Smith: First of all, tell us about your dad and then the relationship that he had with President Ford.

Fisher: Well, I actually met President Ford because of my father, and it’s amazing. They are both Michigan people. Dad was born in Ohio, and went to Ohio State. But they had a very special relationship and I supposed it’s because of their Midwestern upbringing and their ability to be honest with each other. I think that Dad was a person who would always tell the truth. If you really didn’t want to know the truth, you wouldn’t want to ask him because he would tell it to you. But he didn’t talk a lot. He listened better than he spoke. He always spoke well, but I mean he was a good listener and he would let you sort of hang yourself before he would answer a question.

Smith: I’ve thought of this about President Ford – that there is a bit of cultural and geographical condescension toward Midwesterners. And in particular now because I’ve lived in a number of places and the way I phrase it is, people think because you talk slow, that means you think slow. And there is not necessarily a correlation between the two.

Fisher: No, I agree with you. I think of it as being someone who is very thoughtful, and who is thinking while they are talking. And they want to hold their ability to make a judgment.

Smith: No rush to judgment.

Fisher: Exactly. I believe that my father was very much like that, too. I know that he was there for the president all the time. Just for example, and I’m not going to be able to remember all the names, but he would come to Washington and meet with the president. I wouldn’t even know he was here. I’d run into him – my father. It was like we were totally separate people. This was his thing, but then my relationship with the president was different. But my father was
always a behind the scenes person. He was very intent on energy issues, and Israel, of course, but always energy issues. He used to say that a lot of what is happening now was going to happen. That’s interesting to me.

I think my father was very much a Republican, but I think he was a Jerry Ford Republican.

Smith: How would you define that?

Fisher: A Jerry Ford Republican would be a more moderate Republican - a fiscally conservative Republican. Values. But not the way it’s gone to the right with the family value kind of stuff. It’s more about the human being and not about the rhetoric.

Smith: When the president died there was a use of the word decency, in an almost condescending way. He was “incredibly decent” – as if that’s a substitute for bright, sophisticated - fill in the blank. And I think that probably also happens sometimes to Midwesterners. They get branded.

Fisher: That’s probably right. Many of the ones that I respect are not quick to talk. They are not quick to jump in. They want to hear what you have to say and then they’ll tear it apart. But I don’t think decency and integrity and all of those things are bad things to have. When the president died, I was, besides being overwhelmed with emotion, I was grateful that people finally knew what I knew.

Smith: I wore two hats that week because I was with ABC the first half of the week and then with the family the second half. It was fascinating to watch inside the media bubble, the degree to which they were surprised by the response and how it grew day by day. And I think part of it was a reaction to the current political climate. But I also think there was a whole generation of people who were being introduced to him for the first time through those old grainy clips. And it looked awfully good compared to what we have today.
Fisher: Right. Exactly. I exactly agree with you. And I also think that they saw a regular person. I think they saw somebody, not just because he was from the Midwest, he’d been in Washington – but it had never kind of corrupted him.

Smith: Would you say authenticity?

Fisher: Authenticity, absolutely. But sincerity along with it. Just getting back to this one little story that was always fun because Dad went to Ohio State, and the president went to Michigan and I went to Michigan. So we always had this kind of thing. But they always had a bet and every time Dad would introduce him, he would talk about this. It’s in my book that they had this bet - that he’d become the president, but Dad would become rich on the bet that they had between Ohio State and Michigan football. And when Daddy died, the president had given him $5 – it was always $5 – and he’d signed it, which is defacing the money and all of that sort of stuff. But Dad had framed it and put it in his office, and when Dad died and then I went to see Betty and the President out in Beaver Creek, I took it to him. I took that back to him, and I think he was really very touched by that.

So they had a very special relationship - the kind of thing where he would say, “Max, call me Jerry,” and he would say, “No, not as long as you are sitting in that chair. When you’re gone from there, we’ll go back.” They very much respected each other, and they talked all the time.

Smith: How did your paths cross with the Fords?

Fisher: I was living in New York and this was all at the change of the administration. There was a huge event, Michigan Salutes Milliken – Bill Milliken was our governor – and Nixon was supposed to be the keynote speaker. And then, of course, everything happened with Nixon, and so they didn’t have their keynote speaker and they had five thousand people coming to Colball(?) Hall. So my father called me and said, “Would you come?” And I just read this again in the book. I’m going to give you the book so you’ll have it so you can see some of the stuff. But he said, “Would you come and organize this because we’ve sold tickets.” I said, because I had told him I’m not good at
selling the tickets, I haven’t been living in Michigan, don’t ask me to do that part. He said, “No, no, no. We just need to organize the event.” Well, that was like a piece of cake for me and I had a great time. I was the key contact for the White House, and so the advance team came, but they weren’t a cohesive advance team, obviously. There were some leftover Nixon people and there were some people that were just there to help. But there was Secret Service – all the different communications things.

So I rallied the troops kind of thing in Michigan to get the table settings and do this and put the walls up and I think Ray Bolger was the musical entertainment. It was right after Betty had had her breast cancer surgery, and so they weren’t sure then that he was going to come. But he had agreed to this and I met him afterwards – because Dad introduced – all of my siblings were there – so Dad introduced us and I had told the White House people that I worked with, “This is great. Anytime you need me…”

If there had been a job description in those days for this, I think organizational – trying to put things together like events – they didn’t have event planners then and all these other little jobs that they talk about now. So that was perfect for me because I was good at that. And I loved doing it. So I volunteered for a while and helped him, and then sort of – I lobbied – but I was offered the job. My father was intent on not helping me. I remember because Len Garment was still at the White House and people that I knew were still here [Washington, D.C.] I knew through my father. Because Dad had been involved with Nixon, as well.

