

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Peter Secchia
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
August 5, 2008

Smith: Let's start with: where did your paths cross for the first time?

Secchia: We crossed paths during his Congressional re-election campaigns. 1963-1964 I knew of him and he knew of me from meeting at local Republican gatherings. Back then the Lincoln Day dinner might be a \$15 ticket. Everybody went to those and he was the main provider of guest speakers. He would bring in friends like Nixon, who was a cohort of his in the Congress. I have photos of us together, which was the typical \$12-15 ticket. This low price doesn't exist anymore. It would be "How are you?" "How are you Peter. Good to see you". Boom...gone!

We really became better friends sometime in the late '60s when he would come to Grand Rapids and would give me a call. Mildred Leonard was his secretary at the time. I remember one call I got from her. She said, "I don't know who you are, but I have a long list of people here who want to have lunch with the Congressman, but he wants to meet with you, and he'd like to meet with you at some club. I can't remember where it was – the Penn Club, or some restaurant. I remember I said, "No, why don't we meet at the Starboard Tack (Now the Great Lakes Shipping Company)?" It was a restaurant I had just opened in 1969. She said, "I'll check with him," and we met there.

I gave him some ideas on his re-election campaign – how to meet younger people. He was receptive.

Smith: Let me interrupt that, because that raises a couple of things. One, I'm intrigued that you said, how to meet younger people. In '69 this is a time when the whole country is going to hell and campuses are exploding and so forth. Was there a connection there? Curiosity on his part?

Secchia: It was “worry” mostly on my part, because whenever I did see him at an event, he would be off in a corner talking to people older than he, or at least his generation. Those who were of my generation were standing on the other side of the room, sort of like the fourth grade school dance – the boys were here and the girls were there. I thought he needed to meet some of the younger, upcoming people from our community. Now that is the story of the first lunch. The relationship actually goes back before that when he asked me if I’d like to come and work with him at the Republican convention in Miami in 1968. There were two conventions I traveled with him, at my own expense. We stayed at the [Hotel] Fontainebleau – in ’68 and again in ’72. In 1968 the “Vietnam Veterans Against the War” were miserably obnoxious, it was almost violent.

He put me in charge of the Ford kids. I really don’t know how I got invited to be there, but maybe I was just a nanny, or maybe I was someone he trusted with his family. He would go in the morning for two or three hours before the conventions began, because as the Minority Leader, he was chairman of the convention. There were times when he would leave the hotel and say, “Pete, get the kids to these seats,” then give me the tickets. We were given a security officer/driver who was a retired sheriff from Miami – Dade County? I don’t remember his name. But that driver drove our car. Susan might have been sixteen at the time and the boys were older. There were all kinds of problems that could occur, so I was invited to come along and observe. This all came about and I’m sort of getting out of whack here, because the question, “How did it all start?” comes back to me as I go through this process.

But now I go back to the ’68 convention and I can remember Sen. Jacob Javits from New York, making a speech on TV that angered me about my Republican principles. It caused me to get on the phone and talk to Mildred Leonard, or whoever it was at that time was his administrative assistant. I said, “This is crazy, can you ask Jerry to get me a ticket to the convention?” He called to say, “Yes, come on down.” So I went down and I ended up staying there with them and he ended up using me to help get the kids to the conventions and attend various functions with him.

Smith: Was Betty there?

Secchia: Yes. But she went to the convention with others. Mrs. Nixon's car had been urinated on by the Veterans Against the War, fruit was being thrown at the windshields and there was some minor riots – it's hard to sort them out over the 30+ years that have passed, but it was not a comfortable situation. I remember Ford had a pool cabana next to Barbara Walters, and Barbara Walters had a African-American woman assigned who was taking care of the Walters' children. She treated that person with a very mean-spirited attitude. It annoyed Congressman Ford at the time – that this would be happening at his convention and he displayed dismay very obviously with her over the way she was treating that woman. I was observing, as a young man – maybe 31 years old at the time, and watching. From that point on he would then confide in me, ask me to come up to the room and go through some of his speeches with him. “What do you think about saying this?” He was always good at that, “What do you think? You think I ought to do this – think I ought to say this?” The relationship developed – and it was then, after that '68 trip, and after a couple years of seeing each other around town, that we became good friends.

Then he would come to Grand Rapids. He would visit with Joan and me. I think at the time he was making \$36,000 a year. He had holes in his socks, he was traveling all the time, he didn't have any spare money whatsoever. He would confide in us. It was almost like he didn't have a very close relationship with his own children at that time. He was busy and Betty was taking care of the family life, but he was focused on Minority Leader work – traveling, electing, re-electing, the *Ev and Jerry Show*, all the things that he did. So I became the go-to guy in Grand Rapids.

Smith: Do you think after the White House years, particularly the later years, that he had a certain amount of guilt over having missed, not only part of his kids growing up, but burdening Betty with the responsibility for their upbringing? It was a generational thing, like a lot of ambitious men, not only politicians, but others of his generations. He had a goal – a professional goal – and that tended to shape his life.

Secchia: I think he had guilt feelings, but I also think he had a secondary issue, with Betty's health. The term "alcoholic," "over-drinking" wasn't really the issue. She had a lot of pain and the painkiller with one drink...I would stay with them upstairs in the White House. I was often the only guest. I'd sit by her bed for hours and Dr. Lukash used to call me up and say, "Can you come out to D.C. and sit with Betty? The president has to go on a trip, and he would like someone here." I would sit by her bed and talk to her. She had some very serious discomfort, and all the time we entertained or had an evening together, I never saw her have more than a drink and a half. There wasn't any over consumption of alcohol, it was a combination of the drugs. He felt guilty that he wasn't able to be there for her. I think the fact that he never developed a close relationship, and that might be hard for his kids to hear now, but in those days, and it might have been a generational thing, parents didn't talk to children like they do today. Parents led children, disciplined children, but didn't talk to them, didn't have the "get inside your head" kind of attitude. That's another role that I played.

He asked me to fly out and stay with the kids and then he would get on Air Force Two, which was an old prop driven Convair, I'll never forget that, and take off and say, "Look, I want you to talk to Susan about this and talk to Mike about this," and so, I was a big brother, or a son that he never had in politics. Because he didn't have any in politics, he taught me my politics, so we had a lot of political conversations. I don't want to upgrade my position in this thing, but we had many conversations about what I could do for him, generated by him, by the way. Not me saying, "What can I do for you?" It was him saying, "Would you mind doing this for me? I just haven't got the time." (Mostly in Grand Rapids.)

Smith: This brings up a couple of things. You wonder, let's face it, most people in parenting tend to reproduce their own experiences, their own memories from childhood and I'm wondering how much of that approach reflected the norms in the Ford household when he was growing up. Kind of a hierarchical...

Secchia: Because of his tragic background with what happened with his birth father.

Smith: But also, the kind of discipline and structure that an earlier generation took for granted.

Secchia: I think there was no question about it. He loved his new father, (the “Ford” father) very much. Respected him immensely. He told me the story about Leslie King many times. Shortly after Ford was nominated to be the vice president, he was on the west coast, maybe Washington or Oregon. I believe he might have been with Congresswoman Edith Green who later had helped (it would have been a friend, if I’m not mistaken). He was scheduled to give a speech in Knoxville, Tennessee where I was involved. I had arranged for him to be the speaker. Nobody in my industry at that time, (manufactured housing) ever heard of this Congressman from Michigan. He was the Minority Leader, and if you watched the *Ev and Jerry Show*, you might know who he was. But I convinced them to have him as their keynote speaker.

When he was named V.P. the previous months, I thought he would cancel. He called me and said, “I’m coming,” and when he came in as the Vice President of the United States they knew. When he still came in I noticed right then and there that – (I had expected a big change) – but there was *no* change whatsoever. He was still the same Jerry Ford. But my phone started ringing off the hook. I was there for a tradeshow and I’ll never forget the first call was from a British tabloid, (speaking with British accent) “Hello, Governor,” he said, “is this true that your vice president has an assumed name?” I’m thinking, oh gosh, what am I supposed to say, what do I say I know? Do I not know it, do I know it? Is it going to be a problem? Has it been released? Do I talk of this? I was just a nervous wreck. I said, “Well, I really can’t talk about those things.” They made a big splash out of Leslie King, Jr. – not being Gerald R. Ford, Jr.

There was a story he liked to tell about his birth father visiting him when he was working at the local drug store. He took me there to show me the neighborhood, his old family house, where he worked, where he went to school. He told me the story about this – (you’ve heard it over and over again) – but it had an impact on him because he had to make a decision right then. He told his birth father...“I love the father who has given my mother a home.

I love the father who has given me his name.” I thought then that if it were me, I would have said, “Where have you been, you son of a bitch?”

He was much more gentle and kinder than that. Much more Christian. He always said it in kinder terms, but I think he told me that he was very firm that he didn't want to see Mr. King again – and that he'd hurt his mother. So that is probably part of what built the kind of life model he has, you need to be good to your wife and kind to your mother, and kind to your family. But he also had this drive to be good at what he did. Not to be a statesman, he never used that term, but he wanted to be the man who had the frequent flyer mile record for dedicated traveling, or “nobody can outwork me...I work hard,” image.

Smith: You wonder what sort of mix from the parents, because the sense I get, is that his dad was the person who influenced him the most, of anyone - the values and the qualities. His mother had great drive. The famous story about when she died in church and they found her appointment book - it was filled for a month, or whatever. You can see him as the perfect product of these two different, yet very complementary, personalities.

Secchia: You've got to remember, he was of the generation, wrongly or rightly, who didn't give a lot of credit to the mother's role in raising family. We all grew up with that, in that generation of Charles Atlas kicking sand in the face to show the woman he controlled the world. Jerry was a gentleman in a world that didn't have too many gentlemen. He created a role that allowed him to disagree without being disagreeable. I'll never forget one day, I was at the White House. I came downstairs after breakfast. The president was out playing golf and I read the *Washington Post*. Tip O'Neill called GRF everything but a decent human being in the paper. When GRF returned from golf, he buzzed me and I came down to the Oval Office. He was in his golf clothes. He was in the Oval Office chair and I said, “Did you see this?” I laid the paper down. He said, “Oh, that's just Tip. That's politics.” I said, “But he called you all these terrible names!” Jerry Ford looked at me and he said, “Well, that's who I was playing golf with this morning.”

I said, "I don't get this!" He said, "Peter, in Washington, you must learn to disagree without being disagreeable." That sentence is really what everybody is talking about today, the old-fashioned politics that people could get along. They disagreed, but they disagreed without being disagreeable. That was his mantra. That all came about from the raising and the discipline that he had, and that he understood, and from his family.

Smith: He was, to put it mildly, fiscally conservative. How much of that do you think was a product of the Depression? Because, clearly, there is a whole generation of kids who went without, and who have a whole different idea of the meaning of money.

Secchia: He was of a generation where a job was important and loyalty to the boss was important. The fact that, like my grandmother used to say, "Your cousin works over there at that gas station – it's a very good company, his paycheck cashes every week." That was important in telling that child of the Depression that it was important that you just didn't get a paycheck, but you get a paycheck that was cashable. Jerry Ford wasn't just fiscally responsible – he was tighter than a second coat of paint. You couldn't get him to spend a nickel for anything. The people who traveled with him had to carry small bills.

I remember very well when we had these cars in Miami for the two Republican conventions that I attended ('68 and '72), I would ride with him and we'd go to events. We'd come back and we'd say goodnight to the driver and the driver would be standing there with his hand out – a retired officer – I'd have to find some cash to tip him. Jerry never thought about that. I don't know whether he avoided it, but he didn't do it. It got to be, I would rag on him constantly about being tighter than a second coat of paint. He'd just laugh, "I'm from Grand Rapids and that's the way it ought to be." He also prided himself on his knowledge of the budget and the defense appropriations. He understood better than anybody where the money went, and he would get very concerned about certain issues.

Smith: Let me go back because it's remarkable that a Congressman who was as entrenched as he was in this district, would, particularly with all of his other

obligations and travel, still take seriously the obligation to come back as frequently as possible. The fact that, at that point in his career, twenty years on the Hill, he was still curious about reaching out to new audiences and the like. It wouldn't happen today. If you had a safe district, you wouldn't be home. I heard him talk about Guy Vander Jagt as an example – a cautionary example - of someone who was a great guy, but who “went Washington” and who got so caught up in the national scene that he neglected the district. Now here is someone who is even more caught up in the national scene, and yet one senses, he never neglected the home front – even if the home front was as safe politically as anything could be.

