

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Peter McPherson
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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McPherson: I knew Ford growing up. He and my father were friends and I saw him from time to time. I saw President Ford many times when I was working for him as Deputy Director of the Presidential Personnel. At those meetings I developed some understanding of President Ford's decision making.

Smith: Excellent.

McPherson: I also saw President Ford when I was Jim Baker's deputy in the President's fight for the nomination in 1976. Baker was responsible for "delegate hunting" for Ford at the convention.

Smith: That's gold. I mean, all of this is gold. Let's talk about West Michigan, because it is a distinctive place. One senses it has changed considerably over the years. The influence of the Dutch, and the Christian Reformed Church were clearly significant. Sometimes, there's a semi-comical element - the stories about people buying a Sunday paper on Saturday and not reading it until Monday. I'm trying to get a sense of what made West Michigan stand out. Was it not the place that most influenced Gerald Ford; and why were they such a good match during those years where he was in the Congress?

McPherson: The Dutch were a cultural influence since they arrived in large numbers around the turn of the century. My grandmother came from Holland about 1900 when her father came to Grand Rapids to work in the furniture factories. She married a local farmer, my grandfather, and so I was always very aware of the Dutch community, though my grandmother became a Methodist when she married. The Dutch community and their churches were not a dominate political influence in Kent county until probably the late '50 early '60s.

Smith: We've been told that they tended to shy away from political involvement.

McPherson: I think they did for generations, but they began to get really active in the late '50s and into the '60s. I hope someone has or will do a careful study of why and how the Dutch moved into an active political role. I am talking here about their role in Kent County (Grand Rapids). In Ottawa County (the other county of Ford's congressman district) it is my impression that the Dutch were a larger portion of the population and the Dutch were politically active much earlier. In Kent County, as the Dutch became more prominent economically and the immigrant generations passed away, the Dutch community apparently began to feel that they could and should exercise more of a direct political role and should elect leaders from their own community to public offices like the State Senate and House. The big change was the Dutch organizing aggressively through local Dutch churches (mostly the Christian Reform Church I think) to control the primaries. Of course it was the Republican primary that was generally important in Kent County. Jerry Ford was already in Congress before this degree of involvement by the Dutch. I am not aware of the role of the Dutch churches when Ford won the primary for Congress in 1948. Ford defeated an incumbent who I think was Dutch, Congressman Yonkman, though I never heard he was the Dutch candidate. I had the impression that Ford always had strong Dutch community support but also had strong support from others.

For example, Ford, I think, developed a close relationship with many in the Catholic community. Grand Rapids has a large Polish-Catholic community. There's an African-American community. I grew up on a farm in the Vergennes Township in Kent County. The Dutch were there – people like my grandmother, but not in huge numbers. So, major rural parts in Kent County generally were not very Dutch. The board of supervisors for Kent County was divided about equally into the 1940s between greater Grand Rapids and the rest the county. In brief, the full county was not politically dominated by the Dutch as I was growing up in the 1940s and 1950s

Smith: Did the broader culture have more of an influence?

McPherson: Yes, but it depended on where in West Michigan you lived. As I said, I grew up in rural Kent County. I didn't grow up in Ottawa County, and I think if I'd grown up in Ottawa County it might have felt differently. Or if I'd have grown up in one of the dominantly Dutch communities in Grand Rapids, it would have no doubt felt differently as well. The Dutch definitely were more socially conservative than much of the rest of West Michigan. I remember being struck by the fact that the Christian Reform high schools did not have dances after football games. We had those dances at Lowell High School.

Smith: Clearly the nature of conservatism evolved during the Ford years. When he was in the White House he was regarded as the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge. And then almost overnight with the rise of Ronald Reagan, conservatism was redefined. Certainly with the advent of the religious right as part of the governing coalition. So when you say social conservative – that almost has a...

McPherson: Social and economic conservatism.

Smith: Certainly fiscal conservatism.

McPherson: Absolutely. In West Michigan when Ford was growing up and then a Congressman, most everybody thought that you should not spend money you didn't have. We didn't think abortion was a good idea. On the other hand, growing up I remember a couple of girls in my high school that I think had abortions. But it wasn't as if these young girls were forever bad girls if they were otherwise good people. This was in the late 1950s.

Smith: That raises a really important point. Because my sense is that Ford is of a generation that practiced economic conservatism and a healthy skepticism about what government could do to bring about Utopia, through social engineering.

McPherson: Ford generation clearly thought it was the job to individual hard work. It was about individual merit and hard work. We were expected to be responsible people. Working hard and taking responsibility was a key value of West Michigan culture.

Smith: By my sense is that along with that went, for lack of a better word, a decent reticence about subjects that you didn't discuss. Certainly you didn't see them as part of the political agenda.

McPherson: Yes.

Smith: We were talking with Justice Stevens. He was never asked about abortion in his confirmation hearings. But to go back to West Michigan and that generation - America in the '50s, for lack of a better cliché, there were a lot of things below the surface; a lot of things that are now part of the daily conversation.

