Hamilton: ’65 was the year he took on Halleck, wasn’t it?

Smith: That’s right. Now, were you elected in the Johnson landslide?

Hamilton: Right.

Smith: Had it been a Republican district?

Hamilton: Yeah, for 24 years. That was really my first exposure to an internal fight, which are very common of course, but my first exposure in the House. Halleck was from Indiana. I knew him quite well even though there was quite a gap in our ages. Ford took him on. I remember that quite well. Charlie Goodell and Ford and Bob Griffin up in Michigan. Rumsfeld was in that group, wasn’t he?

Smith: And Bob Dole.

Hamilton: And Bob Dole was in that group, yeah. Well, fire away.

Smith: Well, let me ask you, did Halleck ever talk to you about that? Did he voice his unhappiness?

Hamilton: I think Charlie Halleck was deeply disappointed that Ford took him on as the Minority Leader. Halleck had quite a bit of national exposure. He and Ev Dirksen from the Senate were kind of shocked that a young upstart or a relatively young upstart like Jerry Ford would take him on and beat him. After that event, it was all downhill for Charlie Halleck. He was deeply disappointed.

Smith: The older I get, the more I begin to suspect that as important as ideological factors are, that politics is more generational than anything else.
Hamilton: Well, it’s a very large component of it. You remember Joe Martin had been the Speaker. A lot of the Republican younger members had taken him on and defeated him, I guess, as Minority Leader; and then they set their eye on Charlie Halleck. They wanted to take control on the Republican side. They won it eventually, of course, with Jerry Ford in as Speaker. Jerry Ford always said his ambition was to be Speaker of the House and he worked doggedly to achieve that, travelling all over the country, speaking at every chicken dinner in the country, and every Republican gathering in order to try to increase that Republican majority. Jerry Ford had a deceptively low-key approach to things. He was ambitious, no question about that, I think. But he cloaked it nicely. He was very popular in the House on both sides of the aisle. You couldn’t really dislike Jerry Ford. Straight arrow. Lack of pretention. Down-to-earth Midwestern values, from my point of view at least. And that personal popularity stood him in good stead, and in a sense, was why he was chosen by Nixon for Vice President.

Smith: Let me ask you, when you say ‘Midwestern values,’ what do you mean by that phrase?

Hamilton: Decent, honest, without ego, friendly, down-to-earth. Jerry Ford had core values that he believed in very deeply. I’m not just sure where they came from, I don’t know that much about his background. But he was a very stable person, very confident within his own skin, and a very appealing person overall.

Smith: It is an interesting thing when you talk about his ambition because that, in some ways, goes against the grain of the popular image. But I think it’s a shrewd observation. I’ve often wondered whether in some ways Ford used his reputation as a nice guy, maybe an unsophisticated guy, and put that to work for him.

Hamilton: Well, I think without a doubt, he did. It’s not uncommon in Washington, incidentally, to cloak ambition. People don’t like ambitious people who are blatantly obviously ambitious. Washington’s full of ambitious people, but the ones I think that are more likely to succeed are those who are able to hide it, cloak it. Ford had a very outgoing manner to him. He got along well with his
Lee Hamilton

April 7, 2010

colleagues. He had a natural ability to deal well with people. It interested me that he was chosen as a leader of the Young Turks. He probably wasn’t the brightest guy in that group, the others were hard-driving, more obviously ambitious, I think; but they settled on Jerry Ford as their leader, the person most likely to be able to overcome Charlie Halleck.

Smith: And I assume a significant factor in that change was the Goldwater rout. That young members in particular thought, “We’re about as low as we can go. We’ve got to try something different.”

Hamilton: I think that’s correct. They saw a need to rebuild the party after the Goldwater defeat and they were determined to start in the House.

Smith: Did he ever campaign against you?

Hamilton: I don’t think so. In those days, it was fairly rare for a sitting member of Congress to go into the district of another sitting member of Congress and campaign against him. Indeed, it kind of ran against the ethics of the House. Nothing in writing, but it was understood. Now that’s very different today, of course.