Secchia: Guy Vander Jagt was an orator. Jerry Ford was a legislator. Guy enjoyed the social circuit. Jerry Ford didn't enjoy the social circuit. So Guy had a reason to extend a trip or a visit where Jerry would not. So, that was one difference. Another difference was that Vander Jagt had a district that you couldn't fly to. His district went from, I believe Traverse City down to the southwestern corner of Michigan, then you had to fly to Grand Rapids and drive three or four hours either way. Where in the case of Jerry Ford's district, most of it was right here, to Holland and back. It wasn't that different. Jerry Ford had more of a root base than Guy had. Guy was a little more of a party boy. Jerry would drink his martinis and he'd have a good time, but he'd never over imbibe. He had a little button on his chair at the White House and I can remember we'd talk and he'd press the little button and they'd bring him his drink. He enjoyed the dialogue but not the speaking. He wasn't the speaker Guy was. Guy got standing ovations and adulation with his speeches. Jerry felt, “Well, I'm glad its over and time for me to leave. Okay.”

Smith: Was he sensitive? I remember him saying that if he'd had the chance to relive his live, he would have spent more effort on developing his communications skills.

Secchia: Well I think that learning came at the '76 election when he was having difficulty explaining his position. When in fact, he was misinterpreted sometimes by just his choice of delivery – not even the words – just the way he delivered it and it became – Stu Spencer used to talk to me about this and

say, “The guy is good at what he does, but I can’t get him to be the communicator that he needs to be.” Of course, being challenged by the Great Communicator in the ’76 primary, was very threatening to Jerry Ford because he was, as in the case of McCain – white skin, melanoma-threatened - fighting this good-looking, thin, eloquent, preacher-kind of opponent. I think McCain...

Smith: It was an oratorical mismatch.

Secchia: Yes, and I think McCain is being forced to go a little bit negative early to try to balance out that mismatch. Obama is a rock star, but can he lead? Jerry Ford had the same issues – “Why is this man challenging me? I am the sitting president.”

Smith: That raises a question. I assume the competitive juices kicked in, and that must be one key to understanding Ford. He was a very competitive guy, wasn’t he?

Secchia: He was very competitive, but he was also very concerned that people didn’t understand that he had a job to do, to clean up the mess that had been left by the Nixon administration. And at the same time go out on the street and debate or fight from a podium, this “Great Communicator.” Why is he [Reagan] doing this? Why doesn’t he just wait his turn? Why? This is a very complicated story and if I may take it chronologically...

Smith: By the way, one thing, then we’ll get into this because you’re right, it’s a huge, important one. I’ve heard Stu Spencer say, and imagine what it tells you about Ford that someone like Stu Spencer or anyone could say this: they were coming up with the Rose Garden strategy, and Ford, being Ford, wanted to get out on the campaign trail and he wanted to eat rubber chicken and he wanted to do all those things that he loved. I don’t think anyone wanted to tell him to his face why they wanted him to stay in the White House. Certainly the White House staff didn’t want to, but Stu Spencer, being Stu, he didn’t mind. Finally, he said, “Mr. President, you don’t understand, you’re a fucking lousy campaigner.”

Secchia: Well, that very well could have been discussed. The issue that really was the problem was that this man had such a goal-oriented composition that he knew what he had to do was Whip Inflation Now. He had to get the budget under control. He had to get us out of Vietnam. I mean, there was a list on top of list that had to be done. And that didn't include flying to Oshkosh, Wisconsin and talking to the local Caterpillar factory workers.

I can remember having the arguments with him that Reagan provided him a chance to be re-elected because the challenge of the primary forced him to go to places where he had never gone. He had a hard time recognizing that he was the Fifth District Congressman of Michigan who wasn't known in the Sixth, Fourth, and Third Districts very well, and yet he wanted to run in Wisconsin, California, Oregon, Washington. He had to get out and he had to spread his message. He had to just be seen back then. The message wasn't as important as being known and paying homage to the local politicians, because back in those days the Republican Party headquarters in this county or that village or that community, was the office for the re-election.

I want to backtrack to this because when he pardoned Nixon on a Sunday night, I had no knowledge that this was going to happen. Like everybody else, it caught me by surprise. Jerry terHorst resigned and I was bewildered, as was everyone else, wondering what was going to happen. On Monday morning I got a phone call from somebody, I can't remember whether it was Nell Yates or Mildred Leonard - it might have been Bob Hartmann, I can't recall, said, "Would you come out to Washington tomorrow night and have dinner with the President?" I said, "Why, sure." "He needs to be with someone - a friend." It turned out that Monday when I got that call, we didn't have this twenty-four hour news cycle of Fox and CNN, Jerry Ford had been in Pittsburg to give a talk and had been booed. Demonstrations had begun and the accusations were flying. The internet and the blogs weren't yet created, but the fervor was just growing - the fire was being stoked. It was *not* comfortable. On Tuesday I flew into Washington and I waited for him to come upstairs to have dinner. Betty decided not to join us. She wasn't feeling well, so I sat and talked to her. I read the paper and I went back in and talked to her, then I read the paper.

Smith: How was she? Did she talk about the pardon?

Secchia: No – if she did, I don't recall it. It wouldn't have been my place to bring it up and it didn't come up. I tried to make her feel good and feel happy. She was going through a rough period. I can't remember what it was we talked about, but she was happy to have a friend from home who sat next to her bed and got her things if she needed them, or made calls for her.

Smith: Do you think the transition to the White House was a difficult one?

Secchia: Yes. But I want to finish this story. So Ford finally came upstairs and it was pretty late – it might have been close to nine o'clock. He had a series of newspapers that were lying on a credenza just behind the television set, sort of in the center of family quarters. He would pick up the paper and go to the editorial page and he read both of them, the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. He came in, sat down in his chair, and I was sitting there on the couch. He pressed his button and ordered his martini and turned to me and said, "Nixon really fucked up the pea patch." That's the first time I'd ever heard him use the F word. He said, "I had to do it and it will cost me the '76 election, but I had to do it." Like a dummy, I had the vision that I was way over my head. I was a thirty-seven year old young business guy trying to sell lumber, and I just felt like I was over my head. I really didn't need to be told anything I shouldn't be told. It was like – I hadn't even started reading spy books yet, but I was scared that I was over my heard. I said, "Look, you don't have to tell me about it."

I regret to this day I did that because we then changed the subject and we went to dinner. But he was very concerned about that and was very upset that there was not even a doubt that it wouldn't cost him the '76 election. There wasn't even a doubt in his mind. Later on he had second thoughts about what it was and the little things, but that was a telling moment for me.

Smith: In later years he must have returned to the subject. Was he hurt that people suspected a deal? Was he surprised at the ferocity of the reaction?

Secchia: He spent a lot of time – you've got to remember, Jerry Ford's viewpoint, because he was so goal-oriented, and dedicated to accomplishing what he was

supposed to accomplish – a lot of time wasn't a lot of time in your world or my world – in his world it was a lot of time. He called a few people and said, "Look, get this straightened out – they don't understand this." Yeah, he was hurt. He was not very happy with some of the people – Alexander Haig and others who had said things that got people going in different directions.

Smith: And, of course, he lost a press secretary.

Secchia: Right – who over-reacted in an emotional moment – probably because he wasn't counseled. But then again, when you're a new president, you don't realize that... what your obligations are: "I'm supposed to discuss this with him."

Smith: Ford later on said... he understood terHorst was upset that he hadn't told him, but he said, "Stop and think. If I'd told him, he would have had, in effect, a Hobson's choice. Either he would have had to tell others, which he [Ford] obviously didn't want, or he would have had to lie." It tells you so much about Ford, that those are the two choices and neither one is acceptable. So, he, in effect from his viewpoint was saving terHorst from being put in an impossible situation.

Secchia: Knowing Jerry Ford, I'm not so sure that he made the final decision until the last moment because Ford was always one to jump back and forth and listen to different ideas. In many cases we all felt that the person who talked to him last impacted his thinking the most. I don't know who that was in this case, but I don't think he made that decision on Tuesday and then kept it until Sunday night. He obviously went through this, what would work, what wouldn't work, pros and cons and came up with a decision. But, that isn't the guy that I knew.

The guy that I knew was your basic Midwesterner who drew out the thousands of people you saw at the funeral procession, who was enamored by both sides of the aisle, the First World War, the Second World War, and Vietnam vets. He just appealed to a great number of persons because his 'steady as you go' ship was something that wasn't rocking in the rough seas of '74 and '75, the Housing Community Development Act, the wild inflation,

Jimmy Carter shooting rabbits in ponds. Jerry Ford was just steady as Steady Eddie, and he built a confidence around himself. So as that circle of understanding of him in the Fifth Congressional District started to expand out into other areas, and over the years of his retirement, it got stronger and stronger. It built to the point that he was a very popular figure. And rightfully so.

Smith: I think I heard him say, or at least it was attributed to him – very uncharacteristic and I don't think it was for public consumption – he was known to have observed that Nixon never said thank you for the pardon. That he never really thanked him.

Secchia: Well, there was a comedy skit made about that and I bought the painting by the artist of where, if you remember, there was a skit where he was playing poker with Nixon and Nixon sneezes and said, "Pardon me," and Ford said, "I already did." I bought that painting and I had it hanging in my office for years. But he never said to me anything about the thank you. I don't recall that.

Smith: Did you have a sense of what his relationship with Nixon actually was in later years?

Secchia: Yes, in 1972 or 73, he came to Grand Rapids and we had dinner. He gave a talk somewhere and he said, "Meet me after." I met him in the Old Pub, which was a restaurant in the old Pantlind Hotel. He and I had dinner - they were famous for their Sizzler, which was a terrible cut of beef, but on a hot sizzling plate, with a piece of buttered toast. I'll never forget that night. We sat there, the bartender was behind the bar, we were the only table – the hotel was about to close. Nobody talked to him, other than the waitress who took the order. Nobody came up, there were no autograph seekers. He was a pariah to many because of his support of Nixon's Vietnam policy.

After dinner we went up and sat at the bar and had a nightcap. These were his drinking days, not over drinking, but days people don't realize he participated in. We had a drink at the bar and the bartender gave us the perfunctory "Hello, goodbye," and Jerry said to me, "I promised Betty I wouldn't run again. I

wasn't going to, but I have to run one more time or it will appear I'm deserting Nixon in the middle of this terrible period, and so I owe it to Dick Nixon to stay on as Minority Leader, and run again." That must have been the '72 election. He ran for re-election and that was to be his last – and his respect and admiration for Nixon was strong.

Smith: I wonder if it survived later events. He must have had a different outlook, or at least an outlook that had to have been affected by what both of them had been through.

Secchia: I think the line that he used that night about the pea patch is – there were other issues that he didn't realize were going on.

Smith: That gets to the heart of him in so many ways. There is a quote out there that says, "I always was truthful in my dealings with other people, and I expected other people to be truthful." On the one hand, you can say, thank God we have people like that in public life, but in certain circumstances you can also turn that around and say, "Boy, he's naïve." He was genuinely astonished that Nixon lied to him. That's the sense that one gets - that he was genuinely outraged by the language on the tapes and he was genuinely surprised that Nixon would lie to him.

Secchia: I think so. He didn't like anybody lying to him. He didn't think he would do it to people, why would they do it him? In the case of Nixon, again, I wish I could say that he told me something that would reveal a new light on this, but so many things he told me and so many things we talked about, I just automatically purged from my mind, because he was The President of the United States, and I was a lumber salesman from Grand Rapids. I really didn't expect to be involved in that level and the fact that our friendship flourished and the calls became more frequent and my visits became more frequent. We were his special guests for the Bicentennial Dinner. He said, "Betty and I have a surprise for you," and I didn't know what he was talking about. Then we got the invitation and turns out that, according to them, we were allowed to sit together at the same table, which is very unique and supposedly, per Betty, that "each time you have a state dinner, you allow one couple, and that's a

special significant award that we give to people we love. And you and Joan were given that honor.”

Now this is the Bicentennial Dinner. I couldn't even *rent* the right kind of tuxedo. I had to call Maria Downs, who was the social secretary and say, “Maria, what is a white tie?” Maria looked in the book and found pictures from the Kennedy events years ago and said, “Well, it looks just like a white tie.” So I went to see Gus Afendoulis, the Greek tailor, and he said, “Peter, I'll take care of you.” I went on a road trip to sell lumber and I came back and he had a white tux for me with black piping – a white tuxedo! I said, “Gus, I can't wear this!” He said, “Ah, they'll love ya!” I said, “Gus, I'll look like the Platters, you know, shaboom, shaboom, I can't do that!” He said, “Well, what is a white tie? This is a white tuxedo.”

