was really dedicated to his family, very much so.
- Smith: Did security change as a result of those incidents?
- Buendorf: Every time we had an incident within the Secret Service, you change your modus operandi. You had things you'd look at, your mistakes. You'd see what could've been done. What happened there was, there were no mistakes.

Everybody did what they were supposed to do. So, that particular scenario was added to the training out at Beltsdale. It changes how people think and how fast it happens and how they react.

Smith: He was quoted as saying that he was not going to let those incidents keep him from interacting with the American people.

Buendorf: And that's when you go to your agents and you go, "Tune it up, boys, because we've got a job to do and we cannot fail."

Smith: Did he wear a bulletproof vest?

Buendorf: There were occasions, yes. Now it's pretty common. If he decides he doesn't want to, and there were occasions when President Ford insisted on having things his way, then you could only advise and then move on with things.

Smith: Did you detect a certain Dutch willfulness at times?

Buendorf: Just a tad, but being from Minnesota and coming out of the Midwest, I'm a little bit familiar with that approach. Maybe that's why we got along so well. But he could make it very clear when he needed something done and needed it done yesterday.

Smith: He was a very self-disciplined guy in all sorts of ways. Did you see his temper?

Buendorf: Oh, yeah. You could see it coming and that's when you'd beat a retreat. Give him a little room.

Smith: What kinds of things would...

Buendorf: Well, there were a few things that he did not like. Not being on time was a big factor for him. I've heard him dress down campaigners that he'd gone out to campaign for and had them in the back seat of that limo and lectured them about timeliness, because he was a man that went by the clock.

Smith: Which, of course, is the great irony being married to a woman for whom the clock was her enemy.

Buendorf: Yeah. And that's where you get to it all the time because he'd get in the limo in Vail and go, "Okay, go on to Denver. That's an hour and ten minutes. Let's see if we can break the record." And I'd be going, "Who's going to pay the ticket?" "Well, I know you can go 67 in a 60. Seven miles over." And I'd go, "Who's giving you this advice?" There'd be one of those exchanges in the car. "Ah, you always go by the book." Then it'd be Buendorf, it wouldn't be Larry. It'd be "Buendorf, you're always going by the book." "I'm keeping you out of trouble. I don't want you getting a taxi cab." But Mrs. Ford could put that on him, too. When he started that stuff, she'd do a little tuning on him, too. I never felt his anger against me. I could see when he was upset about something that was going on around him and to kind of defuse him at times was part of being able to recognize what was happening. But he was very careful about it. He didn't blow up. He could blow up in his office at times.

Smith: He was such a workaholic. He would've been in there Sunday if he could get anyone else. I've heard wonderful stories from Penny and other folks - of course, you would've been gone by then, but you certainly would've recognized it after 9/11 and the anthrax scare, someone had to explain to him why he isn't getting mail on Saturday. He literally had staffers putting on these anthrax suits to go through the mail.

Buendorf: I did not know that.

Smith: So he could have his mail.

Buendorf: Well, he spent that time in the office and he would go in there, except if Steve was on TV.

Smith: Really?

Buendorf: Oh, yes. Then you don't bother him, you don't call him, and you don't go knock on his door, because he's watching Steve on TV.

Smith: The soap opera.

Buendorf: Soap opera. That was one time you didn't want to go in there.

Smith: And Mrs. Ford, too?

Buendorf: Yeah, I think she watched it at the house. She occasionally would come in to the office and watch. That was kind of always an interesting time.

Smith: That is funny. And I've been told when he was at the White House, Saturdays, he'd watch football if he could. On one hand, you didn't interrupt him, but on the other, he'd get the butlers in and say, "Come on in. Sit down. Watch the game." We've been told that the permanent staff was really very fond of the Fords. That they treated them very well.

Buendorf: There was nothing phony about them and still, to this day, Mrs. Ford was hands-on with Betty Ford Center. I mean, she'd go there daily and it wasn't a distant show of face. She was in there helping, doing her thing.

Smith: He was so proud of her. They'd have their annual alumni event or whatever it was and there are stories of him cooking hot dogs as one of the troops - she was the general.

Buendorf: That was really him. And when she gave up drinking, he gave up drinking. And he didn't cheat because we'd be on the road and they'd come out with a toast on something, he'd make sure that I'd made sure that that was not alcohol.

Smith: Really?

