

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Lee Simmons
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: Thank you for doing this. I have to ask you before we get into your story and then the larger story, how does it feel to be in this room again?

Simmons: How do I feel?

Smith: Obviously this is President Ford's office here at Rancho Mirage.

Simmons: Now that you ask me about it, all of the sudden, I got chills. I think about the number of hours that I have been in here with President Ford preparing for a trip or just preparing for every day activities for him. Now that we think about it, it gives me...well, actually a tremendous amount of pleasure to know that I had the opportunity to work for such a great man. And he was, as far as I'm concerned, one of the greatest politicians that I've had the opportunity to work with.

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

Simmons: He was a kind man. Very kind, very appreciative of everything you did for him. He would always say, thank you very much. Thank you. He never would not remember to do that if you did something for him. But what I liked about him was his high integrity. He was just one of the most outstanding moral men you'd ever want to meet. I was with him for thirty-three years, thirty-three and half years before he died, and I tell you, he was always above board in everything that he did as we traveled.

Smith: Give us an illustration of that.

Simmons: Okay. I'll give you a real good one. President Ford used to drink. He and Mrs. Ford used to have a cocktail and as we traveled around the world, these people knew that. They knew that he liked to have a little Jack Daniels before going to bed, and a little martini, or whatever before dinner. And wherever we traveled, all of the bars would be already there prepared for him, as well as

butter-pecan ice cream. This will always be there and it would be for us to take home with us or leave it there, or do whatever we wanted to. And we used to bring it home. I'm happy to tell you that, we would bring it home.

Not only did they have it in his room, they would have it in my room, so I got an opportunity to bring some Jack Daniels home, or some good liquor home with us. Well, he stopped drinking and one day he told me, he said, "Lee, you know, I don't drink anymore. Why don't you just tell them not to put this in our rooms anymore." This was at the Waldorf. Well, I thought that was very noble of him. I wasn't drinking either, but I like bringing that home. But he told me not to have them put that in the room. That's one of the things. I mean, we could have brought that home forever if we had wanted to, but he decided that since he did not drink anymore, then they should not put that in his room. That was one example.

And the other example was that when we would travel, and people would help us out with the baggage and that kind of stuff, and he would always ask me, "Lee, did you tip him? Did you take care of him? Here's some money." So he was very kind in that way.

Smith: But he was a fiscal conservative, wasn't he?

Simmons: Absolutely. He's not going to give them a fistful of money, but he did want them to know that he appreciated their help. The maids in the hotels, he would always give me some money – we'd put it in an envelope and leave it for them. He was a kind person and, regardless of what people think about him, I thought he was one of the most outstanding men in that regard.

I want to tell you this, Richard, I have fifty-five years of military and government service, and, as a matter of fact, I like to say that I've traveled the world over with these dignitaries from afar. Of course, I wasn't one of their top staff people, I was there in support status, but I've met all the presidents from General Eisenhower - President Eisenhower, through the current presidents and I've had a kind of a support status – whether with them or with President Ford. So I've had opportunities to observe and be around these people, although I would say I was not as close as I was with President Ford

and President Nixon and President Johnson. Those were the three presidents that I was very close with. But my association with President Ford was beyond anything that you can imagine, because I thoroughly enjoyed the way he carried himself, and the way that we did things.

Smith: He must have been a very different personality from Lyndon Johnson.

Simmons: Absolutely. President Ford never was a bully, not that I'm saying that President Johnson was. I think his staff was. They wanted to make sure that he, President Johnson, was taken care of wherever he went. Things that they anticipated he wanted or anticipated his move, it was always there. I remember when I was flying on the airplane with him as a flight attendant, they always anticipated that he might want this, he might want that, or he may want to go here or go there, so consequently, things were always in disarray. But President Ford was always on time – when you got his schedule, you knew where you were going to go, where you were going to be for the next three or four days. But that was not so in some of the other administrations. He was, by far, one of the presidents that kept on time and expected you to, as well.

Smith: It is interesting because it was no secret that he had temper, and he spent a lifetime – he wrote about as a boy and the efforts his mother made. The famous incident, I guess, where she gave him the Rudyard Kipling poem. And from my observations and talking to other people, he did a pretty good job of mastering that. Was it something that stayed with him?

Simmons: Absolutely, he had a temper. Absolutely, he was able to mask that. But President Ford didn't belittle anyone around him. He had his shortcomings as far as mechanical things. He would get upset at things that really were not his doing. If the telephone didn't work, or if the airplane wasn't able to fly because of weather, he could not stand those kind of things. If he wanted to go, if he was ready to go, he wanted to go at that time. Sometimes those things would upset him the most, and I would be sitting beside him on the airplane when some of these things would happen and he would say, "Lee, what's the hold up?" We'd be waiting to get to the gate or be waiting to take off because of weather. Those kind of things peeved him. Kind of upset him a

little bit because he could not control those things. But he wasn't upset at you. He might use a little profanity and everything and want to know what's going here, but he never would let that hang over. He would get over that. Even if you made a mistake, he might tell me, he'd say, "Well, let's not let that happen again." But he would not bring that up again. I never have heard him to give me a hard time about anything. He would correct me, tell me, "Well, let's do it this way, do it that way," but never would he let that linger.

Smith: And is it true, did he late in life learn to use a computer?

Simmons: As a matter of fact, when I retired, President Ford told his audience – I had about a hundred and fifty people there when I retired full time from here – he told them how grateful he was that I was around because he was not too much mechanically inclined. He said, "Lee would always bail me out by coming over to the house and setting the clocks, or setting my watch or those kind of things." He appreciated having me around because he knew his shortcomings there. As a matter of fact, when we were in hotels someplace and he wanted to call Mrs. Ford, he would always call me to come in and make the phone call for him, because he could not get all these numbers and things straight in his mind. He had other things on his mind. I can understand that, I appreciate that.

One day – this is a prime example of this – we were at the Waldorf, and all of a sudden I heard this tirade and I thought maybe he had cut himself or something, so I go running in there and he said, "This so and so telephone is not working. I can't get out on it." I said, "Okay, sir. I'll take care of it." But those are some of the things. But as far as being intelligent, I thought he was a very smart man, and he worked very hard at all times. A lot of people didn't know that about him. I hate to hear people say things about him that were not true - about his ability and all that, because he was a very smart man. He graduated tenth in his class in law school, I believe, or something like that. And he was a great football player. Gee whiz.

Smith: It's interesting, one of the things we've heard from more than one person was, it's a form of intelligence, actually, that he was much shrewder than some people assumed. And that, in fact, people thought of him as kind of an

innocent, and that he used that sometimes. That he sort of played that role as a means of getting more information. It's a very interesting observation – that he was, not Machiavellian, but he was much shrewder. He understood how people saw him and he sometimes made that work for him.

Simmons: Oh, yes. Absolutely. I would say that as we traveled around the world, he made sure that his image was always up to par. A lot of people would say things that were strictly not true. But he had a way of dealing with those kinds of situations and I've never known him to ever get in a situation where he couldn't explain them, or where he could not be presidential.

Smith: Did it hurt him – the whole Chevy Chase business? Here was a guy who was probably one of the best athletes who was ever president. And yet, television as a medium, an image can take hold. Publicly, I know, he sort of laughed it off. Do you think in private it hurt him?

Simmons: I think so. Yes, Richard, I think that bothered him a lot. But he was the kind of man that could roll with those punches. He understood the situations, the news, and the comedians did this as a way of making a living – although it was at his expense. But he knew that he was above all of that so he let it roll right off his back and kept going.

Smith: There is a wonderful story - I think I got it from a photographer, Kennerly. The famous picture, I think it was in Vienna, when he stumbled on the steps. It was raining, they were rain slick. They had the umbrella for Mrs. Ford and he stumbled, and of course, the sycophants around him were all denouncing the photographers. And he said, "Well, of course they took the picture. If they hadn't they would have been fired," which is an extraordinarily generous reaction.

Simmons: Well, Richard, I was on that trip and I was with him. As a matter of fact, I had his briefcase walking down the steps behind him when that happened. And I think the first thing he said was, "Well, I just stumbled into you," or something of that sort. He laughed it off. And, yeah, those things kind of bothered him. And when we were traveling on the airplane, sometimes because of his legs, his football injury, things like that, would buckle a little

bit and he may stumble just a little bit. But, believe you me, I agree with you, he was one of the top presidential athletes ever to be in this office. He could play golf, he swam, he was a boxer and he was very good at all those things. He knew that he was above all of those things that people were saying, so I don't think it bothered him as much as it bothered me. I'm the one that really didn't appreciate that.

I can tell you a little story. Once we were down in Memphis, Tennessee where he had his hole in one, and he played great golf. He could hit that ball as far as some of those pros, and much better than a lot of amateurs that he played with. I'm driving his golf cart, so I'm standing off to the side and here this lady said something like, "Look at him, look at him. He's in this lie, he doesn't even know where he's at." That bothered the heck out of me. I hate for someone to say that when they don't know what they're talking about. Those kind of things bothered me, but I don't think it bothered him as much.