Smith: Anything you can share with us that will give us a sense of how different the climate was in this town, on the Hill, and particularly in the House that Ford was so much a part of?

Hamilton: Well, I’ll give you a very personal story. As a very young member of Congress, I made a big parliamentary mistake on the floor; didn’t even know I’d made it. I knew so little about the rules. Ford was the Minority Leader. Either at his instigation or at least with his consent, I never knew which, he sent over an Indiana Republican member of Congress, Bill Bray, to me and Bill said, “Lee, you just made a mistake. Here’s the way you correct it.” And I did on a bill neither he nor Ford liked. Now, it wasn’t a major piece of legislation, pretty small, but an extraordinary act by the Minority Leader and by Congressman Bray to help this newcomer Democrat not make a fool of himself. And I cannot imagine that kind of thing happening in today’s climate.
Smith: Plus, going back to what you said earlier, it was also smart on his part.

Hamilton: I think so. He understood down the road he could block the bill if he wanted to. I understood it, too. But the important thing from my point of view is that he was sufficiently sympathetic towards a new member of Congress, so he didn’t want that new member of Congress pulling a bonehead play.

Smith: We’ve been told among other things that members of Congress in both houses socialized much more with each other in those days. That many more of them actually brought their families with them to town, which is an enormous factor in integrating yourself into the culture. Is that all true?

Hamilton: Very definitely true. The amenities are important in politics as, I guess, in the rest of life. It’s very hard to get mad at somebody if you know them well. And in those days, members knew each other pretty well. To meet a member in committee or on the floor, both of which are rather confrontational settings, did that back then, too, but the difference is that back then, in the mid-60’s, you socialized with them a lot. You knew their spouses. You knew their family. In Jerry Ford’s case, he lived only a few blocks from my wife and me and Betty Ford and my wife became quite good friends. She often had the use of the Minority Leader’s car, so she’d pick up my wife and take her to social events to which the spouses had been invited. And my wife and Betty Ford became good friends. My wife had an enormous admiration for Betty Ford. Those are the kinds of personal ties that make a big difference.

Smith: What did she admire about Mrs. Ford?

Hamilton: Well, she was very outspoken, very friendly. She had many of the Midwestern values that Jerry Ford had. She was quite unpretentious. Didn’t hesitate, incidentally, to disagree with her husband.

Smith: Did you see that?

Hamilton: Oh, yes. The big example, of course, I remember is on Roe vs. Wade, when she just came out and said that’s a wonderful decision or words to that effect and, of course, that was appalling to Jerry Ford and to the Republican Party. But Betty Ford had that spunkiness about her that was very, very attractive.
And she was a very gracious woman. She had been a model and obviously she and Jerry Ford were very devoted to one another. It was a strong marriage.

Smith: Did you or your wife sense any problems that Mrs. Ford might have been having in those early days, any unhappiness?

Hamilton: Well, I certainly did not and I don’t recall, because I didn’t have that much contact with Betty Ford, but I don’t recall my wife ever indicating that.

Smith: I just wonder, in the larger sense, she’s become almost a stand-in for the political wife who, 40 years ago had a tough road to hoe.

Hamilton: Well, I guess she did and she had, as I understand it, an alcohol problem that developed at some point. I never saw any evidence of that, but neither was I around her very much.

Smith: Sure.

Another thing about the parties. Forty years ago I remember talking to Walter Mondale about this - whether it was the Senate or the House, you came to Washington and you joined a party that had diversity. I mean, each party had wings. And so a northern liberal would have to take account of the fact that up to a point, there was a considerable number of southern conservatives within the party that you had to deal with. And presumably, learning to forge compromises and personal relationships within your party with people who were your ideological opposite must have had some impact in how you operated in the larger legislative arena. That, I assume, is largely gone today.

