

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**Max Friedersdorf**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
**January 30, 2009**

Smith: First of all, thanks so much for doing this. We really appreciate it, on this gorgeous mid-winter day. Is this typical?

Friedersdorf: I'd say this time of year it's typical, around eighty degrees. We had cold days in January, but February and March are really beautiful months.

Smith: I'm interested in your life before Gerald Ford. How did your path lead to Washington and ultimately to the Ford White House?

Friedersdorf: I came to Washington in 1961 after the '60 election with a freshman congressman from Indiana, Richard L. Roudebush, 6th Indiana district. Congressman Ford, of course, was a power in the Republican house delegation and I met many of his staffers, including Bob Hartmann and became friends. I was involved somewhat negatively with President Ford at first because when he ran against Charlie Halleck from Indiana I was working the phones for Charlie Halleck and the Republican delegation from Indiana. But we lost and President Ford never held it against any of the Indiana delegation.

Smith: What was the beef against Halleck? Was it in some ways almost a repeat of the complaint against Joe Martin back in '58?

Friedersdorf: It's a combination of the age thing and minority status, and Halleck had a drinking problem. That was pretty well known. And then you had a group of Young Turks like Gerald R. Ford and Melvin Laird and Donald Rumsfeld and Bob Griffin, and they were up and coming. It was a generational difference and it was after the '64 election which was such a debacle. We lost a lot of seats in the Goldwater election. The house members felt it was time for Charlie to go.

Smith: How was Halleck treated after that by the winners, in effect?

Friedersdorf: He was treated with respect and honor and I think that in his heart of hearts he knew that his time was over. I never saw any resentment or any vengeance or any indication that there was bad blood.

Smith: What was it that people saw in Ford at that point that would lead them to make him the Republican Leader? What were the qualities that they saw?

Friedersdorf: Halleck was a very inspired Minority Leader in his heyday.

Smith: Halleck was. I'm interested in what it was Halleck had, but then I'm wondering about Ford.

Friedersdorf: Well, Halleck had been a very, very effective Leader for a number of years and I think that, as we said, his time had come. But, getting to President Ford, there were a lot of possibilities in the House side at that time, but Ford seemed to have a more broad base of support. He was a very vigorous, energetic, attractive, intelligent type of person that Republicans just seemed to naturally gravitate towards. He's sort of a natural Leader, which he had been all his life in every pursuit. And I think it was just the cream coming to the top.

Smith: And the party, as we said, in those days really was sort of grounded in the Midwest, wasn't it?

Friedersdorf: Right.

Smith: I mean, you had your Northeastern wing. You had a growing Southern wing. You had, certainly, Goldwater support in the Rocky Mountains states.

Friedersdorf: Right.

Smith: But the Midwest was still the heart of it.

Friedersdorf: It was the heart of the Republican Party: Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota.

Smith: What did it mean to be a conservative in the Jerry Ford sense of the word?

Friedersdorf: Well, it was an entirely different conservative than now. When I think about President Ford, I think about how he would have reacted to the Republican party's record during the last eight or ten years on big spending and an

aggressive, almost combative, foreign policy that was just the opposite of what we thought [as of] conservatism. We were the Walter Judd type conservatives: reduce spending, lower taxes, strong foreign policy, but not an adventurous, hostile foreign policy. I think that's what it stood for.

Smith: And yet clearly having to some degree, at least, accommodate yourself to the electoral realities. This was the height of the Great Society, '64 and the landslide for Johnson. It wasn't enough simply to say, "No. We're against this." Presumably, there was some attempt to come up with a conservative alternative, a more constructive opposition, if you will.

Friedersdorf: Well, I think we talked about balanced budgets and these programs, I think if you go back and check the record, most of those programs have turned out to be really successful, like Medicare and Medicaid. Probably the majority of Republicans voted against them. In hindsight, I think we were wrong. I think now even those members who voted during that era against those programs would say they were worthwhile.

Smith: For example, Bob Dole.

Friedersdorf: Right.

Smith: Who was also a member of this...

Friedersdorf: Well, he was a member. I omitted him, but he was a solid member of that group.

Smith: And, in fact, played a key role in Ford's victory over Charlie Halleck.

Friedersdorf: That's right.

Smith: Clearly there was a change from the *Ev and Charlie Show* to the *Ev and Jerry Show*. When we talked with Mel Laird yesterday, one had a sense that Dirksen tended to be *very* accommodationist with LBJ. Whether it was Vietnam or whatever, that there was a relationship between Dirksen and Johnson, and that Dirksen was easily flattered, at least in Mel's viewpoint. And that, in some ways it fell to the House Republicans to lift the banner of opposition a little more than in the Senate.

