Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this. You mentioned that you were covering Congress in the late Sixties and early Seventies. Lots of people in this town are pretty nostalgic about then, compared to now. Is that justified?

Cannon: I think so. You have to say it’s justified and put this big asterisk up there, because there were a lot of congressmen who got investigated. There were a few that went to jail. There were arguably a few who didn’t go to jail that should have. But if you are looking at it, as one of my editors at The Washington Post used to say, “with a lot of altitude,” from high up, you have to say that the Congress of that period was not only collegial – it was at times, and it wasn’t – but it did get things done.

Smith: It was constructive.

Cannon: It was constructive and worked across the aisle. You just look at the bills, everything from civil rights to tax reform and Medicare, all these things that got passed. Sure, the presidents deserved a lot of credit or blame if you don’t like what they did, but Congress was a functioning organism. It was a vital part of government. It both initiated and it reacted. Now some things Congress couldn’t do. I used to say that if I had a dollar for every speech I’d heard opposing the Vietnam War, I would be rich and retired. But no Congress in any period of time has been very good in stopping wars. That’s really not a congressional function. So if you are going to say, is the Congress of a particular epic good, or not good, or functional or not functional, what are you talking about? I think what you’re talking about is partly their investigative role, but mostly the legislative role. And I think the legislative role of Congress in the Sixties and the Seventies was pretty impressive.

Smith: I remember hearing President Ford talk about the prevailing rules of engagement: you fought for your side, but at the end of the day the political incentives were that you produced something. Forty years later it’s the exact
opposite. The political incentives are to keep things from happening. Then you can go home and you can tell your base that you’ve prevented disaster. But consensus was not a dirty word. The notion of finding a medium that a critical mass of people could accept, if not rally around enthusiastically, was a guiding principle. That’s how you measured the democratic process.

Cannon: I agreed with that and I think that one of the ways to look at it is the way the parties dealt with what we would now call their base, although that wasn’t part of the terminology. I knew of various people in Congress who were pretty liberal and pretty conservative. Wiggins, the guy who was the smoking gun guy from California, Don Edwards, on the same committee, very liberal. Phil Burton – people like that. A lot of the liberals, people who were definable liberals in Congress, figured out ways to get their base to accept something that didn’t sound so liberal. And a lot of the conservatives did the same thing.

One of the things about Jerry Ford that is interesting on this, is that it made him vulnerable to Reagan. He could not accept the notion – Ford just couldn’t get it through his head and I don’t think he did until the day he died – that anybody could consider him not conservative enough. In the House context, he was the guy – you know the history of him better than I do – he was this Young Turk who had rebelled against the old guard. He’d been an internationalist. He’d supported Vandenberg, his hero. They did the Marshall Plan and a lot of other things. He really did sort of believe that politics stopped at the water’s edge. And the notion that he could be portrayed as being out of step with conservative Republicans, he just couldn’t get it through his head.

And that was because he was a creature of a Congress in which the words conservative and liberal didn’t have that kind of power. They described something, but they were not the most important – the most important thing about Gerald Ford or Tip O’Neill or Mike Mansfield, or any of these people of this era – I want to say great, I don’t want to romanticize them, but they seemed pretty neat to me in retrospect – was accomplishment, getting things done, achievement.
Smith: Wasn’t it also true that they were part of a Cold War consensus. The older I get, the more I suspect that the most important thing in politics is not ideology, but generational change. And you’re right, Ford was a Young Turk who not only took on an isolationist incumbent in the Forties, but then takes on Charlie Halleck after Goldwater.

Cannon: Well, most of these guys were not only part of a consensus that came out of World War II, they were veterans. Ford was a veteran, but most of these guys, most of the people at one time – was it like two-thirds of the members of Congress or something that served?

Smith: Do you think that gave them a shared background – almost like a shared language in some ways?

Cannon: Adlai Stevenson had a good thing about patriotism – it was something about not the showy display, but the ingrained moments, habits of a lifetime. This is what they were. They were patriots in that sense. Now, I don’t want to get too carried away, because one of the things that happened in the Cold War was the demonization of people as Communist or Crypto-Communist or something. And it’s also true of that Congress in which Joe McCarthy served – all of these people knew he was a bad man and they didn’t stop him. It was really Robert Welch and Dwight Eisenhower who stopped him.

Smith: And Ed Murrow.

Cannon: And some help from Ed Murrow. But Eisenhower had a clear view of – we know this now from the memoirs and all the things – Eisenhower had a clear view from the beginning that McCarthy was a know-nothing at best, and dangerous at worst. And you can argue that he should have stepped in when he attacked Marshall. I take Eisenhower’s side on that. But what one is criticizing if one takes that view is his tactics, not his principles.

I was seventeen years old in 1950. I came here as a member of Boys’ Nation in Nevada. You cannot imagine the thrill of this and I remember two things. I remember meeting Robert Taft who was a big deal to me. And Taft introduced me to McCarthy. And I thought afterward, I thought, well this is
like being introduced to a member of the mob by the most respected citizen in
town.

I remember the name of only one other boy, other than the one from Nevada,
and this is the reason I remember him. We all got to meet the president of the
United States – you cannot imagine what it was like for a seventeen year old
to meet the president of the United States and the guy behind me – because
we filed in alphabetical order – was named Bill Capitan. He was from
Michigan. He was rotund, he was a wrestler, and he said, “I’m going to say
something to the president of the United States.” And I remember we all said,
“You’re going to speak to…?” Everybody else is sort of mechanically shaking
hands, and Bill was right behind me. So he says, “Hello, Mr. President. I’m
from Owosso, Michigan, Tom Dewey’s hometown.” And Truman, who is
mechanically shaking hands, looks up and gives the biggest grin I’ve ever
seen in my life and shakes his hand and says, “You’ve got a good start, boy.”