Hamilton: Well, I think it is. I think the political parties used to be part of the consensus building mechanism in America, as you were talking about. There was diversity in the Democratic Party. Howard Smith was head of the Rules Committee - was about as conservative guy as ever served in the Congress, and in one of the most powerful positions the Democratic Party could provide. So, in the party conventions and the party itself and the caucuses and the House, you could see the party making compromises to build a consensus. Today, that’s much less true because there’s a lot more ideological purity, if
you would. Democrats tend to be more uniformly liberal and Republicans more uniformly conservative. And so, we have lost, and this is the principle point, one of the principle consensus building mechanisms in America of the political party.

Smith: Indeed the very word consensus is seen as offensive to those on the extremes.

Hamilton: Unfortunately, that’s the case, but from my point of view, I think that the task of the Congress is to build consensus behind a solution to a problem.

Smith: And clearly Ford was very much a part of that.

Hamilton: He was indeed. Now, Ford was a very loyal Republican, extremely loyal. And he saw the world through Republican eyes. On the foreign policy side, he was an internationalist. He was what you’d call a hawk on Vietnam, even though later on in his presidency, he played a role in getting us out of Vietnam. He was on the military appropriations subcommittee. That’s a powerful position. He was a ranking member, I believe, and he was very strong on defense, national security matters. But one of the things I appreciated about Jerry Ford was he was not the least bit vindictive. I, for example, offered on the floor of the House, one of the early amendments to reduce our commitment in Vietnam and didn’t win the vote, but we got more votes than anybody anticipated and that began to change the dynamics in the House, I think, considerably. Ford argued vigorously against that amendment, but never took it out on me personally. He had that ability of friendship that went beyond the party lines.

Smith: It’s interesting. There are stories of him and Hale Boggs going down to the National Press Club. They would drive down together; decide what they were going to debate that day on the way to the club. They’d go down. They’d have their debate. Go have a drink and lunch, and go back to work. It sounds almost unbelievable contrasted with today’s climate.

Hamilton: Well, it was a very, very different approach. I’ve seen it so many times when the speakers of those days would sit down with Minority Leader Ford. The Speaker would say, McCormick or someone, Albert, “We’re going to bring up this bill” and Ford would say, “We don’t like that bill.” And Albert or
McCormick would say, “How many votes are you Republicans going to give us?” And Ford would give them an estimate, not an off the cuff estimate, one that he had been whipping. And, likewise, they’d talk about key amendments. Ford would not like the bill, the Speaker would like the bill, and they’d bring it to the floor. They both knew how it was going to come out, knew what the votes were. They would each go into the well and give a ringing speech for or against the bill and then forget about it. And they were friends. But the point is, the civility of when they were calculating the votes, it was an honest exchange. Ford would say, “You’re not going to get more than 15 votes from the Republicans on this bill.” And the Speaker would say, “Well, I need 20.” And then the Speaker would have to make up his mind whether or not to bring the bill forward, hoping he could pick up the 5 votes somewhere. But never vindictiveness, never anger, but both very passionate, very strong in their conviction about the bill. But they didn’t let that interfere with doing business.

Smith: A couple of things. He had a temper and it was very well concealed, but something he struggled with all his life to contain. I wondered if you ever saw that.

Hamilton: I did not.

Smith: Never did.

I’d be fascinated if you could tell us about the strengths of the speakers with whom you worked. I mean particularly John McCormick, Carl Albert, and Tip O’Neill. What did they each bring to the job?

Hamilton: Well, McCormick was a slashing debater. He really was more of a Majority Leader than he was Speaker and you could see John McCormick sitting up there in that chair when a debate was going on just chomping at the bit to get into the debate. He was a debater and a good one. And he found the Speaker’s role uncomfortable.

Smith: Constricting?
Hamilton: Sitting up there in that chair. He was an advocate. He was a very, very able advocate.

Smith: And I assume a sort of a classic New Deal Democrat.