Friedersdorf: I think that's true. I think the Senate was – it's just the nature of the Senate to be club-like and accommodating. They seem to all be part of one fraternity over there. Where, in the House, it's a much more partisan atmosphere.

Smith: Even then it was?

Friedersdorf: I think so, I think so.

Smith: What is it about being a Congressman, because clearly – I don't mean to jump ahead – but the criticism was voiced of Ford when he became president that it took too long for him to shift gears from being on Capitol Hill to the White House. What is it about being in the House for twenty-five years that would define someone, shape their Leadership?

Friedersdorf: Well, I think a Congressman, as a House member, is much closer to the issues because he has to run every two years. In fact he was always running. Back in those days, it wasn't nearly as expensive, but he still was always raising money. And I think they visited the districts more often. I know the House member that I worked for ten years, he went back to Indiana every single weekend. So you were practically, you were in touch with your constituency constantly. And I know Senators, some of them probably go home every six months, the ones that had just been elected.

So I think the House is much closer to the public and I think that President Ford, coming in after having been Leader, was very sensitized to the requests of the House members. He was constantly pounded on every day on the floor. You could just see them lining up, as soon as he came down the aisle. They would be lined up at the Leadership desk about this project and that project and “Can you come here?”, “Can you do that?” And it was a hard transition from becoming a member of the House to being vice president and president. Very hard transition.

Smith: He always thought, and I don't think it was just a line, he believed genuinely that he had adversaries, but no enemies. Now, that may be stretching it, but how would you describe his relations with members in both parties, particularly in the House?

Friedersdorf: I never heard a Democrat or Republican ever say anything critical or mean or vicious about President Ford when he was House Leader. He had the respect of everybody in the House. Members would violently disagree with him on the issues, but he was one of those individuals that absolutely seemed to have a personality that was not abrasive. He could tell you “No”. He could tell you “I can’t do that” in a way that there was no offense taken and there was no bitterness. Of course, that’s why he became president, because he was a person that could be confirmed, he had that many friends in both the House and Senate. I don’t think you can say that about many Leaders over the years that don’t have really, really bitter enemies. Personal enemies. And Ford just didn’t generate enemies.

Smith: The relationship with Tip O’Neill was very close?

Friedersdorf: Yes, extremely close. They played golf together. They had cocktails together occasionally after work. They socialized. They fought like cats and dogs on the floor, but after five o’clock, six o’clock, they were friends.

Smith: There are stories of him and Hale Boggs, who I guess used to debate down at the National Press Club. They would drive down together, decide on the way what they would debate that day. They’d go down to the Press Club, they’d have their debate, and then they’d go off and have lunch or drink and resume the battle. It’s sounds so unlike today.

Friedersdorf: It’s just such an incredible atmosphere that it’s hard for me to imagine working up there now, [the way] the atmosphere is. I never had any hesitation going in and talking to the Speaker about something that President Ford wanted to bring up. He was always accommodating. He might not agree with it, but it was a very congenial atmosphere.

Smith: Now, how did you get into the business of congressional relations?

Friedersdorf: I was working on the Hill and my boss ran for the Senate against Vance Hartke in 1968. Anyway, I was hired by Don Rumsfeld at OEO to run congressional relations. And then when Rumsfeld and Cheney went over to the White House under Nixon to take over the Office of Price Control, I got an offer to go over and be on the congressional relations staff at the White

House, as assistant to the president for congressional relations working the House side. Jerry Ford was the Minority Leader, so I was in and out of his office every day, practically, and got to know him much better than my real boss, President Nixon. And the day that Nixon resigned and President Ford was sworn in, President Ford had a receiving line in the White House, and as I went through the line, he said, "I want you to stay. I'm going to need all the help I can get." And I was very pleased to hear that. So I stayed on during his administration.

Smith: I take it that he was an easier man to know than Richard Nixon.

Friedersdorf: Well, I felt like Jerry Ford was a big brother. I'd traveled with him when he was Minority Leader. We would have these trips – him and Rumsfeld and Laird and Bob Griffin and a lot of the Young Turks in the Republican party -

Smith: Charlie Goodell?

Friedersdorf: Charlie Goodell. We would go around the country during recess and speak in Democrat districts where we had hopes to elect a Republican. So, I did travel with Ford. I got to know him quite well. I had a very, let's say unpleasant experience. One time, we were in Indiana around Kokomo or Muncie. He'd given a speech the night before and we were staying in a private home. I was in the same bedroom with Ford, twin beds, and he said, "I'm a heavy sleeper. I want to get up at six. There's a plane that's going to take me to Indianapolis." So, my alarm didn't go off and we overslept an hour and I have never been chewed out like Ford could do it. So I run out and got him a cup of coffee. I brought the cup of coffee back and he'd calmed down a little, but by the time we got to the airport, on the way to the airport, he said, "That's okay, Max. The plane will wait on me." He got real mad. He could fly off the handle.