McPherson: I think, by the way, that kind of view was the Kansas that Bob Dole grew up in too. In my view, the old Midwest had a set of strong convictions and no doubt, if you didn't work hard, if you were a derelict, you were kind of an outcast, and if you weren't responsible for your kids and your family and so forth. But it wasn't so much a political issue, it was a social question.

Smith: How did your path first cross with that of Gerald Ford?

McPherson: He was our congressman. My family lived in Kent County, and therefore I lived in Ford's Fifth Congressional District. My father was politically active and always worked for the Republican Party and therefore worked for Jerry Ford. I periodically saw Ford in that context. He'd always had his trailer that he took around the district including to the city of Lowell, the little town where I went to high school. As I think about this, that time seems like America of a long time ago, an America without drugs and without the kind of crime and so forth that we now have. At least that was the way it was in my little community.

Smith: Isn't it interesting that someone who was as politically secure in his district spent as much time in the district?

McPherson: I thought that Ford gained energy from his conversations with people. I felt he was interested in what I, as a teenager, had to say. And I remember walking across the Kent County Fair with him one time when I was in college. I was

taking him from one place to another, and people stopped him all along the way and asked him things. I was impressed by how he would ask them questions back and really want to understand. He seemed curious about people and problems. I was impressed by his range of interest in people and practical issues.

There was an old Dutch farmer in our township; he was one of the smartest people I've ever known. No education, but really smart and wise. And he had this regular letter writing relationship with Jerry Ford. Orie Gronabone was his name. I remember Ford telling me, "You know, he gives me a real common sense perspective on things." Ford clearly read his letters. As I came to know Ford, I admire him and thought him a very good and sensible man. That's the way my father thought of him - sound, predictable, and caring about his district.

I went to the Peace Corps for a couple years right after Michigan State, and when I got back I went to law school at American University in Washington. I went to Ford and said I'd like to work on Capitol Hill. Ford got me a job with a Congressman Zion of Indiana. I of course maintain some relationship with Congressman Ford.

Smith: That's interesting.

McPherson: I always felt that Ford had a relationship with members of the Catholic community. Many of them probably voted for his Democrat opponent but everyone liked Jerry personally.

Smith: There must have been, I can't remember the name, I guess there was a gadfly...

McPherson...who ran against him for Congress lots of times and Ford beat him fairly easily as I recall. There was a difference in political views, but almost everyone thought that Jerry Ford was a good person. It is true that some, especially Democrats, thought that he was aggressive enough or did not propose enough new ideas.

- Smith: You mentioned the Catholic community – I wonder if you have any sense what his relationship was with the African-American community.
- McPherson: I don't know any details about it. But I think that he knew their leadership and many individuals and he wanted to hear their views. I am sure that he was too conservative for many in the African-American community and they became more vocal in the 1960s. Still Ford did not think of himself as a congressman for 60% of the population of his district. He was the Congressman for his whole district.
- Smith: So when you saw him in the Minority Leader's office, he was basically the same man?
- McPherson: He was the same man. He was elected to Minority leader by members like Mel Laird. Laird was a brilliant, capable and a somewhat Machiavellian individual who made great contributions to the country. Ford clearly was not Machiavellian as that term is generally used, though Ford did plan. I think Laird saw Ford as a person he could perhaps control. It was a mistake for Laird or anyone to think that ultimately Ford was going to be somebody else's man.
- Smith: We had a great interview with Laird. Bob Dole says Mel Laird's the guy who puts poison in the stream a mile up river and then runs into town to save everyone. Pretty good line.
- McPherson: Now, Ford also had relationships with younger people, for example, Congressman Rumsfeld, who supported Ford when he ran for leader. Ford had this great capacity for friendship. Most people have friends, but Ford had friends with a much broader range of backgrounds than most people realized. I say that when I was working in WH Personnel and came to have a broader understanding of Ford's relationships.
- Smith: That's an interesting observation. Plus the Republican Party was a different party then. It was a party centered in the Midwest. And you had a northeastern wing; and you had parts out west. Initially, you didn't really have much of a southern contingent. That didn't begin to develop until after the Goldwater...

McPherson: Eisenhower picked up a number of states in the South, but the Republican Party really began gaining strength at a state level in the South in '64 and thereafter.

Smith: There has been criticism over the years that the Republicans were of a get-along, go-along permanent minority mindset. Now, that clearly doesn't dovetail with Ford's ambition to be Speaker of the House. But there is that persistent criticism...

McPherson: about Ford and Michael.

Smith: The older I get, the more I am convinced the single biggest political factor – trumping ideology or anything else – is generational. And certainly if you look at this subject, each generation of House Republicans tends to look over their shoulder and to some degree, condescend to an earlier generation of House Republicans.