But we all held Bill in awe because he had spoken to the president of the
United States. Now, this is 1950. Truman isn’t that popular. In our household,
which was New Deal Democrat, Truman couldn’t compare to FDR. Who
could? But meeting the president of the United States… I told one thing in a
speech to the National Council of Legislators, legislative leaders, I told one
story which deals about civil discourse. We had a wonderful civics teacher
and we had free rein and there was, in this class – I was a senior that year in
high school – and this one boy who criticizes Truman for a number of things
and did it in a fashion that we wouldn’t have considered tempered for the
time, the teacher didn’t say anything. She didn’t have to because another boy,
who had the same political views said, “That’s not the right way to talk about
the president of the United States. You have to have respect for the office,
even if you don’t value the man.” I remembered that. I was in the Army and
that was often said in the Army, because Truman’s war was not popular. But
that was a different time. We thought differently about institutions. We
thought differently about the leaders of these institutions. If you were
Catholic, you didn’t take the pope’s name in vain, either.

Smith: And you ate fish on Friday.
Cannon: You certainly didn’t denigrate the institution. That wasn’t all good. If there had been less veneration perhaps they would have removed MacArthur before he got so many people killed. But I don’t know that. But Ford was a part of this. He was a big part of that generation. He thought like that generation. He thought in terms of public service. And I think in Ford’s case, I’ve always had the theory, it’s the gratitude of adopted children, that he had a lot of that anyway. As an adopted kid he’d been treated very well. He had this great gratitude towards the person who was his stepfather. So he had a lot of that in him, plus I think that Midwestern culture just breeds that.

Smith: He said, as a fairly young man and later – I can hear him saying it – he decided early on that most people were mostly good, and he was going to find the good in everyone. That’s what he was going to focus on. It’s a great formula for life. You wonder if, at times, it breeds a kind of naiveté at the presidential level.

Cannon: I think Ford was naïve as a president. I think it was an advantage in some ways. I think that Ford – the most controversial decision, the decision I think that prevented him from being elected in his own right – was the pardon. And Ford gave a lot of different reasons for that pardon. When I pressed him on it he said, “Well I was reading in your writing what shape Nixon was in,” and stuff and that was a fair point. And I certainly probably overwrote that. But I overwrote it because Nixon was over a little bit mad. But I think that what Ford really did – the basic reason why – we don’t want to drag the nation through a trial – is that he saw some good in it. He saw some good in Nixon, he saw some redemptive value in what he was doing.

Ford would never talk about himself in religious terms, but Ford believed in the gospel of redemption. Ford really did. If Ford had been on the bench, he would not have been a hanging judge. He did believe in the goodness – now I think it really hurt him on a number of things. I think it hurt him on being tough enough, particularly on the economic issues. You know, that Whip Inflation Now. A person who had a little more sophistication would have realized that that sounded pretty silly. And there is a story – have you interviewed Don Rumsfeld, or you will.
Smith: We have.

Cannon: Did Don Rumsfeld tell you this story about Ford? If he didn’t – because it’s his story and he’ll tell it better – but Rumsfeld told me this story when I was covering the White House and he was chief of staff. And the story was this: He was tired of hearing from all of his fellow businessmen in Illinois and stuff about how the president was screwing up this and screwing up that, and Rumsfeld scheduled an hour. “Well, here, you’ve got an hour with him. Don’t tell me. Tell the president of the United States. You’ve got this hour this afternoon.” These guys go in and talk to Ford. Afterwards Rumsfeld asked Ford, what did they say? He said, “They told me what a wonderful job I’m doing.” And, of course, the thing is that Ford believed them. And a guy who was tougher and who was more skeptical – Lyndon Johnson as an example – would have asked in a very crude way, what do you really think?

Smith: Two things specifically: when I talk about naïve, for example. It’s hard to get your arms around this. A guy who has been in Washington for twenty-five years. I’ve always believed the pardon was triggered by the first press conference, which was the 28th of August. We talked to people who prepared him and they had a debate beforehand. Ford believed that people were going to want to talk about Cyprus and Turkey and inflation. He literally did believe that.

Cannon: Yes, I know that.

Smith: And people wanted to talk about Nixon. And he came out angry at himself, I think on multiple levels. First, because he hadn’t handled it very well. When he saw the transcript he got angrier. Secondly, because he had been naïve enough to believe all of that. But I also think that that’s what triggered - in some ways it was an emotional decision – that okay, I’ve just been through this evidence that people are obsessed with this man, and it’s not going to go away unless I make it go away. But it raises the question: how could you spend twenty-five years in this town and be around reporters as much as he had, and make such a fundamental misjudgment as to what is news value?
Cannon: Well, I wouldn’t be that hard on Ford on that first press conference. I know what you’re saying is right. I had a discussion with him about, too. But I think it was pretty overwhelming – no matter how long you’ve been in this town – to go from being good old Jerry Ford to being the president of the United States in such a relatively short period. I thought Ford showed a lot of balance. We were talking about Ben Bradlee before. One of the things that happened to me, because I was the White House correspondent for theWashington Post, and we were just shut out by Nixon, so one of the ways in which Ford, very literally figured, I had more access than I needed really. You could see that The Washington Post had been shut out so we’re going to talk to The Washington Post all the time.