Smith: How was he when he got his hole in one?

Simmons: He was playing with Bob Hope, of course, at that time. Yeah, he was playing with Bob Hope. Bob Hope got a lot of mileage out of that hole in one. It was in Memphis, and Bob Hope, that night at one of the galas after the golf tournament, he said, "Well, the President hit a great shot on Number 13, and it hit a tree and bounced off the hole, bounced off the tree and rolled in the cup and President Ford walked up and reached down in the hole to pick the ball up and missed."

Smith: Were they close?

Simmons: They were very close. Yeah. As a matter of fact, they could almost be a team – you know, him the straight man and Bob Hope. Yeah, we traveled a lot with Bob Hope to various golf tournaments and things like that.

Smith: It must have been rough, though, in the last years – I mean, Hope was really not in very good shape physically.

Simmons: No, he wasn't.

Smith: And, I remember, maybe it was Penny who told me, the President – talk about friendship – the call would come and say, “Bob would like to play golf today.” And the President would go out and they would play maybe a hole or two.

Simmons: Two or three holes.

Smith: And then Hope would want to rest. That sort of thing. Is that true?

Simmons: Yeah, that’s quite true. They were good friends. They were great friends. We were in Florida once for a tournament, trying to think of the name of the tournament, but we stayed at the same villa in Jacksonville, Florida and Bob Hope was supposed to ride out with President Ford the next morning. We had breakfast, he was supposed to have breakfast with us but he didn’t show up. So finally President Ford said, “Lee, would you go check and see if Bob is going to ride out with us?” So I went and knocked on his door, and I heard him say, “Yeah?” I said, “Sir, President Ford would like to know if you are going to ride out with us this morning?” He said, “What time is it?” I said, “Well, it’s ten-fifteen.” He said, “My God, it’s in the middle of the night!” He said, “No, tell the President to go on ahead and I’ll join him.”

Smith: Was he funny?

Simmons: All the time. He was. But he was a great guy to be around. He always thought that I was a Secret Service agent.

Smith: How did you first come to have this extraordinary exposure to all of these presidents? How did you wind up on Air Force One?

Simmons: Well, I sort of was at the right place at the right time. First of all, I ended up in the presidential squadron at Washington National Airport in 1953, so that’s when I became a support person during the Eisenhower administration. And after being there for about eight years, I had met a lot of my friends that were traveling, going to different places overseas. I was single at the time so I thought it would be nice if I could travel to Paris or London and some of those places. They would come back and tell me about all those stories.

I inquired about it because I had been in the organization about ten years, knew a lot of the officers, I had worked with a lot of them and they knew who I was. I guess my reputation was pretty good. At that time there were no African Americans flying in the squadron at all – not on flying status. We had a lot of support people, but none flying on the airplanes. And, of course, that's back in the Sixties. The segregation in various hotels and things like that were probably a problem. They were looking at that because we didn't want to embarrass the dignitaries that we were traveling with. If you go to Little Rock, or someplace like that, and the crews couldn't stay together, or whatever.

Some of those things were in people's minds at that time. But I inquired about it, and he told me, he said, "Listen, do you think that you can deal with this kind of situation?" I said, "Absolutely." And they said, "Well, what about if you're traveling with the crew and maybe you would not be able to stay with the crew. Or maybe we would not assign you to a trip because of it?" I said, "I can understand that." Anyway, a few days later, I was assigned directly to the flying squadron and I was in the administrative field. Normally, in order to become a crew member on one of those airplanes, you have to have so many hours in your crew duty. You have to be well-experienced.

Smith: Now, when we're talking about airplanes, we're talking about presidential aircraft.

Simmons: That's the way I got in. Presidential squadron, where you fly other dignitaries. Not necessarily the president, but other dignitaries. But after being there for a while, I filled in for some of the crew members in the Kennedy administration when they needed an extra body to fly. I did support missions, and I did some trips with him before he was assassinated. And after he was assassinated, I flew a lot with President Johnson.

Smith: What was your sense of President Kennedy?

Simmons: President Kennedy? I didn't get to know him very well. I was just like – I can remember myself feeling like, "Wow, this is like going to the movies," to see the President and Mrs. Kennedy. Because they were like a king and queen, or movie stars or something like that. So the only thing I wanted to do was get to

see them, get to be around them. But, of course, because I was very new to flying at that time, I did not have the opportunity to serve them onboard the airplane. As a matter of fact, I served the crew and someone else served them. But I did get a chance to see them and be up with them and I was just like a starry-eyed kid.

Smith: At that point, were there other African Americans on those planes?

Simmons: No, none at all.

Smith: So you were unique?

Simmons: I was the first African American to be assigned as a crew member. There were other African Americans flying on the airplanes in other capacities – White House staff or whatever. Or even maintenance people – some African Americans were in the maintenance squadron, and security. But as a crew member, which are wings, I was the first one.

Smith: Were you welcomed?

Simmons: Absolutely.

Smith: Did you feel comfortable?

Simmons: I felt very welcome. I felt very comfortable. Of course, there were times when I knew that I should not be going to dinner with these guys in certain parts of the country – we'd go down in Texas. When they went to these hillbilly joints at night – I don't want to say hillbilly, I'm sorry. Or go to the country and western restaurant to eat, I figured, ah, maybe I ought to skip that and stay at the hotel. But mostly the crews treated me nice. I was, for about ten years, the only African American on the crews whenever we flew overseas or stateside.

Smith: You weren't in Dallas by any chance at the time of the assassination?

Simmons: Well, I was on the backup airplane, I was not on the primary airplane. I did assist then when we got back to Washington and offloading people – and assisting in any way I could on the ground after we arrived back in Andrews Air Force Base.

Smith: What do you remember of that day?

Simmons: Oh – well, it was unbelievable. People were crying and the crews were very upset – couldn't believe it. Because this man was so popular at that time, especially with the military, and with the crews, it was unbelievable how popular he was. We were very hurt. As a matter of fact, you know that this whole country was very upset about what happened when he was assassinated.

Smith: Did you have any doubts about – now here's this new president – he's a Southerner – he's from Texas. Just as an African American, did you have any reservations at first? The contrast between John F. Kennedy, who belatedly, but nevertheless embraced the civil rights movement – and now, all of a sudden, this unknown Southern commodity...

Simmons: Well, I will say this: yes, I was concerned about working with him on the airplane, but I kind of knew his reputation. I knew to stay out of his way, do what you're supposed to do, and I made several trips with him when he was vice president. So I knew how to deal with him.

Smith: Was he mercurial?

Simmons: I think he was. There again, anticipating what he'd want – remember, I mentioned that earlier. He enjoyed getting on people, chewing them out, and that kind of stuff. I remember an incident on the airplane. He was president this time. We were coming back from Texas from his home. He had been down there for the week and I was working the front of the airplane – had gone in the back to pick up something to take up to the front to feed the crew and also, at that time, the press. The press was up front at that time. So we had to feed the press and the crew. So they sent me in the back to pick up something. Well, President Johnson was standing in the aisle, with his foot propped up on one of the seats, and I stood there with this tray in my hand for like ten minutes, and one of the Secret Service agents said to me, "Lee, tell him to move." I said, "You tell him to move." I wasn't going to tell him to move. We knew how to deal with him. As a military person, you have training and you know how to treat dignitaries on a plane. Protocol was one of the

things that we were taught. You know how to handle those situations and you deal with it because you were there to support them, not for them to support you.

Smith: But the other side of mercurial is that people say he was also capable of great acts of kindness and spontaneous generosity. Did you ever see that side of Johnson?

Simmons: Well, I read about it. I know that he met with Martin Luther King, he met with other African Americans and I know that he sent the troops down in Arkansas to integrate the schools. He did some great things for African Americans, and I was aware of that and very proud of it. Although when he got on the airplane he didn't act like that to me. But he did a lot of things for African Americans.

Smith: But everyone loved Mrs. Johnson.

Simmons: Oh, yes. She was a sweetheart. The family was, too. The first ladies seemed to be a little bit more kind, a little bit more understanding than the presidents. I guess because they had more dealings with us than the presidents because they were always busy on the airplane. They were always writing or talking to the staff and doing things like that. But I loved the first ladies. Mrs. Nixon was one that I thoroughly enjoyed being around. She was a very kind lady.

Smith: The public never really knew that side of her, did they?

Simmons: Right. But I had the opportunity to travel a lot with her. As a matter of fact, I was stationed in Germany when Nixon became president. I was asked to come back to fly on his airplane by the presidential pilot, Colonel Ralph Albertazzie. After coming back, of course, all of a sudden here is this little African American guy's going to be put on the airplane, and some of the crew members didn't know me, so it was a little strange with them that Colonel Albertazzie brought me back.

Smith: What was different? You were now permanently assigned to Air Force One?