Buendorf: Yeah. And when he wanted Susan to give up smoking, he gave up smoking. I asked her every day, that pipe would light up because he couldn't smoke at the house, so he'd get in that limo and light up that pipe and the inside of the limo would be full of smoke and I'd roll down the window a little bit up front and he'd go, "Uh, Larry, could you roll that window up?" And I'd go, "Could you put out that pipe?" But he sacrificed for his family. He loved them all dearly and Mrs. Ford was his angel. No doubt about it.

Smith: Let's back up. He loved to travel, didn't he? One sensed that when he was in Congress, that was part of the problem - that he was on the road as much as he was. Did he feel any guilt about that? Because, we hear stories, touching stories, a day wouldn't begin or end without a call to her.

- Buendorf: That's a good question for Mrs. Ford or their family because I'm not really certain how they handled that, but they all seemed to accept it. I never heard any negative things about it.
- Smith: He took heat, you know, after leaving office, for 'commercializing the presidency.' People didn't pay attention to the charity work that he did and the college campuses that he visited. Plus, he had to raise the money to build the museum and library. For someone who never spent much money in his campaigns, that must have been pretty daunting.
- Buendorf: Well, you take a look at other former presidents, they didn't have to go through what he had to go. He didn't come out a multi-millionaire. And he didn't live in the fanciest house in Washington, D.C. prior to moving into the big house. So, I think he remembers his life in Michigan and how it was, you know, real Midwestern, small town.
- Smith: He went back to Grand Rapids (office) often.
- Buendorf: He did. Grass roots. I think that he remembers that life, what Michigan did, he was very proud of his college.
- Smith: Yeah. Oh, yeah, that was his second home.
- Buendorf: Yeah, absolutely.
- Smith: Did he ever talk about his football days?
- Buendorf: Oh, every now and then, but I never really heard him talk about how good he was. He just talked about the team and the successes of the team. He never talked about 'me' and 'I did this' and 'I did that.' It wasn't his style.
- Smith: This may be an awkward question. One senses, perhaps unavoidably, that after the pardon the relationship with Nixon could never be quite the same. Did you ever see him with Nixon?
- Buendorf: I know that they talked and I think he had a concern about his health and how he was handling everything, because he's a compassionate person. But, it was a discussion that I'm sure was only with his closest friends or within the house.

Smith: Who were his close friends? Leonard Firestone clearly was.

Buendorf: Right. Firestone was very close. Bob Hope was very close to him. Bob Hope could try those jokes on him so often and you've probably heard them all. We'd hear them, and President Ford would go give a speech and we could tell which joke was coming up. You know, "Here we go. This is going to be another Bob Hope joke." Some of them he didn't get straight for awhile, you know, he had to get a little help on them.

Smith: He wasn't a natural joke teller.

Buendorf: He was not, which made it even funnier for us because we're out biting our lips so that no one sees that we're about to burst into laughter, but he stumbled a little bit about a joke or get two jokes mixed up.

Smith: It was also known that Mrs. Ford has a somewhat ribald sense of humor and that would usually go over his head.

Buendorf: That is a fact. Which, like I said, made it even more fun. It wasn't laughing at him, it was a laughing about him, because it was so typical of him being focused on critical things that 'this is not important,' 'this joke is not important,' but he'd always kind of open up his speeches with something about, you know, that he was the only person that could play three golf courses simultaneously. So, it was always kind of fun to hear him over and over.

Smith: I thought that he got better as a speaker over time.

Buendorf: Well, he did, but you know some of the speech cards were getting a little dog-tailed after awhile. But he did extemporaneous - type speaking a lot better. The Q & A's, he really performed quite well.

Smith: Did you see him with young people at college campuses and that sort of thing? Was he comfortable?

Buendorf: Yeah, he had three or four kids that were right there keeping him tuned up.

Smith: When the Squeaky Fromme incident took place, they briefed Nelson Rockefeller on what happened. And his question was, "What's a 'Manson

gang'?" Which is just emblematic of the fact that most politicians are not particularly tuned in to the popular culture. I mean, they've got their own preoccupations.

Buendorf: Absolutely. They don't get into that. They don't know who the rock stars are.

Smith: But I assume in his case, having teenaged children probably addressed some of that.

Buendorf: Well, I think probably Mrs. Ford got it and tried to explain it to him. So, that's the way I would picture it happening because I think that his reaction would be, being a good naval officer - I was a naval officer, so I understood some of his thinking about how certain things have got to be this way and then she probably explained, "Well, it doesn't have to be that way."