Hamilton: Roosevelt Democrat all the way, New Deal, liberal and social programs. Internationalists supported going into the war, World War II. And a very fine decent man. I never really knew him very well. He was too far above me. As a matter of fact, one of my recollections is when Mo Udall challenged him for Democratic Speaker in the Congress, I supported Mo. It’s that generational gap you were talking about. The night before the vote, I got a call from Speaker McCormick and Speaker McCormick said, “Lee, I’ve got a contest tomorrow night. I hope I can have your support.” I don’t think he knew who he was talking to. I doubt if he could identify me personally at that point. I said, “Well, Mr. Speaker, I’m going to support Mr. Udall.” Whammy! The phone went down. I kind of shook for a few minutes after that, but John McCormick never held it against me and never held back. He was a gentleman.

Carl Albert, a stem-winding speaker, a little giant from Oklahoma; likewise, a New Deal liberal. A progressive, we’d say these days, and extremely able. The curious thing about Carl Albert to me, I think, is he wanted to be Speaker all his life and when he got there, he wasn’t quite sure what to do. He was kind of an uncertain leader, uncertain trumpet, if you would.

Tip O’Neill was as popular as Jerry Ford. You just could not dislike Tip O’Neill. He had that Irish Catholic warm friendly approach. I recall a lot of people getting mad at Tip O’Neill, but never holding it. He would overcome it. And I think a good Speaker over all, a strong Speaker. He was one of the early people to oppose the Vietnam War against his party at the time. But Tip was a committed Democrat and I think turned out to be quite a strong Speaker.

Smith: Let me ask you one thing about the House and we’ll move on. Because Ford clearly was very proud of his service in the House, I think he regarded it as his real home in Washington. There’s no evidence that he ever wanted to go to
the Senate, although he’d been approached more than once. What is it about
the House, and I’m not putting down the Senate, but what is it about the
House that inspires such loyalty?

Hamilton: It’s a more collegial body. I didn’t know much about the Michigan politics of
the day, but Ford had I think fairly easy re-elections and he enjoyed travelling
the country, making the Republican case. He was quite good at it. He really
enjoyed his friends.

Smith: On both sides of the aisle?

Hamilton: Oh, no question about it. And I think he felt very much at home. He
described himself as a man of the House and there’s that great story about
him. After he stepped away from the presidency, he took a helicopter tour
and he asked them to swing around the Capitol. “This is my home.” He’d
been in the White House for however long it had been, a couple years, but he
very much considered himself a man of the House and I don’t think ever felt
otherwise, even as President.

Smith: Now, that raises a large question. Because you can also look at the two and a
half years of his presidency as learning the difference between a legislator’s
function and the executive function.

Hamilton: Yeah.

Smith: And he is said to have observed that the great frustration to losing in ’76 was
he’d just felt that he’d mastered the job and he lost it.

What would he bring from the Hill to the White House and what might he
have to unlearn?

Hamilton: Well, what he brought surely was personality. He knew the people. That’s
hugely important in politics and he had their respect. When Nixon asked him
to be vice president, a principle reason for that request was Nixon knew he
could be confirmed overwhelmingly. Nixon was not in a strong position at
that point and he had to have a good strong vice president who could work
with the House and the Senate. So, Jerry Ford knew the House, very, very
well; knew the legislative process intimately. That’s a big strength. On the
Lee Hamilton  
April 7, 2010

negative side, presidents instinctively expand the power of the presidency and I think Ford had to learn that a little bit. He was very much a legislative person, had deep respect for the separation of powers and the Constitution and I think it took him awhile to get accustomed to exercising the power of the presidency.

Smith: I heard him say, “If I had my life to do over again, probably the one thing I would’ve done was spend more time learning mass communications.” In the House and the Senate, the communication of leadership can often be one on one, often behind closed doors. Or it’s a kind of lingo that people don’t understand outside the beltway - you know, incomplete sentences, grunts…and a president’s communications are totally different.

Hamilton: But part of it is the period of time when Jerry Ford started in politics; television was a minor factor and you tended to meet in smaller groups. You didn’t very often address big groups. And as he served in the presidency, national media, not just television, but the print media, picked up in intensity and presence and coverage, so a politician of Ford’s age and generation had to learn media was changing.

Smith: On the job. I mean, literally, the rules were changing all around.

