Smith: Could you begin by explaining what the Military District of Washington is, and what it does?

Wagner: I’ll give you a two part answer. The Military District of Washington is an Army two-star command in Washington, D.C. that is responsible for all Army and Joint Service ceremonial support to the federal government. Ceremonies at the White House, State Department, Pentagon, and then elsewhere in the National Capitol Region as directed. That includes responsibility for very large events like the inauguration of a president, DOD support to the inauguration of a president, state funerals, military support for summits – those kinds of events. It also includes things like day-to-day ceremonies in Arlington National Cemetery, retirements, promotions, color guards for community organizations, and everything in between. Since 9/11, when the U.S. Northern Command was established, that is the responsibility for homeland defense throughout the continental United States. That same time or roughly at that same time in 2003, a separate command was established here in Washington, D.C., which is the Joint Force Headquarters National Capitol Region and that essentially uses the MDW and some augmentation from other services to create a security homeland defense focused headquarters in the National Capitol Region. It also has responsibility for some of those larger events to include state funerals.

Smith: So is it, for lack of a better word, a kind of enhanced security component to your normal functions?

Wagner: That’s correct.

Smith: Auxiliary?

Wagner: In general terms, any military support in terms of homeland defense, in terms of disaster relief, any of those things, that is authorized in the United States is
only at the request of local authorities. So, military support to an event like the inauguration or like a state funeral or for a nuclear security summit, as we saw recently here in the Washington, D.C. area, is essentially support that is requested by Secret Service or requested by the Congress of the United States, or requested by the District of Columbia, the city government, to provide capabilities that they don’t have.

Smith: Now, this may be splitting hairs, but I think there are people who would appreciate knowing what makes a state funeral a state funeral. I’ll qualify that by pointing out that Richard Nixon chose not to have a Washington component in his funeral. Harry Truman for very different reasons planned on such a component, and then in the end did not have it. There’s some confusion, at least in my mind, as to whether the Nixon funeral was a state funeral or not. Could you clarify that?

Wagner: Certainly. In the broadest historical sense, a state funeral is the funeral for a nation’s leader. As we see in Shakespeare, we see a king stand up and say “I am England.” He very literally means that he is the personality that holds the nation together. And so, in that way, when we talk about a state funeral, we talk about a national leader. A state funeral is more narrowly defined in military regulation as being a funeral for an incumbent president, former president, a president-elect, or another person designated by the president of the United States to receive a state funeral. The wording of a presidential proclamation that initiates a state funeral is not terrifically clear. It doesn’t traditionally use the words “state funeral,” though it may. It traditionally uses something that says “Speaking as the president, I therefore direct that the military forces or the armed forces of the United States will provide such courtesies as are appropriate to the station of President Ford,” for instance.

Smith: So, geography is not a factor, per se. The fact that a former president, for example, doesn’t lie in state in the Capitol, that his services take place entirely outside the city of Washington, that would not, per se, keep it from being a state funeral?

Wagner: That’s correct.
Smith: Using your own experience, how does one prepare for this job? And maybe you could give us a capsule description of what your job is.

Wagner: Fair enough. My title is Chief of State Funeral Plans and Operations at Joint Force Headquarters National Capitol Region. What that essentially means - I think of the job as being about equal thirds. It’s about one third liaison to the former First Family, to use the most typical example. About one third liaison to the family for development of the funeral plan, for discovering their desires, and for communicating those intentions to the other supporting members of the federal government and state and local communities as well. So, it’s about a third family liaison. It’s about a third military planning, how you get the right people in the right place, fed, watered, with a place to sleep, trained appropriately to conduct the ceremonies. And it’s about a third inter-agency liaison, if you will, such as talking to a local chief of police in a state, chief of police or police commander, and all the various inter-agency components that need to collaborate in order to make an event of this magnitude flow smoothly.

Smith: And how does one prepare – or does one prepare? Is there an obvious route to what you’re doing now?

Wagner: There’s not an obvious route. It feels a little bit as if it’s one of those things that, for me at least, a responsibility that I’ve fallen into and grown into, if you will.

Smith: How long have you been in that position?

Wagner: I’ve been responsible for planning funerals largely since 2000, so for ten years, with the primary responsibility really coming since about 2004.

Smith: Let me ask you, because obviously everyone’s different, everyone’s unique, every president, every presidential family, every First Lady – by the way, I think it’s safe to say there’s never been a state funeral for a former First Lady.

Wagner: That’s correct.

Smith: We don’t want to intrude on either state secrets or the legitimate realm of family privacy, but it would be very helpful if you could walk us through how
you first got involved with the Ford family and the process leading up to the Ford funeral.

Wagner: Starting back in probably 1993 I was a member of The U.S. Army Band, (Pershing’s Own) here in Washington, D.C., and one of my responsibilities was to ensure that musical organizations across the country that might be called on in the case of a funeral for a former president, bands that were stationed in proximity to their homes, if you will, to the former president’s homes, were prepared to execute the ceremonies if necessary. In about 1993, that became a part of my responsibility and I began to work with Colorado National Guard Band and the Air Force Academy Band in the event that President Ford passed away in residence in Vail in the Beaver Creek area. Began to work with bands in the Midwest, including the Michigan National Guard Band there in Grand Rapids or Wyoming, Michigan and to periodically train them and train with them and ensure that they had the kind of assistance that they needed to be sure that they were properly outfitted in terms of uniforms and equipment and then to work the bands here in the Washington, D.C. area. Over time, that responsibility expanded. I got pulled in more and more questions of musical choices of liturgy and how those things fit together and I think started being invited along by my predecessor to talk about some of those things in meetings with family and senior staff.