Simmons: Air Force One, right. But what was different was that we have three airplanes. We had the two 707s and also we had the Jetstar, so a lot of the support missions were on those two airplanes rather than primary airplane. So I flew

those backup airplanes. I flew with Mrs. Nixon – that’s where they made the mistake – they let me fly with Mrs. Nixon and the girls, so we got to be friends. And then occasionally I would get to fly on the main airplane, on Air Force One itself, instead of the backup – occasionally. Well, anyway, Mrs. Nixon saw me one day, she said, “Oh, there’s my friend, Lee.” From then on, later on, I was assigned as his personal steward on Air Force One – President Nixon. And he would tell me whenever there was a trip that Mrs. Nixon didn’t go with him, when she would represent the United States to inaugurations and to other functions for the government, he would tell me personally, he would say, “Lee, I want you to go with Mrs. Nixon. She’s going to Africa.” And I went to Africa with her.

Smith: It’s funny, we just did an interview with her social secretary, and one of the things that came through was, she had a marvelous sense of humor.

Simmons: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: That people didn’t see. And she was clearly much warmer.

Simmons: Oh, yeah. She was.

Smith: Tell us about that and was she uncomfortable doing this job? You sense, later on, she was glad to be out of the public eye.

Simmons: Yeah, well, I think the press made them nervous because the press had been pretty tough on them during the years. That’s my personal opinion. They said some things about her husband that she didn’t like. Even when we were flying on the airplane, she knew the press could be very, very tough on him. So if they would like to come up on board the airplane and interview her when we were on trips, she would make sure that everything was taken care of. Every once in a while she may have, some people didn’t notice, she may have a smoke every once in a while. She didn’t want any cigarettes or anything around when they came up there.

Smith: That’s right. People didn’t know that she smoked.

Simmons: No, no. But we had special cigarettes that we would keep on board for her – what she liked – drinks and that kind of stuff. Not a big one, but she would do

them occasionally. But she would make sure that everything was cleaned up before the press came up.

I'll tell you a little story. I made a trip with her to Liberia – Monrovia, Liberia – President Nixon asked me to go with her on that trip. We were staying in a guest house, one on the palace there, and I went in with her – into the hotel to take of and to monitor her food requirements, because I knew what she liked and everything. So they asked me to do that. The airport was fifty or sixty miles from where the town was, so I got on the airplane with her – they had another airplane that would take us on in, or I stayed at the hotel with them. While there, they assigned me a white Mercedes, air conditioned Mercedes, where her staff was using embassy cars, which had no air conditioning in them. So, on our way home, some of the staff told Mrs. Nixon, “Lee was assigned a Mercedes with air conditioning and we had the old black staff cars from the embassy”. She said, “Boy, was he really treated nice.” And I said, “Well, what did you expect? That was my country.” This was in Africa. So that went over very well. She laughed about that and kind of patted me on the shoulder, and kind of said, “Good for you, Lee.”

And then, to follow that up, about a year or so later, Tolbert, President Tolbert who she went to his inauguration in Africa, we were on our way down to Key Biscayne and she said, “Lee, our old friend is coming to town for a state visit. I want you and your wife to come.” I thought that was the greatest thing that ever happened to me in my military career. So my wife and I went to a state dinner at the White House because Mrs. Nixon asked that Rosemary Woods send us an invitation to come and we went. So the next day after the dinner, it came out in the *Washington Post* society page that among the other dignitaries attending the dinner was Mr. and Mrs. Lee F. Simmons. So I got a big kick out of that. I thought that was great. But that was her kindness. That was the way she was. A lot of people didn't see that part of her, but I did.

Smith: Was she shy?

Simmons: She was shy. Yes, indeed. I thought so. As a matter of fact, when we left and went to take them back to California for the last time when he resigned, I didn't understand this trip because everybody was crying and carrying on. I

didn't know how to handle this personally. I had been with them for seven and a half years, serving them, taking care of them on the airplane, and what was I going to say to them, or what were they going to say to me? I was very much concerned about that. I wanted to make sure that I had the opportunity to say something to her. But she was in her compartment just about all the time, she was with her daughter and her husband.

President Nixon was up front, and they didn't really get together on that particular trip. She was served in her compartment and he was served in his and I was wondering what they were going to say to me, or what was I going to say to them. But, to make a long story short, when I went into there for the last time in President Nixon's compartment – he had asked me early, before President Ford was sworn in, to bring him in a little cocktail and asked Ron Ziegler to come up, so they both had a little cocktail, and had lunch. He said, when I brought the cocktail in there, he said, "Lee, I'm going to miss you. You did a fine job and I want you to know how much I appreciate it." And I said, "Sir, I am so sorry." And he said, "Well, don't worry about it, the world will continue. Everything is going to be fine. You take care of your family and you enjoy your life." That's what he said.

Mrs. Nixon had not said anything to me. She didn't say anything to me until she was getting off the airplane and I was standing outside her door when she came out. She didn't say very much. She just hugged me. And that was it. I didn't see her again until later on at the dedication of the museum. But she was kind of shy, so she didn't say a lot to me, but I knew she cared.

Smith: Was he shy?

Simmons: He was very much shy, yeah.

Smith: Because, he once said, very candidly, he said, "I'm an introvert in an extrovert's profession."

Simmons: Yeah, I agree with that. Now, I thought both of them were very loose and very accommodating around people they know. People that they had a confidence in, they'd been around them, they were very open, they were very kind, and they spoke to those people in great tones and everything. I think the press and

other people that they didn't have much respect for, or that they thought were out to get them, so to speak – that's my own personal opinion, I'm not saying that I heard that from anybody – I think they were shy about that.

Now President Ford, that's a different story. He was always open, he was always kind. He enjoyed being around people. He was just a joy to be around. I think that anybody that got to meet him – because they all felt as I did – that he was just like your next door neighbor. He was a guy that you felt very comfortable around after you met him. And I'm sure a lot of other people felt the same way.

Smith: What was your first contact with him?

Simmons: My first contact with him was when he flew on Air Force One going to Miami to the convention. He was a keynote speaker at the convention in Miami?

Smith: I think he was the permanent chairman – in '72 – the convention that re-nominated Nixon.

Simmons: I didn't know much about him. I hadn't heard much about – I hadn't even seen him, as a matter of fact, I don't think. But he was on the airplane and I'm so pleased to say that he remembered meeting me on that airplane on that trip. So that was my first encounter with him. And I didn't see him anymore until he became president. I didn't see him during the time he was vice president.

Smith: What did you expect? You obviously had become close to the Nixons.

Simmons: Absolutely.

Smith: And their departure represented a loss for you, as well as a historic event for the country. What did you expect the rest of your life was going to be on August 8th, 1974?

Simmons: It was August 9th, 1974.

Smith: But the resignation came on the 8th. You're right, of course, on the 9th came the actual transfer.

Simmons: I was very sad. Very disappointed. I had heard these rumors that he might leave. But because of my relationship with him and his wife on board the airplane and I was their personal steward, I was not the chief steward on the airplane, but I was their chief steward, because wherever they went, I was there. Their requirements on the airplane, I managed all of that. So this was a great thing for me. I came from the woods, the sticks in Alabama and I end up on Air Force One, being requested by the President of the United States to be their personal steward on board the airplane. That was great.

Smith: Did you feel comfortable around them as an African American?

Simmons: Absolutely. I felt very comfortable. I felt very comfortable and very at ease. The thing is, Richard, you have to be there to serve them. You have to know what they want and be there to take care of them, just like if they were a guest in your home. So, I had that ability to do that, and my personnel that helped me to accomplish that. So I was very comfortable around them. And I think they were very comfortable around me. And if I hadn't been, they would not have requested that I be there. Same thing with President Ford. If they didn't enjoy my personality and had confidence in me that I could do the job, I would have never been there. I would have been gone many years ago.

Smith: Among other things, I would think a successful steward needs a little bit of a sixth sense. It's almost a psychological intuition about particular individuals, almost knowing in advance what they might want and anticipating?

Simmons: Well, let me just say this about President and Mrs. Ford. Of course, I didn't know them very well when he first became president. We were only there for two and a half years. So I didn't get to know them very much in the two and half years when he was president, but they asked me to come to California with them.

Smith: How did that happen?

Simmons: I think maybe Bob Barrett had asked me if I would like to come on the transition team. And of course, he said, "I'll get back with you – let me speak with the president about this." I think he had a talk with President and Mrs. Ford, and mentioned asking me to come to California with them. I went down

to the White House and met them and talked to them and they said they were very pleased that I would be coming to California with them. And that's what happened. I left – I was still assigned to Air Force One, and I came out here on January the 20th, 1977, and I was still in the Air Force for two months out here. I should have been back there flying with President Carter, but I was out here with him.

Smith: That's interesting because you said, yourself, that you didn't get to know them that well during the White House years, but obviously they, at least, thought they knew you well enough to make that very personal decision.

