Smith: Thanks, again, for doing this. A couple of things, if you could sort of sketch in the broader relationship as you saw it that President Ford had with the University. And then maybe zero in on the particular issue of Affirmative Action.

Bollinger: I started out as president of Michigan in ’97, and I think one of the things I felt about Michigan, and I said it in many different contexts, was that it was an institution like many public institutions that did not claim its history. And part of that was not recognizing that Robert Frost had been at Michigan in the early 1920s and had written some wonderful poems there. And so there are places other than the New England area that can make that claim. Well, I also felt the same about President Ford. And at that time, as you know, there was an odd sense about his presidency. A sense that it was a presidency, obviously, that did very important things, but also a sense that it wasn’t a presidency because of the ways it had happened and then the defeat. And my feeling was, he was President of the United States and a graduate of the University. A wonderful human being by everybody’s account and had done very admirable things in this world, and of course, beforehand. And so the University should really identify with him, and visa versa.

And I sort of set in motion the idea that the School of Public Policy, which had moved, I think, from a program to an institute to a school. But it really didn’t have the sort of trappings of a school – its own building and general faculty. I thought that should really be developed, and simultaneously, I thought that making the school identified with President Ford was a great combination of several things that were of enormous importance to the University. And so that idea, of course, bore fruit as the Ford School of Public Policy, and a wonderful building right on the entrance to the campus. And I’m very, very proud of that and pursued that idea with him and he was very, very eager to have that happen. I was moved by how much it meant to him.
Smith: When you met him and sort of worked with him, was there anything that surprised you?

Bollinger: Well, I like to think that I spent a fair amount of time with him on and off over those five years, but actually, if you added up the hours it probably was not that many. But the feeling of being with him was so powerful that I think it magnifies the time I spent. I think there was this wonderful formality and friendliness with him. He struck me as a person who out of World War II— I mean, there is something about the grownup qualities of people who went through that experience. I think of my father, the same kind of demeanor and rectitude, and decency. And a personable-ness that I was really quite…

Smith: That’s an interesting combination.

Bollinger: Yes, that’s right. And then I found it a wonderful personal education to listen to him talk about his time. I remember, and I know you know, Richard, all these stories so well, but to me they were significant because they were so fresh. But he would say something like, “I had no idea who Levi’s—I didn’t know what his party affiliation was, I just knew he was a really, really respected jurist, and I wanted a great person to head up the Justice Department.” And it was comments like that and then the loyalty of the people like yourself and others who had been with him in service, was a testament to—everybody likes to be associated with a President, that’s, I think, a given— but there was a real bond to every single relationship. And I think it was built around—my own sense was— it was built around character. He was a much smarter person than probably his general reputation. Highly intelligent. Highly astute, I think, very good reading of certain situations. But somehow the stereotype sort of played off of different edges.

Smith: Probably Chevy Chase. The stereotype, caricature.

Bollinger: That’s right. And so it’s always interesting how those things can stick.

Smith: Did he reminisce about the University? Did he talk at all about his memories of the University?
Bollinger: Yes, and certainly in the sense of the University being very important to him. That’s takes me to the Affirmative Action thing, which I think was probably – I can’t remember precisely – but I think that may have been my sort of opening encounters with him. When I started in January in ’97, I was told very quickly that Michigan was going to be the next target of the anti-Affirmative Action movement that had been building force in the United States.

Smith: And was that within the state – those that were targeting it? Or was it part of a national?