McPherson: But I think it may also have been generational with the Democratic Party. I think that if Michael, and Ford before him, could work with the majority and could get at least some things done. But by the time you had people like Speaker Jim Wright running the House – his idea was to say, “We're just going to do it and you Republicans shouldn't even complain.” The Democrats got to be so entrenched in their hold on the House. It does seem to me that it was generational both with Republicans and the Democrats.

Smith: Consider the '74 Watergate Babies, and all that. One of the great ironies was that Gerald Ford, who spends his adult life on Capitol Hill, as president finds himself defending the rights of the Executive against these newly empowered, energized, aggressive lawmakers.

McPherson: Much of this was a mistake.

Smith: The War Powers Act is the classic example.

McPherson: During a presidential crisis and their aftermath a lot of unwise things can happen. We had the Anti-Impoundment Act, which stopped the future use of the very helpful quasi- line item veto. We lost presidential impoundment in

the last year of Nixon's presidency. The country would have been much better off fiscally if the Anti-Impoundment Act had never been passed. We also got some unfortunate court decisions during the Clinton years e.g. body guard to the president can be forced to testify, etc.

Smith: Now where were you as Watergate unfolded?

McPherson: I was a tax lawyer at the IRS during those last Nixon years. The Nixon WH wanted me to come over and work in White House legal office, as part of the impeachment defense. It was a great career decision not to do that.

Smith: So, how did you come into the White House?

McPherson: Over the years, I had been very active in the Young Republicans, and I'd come to know Sen. Bill Brock very well. Bill Walker was then head of the White House Presidential Personnel and needed a clear conservative for his office. Brock urged that I be hired.

Smith: Bill Walker or Ron Walker?

McPherson: Bill Walker. Bill Walker was a protégé of Rumsfeld from Illinois, and he was the Director of WH Presidential Personnel at the time. When Walker offered me a job, I said I wanted to do it but that I thought he probably ought to know that I had grown up in the President's congressional district and I knew the President some. That's exactly the way I phrased it. I not sure Walker took much notice because I said it so causally. I never mentioned it to anybody else again. It's unwise in the White House, unless you really have lots of access to the president, to talk about how you know the president. However, I thought it was fair for Walker to know.

Smith: You were in an ideal position, then.

McPherson: So Walker a few weeks later, ran down the hall past my office and said, "Peter, you are working on this personnel problem. I want you to go with me over to see the President." So I walked into the Oval Office and the President said, "Peter! What are you doing here?" It was fun, actually. I got a big kick telling my father about Ford's comment and Walker seemed pleased too.

Smith: Clearly, one of the conundrums that Ford faced from day one was how to balance his sense of fair play and justice toward the vast majority of the Nixon holdovers, who had nothing to do with Watergate and who in many cases were highly competent. Plus he had a government to run, so there was an element of continuity. How do you balance that against the need, political and otherwise, for change? For people to see that this is a Ford administration and not an extension of the Nixon. Rumsfeld has been pretty explicit, and others have backed him up, that he strongly urged the President to clean house early. And one senses that the President, for a number of reasons, was not inclined to take that advice. Over time, clearly, he put in place a Cabinet of his own, and a very impressive group of "Ford people." How did that play itself out in the personnel shop?

McPherson: There was a feeling that there needed to be a break between the two administrations. Certainly Presidential Personnel had the impression we were supposed to do. It's also true that the Nixon people had been there for many years. The fully productive life of a senior government official generally isn't a full eight years, and so there was some turnover in the nature of things. In any case Ford wanted to recruit some new strong people. That is reflected in the careers of so many of the Ford people. When you go back and look at the Reagan and the two Bush administrations, there are a lot of Ford people.

Smith: Let me just nail down: how early in the Ford presidency did you go to work there?

McPherson: I think I went to work in February.

Smith: Of '75?

McPherson: Yes.

Smith: The other side of this coin, of course, is the criticism that the people Ford brought with him, mostly from the Hill, were not quite presidential caliber. That may not be fair, but I would be interested in how you mesh out of your kind of local circle, with the demands of this very different job. Plus you had the Nixon holdovers.

McPherson: Well, of course, it's a person by person question. Some of the people Ford brought with him from his Hill experience were excellent. There was of course Don Rumsfelt. Another excellent example was former Congressman Jack Marsh who provided advice to the President on a range of issues. He was one of the wisest people I have ever worked with and I suspect history will not give him full credit because he was so self-effacing. Some of the other people the President brought from the Hill were not prepared for the much more demanding jobs at the WH. Bob Hartmann is the person people usually talk about in that context but I personally never had much contact with Hartman.

Smith: Why was Hartman such a polarizing figure?

McPherson: Maybe a little bit because of personality. I had the impression that Hartmann was sort of gruff and not very communicative. The reason there was a vacancy for me to fill at the WH, by the way, was because Hartmann insisted my predecessor be fired. My predecessor continues to be a great friend of mine over these years. He did something that Hartmann didn't like and Hartmann insisted that he be fired. Hartmann exercised authority such as in this case some felt it was unfair and arbitrary. I stayed out of his way. I knew enough to not get involved with him.