Smith: He had a temper.

Friedersdorf: Yeah, he did.

Smith: And apparently spent a lifetime trying to control it.

Friedersdorf: But I woke up and it was seven o'clock instead of six and I thought, "How am I going to wake him up?" So, I went over and I took his shoulder and I said, "Mr. Leader. Mr. Leader." He woke up, he said, "What time is it?" I said, "It's seven o'clock." He said, "Augh!" And he was a big guy, I mean, strong as a bull. I know he would never hit me, but I remember he was all-American center on Michigan. But that's the kind of guy he was.

Smith: Yeah. He really wanted to be Speaker of the House, didn't he?

Friedersdorf: Yeah, he told me he did. That was the height of his goal. I think he would rather be Speaker than President.

Smith: When you were in and out of his office doing congressional relations for the Nixon White House - clearly that gets us into the whole Watergate period. Do you remember where you were when you first heard about the break in?

Friedersdorf: I was out on Highway 123 in Fairfax County. I'd been down to the country club in Fairfax that morning playing golf. It was on a Saturday and I was driving down. I had the radio on and it was just a small announcement that there'd been a burglary at the Democratic National headquarters in Watergate. And I didn't think too much about it. I thought, "Why would somebody break in there?" and so on and so forth. But as the thing developed and it became the horrible scandal it was, I thanked my lucky stars, because that spring, I'd gotten a call from John Mitchell over at CREEP, Committee to Reelect. He'd wanted me to come over to CREEP, to take a leave of absence from the White House and come over, and work on the Committee to Reelect and do some speechwriting and advance work. He wasn't specific.

I hung up the phone. I ran over to the West wing. I went into Bill Timmons office and I said, "Bill, Mitchell wants me to come over to CREEP. I took this job to work congressional relations in the White House. I do not want to go to the Committee. That is not my cup of tea." He said, "Don't worry about it. I'll call Mitchell and tell him you cannot." He got me out of that and I thought, "Ugh." Many, many of the guys I know that were working in the White House that were drafted and went over there got into trouble and some of them went to prison, some of them served time.

Smith: Do you think Mitchell took secrets with him to the grave?

Friedersdorf: My theory on that has always been that they had too much money to spend over there. We were ahead 43 to 29 in the polls. Guys like Liddy and those guys were trying to impress Mitchell. Or they were freelancing. Or they were too active for the situation. And when they did this and they got caught and things blew up, John Mitchell was probably briefed or privy to most of it. And President Nixon was trying to protect John Mitchell, his former law partner and best friend. I've always thought that's how it developed and that Nixon, for all his faults, he was extremely loyal to people and I don't think he would have ever done anything that would implicate or reflect on John Mitchell. And I think that was the heart of his problem, the heart of his motivation, let's say.

*Section Not Released*

Smith: Were you surprised by the taping system?

Friedersdorf: Yes, I had no idea that was in there. You just didn't think about it, you know. But in retrospect, maybe I should've, but I was not alone.

Smith: During this period, is Ford asking you, as, in effect, the White House representative, "What's going on?" or "Can you explain this Watergate business to me?" Was there a growing alarm on the Hill among Republicans?

Friedersdorf: It was sort of like an ink blot spreading. I think people at first thought it would go away and it was kind of like slow death or torture by drips. Each day, there'd be something else come out and it seemed like House Leader Ford and the Republican Leadership didn't know any more about it than we did at the White House. It was all kept within a very tight circle, *[text embargoed]* Haldeman and Erlichman and the president and Colson. I don't think it went much beyond that.

Smith: We were talking about Mel Laird. When he went back to the White House, it's now revealed that Fred Buzhardt told him within a month or so that in fact Nixon was involved in the cover up at the very least, based upon Buzhardt's listening to the tapes. But apparently Laird kept that to himself.

Friedersdorf: That didn't get very far. I doubt President Ford knew that. Perhaps he did if Laird shared that with him, but he didn't share it with the White House staff. I was convinced up until a couple days before they finally came up with the smoking gun, which was just a few days before, we were all convinced that it would go away. But we started counting votes on impeachment pretty early, because we could see that was coming in the House. And we were keeping a list and checking Congressmen on how they would vote on a bill of impeachment and also the Senate, too. So we were wary of it.

Smith: For example, the Saturday Night Massacre - did that significantly advance the calls for impeachment in the house? When Cox was fired, remember that? And Richardson refused to quit and...