Hamilton: Now, you fast forward to Ronald Reagan who mastered television partly because of his background but that gave him kind of a leg up later on.

Smith: On balance, do you think television has been good for Congress?

Hamilton: I think good and bad. It’s marvelous that people can flip in and watch a debate. My constituents made me think at times that if I didn’t do it on television, I didn’t do it. There isn’t any doubt at all that television is where people get their information. The good part of that is it exposes them to a lot of things. The bad part of that is that it’s so terribly superficial. So, I have a kind of a love-hate attitude towards television. It’s a very mixed blessing and there’s nothing more frustrating for a legislator than to work six months on a bill and then go before the cameras and they get impatient once you run past 30 seconds in describing a very complicated piece of legislation. It’s maddening. It’s frustrating. And so many times I’ve sat for television
interviews beginning to launch on what I thought was a lot of wisdom and they’d be giving me this signal to wind it down, wind it down, you’re talking too long.

Smith: Was there a moment when you decided or your colleagues decided that the Nixon presidency was doomed? President Ford, who had something of the Boy Scout in him, he couldn’t believe that Nixon lied to him. I think he was shocked by the language that he heard on the tapes, which I think again goes to that sense of Midwestern decency that you referred to. For people who didn’t go through all of that, can you convey a time when the unthinkable seemed unavoidable?

Hamilton: Well, it built. It was a step-by-step process. Ford, of course, was very, very loyal to Nixon and he was very, very loyal to the Republican Party. He had a tough time thinking that John Mitchell would lie to him as he did, or Spiro Agnew would lie to him as he did, and Richard Nixon. That’s natural enough. I don’t know if there was a time. It just seemed to me that the case kept building and building and building and I guess the tapes became the crucial thing. But it was clearly moving in that direction.

Smith: It’s said that Nixon actually looked upon Ford as his insurance which seems like a total misreading of Congress’ attitude.

Hamilton: Nixon, I think, used Ford to his advantage, both prior to his resignation and maybe even long before that. Nixon had a respect for Ford and an appreciation of his friendship, but I think he used him. And I think one of the disappointing aspects of Ford’s career was the extraordinary energy he brought to the task of defending Nixon when he was Vice President, when the evidence was just stacking up strongly against him. I don’t know if this is fair to Ford or not, but from my point of view, Ford seemed to kind of close his mind to the activities of the Nixon White House and defended it all over the country over and over again.

Smith: Did you have any contact with him during his vice presidency?

Hamilton: Some, but not very much. I had more contact with him when he was President. I think he was a Nixon loyalist as vice president, as I guess you’re
expected to be as vice president, and he was in a terribly difficult situation, a really difficult situation. I kind of concluded that Jerry Ford just kind of closed his mind to the evidence and set his course.

Smith: You’re certainly not alone in saying that. The interesting thing is that there were people in the Nixon White House who thought he wasn’t loyal enough, who resented the fact that he was out of town as much as he was.

Hamilton: Is that right? Well, he went on the road and he was all over the country defending Nixon - every whipstitch town, he was there.

Smith: When he becomes president, it must have been a transforming moment in the mood of this town. Having lived through something that no one ever wanted to experience, the resignation of the President - but before the pardon-what was that first month like?

Hamilton: There was a varied sigh of relief. I think Ford’s great statement “The long national nightmare is over,” was a perfect pitch, exactly where the American people were. And everybody recognized Ford to be a very decent man. Everybody had that impression of him, and an honest man. So, I think my chief recollection of his taking the presidency was just a big sigh of relief that a good man was in the office the presidency.

Smith: It’s also interesting because in that first week he was in office, he brought in the Congressional Black Caucus and George Meany, and a whole bunch of people who hadn’t been in the White House for a long time.

Hamilton: Well, Ford’s presidency was marked by his evenhandedness. John Paul Stevens, he was very proud of that appointment to the Supreme Court. And his Attorney General-

Smith: Ed Levi.