And at one of the first interviews I did with Ford – I did several interviews in his short presidency - the fall of Richard Nixon coincided for no reason other than coincidence with an advertising campaign that The Washington Post was running about how I got my job through The Washington Post. And so Ben had one of these mock-ups of this campaign in the office and he wanted me to get Ford to sign it. I was mortified. This was the president of the United States and I shouldn’t be taking this over. I tried to talk Ben out of it, but if Ben got something in his head you couldn’t talk him out of it. So okay, I’ll do it. And I was very embarrassed. And Ford loved it. Ford just loved it. He signed it, he wrote some note to Ben. Ben framed it. I thought these guys were both a little carried away, to put it mildly. But I was just happy that he wasn’t angry at me.

But I think that Ford suffered from something – I don’t think naiveté quite captures it. Lyndon Johnson suffered this in a way, too. And Lyndon Johnson campaigned for the presidency and wanted to be president, that this mode of working to get things done, legislatively - and Tip and Reagan after six, you know, it’s always after six for Tip - and all that stuff, does not lend itself to – there is a congressional mindset: to be successful as a leader in Congress requires a different skill set than to be successful as a president. As a president, you have to be ruthless in a way that if you were that way in Congress, you couldn’t function, you couldn’t exist. And we all knew, those of us in the press corps, when Ford brought some of his own people over, and
it was like a coalition government there for a while because you had Nixon people and Ford people.

I hate to say this, I didn’t like to say it then, and since I value Ford so much more than I do Richard Nixon in any way than you can possibly imagine, I hate to say it now, but some of the Nixon people were better than some of the Ford people. Because, first of all, the Nixon people who were there were not part of the criminal conspiracy, but secondly, they were part of the White House and the staff and the presidency and they were used to getting things done. And the Congress – they just simply weren’t. You had people like Hartmann and Rumsfeld could barely tolerate one another, but Ford just simply wasn’t, in my view, an effective executive, but he also didn’t have an executive staff because the people who came over with him had worked in Congress all their lives.

Smith: It’s fascinating you say that because there is a story line, and we’re not trying to write one narrative or another, but a number of people have suggested that the story line of the Ford presidency is that effort to morph, over time, from someone who was clearly of congressional mindset, into an executive. And it has been suggested that Don Rumsfeld, whatever his other shortcomings, was a very good coach. That said, Rumsfeld said, and others have confirmed it, going back to this notion of all the Nixon people, Rumsfeld wanted Ford sooner, rather than later, to clean house. Ford wouldn’t do it.

Cannon: That’s exactly right.

Smith: And Ford wouldn’t do it, in part, because he thought it was unfair to the majority of Nixon people who had nothing to do with Watergate. He, in effect, didn’t want to tar them all with this stigma. And Rumsfeld tried, unsuccessfully, to suggest to him that you have to look beyond the decent thing to do.

Cannon: It wasn’t just Rumsfeld. Rumsfeld was replaced – it was Rummy’s doing – by Dick Cheney. Dick Cheney, the people who see this, if this clip survives, had better put out of their minds everything they think they know about Dick Cheney. Because Dick Cheney was, I thought he was very good to me,
personally, but he was a very good chief of staff. And he was very effective, and he was very effective with the press, and he was very rational and moderate, and soft-spoken, and just think the opposite of what all those things you’ve been thinking about Cheney recently. And Cheney also saw that.

Cheney was somewhat less abrasive than Rumsfeld and more low-key. But he saw many of the same things that Rumsfeld did and he wasn’t any more successful than Rumsfeld was in getting Ford to make changes. Ford simply did not want to – it was more than just not wanting to fire people. I always hate when they say President X doesn’t like to fire people. I’ve never met anybody who liked to fire people, and if I meet him I would hope that he wouldn’t be in a high office anywhere in this land, or any other. But it was more that he didn’t conceive the executive nature of the office. He didn’t conceive of the notion that if you embarrass the office of the presidency, you’ve got to get out of there because there is more at stake than your feelings or this guy’s feelings. What’s at stake is I’m running the country. I don’t think he ever saw himself as really running the country.

Smith: A kind of constructive ruthlessness.

Cannon: Yeah. Well, what it is that Marty Anderson wrote about Reagan: he’s warmly ruthless? I think that that’s what he lacked.

Smith: Although Stockman didn’t get fired.

Cannon: No. But if you look at the way all of the Ford people, and this includes Cheney, I had gone away on a short leave to write a book that came out a long time later. I was in Aspen; I came back and this is in the fall of ’75, and I guess it was from the summer to the fall. And I came back and I remember Dick Cheney asking me, “Do you think Reagan is going to run?” I said, “Dick, this guy has been running, he’s been running for months. He’s got a campaign committee and he’s probably ready to appoint his Cabinet. What do you mean is he running? Of course, he’s running.” And that whole attitude – in a way Ford suffered from the worst of both worlds. He wasn’t the commanding executive president, but he also believed in the notion that you can’t run against a sitting president of the United States. Ronald Reagan –
now I’m talking about the content of his message, I’m talking about - he was very radical in the sense that he saw you could run against a president of the United States.

Smith: How did he reconcile that with the Eleventh Commandment?

Cannon: He didn’t. I’ve always said that he simply ignored it. He found faults in Ford that he’d never found in any other leader, because deep down, and he not only didn’t wear his ambition on his sleeve, he’d hid it from everybody, including himself, but he was ambitious to become president. I think it made him a better president than he would have been if he hadn’t been. Ford was not ambitious to become president. Ford’s ambition was to become Majority Leader of the House.

The interesting question about Ford, and I wonder about this and I don’t have the answer, but the question is: Lyndon Johnson, who was a more effective president than Ford – yes Lyndon was undone by the Vietnam War, but he got a lot of things done domestically, and I think the longer we are away from that presidency, the more we see. Lyndon Johnson was Majority Leader. Ford was a Minority Leader. And I’ve always wondered what would have been different if Ford had been Tip O’Neill. If the Republicans had somehow won the House…He had not realized his ambition. He was put on the ticket – he was vice president because the Democrats were afraid of John Connally. They wanted somebody they weren’t afraid of. Jerry Ford was somebody they weren’t afraid of. But the truth was, nobody was afraid of him. And he became president and he accepted what was sort of the prevailing, conventional wisdom.