Well, we finally found out that I needed a dickey, but nobody ever told me I needed a white vest [dickey]. So we got to the Hay-Adams and we were reading the paper as we were flying in, and the guest list is printed. It says people are paying a fortune for an invitation. The Queen of England is going to be there, and this is a big deal. So we get there – (I tell this story because there is humor in it). I go to the room and get dressed. If I pull my pants up to where they are supposed to be so that my stomach isn't showing, my ankles are hanging out, if I drop them down, my stomach is hanging out. Something is wrong with this outfit.

I go downstairs, my wife has got her hair all done, had an original outfit made. I go downstairs and bump into Bo Callaway. That ought to be on your list – a person to talk to. Bo Callaway had resigned as chairman of the Ford re-election campaign over the Crested Butte scandal where he had been former Secretary of the Army and had bought this giant ski resort property from the Army Corps of Engineers, so he felt it in his best interest to get out. I see Bo, and Bo comes from a very wealthy, successful family, so I say, “Bo, you want to ride over with us.” “Why sure Pete.” Well, it went downhill from there. Everybody else has limos coming up to the Adams. I'm flagging a cab. It's a hundred degrees, it's raining, it's humid – oh, it was awful! The cab driver I get is from someplace – Southern Africa, where it's warm. He's

wearing a winter ski cap, a jacket, no air conditioning, three fenders on a four-fender car, a dirty cab – it's a mess. Bo gets in, I get in the front seat, my wife and Bo and his wife get in the back seat. We get in - limousine, limousine, limousine, cab, limousine, limousine, one cab.

They re-route us around through the south because they are going to take it from the lawn, where it was going to be, to come into the east side of the White House. When we get there the bright lights are on and all the TV anchors are there and everybody is...I'm still not in the right kind of outfit, so I go to see Chief Justice Berger. I get out of the cab about fifty yards or thirty yards before the exit and I go up there and I look at Chief Justice Berger, and he looks at me like he's seen me before, and obviously I'm going to the event. He had on a cape, top hat, cane – I said, "Would you open your jacket so I can see? – I'm from Grand Rapids, I don't know what..." He opens his jacket – oh my God, there's a vest that you wear with a white tie, and I didn't have a vest, so that's why my dickey ended here and my stomach was there. So I go in the White House, Bo Callaway is just mortified, by the way when our cab pulls up.

I go in the White House and I find Rex Scouten, who was then the Head Usher, and I said, "I need help, Mr. Scouten, I need help." So he says, "What's the matter, Mr. Secchia?" "Oh my God," I said, "Do you have a fat waiter who's off duty tonight that I can borrow...?" Well, this whole thing was backwards. We were wearing white ties, and the staff was wearing black ties. So they take me in there and they unbuckle my studs (back then we wore these studs), and I had all this stuff and suspenders and cummerbund. They take me all apart, I'm sitting there with nothing on, they went down to get this vest – this Secret Service agent comes into the room. He points at me and says to his wrist microphone: "Keep them there, keep them there! There's some guy in here with no clothes on."

What happened was the Queen and the President had decided to come down the back elevator, through Mr. Scouten's office and I'm holding them up, right? So they are trying to put me back together. They can't put me outside the door because then I'm in where the Marine Band is playing, in the lobby.

They can't put me in the other end, because I'm at the elevator, so they are trying to get me put together. "It will be a minute! It will be a minute!" So finally they get me out and everybody had already gone out and they are waiting for the President and the Queen.

Well, we go downstairs and we present our invitation and it's got a table number. We do not know that we've got the same table number that's unique, because we go to parties in Grand Rapids. The Marine won't let us in. He says, "Something's wrong here." So he dials and says, "Who is this guy – what's the deal? And he's the guy." So they have us at a table with Alice Roosevelt Longworth and some other people, and I don't know anything about this. So finally, the Marine says, "Okay, go," and he announces us. We go out, and just as we go out all the lights are bright, shining on us. Loud applause. I said, "Joan, is my stomach showing?" "No." I said, "Joan, Jerry said we have a – this is a surprise – is something going on I don't know about it?" She says, "I don't know." "Do we wave? What do we do?" She says, "Just keep walking." Okay, so we kept walking.

What happened, is we came out in the Rose Garden, and the President and Queen came out upstairs on the portico right above us – so all the people were looking over us at them and applauding. And so we're standing there saying, "Oh my God, what's going on?"

So Ford thought this was funny because he liked this kind of humor. He loved to scorch friends, and did it twenty years later when Betty had her 20 year anniversary for the Betty Ford Center. I bought a table, and I couldn't find persons from Grand Rapids who wanted to fly out west to attend the dinner, so I gave the table back to the Ford staff and she seated my wife and me at a table of ten, with eight prominent Democrats, and one of them was Hillary Clinton. And all the first ladies arrive, except Hillary. She was late. She made a dramatic entrance and came to our table. The minute she sat the conversation began. [Joseph] Califano was next to me from Lyndon Johnson's years. The staff comes over from Betty Ford's table and says, "Mrs. Ford wants to know if you are enjoying your table?" I mean, it was like, always trying to have fun, but do it in a very subtle way.

Smith: He was impressed by Hillary Clinton. One sensed maybe he thought more of her than he did of her husband – in sheer intellectual ability.

Secchia: Jerry Ford might have thought that this was his coming out party for political correctness to be in admiration of a woman because, in his years of politics there were, other than Hale Boggs wife [Lindy], who came in and he was a friend of Lindy Boggs (that's another one you might want to interview). Lindy Boggs and he were friends. I don't know that, he probably said that to me, but I can't remember that.

Smith: Tell me about his sense of humor.

Secchia: Oh he had a great sense of humor. He didn't know how to laugh boisterously, or out loud, but we had a lot of fun. We had bets on Michigan-Michigan State. He went to China and the White House called me and said we don't have a copy of the music for the Michigan fight song. I said I'd get it to them right away, and I sent them the Michigan State fight song (their rival). I wasn't there, but supposedly it was written up in newspapers and magazines that when the plane arrived, he was greeted to the wrong fight song.

When we dedicated the Gerald R. Ford Freeway (US196), we had University of Michigan blankets and I was chairman of the dedication. So I put a Michigan State blanket under it, and when he pulled the rope, the University of Michigan blanket came off and the Grand Valley Band started to play *Hail to the Victors*. I had paid them to change over to the Michigan State song and I have a video tape with him turning to Governor Milliken and saying, "Where's Secchia?" I mean, to the point of when we dedicated this museum, his brothers had a policeman assigned to me to make sure I didn't do anything to embarrass him(at this event.

Smith: Now he did return the favor at the dedication of the airport.

Secchia: Yes, he was funny. (Oh, did you wrote the line? - obviously). That was a *very* funny line, and that's another issue. When I suggested that Kent County rename the airport, I had been given a tip by somebody out in California that Palm Springs was thinking about naming their airport Gerald R. Ford. I said,

wait a minute, we can't do that, we've got to...so I started talking to the commissioners and it was a fast-tracked project.

There were eighteen letters to the editor calling me everything but a decent human being – that I was being selfish doing this for my friend. That it was an ego trip for me – and it was not a pleasant situation. I lost three votes on the county commission – two of them were Republicans, actually, but we carried the day. When we flew home with Air Force One and the casket, and we landed at Gerald R. Ford International, it all came back to me that, as miserable as I felt and as awful as those letters were, we did the right thing. I remember, because the casket was in the compartment right in front of where I was sitting and I looked at it and I said, “You're coming home, Bubba.” I used to joke around with him because he was a football player – he'd say, “Why do you call me Bubba?” I said, “Football players are all Bubba.”

We had a lot of fun. His sense of humor was great. I know there are conflicting stories on this but, and you might have been here – I don't think so, I think it might have been Will Jones - I called him up and tried to convince him to come home to be buried here and his answer was, “Well, let me talk to Betty about that.” A few days later he called me back and said, “We're going to do it, Peter. Can you give us some more information?” So I got a catalog for diving and there was a ‘his and her’ wet suit advertisement. I said, “We checked the water tables, and I'd ordered this matching suit for them so they would be very comfortable.” Well, he called me back with, “You're kidding, aren't you?” He'd take humor to a certain point, but then he really got a little bit lost as to what, “Was it really supposed to be funny?”

Smith: He was a very literal guy.

The subject of religion, it is interesting, because people drew the contrast in '76 between a Carter who was very vocally born again and really came out of a southern, evangelical tradition. And yet my sense was, much more than the public knew, religion mattered, faith mattered to the Fords.

Who was Billy Zeoli?

Secchia: Billy Zeoli was – oh boy, this is one of those ones I’m going to have to read about – Billy Zeoli was a preacher who had an organization that, to this day, has some support from friends of ours. I think Doug DeVos happens to be the head of his organization. He spent most of his time with Christian athletes, and doing meetings and really got very big. Got divorced. Was a friend of Ford’s. I never really could figure out why, but I think because Jerry Ford was who he was, when someone offered to come out and pray with him, or be with him, he accepted that offer. Probably because he didn’t know how to deny it.

They were friends, but not close friends. They were friends because they shared that Christian issue. I remember when Jerry Ford became president, the night we were at his house in Arlington and he said to me, “What do you think I should do?” I said, “Why are you asking me? You’ve got Kissinger here, you’ve got all these people here.” He said, “You’re a friend.” I remember my comment back to him was, “Don’t F it up. You’ve got a chance here to do something.” He said, “Make me a list of what you think I should be concerned about.” I went back to my room in Washington that night, and I dictated nine points, one of them was: don’t bring God to you in the White House, like Nixon did, go out and go to church. Go out to be with the people in their churches. Two: Split Henry Kissinger’s job, he can’t be National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, it just isn’t going to work and it isn’t going to work for you when you get into campaign time. There was three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine and I used to get notes from him from the White House, number two is gone, number six is gone, number four is gone. He actually kept it and he would X it out and drop me a note. They weren’t any great tidbits of wisdom, they were just obvious to me that they would be clumsy for him.

Billy Zeoli offered him something that allowed him some Christian moments privately, because of what he did. But since I’m not part of their prayer circle, I can’t really comment on how it came about. But Billy was a friend of mine from just being somebody I saw around town. There were others he wasn’t friends with. He was a very, very different individual who built his organization and made religious films and sent out documents that Jerry Ford thought were wonderful, that they were teaching the gospel all over the world.

We never discussed that relationship. There were certain ones, I could ask you the same question, there were certain relationships you didn't discuss with him because they really weren't something you'd be interested in, or you were afraid you might say something that would make it difficult for everybody. This was one that I never really understood or got close to.

Smith: Did you sense that religion mattered? Presumably, coming out of his upbringing in the Ford household...

Secchia: No, I sensed that he had a strong faith, and that he did pray. I think Mike is a perfect example of that upbringing. Jack was on the other side of that. One of my tasks was, the night of the Bicentennial Dinner – I got a call from the President – he said, “I want you to watch Jack. I don't want him in Georgetown tonight, standing on a table smoking grass, or reading in the paper that he embarrassed the Queen of England and his country.” That is another humorous story, but when it came time after dinner to (at that time, almost everybody smoked). I saw Jack go out on the south portico to have a cigarette and I went out to talk to him.

My message to Jack was, “Look, tonight's a very important night for your father.” Now you remember, we're in the middle of the campaign - we are talking about July of the re-election year and I have been given the assignment to take care of the delegate (Mr. Reed) from Mississippi. Clarke Reed was his name.

“Peter, you're in charge of him. If he needs a coffee, get him a coffee. If he needs a drink, get him a drink. Ashtray? Yes, sir! I want Mr. Reed to have a wonderful time, but I want you to watch Jack.” So I go outside on the south portico to talk to Jack. I said, “Jack, now look, this is a very important night.” Jack had just started visiting Washington and going out and he was getting a little negative press. He was eighteen or nineteen or twenty, maybe twenty-one, but he was just at the stage where the president was concerned. So I went out to talk to him. I was thirty-seven, he was twenty-one. I thought, why am I doing this?...but just remind him not to do anything that would be embarrassing. So I go out to remind him. I don't *know* that he ever smoked. I don't know that he ever caused trouble, but I was just to remind him that this

was a special night and it could make a difference on a lot of delegates because we were very close in the delegate count for the August convention. Of course, the next month was the convention in Kansas City, where we had Jim Baker who was going to count our votes and we didn't know if we had the votes.