Hamilton: Yeah, Ed Levi, he set the mark for Attorney General. Ford, in his appointments, showed an evenhandedness. He did not push a strong ideological line in his appointments. And that, too, sets that presidency quite apart because now, of course, presidents tend not to do that. But he had an
Lee Hamilton

April 7, 2010

evenhandedness; a steadiness in his approach that I think is quite commendable.

Smith:   Let me ask you. Mel Laird. He had a plan to take care of the pardon. And he’s still angry - I mean he loved Ford - but he’s still angry that Ford didn’t let him carry out his scheme. And his idea later is that he was going to get a bi-partisan delegation from the Hill to go down to the White House to ask the President to pardon Nixon. Now, my question is, given the supercharged political climate of this town at that time, is it realistic to believe that you could’ve floated a trial balloon without it being shot down before it reached the tree level?

Hamilton: Oh, I don’t know that I know the answer to that. I didn’t know about Laird’s initiative. Ford had been in office how long before the pardon?

Smith: A month.

Hamilton: A month. I remember I was appalled by that decision. I guess in retrospect, most people think it was the right decision. I’m not sure I do, but I think he’s been widely praised for that decision.

Smith: We’d be interested in knowing why you still harbor some real reservations.

Hamilton: I’m sure it’s my partisan sensibilities in part; a very strong belief that presidents are not above the law. And, in this case, I thought it was an abuse of the pardon power because what Ford did, in effect, was pardon Nixon before he was convicted of anything, no matter what the evidence might have been. I thought, at the very least, it was a premature act. I don’t think I ever thought there was a deal, as he was widely accused of. I don’t think Ford would’ve done that. I really don’t. And I had no doubt at all that he was utterly sincere in his wish to put it all behind us. I think overall, the country has concluded it was a good judgment. I guess I have a hard time. I’m still wrestling with that.

Smith: Two points: not to defend him, but the context. They were being told as we understand it from Judge Sirica it would be two years before Nixon would be brought …
Hamilton: Yeah, it would drag out for a long time…I don’t think he ever regretted the decision. He was asked about it after he was president frequently. It had a dramatic adverse affect on his political standing. The country, I don’t know what the figures were, but they were very opposed to the pardon at the time. But that was partly just because Nixon had disgraced the presidency and people were really upset with Nixon.

Smith: Do you find it frustrating with the passage of time that now we have, not only Vietnam revisionists, but also Watergate revisionists who suggest that this wasn’t such a big deal after all? Why was it important for Richard Nixon to resign?

Hamilton: Well, I think that he lied may be the principle reason, but he supported a dastardly deed to burglarize the offices in Watergate. Had Nixon just said, “Look, I made a horrible mistake. I should never have done that. It was a period of bad judgment,” I think he would’ve survived his presidency. But it’s this long period of cover-up and denial that I think it was very clear to me despite, I guess, my partisan sensibilities on it, he simply could not function as president. He had lost the ability to have any credibility on anything.

Smith: Is it fair to say he basically squandered the moral authority of the office?

Hamilton: Sure, no question about it. He really did. And it took him awhile, I think, to understand that, but eventually, he did understand it and he did the right thing when he stepped aside.

Smith: And, of course, in November of 1974, in no small measure because of the pardon, Republicans are routed and this whole group of what became as the Watergate babies came in, I assume the House changed as a result of that.

Hamilton: I think it did. You had a lot of reformers come in, and beginning in 1974, you had quite a few changes in the internal procedures of the House, more open. I’m not sure when television came in, but that would’ve been consistent at least with the attitude then.

Smith: Also, wasn’t there much more aggressive legislative versus executive - the War Power Acts being a classic example.
Hamilton: The War Powers Act is a good illustration, a pretty ineffective piece of legislation, but certainly an illustration of what you’re saying. Too much power in the executive branch. So we had to do something about it, the critical question of war powers.

Smith: And, indeed, jumping ahead 35 years, there is this school of thought that the Dick Cheney evolution can be explained as someone whose views were shaped during the Ford presidency, Cheney came to believe that Congress posed a threat to the Executive.