Bollinger: Nationally. And the Center for Individual Rights, I think it was called – it’s been a long time since I’ve uttered the name – had been very successful in challenging the University of Texas law school, and had won in the Fifth Circuit. And I had been an “expert witness” on behalf of the law school in that case. So I was somewhat familiar with it. Of course I knew the constitutional issues. So they’d won there, and then there was Prop 209 in California, and that had been quite successful. And now, obviously, this group and others who were of that viewpoint, really wanted to try to get to the Supreme Court to overturn Bakke. And so I was told, I can’t remember how I found out, but I was told, “They are going to come at you, they are going to come at Michigan,” and me personally. So I began really thinking about this as one of my central goals, defending Affirmative Action at Michigan, which was no different from every other university. I mean, the policies were no different. So it was really a matter of defending higher education’s policies of Affirmative Action. In order to do that, you had to get other universities to be allies with you. And that, actually, is very hard to do because there is nothing more isolating than being a defendant in a major law suit. Everybody wants to say we’re different from them, and so on. So that was the first thing. But the main thing was, it had to expand the support, because higher education is actually not that popular when it comes to its own policies. People would just say this is just the liberal sector of America doing some social engineering. And the key to that, I thought, was to get someone of enormous stature in the country, who was not Democrat, not Republican for these purposes. And I thought that was President Ford. And so I made contact with him and he
agreed right away to do this. And the idea was, he would make a public statement, he would make it in the form of an Op-Ed, and I thought this was a very, very good idea. I did not think he would agree to do it. And he agreed to do it with alacrity. And then when we gave him a draft, thinking that’s the way – change it – but we would do that service, he threw it out completely and I don’t know that he personally – you were probably involved in this so you know a good deal – but the story was personal. And the story – I can’t remember the name of his teammate…

Smith: Willis Ward.

Bollinger: Willis Ward, who played a tackle or a center or something, and there is just nothing more powerful than a Republican President of the United States saying, “When I was on a football team at this public university my teammate couldn’t play because we were playing a southern team…”

Smith: Georgia Tech.

Bollinger: Georgia Tech, “that would refuse to play us if we had a black player.” And then he didn’t play. And the game went ahead. And to say that was a mistake and it should never happen again, and we’re still not done with that problem, and I think this is a reasonable way to approach it, it was taking a position that was fulsome and personal and national and all those qualities. And I really, really was impressed by that. Of all the things I’ve encountered with people in life, that ranks right up there as a very – he didn’t have to do this. And that really led to several interactions as I said. That bolstered my feeling that naming the School of Public Policy after the President would be a great idea.

Smith: The interesting thing – several things – one, that game against Georgia Tech was the only game they won all year. The only game they won, it was 6-0, or something like that. Fast forward seventy years, and there is an effort underway, which is about to be approved to put a statue of President Ford in the Capitol Rotunda, which entails replacing Zachariah Chandler’s statue. When the initial effort was launched, there were two or three western Michigan strongly conservative Republican state senators, who threw sand in the works, and who managed to, at the very least, delay this and perhaps
defeat it. And the governor indicated she would sign it, but I don’t think she was going to get very involved. So anyway, lo and behold, literally it’s a Frank Capra movie – the last day of the session in the state senate this thing comes up and a member of the Detroit delegation, African-American, gets up – Willis Ward’s grandson – who proceeds to tell everyone the story. And to shame these people who basically were Reaganites from ’76 and had never forgiven Ford. But my sense is, he took a lot of heat for that from the right. But the other side of the coin was, it coincided with, what appeared in the New York Times, the day before the twenty-fifth anniversary of his swearing in. And on that anniversary, the very next day he was in the East Room of the White House receiving the Medal of Freedom. The Clinton administration had a number of people, including him, but because of the story, he became the center of it all. So in the Clinton White House he was surrounded by people who were thrilled, but when he went outside a lot of Republicans…

Bollinger: That’s really interesting. And I have to say that I thought he was more courageous and bolder than the Clinton administration. Because I think President Clinton, he was in this sort of mend it, don’t end it, and it was clearly a political strategy from my point of view, that this was a very unpopular thing – Affirmative Action – and obviously we’re in favor of it, but we can’t take the strong position. And so we’ll sort of play this middle road – let’s change it, but let’s not end it. But the way that translated, I knew this right from the start – this litigation, I knew was Supreme Court bound, as it, of course, turned out to be. And its initial sort of playing – the way it played out in the press, made the policy even more unpopular and made people who supported Affirmative Action want even more to distance themselves from it. I could not get the Clinton administration to support the University. So it was mend it, don’t end it, but we’re not going to support you. Now, ultimately, the Justice Department did support it. But the President wouldn’t speak out on it. So for Ford to do this – in fact, he was the only political leader in the country. Because I met with some other political leaders at the time – ultimately Senator Kennedy was very strong, I think he brought along Tom Daschle, I don’t know quite how Daschle got there. But it was amazing how difficult it was to get a political person to support, not just Affirmative Action, but the
litigation. And this was where the action was going to be. So it made it all the more impressive to me.