So I was offered the job and I was the first woman, really in the history of the United States, to be an advance man for a president. Did you know that?

Smith: No.

Fisher: I was the first one. It’s interesting because since then if I’ve run into presidents and the advance people come up to me, the women will come and say, “Thanks.” You know, I didn’t do it for that reason. But there were bunches of hurdles to get over because I was a woman. It was tough, it was
really tough. They didn’t pay me the same, they didn’t do anything…but my thing was, I think, I wanted the president to be happy. That was the only reason I was there. Now, others are there for – and I understand this – the career movement and all of that, but I was doing what I loved to do and I was making him happy.

Smith: Let me ask you – back up a bit, because one of the recurring themes of this project – Leon Parma sort of encapsulates this, because he was shoehorned into the East Room on the morning of August 9th for the swearing in. And afterwards there was a receiving line and then a reception in the dining room. He said, and this has led to this conversation with a number of people, he said you could see the Nixon people just peel off, go back to their offices. Which under the circumstances you can understand. My question is: did you detect tension between them and us? The Nixon people and the Ford people?

Fisher: Absolutely. Well, for me, watching it was – how to explain this – Nixon ran his White House differently than Ford ran his White House. Two totally different men. That advance group had to deal with a lot of demonstrators. If they wanted to be in a hotel, they would call the hotel and they would say get them out, get people out of there. Jerry Ford would never want to do that. We would go to a different hotel. So there was some of that tension there because some said, “but you’re working for the president, you can do whatever you want.” No, that’s not the way he wanted us to act. So there was a difference, and that’s the tension that I felt.

Smith: There is a wonderful story in a book I remember. They went to some hotel and of course they put him up in the best suite. It was literally called the Emperor’s Suite. And [he] felt distinctly uncomfortable about that. And someone wrote a handwritten sign that said, “Jerry Ford’s Room,” and put it on the door. And he thought that was fine. But that goes to what you say.

Fisher: Absolutely. Unless he was upset about something, unless he was having a moment, which we all have.

Smith: Now tell us, because it’s not a secret that he had a temper.
Fisher: Yes, he did. Two times I can tell you that I encountered his temper. It was my first trip out of town for him, and it was to Atlanta at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, and it was a mess of a trip. All the advance men, every one of them, they were all the chiefs and I was the Indian and they kept me up all night. I think they were trying to kill me. It was a pretty awful experience and at the end of the trip, I was just like, please let them go out of town, let them leave, let them leave, let the motorcade go, please.

They are all in the cars and I’m standing there with the agent who did the hotel, who should never have done hotels. His name is Smitty, Dick Smith. I mean, he had pulled a gun on me during this trip. It was an awful trip. So, I was standing there with him and we were both going, “Please leave. Please leave.” And the cars wouldn’t move. Dick Kaiser got out of the car and said there were no newspapers, and the president was really angry. Now, normally, if there hadn’t been something else going on – there was probably something else going on – he would have just driven off and he would have gotten his papers.

I know that he had the papers in the room in the morning, because I did that. But he didn’t have them in the car, and I didn’t know that was my responsibility. So Smitty is looking at me and Kaiser is looking at Smitty, and they all of us take off to try and find papers. Now, I know he’s fuming, he’s fuming, and the motorcade’s not moving. This was one of those times when it was just awful. Went into the gift shop, and I said, “I don’t have any money.” I didn’t carry any money because I didn’t carry my purse, and said, “I need a paper, it’s for the president.” She said, “Someone was just in here and tried that,” because Smitty had been in there before me. So he had gone, apparently, into the men’s room and found a paper and put it back together again and…oh God.

Smith: In those days there were afternoon papers.

Fisher: Right. But this was morning, and there was nothing. It was awful. He was very upset.
Smith: Plus, he was a newspaper junkie.

Fisher: Yes, and he was very upset. I learned my lesson. That was a silly situation, but...and the other time I saw him have anger was when I told him I was HIV positive. And that's a whole other story, but he was furious.

Smith: What happened?

Fisher: When I was diagnosed with HIV, it was in 1991, and at that point in my life, the President and Mrs. Ford were godparents to my children, my two boys and they were little. We talked all the time and we were very close, and I had become very close with Betty. So, I knew I needed to tell them and that was even almost harder than telling my own mom and dad. But I went to Beaver Creek and we spent the day there. I took the boys with me, and the president was playing with the boys and I went in to talk with Betty and this was a moment in my life that I remember so vividly. We cried, I told her, we cried. She was like, “Okay. You’re going to help women, aren’t you?” And I said, “I can’t even think about it, I don’t know if I’m going to be alive, I’m never going to see my children…” She said, “Well, you’re not going to be thinking about you.” She was crying. I was crying. We were laughing; we were crying.

She said, “We have to go tell Jerry.” I said, “Well, I think maybe you should tell him. I’ll be there.” And she’s holding my hand and tapping my hand and everything. We went into that little office there, it’s right at the top of the steps at Beaver Creek, and I just broke down. It was almost as if I – I don’t know why. He was like a dad in some respects. I was letting him down; there was something wrong with this. It was a bad thing. And he just – I could see him – his face got red, he said, “What about your dad? What about your father?” And I told him, I said, “You know, he could use a call from you because they’re not talking about this.” And I hadn’t gone public or anything, so this was all very quiet and I hadn’t even decided what I was going to do.