Smith: How awkward was that, particularly early on?

Wagner: Well, it’s hard to go to anybody and say, “I’m here to talk with you about your funeral.” But it’s easy to talk with almost anyone about what’s important to them, about how they would like to be remembered, and about how they would like to see their legacy perpetuated. We all like to feel that we’ve made a difference. The individuals who’ve led this country are certainly no exception to that. They’ve definitely, each of them in their own unique ways, made significant differences in the world. And how that is thought of and how their story is told to a new generation is of great interest to them and to their family. One of the things that I find useful is not to go in and sit down and say, “Let’s plan a funeral,” but to really start the conversation with, “What’s important to you?” - “What places are important
to you?” - “What parts of your story do you think are important to remember, maybe other than the White House years?”

Smith: Sure.

Wagner: The situation like that is what evolved into, for instance, in the course of President Ford’s funeral, really a chronological telling through the funeral of his World War II service, of his service in the House, and then as the Vice President and the President of the Senate before moving into the White House. That sequential storytelling really became the focus more than thinking about ‘How do we do a funeral?’

Smith: Let me ask you, because my sense is that, before you reached that phase of personalizing the ceremonies, there is a ceremonial plan. There’s some question over how much input the Fords had in what, for lack of a better word, I’ll call the “first draft.” I knew before the Reagan funeral there was a plan and it was in many ways an offshoot of the Eisenhower plan. The fact that now we have presidents on the west coast, clearly changes logistical planning. At one time, it was thought to require the overnight at Bethlehem Chapel on the grounds of Washington National Cathedral. And I know that was originally in the Reagan plan, and it was decided to dispense with that given the expected crowds. They wanted to go right to the Rotunda. Do you initially say the equivalent of. ‘Here’s a basic chassis. You customize this model to fit your desires’?

Wagner: That’s a fair question. When my predecessor twice removed, Paul Miller, who was responsible for the conduct of President Kennedy’s funeral, was called to the White House to implement that funeral plan, there was no consolidated plan. There were some general customs; there were some general notions that a cordon for a living president was twenty-one service members with the same symbolism as a twenty-one gun salute. And if the president had passed away and we were in fact carrying the casket to a cordon that it should be twenty-one members, as well.

Smith: The fact is, in November of 1963, there had not been a presidential funeral since Franklin Roosevelt’s.
Wagner: Correct.

Smith: So, a whole generation had passed.

Wagner: A whole generation and really no planning. And, even the Roosevelt funeral - the planning was definitely influenced by the fact that it was war time. There was much less of a public observance.

Smith: Ironic, given his historical and emotional connection to the American people.

Wagner: Exactly.

Smith: Is that why, for example, there was no lying in state at the Capitol - which has always struck me as bizarre?

Wagner: Yes. Right. And the records that I’ve read indicate that to be the case. That there was a sense that what was perceived as prolonged national mourning was in fact giving aid and comfort to the enemy and there was no interest in that. Interesting how our perspectives have changed.

Smith: Of course, it’s ironic, because after the fact, they found his wishes. And a lot of what was done in fact turned out, by accident, to have reflected his desire for a very simple service.

Wagner: To be precisely what he asked for. Sure. But, to get back to Kennedy, there really was no plan for the Kennedy funeral. And, after the Kennedy funeral—

Smith: By the way, what was done? I mean, the legend is Mrs. Kennedy wanted it patterned after the Lincoln funeral. And it’s astonishing what was done was done in the course of that weekend. But people went and did their research at the archives or wherever they did and came back and complied with her wishes.

Wagner: There was a lot of make it up one evening and execute it the next day during the course of the Kennedy funeral and some startling anomalies - the presence of soldiers of the Irish Republic at the gravesite in Arlington Cemetery. He’d been to Ireland recently and there was that heritage, but it was really kind of an odd thing when you think about it. He’d been many places in the world
and why that? Timing. This contingent happened to be in the states, those kinds of things.

But, after the Kennedy funeral, the Department of Defense closed the barn door after the horses were gone and said, “There really ought to be a generic plan for a state funeral.” And it looks about like this: arrival at a location out of town, a church or a library or a public building, movement by air or by train to the nation’s capital, understanding the Bethlehem Chapel component, understanding that it’s difficult to do large scale ceremonies in the darkness, and then the procession to the Capitol for the lying in state, a church here in the nation’s capital for a funeral service, and then movement to an internment location. So, that framework is encapsulated in a document that was a Department of the Army pamphlet 1-1, published in 1965 and concurrently published as a Navy regulation, as an Air Force manual, as a Coast Guard regulation. We didn’t do Department of Defense directives in those days. The services all published the same thing with their own number on the front and that became the template, if you will.

Smith: By the way, one of the things that also resulted was a much longer series of ceremonies. It’s remarkable President Kennedy was assassinated on a Friday and buried on a Monday. That would not be the case presumably today.

Wagner: Right. But, if we look at that template being built and President Eisenhower being the first president to die after that, then the first public execution of that plan would’ve been in 1969 for President Eisenhower.