Smith: Jeffrey Toobin’s book *The Nine* makes a passing reference to Ford’s intervention. Apparently, Justice O’Connor brought it up. Does that ring a bell at all?

Bollinger: It’s been some time since I read Toobin’s book, so it doesn’t. What does follow from this though, is that I really strongly believe that it was Ford, it was his Op-Ed and his public commitment that unlocked other – made it possible for other people to do it, and I met David Halberstam for a lunch on Nantucket that summer where he was staying. Of course, he had a house. And I wanted to try to get advice from people about who politically and so on we could get to support this. And he suggested, and now I am forgetting – a good friend of yours, good friend of Ford’s, wrote a book on Ford.

Smith: Jim Cannon.

Bollinger: Jim, suggested Jim. A dear, dear man. And so I had lunch with Jim at the President’s House at Michigan, and it was through that conversation that we ended up with the military brief. Because Jim was sitting on the board, I think, of the Naval Academy or something, and I felt that trying to widen the sectors – my idea was what higher education had done in Affirmative Action was simply one of many institutions in the society that had tried to take positive steps to implement *Brown v. Board of Education*’s ground goal of an integrated society. You go to corporations, you go to the churches, you go to cultural institutions, you go even to the military, the academies, and the military services. They knew that they had to have a diverse integrated armed forces. And Jim jumped on this and said that he could help establish contact with people and that led to the military brief. And many people would say that it was the military brief that really persuaded O’Connor.

Smith: That’s right. And I remember subsequently asking, Justice Stevens, who cited it as a significant factor. But you are right about the fact that the service academies, in particular, took the position that they did.
Bollinger: And I think it was President Ford that, again, made all that possible. And then the same made it possible for GM - I met with the head of General Motors and they were prepared to lead a brief of business interests and we ended up with multiple. So we had *amicus* briefs from the business sector and we had statements from President Ford and the military and lots of others. And it was that wider kind of consensus - look, if you throw out this and the military and higher education, you’re going to unravel several decades of efforts by the society in every sector to try to grapple with the fact of a couple hundred years of segregation and discrimination. And it was that case.

Smith: And how was affirmative action applied at Michigan? I mean, presumably there was not a uniform formula.

Bollinger: That’s right. Because the University of Michigan, like every university, is very decentralized, so the law school had its own policy and the medical school had its policy and the LSA, the Arts and Sciences of Michigan, had its own policy. And what happened in the litigation was, there were two lawsuits. One against the Arts and Sciences, both against the individuals, myself and some others, but also against the University. And they identified the policies in LSA, and the policy in the law school. The policy in the law school, I was significantly responsible for it because I was dean. It was the late ‘80s. I could see the world was changing in attitudes about this, and I could see some need for greater attention. We set up a committee, we developed a policy, etc. LSA did this independently of the law school and had its own, and they were very different in their structure – opposite actually.

So the law school was the gestalt. We take into account race is one of many factors…we want a diverse population, we want people from all backgrounds and experiences and capacities. And we kind of just put it together. And LSA policy was, we’re going to be much more specific and concrete. So if you are at this grade point average, you get these points; if you got this SAT score, you get these points; if you’ve got these kind of references, you get this point; and if you are African-American or in an under-represented minority, you get these points. So they actually gave points. Now, that was called a grid that listed these factors and points for them. And that was uncovered through
discover. And it was that, that was pasted on the front pages of the press and the New York Times, in particular, and made it seem scandalous that just because of your skin color you would get these points in an application process where the outcome was highly coveted. And my feeling, in all candor, was that this was not – you could defend this by saying, “Look, you say you want specificity, you don’t want this kind of hide the ball,” and here it is. On the other hand, it looked – the formulated quality of it resonated with the sense of invidious discrimination, even though the purpose was fine and noble.

And my feeling was, keep both cases going. Don’t give in on one, certainly don’t give in on both. And actually, you’d be better off in the courts and the courts can say, “This one, we really don’t like. This one is fine.” And of course, that’s the way it ended up in the Supreme Court. The grid – that form – was rejected as unconstitutional, and the law school policy was upheld. But I felt it was better to keep one that was likely to lose.