Friedersdorf: Oh yeah, the Saturday Night Massacre? Oh, that was a major, major blow. Because Ruckelshaus was considered part of the Nixon team. We weren't that much surprised at Elliot Richardson, he was kind of a weak reed, but when Ruckelshaus went along with it then the whole thing I think was a major blow.

Smith: Plus, by that time, Agnew had resigned.

Friedersdorf: It was a real distraction at the time. I think at the time it might have been just a bit helpful, not helpful in the long-term, but it took your mind off of Watergate for a day or two.

Smith: I'll tell you something extraordinary. We talked to Jerry Jones, who worked with Haig later on. Just before Haldeman left, whenever it was, April, May of '73, Haldeman had Jones reorganizing the personnel office. He called him one day and he said, "How many jobs report to the vice president?" Jones did some figuring and he said, "About 50." Haldeman said, "Good. I want letters of resignation." Now this is in April of '73, Jones at least thinks they knew as early as then that Agnew was going to be in trouble. What was it like to come into work, day after day after day?

Friedersdorf: It was tough and a lot of my friends resigned and went to other jobs. Most of the guys on the congressional relations staff left. And Dick Cook and Gene Cowan and Ken Delicium and Bill Timmons, who were hardcore Nixon. These

guys were quitting and taking private sector jobs. I had made up my mind that I was going to stay until the thing was over, until the last day. And I did. President Nixon gave that emotional address in the East Room the day that he resigned, and then that evening – no, that was the day he did resign - but the evening before, he asked us to bring down the remaining supporters from the House and Senate. We had less than forty votes, counting House and Senate. That’s how extreme we were. Guys like Senator Eastland, Senator Stennis, Joe Waggoner, John Rhodes, Les Arends, the hardcore of the hardcore. And we assembled them in the Cabinet Room about 6:00 p.m. and we waited on the president, waited on the president. Some of the guys were getting restless, they had things to go to, but everybody stayed.

He finally came in and he said, “I’m going on television tonight and I’m going to announce my resignation. I’m going to resign tomorrow at noon.” Everybody was kind of anticipating it, but there were a lot of tears in the room. And Nixon kind of broke down, he was starting to tear up and he laid his head down on the desk and you could see his shoulders heaving. And we, everybody in the room, was just – just the drama of that. And he finally raised up and he said, “I’m sorry I let you down.” And he got up and he sort of ran out of the room back into the Oval Office. It was one of the most painful, depressing things I’ve ever seen. The President of the United States.

And, of course, the next day, he spoke in the East Room. If you remember that speech, he got into his mother and there wasn’t a dry eye in that room. Then he went out and got in the helicopter. That’s when President Ford; it was like a new day. It was like the sun coming up over Mount Everest. Nixon was gone and Ford was there. It was almost like a celebration. They lifted a weight off our shoulders. But I stayed until that day and I thought President Ford would want an entirely new team. But I had stayed and I felt like I would like to work for him if he wanted me. But I didn’t say a word. He just said, “Max, I want you to stay right here.”

Smith: You know, it’s fascinating, people who were there have told us, following the swearing in, there was a receiving line and then people were invited into the State Dining Room for a reception. Someone said, “You could watch the

Nixon people just strip away and go back to their offices”. How much of a problem was that for a while, at least, the White House was basically staffed with Nixon loyalists?

Friedersdorf: Well, you know, it played out in a strange way because I was on Nixon’s staff, but I was so close to Ford, I considered myself a Ford person. I’d spent more time with Ford, a hundred times more than I had with Nixon. But there were people like Bob Hartmann who were very vindictive. They wanted to get rid of every single Nixon person. If you had [the] Nixon stain on you, Bob wanted that person gone. Then there were guys like Jack Marsh, they were thinking about Ford’s administration and not whether you were Nixon person or a Ford. They wanted to keep the people that could do the job. And Jack was a big, big influence on President Ford. President Ford respected Jack’s judgment, which we all did. Jack was a steady hand at that time and I think that his attitude toward the Nixon people was that they did their job. They didn’t throw them all out. They had kept some of them.

Smith: Hartmann was almost a polarizing figure, wasn’t he?

Friedersdorf: Yes, he was. And a good friend of mine. I got along with him, but he had a lot of enemies. Guys like Rumsfeld and him, they just clashed all the time.

Smith: What contributed to that?

Friedersdorf: Well, you know Hartmann as well as I do, probably, and he was an irascible guy. And he was tremendously loyal to Ford.

Smith: Possessive of Ford, though, too.