One of the parts of the conventional wisdom at the time was you couldn’t run against a sitting president. It wasn’t just Reagan, it wasn’t just the notion that they underestimated Reagan. Of course, they did, but everybody underestimated him. Pat Brown did and Jimmy Carter did after Ford, and so Ford is hardly alone in that. Conceptually, they didn’t understand that a person who had been in every state in the country and campaigned for Republicans could certainly be an effective candidate against a person who
had represented a single congressional district for all those years. And Ford just did not see that.

Smith: Let me ask you, because there is this sense that Reagan also – consistent with what you say – the Republican Party has traditionally been a more hierarchical party, and that Reagan had convinced himself that after Nixon, he was the natural successor.

Cannon: Well, he’d also convinced himself that Ford wasn’t up to the job. And you needed both of those things in place. And I think Ford was up to job, despite my criticisms of what he did. I think that Ford, as he showed in the Mayaguez, Ford was certainly not a guy you’d have to ask, “Would he do the right thing at three o’clock in the morning?” And I think Ford was learning, and who knows what would have happened if he’d been elected? He would have been elected if he hadn’t pardoned Nixon. I think it was quite clear. He was very, very close to being elected, anyway.

Smith: But counterintuitive history – had you spent those intervening two years with Nixon facing a trial, and Nixon remaining at the center of the American discussion.

Cannon: Well, you don’t really know, but I think – because there are too many variables in that. You don’t know when Nixon would have been tried. What kind of a judge he would have had. Whether he would have… I would have found it hard to think that he would have gone to prison, but who knows?

Smith: Stu Spencer said something really interesting. Very interesting. Stu is convinced in February of ’76, on the eve of the New Hampshire primary, with Ford fighting for his life, Nixon lets it be known that he’s going to China. And Stu, who I don’t think of as a bitter person…

Cannon: He’s not.

Smith: Nevertheless [he] is utterly convinced that Nixon knew exactly what he was doing and that he let the chips fall where they may as far as his successor goes.

Cannon: Well, he went to China in ’74.
Smith: Nixon went in ’76. Right about the time of the New Hampshire primary. Nixon is out of office and he goes back to China and he chooses, literally, the week of the New Hampshire primary to do it.

Cannon: Yeah, I’ve talked to Stu about that. I don’t know. I think Nixon never cared for anybody but himself. The question is: was Nixon trying to hurt Ford? My guess is that he didn’t give a damn. Nixon didn’t have the emotion of gratitude. He should have been so grateful for that pardon that he would have done anything – that he could have found out through an intermediary – he couldn’t have talked to Ford directly, but it would have been easy for Nixon to have found out “Do you want me to go to China?”

Smith: And my sense is from Stu and other people that Nixon didn’t only didn’t feel gratitude, that part of Nixon really resented Ford.

Cannon: Of course you would. Think about it. Here you’ve overcome all these demons and you’ve won the presidency, and you’re Nixon and you always feel – Nixon always felt uncomfortable with athletic people, who everybody liked. You can’t imagine two people that are more opposite than Nixon and Ford. They say Reagan was comfortable in his own skin, he certainly was. Nobody that I’ve ever known in politics was more comfortable with who he was than Gerald Ford. Did he ever have a doubt, was he up nights thinking should I do this or not? I doubt it. He knew who he was and he liked who he was and I liked who he was, and almost everybody who met him did. Nixon didn’t like himself, and most people didn’t like him. And all of a sudden this big lug is in the White House and I’m one step from the penitentiary. How could he possibly have liked him?

Smith: Did you ever talk then or in later years – did you get a feel of how Ford felt toward Nixon?

Cannon: I talked to him about it. I did obits for him/with him and I don’t remember the exact language to be truthful, but I felt that he felt sorry for Nixon. That’s what I think. He felt sorry that it had come to this; that anybody had done what he did. Ford had no doubt that Nixon had done everything that he was accused of and probably more beside, but I think it’s probably the right
attitude to have. He had a better attitude about it than I do. His attitude was not that this crook has got his comeuppance; his attitude was: it’s really pretty sad that the president of the United States would – and I know he expressed this to me about Agnew, and what I remember was sort of in the same sentence. We went from Agnew to Nixon – these two guys, they’re in power, why would you do that? I don’t think that Ford understood quite why Nixon had done what he did, and there is a certain mystery to it that we don’t like to admit to ourselves because it’s easy to say…the thing that I’ve always felt that is most convincing to me about Nixon, and the view that I came to about why he kept those tapes, was that he really didn’t believe that anybody else could write history about his own history but him. And I’m quite convinced of that. But I don’t think Ford really – I think he felt it was sort of terrible that somebody that he knew and worked with, and a Republican, and had become president and he just…

Smith: Naïve is such a pejorative, but he sure as hell did a convincing imitation. When we talked he said he was genuinely taken aback that Nixon lied to him.

Cannon: Yes. Oh there is no question about that. He felt there was a sense of betrayal in that, that he felt Nixon had lied to him. But beyond it, we’re talking second thoughts. I noticed that the last time that I – what year was it that Gerald Ford died?

Smith: 2006.