I went out and I'm talking to Jack and this British staffer came out wearing a black tie, and asked if I had a light. I did, so I lit his cigarette, and just to make conversation, I said, "Excuse me, what do you do for the Queen?" He says, "That's a rather personal question?" It was Prince Philip. I said, "I'm sorry, I'm from Grand Rapids, I didn't recognize you." He said, "Oh, I can deal with it, I have an agreement with the Queen mother and her daughter, that whoever was in the family...that I would never wear a white tie to one of her stuffy kind of..." Oh my God, I couldn't dig my way out of that hole, so meanwhile Jack is out there laughing and Prince Philip is thinking I'm a fool, and I couldn't wait to tell Jerry Ford that story. But we did get through the night and there were no problems. We did have a wonderful evening.

Smith: There was the famous incident when the Marine Band played *The Lady is a Tramp*.

Secchia: Right. That's because Jerry Ford, who loved to delegate to the people he cared about – he said, "Susan's in charge of the music tonight." Susan picked this, and I'm sitting there with Clarke Reed, "Would you like a cigarette? Would you like a drink Mr. Reed? Can I get your ashtray cleaned?" I could not believe it when that music started to play and my wife looked at me and I looked at my wife, "I can't believe this." That was that famous night. It was a long night, but it was a wonderful night and they did very well. The Fords were magnificent.

Smith: Were you surprised at all? There was a certain amount - Washington can be a pretty insular town – of condescension. Doubts about his intelligence, doubts about his athletic ability, etc, etc, etc. And she was condescended to in a different sort of way. The notion that this Cub Scout den mother from Grand Rapids was going to be in Jackie Kennedy's place. Did they ever talk about

that? How did they deal with that? Except simply to just do the job and disprove it.

Secchia: That didn't bother them – they recognized the criticism as based on East Coast values, but the fact that they were Midwesterners was a point of pride. Midwesterners might always have a problem getting in the club at Harvard, but he had gone to Yale, so he felt that he had earned whatever it was that they were in search of finding in their president. So it never really got to him. He never really let the letters to the editor, or the personal issues bother him.

Smith: Or Chevy Chase?

Secchia: Well, Chevy Chase was a – he laughed at Chevy Chase. He did not get mean about that. I chaired the Humor in the Presidency when we had Chevy Chase here in Grand Rapids and I can remember sitting with Tip O'Neill at Tootsie Van Kelly's - a little bar and pub that I owned here - for an hour and a half talking about the Chevy Chase issues and how he felt Ford was misjudged by people.

Smith: Was there real affection there between Tip and Ford?

Secchia: Without a doubt, without a doubt. A mutual admiration society. Both respected the opposition who can get the job done. It's funny, you can go to a football game and watch the linebacker from Michigan just totally destroy the running backs at Michigan State, and then watch the Michigan State quarterback just pepper the Michigan defense with completed passes. That quarterback leads one team and that linebacker leads the other team and they both lead them to the conclusion of the game, which might be a win or a loss, but they walk off the field with their arm around each other. They lead the opposition while you were throwing well. You made twenty-seven tackles – I mean they respected each other for what they were able to do for their team.

That mutual respect was based on knowledge, effectiveness and ability – where today the vitriolic discourse in D.C. is based on personality, church, past history, what you did in high school or college. Really – when is the last time you read about the debate of the effectiveness of a leader in the legislature rather than, well, he's one of *them*? Ick! So they had that respect,

and I would say I never saw a better relationship between two totally opposite political visionaries. That relationship is one that will someday be written about – how the odd couple they were. They were the odd couple. I could tell you more stories that he would tell me about Tip.

Smith: Tell us another one.

Secchia: Well, they would call each other when they had a problem on the floor. They would discuss an issue. Tip would say why I can't go here, but I can go here if you'll go here. And they worked those deals. Today, it's the pork barrel that's being offered by Senator Reid, or Nancy Pelosi – we'll put twenty million into your peanut farm subsidy in Georgia if you'll vote against the surge in Iraq. That's not the same as the relationship that Ford and Tip had. But while you need this for your caucus, there were little tweaks that they were able to work that got them both where they had to be eventually. But it wasn't so polarized and so vitriolic and so publicized and there wasn't a reporter standing behind every bush like the paparazzi would do a starlet.

That was a genuine affection, and maybe just a mutual respect that you didn't attack. If you told Jerry Ford you were angry at Tip O'Neill, keep it to yourself, "I'll work with Tip." I heard that. I remember a wonderful story when he told me that Jim Baker was going to be the next chairman of the Republican National Committee and I said, "I'm not getting that information." He said, "Well, what is your information?" I said, "Well, Bill Brock and his secretary, Muffett, (I think her name) [Secchia note: Muffett may have been his last name. The Sec. may have been Orror(?) Browning] are working very hard. I think they are close to getting the votes." He said, "Cheney (C.O.S then) tells me that Baker's got the votes." I said, "Well, you'd better count again, just so you don't get embarrassed."

Well, that night I had dinner with him and the two of us were upstairs. He had removed Mary Louise Smith (from Iowa) as the chairman of the RNC and he was going to replace her with Baker – get the election and replace her with Baker. We all know that Baker later became a very competent statesman, but at that time, he was not well known – he was a deputy secretary in Commerce and had been involved a little in the '76 campaign by counting delegates. He

was in charge of that. But, Ford called that night after dinner. Ford and I got into it and he asked me to leave the White House. That's the first time – he didn't just say, "let me get you a car and take you to your hotel," or you go on upstairs to sleep, whatever. He actually wanted me to leave the White House.

Smith: Over what?

Secchia: Over our discussion that he was wrong, that he shouldn't be backing Baker. It was going to blow up on him, and the fact that he had screwed up with Mary Louise Smith. That he never told – if you remember correctly – he never discussed it with Barry Goldwater, who made a big stink that the conservative wing of the party had been ignored on this switch, and they shouldn't have been. Well Reagan had his own candidate, Dick Richards, to be the chairman of the party because Reagan was running in the primary that summer and my discussion was coming from a chubby, chunky lumber salesman from Grand Rapids wearing jeans and a flannel shirt at the White House. So Gerald R. Ford said, "You don't know what you're talking about, we've got the votes. Baker's going to win. If I screwed up on Mary Louise Smith, it was.... I think it's time for you to go." Boing. I left the White House.

It was snowing and I didn't have a coat and I was staying at the Madison so I had to walk several blocks up Connecticut. I'll never forget that night. I laughed because I'd just been thrown out of the White House. My friend had asked me to leave – what did I do wrong? I only told him – and I'll never forget – I was freezing, there was snow coming down, there were no cell phones then, no cabs, dark – get to the Madison and walk into it – back then they had a small bar, very small. I went into the bar to get a beer and bartender says, "How you doing? How'd your night go?" I thought, "You don't want to hear it."

The next morning the phone rings. It's Nell Yates. I've got a 9:30 plane at DCA, which isn't far – 15 minutes from the hotel. "President wants to see you right away." I said, "I've got a plane at 9." She says, "Now. There's a car downstairs at the curb to pick you up." "Yes, ma'am." Quick, get up, shower, downstairs, in the car to the White House. Someone is meeting me, right inside – right to the Oval Office. President Ford is sitting there like this –

writing. Doesn't even look up. Says: "I checked with Cheney, I checked with Baker, we counted the votes, Baker is dropping out today, Bill Brock does have the votes. I've talked to Barry Goldwater and we put that to bed – that issue – and how the hell do you get so much information when you are out in Grand Rapids selling lumber? Now get outta here." And I left. He hardly even looked up.

The friendship, of course, rekindled, but he was already beginning to be out of touch as a president, getting information fed to him that wasn't really what was going on. I think then he found that he had to have more Pete Secchias in his world that he could talk to about what was really going on back home. After the election decided to move his voting registration to California. He asked me to do it quietly and carefully so that it wouldn't alarm people. It was basically based on two reasons. One is, he came back home and we went to dinner at the 1913 Room, he couldn't eat his dinner, between autographs, everybody who came to the table, "I went to high school with your brother's cousin's sister-in-law, and we're old friends and do you remember so and so," and we were trying to eat dinner and it was just awful. He said, this was right before he left the White House, "You know, I don't know that it's going be easy for me to be in Grand Rapids and Betty's health can't handle the climate." So then they went to California, and then they went there just, supposedly part-time.

Smith: But I take it that there was some local backlash.

Secchia: Big time. We had a family here, the Dilley family, and I don't know if you want to interview them, but they were always writing letters to the editor. They were the loyal opposition to Jerry Ford. Whatever he did, one of the brothers in the Dilley, Dilley, and Dilley law firm would have a letter to the editor. As recently as a few years ago on the airport naming, just vitriolic, they just could not stand him.

Smith: Do you know where that started?

Secchia: That started back in the '48 campaign through the family, but I didn't know that because I didn't get to be his friend until the '60s, so I don't have that information. Did you ever get hold of Maury DeJonge?

Smith: Yes, I'm going to see him Friday.

Secchia: There's where you're going to fill in the '48-'78 gap. He'll be great because he's got that newspaper mind and he's got that memory. He's probably got boxes of info. I have all these photos in my computer of Betty Ford in my kitchen making dinner for Jerry and Joan and me. She and I making...

Smith: Was she a good cook?

Secchia: Well, she was a good cook in the sense that she didn't often cook. It was the fact that she was comfortable in the kitchen – she put an apron on and helped me. I was making veal parmesan and I had an Italian recipe and she was chopping – she was doing okay. But we were friends and we were having fun, and that was more important than whether – but we had a nice time.

Smith: Tell me about that love-match. Because it was clearly a very close marriage. I think a lot of people were – I don't mean to say surprised – but I think a lot of people learned a lot of things at the time of his death. I think, particularly for younger people who were being introduced to him for the first time, there is one reason why, as the week went on, it built and built and built. Because people were contrasting what they were seeing with what we have. For a lot of folks, it came as news that the Fords had been married as long as they had. Everyone knows about Nancy and Ronnie, in part because Nancy and Ronnie wanted people to know about them.

Secchia: You've got to remember that period of time. You're coming after Jackie and President Kennedy - both accused of having their own little flings. Then you have the divorces of the Reagans and then you have the issues that go back to the Lyndon Johnson wild days. The relationship that Nixon had was not one that anybody ever really understood. So you add up all those years of the monarchy being a queen and a king are not – who's wearing the clothes, who's the boss?

Jerry Ford had this, in my judgment, this value of the worth of his wife that was very high, without being obsequiously subservient to the public. Privately, it was also, “Well, I want to talk to Betty about that.” There was never a major decision without, “I want to talk to Betty about that.” Now, not presidential decisions, and I’m not so sure that she was involved in the pardon, she may have been, but the issues that had to do with their life, she was “Mother says this, that’s the way it will be.” And that may be the result of that relationship that also forced him to feel comfortable saying to his real father, “I don’t want to see you again. My mother, my new father are very important to me. Mother rules.”

In his house, she, Betty, ruled because he was committed to being a legislator. And it is no different than many of the businessmen in my era – I go to the office, don’t call me, don’t bother me, let me do my work and I will try to get enough treasury to build, to get our kids’ teeth fixed, to get our kids into college, to get us a good health plan, to find us a nice home – and it was sort of an understanding of, “You do this, and I will do that.” It was a division of labor in that generation. This generation, the division is a battle between, well, I want to be a working wife and you can be the house husband, or you can do it a different way. But that changed. Betty and Jerry Ford – they were the post-World War II poster children. We’ve been through a war, our parents went through a Depression, we’re going to stay together no matter what. Nobody is going to come between us. But he was not a good husband. I mean, he was not home very often. He was on the road doing what he thought he had to do.

Smith: Maybe that’s when she developed some of her problems, particularly with alcohol, and the drug dependency, which really is an offshoot of the pain that she was going through.

Secchia: No question about that.

Smith: But the fact that he wasn’t there then.

Secchia: Where he really felt guilty – one of the things that he used to talk to me about was, he would say that he had to be somewhere, and he had to be somewhere

because he had jerks like me, who were running the Kent County Republican Party. “You’ve got to be at our dinner.” She was having pain and suffering, and he wasn’t going to share that with county chairman, but he had to be to an event because there were people attending. He would leave her alone and he would need somebody to be with her. Dr. Lukash, which I don’t know if he is still alive or not...

Smith: No, he’s passed away.

Secchia: Dr. Lukash would have been a great interview because he knew the inside of a lot of things and he was a very dedicated friend of theirs. GRF knew that he had to have somebody, a surrogate person – sometimes it was me, sometimes it was somebody else there but that wasn’t really guilt as much as it was defensive. He felt: “I have to do what I have to do, so I’d better find somebody else to be there.”