Simmons: Right, I think you're right, there. And I would hope to credit that – because of the way that I held myself on board the airplane, and the way that I took care of them. But after we came out here and I started traveling with him on the airplane, taking care of him in hotels and being with him, we became much closer. As a matter of fact, President Ford would tell people, "This is my friend, Lee Simmons, who has been with me since the days I was in the White House." And he would also tell them that Lee Simmons used to run Air Force One, "How many years, Lee? Twenty – twenty-five years?" I would not dispute him on that. I would just say, "Yes, sir."

So, of course, we spent many, many hours together traveling. And in hotels across the country, and a lot of times, if he had no guests that he had to have dinner with, he would ask me to come in and have dinner with him. We would have breakfast together, we would have lunches, and whatever. He would say, "Lee, you got anything to do today or for dinner tonight?" And I would say, "No, sir." I never had anything to do if the president wanted me to have dinner with him or lunch. I'm always available.

Smith: Does that suggest that he didn't like to eat alone?

Simmons: Well, no. I think he didn't mind. But he knew I was there. He and I – we left here together in the car – and so he's just being kind. Asking me, "If you're not doing anything, why don't we just eat together." Sometimes he would say, "Why don't you find a restaurant – ask the Secret Service to find a restaurant close by someplace and let's just go out and have dinner." It would just be he

and I. Of course, I ate that up. I thought that was great. Here I am sitting in the corner with President Ford having dinner and I'm sure the public is looking there and seeing this African American guy over here saying, ummm, wonder who that is? Must be the ambassador from Africa or somewhere – some diplomat.

So, of course, I enjoyed that. But he was that kind. He always was very thoughtful. I'd have dinner with him, if we were at some function that he was going to make a speech, regardless of where it was at, he would always introduce me. He would tell people, "This is Lee Simmons, who has been on my staff for x number of years," and that kind of thing.

Smith: I get the impression that he and Mrs. Ford really enjoyed New York.

Simmons: Yes, oh yes. Of course, Mrs. Ford had some experience in New York before they got married. So, yeah, they enjoyed New York. They liked to shop – Mrs. Ford did, and President Ford bought a few suits up there. They had a lot of friends there, of course – a lot of people from his Cabinet.

Smith: He never threw away a suit, though, did he?

Simmons: No, no. He kept a lot of them. Once in a while he would get rid of something. As a matter of fact, I just sent some suits out to the museum here recently. I don't know if you are aware of that, that he had when he was still a congressman in Grand Rapids. That was *made* in Grand Rapids.

Smith: My impression was, on more than one occasion he would appear dressed for an event and Mrs. Ford would say, "You're not going to wear that."

Simmons: Yeah, she had an influence on him. He would like to go in and say, "Betty, how you like this tie? How you like this?" And she would nod – but, on the whole, though, he was a pretty good dresser. He knew how to put his things together. The only thing is, he was always presidential. He never knew how to dress down. I remember getting a call from Marty Allen and telling me, "Lee, make sure the president has some casual clothes on when he arrives, because we are going directly to a baseball game at the White Caps." Anyway, he wanted him to have on a sports coat or no tie. So I told him that the day before

we left. I said, "Marty Allen would like for you to dress casual when you go in." So the next morning I went over to pick him up and he had a suit on. I said, "Sir, they wanted you to wear a sports coat or some kind of casual, open collar." He said, "Well, this is an old suit." So that was his casual dress.

Smith: Probably made in Grand Rapids, too.

Simmons: He was that kind of guy. He was always presidential. When we flew on commercial airplanes, going to New York, arrive at the airport and go into the hotel and go to bed and the next day was going to get up and go to his function. I really wanted him to wear a coat, a sports coat and a tie because I always did – a sports coat and a tie, sweater. You always wore a sweater on the airplane to keep comfortable. But he always wore a suit and tie most of the time. Very seldom, occasionally when we were on a private airplane, he might wear something else.

Smith: I think people are surprised – and I'll tell you very candidly because we'll edit this out, because I was astonished, frankly, how long he flew commercial, long after he should have been flying commercial, and we pulled some strings and got that addressed. That said, how did people react on a commercial flight when Gerald Ford appeared? It must have been a shocker.

Simmons: Well, I tell you, I enjoyed that the most. I'd be sitting beside him, and then close to President Ford would tune them out when they got on board the airplane. He would be sitting there with his papers, of course, he was always busy on the airplane – reading the paper, or going over his speech, or whatever. He would just tune them out and people would get on board and then you could look at them punching one another and pointing to him. He would just continue to read his newspaper. Then occasionally they would ask Secret Service or someone if they could just shake his hand. Of course, they would always come up and ask me first. I had that privilege to say, "Sir, we have some people that would like to come up and shake up your hand. They know you from such and such a place." He'd say, "Alright. Maybe one or two, I don't want everybody on the airplane coming up." Sometimes he'd say, "Well, I'm busy," or whatever. And then he'd say, "Lee, tell that person to come on up." He always wanted to be nice and kind to everyone.

But I enjoyed it the most, not him, that these people recognized him, and wanted to speak to him, and wanted to say hello to him. And then sometimes he didn't want to be bothered. One thing he didn't want them to do, he didn't want them to be taking his picture, or disturbing other people on the airplane. He was concerned about the other people. Not so much that he didn't want this to happen, but he didn't want to disturb people on the airplane. He just wanted to read his newspaper and get to where he was going.

Smith: And one of the banes of the existence of former presidents is autograph seekers. I suspect they could spend a day a week doing nothing but signing their name.

Simmons: You know, I think that was one thing that bothered him the most. When he was in the public, that people would come up and ask for his autograph. He knew that if he'd give one person an autograph, then everybody and their brother would come up and ask for an autograph. And he would tell me when we were traveling, he would say, "Now, we will keep these autographs down to a minimum, if we can. We will try to." But he would never hurt anybody's feelings. He might try to stay away from it by being busy, but if it came down to whether or not he would disappoint a person, he would sign that autograph. But if he could stay out of it and not be involved in it, he would certainly do that.

Smith: Isn't part of that because he knew there were also dealers? That this wasn't just spontaneous – that in fact, there were people out there who were making money off of dealing his signature.

Simmons: Absolutely. And of course, that was one of my jobs. I handled autographs in books and things here in the office, and I had met autograph collectors and they told me how some people would get autographs out of them and take them and use them for something else – like, for instance, the signing of the pardon. He only did that once. But there are a lot of pardons out there for sale. People made a lot of money off of it. He knew about that because people told him about it. A lot of letters that he personally wrote to people ended up being sold. He was aware of them and that really upset him. He didn't like that. So he had a thing about giving out autographs. It was okay if it was kids or

someone that he thought was really deserving of one. But some of these people, collectors were one, and he could spot them because they were there with a handful of stuff, wanting you to autograph them. He was aware of that.

Smith: Baseballs?

Simmons: Baseballs, books, oh, absolutely. Oh, he was aware of that. That kind of drove him up a wall sometimes.

Smith: I saw President Reagan, it was fascinating to watch what he did. It was sort of counterintuitive. But one way he had of getting around this was, he would insist on personalizing the autograph, which actually diminishes the value if you're selling.

Simmons: That was one way that he got out of it, too. But, Richard, he enjoyed doing things for people. He would do it, but he was aware that a lot of people were making money off of these autographs and that is not what he had intended for this to happen. He was a little cautious about that.

Smith: We were talking about the weather. That must have been one of the things that attracted the Fords to come out here.

Simmons: Yes, you're right on that, Richard. I was told that one reason that they liked this place here is because of the dryness, because Mrs. Ford had some problem with her arthritis or whatever. That's just what I was told. They considered Carmel. They had friends living up there – the Firestones had a home up there and they had a home down here. But I think they decided on this place because of the dry heat here, the weather, and of course, the nice golf course out here. President Ford liked to play a little bit of golf, so it was a good thing that he did because I, myself, enjoy playing a little golf.

Smith: Let me ask you, because, obviously she's written about it at great length – has been very candid about it. What was your perception of her health when they moved out here? It has been written about - that by then her kids were grown up – it's not an unusual situation, particularly for political wives, and he was as busy as ever. He was on the road a lot. He never really retired. Which left her, and that's a difficult situation. What was your sense of that period?

Simmons: You mentioned her health. I never knew she had a health problem when I was around her. I knew they had sociable drinks occasionally – I never knew that was a problem until they addressed it. I did know a couple of times when we were scheduled to leave, go on a trip maybe, she had a little bit of a problem being on time, but I never attributed that to any drinking or anything. As a matter of fact, I'll tell you this: when finally she did go to the Center – the Navy place.

Smith: In Long Beach.