Friedersdorf: Yes, that’s the word ‘possessive.’ He didn’t want anybody else. And he started writing his speeches after he became president. He’d been writing his speeches for years. Well, Rumsfeld wanted to vet those speeches and we had a committee that would go over those speeches, but if you’d change one word, Hartmann would go ballistic. He couldn’t accept the fact that this former Congressman, who he was his right arm for years and years, did all of his writing, all of his PR, he was his campaign manager, he was everything - that suddenly this man was President of the United States, and he had a big staff

and a lot of responsibility to different constituents. And this was hard for Bob to accept.

Smith: As someone who had spent twenty-five years on the Hill, how did that affect your job doing congressional relations? Because part of the irony, the paradox, of the Ford presidency is, post-Nixon, there's this huge backlash from the Hill. Worse after '74. With the elections going as badly as they did, how did you do your job?

Friedersdorf: Well, President Ford was very perceptive to that and he understood that naturally all the Congressmen, they would want to see him personally. And he realized he couldn't see all of them personally every day that wanted to see him. It wasn't like he was Minority Leader again and that they could all just come up and vent their problems on him. He had to run the country. So, he made it clear that the congressional relations guys – he would take their calls, but he would say, "Well, Max or some of the staff will come up and see you. Give them the information and I'll look over it." He was very helpful in getting us involved and not trying to play Mr. Congressional Relations any longer. We had a good staff and we gradually weaned them off of that.

One of the things that's hard to do is, they were so familiar with him, they would call him Jerry. He'd come up to give the State of the Union and they'd say Jerry. And Bob Griffin used to just go bananas. Bob would say, "Damn it, that is Mr. President. That is not Jerry!" It was a hard thing to do.

Smith: I assume Ford wasn't offended by them calling him Jerry.

Friedersdorf: No, no, not at all. And some of them never did change. Al Cederberg, we would go over to those Ford dinners when the president was living and he would call him Jerry. I don't think I ever heard Al Cederberg in his life call him Mr. President. Chuck Chamberlain called him Jerry. Bill Broomfield called him Jerry. They were part of the Michigan delegation, they'd been with him for years, so you're not going to change those guys. But he did, on business, try to make them understand that the congressional relations staff were the persons to deal with. And Marsh was very instrumental in that, too, having been a former House member.

Smith: Let me ask you, because you have this honeymoon and it's very short-lived. During that month before the pardon: were you getting advice, were people in the Congress telling the president how to handle Nixon?

Friedersdorf: Yeah, that's all they talked about. Watergate was still in their mind. I think that they were wanting to see closure, but they weren't certain what kind of closure. It's hard for even a partisan Democrat to imagine putting a former president on trial. When he had resigned, they got their pound of flesh. And I think it was beginning to die down. It was really beginning to die down by the time the pardon came. Of course that just re-opened all those wounds.

Smith: How bad was it?

Friedersdorf: Horrible!

Smith: What'd you hear?

Friedersdorf: When Nixon resigned and right after President Ford took office, was sworn in, I got a call from Fulbright, Senator Fulbright and Hubert Humphrey, and [they] said, "President Nixon had designated us as a delegation to go to China." This was a third trip to China. It was a very important delegation. It had senators and a lot of members from the House foreign relations. A high level delegation. "Is that trip still on?" I went to see President Ford. I said, "You know, Nixon had laid on this trip and these guys during recess in August want to know if this trip is still on." And he said, "Absolutely. I'll get them one of the Air Force planes," and so on. So, anyway, it went on and he said, "I want you to go with them. You'll be in recess." And I said, "Okay, I will."

So, we had a really good delegation. Barbara Jordan was on it. Hubert Humphrey was the chairman. Fulbright. It was a powerful delegation. And we were down in central China, miles from anywhere, and one of the Air Force guys came in when we were having a meeting and told me to come out. He said, "You know, we just got communication from home that President Ford has pardoned Richard Nixon and they wanted you to let the delegation know." So I went back in and when the meeting broke up, I asked Senator Humphrey if we could all stay there a few minutes. We'd been meeting with

the Chinese. He said, "Sure, we'll hang around. I'll keep them here." I told them and Barbara Jordan got so upset, she said, "Senator Humphrey, I think we should all go out to the airport and get on a plane and go home. Where we should be is in Washington, D.C. This is just terrible! We've got to do something about this." And Humphrey said, "No, we've got a program. We've got a mission here. We've got a few more days of meetings. We'll go home when we're scheduled to go home." And she just threw a fit.

Smith: Really?

Friedersdorf: Oh! And some of the others on the delegation, too, Democrats, threw a fit. But Fulbright and Humphrey said, "No, we're going to finish this trip." And it was Humphrey's call.