Smith: In between you had both Herbert Hoover and Douglas MacArthur who had state funerals.

Wagner: Right. And it’s interesting because, when I talk to incoming commanders, when I talk to individuals who will be key in some way to the state funeral planning process and kind of walk them through the history and authorizations and those things, I have a slide that says, “Who’s authorized a state funeral?” and in the lower right-hand corner, there’s that category “Other Individuals Authorized by the President of the United States.” That always occasions a great deal of nervousness because that implies that there’s really
not advance planning. So, the question becomes ‘How often do we do that?’ And the answer, really, is that within the last fifty years, we’ve done it once.

Smith: MacArthur.

Wagner: For MacArthur and not really without planning, but by prior arrangement at the invitation of President Kennedy.

Smith: Oh, okay. I didn’t realize that it had originated under Kennedy.

Wagner: Kennedy actually wrote each of the World War II era five stars a personal letter and offered to them on behalf of the nation a state funeral. They were the heroes of his young adulthood clearly and he made that offer. General Eisenhower had already been president. Most of the rest of that group is a pretty self-effacing group of individuals and didn’t do it.

Smith: Omar Bradley.

Wagner: Omar Bradley, Chester Nimitz, Hap Arnold – I’m going to do this upside down and backwards - but that group.

Smith: Everyone but MacArthur.

Wagner: But MacArthur said, “Why, yes, thank you.” And if the camera wasn’t running, I’d say maybe he thought, “Well, if Truman got one then maybe I should get one, too.”

Smith: It’s interesting. He’d established this unlikely friendship with Kennedy.

Wagner: Sure.

Smith: Kennedy had expected a blowhard and was, in fact, mesmerized by MacArthur at his most mesmerizing.

Wagner: So MacArthur did receive a state funeral. He died at the Waldorf Astoria the old Walter Reed Army Hospital and returned to New York. Departure from New York Penn Station. Whenever I think I’m having a bad day, I imagine what it must’ve been like to stage a departure on 7th Avenue.

Smith: At the Armory.
Wagner: And then movement, exactly. Just can’t imagine it. But then came by train to Washington and then onto Norfolk where he’s buried. The interesting thing is that when you talk to people who remember the Kennedy assassination, they don’t remember the Hoover funeral and they don’t remember the MacArthur funeral, both of which happened soon after and really in the shadow of the Kennedy funeral.

Smith: I remember them vividly.

Wagner: Well, you’re like me, you’re a buff. You’re a student of this. But no one ever says, “Oh, yes, of course, I remember the MacArthur funeral as well.”

Smith: Bobby Kennedy. Did he have a state funeral?

Wagner: He did not.

Smith: Okay.

Wagner: There are a few individuals over time that have received what DOD has chosen to call ‘funerals without classification’.

Smith: Earl Warren, for example. Would he be in that side?

Wagner: A Chief Justice would be authorized an official funeral which is just a step down, really. It involves almost the same forces as a state funeral.

Smith: So, Chief Justice Rehnquist, for example, who died on the job.

Wagner: Died on the job. Was authorized an official funeral. The call was made from the White House to the family, making that offer. The family chose to celebrate his life in a more private way, if you will, to involve the Court community, to involve his church community, and, beyond that, to be very, very private.

Smith: Yeah. Again, that goes to the heart of the fact that every family has its own unique characteristics, its own pattern, and there needs have to be superimposed on—

Mike Wagner
July 19, 2010

Smith: Of course you weren’t around, but the Truman funeral was famous. Elaborate services were planned and he is said to have observed, “It’s going to be a great show. Too bad I’m not going to be around to enjoy it.” And then, of course, he lived long enough it was December and Mrs. Truman, I guess, the feeling was she really wasn’t up to the whole Washington end of things. And so that was cancelled. And, in some ways, it became more poignant being restricted to Independence because that was so evocative of Truman the man. And then, Nixon, on his own, decided not to have a Washington component.

Wagner: Absolutely. So, it had been a very long time since a funeral with a Washington component when President Reagan died in June of 2004.

Smith: Thirty-one years.

Wagner: Since President Johnson in January of ’73.

Smith: It’s obviously a little bit off the story, but it goes to the process. I knew there was a plan, a quite elaborate plan, but my sense was the old gang got together, the team that had presented Reagan and they had their input. There were changes made along the way.

Wagner: Well, I think it’s fair to say that that community that had been closely involved with the Reagan White House in terms of advance was involved to a considerable extent for years, that President Reagan had had conversations with a number of those individuals over time and shared intent with them. And that, in fact, there was a detailed plan that changed very little after execution. There’s always a question when you lay out a plan with a family about the desired sequence of events and how you build in rest, and how a plan might need to be different in December than it is in June just because of the number of hours of daylight that are available.

Smith: At one point, the idea was that the final service would take place in the courtyard as opposed to moving it out with the spectacular view of the mountains and the ocean beyond. And I remember at one point suggesting, “Ronald Reagan was a great communicator. There’s a whole generation that’s as mesmerized by his voice as FDR’s radio audiences were. Somewhere in this service, his voice should be heard.” I still think it
would’ve been dynamite. And Mrs. Reagan thought about it and said, “I couldn’t get through it.” Well, jump ahead and, of course, the idea resurfaced in the Ford funeral.

Wagner: Yes, it did.