Simmons: Long Beach – for this problem. She was there for a while. I went with her. I went down there and President Ford also went, so we all went down and she was there for whatever length of time she was. And then after it was all over, she was so candid about talking about it. She'd be talking to me about it and she said that was the greatest thing that ever happened to her. She said she never thought she had a problem until the kids and her husband got together and had this intervention. And I told her, and this is a true story and my own personal opinion about her, I said, "Ma'am, I never thought you had a drinking problem." I said, "If you had a drinking problem, then I've a whole lot of friends that need to go to the Betty Ford Center right now."

I think President Ford, when he traveled was concerned about her health, concerned about that problem. That's the reason why, whenever we had the opportunity to come back here, maybe with one day, one night, he would come back home. He would be here with Mrs. Ford, and we would have to turn right around and fly back to Grand Rapids. Say we were in New York and the next day, he had an event in Grand Rapids or wherever back east, he would come home and be home with Mrs. Ford, and then he would take off and go back.

They were very close and a loveable family. He never went to bed at night when we were traveling without calling and talking to Mrs. Ford. The only time that ever happened was if we could not catch up with her. But usually we'd know where she was at. We could, of course, find out where she was because she had Secret Service agents. Maybe she would not have been able to speak to him at that time. If she wasn't available he would say, "Lee, wake

me up at such and such a time, because I want to call Mrs. Ford.” He would always call her, and in the conversation would say, how you been and whatever, and the last words he would say, “I love you, I can’t wait to get home.” Those kind of things. So they were very close. I think it had to do with probably he figured she needed him there, and he was gone for so much. He probably felt a little guilty about that and that’s the reason why he would fly home and turn around the next day and fly back east. But if he had the opportunity to spend it home with Mrs. Ford, he would certainly do that.

Smith: It’s interesting that you say that, because I wonder – the earlier years, when he was coming up the ladder and just becoming a national figure in Congress, Republican leader and that sort of thing – and he was on the road so much of the time. He was pretty candid about saying, in fact, he really left the raising of the kids to Mrs. Ford. And I wonder if he felt, not guilt necessarily, but obviously he was aware of that...one sensed that he spent more time and more quality time, with the kids than perhaps he had when they were growing up.

Simmons: Oh, yeah. I think that’s quite true. As a matter of fact, I think that was one reason why he didn’t want to be president or run for office, because he had planned to retire, as you probably know, rather than run for any other political office. He had planned to retire so he could spend his time with his wife and family. I remember Mrs. Ford telling me that there was a lot of times on weekends when he was a Congressman, in order to spend some time with him, she had to go down to the office and spend time with him because he was gone so much. I’m sure she was aware of that, and I’m sure he felt that it was his responsibility to spend as much time as he could with her.

We could be in Australia or in China, or wherever, if Mrs. Ford was not with us, he would always make that phone call, and be able to say, “Betty, how are you doing? I love you and I miss you and I can’t wait to get back home to you.” Those are some of the things I heard. Maybe I’m not supposed to say those things, but...

Smith: That’s exactly what we’re looking for. And with the kids, I knew by that time they all had lives of their own, but I’d heard in particular that he spent a lot of time with Steve. That they would play golf together.

Simmons: Yes.

Smith: Particularly in the later years. I'm sure that was true with each of the kids, but I'd heard that in particular.

Simmons: Well, I think Steve was available. He was single. He would be around the president more than the other kids. I don't think there was any choice there that he was making because he cared for one more for the other. I don't believe so, personally. But he did spend a lot of time with Steve. He played a lot of golf with Steve, where he didn't have the opportunity to do that with Jack and Mike, because they were not around as much. Of course, Susan was the love of his life.

Smith: Tell me about that relationship.

Simmons: Susan was more like her mom, I think. I think they had a very close relationship. She loved her daddy, I could see that. I remember Susan when she was like sixteen years old in the airplane, throwing spitballs at Secret Service agents. But she was there with her dad, and she was Susan.

Smith: Plus, they'd all been through that ordeal of Mrs. Ford's cancer surgery – in the White House. Do you remember anything from that period – when Mrs. Ford had her cancer surgery and the family had to decide, do we make this public?

Simmons: The only thing I know about it is what I read in the paper, because I was on the airplane, of course. I was not in the White House with them when this all went down. So the only knowledge I had about that is what I heard later in life. I've heard them make comments about that. But, no, I was not too privileged of that going on in the White House.

Smith: But it's funny how quickly kids grow up, because it was right at that time that Susan, who before they moved into the White House had said, "I'm not going if I have to give up my blue jeans," put on an evening dress and gloves, white gloves and stood in for her mother. Overnight – the transformation.

Simmons: Susan traveled with us a lot when he was President, on a lot of trips overseas. And she was a kid.

Smith: She met Chairman Mao.

Simmons: Yes. She sure did. It was interesting to see her – her father being president and she's on the airplane traveling around with him. It was great to see that. I've known her ever since she was sixteen years old.

Smith: And as grandparents, how did they deal with that?

Simmons: Well, they talked about that a lot because, I have grandkids, and we often talked about their grandkids. They loved their grandkids. They enjoyed having them around. I think that was some of the greatest times they had, when they'd come visit – and still do at this time with Mrs. Ford. When her grandkids and her great-grandkids now come around – that's all new. When I met them, there was only one of them who was married, and had no kids at that time – Mike. So the kids have been a very great, and I believe, one of the great things for them - they thoroughly enjoyed mostly - is having their kids around them when they could.

Of course, with them living here and the kids living elsewhere, it was kind of difficult, but that's why they enjoyed going to Beaver Creek. Because they always made it a point to get together in Beaver Creek, to be together either at Christmas time, or during the summer time. They made time for those kids there. They didn't spend too much time here with them, but in Beaver Creek, at Christmastime, and then during the summer months when they were up there for summer, all the kids were there as much as possible.

Smith: When he was here in the office, take us through a typical day.

Simmons: On a typical day, President Ford would come over to the office about nine, nine-thirty, ten o'clock. He would come in the office and go over his mail, whatever we put on his desk - he would go through that. Maybe he would have Penny come in. He would deal with her with certain things that had to be done – whatever her responsibility was to him. The appointment secretary, schedule person would come in and go over whatever the schedule is and whatever he is dealing with to make the arrangements when he arrived to a particular function that he had to go to. And then Shelley, who was his

personal secretary, to deal with personal stuff. She would come in and deal with him.

And then if he needed me for whatever – if he wanted me to run errands, or to deal with things that are going on at the museum, if I had to send stuff out there, or find out about the book count, or whatever – he would occasionally have me. I was in and out of here more than most of them because I had a lot of other little things to do, because we were traveling together all of the time.

He would be here until about one o'clock, and then he would go over and have lunch, and then about two o'clock he would come back over and stay here until we leave. As a matter of fact, sometimes he would be in the office here, still going over his papers, or reading his papers, and having a little smoke when he smoked. And then on Saturdays – he worked on Saturdays, boy – we had to have the office open on Saturdays, as well. Although no banks were open, but the mail probably was not going to go out because nobody was here but him. But one of us, or somebody had to come in and go over the mail and make sure he got his newspapers and his magazines. Maybe we didn't have to spend all day here, but we would come in because he was always here. I understand, on Sundays, he would come back over and spend some time here between breakfast and lunch.

A typical day with him is, he'd spend at least six or seven hours here in the office and then he would go back home.

Smith: And he did that as long as he was physically able.

Simmons: Right. He certainly did. Holidays, he said to me once – I said, "You know, sir, tomorrow is a holiday." He'd say, "Well, I didn't vote for it." So he wanted us here on holidays, too, as well. But we understood him. We were government workers, and government supposedly has the holidays off, but we were working not for the government, we were working for President Ford.

Smith: The taxpayer got their money's worth in this office.

Simmons: That's right! What a great guy – what a wonderful person to work for. I will always be grateful for that opportunity.

Smith: My sense is that, up until his ninetieth birthday, he was still traveling extensively. And that whenever – I don't know if there was a time when the doctor said, you really have got to stop traveling – or whether it was less dramatic than that – that that really marked the turning point. He loved travel, didn't he?

Simmons: He loved traveling. He enjoyed it. I don't know when it tapered off. The last couple years of his life, there were only one or two trips. One of them was when his granddaughter got married down in Texas. We went to that. Other than that, he didn't do much traveling any more after that. But, boy, we were gone a lot when he was able to travel.

Smith: Do you remember the ninetieth birthday party at the White House?

Simmons: Oh, yes.

Smith: Tell us about that.

Simmons: I wasn't on that trip, as a matter of fact, because I was here and they left Beaver Creek and went to – so I'm not privileged on what happened on his ninetieth birthday party – although I was with him in most things we went to the White House. But that one escaped me.

Smith: Tell us about a typical day in Beaver Creek and how that would be different, or if it was different from a typical day here.

Simmons: It was the same routine as if he was here. The same thing. He had his schedule. His schedule was laid out from the time he got up in the morning until he went to bed at night, and the various little trips when he was in Beaver Creek to go to when there was no out of town trip. If he had to leave to go to New York to board meetings, or wherever, of course, those were still maintained as it was if he were here.