Cannon: So the last time I interviewed him would have been, I think it was 2004. I went up to Beaver Creek, and I had co-written an obituary in The Washington Post on him that didn’t turn out particularly well, but I had done an earlier interview when he was in California when I was a bureau chief for the Post out there and I seen him several times and I thought it was really out of date and I thought that I needed to edit. And I felt in 2004, where the earlier one was twenty years removed, that he had become more magnanimous toward Nixon. That the sense of betrayal wasn’t fresh and he felt more sorry for him as the years went by. I think, if you know Ford as you do, that that would be what you would expect. Right? Because Gerald Ford was not one to hold grudges.
By the way, you’re going to ask me this, so I’m going to say it here, because there was one thing I had resolved to say to you, and I think we have it in the obituary, but it’s the part of the obituary that ran down somewhere among the truss ads and it’s way buried in the thing and I would have made a bigger deal of it if I were kind. And that is, I asked about the Vietnam War, and about his decision and he said that if he had known more, he would have pulled the plug earlier. And I thought that we should have withdrawn before...because at the time, and this is 2004, it’s sort of been building up ever since – there’s this theory how we – even Newsweek did it – how we could have won the Vietnam War. Sure. And I could have climbed Mt. Everest if I was taller and stronger and had more oxygen.

But at the time it was just sort of beginning what I guess would be the conservative, although it isn’t all conservative, second guessing on the war. Had we, instead of pulling the plug, had we sent troops back in, had we done a whole number of things that were impossible. Ford, as he reflected on it, thought what we should have done was get out sooner. And he said something about how he wasn’t politically able to do that. And he knew, by the way, by that time that he had been weakened by the Nixon pardon.

You can get a hundred opinions, of a hundred people in Washington of that day as to whether Ford would have been a good president if he’d been elected in his own right. But I think the strongest argument that I would make in favor that he might have been is that he kept thinking about what it was it had done. He was not a boob, he was a much brighter person than most people realized. He mastered things and I think he would have mastered the office of the presidency, given a chance. But it’s interesting to me that when he thought about the Vietnam War he had reached almost exactly the opposite conclusion of most of the revisionist thinking that was then beginning to take place.

I happen to think he was right. I agreed with Ford’s revisionism that we would have saved lives, and angst and a lot of other things, and maybe even honor if we had withdrawn sooner. Now Mel Laird, who was his closest friend, and Mel Laird takes the exact opposite view of that.
Smith: We talked to Laird. Talk about revisionism. Mel Laird, who loves Ford, but still blames him. Mel Laird has got it in his head that Ford should have gotten that money out of Congress in April, 1975. Laird also has it in his head that he had the solution to the pardon problem. If his friend Jerry hadn’t been so bull-headed, Mel was going to bring members of Congress from both parties to the White House and petition the president to pardon Nixon. The problem with that is, I once spent two and a half hours in a Grand Rapids hotel room war gaming the pardon with Ford. And I went in a skeptic, not about the pardon itself, but about the timing – there must have been a more adroit way to do it. And I came away pretty well convinced that given the poisonous climate of the time, I don’t know how you could have had a trial balloon. It would have been shot down before it reached the trees. Maybe there were alternative ways to do it, maybe Laird’s right, but I don’t know in that climate that rational action was possible.

Cannon: Here’s the thing. Think of the pardon as the equivalent of a wartime decision. Lots of decisions made in war turn out to be the kinds of decisions – you would have gone up this hill, or would you have invaded on this day, or would you have dropped those bombs – and in rational hindsight you can say, yeah, there was a lot better way to do that and we could have lost a hell of a lot fewer people than we lost in Normandy. But that’s imposing hindsight and I think, with all due respect to Mel Laird, who I respect, if he thought that at the time, if he proposed it to Ford at the time, then it seems to me he has a right to make that argument. But I think the whole Nixon thing was so traumatic for the country and everybody involved.

I remember this. I was a White House correspondent and I remember in the last few days I hated going over to the White House. I just hated it. I just felt being a White House correspondent and also being an American and was so damn depressing. I never felt that way any other time in all the years that I worked as a reporter and I’ve been to some terrible catastrophes, plane crashes, the Oakland fires, where people were killed and everything – I never felt – I was in Vietnam briefly – I never felt this except about the White House at that time, that this is a hell of thing.
People like to think – one review of the book that we did after the fall of Nixon compared the people at the Post to a bunch of Indians going around doing a war dance around the fire. That was not the attitude at all at the Post. I don’t recall anybody happy about – yeah, we were happy that we’d been proven right and that Kay Graham, particularly, had been vindicated but I don’t think we were – we weren’t happy that the president of the United States was forced to resign. And I think that it was a sort of national trauma. And I think that Ford, if you go beyond the “he said, she said,” we could’ve done this, we could’ve done that, that Ford was seeking to heal that trauma. He did perceive that this was a traumatic event for America. He was the president of the United States. He thought he could heal it in a moment.

Smith: By the way, I’ve always believed that the VFW speech and the Vietnam amnesty, which came two weeks before the pardon, was part of the same plan. That they are almost inseparable.

Cannon: That’s exactly right. You’re exactly right in thinking that. He was trying to say: “Let’s heal America.” That was what he was trying to do. Now, here’s the argument for why he shouldn’t be elected. I think that Ford did heal America. You see, I think that Gerald Ford did this so effortlessly that people don’t realize even today – and didn’t at the time realize at all what an achievement it was. Within a few months, we were talking about what we should have been talking about. Yeah, maybe we shouldn’t have been wearing stupid WIN buttons, but we were talking about inflation.

Smith: And you were also writing stories about how dull this presidency was.