Smith: That brings up a big question. Most of us, as we get older, we tend to get a little more conservative. They were exceptions. Did he change? Did she influence that? Did the children have an impact?

Buendorf: I don't think he changed a bit from what he was when he left office until the day that he passed away, because I think that he had the ability to analyze things that other people rush through. And he didn't rush through these things.

Smith: That's interesting.

Buendorf: He had a better grasp, I think, on what was happening economically and he recognized some of the mistakes that were being made by the various presidents at various times. He spoke, not often, but sometimes, he would send the message that maybe they could've done something a little differently.

Smith: Tell me about his intelligence. I lived in the Midwest long enough to conclude that there's a bias against Midwesterners. It's thought that because they talk slow, they think slow. How did his mind work?

Buendorf: He was a thinker. He absorbed a lot of information and stored it and could draw upon it at the damndest times. I mean, out of somewhere, something he'd read years ago, he could pull that out someplace and present it in some type of dialogue with somebody or give it in a speech. But he was so up-to-date on current events that it'd be difficult to debate him because he was just so on top of stuff. I think that the young candidates that came running for office at various times that he'd go out to support...I just had to smile at because they couldn't hold a candle to him when they got into a discussion. He had great retention and a great analytical mind, but you almost see him start thinking about how to express himself and do it in the right way to win the argument, if there was an argument, or to make his point.

Smith: Certainly those years, '83 to '93, coincided with the period of his unlikely friendship with Jimmy Carter. Were you surprised initially?

Buendorf: Yeah, because I think that I don't know who swayed who over, but I have a feeling that President Ford swayed Jimmy to his way of thinking. And I think he won him over because Carter actually began to realize just how smart and how lucky he was to have won over this man. And I think that probably drew them together in discussions. I knew that they talked a lot on the telephone. He paid visits.

Smith: And they seemed to be perfectly comfortable together?

Buendorf: Yeah.

Smith: And the wives, too.

Buendorf: Yeah. Like I said, I think that Carter probably realized that he was pretty lucky.

Smith: It's interesting. Two things come to mind. One is, I've often thought one of the things that may have brought them together was that they both ran against Ronald Reagan.

Buendorf: Probably.

- Smith: I will never forget being on Air Force One, going back to Michigan, and the sight of President Carter walking up and down the aisle of the plane with Gerald Ford's youngest great grandchild on his shoulder. I mean, if people could only see that image. You wonder why is it that we have to have *elder* statesmen. Why can't we just have statesmen?
- Buendorf: Well, when you become a former president, I think the pressure is off in a lot of ways and you do things differently, perhaps become more yourself, instead of having to be under the magnifying glass all the time. I think that changes.
- Smith: Tell me about Vail. What it meant to them and what they meant to the place.
- Buendorf: Well, you know, when I first came to the detail, headed up his ski team, we stayed at the Bass House, which is right in town, not too far from the lift. Again, I was on the clock and couldn't ski at ten o'clock. At ten o'clock, you'd better be there because he was on the clock. But he really enjoyed getting on those skis and, by the time I took over his detail and they had moved to the big house in Beaver Creek, he was no longer skiing. But he had a routine up in Vail that was, again, predictable. We'd do the mail run every day at a specific time. He knew what time the mail was being delivered at the post office, so we made sure we were there. Loved to play golf; loved his golf. And he could play. He could hit that ball a long ways. Shank every now and then. Don't we all? But that was his day. Get up in the morning, he'd swim. He'd go to his office and do his paperwork, whatever it was. He'd go get the mail. He'd have his lunch. He'd go play golf.
- Smith: And he was pretty accessible to the press.
- Buendorf: Oh, yeah. And I mean they were very social there. They had a lot of good friends in Vail that you'll meet. So, he spent a lot of time with them.
- Smith: One senses that they got in on from the ground floor.
- Buendorf: Yeah, they really made Vail. They brought Vail from being just a little sleepy town like some that still exist in Colorado, to this raging resort. They both played a role in that. He'd be on the slopes. Mrs. Ford with her garden. They brought some culture to the city. They did a lot.

Smith: And, of course, there was the annual AEI event. The World Forum.

Buendorf: I forgot about that. First of all, they'd started out with the Jerry Ford Golf Tournament and that drew a lot of celebrities and a lot of people from the front range area up to Vail. Then you had the World Forum that he brought. I think Vail used them a bit to help them along and he was happy to do it because he felt he had a special relationship with Vail.