Smith: And where would you fly into? Where was the nearest airport for Beaver Creek?

Simmons: Beaver Creek? At Avon. They had an airport at Avon. Avon was closer. Then we had another airport. That's something that's escaping me at the moment, I

can't think of the name of it. But sometimes if the weather was inclement, we would have to drive two and a half hours down to Denver to go out of Denver. But there was another airport there.

Smith: And I suspect he probably didn't enjoy that.

Simmons: Well, President Ford entertained himself because he would have all those stacks of newspapers that he had to get rid of. So he'd sit in the back of the limo and read his newspapers. So it didn't bother him.

Smith: He really was a newspaper junkie, wasn't he?

Simmons: He was. He read about six newspapers, and then the thing about him: you saying a junkie, if we were in New York, and he had the *New York Times*, those papers would be here when he got back, he would keep a record of it. If we were in Washington, D.C., he would keep a record of the newspapers that he had read and he would give me that slip and tell me, when we would get back, I'd know what to do – go get those newspapers and throw them out so he wouldn't have to deal with them. But he would read every newspaper, the *Grand Rapids Press*, of course we got the *Wall Street Journal* everywhere we went, he read all the newspapers.

Smith: And what about exercise? There is this pool out back here, he made use of that, didn't he?

Simmons: Yeah, but the pool over at the house, not the one here at the office, but the one over at the house. He had a lap pool over there and he used to swim sometimes in the morning and sometimes in the evening when his health allowed him to do that. He had a couple of little exercise things in his dressing room that he would exercise. He stayed fit, and he watched his diet all the time.

Smith: He was very disciplined, wasn't he?

Simmons: He certainly was. He loved butter-pecan ice cream and, as you probably know, and he loved chocolate ice cream. But he always watched his weight. As a matter of fact, I think he told me that his weight never varied too much

from his playing weight when he was in college – 198 pounds or something like that. He loved to brag about that – that he was still in shape.

Smith: You saw him around President Carter. They clearly developed a very good friendship. Can you describe that relationship?

Simmons: Oh yeah, I can. I think, personally – now this is my own personal opinion – at first, maybe there was some distance there between the two of them. I always felt President Carter was very friendly and very nice. I was wondering about President Ford. This is my own opinion now, I was wondering if he didn't still, maybe have some kind of resentment because of the defeat and because of some of the things that were said. But they did, eventually, become close friends, and they did travel together occasionally and on the same airplane together. They had lunch together. They had dinner together. Of course, I was there. As a matter of fact, I made arrangements for both of them.

Smith: Were you there on the trip to the Sadat funeral?

Simmons: I didn't go on that trip.

Smith: Supposedly that's where they broke the ice.

Simmons: As a matter of fact, President Carter told me about a month ago, that's when they became good friends. I had the opportunity to speak to President Carter's Political Item Collectors. There is a group of people from twenty-one years that have called themselves President Carter's Political Items Collectors, and they asked me to speak to that group about a month ago down in Plains, Georgia. And I had the opportunity to meet with President and Mrs. Carter while down there. As a matter of fact, they came to the event and sat at the head table with me and my wife, which was a great opportunity for me to get to see them again and say hello to them again. And he told me at that time, as a matter of fact, I had said in my speech that they became good friends and we traveled a lot together in my introduction to my speech.

I mentioned some of the places that we had gone – Tip O'Neill's funeral, down to the Panama Canal Zone, and various other trips, to the Carter Center and also out at the Museum and Library. They were there on several

occasions. I just mentioned that and I said they became good friends. I said, as a matter of fact, I didn't know – I wasn't sure President Carter knew who I was. I'd been traveling around with him, so I went up to him one day, although I had met him and shook hands with him, but I wasn't sure if he knew who I was. I was thinking maybe he thought I was a Secret Service agent. I wanted to make sure he knew I was President Ford's assistant, so I went up and shook hands and said, "How you doing, President Carter? It's good to see you again. I'm Lee Simmons, President Ford's assistant." And he said to me, "Lee, I know who you are." And I said, from that day on he became my buddy, too.

He got up after I finished speaking and made comments, and he said that he and President Ford became very good friends at Anwar Sadat's funeral trip – that's when we really got to become good friends.

Smith: You stop to think about it, as unlikely as it seems in the abstract, they had a lot of shared values. They had a lot of what you would call traditional values, strong religious convictions, family men – they had a lot that would bond them once you get past that very large fact that they'd run against each other for president. And it tells you a lot about both of them that they were able to get past that.

Simmons: Absolutely. I think that is quite true. They both were family men, they loved their family and their kids. They were ordinary people. They came from ordinary backgrounds. As you know, President Carter was a peanut farmer, President Ford's family was not well off. He worked for whatever he got. So, yeah, they were almost like your next door neighbor, so to speak.

Smith: Plus, they both ran against Ronald Reagan.

Simmons: Yes. That's true, too.

Smith: That was something else that bonded them.

Simmons: That's true. So, I think they became good friends and I think they had a lot in common, as well.

Smith: There clearly was a close relationship with the Bush family.

Simmons: Oh, absolutely.

Smith: That went back really to President Bush '41's dad – who I guess had been in Congress when Gerald Ford was there.

Simmons: Yes, absolutely. And they played golf together at various places around. We played golf with him in Texas at a tournament there. They played here at the Annenberg estate – they played golf there together.

Smith: Tell me about that relationship with the Annenbergs, because that was a very close friendship, wasn't it?

Simmons: It was. Maybe some other staff people might have more insight on that because when they visited the Annenberg estate, or the Annenberg's came here, I was not too much involved in that. I didn't have to be with him on those kind of occasions, so I didn't get to know a lot about what was going on. I just know that they had a good, close relationship with the Annenberg's. We made two or three trips with the Annenberg's. President Ford went to the Annenberg School back in Pennsylvania. I was on that trip with him. And so I was around them, but not as much as when they were here.

Smith: And I remember, because I worked on the eulogy, one of President Ford's last trips was to speak at Ambassador Annenberg's memorial service. It must have been one of his last trips.

Simmons: Probably was. Close to it, I'm not sure, but I think it was. They were good friends and they liked one another very much. They often had lunch or dinner there when they had other dignitaries in, even when Ronald Reagan used to come out when he was president. He used to come here for a New Year's dinner and the Fords were always invited and they were always there. So they were very close.

Smith: How did you sense, just from your observation, the relationship with the Reagans?

Simmons: The Reagans? I think they were friendly, but I don't think they were as close as they were with other friends of theirs. They did not get together that much. Occasionally, for various functions when they were there, they were very

cordial towards one another and everything. I think the relationship was fine – was okay, but I, personally, would not say that it was on the top of their list for social functions.

Smith: Let me ask you something, and this may be totally speculative and you don't have to answer this, but clearly an attempt was made when President Ford died - there were the stories that Bob Woodward and others who wrote, quoting or taking out of context, depending on however you see it - some of the things that he'd said, for example, about the Iraq war. Questions about some of his people who had been involved in the current administration. Did you have a sense of how he felt about all that? Particularly the current war and the role that some of his cabinet officers played in the current administration.

Simmons: I think he was very much aware of what was going on, and I think he was very proud of the former cabinet members who were on his cabinet were there. He supported them wholeheartedly. He always defended them. He thought they were good people and he thought they were doing a great job. He always supported them and I don't think he was disappointed in what was going on. He thought they were making a great contribution. I heard him say that. Dick Cheney and all the other people who were on there. He thought they were doing a great job. He had utmost respect for all of those people and their capability in handling the situation. So he was very, very pleased about that situation.

Smith: Did he have much contact with Richard Nixon after leaving the White House?

Simmons: No, not a lot. We only saw Richard Nixon when we went to a couple functions that he was there. One of them was in Washington, D.C. and I don't remember what the function was. And it was the first time that I had seen President Nixon after I had been working with him, and I was so pleased to be there – to be able to go up and say hello to him. I'll never forget, President Nixon looked at me and said, "Where'd you get that thing from?" – talking about my mustache. When I worked with him I didn't have a mustache on. I was very happy about that – that he recognized me and knew who I was.

They did call one another occasionally – birthdays and that kind of stuff. Occasionally, they did talk. I know they did have a personal relationship, but it wasn't as outgoing as it probably could have been, if it hadn't been for political reasons.

Smith: When Nixon died – what were your feelings? I think a lot of people were surprised that the country reacted the way that it did – that there was really such an outpouring of genuine emotional response.

Simmons: Yes, I was pleased to see that and I think President Ford was, too. He was happy to be able to go to the funeral and pay his respects. I know I was. I thought that it was overdue. I believed the man was trying to, when he did what he did, he did it because he thought that was the right thing to do for his staff. He may have made a mistake, and I think he eventually admitted that. And I know President Ford probably thought the same thing – that he'd made a mistake when he didn't... whoever was responsible, he should have just went ahead and got rid of him and then he probably would have been fine.