And the president was so angry about Brian, my husband. I’d never seen him like this. He was furious and it almost made me feel like – very safe- because he said, “Aren’t you angry?” And I go, “I, I don’t know. I don’t have time. I
have two children, I don’t know what I’m doing.” He was holding my hand and we were crying, and he was just walking and then he started pacing and then he lit up his pipe, and then he was…he was furious. He was absolutely furious. There was something so wonderful about that when I look back on it because it wasn’t an easy thing for them to understand. Because, just like my dad, it’s the generation of people that said, “Well, we can fix this.” Well, we can’t fix this. I am still here today, and this is an amazing thing. But in those days, we weren’t sure. At that point I probably had about five more years to live, and little children and this whole stigma. And the president was just beyond – he was very angry – which I loved him for it. It was just very special, really.

Smith: And they were outspoken in subsequent years, both in their support of you and the cause, at a time when that was not politically fashionable.

Fisher: He was very supportive of me – both of them. And they helped me during that period of time, that July when I was diagnosed in ’91 and I think I saw them in August, and then into January, when I went public. I was on the phone with her all the time, the president was on the phone with my father, Betty was talking to my mother. Her biggest thing to me was: be really sure, because you can’t take it back. Once you say something publicly like that, you can’t take it back. And she is so outspoken, anyway.

So, she’s been my mentor on this whole thing all the time, and the president was there for me. Between my father agreeing that I could use him and the president agreeing that I could use him – I mean, there were times when I asked the president, “Won’t you please do this?” And he would go, “No, I can’t do that.” There were things he wouldn’t do, like my father wouldn’t do, either. They just wouldn’t use up their political chits, I think. Which, okay, I’ll do it, I’ll do it anyway, it’s all right. So Betty and I would have those conversations; how are we going to get this done, how am I going to get this done. But they were there for me in that personal way that says how to handle yourself, even though you may not know, you’ll never really know if you’ve affected anybody.
Then when you gave your speech to the convention, were they there?

Yes. It was amazing. I had asked Betty because they wanted to know who did I want to introduce me. And I had asked her if she would. She said that obviously she would want to, but she was coming to this convention and not talking to anybody. Because this was – was it abortion in those days? It was something else, equal rights for women….and she didn’t want to say anything to anybody. So she wasn’t going to overshadow - that she was coming. So they were there in the president’s box with my mother and father. I could see them in the box – and my brother. They were amazing, they were just amazing.

It’s interesting because maybe you’ve begun to answer one of the questions I’ve always had. Clearly the party moved over here in their later years, and I’ve often wondered, did they simply stay where they were and by contrast with party appeared to be more “liberal,” or, in fact, did they themselves also evolve through experiences like this? I know for a fact that he’s the only president ever to have put his name on a pro-gay rights organization, for example. And that’s surprising, if you accept the caricature of West Michigan, conservative congressman, vanilla.

When you look at the people from West Michigan actually.

And you just wonder, how do you think they evolved? Because I think of them as a partnership. Did she move him in some ways, do you think?

Oh, I absolutely think. I think she moved him all the time.

But he was moveable.

He was moveable, which is amazing, when you think about it.

Let’s face it, most people get more conservative with age. I remember in the eulogy I said, “Our attitudes harden along with our arteries,” but Gerald Ford seemed to be just the opposite.
Fisher: It’s almost as if he could take a deep breath and say, “What’s humanity? What’s being human?” And I think a lot of these things were about being human, and so he didn’t move to the right with the party, as I saw it.

Smith: First of all there was the pro-choice issue. They had clearly nailed their banner to that mast and weren’t going to change their minds.

Fisher: And what about ERA? Do you remember that?

Smith: Yeah.

Fisher: And I think that that was a lot of the reason that she would be quiet, she wouldn’t talk or she wouldn’t say things to upset the apple cart, rather than say something that would be against a sitting president or something like that. She was very respectful of that stuff, and she followed her husband that way. There are many times when I think, yes, she led him; but I do think there were times when she would have loved to have said things, but she wouldn’t do it because it might embarrass. And she wouldn’t want to do that.

Those are different kinds of values. And your question being the party – you know, Richard, I remember when President Bush ’41, when we were talking about – I used to come to Washington and sit with his speechwriters and try to give them language for him – because every time he spoke out on AIDS, he said the wrong thing. He couldn’t get it. And I felt so bad, because it wasn’t as if he and Barbara were not wanting to get it; they really wanted to be a part of the community and to help. It was just like…

Smith: Just tone deaf?

Fisher: Maybe.

Smith: Not insensitive, but just not…

Fisher: It’s like this being shoved at you at a time when there was so much other stuff going on, but also shoved at you and you need to learn what words to use and what words to not use. It’s almost like a different language kind of thing. And everybody was very sensitive to that. The party went even further. I would sit
with President Ford and Betty at their home and I would ask questions and they would go, “Well, we’re just going to let that go. We’re just going to let it be.” You could see sometimes that they would be riled up about something. I had a hard time, myself, working for him when the election came around and Reagan promising that he would “I’m going to be there for you – and all my people are going to be working for you,” and then it was like going out in the field, we were fighting Carter and Reagan.

Smith: Really?

Fisher: It was just awful.

Smith: Describe that.

Fisher: It was awful. It’s one thing to be fighting against the Democrats if you’re a Republican, but it’s another to be fighting against your own party. His people were very adamant and they didn’t want Jerry Ford in there. I think that there was just a lot of…

Smith: Do you think what he had in mind was 1980?

Fisher: I felt so strongly about him and it was very difficult for me to be in this campaign. It was different than just taking him and doing trips for him. You’re in a world – well, you know what the campaigns are like – they’re awful. But to be fighting against all odds – that’s why I don’t think it was just the Nixon pardon that did it.

Smith: Yeah. Right.

Fisher: I think it was the lack of support from the Republican Party that didn’t push him there for that election.

Smith: Were you at the convention? We keep hearing how nasty the atmosphere was.