Smith: Is there a thin line between protective and possessive?

McPherson: Oh, sure. Ford trusted Hartmann and needed to have somebody like that around. Hartmann had no agenda in terms of getting a better job personally. His agenda was President Ford. I think that Hartmann's biggest problem was that he had lived and professionally grown up in a single and not-large world, and all of a sudden he had real power in a much bigger world. And he didn't have time to adjust and perhaps did not want to. There is not much time to adjust to the bigger world of the WH. Others will have more developed views on Hartmann.

Smith: Very well put.

McPherson: There are a few people in most WHs who have time to think about things more and talk to more people. Jack March is a good example of a person who did this.

Smith: Enough critical things have been said about Hartmann...in Hartmann's defense, he played a critically useful role at the very end of the Nixon presidency, with Haig and making certain that Ford didn't even accidentally leave an impression regarding the pardon and all that.

McPherson: That was a historically important role, and I think that Hartmann doesn't get enough credit for his role. The older I am, the more I'm disinclined to make final and complete judgments about individuals. I tend to take them in pieces – this works and that does not work.

Smith: And I wonder - Hartmann having seen Ford on the Hill, knowing him in ways that other people didn't...for lack of a better word, the Eagle Scout quality about Jerry Ford, the fact that he was genuinely shocked that anyone would lie to him. It's a hugely admirable, human trait, but it may not be the best outlook for a president. And you wonder whether Hartmann, in his own mind, was compensating to some degree by being the SOB.

McPherson: He'd probably always played that role with Ford. I assume but I don't know for sure.

Let me mention something that goes back to Ford's relationship with his community. I was the young man who of course wanted to impress the President. I soon found that when I went to see the President on something, that if I told a little news about Kent County, he just loved it. I remember there was a man who was a pillar of the community in Lowell by the name of Norm Borgensen, who had just died. And I said, "Mr. President, did you know that Norm Borgensen died?" And he said, "Is that right? Nobody told me. Norm was a wonderful friend of mine." He loved his community and the individuals in his community.

Smith: So the congressman never wholly went away.

McPherson: The congressman never completely left. I had the impression he was always the congressman from the Fifth Congressional District, in at least some part of his soul. That was true, even after he left public life. When I saw him after he left office, he always wanted to hear about or talk about people back home.

Smith: And yet presumably the trajectory of those two and half years is the degree to which he was able to master a very different set of leadership skills.

McPherson: And he was the person to do it.

Smith: Could you see that?

McPherson: Yes. Absolutely. Look at the Nixon pardon. I'm thrilled yet when I think about his wonderful speech to the convention. I've never seen him give a better speech. It was a very presidential speech. I think he thought about national issues because of his roles on the Hill – but he understood what he had to do to be the leader of the nation. It could not have been easy to go from a brief time as Vice President and years as Minority leader and then to President of the United States. It's always irritated me that people did not understand how smart and knowledgeable Ford was on a great range of issue. They mistook lack of flashiness...

Smith: Plus, Midwesterners talk slow.

McPherson: They talk slow and they don't try to impress with brilliance. In fact, if you are trying to be brilliant, you are viewed as somebody from New York or somewhere like that, back in those days anyway. It's a little different now because Grand Rapids and Michigan are more cosmopolitan. But that's not the Grand Rapids that Jerry Ford grew up in

At the WH I became the chief operating officer of the Presidential Personnel and from time to time gave the office's recommendations directly to the President. Ford always knew so much about people, about government organizations, about history. I of course felt that I better really know what I talking about when I went to see the President because he was likely to know a lot more than I did about the some part of the issue a hand. And he was

thoughtful about people and issues but he definitely had his own developed opinions on lots of topics. There could be no assumption that he was going to accept what we told him he ought to do.

Smith: That's interesting. We've talked with Cabinet officers and others who have related wonderful stories about the budget process, where he would get both sides into the Oval Office. You can't imagine Richard Nixon making decisions that way – but he liked to have the protagonists, in this case, the antagonists.

McPherson: He liked to talk about it and think it through. He liked other people there. In some ways it wasn't a debate forum. It was a let's discuss it forum.

Let me tell you a story about Ford's decision making. Kissinger is brilliant and certainly Ford felt he was. I said to Kissinger just before a big dinner the other night and said, "I bet you never knew this story about your appointment of Rodgers to be Undersecretary for Economic Affairs at the State Department." Henry did not know the story. WH personnel and Chief of Staff Dick Cheney did not think the President should appoint Rogers. This was the spring of '76 and the convention was a few months away. The Cuban community was strongly opposed to Rogers. We thought why do we need to do this now?

Smith: Now, this was the appointment of?