Then again, if that would have happened, he probably would have never become president. And I would probably have never ended up out here in this good weather. I'm very happy to see the outpouring of love and affection for President Nixon as well as I was for President Ford when he died. I thought it was well overdue. I think when he died, and we went back to Washington and to Grand Rapids, all the people that showed up and showed their affection, "My Jerry," and all of that. That was heartwarming, and I was so pleased to be a part of that.

Smith: It's interesting because I was wearing two hats that week. The first half of the week I was with ABC and then, of course, was with the family the second half. I can tell you, from my observation inside the media cocoon, the media was surprised at the amount of public response. And one of the things in particular, in D.C., the number of young people who you would see in the crowds, and in many cases, African-Americans. A lot of people were being introduced to him for the first time. They weren't even alive when he was in the White House, but they were seeing this man, these old clips, and they

were comparing him, contrasting him, with what had happened to politics, and they liked what they saw. I think that was part of the response, don't you?

Simmons: Yeah, I do, too. And what I noticed a whole lot, and I'm sure it was due to the fact that he was a Boy Scout himself, as we traveled, all the Boy Scouts were there, all over the place. Everywhere you went, signs ups, troops, and that was gratifying to see because even after he left the White House and came out here, we got tons of letters – Boy Scouts that had become Eagle Scouts and President Ford was one – and he wrote letters to all these people and they were there. I bet you maybe a hundred thousand of them were Boy Scouts who had received a letter from President Ford from this office right here, congratulating them.

Smith: And another constituency he had, which very poignantly appeared out of nowhere at that point, were Vietnamese Americans. Vietnamese who had been rescued and their children. Operation Baby Lift, that was an extraordinary and very little known part of his story.

Simmons: Yes, that is true, Richard, but I think President Ford was aware of it. It was very gratifying to see this outpouring of love from even those people, too.

Smith: The last years – tough?

Simmons: Tough for all of us. Very tough, because we knew how active he had always been. It was tough for me to see him when he needed help to do anything, because he was such a private and such a gentleman that he wanted to be able to function on his own. Although I had been with him all these many years, it became a time when he couldn't tie his necktie, when I would have to come over. He would say, "Lee, I hate to ask you to do this," and I'd say, "Sir, don't worry about it, anytime you need me, I'm here." So I would go home – I wasn't working full time, I was just part time, but whenever he needed me, I would be there. And grateful, very happy to do that. I'd go tie his necktie, or help him to get dressed. I was very pleased to do that because I think he was the nicest, kindest person that you'd ever want to meet.

Smith: It was just basically a heart problem, wasn't it? A weakening heart contributed to a general...

Simmons: What I read in the paper, yes, I think that had something to do with it. He became weak where he couldn't get around as much as he'd like. That was very sad for me to see, because I knew that he was always a man that wanted to go out and exercise, he wanted to go for a walk, and all of a sudden he couldn't do those things. I know that he was miserable. I know if he had anything to do with it, it would not be that way. But, unfortunately, that's the way life is. It's going to happen to all of us one of these days.

Smith: Do you remember 9/11?

Simmons: Absolutely. Yes.

Smith: What was that like around here?

Simmons: We were in New York when that happened. President Ford and I were at the Waldorf. No, no, no. I'm sorry – back up. We were here. That was something else that happened in New York. I remember being in the Waldorf – I think it's when the spaceship was blown up – that's where we were. I'm sorry, we were here. I correct that.

Well, I remember coming in and talking to him about it and he asked me, "Did you see that?" We talked about it a little bit. I think he was very sad about it and he watched the news in here, in this office, and heard about it when it was going on. There were some phone calls made to him. He was involved in it.

Smith: I remember he did a – because we had an event in Grand Rapids and he did a phone call and spoke and compared it to Pearl Harbor. For his generation, it must have brought back painful, but ultimately triumphant memories. Pearl Harbor ushered in a war that nobody wanted, but in the end couldn't be avoided.

Simmons: I agree with you there. That was a hard time for all of us – not only for President and Mrs. Ford, but for staff as well. We got a lot of calls, people were calling, trying to get in touch with him during that period of time.

Smith: He was very proud of his Navy service, wasn't he?

Simmons: Oh yeah. Yes, proud of his military service. We often talked about the Navy and the Air Force. I was in the Air Force – that’s how we became good friends as well. Talk about my military career, he was proud of my military career. We would talk about that – about the boats and the ships and that kind of stuff. He was proud of it.

Smith: Another controversy that I know, because I was involved with him, of course, was the whole Clinton impeachment business. And I’m sure he got a lot of calls and a lot of angry messages when he wrote the OpEd piece in the *Times* that proposed, in effect, a formal rebuke in a joint session of Congress, nationally televised, which, when you stop to think now, I bet you both sides wished they’d had the smarts to take. Because it would have been a dignified end to this mess and the country could have gotten on with its business.

How did he feel about it? You must have seen him together with President Clinton.

Simmons: Oh, yeah, I had. On several occasions I was with him at the White House and other events. I think maybe one of the other staff persons could probably answer how his true feeling was better than I can at that time. I know that he was concerned about this and he made his comments, which I was not as privileged to them as some of the other staff people would probably be.

Smith: But in doing so, he was also willing, frankly, to take on the right wing of his own party. At that point everything had become so polarized, and he was the one person who was out there trying to sort of point out there was a moderate, dignified way to bring this to a conclusion. Not only that, but remember, he and Mrs. Ford were outspokenly pro-choice when it came to abortion. They were supportive of gay rights at a time when you didn’t hear a lot of that from conservative Republicans. Did they feel at all isolated within their own party – the party that he’d spent his whole lifetime in?

Simmons: I don’t think so. I think they spoke their mind, whatever they thought about it, they spoke up. He wrote about it, he talked about it. So, I don’t think they felt isolated. I think they did what they thought was right and they spoke their mind when it was necessary. Absolutely, I do believe that.

Smith: What was Christmas like? They would go up to Vail every year?

Simmons: Yes. They always went to Vail until the last two years of his life. They didn't go the last couple of years. They always went to Vail. As I said earlier, that was a time that they got together for family. The whole family was able to get together and they skied together, when they were able to ski together. And now the grandkids were skiing. He made sure that they got lessons, because that was one of his passions. I understand Mrs. Ford used to ski, too. But in the later years neither one of them skied when we used to go up there. For the last thirty years they very seldom skied. But that was a great time for them. They used to have all those ski tournaments and he always participated in that because that was one of their passions. They thoroughly enjoyed that. That was a great time for them to get together as family members and enjoy one another. Because with his traveling and her doing her thing, they didn't get together too much down here, but up there, they did have the opportunity.

Smith: He was very proud of her work with the Betty Ford Center, wasn't he?

Simmons: Absolutely, very proud of her.

Smith: And he was involved with that, wasn't he?

Simmons: That's right. As a matter of fact, he would always come back and say, "Betty, all your fans were looking for you. They wanted to know why you weren't there. They were more concerned about you than they were about me." He loved to come back and tell her that. And I think that's true. I think she was very popular as his wife, and she had her fans out there as well. People respected her for what she contributed, and even to this day.

Smith: I've heard stories – I guess every year they would have a sort of an alumni reunion and it would not be surprising to find the president cooking hot dogs and serving hot dogs. That sort of thing. That kind of hands-on involvement.

Simmons: Absolutely. I went through the program. As a matter of fact, a lot of our staff people went through the Betty Ford program – they had support for family members and that kind of stuff, not for who had a problem – drug or alcohol problem. But family support groups. They had a lot of those classes over there

and I went to two of them. I got a chance to go to those and those alumni association lunches and dinners and enjoyed the heck out of it. They did, too. They enjoyed being there. People enjoyed having them there. That's my joy, seeing them being worshipped by these people, showing their appreciation for the things that they have done for this country.

Smith: That's interesting because here and in Vail, one sensed that they were really first-citizens.

Simmons: I think that people realized that the Fords made a difference in Vail, and they made a difference here. Of course, President Ford was very active in support of the local communities here - Boys & Girls Club - because I was on the board, and still am on the board of Boys & Girls Club. He always supported the Boys & Girls Club, not only with funds, but also with items - auction items and card drawings and that kind of thing - he always participated in that. I'm happy to say that Mrs. Ford told me, "Oh, yeah, I know how you come in and bang on his door to help support the Boys & Girls Club. We will continue that trend. We will continue to support those groups." And so she is still doing that to this day, the Boys & Girls Club.

I'm also in the Optimist Club in Palm Desert, and we support the high school students and some of the junior colleges around here with essays and oratoricals, and he was always willing to support those groups whenever I came in and talked to him. Sometimes he would even go out and meet some of these people for me. He was just a nice guy and a caring person for his community. And I guess he always has been. He told me he was on the Optimist Club back in Grand Rapids. I didn't know that until I joined and he told me, "I was an Optimist." So he was an all around general nice man. Beautiful person.