Smith: Humphrey had a pretty good relationship with President Ford, didn't he?

Friedersdorf: He did and I spent a lot of time with Humphrey on that trip. I'm a great admirer of Hubert Humphrey.

Smith: There's a wonderful story in '76, when Humphrey was in the hospital, I think it was up in New York, not long before the election, and President Ford went to visit him. Humphrey said, "You're going to get some votes out of the Humphrey household." And of course Bess Truman voted for him in '76. I guess it was a big shocker, after the president died, when George McGovern told Larry King that he'd voted for Ford in '76 - then found out that his wife had, too, after the fact. So, it was interesting, those people who, ideologically, you wouldn't voting for Ford. It had to have been something personal.

Friedersdorf: Yeah, I never knew what the relationship was, but Humphrey was very, very fond of President Ford. And he told Barbara Jordan, "We were sent over here by the president." This is only the third trip to China in the last twenty or thirty years and we're supposed to meet with some Leaders of the country. He said, "We're not going to bail out of here." He calmed her down real quick.

Smith: Do you think the pardon was the single biggest factor that lead to Ford's defeat in '76?

Friedersdorf: I do. Tragedy, the way that it turned out, because Ford deserved a second term. He had a bob-tailed first term and I think things would've been a lot different. Carter, you know, we don't have to go into the Carter administration, but the way that turned out, I think President Ford would've had a great second term.

Smith: Well, you know, there is this argument. He, himself, is said to have believed that just when he learned how to be president, he lost it.

Friedersdorf: Right. He was just gaining momentum.

Smith: The economy was turning around.

Friedersdorf: Right. And his popularity, you know. Without the pardon, there were other factors. I know that, even with the pardon, that election was extremely close, except for a few votes in southern Ohio. I think six counties in Ohio would have switched Ohio and then if he'd had carried that and, I believe it was Hawaii, he didn't need too much. I'd talked to Laird about that and Laird said that they wanted Ford to go back to Ohio that last weekend. I can't remember what the issue was in southern Ohio, there was something that was really hurting the GOP. And they thought they would take Ford out there for the final push and that would put him over. It was close anyway, but he had made a commitment to somewhere in Minnesota or someplace else that was already locked up, one of those upper Midwest states. Laird said, "You know how Jerry was. He made a commitment, he was going to go." And he said, "That may have cost him the election."

Smith: The whole fight with Reagan, that must've affected the race. The criticism has been made that Ford was late in really getting into the '76 campaign and perhaps a little naïve in underestimating Reagan.

Friedersdorf: I think it was a combination of that. I felt that many of us in the White House from the president on down underestimated Reagan. You know, he couldn't beat an incumbent. We were so overconfident and then after we started in, he was doing good. Even then there was still overconfidence.

Smith: Someone told me, for example, in terms of the retail politics that were being played at the end - thank God for the Bicentennial. You had the Queen's visit and the State Dinner. And someone said, "It's a good thing the Queen never saw the guest list, because it was bloated with Republican delegates and their families, people whose votes you had to have in Kansas City."

Friedersdorf: President Ford, he had the right guy in the right place. Jim Baker was magnificent. He saved that presidency. Without him, I don't think it would've happened. He pulled every stop out you can think of.

Smith: Stu Spencer tells a wonderful story. Stu says, it's a Friday night and Stu, you know, was stewing. The president loved to campaign. They had these polls that showed that if you go out there and give some Bob Hartmann speech that wasn't very good, his numbers would go down. Well, how do you tell a president not to campaign? They're in the Oval Office, just the three of them, him, Cheney, and the president. It's a Friday night and he's kind of fed up anyway and the president's not getting it, so he finally says, "You know, Mr. President, you're a great president, but you're a fucking lousy campaigner."

Friedersdorf: Stu told him that?

Smith: Yes. And Ford didn't take it personally. But the sequel is what makes the story. That story appeared in Germond and Witcover's book the following year and Stu went ballistic. And he called Cheney to chew him out for careless-

Friedersdorf: What book was this?

Smith: Germond and Witcover's. And so he's going on and yelling at Dick for breaking the confidence and Cheney said, "Stu, there was a third person in that room." Ford told the story on himself!

Friedersdorf: I'll be darned.

Smith: Which tells you volumes.

Friedersdorf: Yeah, I can see him doing that. Something like that wouldn't offend him. He knew he had trouble speaking and he wasn't the greatest Speaker that ever came down the pike.

Smith: There is this argument that actually the Reagan challenge made him a better candidate.

Friedersdorf: It did and, you know, by the end of the campaign, his speaking performances were much improved. He was not stumbling over words, he was giving the right emphasis and the speech he gave at the convention, I thought was a magnificent speech. The best speech I ever heard him give. He was just high that night. But, getting that Mississippi delegation there...