Fisher: Which one was this?

Smith: In ’76 – the Ford-Reagan. That it was very personal and often bitter.

Fisher: In Kansas City?
Smith: Yes. What do you recall?

Fisher: I recall it being bitter, and I recall it being angry. And yet, I just needed to do my job. But I also recall that being a time when Betty was going through a lot of stuff.

Smith: You were aware of her problems?

Fisher: Yeah. Well, there are some things I think I just don’t want to say. But, yes, I was aware of her problem. But in those days it was a little different. You had a drink, but even the president – I don’t know if he ever knew this but – I would water down his drinks because it’s not a matter of – in those days people just drank to drink. It wasn’t…

Smith: It really was a different culture.

Fisher: It was a different culture. And then when she was facing her problems, he didn’t do it – he stopped. He was amazing that way, so supportive. I felt, watching him do that, it says a lot.

Smith: His self-discipline is something that people comment on. He was a remarkably disciplined man.

Fisher: Unbelievable. And that’s why I always – you know they always show that thing of him sliding down the steps and Chevy Chase and all of this – but he’s the most athletic president we had had until some of these younger ones. He swam every day, twice a day.

Smith: Maybe it’s not a euphemism, people just talk about, well, Mrs. Ford was late a lot. That’s how they sort of described…some people read something into that, other people figured she was just not punctual. Was it something you had to take into account in planning and organizing events?

Fisher: Well, I worked for him, so the only time I got to spend time with her in those days was when she went on a trip with him. And then I would make it my business to sit with her a little bit because she was sometimes, in those days, a little bit left out. It was about the president, and so forth.
Smith: How did she handle that?

Fisher: Because I think that was during the time she was drinking and having pain in her neck, and all of that stuff, I felt there was a lot of sadness in her. And facing your own mortality with the breast cancer, there is not anybody…I totally get that, I totally understand that. And I think that there is just something that just sits right back here all the time, and it just changes the way you relate to people and the way you relate to your life. There seemed to me that before the intervention and before all that stuff, that there was some sadness. Looking back and it’s always 20/20, obviously, but it seemed like there was a lot of sadness there. That was my sense.

Smith: That’s an interesting description. And presumably that lifted in later years.

Fisher: Absolutely. Once Betty went through Long Beach and sort of got her life back, and her family and her friends and moved into the world of “I’m going to make it a better place” part, you couldn’t stop her.

Smith: Do you remember when you went to work in the White House?

Fisher: Well, I was a volunteer. That was in the fall of ’74, and I did a trip in Grand Rapids, and one in Scottsdale. But I think that I went on full time maybe in ’75. But I was a volunteer at the end of that year, or something like that.

Smith: Were you surprised by the pardon?

Fisher: No. My father would have done that.

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction to the pardon?

Fisher: Yes. But I was also young and I was not looking historically. I just didn’t want people to be upset with him. I wouldn’t say I was politically savvy. I was a Republican, I grew up in a Republican home, and there was no reason for them to be upset with him, because this was important. And think about what he was trying to do for the country. I mean, I felt very strongly about it, but I wasn’t a political pundit. I’m still not a political pundit.
Smith: Who did you report to? How was the White House organized in a way that your function…

Fisher: My job was under Red Cavaney, and if he wasn’t there, our direct boss was Don Rumsfeld or Dick Cheney.

Smith: And it’s interesting because we picked up from a number of people, differences between – people tend to equate the two now.

Fisher: What, Rumsfeld and Cheney?

Smith: Rumsfeld and Cheney, as if they were one person. But one senses that in fact, the atmosphere in the Ford White House was different under each one.

Fisher: Definitely, I think so.

Smith: How would you describe it?

Fisher: I was the woman on the team. I didn’t have a family – of course, I had a family – but I was considered not to have a family, so I was gone almost every week. And I always had the last trip. I had the last trip of the week. I would come back on Air Force One with the president and I was exhausted because I would then get the call the next morning on Sunday because the president had gotten some sleep. Now he wanted to go to the Washington Hilton because a friend of his was having an event. And it wasn’t planned and who would they call? Me. So I never, like, got a day off. It was very difficult for me. And I didn’t really get to see, except on trips, Rumsfeld and Cheney. And then I’d sit with them all the time. That’s how I know all of the Cabinet and everybody, because on trips I would take care of them. You know what I mean. I would arrange for them; if they needed something, I would get them something, whatever it was; but that’s how I knew all of the men. There were no women. At President Ford’s ninetieth birthday I was like, this is just amazing to me because I know all of the men; I had never met a lot of the wives. It was interesting.

So, Rumsfeld and Cheney: Rumsfeld is a different personality, I think, totally, than Cheney. Cheney was different then than he is now. A lot different.
Cheney was in that same morality that Gerald Ford was in. He was from the West a little bit, but he was still of that same kind of…

Smith: It’s interesting, even people who are very critical of Cheney today, go out of their way to say why they thought he was one of the best chiefs of staff because he, at least, did not appear to have an agenda of his own. And he made sure that diverse viewpoints were presented for the president’s consideration, which is maybe one of the most important things any chief of staff can do.

Fisher: It wasn’t about him. It never felt like it was about him, it always felt like what would be the right thing to do. And, like you say, diverse. I wasn’t ever at that level, but I know that he was so totally different than you hear and see him talking now. [He was] very much in the background on trips and stuff. He wasn’t like, “Do it this way…” He was very much like, however you’re doing it, don’t worry about me, I’ll find my way. Rumsfeld’s a little more demanding. Cheney was never really demanding.

Smith: Well, that’s totally consistent with what we’ve been told.

Fisher: And he was very gentle. I really, really adored him.