Smith: We talked about his daily routine in Vail. What did she do up there?

Buendorf: Well, you know, her days were kind of spent socializing with others. She didn't play the golf, but she'd go to lunches and she loved to have the family up there. She spent time with the grandchildren, with her own children. So, she enjoyed the house. She liked being there, but she'd go out and do her own thing, go into Vail and visit her friends. But usually the evenings were together or with friends.

Smith: Where were their favorite restaurants that they'd go to?

Buendorf: Yeah, usually they'd go to Pepe's. Gramshammers were very good friends and they usually went there several times. But they had other places that they like to go to.

Smith: One of the most poignant stories we were told came from Lorraine, the family cook. Talk about being treated like a member of the family – she'd never seen snow, she'd never been in an airplane. She was scared to death the first time she got in the plane and the President had the pilot explain everything to her and the engines, et cetera, all this. And when they got up to Vail he took her almost by the hand to the ski school and they got her clothes.

Buendorf: And they had those that were practically part of the family. At the White House, Benji was at the White House and he was a very big favorite of President Ford's.

Smith: Now, who is he?

Buendorf: Benji Ramos.

Smith: Was he a steward?

- Buendorf: Yeah. And I think Benji came out. Penny would have to verify that. I think, initially, when he left office, that Benji was with him. I just don't recall. But they had their friends within the staff.
- Smith: Were the kids there frequently?
- Buendorf: Yeah, at Christmastime, of course, they'd all show up and then during the summer, they kind of did it in shifts. They'd come up at different times so they could each one have their individual personal time.
- Smith: And how was he as a grandfather?
- Buendorf: I think he was actually pretty good. He spent time with the kids. He couldn't go skiing with them, but in the summertime, he'd take them to wherever they wanted to go. I don't know what it was like inside the house, but it seemed to me that he was quite close.
- Smith: I'm told that the Fords distinguished themselves by trying, for example, at Christmastime not to schedule events, so that the agents could have some kind of holiday of their own.
- Buendorf: That's true. Well, they knew that we liked Vail, so they would go to Vail at Christmastime because everybody would bring up their family, their friends, or whatever and make it a two week vacation. And I rotated the shifts so that everybody got their fair share of midnights and daytimes and four to twelves. So they were pretty thoughtful about that.
- Smith: Another thing that might surprise some people was just how strong their faith was. Did you see that?
- Buendorf: Yeah. It was not a false faith. They practiced good Christianity. That's to say, that they were both compassionate, they cared about others, obviously. Take a look at the Betty Ford Center. I mean, she took this on because she saw a need and he supported her all the way. Firestone played a big role in that. And it became very successful. It was not for show. It was all work. Long hours for the agents that had to go to the Betty Ford Center and not go in because we gave her that; she did not want agents standing on top of her.

Smith: Does that change over time? For example, Susan, as a teenager, probably had an attitude about not wanting to be followed.

Buendorf: Probably.

Smith: As people get older, does that relationship evolve?

Buendorf: Yeah, you know, it becomes a convenience in a lot of ways and you walk into the house and the car is there and you get in the car and you go into the restaurant and you walk in and there's a table there waiting for you and you get up and the car is waiting for you and you go back home. I don't have that luxury here.

Smith: That's interesting because there are two sides of the street here. On the one hand, you don't want the agents taking for granted pretty nice digs. I suppose you don't want to be taken *for* granted either.

Buendorf: And they were very careful about that. President Ford knew what we were required to do and what we were not required to do. When he had his bad knees and we flew commercial and he always wanted to carry his own hang-up baggage; carried everything in the house, so you could see that he's having trouble with it and I told the agents, "Here's the deal. We don't carry bags. I will carry their bag and when I do, I'm out. The job is yours. I'm out of the play. I can't do anything." So, with that understanding, I'd get off and I'd go, "I'll take that, Mr. President." "Oh, okay. Give it to me." I'd fall back. The agents would take over and we continued to do our job the way it should be done.

Smith: In later years, after you'd gone, the issue arose as their health began to decline...what's the role? The Secret Service are not medical providers. How did he deal with aging?

Buendorf: I don't think he ever felt that he was aging. I think he felt he was just as strong as ever, could keep up with anyone, and I think that he proved it. I mean, he'd get out there, could he walk the golf course? No. But he got in and out of that cart and he hit the ball a mile and he did his swimming. He recognized that his knees were not the best.

Smith: I assumed he always watched his diet.