Smith: And we had this remarkable clip from his farewell address to Congress. He didn’t have an Eisenhower TV farewell address. His address appropriately was on Capitol Hill. And at the end, he had this very poignant prayer for the American people, powerful stuff.

Wagner: Absolutely.

Smith: And it was incorporated in the plan. And it didn’t happen. I assume for similar reasons, the decision was made to have Father Certain read that prayer.

Wagner: Yes, the decision was made the night before the service in Grace at the family’s request that his voice not fill that church on that last day.

Smith: Do things like that happen? I mean, are there last minute changes?

Wagner: Always. Always. There are last minute changes due to health of family members. There are last minute changes due to what’s going on in the world. When President Reagan died in June of 2004, the incumbent president, President Bush, was in Florence, Italy, en route to Normandy for the 60th Anniversary of D-Day observance, en route to Sea Island, Georgia for an economic summit. In fact, there were a number of world leaders already gathered on Sea Island. Not only was the White House concerned about how they could interrupt the flow of those world events, but the Reagan family and staff were sensitive to the timing of those events and the importance that they would’ve held for President Reagan. So, adjustments were made in time schedule in the frantic first day or first half day of trying to put a schedule together for the conduct of that funeral. Changes were made about the timing of events in order to deal with who needed to be where, when, when aircraft to get people could be made available, to move the family, those kinds of things.
Smith: That brings up something. When President Ford died - the first service in the Rotunda that Saturday night where Dick Cheney, in effect, spoke for the country. There was some comment about the fact that the President wasn’t there. The President was at his ranch. But the plan always had been - because of the Capitol Hill component - that the vice president would be the chief eulogist that evening.

Wagner: Well, the situation there was different. In the cases of both the Reagan and Ford funerals, Mr. Cheney delivered the eulogy on Capitol Hill. The reason behind it was different. During the course of the Reagan funeral, because of President Bush’s commitments to the economic summit in Sea Island, the options essentially were offered to the family about whether it was preferable to wait until the incumbent president could be there or to allow the vice president to offer the eulogy in the Rotunda. And the decision was made to proceed and have Mr. Cheney offer the remarks there. Then President Bush was in fact back in the city, paid his respects, while President Reagan lay in state and escorted Mrs. Reagan in the National Cathedral. In the case of the Fords, because of the close personal relationship between Vice President Cheney and President Ford and the Ford family, the request had been placed before the funeral from the family to the White House that Mr. Cheney be allowed to speak for the administration, that the incumbent president defer to him, which the Bush administration was happy to do.

Smith: Knowing that President Bush would be speaking for the nation at the Cathedral.

Wagner: Exactly.

Smith: How did the Ford plan change over the years? My experience - I talked about it a little bit – was that the one thing he was adamant about was that he did not want a caisson through the streets of Washington. I wonder if you had that conversation or other people, your associates, had that conversation. There are some legends about what may or may not have been said. It’s a revealing request.
Wagner: It is. As I came to the Ford plan in terms of contact with those on the staff who were really involved in shepherding the plan over the years, if you will. There was a choice of what I would call stage one of the area of demise - whether there would be services in Vail and Beaver Creek to start with, or whether the services would initially be in Palm Springs where they were in residence. There was always the intent of going home to the museum in Grand Rapids for interment. The Nation’s Capital was always very important to the Fords, not only because of his service, but I think because the Washington, D.C. area is where the family grew up, the children grew up. There was active discussion for many years between my predecessors and the Fords, including the President, about whether or not there would be a main funeral procession on Constitution Avenue. I think that you were one of the people who were asked by President Ford at one point to offer your thoughts on that subject. And, in fact, as I became more directly involved with the funeral in the fall of 2004, early November of 2004—

Smith: So, post-Reagan funeral.

Wagner: Post-Reagan funeral and I think that’s critical. Post-Reagan funeral, most of the individuals that I would call my clients took that opportunity to reflect on what they might like their own funeral to be like. And the Fords, as they called their team together to entertain those discussions, were quick to express the fact that in their mind the Reagan funeral, the sequence of the conduct of the ceremonies, was perfect for President Reagan and perfect for that family. That it addressed their needs, it addressed his legacy. But that it didn’t feel like them, like the Ford family. They were anxious to think about ways in which President Ford’s funeral could be not different for different’s sake, but different in ways that told the story of a different man.

Smith: Exactly. I wrote him a memo – I don’t know if you ever saw it or heard about it—

Wagner: I tried not to quote it just a moment ago.

Smith: It started out by saying, “Your funeral has to be Truman-esque, not Reagan-esque,” simply making the point that, “This is the most personal decision
you’ll make, but it is a story and that your story is your story. It’s not a reflection on any other president. Each one of these is unique.” I remember in 2000, the first time when Marty and I went out there and had the conversation with him, both of them. And, needless to say, subsequently the plans were much changed. I would say much improved. But he was adamant at that point. So, that was not a seed that anyone else planted. And, before the Reagan funeral, he felt pretty strongly about it. Which, again, just goes to show that every one of these is as personalized as a fingerprint.

Wagner: Absolutely.

Smith: It’s awkward. If you think that maybe something should be revisited, if you think that perhaps some ceremonial is being overlooked, can you have that conversation? Can you invite reconsideration of decisions or do you just sort of salute and say ‘whatever you want’.

Wagner: Well, you can invite reconsideration. Obviously, you have to sense the room, you have to sense people, you have to sense a time when they’re open to such discussions. And families and staffs work differently.