Smith: Dorothy Dowton, who was the president’s personal secretary, first of all, drew a sharp contrast – and by her own acknowledgement, she’s critical of Rumsfeld. He tried to get her fired. He tried to replace the president’s personal secretary. And she said it was night and day when Cheney took over. You relaxed, you still worked hard, but it was almost as if you felt no longer under Big Brother.

Fisher: Right. I think a lot of that is probably true. But Rumsfeld was also there in the very beginning, so there was a sense of “We need to pull this together quickly.” So there may have been a little bit more, to give him the benefit of the doubt, there may have been a little bit more pressure and stress on that.

I need to just tell you a quick story about the president. The way he thought of his people. Two stories: He always knew when I was on a trip with him, or if I
was doing his trip. So, I can’t remember exactly where we were, it might have been Portland, could have been anywhere. I’d walk him into the hotel and there would be the agents – this was in the beginning – there would be the agents and communications and all these people, and the press and everybody, and I’d go this way and the agents would say, “This way, Mr. President.” And he’d say, “No, I’m going on Mary’s elevator.” He was very aware of the people around him.

Smith: Which is by no means universally the case with political figures.

Fisher: No, because, it just happens. But he was very aware and he knew I was being – I mean, I went to my father, I went to Dick Cheney, and I went to all these men and I said, “Don’t you think that you could talk to Red, because I should be getting paid the same amount. I’m training all these guys.” In those days, Richard, we’re talking the ‘70s, I would never have done anything to embarrass the president, so would I have sued? They knew I wouldn’t do that. And the whole thing was, “You don’t need it.” That’s just not good. But [it was] their way of getting back at me.

But the president knew I was sort of being run down because he’d see me everywhere. He’d come back from a long trip and then he’d see me the next day in Washington and then the next day. I mean, I was always there. One time we were on Air Force One and Terry O’Donnell said – my memory is a little fading - but we landed at Andrews and he brought me back and said, “The president wants to see you.” Because we would all go off the back and he’d go off the front and that was before the 747, so I never saw that one. We were on 27000 and he handed me a corsage which somebody had probably given him for Betty or whatever, and he just said, “I just hope this makes you feel better. I know it’s been a rough trip.” Now, that was a little silly thing, but it meant a lot to me, and it was like, I know that he understands. His character was very much about the people, and for me that always meant a lot.

Smith: That’s a wonderful story.
Fisher: It really was a very special – he was very special. So that’s why I always gave him his – he always had a board under his mattress wherever we went. He always had ice cream, even if the doctor said, don’t give him ice cream. Because I always took care of him like I was a mother, I just wanted him to be comfortable. And then I know there is a funny story here because I did walk in on him one time when he didn’t have his clothes on and that was awful. That was just awful. There were lots of things that happened that mostly were funny and that everybody would laugh at today. I actually told that story in a speech: the one about taking him into the ladies room. Did I ever tell you that story?

We were somewhere and he was in the Green Room and he said, before I go on I want to go to the men’s room and I said, oh yeah, absolutely. And the agents – I don’t know about now, but then the agents always had a bathroom that was going to be his, whether it was a ladies room or a men’s room. It had been swept, and it was clean and he could go in there and nobody was in there. So, I must have just been thinking about too many things, and I knew he had to be on at a certain time, I said, come with me, and I walked him right into a ladies room, and I stood there and the door closed – and they let me do this. There were ten agents standing there and I saw the ladies’ thing and then I heard this scream inside and it was, “Oh my God.” And all the agents were laughing. They thought this was so funny; I’d taken the president to the ladies’ room – I mean, you just don’t think, it was habit. I never went into a men’s room. It was very much a habit. So things like that are the kinds of things that happened.

Smith: How did he respond when he walked out?

Fisher: He was not angry. He was very…I can’t actually remember exactly what he said, but I kept saying, “I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.” He knew that I would never do something like that on purpose. It just happens.

Smith: Were you on either of the trips with the assassination attempts out in California?
Fisher: I was in the plane. Luckily it wasn’t my trip. I can’t tell you whose trip it was, but it wasn’t my trip. I was in the plane because I had done Monterrey, and we were going to San Francisco. Betty Ford was on the plane, and so when we had landed in San Francisco, I was on the plane because we were all going back when Sarah Jane Moore…I was not there for Sacramento. It doesn’t matter. It’s like: you’re there when those things happen; then you think, I’m standing around here, I’m walking in front of all these big guys, I don’t have a gun. What am I doing? How stupid am I?

Smith: How did Mrs. Ford react to the news?

Fisher: Well, I didn’t see because we didn’t know what happened. They took her, and I think there was another plane. I can’t quite remember, but I remember them coming into the airport so fast with all the cars screeching. It happened pretty quickly.

Smith: Did you get to know the kids at all during that period?

Fisher: I did Susan. She was on trips a lot. And then she was taking pictures for a while, and I got to know…the problem was that if they went to Vail to ski or something, I always got Milwaukee on the way in or the way out. So I never really [got] what you would say the “good trips,” where the family would be, because I was the girl. I got Milwaukee. I was really good in Milwaukee, I can’t tell you how many times I did Milwaukee.

Smith: Did you go on any foreign trips?

Fisher: I did Bucharest, Romania.

Smith: With Ceausescu.