McPherson: Of an Undersecretary for Economic Affairs at the State Department – Rogers was a competent good man by the way. He was Assistant Secretary at State for Latin America. So the appointment is before the President for his decision Cheney, Doug Bennett, who is the head of the office, went to see the President to lay out why he shouldn't make the appointment. I am told by the others to make the case and I did so. Ford ponder the question a few moments, and said, "Well, Henry wants this, I know. But I have also thought about it, and I am going to go with Rodgers because it is the right thing to do." And we all sat up straight and said, yes sir. I really respected President Ford.

Smith: Did it include the political ramifications in Florida?

McPherson: Yes. I argued to the President that he could do this for Rogers in another day, another time. Rodgers was already an Assistant Secretary; he doesn't need to move up. Besides Rogers was particularly an economic policy person, he was a foreign policy person. I think Ford made the decision because he thought it was right and did not want to take politics into consideration. So, after I told this story to Henry, Henry stands up at the dinner and says, "Ah, Peter McPherson told me a great story about how he tried to roll me and he never told me about it until tonight' which wasn't quite the way I phrased it. And Cheney came up to me afterwards and said, "Peter. We all experienced those situations from time to time, didn't we?" This was about two months ago.

Smith: Let me ask, how was the White House different with Rumsfeld in the chief of staff job and Cheney? Or was it?

McPherson: Well, it didn't seem to change immediately. Rumsfeld had his so-called snowflakes – brief memo on directions or ideas - that were always coming. Cheney was more of an institutional manger, from where I sat, than Rumsfeld. Does that sound right?

Smith: Yeah. We've also been told that there were people, including the President's personal secretary, who thought it was a more relaxed atmosphere under Cheney.

McPherson: Oh, I think probably.

Smith: Certainly not in terms of relaxed professional standards or work product, but a somewhat...

McPherson: Easier personal relationships.

Smith: Exactly.

McPherson: As far as I was concerned, Rumsfeld did very well. Overall Cheney's way of operating did not seem that much different from where I sat. I am certain that I do not have a full view however.

Smith: Was the White House slow on the uptake regarding Reagan? Because there have been stories about efforts being made which, in retrospect, seem a little off the wall - appointing him to a Cabinet position, for example.

McPherson: Yes. There was a crazy idea. Reagan wasn't going to accept secretary of transportation.

Smith: It would border on insult.

McPherson: Exactly. I'm sure that that's what Reagan must have thought.

Smith: Was the offer made?

McPherson: I believe so. I was told it was.

I thought there were two key decisions which were not good policy and hurt our relations with the conservative. Not meeting with Solzhenitsyn - and Kissinger always understood international politics better than he did domestic politics - that was a real mistake. And, too, the supporting of the Secretary of Labor on the common situs.

Smith: John Dunlop.

McPherson: Dunlop is a brilliant man, but he's an organized labor person. The Republican Party is not the party of organized labor. You go to Oklahoma, you go to Texas, and other parts of the country that were the center of conservative Republican strength and the President's support of the common situs legislation really made critical people mad.

Smith: Explain it for people who are not familiar with the term.

McPherson: To be simplistic the common situs legislation essentially requires union workers for large portions of construction work even if it was not a government paid for construction. It flew right in the face of the right to work legislation of many states. How we ever got into this mess...those two decisions, in my view, gave legs to Reagan that he never would have had otherwise.

Smith: Interesting.

You get this checkerboard approach to foreign policy, where, on the one hand, détente is being pursued, but then you've got confrontation in Angola, and other parts of the Third World. You've got the Soyuz-Apollo mission going forward, and Helsinki.

McPherson: Foreign policy almost is never totally coherent in any administration because of the complexity and differences in the world. Tidy minds find foreign policy very frustrating. The world is too big and complex.

Smith: And primary campaigns are all about tidiness.

McPherson: The world is too complex to be totally consistent so you have to do the best you can. On the other hand, I never understood why Henry felt so strongly – and I'd be curious, if you ever talk to him, which you no doubt will or have – why he was so against the President seeing Solzhenitsyn. First Ford should have seen him as the right thing to do on human rights. Moreover, the Russians understood that we had a political campaign going on. It not as if they never did anything to irritate us.

Smith: And then, remember, this sort of Africa split...

McPherson: This common situs legislation – I would be very interested in what people like Jim Baker say – but it was my view then, it's been my view ever since, that those two decisions caused Reagan's base to say they had to do something. The pardoning of those who left for Canada during Vietnam upset conservatives but that decision had begun work itself out by the summer of 1976 in my view. Moreover, that those pardons probably needed healing. Just like the Nixon pardon, the decision was sound.

Smith: Of course there's an irony here. Jump forward a year to the convention, and instead of picking a really emotional hot button issue to try to shake those last delegates free, Sears embraces this procedural issue about naming your vice president...

McPherson: Let me talk about the convention. Jim Baker asked me to go over and work for him and be in charge of the team of people working on delegates for the convention.

Smith: Leading up to the convention?

McPherson: Yes. I went over a few months before the convention. Baker was in charge of the delegate hunt, which was much of the campaign at that point in time.

Smith: Someone, told us that if Her Majesty ever got a look at the guest list for the Bicentennial dinner at the White House, she might have been surprised at how many uncommitted delegates and their families were there.