Cannon: And yeah, and we were talking about Vietnam, which had to be lanced. We had to withdraw from Vietnam. There was no other way to do it. Whether that was the right time to do, we had to do it. And we were talking about the next president of the United States and it wasn’t too long and we were talking about Reagan and Carter. And I think that Ford brought us back to normalcy. That he, more than any other person, did that. And I’m not sure that anybody else could have done it that well.
So, yeah, Ford could have done this, he could have done that, we could have
done differently. I should have covered him better than I did, but I think that
Ford was quite genuine in what he saw. And I think what he saw – he’s not a
skilled president, and he’s not a particularly good executive - but there’s a
larger part of being president than being an executive. The larger part of
president is that you have to be what Harold Laski saw in the presidency. The
many sidedness. You’re the tribune of the nation, is I think, Laski’s phrase.
And I think he was the tribune of the nation. The nation wanted this healed
and those of us who didn’t care for Nixon wanted to heal just as much as the
diminishing number of people who really adored Nixon, if there were such –
I’m sure there were.

Smith: Broder said he was the most normal person to be president in his lifetime. But
he also said something later on, many years after. He said, looking back, Ford,
in many ways, at least embodied many of the qualities that people say they
want in a president, but perhaps don’t appreciate at the time.

Cannon: Ford is the good American. He’s not only what we say we want in a president,
it’s what we say we want in each other. We want people who are responsible,
we want people who are honest, we want people who are prepared to make
hard decisions and stick by them. We want people who are loyal to their
friends. Ford is all of these things and more. Ford is: who do you want for
your neighbor? I always used to say the person in the Senate that I most
wanted for my neighbor was Scoop Jackson. And I actually got to talk to
Scoop Jackson’s neighbor, and it turned out I was right. I think that the guy
that I want for my neighbor, if it wasn’t Scoop Jackson, would be Gerald
Ford. And this is a guy who did a big thing and he did it in a Ford way, which
means it was a clumsy way, but it was authentic. He was the authentic – that
was the authentic representative of the people. And I think that history is
going to remember Gerald Ford very kindly. I know I do.

Smith: He liked reporters.

Cannon: I think so. I liked him and he liked me. You know, Ford liked people.

Smith: Is that what set him apart from Nixon?
Cannon: Yeah, it set it apart from Nixon. But the thing that set Ford apart from other Republicans, particularly, but also a lot of Democrats, with reporters, is that Ford really didn’t – yeah, he knew what we did for a living – but Ford didn’t make a distinction. It was “reporters are people, too.” Reporters were people. I mean, he treated us the same way he treated you or anybody else. He didn’t have a standard for treating kings and commoners and reporters and non-reporters in different ways. And I think that’s another way in which he was this genuine American.

Smith: In planning his funeral, we wanted to send a couple of messages. One was that one of the eulogists would be a journalist at the cathedral. And, of course, originally it was going to be Hugh Sidey until Hugh passed away, and then it was going to be Tom Brokaw. But we deliberately wanted to send that signal that there was a time, not so very long ago in town, while respecting the adversarial relationship, presidents also respected reporters. And actually enjoyed their company. And the other was, of course, in Grand Rapids, that one of the eulogists would be Jimmy Carter. Which would send its own signal. I’ve often thought that one thing that brought Ford and Carter together was a shared antipathy toward Reagan.

Cannon: Well, that may be. But I remember asking Ford – it was still a most amazing thing to me, campaigning in Michigan in ’80, near the end of the campaign. I remember Bob Hope was on the plane, and I asked Ford, “How can you campaign so enthusiastically for this guy after what he did to you?” And Ford said, “Well, he’s better than Carter.” Don’t forget, Carter – later in life we all hug and kiss and make up – but that misery index of Carter’s, which was really absurd, and then Carter, to this day hasn’t acknowledged the fact that his own misery index was much worse than this thing he invented for Ford. [The “misery index” was a combination of the inflation and unemployment rates.]

But I think that ex-presidents are such an exclusive club, that it’s rare that they don’t find some common ground. I have friends who dislike Carter who say that if the fact that Ford came to like Carter just proves to you that he can like anybody. But I don’t know that that’s true.
I think that the single thing about Ford, and we’ve used this word, and you’ve used this word, is the authenticity of the guy. He’s an authentic American. We’re supposed to forgive grudges, right? And a lot of us don’t, but Ford did. Here’s one other thing about Ford, I hope there is a minute more on this – Ford was willing to do something that most American politicians never do, admit mistakes.

I mean, Ford told me, and I’m sure he told you this, that he made a mistake in dumping Nelson Rockefeller from the ticket, which he certainly did, in my view. And Ford admitted mistakes. He admitted even saying things like we should have gotten out of Vietnam earlier. I can’t imagine – talk about all these other presidents, Carter, Reagan, any Bush – the number of times all of them cubed admitted a mistake is less than Gerald Ford would do in two sentences.

Smith: Was Rumsfeld the architect? Rockefeller went to his grave believing that Rumsfeld was the architect of his departure. Certainly Bush being deep-sixxed, in effect, at the CIA and…

Cannon: I think that Rumsfeld was – it depends in the sense in which you say architect. If you say architect – would it have happened without Rumsfeld? Yes. If Rumsfeld had been removed from the first, I think Rocky would have been dumped from the ticket because of the conservative movement and the great underestimation of Reagan by Ford. You can’t say he’s so wonderful and then pawn off all of his mistakes on his subordinate. It was Ford’s mistake. First they underestimated Reagan, and then when they got around to it, they panicked, and sacrificing Rockefeller was the result of the panic. Yeah, Rumsfeld wanted to get him off the ticket, but I blame Gerald Ford for that.

Smith: Yeah. Was he more unhappy than the average vice president, from your observation?