Smith: But go down the road, after they left Washington and the intervention takes place. I’m just wondering whether by that time he felt any sort of responsibility, simply for the fact that he let this creep up on him.

Secchia: There were issues that bothered the family. One day I received a phone call from Betty Ford and it was a very difficult conversation because she said, “Peter, this is Betty.” “Hi, Betty.” “They did it to me again.” I said, “What are you talking about?” She said, “They did it to me again.” I said, “I’m sorry, what did they do?” She replied: “I went to this doctor and he gave me too much medication. They just don’t want me to leave their office and be able to say that they weren’t able to help me. So they are over-compensating me with pain killer.”

I had been aware of the issues with a couple of drinks, maybe one, maybe two, and the combination of the pain killer, and I immediately hung up the phone and called their C.O.S. Barrett. I didn’t want to call him and say, “Hey, I just got a disturbing call from your wife.” So I said to Bob, “What do we do about this, guys? Here’s the phone call I got.” But I think Barrett was working with the kids and developing this intervention. I don’t even know what happened because I wasn’t that close to Bob. But, I was probably a threat to

Bob because I was very close to the president. Penny Circle told me that Bob didn't want anybody else close to the president. But that's okay because I was here and I didn't want to be flying back and forth to Palm Springs.

That call was a telling moment that Betty was out of control and she had no way to handle this. Then when I got into it, I found it was a pretty common occurrence that a doctor had Betty Ford as a client and would try to reduce her pain. He surely didn't want her telling the neighborhood in his market that he wasn't competent – or unable to improve her health, so he gave her a little extra medication. That was the part I knew about. Susan discussed the intervention with me and what they were going to do as a family. Susan was the one who called me to tell me he was going to be vice president and she wasn't supposed to tell me. That's another funny story about the Ford relationship.

I was home and she called me. She said, "Peter, I'm not allowed to tell you this, but Mom's getting dressed." "Mom's getting dressed?" "Yes, she's getting dressed up. She's been invited tonight to the White House." I thought, "What's going on here, what's she trying to tell me?" She said, "I can't tell you anything more than that." I thought, "What is she talking about?" So I hung up the phone. We were watching the six o'clock national news or what we saw in Grand Rapids then, and they were talking about going to be in the East Room tonight and Nixon is going to announce his choice of vice president, I thought. "Mom's getting dressed – I'm not allowed to tell you this." Oh my God, he's going to be the vice presidential nominee. I'm going to make some money on this deal.

So I call three guys who I knew were interested in politics, or involved - friends of mine (not activists). Calls: I found a babysitter, got a voice mail message, and had a no answer. I couldn't make a single ten dollar bet that Ford was going to be Vice President of the United States. Well, twenty minutes later they opened up the TV at seven-thirty or eight o'clock, whatever it was, and Nixon came to the podium, and I'm watching with Joan, and they announce that Jerry Ford would be the vice president. I said, "I didn't make a buck on it. I could have had more fun with that."

Smith: My sense was, he was so proud of her. First of all, for what she had overcome, but secondly, for what she created with the Betty Ford Center. She got the Medal of Honor long before he got the Medal of Honor. She probably had higher poll ratings than he did, etc., etc., etc. And yet my sense was, that was wonderful.

Secchia: His self-deprecating humor about how the fact that Betty was more popular than he was when he was campaigning, was always a very effective line, I thought, because it endeared him to all those other women of that generation who were never recognized as being the competent leaders they were.

Smith: What does it tell you also about, just the White House climate, when the *Sixty Minutes* interview aired, the immediate reaction was, “Oh my God, this is terrible!”

Secchia: After what?

Smith: In the White House, when she did the famous interview with Morley Safer, and talked about what she would do if Susan said she was having an affair, and she talked about, what if her kids were smoking grass – and abortion, etc., etc. First Ladies never talked about those things before and it really was a watershed moment in many, many ways. Not surprisingly, the political team in the White House thought, “Oh my God, this is terrible!” It took a few days for the polls to come in and to their astonishment, there were a lot of people who found it very refreshing. It really was, in many ways, the beginning of her reputation as a bit of a free spirit, someone who actually, without maybe deliberately trying to, contributed to the openness of the Ford White House. It actually advanced that storyline. But the immediate reaction was, “Oh my God, this is a disaster!”

Secchia: And his reaction to that was the most surprising. He could have used one of the trite, “Well, that’s Betty being Betty.” The typical answer many of us husbands might use, but he said, “That’s her opinion, and we don’t agree on everything.” They had the same discussion about women’s rights and the ERA, and he had to be careful in his re-election campaign. But his reaction to what she said was very supportive of her, and really that might have been a

watershed moment for his presidency, rather than her statement being a watershed moment for the First Lady.

Smith: Jump ahead, because in later years, they'd go to every Republican convention, and every four years they were more and more isolated in a lot of ways.

Secchia: Are you talking about the Philadelphia convention in '92?

Smith: Whether it was abortion or gay rights or issues where the party went this way, my question is: did he change, and how much of it was her influence – or was it simply that the party went this way – because, let's face it, when he was in the White House he was viewed as the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge. But in many ways, conservatism was about to undergo a redefinition, particularly on social issues. There were things that weren't on the agenda in the Fifth District in Michigan. Tell me if I'm wrong: conservatism, first and foremost, was a matter of matter of economics and foreign policy. But there were a host of issues that, frankly, you just didn't discuss. Let alone regard as part of the public agenda.

Secchia: Well, the Right to Life and the ERA were already being discussed quite openly. But Jerry Ford never really was a straight party guy – a partisan kind of House Speaker. I tried to explain this to John McCain when he was at my home last week (spring of 2008). I said, "You know, you and Jerry Ford have a lot in common in the way you approach things." I wanted him [McCain] to come to the burial site, but he flew into Muskegon and it was too long a drive, but he will be here, I'm sure. I don't think he even noticed, or has read enough to realize that he and GRF are similar. But Ford did speak out against his party on several issues, and I don't think GRF changed. I think the party changed. But again, it's part of the Internet, the information, the 24 hour news cycle. We now discuss all these issues 24/7. While you and I are sleeping, somebody is blogging away and some Drudge report being written about what you, or somebody said. And somebody else is running with it and using it. Jerry Ford really never changed. He might have been more vocal on some issues that he didn't want to make front page with when he was in the White House.

Smith: How much of an influence do you think she was?

Secchia: She was a strong influence, and I don't think the influence diminished. I think she was a strong influence pre the White House, during the White House, and after the White House. It's just that he was so busy pre the White House, being a Legislator and a House Leader that he didn't spend a lot of time discussing family issues with her. When he was in the White House, he really felt it important because he needed to hear other viewpoints than just his palace guard. That's how his relationship with Rumsfeld and Cheney started to develop, because he found those two to be two that he could always count on to tell him the truth. But in many cases, not what he wanted to hear – but the truth. There were others that were not so close because they weren't seen that way by him.

Smith: Was it awkward for him in later years? Particularly, let's face it, over the last eight years, in terms of the alumni from his administration like Paul O'Neill, or Cheney, or Rumsfeld. Did you discuss it?

Secchia: We did. He would talk to me about, in the case of Paul O'Neill. He thought Paul was a great public servant and a wonderful, bright young man, who may have said a few things that he shouldn't say. But Jerry Ford was never one to be vitriolic against somebody who spoke what they felt they had to say (including his wife). It was like, well, that's what she thinks she has to say. That's what Paul thought he had to say. He kept his faith in Paul and his friendship with Paul throughout all of that. So, was it difficult for him? No. But there were people who had served in his administration who, at times, had to explain their actions to him, without him demanding the explanation. It was just sort of an automatic camaraderie amongst that group of people. "You know what I just said was written up, I think I'd better call." Henry Kissinger was a perfect example. He was always chewing on some piece of foot leather that he had in his mouth, and he would call the president and explain it. The president was always very good about that. "Well Henry told me what really happened, and..."

Smith: Was he too nice to be president?

Secchia: Could he have been re-elected if he hadn't been so nice? Probably. But, he and I had this discussion many times. When you run for the Presidency and you lose by one voter precinct in Ohio, a couple thousand votes in Hawaii or Washington – it boils down to: what cost you the election? Was it the pardon, was it the stumbling, was it the knee that collapsed on the airplane, was it the Chevy Chase mocking you every night, was it the comment you made about “Drop dead New York.” None of these. All of these impacted (each of them) the election by a tenth of a percentage point. But if you have eight or ten of these, you have a percentage point, and percentage point is a 51-49, and you get close, but you don't get closure. None of them by themselves, Betty's position on the ERA, that's one of my 10-15 items, they all cost him a little.

Smith: And the Reagan challenge.

Secchia: Well, the Reagan challenge, I think, helped him. I think if Reagan hadn't challenged him, he wouldn't have campaigned in Minnesota and other non-Ford states. He wouldn't have turned out the vote.

Smith: That's interesting, because I've also argued this, that it made him a better candidate.

Secchia: It made him a better candidate, but it made him a more understood candidate. To get people out to the polls they have to be pumped, you just can't depend on a party mechanism getting people to the polls. You have to believe in the candidate. If they've never met him, they're not going to believe in him. I often would say to him, “Look, say thank you to Ronald Reagan.”

Now going to the convention in 1980, when they were talking about – when they said Jerry Ford might be vice president. A rather funny story that night. He gave me his phone number for his suite, and said, “Call me if there is anything you think I should know.” I had promised Guy Vander Jagt that I would keep the Michigan delegation in their seats when he spoke. He had the keynote address that night (postponed one day). I had made a promise to him that I would keep the Michigan delegates in their seats. I was, at that time, the Republican National Committeeman, and soon to be elected Vice Chairman of the Party, but he felt I had some influence and I said I'd do that.

We ran a full page ad for Guy Vander Jagt for Vice President. Jim Sparling, who was his administrative assistant, and I and a few others paid for that, and we tried to get Guy consideration. It's not unusual that you do that for a vice presidential candidate. In fact, I was on the phone with Cheney trying to convince him to consider Engler when Cheney flew to Texas and Bush convinced him to take the VP job. I mean, this is always something you're doing if you have friends that are involved. At this particular (Detroit) convention, I had the phone number and Bob Griffin asked me for it. I said, "I can't give it to you. He told me this is just to use if I need to talk to him."

And, of course, the word was then out. In 1980 the TV anchor guys carried giant backpacks with antennas and they wanted interviews. Pettit, (Tom Pettit) from NBC came to me to interview me because he said, "I hear that you say that Jerry Ford will not be the vice president of the United States. I'd like to interview you to find out why you say that." I said, "I can't talk right now, we're getting ready for Vander Jagt's address, and when he's done, I'll be happy to talk to you, but right now I've got to keep the delegates in their seats." Well, people were not in their seats because the word was Jerry Ford was being considered. Vander Jagt was trying to get that same job. Vander Jagt was the keynote speaker. Ford was up in his room and this current back and forth – who's doing it – who's orchestrating it – I'm on the floor as a delegate. So Pettit's there and I can hear him telling his control booth, "Well, Vander Jagt spoke for forty-five minutes and never stopped, never ended." By the time it ended, Pettit was gone.

Smith: By the time that ended, it also ended for Vander Jagt.

Secchia: By the time the speech ended. But, I saw NBC's Tom Pettit the next morning in the gift shop in the hotel. He asked me, "Why were you so adamant with everybody who asked you, that Ford would not be the vice president _____?" I said, "Well, it's pretty obvious to me because Ford lives in California, Reagan lives in California. One of them has to move, and I don't think you're going to ever convince either one of them they should move for the other. But I thought I learned in fifth grade constitutional studies that that was the deal." Pettit says, "Oh my God, that never came up last

night.” You go back and you look at all the transcripts and it never came up in all the discussions. Then 30 years later Cheney moves back from Texas to Wyoming to run for vice president. He got a lot of heat for that. But even though he was from Wyoming, and he’d only temporarily gone with Halliburton to Texas, when he moved back home, it appeared to be the kind of move that Ford - and you know from your interviews with Ford and Reagan, that that relationship would have had a hard time understanding, well, who is moving? You can’t ask Reagan to move – that was not going to happen.

Smith: Was it ever really seriously – my sense is that it’s been exaggerated over the years.