Smith: Did you find the Fords and those around them to be fairly comfortable to deal with?

Wagner: The meetings, particularly in Palm Springs, starting on November 4th of 2004, and moving forward until just a few months before his death, were remarkable collaborative staff exercises that I was privileged to be a part of. Family friends like Ann Cullen, trusted advisors like Greg Willard; the professional staff, Penny Circle, certainly the Secret Service was always with us, and the children, increasingly with Jack especially. You were involved in many of those and people representing the Foundation.

Smith: Is there anything unconventional about the process that this went through?

Wagner: Well, everybody approaches the subject differently. My sense is, and I probably of all the people in the room for those meetings, had less direct experience of working with President Ford than anyone else. But that series of meetings rang true with my understanding. Essentially there would be
memos and there would be updated plans and updated proposals and people would make their arguments in writing. And then that group would come together and spend the mornings thrashing them out. And then we’d all have lunch. We’d come back after lunch. President and Mrs. Ford would sit at the head of the table. We’d brief what we thought the best answers were. And we’d get the crooked finger of the President’s that said, ‘Yes, that part was good and that part was not so good.’

Smith: Were there things that were rejected?

Wagner: There were many things that were talked about and that evolved over time. And it became both a planning effort and in many ways a story-telling. Really a remarkable time.

Smith: Yeah. The fact that they wanted to have a journalist among the eulogists - originally to be Hugh Sidey until he passed away - is part of that story.

Wagner: Absolutely.

Smith: And the fact that they wanted Jimmy Carter is a significant part of that story.

Wagner: Absolutely.

Smith: For the message that it sent. It’s interesting. When you’re up there and you’re doing that, you’re in a fog and you’re trying to hold yourself together and the Fords are sitting right in front of you.

Wagner: When you’re eulogizing.

Smith: Yeah. But for some reason it sticks in my memory, I remember I heard this sound and I looked over and Rosalyn Carter was weeping. I thought to myself, “Who would’ve thought thirty years ago that this is how the story ends?” Only in America. You know? I’ll never forget. On Air Force One, going back to Grand Rapids, President Carter had Gerald Ford’s youngest great-grandchild on his shoulder and was walking up and down the aisle. Did you see that?

Wagner: I did. I have a copy of that picture in my office.
Smith: I mean, what an extraordinary sight. Do you have memories of things that stick out in your mind of that trip? Were you prepared for the public response, which I know, many colleagues in the media, found surprising.

Wagner: Places where I was stunned by the response – and I’ve been in a lot of funeral motorcades, including the last trip with President Reagan from Point Mugu to the library, which was astonishing, just astonishing. But the congregation in the Cathedral on a day when most of Washington didn’t have to be there, didn’t even have to be in the city - the full Cathedral there, the arrival in Grand Rapids - and pretty much everything in Grand Rapids, that evening, going out and there being just tens of thousands of people standing in the cold—

Smith: On a January night. The weather, of course, was perfect, though.

Wagner: It was better than we had any right to expect. Far better than we had any right to expect.

Smith: Yes. Certainly, the odds were not in our favor. I know a few members of the family and I think Mrs. Ford in particular were surprised that Saturday when they flew back to Andrews and drove through Alexandria. She was astonished that night at the crowds on the streets. Obviously, they hadn’t lived in the neighborhood in a long time; I just don’t think they were prepared for what they saw.

Wagner: At some point in that drive, we were in Redskins football game traffic leaving Andrews on the Beltway and eight, ten lanes of traffic just stopped, got out of the car and stood.

Smith: Really?

Wagner: Coming through Alexandria in the dark with a hundred and twenty-some car motorcade including the incumbent vice president during war time and we’re on Alexandria streets that were designed for horse and buggies to pass at the wide spots.

Smith: They’re designed for George Washington’s funeral.
Wagner: There you go. And I’m just thinking, “My goodness, what are we in the midst of here?” And yet, the turnout in the dark in the drizzle was quite remarkable.

Smith: And, clearly the family was blown away by what they were saying.

Wagner: Terrifically.

Smith: And the stop at the World War II Memorial which turned out to be much more than a photo op. The little things. Again, the decision to go into the Capitol, not up the main staircase, as is done ordinarily, but through the House, presumably reflecting his long service there.

Wagner: Right. And we talked about that early in the planning process, early in the conversation about the possibility of doing that. The word ‘unprecedented’ arrival up some steps other than the main central rotunda steps came up, and we had a hallway conversation during a break. Actually, because the Johnson funeral was within days of an inauguration at that point, it was conducted on the East side and the swearing in platform was in fact still over the center steps during the Johnson funeral in January of ’73. It is in fact true that within recent memory, other steps have been used at the Capitol on the East side, but never the House steps and then proceeding to the House Chamber. That tribute on the House side makes the story of President Ford’s funeral even more powerful. But we need use the right words, or we’ll get a call from the Johnson girls with a gentle reminder on the East side of the Capitol generally.

Smith: Music, scripture, all of those things had to be chosen or re-chosen, as the case may be.

Wagner: Yes. Music, as it evolved over time, highlighting always the close relationship of the Fords with the Army Chorus over the years.

Smith: And especially Alvy Powell.