Buendorf: Yeah, he did. They did. He loved his ice cream, though.

Smith: Especially butter pecan.

Buendorf: Yeah. Yeah, he did like his ice cream. He could pass up deserts all day long until you put that ice cream in front of him, disaster.

Erik: I remember seeing his arm in a sling. He hurt his rotator cuff or broke his arm at some point?

Buendorf: I think he had a rotator cuff problem, but I don't know when that occurred.

Erik: They told him he couldn't swim for six months or something and he was irritated.

Buendorf: Yeah, that would be putting it mildly. When he had his knees replaced, poor Penny, she was under the gun all the time. At that time, we moved our perimeter further out. We gave him all of the room he needed.

Smith: She didn't have that option.

Buendorf: No, she didn't have the option. She was in and out there all of the time. Poor her.

Smith: He doesn't strike me as someone who would've been a very good invalid.

Buendorf: No, he didn't like, you know, heaven forbid, you put him in a wheelchair. Oh, no, no way. No, that wasn't going to happen. I gave him a lot of credit for trying to do. I think a lot of us males are that way, you know, we're not sick. We can still climb ladders and leap over buildings and do all of those things. But there comes a time where maybe you ought to slow down a little bit. I never got the impression that he really wanted to slow down at all.

Smith: It's funny you say that because I sense he was really in extraordinary health until right about his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and right about then, I think, the doctors basically told him you really can't travel anymore. And I think for him that was a little death of sorts. I mean, not to be able to do what he loved doing had to have been a disappointment.

- Buendorf: Well, he was on a lot of boards and anyone who thought that they put him on a board for just using his name were in for a very rude awakening because when he went in, it was about knowing the business, knowing what to discuss, having input, and in a lot of cases, taking charge. I wasn't in the board meeting, but I was close enough to know that he wasn't going to be sitting back there waiting for them to say, "It's good having you here."
- Smith: He was never a figurehead.
- Buendorf: No. No. That was, again, his lifestyle, the way he was brought up.
- Smith: They enjoyed New York, didn't they? Before Christmas they'd go and see shows and she'd shop and that was something they looked forward to every year.
- Buendorf: He had agreed with Mrs. Ford that this was a week or two week vacation and was good for all of us. I saw more shows than I probably ever would've seen if I'd gone by myself.
- Smith: We heard that they saw *The Lion King* and they also saw *The Producers*.
- Buendorf: And she did shop.
- Smith: Was she an impulse buyer?
- Buendorf: No. She usually went on a mission.
- Smith: Was it clothes that she was shopping for?
- Buendorf: Clothes and things for the grandchildren. When I first came to the detail, she cornered me pretty early on and said, "You know, Larry, we don't have any women on our detail." I go, "Well, what does that mean?" She goes, "I think that you could find some." "Let me see what I can do, but I'll tell you this. If we get women on the detail, they're not going to be assigned to you." I said, "They're going to be assigned according to needs of the detail. So it might be with the President, some might be with you. It's not going to be, you get the women, he gets the men." "I agree." So I went out and recruited and got women to come mainly because I said, "You come to my detail and give me

two years and I'll get you to whatever office you want with the director, of course."

Smith: There's a famous story while she was in the White House, and her male agents gave her a flag for the car, the bloomer flag - because the President had a flag. Is that a true story?

Buendorf: Yeah. Well, I'd heard it, but I don't know if they flew it or not. I think they might have presented it to her. But she'd get out there and go in shopping, I'd make sure that maybe one female agent and then the other two would be males.

Smith: New Yorkers are famously indifferent, but I assumed she'd be recognized.

Buendorf: Oh, yeah.

Smith: How did that work? How'd she handle it?

Buendorf: Well, of course you'd have enough people, you'd probably have four or five agents that were with her at any time and just gently asking people to give her a little space, she's out shopping, too. Not hands-on. I said, "Don't take anybody down because they want to get her autograph, but try to be polite and courteous."

Smith: Did she handle it well?

Buendorf: Yeah.

Smith: People are nice most of the time.

Buendorf: Yeah, she'd usually be very busy, try to stay very busy and that way nobody would interrupt her because they'd have to wait until she wasn't busy.

Smith: Did you go with him overseas?

Buendorf: Yes.

Smith: Was there a lot of business-related travel?