Secchia: Here’s what happened that evening. I gave that suite phone number to Senator Bob Griffin because he convinced me he had to talk to Ford. Told him to tell no one. About an hour later I’m walking – you know how you fight your way through a convention – I see this gathering and all these antennas sticking up from all those backpacks. Bob Griffin was having a small press conference – I’m watching from the back. He says, “I have his private number up in his suite and I’ve been talking to them.” I thought, “You #@% (mumbling). That was terrible. I was offended. I told him later I thought that was a cheap shot. “That was not what I gave it to you for.” I don’t think the idea was ever serious, but Barrett or Kissinger could tell you that they didn’t tell me. I don’t think it would have worked. I don’t think Jerry Ford would ever be the architect of it. He might have used it to negotiate from his congressional days, learning how you negotiate it. And he might have been to help some of his friends who were in his cabinet become part of Reagan’s leadership group.

Smith: I can’t image Mrs. Ford would have been thrilled about the idea.

Secchia: I don’t know where it came from. I was so adamantly convinced that it wasn’t going to happen, I didn’t give it much credibility.

Smith: Remember who was doing the negotiating supposedly for the Ford team – Kissinger, Greenspan, one other, I don’t remember.

Secchia: You'll probably interview one of them and you'll find out what really happened, but I don't think it had any credibility whatsoever with the delegates. In my judgment they wanted to be "back in the action." Ford group (individuals) may have.

Smith: Let me ask you, because you mentioned Barrett's name, when the President first left the White House, he signed up for a lot of things which were actually beyond criticism. He had a deal with NBC, obviously was going to write his memoirs and all that – and even going on some boards that would have passed muster. But there was criticism that he was "cashing in" on the presidency. People didn't know that he had to raise nine million dollars to build this Gerald R. Ford Museum building, which he said later was the toughest thing he ever did.

There are a lot of things people didn't know, but the deals like the Franklin Mint – there were commercial ventures that in retrospect might best have been passed. I always wondered about the dynamic of that, because a really good staff person is counterintuitive, and they protect you from yourself. I wondered whether that was not the case at that point. Whether basically, for the first time in his life, he [Ford] saw how easy it was to make a lot of money. He hadn't made money and he had family he wanted to take care of, he had kids he wanted to leave...

Secchia: I think those first four years were tough because, first off, the house that was his office was gifted by Firestone to the University of Southern California (USC), and it was, at his death, to go back to them. So they had, in actuality, a charitable remainder trust where they had made their gift to the University and it was their building on a sublease to the Ford people. There were overhead expenses that had to be met, and that's where Sandy Weil comes in and some of the American Express boards that were always questioned.

But now you have to put it all in perspective. Four years later when Jimmy Carter lost and then he went into the post-presidency period, building Habitat for Humanity and not being the big board member and not making the big bucks, staying in Plains, Georgia. He was fitting a mold that would put pressure on another former president to go out and not do things. The staff is

trying to be the balance. But then you have the Herbert Walker Bush victory, and the post-'92 when fifteen years ago Ford is still alive and healthy, and '74 Bush making a million dollars to give a speech. I don't know if it was a million, but he got paid big bucks to go to Tokyo and give a speech.

Smith: Reagan. Reagan famously goes to Japan – gets two million dollars for two speeches.

Secchia: Right. You see what other past presidents are now doing and you say, “Wait a minute,” I was worried about Ford taking this \$80,000 a year as a board member, or this \$50,000 to give a speech, and another former president is making two million. Everything that you do seems less destructive to the image of the presidency if others have already violated it to great extremes. And it wasn't just Reagan and wasn't just Democrat vs Republicans. Clinton was just out hustling – Ford, Reagan, the money they raised for their museums. Ford's money that he raised was from people who aren't part of that Washington scene. We (Ford administration) didn't have any relationships with Kuwait, or some of these countries that made big Bush '41 contributions. So I think a lot of what Ford did in his later years was a little more open market acceptable.

It's really now out of control when you look at what Clinton has reported he's earned since his presidency – what his wife as earned since her First Ladyship. It's just like “Wow, how could anybody ever say Ford did anything wrong.” If the Franklin Mint made him a couple hundred grand, it's nothing compared to what these people make now. I think all of that changed over these years (1976-2006).

Smith: In fact, correct me if I'm wrong, but a lot of those Ford speaking fees actually came back to the Foundation.

Secchia: Toward the end, a lot of the speaking fees came to the Foundation because we arranged it where it was convenient to do that. Where, rather than Jerry Ford by himself, with very little staff, Barrett or Penny, or someone saying, “He needs to have a private plane and \$25,000 or \$50,000 written out to the Foundation.” That was a way to keep it out of the mainstream of concerned

citizen dialogue. It made it easier for all of us because it was money for the Ford Foundation.

The other side of it – making the money the legitimate way – was dwarfed by his successors, whether it be George Herbert Walker Bush or Reagan, and they both did very well. Bush didn't really need the money, he just did it because it was what Reagan had done, and it seemed okay. But that was ten-twelve years after Ford.

Smith: It's another chapter of that whole ex-presidency story, because people looked at Jimmy Carter and said, "Boy, isn't this admirable?" This guy's out there building houses and eradicating disease and off negotiating peace settlements. My sense was Ford could, on one level agree that was admirable. At the same time he had a much more, shall we say, traditional view of an ex-president's responsibility. That basically, if a president asked him to do something, he'd do it. But he also took very seriously the fact that there is only one president, and only one secretary of state. And that with the best of intentions, an ex-president, no matter who it is, could really gum up public policy.

Secchia: You have to also remember that when Ford left the White House, Jimmy Carter was the bane of his existence, and that over the next several years they leaned on each other and made some "you help me, I'll help you" kind of deals and they became good friends. So, even though, yes he would say that was wrong because there is only one secretary of state, he would also just, as Jerry Ford would, look the other way and worry about something else.

Smith: I shouldn't express an opinion on this, but I thought that the worst part of the Mike Lloyd excerpts was very little context. They left out that long period when Carter and Ford, in fact, really were friends. He campaigned in '80 against Carter, but after '80 there was a quarter century when they became good friends, and had a lot of respect for each other. The wives, clearly, became very close – had a lot of shared interests, and the like.

That was all left out because that wasn't headline material. I thought at the funeral, one of the images that will remain, was when I was standing up there – you're in a fog – and you don't really notice a lot of things, but I read

afterwards that Roselyn Carter was weeping in her pew. Who would have predicted that thirty years earlier? And what does that tell you about these people and the friendship that existed? Yet none of that found its way into the post ex-post facto reconstruction of those thirty years.

Secchia: It is a friendship that will endure. The Bo Schembechler empty seat and Roselyn Carter weeping – all the little things you saw, that you knew if you were close to him – they weren't a surprise to me. I mean, that was just expected. It was vintage Jerry Ford.

Smith: Were you surprised at all by the reaction – the outpouring, not only here, but elsewhere?

Secchia: When I flew to Washington, I was just part of the turtles coming home. You gravitate to where that is going to be, but then to be invited on Air Force One to come home on Air Force One. I never left my seat – I watched the casket, I didn't go to the window and look at Michigan stadium when the plane flew over. I was sitting there trying to think, (in that hour and a half) about “how we got where we are,” and “what would happen when we got home.” When we first hit Patterson Avenue, (we came out that back road and we went down Patterson Avenue) I saw people three and four deep, parking their cars up on the lawns of industrial buildings. Then we came to 28th Street and we turned right and they were four, five and six deep. I started to read the signs, “Welcome home, the gentleman from Grand Rapids,” “Thank you, Mr. Ford.” Boy Scouts saluting, veterans in their uniforms, and then we turned on the 296 expressway and the traffic was stopped in both directions – it wasn't supposed to be stopped on the eastbound lanes, but all cars stopped.

They had on the radio, and they had their kids – this is the middle, or first week of a Michigan January – they had their kids up on the roof of the car – they had cameras out – they were waving, and as the procession got closer to town the traffic and people were hanging off the overhead bridges, and the thicker the crowd got, the closer we were to downtown. We pulled up on Bridge Street to cross over to the Museum, and they were twenty people thick - including World War I veterans. This was not an organized crowd. I've turned out crowds for presidential visits and vice presidential visits –

candidates' visits. I've got pictures of Reagan and me and Ford and the campaign in 1976 and 1980, and beyond. I've got all these pictures. We had to work the crowd. You get these people out, you're in charge of that. You get the uniforms, you get the Scouts over here. We'd bring in bands to fill up space. We hung banners to keep the camera picture right. None of that was done – there was no organized effort. This all was spontaneous.

Closer to the Museum (where he was going to lie in state), the crowd was thicker and thicker and thicker. It got more quiet – it was respectful. The surprise wasn't just the turnout, the surprise was the line to go by the casket. To walk that line as I did the next morning and saw Jack Lousma, our candidate for Senate in 1984, an astronaut who had resigned his Marine Corps to come home, and Jerry Ford endorsed. To see people – the Secretary of State (Michigan) – to see these people who waited in line for three, four and five hours, to proceed past the casket and pay their respects was just an unbelievable turnout.

As we drove into town in the car, I was thinking to myself, I'd ridden this path many times with him when nobody paid much attention and I just felt like DaVinci or Michelangelo. Like you've completed a piece of art – you wrote a symphony of your life that is now being applauded – the applause is deafening, and I hope you are looking down and you're seeing this because this the way they are saying, "Thank you for what you did, what you stood for."

I know the family was just unbelievably impressed by that crowd and the continued fervor into the next day, and then the procession to the church and the way back. I remember seeing a Scout standing outside in the cold in a short-sleeved shirt saluting. And then we went to the church and that was a long process – getting the casket out – the service. By riding by that same Scout and the same people still standing out there, saluting. It was just marvelous. Was I surprised? Yes. Was I grateful? Yes. Did I feel that he was out from under the joke of being the yokel, being the uncoordinated, being not the president people wanted? I think the whole world saw a whole new perspective on that.

Smith: Yeah. I was wearing two hats that week. The first part of the week I was with ABC, and I sensed the media, in particular, were astonished at the reaction and how it grew and grew and grew as the week went by. I think part of it was the timing – it was after the election and people desperately wanted to feel good about their government and Ford, as I said, was being introduced to a lot of people for the first time, and they were contrasting his qualities and the kind of politics that he practiced with the ugly and personal today. All of that. There is a little bit of misplaced nostalgia because people forgot, there was no era of good feelings in the 70s. Anyone who remembered Vietnam and Watergate and the stridency of that period, but the difference was that Ford never joined that. He never had an enemy, at least he didn't think he had enemies. Again, the contrast – I think that's part of – it was kind of Trumanesque phenomenon that was going on as the week unfolded, and there was some contrast with the grandeur, understandable, the elegance of the Reagan funeral, which was truly an occasion of state.

Secchia: I think we have to remember that if you were under the age of 45 in 2006 you had no recollection of Ford's years. Maybe 50? If you were ten years old, do you pay any attention to Washington politics? So, forty years ago, fifty years ago, basically the kids who were coming by the casket and families were the older generation, sort of like taking my family back to my roots in Italy. When you are bringing people back to your roots, this is the kind of man that represented us. So half of America didn't remember that. But they were taught it and I think the media was shocked that that happened. I have no question about it. The next day was just an awesome day. I don't remember much of it because I was in a fog. I did a lot of crying. Did you already interview Leon Parma?

Smith: Yeah.

Secchia: They were in a car with me. It was the most disappointing moment I had the whole week. I was riding in the motorcade - Jack Nicklaus in the middle and Leon Parma on the outside. I was looking out the window. I saw these emotional signs and kids and people in wheelchairs and knew they had been waiting for hours. It was a clear day, but it was cold. Parma kept saying to

Nicklaus, “I remember in ’94 when you missed that putt on the 17th hole in the...” and I’d say “Look at that sign – look at those people,” and I was losing it. I thought, “This is amazing, it was just amazing.” And then Parma would say, (Jack was a polite guy, nice guy that he is) “You know, I remember you and Fuzzy Thurston on that interview.” We were almost to downtown; the people were hanging off the bridge rafters of the overpass. I shouted, “This is absolutely amazing,” and Parma came up with another golf story. I turned to the two of them and I said, “You know, we’re here to bury our friend. Would you pay f---ing attention to what’s going on and stop talking about golf?” And there was silence. I was so angry – not at Jack, but at Leon.

The next morning Jack Nicklaus came up to me and he said, “You know, I found out why you were so concerned.” I thought, “Well, good for you.” He said, “You don’t like golf.” “No, that isn’t it...I like the man we were here to honor and I didn’t think the conversation was appropriate.” I’ll never see him again, and I’ll never get to talk to him again, but I’m sure that kind of activity went on throughout the week, and I’m sure you were in the media wagons and you heard some conversations.