Smith: How did he get that? Because Clarke Reed has a reputation for being purchase-able or at least someone who can be bought. Though he doesn't always stay bought. What was the story around Mississippi?

Friedersdorf: I don't know. I don't know how they finally got that. I know that the whole thing hung in balance and, I guess, Jim Baker or Jack Marsh or Stu Spencer could tell you, but we had to have them and we got them.

Smith: It really, literally, did go right down to the line.

Friedersdorf: It did. I think just a handful of less than twelve delegates decided that.

Smith: What could you offer delegates?

Friedersdorf: I don't know.

Smith: What about up on the Hill? Obviously, Reagan had some support from the Jesse Helms's of the world.

Friedersdorf: Well, they had me working on Jesse Helms and the North Carolina delegation. Jesse Helms, I called him and he wanted Ford to come down there for something. And he went down there and I don't know whether that turned some of North Carolina. But, I had a really good relationship with Helms and I can't remember if it was Ford or Stu or Baker who'd asked me to call him and find out what would really make him happy and that was a trip

down there. And Ford did it. And we got a few more of those North Carolinians.

Smith: You just never got Helms.

Friedersdorf: No, no, no. And I don't know whether he backed off or if it made a difference, but we were working those guys. But I don't know about the Mississippi. If I did know, I've forgotten.

Smith: Let me back up to the spring of '75 and the fall of Saigon. What are your memories around that time?

Friedersdorf: The guy scrambling off the roof. My memories around that time--

Smith: Well, let me interrupt because Mel Laird is still convinced that the president and Congress let the South go. I understand it, but I find it hard to believe. You were on the Hill. What was the mood at that point in terms of additional funding for the South?

Friedersdorf: Well, we were getting those end the war resolutions and amendments constantly. Mike Mansfield in the Senate and Tip O'Neill and his crowd in the House and they were passing. We just couldn't sustain it. And they were smart. They were starting to cut the money off, not so much the troops. They finally realized that to cut the money off was the way to stop the war. But my recollection of it after all these years is one of tremendous relief. I know it was an embarrassing, humiliating way to leave, but most of us, including myself, had for a long time lost faith in that war. I supported it strongly when Nixon was in there. And, you know, Laird gives himself credit in the book for them starting the withdrawals. He did, and that was very encouraging, but Nixon let it go on too long. That thing was so sour by the time he came in, but he tried to win it. And I think Kissinger and the military were convincing it him could be won. But by the time Ford got in there, I think it was way, way past time it could ever be won.

Smith: There's nothing Ford could've said on Capital Hill that could've reversed that move.

- Friedersdorf: No. I think when Ford came in it was a given that that thing was going to peter out. I don't know in what manner it would peter out, but certainly the way it played out was ugly.
- Smith: What was the toughest part of those years during the Ford presidency?
- Friedersdorf: I think after the pardon, we caught a lot of flack on that every day and between then and the election and trying to overcome that.
- Smith: I assume the Republicans who were up for reelection were pretty upset by that. Did you hear from them?
- Friedersdorf: Oh, yes. Yes, they were livid. They were absolutely livid and they said, "We weren't consulted," "It's going to kill the Republican party," "We're all going to lose." I think it was in August, he did that, and you know the campaign was under way right after Labor Day, so they didn't have much time to recover. It was wonderful before the pardon because Ford could do no wrong for those first months, but after that, it was difficult.
- Smith: What does it tell you about Ford the man that he goes out to California, right before the election, and Nixon's in the hospital, close to death. And everyone said, "Don't go near him." And, what does he do? He goes to visit Nixon.
- Friedersdorf: Yeah, I have to admire him for that. That was the kind of man he was.
- Smith: The other thing was, of course, you had these huge fights over foreign policy. And here, Jerry Ford, the child of Capitol Hill, spends his presidency trying to fend off Congress.
- Friedersdorf: Well, we had incredible legislative problems because the Democrats adopted a strategy that any program the president would support, like emergency medical services, programs that were very, very appealing in their name and in what they did, he would send the legislation up and the budget to accompany it. The Democrats then would raise the ante so much that it would be a budget buster and it would force him to veto it. And I think in just the short time he was in, he had over 62, 64 vetoes. And our time was consumed with trying to sustain his vetoes. And I think Ford sustained a vast majority

of those which was pretty incredible considering the Democrats had a big majority. Which I think speaks very well for Ford legislatively.

Smith: It could be argued he was the last president who was willing to spend his capital in an effort to hold the line on spending. He really was a conservative when it came to federal spending.