Smith: That’s interesting. At the time when that outcome emerged, did you hear from Ford? Did you have contact with him?

Bollinger: On the outcome of the case?

Smith: Yeah, once this was resolved.

Bollinger: Yes, I did talk with him. I can’t remember the details, but yes. And he was very happy about it.

Smith: It may be unfair to ask you to speculate, but I will. In my eulogy in Grand Rapids, I talked about the fact that most of us tend to get a little conservative as we get older. And in his case it seemed to be the opposite. My sense is on a number of issues - Affirmative Action being one, clearly abortion is another. He is, I believe, the only former president to put his name on a petition for gay rights.

Bollinger: Is that right?

Smith: Someone told us he said ten years before he died that gay marriage was coming and you might as well get used to it.
Bollinger: Isn’t that wonderful?

Smith: And I’m wondering, it is pure speculation, whether she [Mrs. Ford] was a factor in this. Whether having kids or grandkids factored in. It’s more than just the party went so far to the right and he stayed where he was. Because he was clearly more “liberal” and outspoken than he had been during his political career.

Bollinger: Well, that’s interesting, Richard. As you are talking – I’ll come back to that – but I want to say something going back to where we were just a moment ago, which again is revealing about him and the ways you are asking and talking about yourself. I am now recalling that I think the first time I actually saw him – this has to be checked because my memory may be flawed, and of course it would be highly embarrassing if what I’m going to say turns out not to be true, a figment of my imagination - but if you will recall, we had a reception at the White House, a dinner in honor of Ford, and I was in the receiving line, like everybody was, going through and Ford and George Bush were standing there and I think their wives were seated, if I remember correctly. What would have been the occasion?

Smith: Ford’s 90th birthday.

Bollinger: 90th birthday, yes.

Smith: And the Bushes had a dinner for him.

Bollinger: And the interesting thing here was this was the first time I had seen him after the Supreme Court victories, I believe. And I’m nothing in the world of George Bush, but when I left Michigan to come here, the case was in its final months before the Supreme Court, and George Bush had never said anything about the case. In January or February, I think it was, he suddenly came out and said, “This was a terrible policy at the University of Michigan. It was a quota and the Supreme Court should strike it down.” And I felt this was a Condoleezza Rice idea, because she comes from the university world and she told him. That was my interpretation. So I’d just returned, I think, from a trip to India and I’m suddenly confronted with this, that the case is just a quota, the policies. I had never felt the power of a presidential statement that’s
against you. And boy, was it something. And I went on a number of talk shows, interviews, and said it’s just not right, and I made some statements and they were quoted in the *New York Times* that the President is wrong, that it’s not a quota, and he doesn’t understand, and so on. And it was sometime, maybe you will remember the month perhaps, but I remember as I got there to where they were standing, President Ford said, “Lee, we won!” And George Bush is right by him, and I remember this kind of – I mean, he had lots of reasons not to want to be highly friendly to me, but I thought it was an unusually unfriendly shaking of hands. But it was Ford’s irrepressible, “We won!” That was great.

Now, on these other qualities that you said, I always interpreted him as having real personal – this goes back to the oddity of the formality of the man – I just feel like this Willis Ward, Betty, his children, these are the things that shaped his views. When you know people and you like them, or love them, and things happen to them, that’s where you get your political views from.

**Smith:** Plus, he had gone through the intervention with her, and he’d become in his own way as involved in the work of the Center as she was. And I think, as a spur to compassion - seeing people, including personal friends, people in his circle who were good people, decent people, who happened to have a weakness. You wonder - the cumulative impact of that.

**Bollinger:** I also wonder, and again, you’ll know more about this, I wonder if this is an example of somebody who in later life, rather than being more conservative, is actually more human. Because one of the things I remember him saying now that you’ve just said that is, didn’t they go on a campaign tour for their honeymoon, or something? And there was that sense that this was a very self-absorbed - somebody who is after his own career and wasn’t around the kids as much. And then maybe in the latter years, it was human beings that mattered most to him. And he felt that he had not done that before.