McPherson: Certainly. We worked the delegate problem from all legal angles. We had the person in charge of each of the regions in the country – most of them with a lot of convention experience. Over the years I had been involved in a number of party conventions and this was a particularly exciting for me. *Reagan's operation was run by Sears, who was a great technician and strategist*, and had great credibility with the press, mostly because he spent a lot of time with them and could tell a great story. He was to be able to persuade the press like few I have known. Reagan announced Sen. Schweiker of Pennsylvania as the Reagan vice president nominee and that immediately put Pennsylvania in play. Sears then convinced the press that Reagan probably had the Penn delegation and it was plausible. Ford and our team really worked those delegations. However the person that delivered the delegation for Ford was Drew Lewis of Pennsylvania. Drew later made history as Reagan Secretary of Labor. Drew's gone, isn't he? He was a good man.

Smith: I don't know.

McPherson: I'm almost sure he is. But Drew pulled that delegation together.

Smith: Did Sears think that by picking Schweiker they could bring Lewis with him?

McPherson: Yes, they certainly hoped so, because Lewis was a political creation of Schweiker. Sears clearly felt that they had something to do with the Schweiker move because Ford was winning. Ford was lining up the

delegation one-by-one. Both camps more or less knew where the delegates were going. There were some major uncertainties like Mississippi but the trend was clear and Sears knew that sooner or later the press would figure it out. So he pulled out Schweiker and created enough uncertainty so he was able to have another few weeks of uncertainty. By the convention it was fairly clear Ford had Penn but Sears was not though, as we will discuss later.

But there was no question that we used state dinners and various kinds of stroking of delegates.

For example – it sounds astounding, but Hawaii was uncertain enough, that we recommended the President call every delegate in Hawaii – every delegate – that was a total of eighteen or nineteen people. And, of course, true to form, one guy when he is talking to the President says, “Okay, I’ll vote for you if you appoint me to this Presidential commission.” It was a commission at HEW as I remember. Of course the President did not commit anything.

Smith: Dick Cheney told us about a family who came from Brooklyn or the Bronx or something. I think it was a woman. And she would go back and forth; one week she was for Reagan and one week she was with Ford. Finally, “So what is it going to take?” And she said, “I want to meet the President in the Oval Office and bring my family.” And a meeting was arranged and on the day in question, this really disreputable looking bunch of people show up and had their visit with the President.

McPherson: All of the delegates weren’t model citizens. Cheney was very involved in all this. He was the key and of course was the gatekeeper to the President, ran the President’s schedule and so forth. The President was wonderful. The President understood the politics but never made any personnel or other such commitments.

Smith: Yeah, it’s congressional.

McPherson: It’s lot like congressional politics. So we get to the convention and there’s a problem. We had the majority of delegates including those states that were bound by their state primaries to vote for the President. For example Indiana

primary bound the delegates from that state to vote for Ford. But when Indiana party selected their delegation they created a problem. The Ford people who had won the primary were party people and they did not want to be too confrontational. They wanted to work with the Reagan people after the convention. So Indiana's party put some Reagan people on the delegation on the theory that they would vote for Ford pursuant to the binding primary requirement. Unfortunately for Ford, that primary did not bind Reagan supporters to vote in support of Ford on procedural matters. On the other hand, when delegations bound to Reagan, his people usually did not allow any Ford supporters as delegates e.g. in New Mexico Sen. Domenici, a Ford supported, was not allowed to be a delegate. So when you look at the formally committed delegates, Ford had the majority but it was still close. If you look at the vote on procedural matters the outcome was not so clear. So John Sears came up with his famous 16-C proposal, which was something about the candidate naming your vice president.

Smith: You had to name your vice presidential...I'll show you mine if you'll show me yours.

McPherson: Of course but it was in fact a test of power. Test of strength.

Smith: But a procedural test as opposed to...anything gut, emotional.

McPherson: There was an emotional/public policy move Sears tried later and I will talk about that in a few minutes. But back to the procedural vote, the afternoon before 16-C, I suggested to Baker that I get together Cliff White, Dean Birch, and Bill Timmons for one more look at the formally committed Ford delegations in which there were Reagan supporters. Our regional political people were working hard but I thought these old hands might have some ideas. The group mapped out some additional ideas on how to deal with some of these problem delegations like Indiana. In that case the former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz was on the Indiana delegation as a Ford supporter. Butz was a powerful man in Indiana. This went reasonable well. We went to Butz and he had an impact on some of the Reagan supporters using a moral argument of the primary vote.

But we still had the problem with Mississippi which was remained uncommitted as we the evening session of the convention approached. The 16-C vote was to take place that night.

Smith: With the famous Clarke Reed.

McPherson: Famous Clarke Reed. Clarke Reed had committed to both sides. He certainly had committed to President Ford.

Smith: Probably not the first time.