- Buendorf: For the most part, it was all business-related, you know, some conference or something that he attended. But they'd take personal time, too. When we went to Paris and she'd go shopping and he'd go to his meetings.
- Smith: We talk about opposites attracting - on the surface, the thought of Gerald Ford and James Callaghan who was an old-line Labor socialist, Helmut Schmidt, German socialist and Giscard who, for all of his fine qualities, has a certain top-lofty aspect to him. He's not Grand Rapids. And yet they all seemed to hit it off famously.
- Buendorf: You know, he had that affect on people. It's the ability to change gears when you meet people. Meet their level, and he could click it up to the highest level or he can be the Michigan boy out there and talk to the boys about football. He was good in the international scene. He really was. I think he was well-respected. They acknowledged his expertise. He was effective.
- Smith: I was in Rome in December for Christmas. Did he ever go to the Vatican?
- Buendorf: Yes, he did.
- Smith: Was John Paul II then the Pope?
- Buendorf: I think, yes.
- Smith: So, they had an audience?
- Buendorf: Yeah. And I forget who went in there. I didn't go in because I had some Catholic agents on the detail. One was a female and one was a male. I sent those two in. I figured it was safer for me to be on the outside rather than on the inside.
- Smith: Are there places overseas that he enjoyed especially visiting?
- Buendorf: I can't think of any particular place. I think that he really enjoyed Paris the time we were there. He hit the weather right. It was nice.
- Smith: You left the detail in '93?
- Buendorf: Yes.

Smith: What were the circumstances surrounding that?

Buendorf: Well, this job came up. They came up to interview me and said, "Would you be interested?" I was eligible to retire, so I thought, "Well, a bird in the hand," and it sounded like something I would really enjoy. I had an opportunity to go to New York. One of the corporations where President Ford was a board member wanted me to come.

Smith: In a security role?

Buendorf: Yeah. So, New York City, Colorado Springs... It was Colorado Springs.

Smith: Did you discuss it with him?

Buendorf: Yeah, and he knew what I was going to do. He attended my retirement party from the detail.

Smith: Was it awkward at all?

Buendorf: No, he was very encouraging. He said, "There comes a time in our career when we move on to something else. I think that this would be good." He said, "You've done a great job with the detail. You've brought it to the level I would like to have it remain at and I'm sure that he's passed that word on to those that took over."

Smith: You'd more than validated his phone call to you ten years earlier.

Buendorf: Yes.

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

Buendorf: It was up in Vail. I drove up specifically to say hello. It was maybe one year before he passed away. Had a half hour with him in his office and talked about times, a few laughs, told me I was looking a little bit older, my hair was turning gray. I said, "No, it's pewter. It's not gray."

Smith: Did you sense that was going to be the last time you saw him?

Buendorf: I did. Penny was kind of keeping me apprised of what was happening, so I knew I wanted to make a trip to see him. As a matter of fact, it came up one

time after that and Penny said, "I don't think you want to see him." So, I didn't.

Smith: Have you seen her (Mrs. Ford) at all since?

Buendorf: No, I haven't. Not since the funeral. But I communicate with Susan every now and then just to see how she's doing. Penny, of course, is right on top of it, so I talk to Penny all the time. Our friendship goes back.

Smith: Were you surprised at all at the extent of the public reaction when he died? I wonder whether part of it was there was a whole generation being introduced to him for the first time. They were seeing these old film clips and comparing that with the ugliness of the contemporary political scene. And he looked awfully good.

Buendorf: He did, didn't he?

Smith: I know.

Buendorf: But it's kind of surprising how years passed and you become a better statesman than you were when you were a statesman. I think that history will show and continue to show that he was a good President.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered historically? And how do you remember him?

Buendorf: I think given the way the world was at the time of the election dictated a loss for President Ford and a loss for the American public because they were not wise enough in my opinion to see what value he could've brought as a voted in president. So, I think we missed it. We missed it.

Smith: And on a personal level?

Buendorf: Well, he's pretty special.

## INDEX

### F

Ford, Gerald R.

- assassination attempts, 9–15
- Carter, Jimmy, 21–22
- clumsy, perception as, 4–5
- first acquaintance with, 1–3
- funeral, reactions to, 32–33
- intelligence, 21
- latter years, 26–28
- personal stories about, 16, 17–18, 31
- post-presidency earnings, 18–19
- post-presidency schedule, 16–17
- remembrance, 32
- Secret Service relationship, 1–33
- speaking style, 20
- Vail/Beaver Creek, Colorado, 22–24

### N

Nixon, Richard

- personal stories about, 5–6