Smith: His health really remained pretty extraordinary up to his ninetieth birthday. It seemed to me, because I wasn’t here then, that when he concluded or was no doubt told, by his doctors, “You really can’t travel anymore.” That that was like switching a switch – that part of his life was over – a part that he really cherished. That was right about that time.

Secchia: I chaired his ninetieth birthday party, and, have you seen the photo where we took with him with all the kids? We put together a committee. Others didn’t want to do this, but I thought, we’ve got to do that because these kids, I think we allowed eight years and under or ten years and under, these kids will never meet a president, so let’s have a picture that’s a “forever picture.” We sold it here at the museum, and thousands of kids and ten thousand people showed up for that birthday party, and he was speaking very clearly. But, he was eloquent. He was tired.

We had him in a golf cart, but he did a marvelous job. He and I spent a lot of time together on that particular trip. We had a chance to reminisce about some

of the things that we had done together, or that he had done. He got a big kick out of the Cabinet Room that I had funded for the museum. I said, "I did that for you. I didn't do that for any archivist or for anybody else. That's for you because I was in that room with you and you told me what happened in that room." (sometimes)

He was still pretty lucid, and I visited him shortly thereafter in Palm Springs and he was sitting in a chair, watching the University of Michigan game. It was basketball season and I had Governor John Engler with me because my company had a board meeting out there. The others (Directors) all went to play golf and we made arrangements to go over and pay our respects to President Ford.

Michigan was playing basketball that day on cable TV. We three sat in his office... and had a nice chat. I looked at my watch and I said, "Well, you know, if you'd spring a few bucks you ol' tightwad, maybe you could watch the Michigan game on cable," (you had to have special pay-per-view rights). He said, "Oh, I do." I said, "Well then, why are we sitting here?" Well, he got up instantly and we took the path over to the house. He forgot his cane. Judy came running down the path and down the sidewalk after us. "Mr. President, Mr. President, you forgot your cane!" He was so intent on watching his Wolverines play that he forgot that he needed a cane (or his walker). We went quickly and Engler followed us, we went in the house (in that back door through that little narrow area where they had their personal goodies). We went inside and watched the game. He sat in his chair right in front of the screen. He knew every player, what they had done, what their record was. We sat there and watched that game, and he didn't take any phone calls. He got to watch his Michigan Wolverines. After the game, we left and I said to Penny Circle, "I can't believe he spent the money to get that extra package on cable TV." She said, "He didn't, somebody gave it to him." We all know he didn't change.

I know the last time I came to visit him, he was not going to the office much.

Smith: Do you know how close that was to the end?

Secchia: No, I don't know.

Smith: Within the last year?

Secchia: I never admitted the end was coming. I could look it up and research it but, he got out of bed and came out and gave me a hug. Betty was in her robe wearing – probably the hundred times I saw Betty over the years, she was in a robe 80 times – she loves being in a robe and a pair of slippers and just hanging out. She too came out and we chatted about a few things. You don't measure it – you don't want the end to ever come, so I never did that to the end. It was always, "Remember the time we did this, remember the time we did that?" We'd laugh about things. It was the way I wanted to remember him.

Smith: This may be speculative, but that ninetieth birthday, I think that's the last time he was in Grand Rapids.

Secchia: See, I don't even know that.

Smith: Yeah, I think that was the last time, and I wonder if he realized that that would probably be the last time that he'd be here.

Secchia: Richard, you're the historian, I don't know that. I don't know that he didn't come back again. He was ninety-two when he died, was he?

Smith: Ninety-three.

Secchia: He probably didn't come back because – that was an outpouring – they ran thousands of people through the museum that day.

Smith: He was very proud of this place, wasn't he?

Secchia: Yes and he was really proud that his friends made it happen, but it was not an easy thing for him and he said it was difficult. It was difficult for him. When Bush calls Kuwait and he gets a pile of money for his museum, or Clinton calls so and so. If we asked Ford to call somebody like a Max Fisher, we might get a hundred grand out of him, not a hundred million or not a fifty million. I would call Ford and say, "Hey, you know Max is getting old, you'd better call him because we're soon going to lose him." And we lost him. We

never got that big gift that Max said was going to come to the Gerald R. Ford Foundation. We had a lot of people like that, because Ford didn't want to ask. And he didn't have a right-hand man who was a fundraiser.

We can all go back and look at who raised the money for this guy and that guy. We didn't have that. Carl Morgenstern was the first financial chairman for this, and then he went to Florida all winter and we didn't have funding to pay the bills. So I took over and then I was asked to resign because we needed the Democrat legislature's approval to fund the money to buy the land, and Tom Mattieu, a legislator at the time, went to one of the Ford brothers and said, "As long as Secchia's name is on that committee we're not going to appropriate the money." So the brother came to me, and I said, "Well, I'll be happy to resign." So I resigned and then later I continued to raise the money.

Smith: Was there ever any doubt – I understood he was offered other building sites. There were parcels identified on the outskirts of town?

Secchia: Yeah. Out there by the East Beltline and there were other community leaders who wouldn't accept that. I think Mary Ann Keeler was one of the people who insisted it be downtown. Mostly wanted it to be downtown. I don't think there was any real movement – there was some consideration, either Fred Meijer or somebody had the land. I'm not so sure Fred knew him that well early in the years, because Fred was trying very hard to not be partisan, not to be involved with anyone personally.

Smith: Was it seen, in fact, as a catalyst for downtown revitalization?

Secchia: It was one of the keys. The Celebration on the Grand was started year we opened the museum, and I was its first chairman. We had a salmon fishing contest, a bike ride, fireworks, the opening of the museum, the opening of the art museum, and the opening of the DeVos Performance Hall, and we had all that thrown together. We dedicated the hotel. So we put all that into a package and we called it "Celebration on the Grand," and we just had our twenty-seventh or twenty-eighth Celebration on the Grand. Well, the salmon contest is gone, the bike race has been moved to a different time of year, and we try to celebrate ourselves. The museum, the hotel, and the art museum were the

catalysts, because we ended up – we really dedicated the DeVos Performance Hall the year before.

Smith: He must have been impressed when he would come back in the later years, and see what had happened downtown.

Secchia: Oh, he was enamored with that. It was his parade – in 1976 we scheduled a parade – the one that the guy who wrote the book, “Say It After I’m Dead.”

Smith: Tom DeFrank.

Secchia: Tom DeFrank. When Tom DeFrank came here he referred to the fact that he has a press badge that Jerry called himself Jerry when he was president. Well, this was an event I put on, and I called it Jerry’s Hometown Downtown Celebration. All the press credentials said, “Jerry’s Hometown Downtown” or “Jerry’s Hometown Downtown Celebration” and Tom DeFrank made a big thing about how GRF was this humble guy. I’ll never forget the event. We held it at the Calder Plaza, and he was vice president at the time.

Then in ’76 his staff wanted me to host a parade. He came home to vote the night before, and they refused to allow me to have the parade because there were so many empty buildings between the Pantlind and Jefferson Ave and they didn’t have enough police to man the empty space. Of course, this is only thirteen years after Kennedy’s assassination in Dallas, and so empty second and third story buildings were a big fear of the Secret Service. It took a lot of negotiations and I found off-duty policemen and off-duty retired to wear their uniforms and pack their, if they were allowed to carry, heat. They took all the positions and I was able to go back to the Secret Service and we did it. Then we got a call that night from Bob Teeter and he wanted to cancel the parade.

He said, “If we go back to Ohio, we can win Ohio.” Betty got on the phone – (they were in Air Force One) – she said, “Peter, we’re coming home. Jerry’s tired. There’s no voice left.” I had a broken leg at the time and I was in a golf cart, and I had forty-some bands and I had a big parade – thousands of people to welcome them home that night. After that night I had a meeting with the leadership in the community about how we had to do something about all these empty buildings and how we almost lost this Presidential homecoming

and it was a blight on our downtown and they all said, you're right, and they all committed, and that's why we have a lot of the buildings today with the Van Andel Museum, the Meijers Heart Center and all the buildings along downtown that have names of philanthropy.

Grand Rapids, in that thirty years, from '76, the night of the parade, until 2006, became designated the number two philanthropic city in America, because the families all gave money for all this redevelopment. Jerry Ford always saw this as important to his legacy and it was, because little did he know that his downtown procession would be through those same streets.

Smith: It's ironic, you can bracket the story between two parades, one that almost never was and then the ultimate homecoming and it's a very different city.

Secchia: That's right, and that was those thirty years of great development and progression, including this museum and AD, which was four years later. Then what happened the fall of his funeral, I got a call from John Wheeler, who was my partner. He and I had done forty some buildings, cleaned them up, took out pigeon poop by the wheelbarrow load, and did everything we could do to hang awnings, and plant flowers. The town itself had the Downtown Development Authority and the Downtown Alliance, and we have people who sweep the streets. Marvin Hamlich came here and said, "How do you keep your city so clean and so happy?" I said, "Well, we work at it." Everybody was part of this, so when he came back home and the procession went up those same streets, right up the hill of Fulton Street, it went right down the same streets that were empty – I hadn't thought about that before – that all because...and there it was.

Smith: Let me sort of wrap up with a couple of things. Tell us something that might surprise people about Ford.

Secchia: I think he was an administrative genius. He always struck me as the kind of guy you could take all the papers of different issues that were pertinent and as they floated to the ground, he'd be able to pick out the two or three that needed to be decided first. That, combined with the fact that he was probably the most athletic president we ever had. I would say that if we could ever

convince America that he was an administrative genius, and the most athletic, they would have hard time believing that because they read the media reports and I always felt badly for him that he was perceived that way. I think everybody now knows that he was a good bipartisan, working gentlemen who could disagree without being disagreeable, but they probably will never know that he was the most athletic and administrative – I can see him dozens of times, just sitting back and sucking on his pipe and picking out those issues that had to be dealt with – and he dealt with them. He made decisions and he surrounded himself with people who fed him those papers.

Smith: Talk about a good life – here is someone, I think I may have mentioned – poor Lyndon Johnson, who literally died the day before a peace agreement was announced in Vietnam, and who during that very short period of his ex-presidency, was virtually a recluse. Driven into exile. Ford, who had a very different temperament anyway, but nevertheless lived long enough to have the satisfaction of knowing that most people had come around to hold a very different view – not only of the pardon – but I think in a broader sense of his presidency.

Secchia: I think he was who he was, and it never bothered him other than the Profiles in Courage turnaround of that issue, but he was always comfortable with himself. He was one of those kind of guys that had the skin that he knew what he lived in, and people read about those kind of people today as unique. He was always comfortable in his own skin.

Smith: Comfortable with having big egos around him – comfortable with the debates that would result from all of that.

Secchia: And comfortable with having a Kennerly or Secchia who could pop in and tell him he was full of bologna, and, naw, you shouldn't do this, and give us the comfort of knowing that he was still our friend. David and I have had many conversations about how we were unique in living through that period. David did it every day. I didn't do it every day. Another thing about Ford that people won't know is, Jimmy Carter's big claim – the big success of his presidency was the Camp David Accords. I can remember Jerry Ford telling me in the fall of '76 that everything was in play to create the Camp David Accords. And

that he thought it would be best if we postponed the meeting so that the next president could host it. He made that decision in the summer and postponed it to the winter/spring of the next year. When Sadat came here I was having breakfast with Ford at a small meeting of people over here in the Black and Silver Room that no longer exists in the George Welsh Civic Auditorium, and the phone rang and one of his staff said, "Mr. President, this phone call, you should take." He said to me, "Sadat. Come on with me."

So I went with him and we went in the back room and of course I only heard his end of the conversation. Then later he told me that Sadat was calling him from the airport – that they just concluded the meetings and that he wanted President Ford to know that he was very thankful for all the work that Ford had done getting it ready and making it happen. Jerry Ford, I heard him on his conversation saying that he was very happy that "Anwar, you're a great man and you've done this." I remember afterwards reading about how Jimmy Carter's great claim to fame was that particular event. Never once did I ever hear Jerry Ford say, "I set it up, I did all the work, I yielded to it in the fall of '76 to postpone it for the next president." Never a word.

So that falls in the category of coordinated athlete, administrative genius, and visionary – whether it's Vladivostok and the basket, that he wanted approval or the Anwar Sadat meeting, who he loved dearly, by the way. He felt that Sadat was one of the world's great leaders. And when he was invited to go over to the funeral, that was a tough trip for him because that was certainly one of his closer friends and allies.

Smith: That's a perfect note on which to end.