Smith: Let me ask you something, because I sort of hinted at it earlier. But in terms of, for lack of a better word, racial politics, you felt totally comfortable around the Fords as an African American.

Simmons: Oh, I never - unless I looked down and saw my skin, I wouldn't have known I was black. I felt very comfortable and I know President Ford was very

comfortable around African Americans. Of course, you all know about his association and his affection for one of his football players.

Smith: Willis Ward.

Simmons: Willis Ward. He told me about him, many times. I got a sense that he had passion for African American people. I don't know any other people that he was close with.

Smith: Pearl Bailey was a real friend.

Simmons: Pearl Bailey was, yeah. As a matter of fact, when we moved here the first time, Pearl Bailey came from Arizona and brought loads of food over here for the Fords and maintained her relationship with them until she died.

Yeah, he would always say nice things about some of the people that he knew who were African Americans. As a matter of fact, I'll never forget the gentleman that became – the first African American to become the president and CEO of American Express – Chenault, I don't know if you know him. I remember we were at a board meeting there. Henry Kissinger was there. And I saw this gentleman there, it was kind of strange for me to see an African American on the board there, and I was kind of surprised when I saw him. I asked President Ford who he was. Let me tell you, he went to great length to tell me about this gentleman, who he was, and what he thought of him. And let me tell you what he said. He said, "One day I think he will probably be the CEO of American Express." Sure enough, it happened. So, I think President Ford was a very caring person when it came to racial relations. I think he contributed as much as any other president would have.

Smith: A couple of things and I'll let you go. One is, he took some grief, particularly early on for "commercializing" the ex-presidency. And I'm not pointing fingers, or anything else, but he did, he took some grief.

Simmons: Absolutely.

Smith: How did he handle that? I don't mean to answer my own question, but of course, what didn't get the publicity, were all of the charity events and all the campus visits and everything else that he did. That said, how did he handle that?

- Simmons: I think he handled it very well. He knew what he was doing. He knew it was an honest job. Nobody was giving him anything. He was making a contribution to those companies that he spoke to, and those groups that he was on the boards with.
- Smith: He took those board directorships very seriously.
- Simmons: Very serious. And he went to every one of them. There was very few times where he didn't make the board meeting when he was supposed to be there. He went, he contributed. I was there, I saw this. I think he was very comfortable with that. He knew that he was contributing to other areas, not only to the boards. As I mentioned, here in Coachella Valley, he was very visible, he did a lot of things for the library here, and also the post office was recently named after him. He was very comfortable. He knew he was making his contribution to mankind. There were a lot of people criticize him for doing a lot of things, but he didn't feel he was doing anything wrong.
- Smith: And the other thing – one of the things that I think brought Ford and Carter together was, neither one was prepared for that fact that as an ex-president they had to raise millions of dollars to build their presidential library. And I know President Ford was quoted as saying, "It's the toughest thing I ever did." And in those days it was like nine million dollars – you can imagine today. But a lot of those speaking fees went directly to the Foundation.
- Simmons: Yeah. Oh, absolutely. He'd donate a lot of that. And he had a problem with – he knew that he had friends that made contributions to his Foundation, and a lot of people were after him to ask him to make contributions to theirs, and he didn't feel like it was right for him to solicit them for his endeavor and then to ask them to go and go do things for other people. He felt a little uncomfortable in doing that. Of course, he did do that in some occasions, but I think that he had a problem with soliciting funds for other endeavors, for other people because he was very appreciative for what they had done for him and Mrs. Ford and the Betty Ford Center and the Foundation. And he just didn't want to overdo it because he is a compassionate person, that's why I think he had a problem with that.

Smith: Do you remember his last days? Were you around during his last days?

Simmons: I was there the day that he died, yes. Saw him, came in and looked at him. Of course, I was always around him.

Smith: Did he just fade away?

Simmons: Yes. He just went to sleep, peaceful.

Smith: Now, some of the family had been here for Christmas.

Simmons: Yes. Jack and his family were here. Steve was here. A couple of granddaughters were here that live out here – Mike’s two daughters that live here in California. They were here. Those are the ones that were here for Thanksgiving.

Smith: Was he aware that they were around?

Simmons: I think so, yeah. He was alert. I think so, yeah.

Smith: Because you’d heard, it’s speculated that, at some level, he knew it was Christmas and he didn’t want to die on Christmas. He wanted to postpone it.

Simmons: Oh, Christmas Day, I’m not so sure he was that alert, but I don’t know for sure. But, I don’t think he was too alert at that time.

Smith: Do you remember your last conversation with him?

Simmons: Yes, of course. I went in there and asked him, “How you doing, sir?” He looked up at me and said, “Very good,” in a very weak voice, “Doing pretty good.” I said, “Good,” and I told him about there was something that was in the newspaper concerning Michigan and I mentioned something to him about that. He just kind of nodded, not too much conversation about it. But those are the last things that I said to him.

Smith: How rough has it been for her?

Simmons: On my personal opinion, looking at her I think it has been very, very difficult for her. And the reason I say that is because, of course though, she is ninety years old, she doesn’t seem to be getting out as much as I think that she

probably could if she wanted to. She doesn't see a lot of people. Very seldom does she see anyone at this time. But I'm happy to say that I can go over there and sit down and talk to her anytime. She will always say, "Hi, Lee," and ask me about my family and how you doing, or what's going on for Christmas or Thanksgiving – that kind of stuff. But I don't think she really enjoys being there by herself anymore.

Smith: I think a lot of people didn't realize, they'd been married fifty-eight years, and it was a great love match.

Simmons: It was, I think.

Smith: And, you don't get over that.

Simmons: It doesn't end. I have great respect for her to endure this. She held up so wonderfully during the funeral. I thought she did a marvelous job of getting through that.

Smith: It was extraordinary.

Simmons: Because she was sick herself.

Smith: We were told, and I assume the other networks, starting at St. Margaret's, we had been told, don't be surprised if you see Mrs. Ford in a wheelchair. Well, of course, we never saw her...

Simmons: She was determined not to do that. A lot of people wanted her to be in a wheelchair because they thought she was just that sick. But she was such a trooper, she decided she was going to walk to her husband's funeral, and she did so. And I'm so proud of that.

Smith: Someone said, afterwards, that they had remarked to her along those lines, and her response was, "Well, that's what my husband would have wanted."

Simmons: Absolutely. They both would have been strong for one another. They would have went the last mile for one another because they cared so much for one another. I know that why she stuck it out. I know that she probably didn't want to be there, she would have rather been home in bed in her housecoat, but this was a duty that's she had to perform and, thank God, she was able to

do it. And I think she needs to be commended about that above anything – that she did that for her husband, who had this great love affair.

Smith: She must be pleased to know – how many people found an institution and know in their own lifetime that it's been handed on to someone that they really, obviously can trust. In her case, to Susan, with the Betty Ford Center. That must be a source of some satisfaction, to know that it will not only "endure after I'm gone," but it will be in the hands of someone who will cherish it as much she has.

Simmons: Oh, yeah. She's very pleased about that, I think. This is my own opinion, I never talked to her about that, but I can tell that she is very pleased that Susan is doing an excellent job. And it's been in the paper. A lot of stories about what a great job she is doing. And I know she has got to be very, very proud. We have not talked about this personally, but I think she is very pleased.

Smith: One last thing. When you look back at the funeral, in all the places that it took place, the crowds and everything else – is there something that you can distill out of that. Is there one scene, one incident, one story, or something that you really take with you? Something that almost sums it all up?

Simmons: Well, I hate to say - that's because I had the opportunity to be there with them, that I was treated like part of the family, that was a great thing that I will always remember. That I had the opportunity to fly with President Ford, with his body on Air Force One, an airplane that I flew when he was president, back to Washington, D.C., and all the way over to Grand Rapids. That was a great pride of mine and to have my wife with me, as well. Now as far as President Ford goes, I thought he was well deserving of all those accolades, of those folks who turned out.

Smith: Think he would have been surprised?

Simmons: No, no. I think he knew that he was deserving of this. I don't think he would have been surprised. He would have expected those people to show up, because he was a compassionate person. He was a dignified man.

Smith: But one of the real satisfactions must have been knowing, long before he died, that people would come around to his way of thinking on the pardon.

Simmons: Oh, absolutely. Yes. The Kennedys for one. That was a big, great relief for him, I think, when we went up there and he received that award at the museum in Massachusetts – the Kennedy Museum, when they gave him that award and put it around...he felt almost like he was vindicated – is that a good word? Because the Kennedys came out for him in support of the pardon. I think that was absolutely a thrill for him. Yes, sir! And I was there to witness it!

Smith: And the senator could not have been more gracious – Senator Kennedy. Basically, saying I was wrong and he was right. And Caroline – that was an amazing day.

Simmons: That was an amazing day and I'm pleased to say that I was there to witness it, yes, sir.

Smith: Lee, thank you. This has been wonderful.

Simmons: You're welcome. It was my pleasure.

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