Wagner: And especially Alvy Powell. Highlighting his Navy service in “Eternal Father,” and I wish I had a nickel for every email that we wrote over the years concerning the use of “Hail the Victors” in a funeral and how to do that appropriately. And I think one of the great adventures – you talked about how the funeral changed in process – well, it had been long been a request of
President Ford that the University of Michigan band welcome him back to Michigan. And we had a little problem because the University of Michigan was in the Rose Bowl.

Smith: For which he would’ve been the loudest cheerleader.

Wagner: Which would’ve definitely been fine with him. Wherever he was, it was fine with him. That wasn’t the issue at all. But the issue was how to get the band back or if it was possible to get the band back.

Smith: The band wanted to participate.

Wagner: The band wanted very much to participate, but the timing of the Rose Parade and the game was such that it essentially meant that the band had to leave immediately after the game, go to the airport, get on a charter aircraft, come to Grand Rapids, have breakfast, change clothes, and play the arrival ceremony. The University of Michigan did have planes chartered to move the band. They had planes chartered to move the University leadership and trustees and on about the third or fourth loop, to get around to moving the band. And there were long conversations about how they really needed to consider what was most important on that overnight flight. In fact, the first folks that came home were not the big donors, or the university trustees. It was the band. The rest of the University of Michigan community spent an extra day in California and waited for the plane to come back for them. And we were able to have the band welcome the President home.

Smith: Did anything go wrong? That’s not a fair question to ask, but I can’t resist because, if it did, I should preface, no one noticed. I’ll give you an example. Even the fact that we were running a little bit late turned out to be a blessing because the interment and those planes and the sunset were synchronized.

Wagner: I’d like to take credit for that, but at that point, we were hours off schedule, but it didn’t matter. It didn’t matter. Greg Willard and I had a conversation early in that last day and decided that essentially it was going to take as long as it took and that Mrs. Ford was going to move at her speed and we weren’t going to be concerned.
Smith: As I recall, the original plan was that the museum would close a little bit earlier than it did, but that the lines were so long - did you sort of bump up against the latest possible time?

Wagner: We built some extra time in. We had a little bit of flex there.

Smith: And I noticed the line was moving a lot faster at the end than it was at the beginning.

Wagner: It was. We reengineered a few things in the middle of the night, too. It’s an interesting building. It’s not a building that’s designed to have large numbers of people go through the lobby.

Smith: 60,000 people overnight.

Wagner: Overnight.

Smith: Phenomenal.

Wagner: In the winter, all wearing heavy coats.

Smith: Yeah. A two-mile line at one point and extraordinary camaraderie. I don’t think there was an arrest that night.

Wagner: If there was, I never heard about it.

Smith: Did anything go wrong?

Wagner: You did come back to that question, didn’t you?

Smith: I recall a couple times when it seemed like we were waiting.

Wagner: Well, and that’s what I would say. There are places and the one that comes to mind is leaving the United States Capitol on the way to the Cathedral service. Would I have wished that family and honorary pallbearers had less of a wait before the casket and the four children came down the steps? Yes, absolutely. It was plenty cold that morning.

Smith: Yeah.
Wagner: That was a long, cold stand. But my abiding image of that, until the casket came down the steps, was just a beautiful picture on that early winter morning - was a sailor at the end of the cordon, bottom of the cordon, and the wind was blowing and that Dixie cup hat came off. The two people standing closest to the sailor were Mr. Rumsfeld and Mr. Cheney and they bent down, picked up the hat, and put it back on the head. It blew off again and they did it again.

Smith: I had been up at the cathedral with ABC that morning, but I was told by people afterwards that one of the things that surprised them – and, again, particularly after no caisson, et cetera, et cetera – that there were a surprising number of people who were out on the street of Washington that morning to pay their respects.

Wagner: Including the White House house staff on the North side who passed by. Including the Blair House staff, who’d become quite close to the family in those few days.

Smith: Really? That’s very touching.

Wagner: It was something.

Smith: We talked a little bit about the Cathedral service. My sense was that the first President Bush who is sensitive to the fact that he tears up really easily was consciously trying not to get too emotional. Came close a couple of times. I think this was just a few days after he had teared up – there was a scene where he was introducing Jeb in Florida to the legislature or something and he got very emotional. And he was probably embarrassed by that fact. But it was an interesting choice of speakers. I think most people were surprised Mrs. Reagan was there. I don’t think they knew in advance. At least that’s what I heard later, that they did not know that she was going to be there. It was obviously pretty gracious on her part to make that effort.

Wagner: Sure.

Smith: Did you know that she was going?

Wagner: I knew she’d be there.
Smith: And then, it’s so funny, a friend of mine who’d been in the Johnson administration after watching Mrs. Ford go all the way down the aisle, said, “She’s got a dancer’s legs.” It’s complimentary, but that must’ve been quite an ordeal. I don’t think her health was perfect that week and it must’ve exacted a real toll.

Wagner: Well, we - family and Greg Willard and certainly General Guy Swan who was her escort – we were all very protective of her throughout the week and making sure many times that there was a second person on her other arm. And she was a trooper. And getting out of the car and up the steps into the Cathedral was one person and walking down the aisle was a very self-possessed woman.

Smith: It’s interesting you say that. The following week, when she was at home, someone commented to her on how impressed they were, particularly at that, long walk at the very end in Grand Rapids. We’d been told at ABC, “Don’t be surprised if you see her in a wheelchair.” Of course, we never did until the very end and then she got out and I think she was on Steve’s arm and walked all the way down to the interment.