Cannon: Oh, I don’t know. I don’t know how to answer that. I think that that office was designed cleverly by the framers to be worthless, as you know. It’s in one of your books, and boy, they succeeded in making it worthless beyond their wildest expectations.
Smith: One of the things that surprised us is how many people close to Ford during that period volunteered the observation of how unhappy he was as vice president, and suggest that that initially fed some of the promises that were made to Rockefeller. That he was, first of all, put in an impossible position of defending Nixon, and at the same time, keeping his own integrity. But even quite apart from that, he was really wasn’t – he didn’t enjoy the vice presidency.

Cannon: How could you? If you look at the people who get to be vice president, if they’ve done anything important, and being minority leader was an important job. If you’ve done something – everyday in the House there was a semi-important decision to make, and in the vice presidency there’s not any important decision to make. You inquire solicitously on the health of the president and preside over the Senate, or in reverse order, but that’s what that job was. And I can’t imagine, even if he didn’t have to dodge the “be loyal to the party and defend Nixon,” but not go overboard, even if he didn’t have that problem, which would drive anybody mad. That office – there’s just nothing there for a man like Gerald Ford, or for any person.

Smith: He and Mrs. Ford would come back to the convention every four years, and they were pro-choice. He is, to this day, I think the only president to actually sign his name to a pro-gay rights petition. The question is: did he change? Did he consciously move left in some way, particularly on social issues, maybe under her influence? I don’t know. Or, did he just stay where he was and the party went so far to the right? Or a combination of the two?

Cannon: I don’t think left/right does it. The Republican Party was, for most of the twentieth century, a libertarian party. We didn’t have the term pro-choice and pro-right, but Barry Goldwater was pro-choice. The bromide that the government should stay out of the bedroom and boardroom was believed as an article of faith by most Republicans and by a lot of people who weren’t Republicans. The greatest agony that Ronald Reagan ever had in office, which he told me and which I described in a lot of detail, was the 1967 abortion rights bill which he signed. And he was being tugged different ways by Stu Spencer and Bill Roberts, and Nancy Reagan and his own Cabinet. His
Cabinet – imagine this – you’re the governor of the state of California and you’ve got this abortion rights bill and the Cabinet – your Cabinet – splits on religious lines. So the people who are Catholic are arguing with you to veto the bill and the people who aren’t….you know, thanks a lot guys. Give me some help.

Smith: Where did Mrs. Reagan come down?

Cannon: She lobbied people on stem cell.

Smith: Well, as a matter of fact, one of the people she lobbied was Gerald Ford. And he did a piece. He did an op-ed piece very sympathetic to her position.

Cannon: Deaver had the last word on that, as far as I’m concerned. A conservative said to him, “She said, ‘Ronald Reagan wouldn’t have done that,’” and Dever said, “Well, Ronald Reagan didn’t have to care for Ronald Reagan.”

Nancy Reagan was the daughter of a doctor. Look – all the Republican view, it’s useful to look at the 1967 abortion rights bill that was passed in California because that really is, still at a time when the Republican Party was a permissive party. The Republicans are much more overwhelming in favor of that bill than the Democrats are.

Smith: Because of the Catholic Church?

Cannon: Because it’s split on religious lines, and there are many more Catholic Democrats. And the head of the Judiciary Committee, a very smart man named Donald Grunsky, he said, “Let’s do this now so we can get this over with.” What changed the Republican Party on this issue was Roe v Wade. I’m one of those people who, while being sympathetic to the pro-choice point of view, always felt that Roe v Wade was wrong, and that the right thing was for this thing to have found itself through the legislature so we could have solved, and we could have come to some view. Instead, we cut the people out of it. Roe v Wade just becomes – from then on, the people who want to argue the case are arguing for the courts. And they are arguing for this very elite minority. But if you looked at Ford, he is a product of this same period.
When Goldwater and Reagan and everybody else was a libertarian, and that your differences – and the differences that you had – I think it was better actually - the difference tended to be on religion. You were not saying to a Republican candidate that you’ve got to take this particular view on abortion, or on any issue in order to get the Republican nomination. It was more like the – what’s the parliamentary equivalent – a free vote, where you can vote your conscience in parliament. On abortion and those issues you vote on your conscience. I think that was a much healthier situation. It certainly was a healthier situation for the Republican and Democratic parties. Today we are trying to weed people out of the Democratic Party because they are pro-life. And the Republican Party, we’re making a litmus test in the nominating process.

Smith: John Paul Stevens told us no one asked him at his confirmation hearings…

Cannon: No, he wouldn’t have been asked. But we’re getting this sea-change going on in American politics where social issues that have not previously been a part of party platforms, which were largely a matter of conscience and choice, and so you could have Democrats and Republicans – you had differences that went across party lines – are becoming part of a political catechism, and Ford is caught up in this. Ford is a sort of an early victim.

Now, the other thing, to give the guy I write about, Ronald Reagan, some credit and to give Ford a little more credit, is Ronald Reagan was not a garden variety, Orange County, conservative. Ronald Reagan was the most effective political communicator, arguably, of the twentieth century. So Ford wasn’t up against chopped liver. And the truth is, if some other conservative like John Ashbrook or somebody had been the guy who challenged Ford, Ford would have demolished him. So it’s important to keep in perspective the fact that the guy that almost beat Ford was Reagan, and if you’ve read my books, you know I argue that he made Ford a better candidate.

Smith: I’d like to hear you expound on that.

Cannon: Ford was an utterly inarticulate candidate when he started in ’76. I remember a thing, I think it was somewhere in the Midwest, I think it was in Wisconsin,
might have been Minnesota. And they had written in Ford’s speech, because he was giving these very dull, terrible speeches, and they had started to write this in the speech and the sentence was: “and I say to you, this is nonsense.” And it said in the speech “with emphasis” and Ford read it, “And I say to you, this is nonsense with emphasis.” He’s standing next to Cheney and Cheney says, “Well, that’s another thing we can’t do – write instructions in the speech text.”