Hamilton: Yeah, I think that’s right. Dick Cheney has been very consistent throughout his career in support of executive power. And he felt that Vietnam, Watergate, Iran-Contra were seminal events in the history of the country in which the presidency, the executive branch, lost power. Indeed, his dissenting views in Iran-Contra - I was involved in that myself - probably is as clear a statement of his fundamental philosophy a statement on executive power as you can find.

Smith: When we get to the fall of Saigon, and another Mel Laird scheme. Laird is still blaming Ford for not getting last minute aid to prop up Saigon. And again, I’m asking, as someone who was there, is that a realistic reading of the mood of Congress at that point? Was there anything in April of 1975 that a president could have said that would have persuaded Congress to appropriate those funds?

Hamilton: I think Ford accurately read the mood of the country. If we had pumped a lot more military effort at that point, we’d have tipped the needle our way for a period of time, but not permanently.

Smith: Do you think the South Vietnamese government was doomed?

Hamilton: I do. And I think, more importantly, from the American political standpoint, the American people had figured it out. Look, they strongly supported the war and then over a period of 5, maybe 7 years, they turned against the war. And they did not just turned against it, they turned against it strongly. And they’d had enough of the bombing. They’d had enough of the killing. They’d had enough of the incompetence of the South Vietnamese government. Sure,
we could’ have bombed more, we could’ have put more men in. We could’ have hit that and we could have hit this and we could have had a marginal impact. The big argument there was from the people who wanted victory in Vietnam and those that said, “Look, this nightmare has got to come to a stop.” The interesting thing here is Ford, by his history, you would think he would come down on the side of the hawks. He didn’t. And I think the reason he didn’t, defying Kissinger and a lot of other respected voices, he said, “Look, we’ ve got to cut our losses here and get out of here, short of victory.” And I think personally he made the right judgment, but that’s not important. What is important I think, he accurately read the opinion of the American people at that point.

Smith: And then there’s this coda because after Saigon falls, there is a kind of recoil on Capitol Hill and in particular, money that was to have been spent to bring refugees is in effect pulled off the table. And Ford puts together this sort of crazy quilt coalition, the American-Jewish Congress and George Meany and others who argue that America has a responsibility, a moral responsibility.

Hamilton: And I think this is real leadership on his part. If I recall, he gave amnesty to American draft dodgers. He insisted that many Vietnamese come into this country. He recognized our responsibilities and he stood up for them and I don’t think those things were popular. And I think Ford deserves credit for that.

Smith: Was there a desire on the Hill at that point to just wash our hands of this whole misadventure?

Hamilton: I think so. You’ve got to remember that a member of Congress was voting time after time for pouring money and money and money in there. And our casualties - I don’t recall the exact figures, 50-55,000 dead. And a deep sense of discouragement on the side of the South Vietnamese government. And American officials over a period of time beginning with Johnson, McNamara, Rusk, that was back in ’64, and the Nixon period in ‘68, they had kept telling us how well things were going in Vietnam. And the people just turned it off. The people said, “Look, we’ ve got problems here at home. We’ ve got other
things to do. We did the best we could. We gave them an opportunity. It’s time to get out.” That feeling was very strong.

Smith: In retrospect, is it surprising how little lasting damage was done to American influence? I mean, literally within months, you had Kissinger talking to the Israelis and Egyptians. It’s almost as if everyone had assumed that when America loses a war, it would have had a crippling effect.

Hamilton: I never bought that argument. I didn’t think it was the alpha and omega of American prestige. I began to be very suspicious about the domino theory, and we got so focused on the domino theory that we lost all perspective and we kind of lost confidence in ourselves as a nation. We took it on the chin in Vietnam. It wasn’t an utter defeat, there were some good things that came out of it, but I did not think that the result there would influence our position elsewhere in the world. There were just too many things going for us in the economy and in the military power that we had, even though we suffered a setback there. No, I didn’t buy that.

Smith: You said you had some contact with him during the presidency. Can you describe that?

Hamilton: Well, Helsinki.

Smith: Tell us about that.