**Smith:** I think that’s very shrewd. How do you think he should be remembered?

**Bollinger:** For all these things, I think, we’re a nation who seems to be desperate for leaders who are authentic and rooted in human relationships and not taking
positions for some kind of ideological advantage. And, I mean, he just stands out, doesn’t he, in this kind of way? I think the kind of self-sacrificing public servant who realizes he is going to pay a price, but he’s doing this for other people.

Smith: Were you, at the time of the pardon, when you first heard about the pardon, were you opposed?

Bollinger: You know, that’s a good question. I can’t remember. I bet I thought it was the right thing to do. You just have to forgive and move on. I’m almost positive that’s what I would have thought.

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

Bollinger: I don’t remember exactly the last time. It may have been one of our meetings. I have a personal letter from him about the Ford School, accepting and thanking me for that. I keep that up in my study.

Smith: It was dedicated a month before he died.

Bollinger: Yeah.

Smith: And he really intended to be there. There was nothing that made him more upset than his inability to be there. If there was any way he could have, he would have.

Bollinger: As I said before, I was really impressed by how much it meant to him. And I don’t know what went through his mind about this sort of issue: am I a real president, or was I just a fill in for a while? Can I really act like I was a former President of the United States? I never got a sense of whether that was an issue for him or not.

Smith: When we were planning the funeral, the Military District of Washington tends to see this as their doing, and they are heavily involved. But the one thing he was adamantly about, he did not want a caisson down the streets of Washington. And a very ill-advised representative of the military tried to change him by saying, “Now, Mr. President, you wouldn’t want people to think that you were a second rate president.” Needless to say, that argument did not carry. I
don’t think he harbored any doubts about his legitimacy. But the pomp was not his thing.

Bollinger: That’s really interesting. I also remember, and I used it in a graduation speech at Michigan, it was one of my better speeches at graduation, which are very hard to give, as you know, especially in a football stadium. But I remember walking from the President’s House over to the Union where the Regents were meeting. And this proposal of having the Ford School created – he would be there to accept applause and make a statement. And as we were walking from the President’s House over – of course, there’s State Street – and I remember being struck by the fact that we’re walking along, he’s talking to me, and I’ve got a picture of it upstairs, and he never looked this way or that way to cross the street. He just walked across the street, and I thought, boy, that’s one perk of having been a president. You never have to look as you cross streets.

Smith: Was there any opposition, even sub rosa, to the idea of putting his name on the school?

Bollinger: Yeah, there was.

Smith: Was it political or ideological?

Bollinger: It was both those things, it was also “this is not a real president.” And there was also a “didn’t do anything” kind of perspective. You’ve got the glorification of the Kennedy School, the Kennedys, and there’s always the feeling of well, it’s everybody just trying to latch on, this is as good as we can do. There’s always going to be reticence about identifying with a particular public figure and political figure, but in this case, there was this sort of residue. So, yes, I had to push very hard for it, actually. It was not easy.

Smith: And was that on the Board of Regents, or the faculty?

Bollinger: It was every place.

Smith: Okay.
Bollinger: It was in the Regents, it was every place. At the end of the day, everybody thinks it was a great idea. I don’t mean to say it was my great idea, but everybody thinks it’s really great to have. His reputation actually was going up, as I could sense it. And part of that was the dignity and the character issues and the lack of partisanship.

Smith: Well, you speak of the Kennedys. When they gave him the Profiles in Courage Award, it was the ultimate imprimatur. He said, for twenty years, everywhere he went people asked the same question. And after he received that award, he said they don’t ask the question anymore.

Bollinger: Isn’t that amazing.

Smith: The power of the Kennedys.

Bollinger: That’s very interesting. I remember, again, just a little tidbit, maybe many people felt this way, but I remember, as a Democrat, watching the debates, and after the debates I said to my wife, Jean, “Ford is a better person. I like him better, I admire him more, but I don’t think I can vote for him.” But that stuck with me.

Smith: In October of ’76, he went to visit Hubert Humphrey in the hospital. And Humphrey told him he was getting votes in the Humphrey family. And Bess Truman voted for him.

Bollinger: Is that right?

Smith: She wanted him to be sure to know. Listen, this is wonderful. Thank you so much.

Bollinger: It was a pleasure to remember all this.
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