Fisher: With Ceausescu. And although it was my trip, they had to send Jon D______, who was a volunteer from Chicago, who was a great guy, because the Ceausescu people would not negotiate with a woman. So I would do the work, I would do the schedule. But that’s very interesting when you go to a Communist country and you realize that you can’t do it the way you normally do it. But, yes.
There’s a great story about Kissinger in there, because he was on that trip. It was very fun because when Kissinger traveled, we always had the State Department/White House thing. Who’s going to get the better office, and who’s going to...shouldn’t it be the president, not the State Department? Well, they give you these homes and you have to work with State because you’re out of the country. I’m sure it’s much different now, but then it was, “Who’s more important, the president or the secretary of state?” Well, the secretary of state thought he was more important and the president was just the president, who was the president. So it was my job on that trip to get all the staff, which would include the secretary of state. He was considered staff. He didn’t like that very much. So I was always moving him and telling him to go somewhere. He wanted to know, “Who was she, who is she?”

Then he told me I should go to Belgrade with him. He thought that would be a great thing. So I’m calling my father, I’m going, “You know, your friend,” because he was friends, used to talk to him like all the time on the phone, “is coming on pretty strong.” He didn’t know I was Max’s daughter and it was a little funny. He was always, his agents would come to me and say, “The secretary needs to see you now,” and I knew he didn’t need to see me, but there I was. I was the only woman on the trip, so it was that kind of stuff.

Smith: Tito was still around then, wasn’t he? Yugoslavia.

Fisher: I didn’t do Yugoslavia. I had to go to Fort Smith, Arkansas. I did Ceausescu, but we were...

Smith: Didn’t do China?

Fisher: I was supposed to go to China, but I was the one advanceman they left behind. So I was up twenty-four hours a day because I was doing the schedule from here, and that’s when I met and worked with a lot of the senior staff because there wasn’t anybody else here.

Smith: Were you in Helsinki?

Fisher: Just on the way to Bucharest.
Smith: Then of course, he went to Japan and saw the emperor.

Fisher: Yeah, but I didn’t get to do that, either. You know, it’s funny because I was supposed to go to China. This has nothing to do with… But just a month ago I was supposed to go, and they denied me my visa because I’m HIV positive.

Smith: Really? Wow. What does that tell you about their claims to be a great power?

Fisher: Well, America does that. I’ve been working since 1982 to try and change that. Not that I can do anything about it, but it’s really an awful policy.

Smith: I guess it’s fair to assume that you really got to know them better after the White House years.

Fisher: Absolutely. Yeah, because I went and spent time with them, and I did trips for him. I remember doing the University of Michigan for him, or when they would call. I didn’t go work for him – I was burned out.

Smith: You mentioned Ann Arbor. It clearly had a special place in his heart.

Fisher: In his heart, and they had for him, too. It’s both. Really, both.

Smith: I’ve heard it from a number of people – we talked at the very beginning about talking slow. Apparently, it was almost like you flipped a switch. Every year he tried to go out and give a pep talk to the Michigan team before the big game. And it was a different man. It was someone who was eloquent, and just overwhelming, and knew every player and knew everything about every player. And brought them all into it, and it was just an extraordinary experience. People who had the chance to observe it, they never forgot it.

Fisher: I never observed it. I would have loved to. I always thought that he was, in many ways, better off the cuff. I remember thinking to myself, remember there was a communications department when I was at the White House, and…

Smith: Bob Hartmann, who was kind of a lightning rod, and still is.

Fisher: Is he?
Smith: Well, he’s gone, but he remains a lightning rod, sort of polarizing. Some people thought he was just very protective, some people thought possessive.

Fisher: I think both, actually. I think he was. But I’m talking Bob Mead, [he] was the communications director. I think it was Bob. Anyway, television. A lot of the time, since I had been in television, when we would do trips, I would be able to do a lot of the press advance because I knew what to do. I had been in the media. But I would have to say that those were the beginning of the days of the media, and I don’t think that he was a television president. He wasn’t what you would consider on television, charismatic. He hadn’t grown up that way.

Smith: He got better.

Fisher: Much better. Decency might be the word you said before, but a humanist is really regular, and that’s not a bad thing.

Smith: Particularly in the bubble of the presidency.

Fisher: Especially since he wasn’t even out there to get it. He was about to retire. He wanted to be Speaker of the House, didn’t he?

Smith: Yeah.

Fisher: That was what I understood it to be – and then he was going to retire that year.

Smith: There is a school of thought that says Reagan, by pushing for the nomination, actually made him a better candidate.

Fisher: Made Ford a better candidate?

Smith: Yeah. Think of the acceptance speech he gave. It’s probably one of the best speeches he ever gave. He really, really, worked at it, and he was pushed to do things at a level that he hadn’t…

Fisher: …ever done before.

Smith: Yeah.
Fisher: He hadn’t aspired to it. I don’t know if it was Reagan pushing him, or whether it was because he felt he could do the best job for the country. I have a tendency to believe that nobody could push him. He could make you think that you were pushing him, but in my heart of hearts, I think that he felt he would do the best job for the country.

Smith: In the campaign you have the debates and of course, the famous Polish gaffe – where were you that night?

Fisher: I don’t know. I know I wasn’t on that trip. It so reminded me of Romney and the brainwashing thing.

Smith: You knew instantly that it was a real problem.

Fisher: There were too many problems. There were really too many problems. And, like I say, I don’t think of him as – not that Carter was so great on television, but, President Ford was coming into his own. Give him another few years; he would have been a great orator.

Smith: It’s interesting that you say that because he said to people that the hardest thing about losing was that he felt he had done a good job. He had to unlearn in some ways, being a Congressman. He had to evolve from that role into the role of executive, which was very different.

Fisher: But that’s why I think that nobody pushed him. I think that he felt that he was there now, and he could move now, and “give me my chance” kind of thing. Because this was all a learning curve that he hadn’t planned on.

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

Fisher: I think the last time I saw him was after my father died and I gave him his signed five dollar bill. I think that was the last time I saw him.