Hamilton: I think that, from my point of view, this would be the strongest achievement of the Ford presidency. You could argue, I guess that getting out of Vietnam in the way he did was a major accomplishment. I think it was. But in terms of long lasting impact, Helsinki was a major accomplishment.

Smith: And the fascinating thing is, at the time, it was highly unpopular.

Hamilton: Well, people didn’t understand it. It took me a while to understand it. I didn’t quite understand what the Soviets had signed on to there and I was being briefed on it every day. Ford was dead right about that.

Smith: Describe what Helsinki is.
Hamilton: With the Helsinki Accords, basically we were negotiating with the Soviets and others there, and what we did in effect was put human rights on the agenda among nations. And all of the leading nations agreed to conduct themselves in a way that was respectful of human rights. That became the Helsinki Accords. The Soviets signed on to it, a club for us to use against them. And we reminded the Soviets of their misbehavior hundreds of times after that, and began to swing world opinion against the Soviet Union. The Helsinki Accords were the beginning of the Soviet downfall and I did not recognize the potential of the Helsinki Accords initially, but I think Ford saw it much more clearly than I did.

Smith: His relationship with Secretary Schlesinger. I realize you weren’t in the room.

Hamilton: Schlesinger?

Smith: Jim Schlesinger. But I wonder, you mentioned, he’d been all those years on the military appropriations committee. He knew the feds. And I’m wondering if there just was a chemistry that --

Hamilton: I can’t help you there. I don’t know. He let Jim go as Defense Secretary. He shook up things, didn’t he? Put Rumsfeld in. Cheney came into the White House.

Smith: The same time Rockefeller was dumped.

Hamilton: Incidentally, I do have a clear recollection about that. Ford regretted that he did not defend Rockefeller more. I think he looked upon that as one of his major mistakes, if I’m not mistaken, because when he was gearing up to run in ’76, the Republicans didn’t like Rockefeller for a lot of different reasons, but Ford did. Most people would say, including me, that Rockefeller had been a very good vice president. But that didn’t matter. He ran against the core of the Republican Party and Ford kind of ran away from him and didn’t stick up for him and ended up appointing Bob Dole.

Smith: Did you have contact with him at all after he left the presidency?
Hamilton: I ran into him on a couple of occasions at meetings and found him always very, very cordial. He appreciated that House tie and the fact that Betty Ford and my wife Nancy were good friends added something to it. But the really good qualities, personal qualities, of President Ford came out again in his post-presidency years. And remarkable about that was his lack of bitterness. That was quite a crushing defeat with Jimmy Carter and he had that famous statement about Soviet domination in Eastern Europe that hurt him badly in the election. As I recall, he started way behind in that election. Is that right?

Smith: Yeah, 30 points.

Hamilton: 30 points, I knew he was behind. But it turned out to be a horse race – a close one. He was deeply, deeply disappointed that he lost the election, but he was never bitter. It was a good quality.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Hamilton: Oh, I think without any doubt as a healer. Look, he took a presidency that was in the pits and when he left office, he had elevated it. Even though people didn’t vote for him, they knew what he had done.

Smith: Well, with the Bicentennial, people actually celebrated the Bicentennial.

Hamilton: That’s right, in ’76. So his great overwhelming accomplishment was that he healed the nation at a time when it was deeply divided. I think he’ll be remembered for being just a very decent man in the presidency. He didn’t have to go through the ordeal of getting to the presidency, where you create great friends and great enemies. I think he’ll be remembered as a president who brought the nation together at a very critical time in its history. He wasn’t in long enough to have too much of a judgment about his presidency, but on the whole, he’ll be remembered very, very positively.
INDEX

F
Ford, Betty
    character traits, 4–5
Ford, Gerald R.
    character traits, 2
    Congressional days, 1–2
    Nixon pardon, 13–14
    personal stories about, 3
    political style, 5–7
    presidential style, 9–10
    remembrance, 19
    Saigon, fall of, 15–17
    transition to White House, 12–13
    as vice president, 11

H
Halleck, Charles, 1–2
Helsinki Accords, 18