McPherson: But Reed apparently thought Reagan wouldn't be in the race to the end and so it was freebie to commit to Reagan as well. I know Reagan thought he had Reed's commitment. His approach in the time leading up to that night was to tell both camps that he could not go public yet but rather he would work quietly. But then the convention came with an approaching 16-C. Mississippi caucuses that afternoon to decide how to vote on 16-C. Reed cannot keep stalling both sides. Mississippi has what is called unit rule – there were 60 votes, and whoever had the majority gets all 60 votes. If you got 31 votes to 29, you got all 60. In the end Reed fell apart, latterly crumpled. He just kind of folded up in his bed and could hardly move. Ford had this excellent convention man who became a preacher, the southern strategist for Nixon.

Smith: Harry Dent?

McPherson: Yes, Harry Dent. He worked Mississippi for Ford before and that night. As the evening session was approaching, we did not yet know the outcome of the Mississippi caucus. At that time I delivered the delegate vote count for 16-C to Cheney who in turn took it to the President – I delivered it at about five o'clock – the convention was beginning at seven – The vote count showed an undecided convention, with Mississippi being the swing. Well, Mississippi, as I said ended up voting all their 60 votes with us, and Ford won the procedure vote with some votes to spare and people saw what was happening. And there are a lot of other things that impacted that vote, but the Mississippi was critical. I've still that vote count chart we used in the trailer.

Smith: To what do you attribute Mississippi's decision?

McPherson: Harry Dent's good work was the key on top of the relentless work leading up to the convention. I know of no other time that Mississippi had so much attention at a Republican convention.

Smith: Did Reed become less of a factor?

McPherson: Yes. As best I can tell he was not a factor in the Mississippi vote on 16-C. He literally was crumpled up on his bed and was inoperable.

Smith: A Nixonian turn of phrase. And that was a bitter convention, wasn't it?

McPherson: Yes for some of people most directly involved.

Smith: To people watching, the First Lady, the wives and friends.

McPherson: I was sort of the day to day operator, if you will, of the trailer. Timmons was there, but Timmons was doing a lot of things. Timmons is a very good man.

Smith: We had a great interview with Timmons.

McPherson: My friend Charlie Black was my counterpart over in the Reagan trailer, just a few yards away. We won the 16-C and that was the critical vote at the convention. Ford might have won the nomination if we had lost 16-C but it would have been real struggle.

Smith: Plus, you would have had to name a vice presidential pick.

McPherson: Most important, we would have lost the momentum. The next day was the platform day and Reagan folks proposed a full platform, including a plank on the Panama Canal, several hardline and anti-détente positions. And Rockefeller and Kissinger were up in their box extremely upset about the Reagan platform and demanding that we tell the floor organization to vote against the Reagan platform. The process was moving quickly on the floor for a single vote on the whole Reagan platform. So the question was, as Timmons and I are sitting there in the trailer with our floor network – our communication network – should we tell our people to vote against the

resolution. Maybe Cheney and others had already worked out a position but we could not get a clear direction on what to do. So we decided to tell our floor structure to tell the delegates to vote their conscience. Timmons will remember this. Have you talked to him?

Smith: Yeah.

McPherson: No one told us anything, so we just said to vote your conscience. It passed by a voice vote and that was it.

Smith: And you know the famous Tom Korologos story about this? Kissinger threatened to resign, not for the first time – and you can hear Korologos saying this, he said, “Henry, if you’re going to resign, do it fast, we need the votes.”

McPherson: Korologos is a wonderful guy. So the thing went by and it was so smart not to oppose this because there was no gain among this group of people to argue about the Panama Canal.

Smith: But it goes again to your point about Kissinger’s grasp of geo-politics being much surer than domestic politics. Plus he saw it in very personal terms, as a repudiation of his legacy.

McPherson: And maybe another way to think about it is when your responsibility is international, you don’t take other areas into consideration as much as you might. Maybe that’s the way to say it, because he’s enormously clever. If he had the responsibility for domestic affairs, he might have had a different view altogether. I never told Henry that story. He probably knows it.

Smith: What made Baker so good at what he was doing?

McPherson: Baker is organized; Baker is an extraordinary tactician, even in working on problems new to him. Baker is very good with people; people like Baker. He’s an extraordinary effective within government and Congress. More than that however he sees the big picture and gets it done.