Wagner: Right, there was a General on one side and Steve on the right.

Smith: And this person complimented her and said, “I don’t know how you did it.” And in a sort of matter of fact way, she said, “I just did what my husband would want me to do.” Says volumes.

Wagner: Exactly.

Smith: The kids impressed a lot of people. A lot of people hadn’t seen them, of course, in years. Their gesture of going down to the Capitol and greeting people, which they then repeated in Grand Rapids, drew a lot of favorable comment.

Wagner: It was interesting. Remarkable. Again, I think very genuine, very much in character with his family. When I think about that – I’m trying to get my days straight – it would’ve been, I think, Sunday evening. We arrived at the Capitol on Saturday late in the day. Sunday evening, Mrs. Ford’s children
and their spouses, a few close friends and staff came up from Blair House to the Capitol around dinner time. It was dark. I don’t remember how late in the evening it was, but it was dark. Their intent was to just go and sit inside the circle for awhile. And we came in on the House side through the door under the House steps and Betty and the grandchildren and the girls were there. I had been busy all day getting ready for the next week’s events, for the 2nd and the 3rd and hadn’t watched the news. And we came in through the door and the girls, the grandchildren, met Mrs. Ford in the hallway down just inside the door and proceeded to tell her all about their day, speaking with people in the Rotunda who’d come to pay their respects. I was done. It was remarkable - this sharing moment. Maybe it snuck up on me because I hadn’t been watching it on the news. I’d been too busy. But it was a moment, very much a Ford family moment.

Smith: How much of a problem did the New Year’s holiday create? Did it require significant changes in the planning or in the plan?

Wagner: Not really.

Smith: I mean, did you just add a day in D.C.?

Wagner: We just added another day in Blair House, another day in the Capitol. It didn’t create a problem. The kind of behind the scenes piece of that is that, because it was over the New Year in the year of a cycle of an off-year election, we carried in with the Republican Party in control of both houses of Congress and we carried out three days later with the Democratic Party in control of both houses of Congress.

Smith: By the way, there really did seem to be genuine bipartisan feeling surrounding these events in D.C., more than pro forma, more than the purely ceremonial kinds of reactions that you get sometimes.

Wagner: Absolutely. Absolutely. But it was interesting just from a staff perspective of ‘here’s the staff of the Speaker’s office, the Majority Leader’s office, all the political appointees who were associated with rules and those committees that are very important to the conduct of an event like this on the Hill. And everybody has their office in a box under their arm and they’re in the process.
of moving and they’re bringing their life with them into the meeting. And it’s sitting on the conference table in front of them as we’re collaborating to make the plan for events up there. I think that part was seamless. I don’t think anybody outside of those staff meetings saw it, but it was an interesting time.

Smith: I remember walking up there and the thought - on the first day of the year - a line of people waiting to get inside the Capitol to pay their respects. Speaking of unprecedented.

Wagner: Right. Absolutely.

Smith: How did the family express themselves to you and your colleagues?

Wagner: They were remarkably warm and genuine to everyone who supported the event. They made a point of speaking to body bearers, to individuals standing guard of honor. It was very personal to them. Very personal.

Smith: I’ve heard rumors, only rumors, that other first families, were moved by what they felt to be the intimacy, the family feeling, for lack of a better word, that accompanied the pomp and the official aspects. It felt like a family funeral.

Wagner: Sure.

Smith: And that they took that into consideration in some of their own plans. I understand that the Johnson girls revisited their plans. What impact do you think it had?

Wagner: Well, I think the impact is in terms of how other First Families look at state funerals. I think the impact is actually a combined impact of the Reagan and Ford funerals occurring in reasonable proximity and being very different events with very different feelings. Each perfect in their own way. Each perfect for the family. And each in that way that we don’t necessarily understand, I think, perfect for the Nation at that time and that moment.

Smith: That does raise the question of creative tension between the state aspects and the personal ones. There’s always going to be a little bit of back and forth in terms of striking the balance.

Wagner: Well, there’s an art and a science to it.
Smith: So, you necessarily re-invent the wheel in some ways with each.

Wagner: In some ways.

Smith: Again, they both in their own way influenced what follows.

Wagner: Sure, and I think if other families take away lessons, to use the example of the Fords and Carters as a remarkable example of families and individuals who have been in that unique position of being President of the United States and who find common ground whatever their differences may have been. The families do talk, the staffs do talk, and I think the message that they’ve taken away is one that they do have an opportunity to work with the host of people who will support the funeral to build an event. And ‘event’ sometimes sounds like a harsh word, but not really. To tell the story once again in a way that is meaningful for them and meaningful for the nation.

Smith: Is there an awareness that this is in fact a national event? That, however intense the personal grief is in the family and among close friends, there is inevitably a national component.

Wagner: There is. These are families who have lived – many of them almost half of their lives and many of their children, most of their cognizant lives in the spotlight, if you will, of being on the national stage. They do have an awareness of that. They also have the remarkable gift of each of the individuals who I have known that has been President of the United States - that when you are with them, you have a sense of your complete engagement and their complete engagement and involvement. A very strong sense of presence and of connections. It’s a great thing, makes great successful politicians, but it also means that there are many thousands of people who feel a genuine, very real for them, personal connection. And, I think families recognize that they also need to have an opportunity to grieve and celebrate.