Smith: And that was out at Beaver Creek?

Fisher: Yeah. He was fragile. And I had just gone through this with Dad, so you can tell. And yet, you know, they were always so close, Betty and the president, and it’s like when I was there and we had dinner together, we didn’t always
eat in the dining room. Sometimes we’d eat in the den, and in Palm Springs, too. And they called each other Mom and Dad kind of thing. They were very relaxed and comfortable and easy going. I remember having lunch that day with them in Beaver Creek, and his memory of my father, and things that went on years ago, long term. It was amazing, and she was helping him with the short term stuff. Then it was time for them to both rest. He was worried about her and she was worried about him. They were just the best together.

Smith: I think that was also part of the dynamic when he died; that people, first of all had not seen her in a while, they hadn’t seen the kids in a long while, and I think they were, perhaps, surprised at how close the family was, and in particular, how close the marriage was.

Fisher: Well, as close as the marriage was, and it was really close, and the children – you say children – we’re talking adults – my age and stuff, too. But if you could be proud of somebody, I was so proud of all of them for the way they handled themselves during the Washington time and the Grand Rapids time, and being up there at the Rotunda. I mean, these are human people, and they were trying to say, this is what my dad would have wanted us to do.

Smith: There’s a wonderful story which sort of sums it all up. We’d been told at ABC at the beginning of the week, out at St. Margaret’s, don’t be surprised if you see Mrs. Ford in wheelchair. Well, of course, we didn’t, until at the very end, briefly, outside the museum. But she walked that long distance to the gravesite. The following week someone commented on that to her, in terms of admiration and surprise. And she said, “Well, that’s what my husband would have wanted.” As simple as that, she was doing it for him.

Fisher: Absolutely. That’s the way she thought, and she still thinks that way.

Smith: Do you keep in touch with her?

Fisher: I do. It’s been hard this last bit of time.

Smith: Since his passing?

Fisher: No, just in this last year.
Smith: One senses that she is still grieving.

Fisher: Yeah, that’s true.

Smith: And she’s told people, “I’m retired.” That’s her characterization. On the one hand, she must be enormously proud and gratified to know that the Betty Ford Center is in Susan’s hands.

Fisher: Right. Oh, she’s very proud of her.

Smith: How many people create something and then, in fact, have a succession in their own lifetime that they can be completely comfortable with? So that’s on the plus side. But one senses that she is somewhat reclusive.

Fisher: She’s not somewhat; she is. And I also think that she’s frail, she’s fragile. And my concern, obviously, is that I have to now talk with Jan to get to her because she’s not answering her phone anymore like she used to. And maybe she’s not getting the messages, and there’s a lot of stuff going on with nurses and this, that, and the other thing. So, for me, I feel like I’ve – and I don’t know why – but maybe it’s just because they’re keeping…you know how when you get older your circle gets much smaller. I watched it happen with my dad. And I think the family has sort of made it be like that. I haven’t talked to her – I’ve talked around her, but not with her – in quite a while. Maybe nine months. For me, it’s very sad. She’s so much a part of my life. Of course she’s proud, but she misses him terribly. This is not easy.

Smith: Growing old is not easy, under the best of circumstances. But one tiny metaphor: I don’t think people realize, in the best sense of the word, how much he was her goad. He would complain about it, but every week, disciplined as he was, he would do it. I think it was Tuesday. He would sit down, you know there was that huge table in the conference room, and once a week everything he had to autograph was stacked up in front of him, and he’d do it manfully – get it out of the way – and he’d say, “Now, come on Mother, you’ve got to do yours.” And that’s not there anymore.

Fisher: No.
Smith: That friendly persuasion.

Fisher: I don’t think she feels that she has to. I think that she feels like she’s done it. I know she feels like she’s just waiting, in some respects.

Smith: She has said to people, “I don’t know why I’m still here.”

Fisher: Right. Yeah.

Smith: This sort of brings up the fact, another one of those things that I don’t think people realize because they are accustomed to more obvious displays, but how important faith was to both of them. It wasn’t, to use the cliché, worn on their sleeve. But it was clearly a very significant part of their lives.

Fisher: Yes, and it’s interesting because I think that’s another reason that they respected my dad and us for being Jewish, and they had a sense of what that meant. She has a spirituality. She’s spiritual as well as having faith, I think. Has a lot of “this is happening for a reason,” kind of thing, and we do these things because…based in some inner strength.

Smith: You hope – I don’t mean to sound saccharine, but – you have to hope that she believes that when the times comes, that they’d be reunited.

Fisher: Well, I think they probably will. I think she thinks that. And, yeah, but see that’s – now you get me going, Richard. I was going through my book and reading because I was trying to remember some of the stories and stuff, and I cry when I think about him, and her. They were such a part of my life for so many years, and it’s like, I miss him. I miss him.

Smith: For people who didn’t know them, or just know them as names in a textbook – what would you tell them? Is there something that would surprise people about either Gerald or Betty Ford?

Fisher: I think that the closeness that they had would surprise people. They called each other Mother and Dad, and their closeness and how they looked out for each other in so many respects. You talk about him goading her; she used to goad him pretty good, too.
Smith: She could zing.

Fisher: Absolutely. But I watched my mom do that with my father, and they were the only ones that could do that, by the way. So I think that that would surprise people as how really close they are. They knew how each other was thinking.

Smith: You wonder—it’s purely speculative—whether he felt any degree of guilt over all those years when he was coming up the ladder and he was on the road as much as he was. And she was already beginning to experience some problems. Not unlike a lot of American women in her generation. In some ways she is such a representative figure.