Ford was a really bad candidate. He’d have gotten clobbered. He’d have gotten clobbered by Carter or anybody else. And at the end of the race, by the time – Reagan really sharpens this guy – and I think if you hear Ford, this inarticulate, dull, in parenthesis, Gerald Ford – in the later stages of the ’76 campaign, he clobbered Carter in the first debate. It was only his damn stubbornness that he refused to admit he’d made a mistake about the Soviet domination of Poland. Scowcroft after the debate gave a briefing, and I asked the first quest. I asked, “How many divisions does the Soviet Union have in Poland?” And stud and Cheney tried for three or four days to get Ford to back down and he wouldn’t.” Ford knew what he meant – that you haven’t conquered the spirit of the Polish people. And in later years, he joked that the had liberated Poland prematurely.

Smith: And he’d been to Poland.

Cannon: He’d been to Poland. And unlike Carter, he didn’t say he had lust for the Polish people because the translation was so bad. Ford really was a completely better campaigner in October in ’76 than he would have been. I just don’t see how he could have – now in an ideal world, he’d have disposed of the Reagan challenge sooner than he did. I think that by the time of the convention, when I think we all knew in Kansas City that if there had been a secret ballot, Reagan would have won and been the nominee. By that time it had begun to hurt him. And I think Reagan hurt him. But he carried California.

Smith: Yes he did.
Cannon: He carried California, so how much more was Reagan...Reagan wasn’t going to win Mississippi for him.


Cannon: I don’t want to say it here, because I think I looked at the number and I think in my revised President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime, I have the exact number. As you know as a historian, it’s one of these unsatisfying resolutions. He campaigned more than Ford and his people remembered, and less than Reagan and his people remembered. The question is, I think, would Ford have won the election if Reagan had campaigned more for him? I think that’s very hard to argue. The one state that he might have carried if Reagan had gone in tooth and nail, but Reagan didn’t campaign tooth and nail for anybody, even for himself, arguably, was Mississippi.

But I think that the bigger thing working in Mississippi was Carter. Carter was, for some Southerners, what John F. Kennedy was to me. John F. Kennedy proved that a Catholic could win the White House. And Carter proved that a Southerner could win the White House, and in ’76, was a fresh face. We didn’t know what a disastrous president he was going to be, and certainly the good people of Mississippi didn’t have a clue. And I think that Carter won Mississippi. I don’t think Ford lost it. And I don’t think Reagan could have carried it for him.

Smith: Two last things. One thing, Mrs. Ford. What was her impact? One senses, this is a town where everyone likes to fight the last war, and so when the famous Sixty Minutes interview came out there were lots of people in the White House who reflexively said, “Oh my God, what has she done?” And then it took a while, for some polling data to come in, and probably she didn’t help where Reagan was appealing, but that the country had changed, and that in a country that was looking for authenticity, plain speaking candor, that she struck a chord.

Cannon: I think that’s exactly right. And I think something else is important to add. Gerald Ford was known for truthfulness. She went on Sixty Minutes and she
knew what she was going to say, but she was also being asked questions. If Betty Ford had lied instead of telling the truth, which she did, I don’t think that would have helped her husband. I don’t think it would have helped the Ford image. The Ford image was one of this guy is an honest guy, she’s an honest woman. I don’t even think that’s a close question. I think that there’s no question that she touched a chord. I don’t know of anybody, even people who didn’t like Ford, or didn’t like him either because they preferred Reagan or because they preferred a Democrat, who was critical of Betty Ford. Everybody that I knew of said she was honest and she was open about it. It seemed to me that it was a plus, but it wasn’t a plus because it was a calculated plus. It was a plus because she was telling the truth.

Smith: Did you know, did other people in the press know that she had a problem?

Cannon: I don’t know what others knew. I had heard that she had had a problem. I’d heard that she had a drinking problem. But in those days, that was off limits to report what spouses or children did. And it still is as far as I’m concerned. I don’t write about a president’s children, or about their spouse. That’s a very old-fashioned virtue, and I know there are people who will hear this among my colleagues who don’t consider it a virtue at all, but I would never dream of it. It’s one thing if you get drunk and fall down in public; it’s another thing if your spouse does.

Smith: Last thing: how do you think he should be remembered? To people who see his name in a textbook, or maybe some grainy film – what is it about Ford that people ought to know?

Cannon: Our country has a way – what is it my father used to say: God looks after drunks, little children, and the United States of America – our country has had a way of thrusting up people who were the right people for the moment. Abraham Lincoln being the supreme example of this, but also I would argue in their own ways, Teddy and Woodrow Wilson and certainly Franklin Roosevelt, and I would say Dwight Eisenhower, who to me is the most underrated president in history. Well, I think that Ford was one of those people. I don’t think you’re going to see very many history books that are going to put Ford in the same paragraph, let alone sentence, of the people I
just named, but I think that Ford deserves to be for one reason. And that is that he healed the country at a time that it was desperately in need of healing and was really at a loss. Because our president is so much more important to us because he is always a many-sided person, we’re not prepared for...you know, Truman made this notation that nobody has dishonored this house. Well, Nixon had dishonored the house. And he dishonored the nation, and we had no clue, really, any of us, no matter what our view was of Mr. Nixon, of how to deal with this. And I think Ford did. And he didn’t do it in a way that was particularly deft, or exhilarating, but he did it in an honest and straightforward way, and I think he’s going to be remembered as a honest man who rescued the United States of America in a moment of need.

Smith: That’s great. Thank you.
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