Friedersdorf: Right. His political philosophy was fiscal responsibility and preserving the budget. He's probably the only president in the history of the country that presented his own budget program to the Congress and to the press. You know, he'd come out of the Congress on the appropriations committee and defense subcommittee. He could read a budget. He knew what was in there. Probably the best educated president we have ever had on the actual fiscal workings of the budget.

Smith: Did you know Mrs. Ford during that period? Did you spend much time around her?

Friedersdorf: Yes, at social things. I got to know her better after Ford left office. President Reagan appointed me to consul general in Bermuda. And Priscilla and I were in Bermuda and President Ford and Mrs. Ford used to come out to stay in Bermuda and we would play golf together and have dinner with them.

Smith: President Ford and Mrs. Ford.

Friedersdorf: Yeah, what did I say?

Smith: You said President Ford and Mrs. Reagan.

Friedersdorf: No, no, I take that back.

Smith: For many reasons, that would be an unlikely couple.

Friedersdorf: President and Mrs. Ford. Those were wonderful times. We could be very casual.

Smith: Now was that after she'd taken care of her problem?

Friedersdorf: She was just recovering and I remember very, very vividly, we were on the elevator in the Hamilton Princess Hotel one evening. We had come back

from dinner and we were going up to the Ford's suite for a nightcap. And the four of us got on the elevator and some other guy jumped in the elevator and he took a double take and saw this was President Ford and Mrs. Ford and he said to Mrs. Ford, "How's your drinking problem?" And, you know, it was embarrassing. And she said, "Oh, I'm doing fine." You know, without any glimmer of resentment or shock. I was totally, totally impressed by her presence of mind. And President Ford didn't bat an eye either, so that's the kind of people they were.

Smith: Unflappable.

Friedersdorf: Yeah, unflappable. That's the word. But he used to come out there fairly often. He was on the board of American Express, I believe, at that time. And they had their board meetings in Bermuda and he would always invite Priscilla and I to dinner and we would play golf together. We had a lot of great times. One time, we were playing and he was my partner and we were playing Sandy Weil and Jim Robinson who were the big muckety-mucks in American Express and President Ford and I, by the way, we beat them, but President Ford was to my left about thirty yards and a little bit in front and I heeled a golf shot and hit him right in the fanny, just square in the fanny. I was mortified. I threw down my golf club and I ran over there and I said, "Are you alright, Mr. President?" He turned around and laughed and said, "I wish you'd work on that shot a little more." It didn't hurt him, but he thought it was funny. But I was so embarrassed.

Smith: He was usually the one who was being criticized for -

Friedersdorf: He never got credit for the athlete he was, you know. Here's a guy who was all-American football player. He coached football and went to Yale law school full-time. He was an excellent skier. He was an excellent swimmer. He was a tremendous athlete and thanks to Chevy Chase, they made out like he was some awkward person. It was unfortunate.

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

Friedersdorf: I think at the Ford banquet, probably. And then the next year, they didn't come. They had a video. He wasn't feeling well. You remember that one at the Archives?

Smith: Yes. Yes.

Friedersdorf: That's the last time I saw him on film, but I think the year before he had been there and I talked to him a little bit, but I think that was the last time.

Smith: He really was in extraordinary good health up until his ninetieth birthday and then I think things caught up with him. When the doctors said, "You really shouldn't travel," I think that was rough because he loved to travel. He loved rubber chicken, he loved talking politics.

Friedersdorf: Well, I think that was one of the things that caused Mrs. Ford's problem was he was gone so much. The last thing I would do in the evening when I was Congressional Relations and he was Leader, I always went by his office to check before I'd go back to the White House and see what was coming up the next day and just see if there was anything I could do, what was going on. We'd sit in there and talk about what had happened during the day.

I remember one evening he got a call from Mrs. Ford and he had to go catch a damn plane and go somewhere that evening to make a speech. And she was not feeling well. She said, "Why don't you cancel that and come home?" But he said, "Betty, I've made a commitment". You know, he was torn and it was a sad situation. It was so wonderful when he got to be president because he could spend more time with Mrs. Ford and he didn't have to go on the road all the time and when he did, he could take her. But he was running around to these fundraisers all over the country that all the Congressmen wanted him, that it was difficult for her to be home alone all that time.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Friedersdorf: Well, I think it's a cliché to say this, but a unifier and a president who was the right person at the right time. I can't think of any politician that could've filled that slot like he did when we were in such terrible, terrible political shape. The country was just torn apart. People were thinking that maybe the

Union would not last. It was really a serious, serious time. I think one of the most dangerous times since the Civil War. The country was falling apart, but he put it back together. And I think he'll be remembered as a very, very good president.

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