Smith: Where there people surprised that Jimmy Carter was giving a eulogy for Gerald Ford

Wagner: There may have been people during the funeral who had an opportunity to hear what the gallery was whispering. I certainly wasn’t one of them.
Smith: But in terms of the general public, you wonder whether – a lot of people didn’t know that they’d become friends.

Wagner: But a lot of people also didn’t remember where things stood or where things seemed to stand in 1977 either. And I think it may be only for those of us who remember the one can understand or begin to understand how remarkable that friendship really is.

Smith: Yeah. Last thing, and I don’t know how to phrase this, given the subject at hand. In any other line of work, when it’s all over, you can go out and have a beer and say, “Geez, we really did a bang-up job.” What’s the equivalent in your line of work? How do you, for lack of a better word, engage in self-congratulation? How do you know you’ve pulled it off and acknowledge that fact?

Wagner: Well, with the military, we have lots of ways to recognize jobs well done and to recognize the important contribution of every individual. And making sure that the people who played key roles are recognized in ways that reflect their effort, reflect their work, reflect their service, reflect their care, is important.

Smith: But just at the visceral level—

Wagner: The people who understand this know. And, I guess, what I would say is where you know is the people like, for me personally, you do a ceremony in subsequent years in support of for example, a Senator Kennedy’s funeral, Senator Byrd’s funeral recently, Lady Bird Johnson’s funeral. Out of nowhere you get a three word text from someone you’d been in the foxhole with in a prior intense funeral setting - a Greg Willard, a Susan Ford. And right then, hearing from someone like them, you know – job well done, very well done.

Smith: Yeah. Does it take you time to decompress?

Wagner: Absolutely. Absolutely. It certainly is a period of time when going through a funeral, being that ‘on’, being that focused, is what people around the military, I guess, in a way would call that kind of a foxhole experience. It’s the being under fire together in a way which is very different. And I don’t say that in a way that in any way says that planning a funeral is like being under
fire. It’s not. But that intense shared experience, whether it’s being on a championship sports team or being a part of any focused effort like that, and you get to the end and it takes you awhile to take a deep breath and to kind of settle down and come back up to be ready to engage and have the energy again.

Smith: I think people would be interested to know - clearly there’s a different role, different magnitude in terms of the First Ladies services. Can you explain the difference and, maybe, where there isn’t a difference in terms of the planning process?

Wagner: The former First Ladies have no authorization in regulation or in public law for military support for their funerals. Certainly not for the kind of planning and support on a large-scale that is part of a state funeral, part of our tradition of a state funeral. Traditionally, the military extends to a former First Lady the same courtesy that we extend to a dependent in Arlington National Cemetery. We carry the casket, provide a chaplain if asked. We’ll advise, we’ll assist in those kinds of ways, but the ceremonial requirements or the ceremonial traditions are much less public. Generally there’s not a Washington component or if there is, it’s a memorial service, a later event, but a very different tradition.

Smith: Anything we haven’t covered? Anything that you take away that really sticks with you?

Wagner: I don’t know if I can tell this story or if I can get through this story, but I’ll try. The way we do events in the National Capitol Region, the collaboration of all the various protocol, agencies, all the various military support, all the security and law enforcement support, for years, up to and including the Reagan funeral, were handled pretty much on the basis of unofficial collaboration, coordination, between the organizations. As part of the same reorganization of DOD and of the Department of Homeland Security and changing roles post-9/11, the Department of Homeland Security decided to designate certain events as national special security events and to put Secret Service in charge of planning those events.
Smith: Planning the security aspects?

Wagner: In essentially planning the security aspect of those events, which was a significant cultural change for Secret Service from a focus on when their protectees were at an event to responsibility for large-scale public events, whether or not their protectee was present or any protectees were present. Very different focus for them. And, particularly here in the Washington, D.C. area, a terrific challenge to get their arms around and change the relationships and bring the literally hundreds of law enforcement and other inter-agency partners together. Prior to the Ford funeral, about eighteen months beforehand, when that effort began, not specifically directed toward the Ford funeral, but certainly realizing that President Ford was in failing health or declining health is probably a better word, a Secret Service agent named Stacy Bauerschmidt, who was the assistant to the special agent in charge of the Washington field office of the Secret Service, which generally means you become the project person for the boss, got handed the job to figure out how to make this work, figure out how to make all these people play nice together, figure out how to make all these people do the coordination. She got handed the job and set about it.

Deep breath. Stacy was the daughter of a couple who lived in western Michigan. He was a veteran. I would guess a veteran of the Korean War, who came home and had a newborn daughter named Stacy and had some trouble with veteran’s benefits. And, as Stacy told the story, her parents—excuse me, sorry, I do this—were on the edge of eviction because a check hadn’t come and because somehow in the system things were held up. And in desperation, they called their Representative’s office and said, “We’ve got this problem. We don’t know what to do.” Of course, we know what district they were in. They were in President Ford’s district, Congressman Ford’s district, and the check arrived and they kept the house. Now, I don’t know the details. You could probably go back and find the details. Bauerschmidt is not that common a name. But it was very real to her. It was a story she grew up with and, to her, she had a chance to pay a man back. She did just that. I don’t think anybody knows that story but me and Stacy.
Smith: It’s a great story. That’s why we do oral history projects.

Wagner: It’s a very Ford story.

Smith: It is a Ford story. That’s perfect.
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