Fisher: Unbelievable. So much so that my mother’s situation, and my mother’s alcoholism, was very similar. So, I grew up with that in my home. I really do know how Susan…but hers was so public, my mother’s wasn’t so public, and I think that, yes, she was representative of a generation of women. She used to stand up for ERA. I’ll never forget that choice.

Smith: Remember the famous Sixty Minutes interview.

Fisher: Oh!

Smith: When you look at the transcript of that interview—I said years later, “Hillary Clinton could not say this today in the White House, what Betty Ford said a generation ago.”

Fisher: Well, and also because it wasn’t a twenty-four hour news cycle where you heard it over and over and over and over again. She was very outspoken, and maybe part of that was…I think that that kept—I look at my mother doing stuff like that, too. And it kept my father very interested. I think that there is a piece of “you know, I know how to say this, and I’m going to keep…” That was part of their relationship. To me, watching them was just as much fun.

Smith: Well, and clearly, he was so proud of her.

Fisher: Oh, no question.
Smith: The stories about every year the Betty Ford Center would have a big alumni weekend, and he’d be there cooking hot dogs – just part of the scene. She got the Medal of Freedom years before he got the Medal of Freedom. Well, again, he was just so willing to, in some ways, submerge his own identity, celebrity, whatever, in her causes.

Fisher: Oh, absolutely. There’s no question that this was about her, a lot of it was about her. And that’s where I thought they were so – you don’t want to say a President and a First Lady were cute – it was adorable. It was heartwarming. And you say: is there anything that you would want to say that people wouldn’t understand, or wouldn’t know about them? I think that’s one of the things that people wouldn’t know about them, is that incredible heart connection.

Smith: Last thing, how do you think each one of them should be remembered?

Fisher: Oh, I’m grateful that he’s being remembered as having done the right thing, to me. And Betty, oh, well, as affecting the disease of alcoholism and women and breast cancer - but for me, personally, her legacy is large. She took risks - that perhaps being a president, he took a risk, obviously, with the pardon and things like that – but she took risks on a social level, on a personal level, on a family level. And so, to me, I always talk about her when I’m giving speeches. She’s my mentor and I always think, what would she tell me about this? How should I handle this? Because she was the one that really pulled me along to help me make a difference in the world. And so, for her, her legacy is very large for me and my life. I can’t even think about her being gone. I don’t want to think of it. Sorry.

Smith: No, you just wonder, again though, in the last few years – I don’t know if you’ve seen it – one of the best things Ken Burns ever did was his documentary about Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. It’s called, “Not for Ourselves Alone,” and it’s very moving. In fact, I gave it to her for Christmas last year.
Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in the last years of her life, had actually been repudiated by the National Women’s Organization that she had founded because she had written the *Women’s Bible*, which was a characteristically audacious, bold, editing of the Bible to remove some of the patriarchy. And Susan B. Anthony was put in this impossible position where she defended her friend, but it wasn’t enough to keep her from being censured by the organization. Anyway, in the last years of her life, she really withdrew, but the last speech she gave, she wrote this extraordinary thing. If you’ve not seen it, you should read it. It’s called the *Solitude of Self*, in which she talks about particularly, women in their later years. And that in the end, whatever one’s gender, and however much we might like to sentimentalize to the contrary, each one of us is alone. Each one of is on his or her own. And it’s clearly about aging, and aging well. But anyway, it’s a remarkable essay, and I thought about it in connection with Mrs. Ford.

Fisher: And it’s an essay?

Smith: It’s an essay by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, it’s a speech, called *The Solitude of Self*.

Fisher: Okay. Interesting.

Smith: Anything else that we haven’t…we’ve covered a lot.

Fisher: Well, you know the regular kind of people that it looks like we have president and first lady? That’s the kind of regular person Jerry Ford was. It’s interesting to me to kind of – I know history will draw this and I won’t be around, but there’s a lot about this president that is very much like Jerry Ford.

Smith: I also thought there was a connection. Again, when the president died, and the reaction – and some of it was “the country needed to feel good about itself at that point.” But a lot of it also reinforced what I think Obama had already caught on to, which was: contrary to conventional thinking, we weren’t a 50-50 country. There was a large center, there was a very large number of Americans, if not a majority, who wanted to get serious, who didn’t care about ideology as much as about practical problem solving, who wanted
civility restored to the public square, all of those things that President Ford represented, and for which he sometimes took heat from the increasingly strident right wing.

I will never forget, at the time of the Monica Lewinski madness, we collaborated, I worked with him on it, an OpEd piece that appeared in the *New York Times* in which he proposed, short of impeachment, as he put it, a unique punishment for a unique offense. The idea was to have the president appear before a joint session of Congress, nationally televised, stand in the well of the House; be formally rebuked by both houses of Congress; not say anything; and then the country could get back to business. And people would have felt that, you know what, Congress rose to the occasion instead of sinking to the occasion. The president accepted it manfully.

It would have been a dignified way out of a very undignified situation. And he took more heat for that from the right wing, especially. But of course, subsequently, I learned that when it first appeared the White House was willing to grab it like manna from Heaven, and the Republicans in the House committee didn’t want to go along. Well, then a month later came along the mid-term elections in which, of course, the Republicans lost, and all of a sudden they wanted to dust off Jerry Ford’s proposal. At that point the White House was feeling its oats. But it’s a classic case of, if only people had been able to look beyond their immediate emotional, partisan, irrationality, and thought about what was good, not only for the country, but frankly what was good for them in the long run, instead of just playing to the base.

Fisher: But that’s how he always thought. Look, it’s the same thing with the pardon. Actually, it’s the same.

Smith: It’s exactly the same. Putting your country first, even if you take a hit.

Fisher: Right.

Smith: This has been wonderful. Thank you.

Fisher: Thank you.
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