- Smith: And obviously good with the press.
- McPherson: And great with the press and has credibility with the press. He engenders confidence. He may be the best of anyone in modern times in getting things done in government.
- Smith: The confluence of policy and politics; some people are good at one, but not both.
- McPherson: Baker always talks about himself as a politician who works the policy, instead of the other way around - a policy person who worked the politics. He was able to accomplish most things he has sought out to do – I saw it, for example, in the Canadian Free Trade Agreement when I was his Deputy at Treasury. We just would not had the Canadian Free Trade Agreement without Baker and that agreement led to the three party trade agreement with the US, Mexico and Canada. The economics of this country would be different if the US hadn't done the Canadian trade agreement.
- Smith: Yeah. The whole question about the vice presidency. I'm satisfied after many conversations, that those closest to Governor Reagan, in advance of the convention, made it crystal clear that he was not interested in the vice presidency, and that it should not be raised.
- McPherson: You're talking about the Ford convention, '76?
- Smith: Yeah, when they met after the nomination. And yet Reagan supposedly told Baker once they were both in the White House that, had Ford asked him –I almost sensed he was trying to have it both ways because the real Reagan, not to mention Mrs. Reagan, would have opposed him going on that ticket.
- McPherson: I don't know, I think that Reagan was a patriot. And that if Ford had said, "We need to patch everything together here. We can't have Carter for four years, would you do this?" I think he might have done it. Now there would have been some debates about Henry Kissinger's status and other questions.
- Smith: Do you think it was ever seriously considered?

McPherson: I just don't know. I think the biggest issue was Kissinger. And Kissinger brought some problems to the President, but he also brought some huge strength too.

So the more interesting issue was what happened at the convention in 1980 when Henry and Greenspan tried to get Ford to be a co-president to Reagan. Fortunately sound judgment prevailed on this. On the other hand, if Henry and Alan had not tried to reach for so much control of the Reagan Presidency, could Ford and Reagan have worked it out with Ford as Vice President?

Smith: Would Mrs. Ford have been willing to – at that point in their lives?

McPherson: Who knows? It was a bad idea anyway.

Smith: Exactly. It is your sense that it was something that Kissinger and Greenspan were promoting?

McPherson: Yes, absolutely. It was their ticket back into the game. And of course both had much to contribute to the county. Nevertheless the whole idea was unrealistic.

Smith: But it's fascinating, on the other side of the coin, people today forget Reagan's willingness to be pragmatic in pursuit of victory. They claim Reagan would be a Tea Partier. Interesting. Is that the Ronald Reagan who put Richard Schweiker on his ticket in '76 and was willing to put Gerald Ford on his ticket in 1980, and who did put George Bush on his ticket in 1980.

McPherson: Absolutely. Ronald Reagan had this wonderful capability of articulating a vision and a spirit, but the capacity not to be so constrained by such that he defeated his own ends.

Smith: That's great. And if you could bottle that...you'd be a wealthy man. And I suspect our politics would be a lot healthier.

After the convention, were you involved in the campaign?

McPherson: Yes. I ran several of the states in the Midwest for the campaign and then after the election I came back to the WH.

Smith: And of course, the rationale for putting Bob Dole on the ticket was, going into that convention, you didn't even have your own base. The farm belt was, at that point, literally up for grabs.

McPherson: It was a problem because we should have had that base. But we did not and it goes back, in at least some part, to decisions like the common situs decision. I'll bet you when you talk to some of these other people like Baker – ask him – he'll probably complain about the common situs decision.

Smith: It's a great line of questioning. Did your heart sink when you watched the Poland debate?

McPherson: Oh, when he talked about Poland? Absolutely! I'm sitting there and my friend Don Sundquist, who later became governor of Tennessee – “Ah jeez, did he say that?”

Smith: It reinforced all the doubts about his capacity to be president.

McPherson: I certainly had no doubts but it surely hurt the President. On the other hand, I love those polling data, day by day, as we approached the election. Each day Ford was stronger. And we damned near won that election.

Smith: What did you think at the end?

McPherson: That we might win it. We were climbing a point a day. Ford was steadily more presidential. We don't like these long campaigns in this country, and I think for good reason. But I also think there is enormous growth in candidates as they run for president. They became more sensitive to a set of people, to a set of the issues. They become bigger people because they must.

Smith: That raises one quick question: on balance, do you think the Reagan challenge made Ford a better candidate, and therefore, a stronger candidate in November, or did it contribute to his defeat?

McPherson: I think if we hadn't lost North Carolina, the Reagan Challenge would have helped. If Ford had won NC, Ford probably would have been able to wrap it

quite quickly. Ford had to fight on too long. North Carolina probably insured the convention and the convention just was too much.

I wanted to tell you one other story. Ford, after he left the presidency, was always very helpful to me, which he was to so many people. When I was President at Michigan State University, I brought the Detroit College of Law from Detroit to Michigan State at East Lansing and built a new law school building. Ford gave the speech to dedicate the building.

Smith: I think I wrote the speech.

McPherson: Did you? It was a great speech. I sat in a little room just before his speech for about 30 minutes. He wanted tell me about my grandfather. My grandfather was a political leader who more or less ran rural Michigan for about twenty years just before Ford went to Congress. It was great fun. And then I said to Ford, "Now, tell me about your primary against Jonkman?" And he said, "Well, you know, he was really an isolationist. I'd come back after the War. I'd seen the world and did not agree with Jonkman. I couldn't get Sen. Vandenberg to be publicly for me, but Vandenberg did a whole lot to elect me." I'm sure that you've heard that before.

Smith: I heard something like that, yes.

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