INDEX

B

Baker, James, 25
 Barrett, Bob, 30, 38
 Brock, Bill, 25
 Bush, George W., 39

C

Callaway, Bo, 16
 Carter, Jimmy, 39, 40
 Carter, Roselyn, 41
 Celebration on the Grand, 48
 Chase, Chevy, 24
 Circle, Penny, 30
 Clinton, William J., 39

D

DeFrank, Tom, 48–49
 DeJonge, Maury, 27–28
 DeVos Performance Hall, 48
 Dilley, Dilley, and Dilley, 27

E

Engler, Gov. John, 45

F

Firestone, Leonard, 38–39
 Fisher, Max, 47
 Ford, Betty
 as First Lady, 32–33
 health issues, 4
 humor, sense of, 18
 Sixty Minutes interview, 32
 Ford, Gerald R.
 1976 election, 9
 1980 election, 35–36, 37–38
 90th birthday, 44, 46–47
 adoption, 5–6
 Betty Ford Center, 31–32
 Betty Ford's addiction, 4, 29–30
 character traits, 6–7, 50–51
 as fiscal conservative, 7–8
 funeral, reactions to, 41–44
 health issues, 30–31
 humor, sense of, 18–19
 Jimmy Carter, 40–41
 latter years, 45–46
 Leslie King, 5
 loss of 1976 election, 35
 move to Rancho Mirage, 27
 Nixon pardon, 10–12

personal relationship with Nixon, 13–14
 post-presidency earnings, 38–39
 Profiles in Courage award, 51
 Queen Elizabeth, 15–18, 22–23
 religion, 20–21
 Rose Garden strategy, 10
 social issues, 33–34
 speaking style, 9–10
 vice president, 31
 Whip Inflation Now, 10
 Ford, Gerald and Betty
 relationship, 28–29, 31–32
 Ford, Jack, 22
 Ford Museum, 47–48
 building sites, 47–48

G

Griffin, Bob, 36, 37

H

Habitat for Humanity, 39
 Hamlich, Marvin, 50

J

Javits, Sen. Jacob, 2

K

Keeler, Mary Ann, 48
 King, Leslie, 5

L

Lukash, Dr., 4

M

Mattieu, Tom, 47

N

Nicklaus, Jack, 44
 Nixon pardon, 10–12

O

O'Neill, Paul, 34
 O'Neill, Tip, 6–7, 24–25

P

Parma, Leon, 44
 Pettit, Tom, 36–37
 Post-presidency earnings, 39–40, 40
 Prince Philip, 22–23
 Profiles in Courage award, 51

Q

Queen Elizabeth, 15–18

R

Reagan, Ronald, 26, 39

Reed, Clarke, 22

Republican Convention

1968, 2–3

Republican National Committee, 25

Richards, Dick, 26

S

Sadat, Anwar, 51–52

Safer, Morley, 32

Schembeckler, Bo, 41

Scouten, Rex, 17

Secchia, Peter Interview

Smith, Mary Louise, 25–26

Sparling, Jim, 36

Spencer, Stu, t

Starboard Tack, 1

T

terHorst, Jerry, 12

The Lady is A Tramp, 23

V

Vander Jagt, Guy, 8, 35–36

Veterans Against the War, 3

W

Walters, Barbara, 3

Z

Zeoli, Billy, 20–21

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Peter Secchia #2– Follow Up
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
May 8, 2009

Smith: We talked yesterday with Bill Gill and got some great stories, some of them understandably embargoed probably during the president's lifetime. He talked about this little - he didn't use the phrase "kitchen cabinet" - but this little advisory group of four people who met with him from time to time, particularly during the vice presidency. When he would come back here they'd meet at some coffee shop. Two of them are gone which means two of them are still around. One of them is a Republican leader of some sort whom he didn't identify, and himself. Are you the fourth? (Could be Walt Russell?)

Secchia: I have no idea. One of Jerry Ford's unique talents was to meet with little groups of people and each one of them thought they were the only group, you'll find as you get through all these interviews. Well, "there was one special group and I was part of that."

Smith: It's interesting, though, ego aside, he walked us through the conversation in a way that sounded pretty credible. These folks - this was about two months before Nixon quit - basically, they were beating up on Ford. They were pressing him to put more distance between himself and the White House.

Secchia: Local people?

Smith: Yes. And he was in, I don't think it's too strong to say, some degree of anguish, caught between his loyalty and what might be in his own, and for that matter, the country's interest. Clearly, this conversation took for granted that the time was coming when he would be in the Oval Office, which is why, according to Bill, it was off the record, at least during his lifetime. But at one point he quoted Ford as saying, almost his head in his hands, "But, you don't understand. No one else is defending this guy." And their sort of collective response was, "That's admirable as a human trait, a personal trait, but you've got to look beyond that at this point. You have larger obligations." Does that sound credible to you?

I suspect he was getting that advice from other sources as well.

Secchia: Let's work our way back to 1974. I don't think there were four people in Kent County who understood what was going on in Washington outside of Jerry Ford. So I would doubt that he would put much stock into what four locals had to say about this issue. When the pardon was given, I believe it was on a Sunday night. If I've done this interview before, stop me.

He was in Pittsburgh on Monday and the wheels came off the cart, the protestors at the White House, the loud crescendo of boos and harassment just came up out of nowhere from a White House entry honeymoon that had gone fairly well up to that point. Jerry terHorst action totally surprised him. I received a call on that Monday from, I can't remember who, maybe it was Nell Yates, (his private Oval Office secretary – or Terry O'Donnell his scheduler) I don't remember who it was. They said, "President's coming back tomorrow," which would've been Tuesday, "after he overnights in Pittsburgh and he wanted to know if you'd come by for dinner on Tuesday."

So I went to D.C. for dinner that night. He would usually come upstairs for dinner at 7:00, 7:30, sometimes 8:00, but very seldom later than that. And that night it was almost 9:00 and he hadn't come up yet. He was busy reacting to all of the pressure that he was receiving. When he came up, he pressed the little button on his chair and asked for his martini. That was the only time I ever heard him use the f-word. But he said to me, "Nixon had really f'ed up the pea patch and it had to be done." And I recall just saying, "Why am I in this conversation, it's above my pay grade?"

And so I (regretfully today) shut him down to end this high level tone and said, "Why don't we talk about something else?" And he said, "This will probably cost me the '76 election." (The first time I had heard him mention '76.) And I tended to sort of agree with this, but you have to remember at this point in time, I was not a Republican "Leader." A lot of people think I was born that way, but I was *not* involved in active party politics in '75. I was helping Jerry Ford and some like-minded candidates in a very minor way. I was a young, I mean, I still dressed the same as I am, i.e.,

in jeans and a plaid shirt. I was just hanging out at the White House helping him and didn't deserve to be there, but he kept inviting me.

That night Betty wasn't feeling well. She was in bed with her neck propped up and her brace on. We talked a little bit, but she wanted to rest and read. So I went out to wait in their sitting area. When the President came upstairs, he picked up the papers and the first thing he did was go to the editorial which was his way of devouring a newspaper. He'd open up the paper and look at the letters to the editor in Grand Rapids, but when he was in Washington, he'd open up the *Washington Post* or *New York Times* and take a peek at the editorial.

This day they were brutally attacking his "pardon" decision and that just made the night go deeper and deeper into the darkness of despair, kind of, "What did I do?" and "Why did I do it?"

But his mind was made up. There was no question in his mind that he *did the right thing* then. I watched him receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. And the Kennedy Profiles in Courage Award. The pride was abundantly clear.

Smith: The Kennedy Profiles in Courage award?

Secchia: Both, the one from Congress and the "Profiles" award.

Smith: The Congressional Gold Medal.

Secchia: The Congressional Gold Medal. I watched him when he received that and I think that happened after the Kennedy. But he reflected on the fact that "finally I am proven right." It was like a weight was lifted off his shoulders. I don't remember him ever mentioning this when I was home. Now I'd ask Jack, remember Jack Stiles, Jack was his closest friend that he took to Washington?

Smith: Jack Stiles? Who was Jack Stiles first of all?

Secchia: Jack Stiles, Jerry Ford respected early in his career because Jack got things done for him. It was a funny relationship. (It was sort of the kind of the

relationship I had with him.) He depended on me to get things done for him and I think Jack had filled that void for him in his early congressional years.

Smith: But who was Jack Stiles? Where did he come from?

Secchia: He was a local man. Nobody really knew much about him. The night he died, he was supposed to have dinner with me. He had called me at 4 pm...to say he had arranged a lady friend to meet with him and he went to Grand Haven. On his way home he rolled his car. They found his car the next morning in a ditch in the creek off West River Drive. Jack lived a fast life and was a small problem for the president in Washington. During this negotiation was the Midnight Massacre. All of these things happened fast. I believe President Ford was trying very hard to keep Jack out of the spotlight because there were some strange feelings about him, whether it be here or there. But I had dinner with Jack several times and I have a picture of us having a dinner on Ford's first trip home at the old Harley Inn. The hotel's not even there anymore, but I have a picture of that dinner, just the four of us. But I don't remember anything about Bill Gill's four-person group, but knowing Jerry Ford, I don't doubt it.

Smith: One thing Bill said...

Secchia: This is Bill Gill the television guy?

Smith: Yeah. He didn't say it, critically, he said it almost matter of factly, he said, "Jerry Ford was not without guile." Now, that obviously runs counter to the popular impression. I don't take it as criticism. I mean, anyone who wants to be Speaker of the House has more than simply ambition.

Secchia: Well, you know what, there's good ambition and there's bad ambition.

Smith: Well, sure. Sure.

Secchia: Jerry Ford wanted to be Speaker of the House because he believed that was the ultimate position for someone who had dedicated many years to legislative reasoning. He'd studied the budget, he understood the administrative procedures of the House. He was like John Engler as our governor. He understood the insides facts and workings of the government.

- Smith: Let me ask you about Jack Stiles. As I may have said earlier, Nelson Rockefeller didn't age well. There was a streak of, it's not too much to say, of paranoia. As vice president he saw enemies, and he had convinced himself that Rumsfeld was his ultimate enemy.
- Secchia: Rockefeller?
- Smith: Yeah, but he had literally also convinced himself that Jack Stiles' death was no accident.
- Secchia: Did he?
- Smith: Yeah, he believed that the president was surrounded by people who didn't want him to get reelected in 1976, and that somehow Stiles' death factored into - that they started the campaign very late and so forth and so on.
- Secchia: If they did a sperm check on Jack's body, they would have found he was short a few gallons. No one knew at 4 p.m. that evening where he was going. I mean, he was out drinking and rendezvousing. I wouldn't refute that. But the campaign started late because President Ford had wanted to wait, to not get into the primaries... However, the next day after he received the Kansas City nomination we all met in Vail with Stu Spencer, Cheney and Baker (5-6 of us) to plan the campaign.
- Smith: So, he had a local reputation?
- Secchia: I don't know if he had a big reputation because you have to remember that these men were 25 years older than me so I didn't know about their younger days, (their prowling days). I just knew Jack was a loyal friend of President Ford's from years gone by.
- Smith: What was his professional background?
- Secchia: I'm sorry...I forgot.
- Smith: But it's interesting that the president had him for such a close friend and in effect as a political ally given the vulnerabilities that went along with that.

Secchia: And I think those vulnerabilities really approached this risky status when Jerry Ford's role became more important. When Jerry Ford was a congressman and later, the Minority Leader, nobody really paid attention to who he hung around with, or who he had dinner with when he came back to town. I can remember taking Jerry Ford to an old hotel in D.C. where the piano player (Mark Russell), used to play. It's the old Shoreham Hotel, right on the river by the parkway, off of Connecticut Ave. a couple blocks. It's where Mark Russell used to play in the early '70s.

Jerry and I went in there and we had dinner and a few drinks. We were talking and I was proud of my relationship with Jerry. I went over to Mark Russell and said, "Do you realize the Minority Leader of the U.S. Congress is in this room?" Russell played all this political satire and he looked at me like, "No, which one is he?" And I had to point out "The Minority Leader." Now, if Mark Russell, who is a 24/7 full-time political satirist and humorist and musician, didn't know who the Minority Leader was, then who was paying any attention to who he was having dinner with, me or Jack Stiles. It just didn't matter to most.

Rockefeller had this paranoia and he was also involved in a lot of intelligence operations that I wasn't involved in. I would challenge his thinking. I think Jack was just a party boy whose time had come. Great guy, fun to be with, and maybe drank a little too much, but he didn't talk a lot and he was loyal to Ford and that was important to Jerry Ford. Now, with your experience you know more about Jerry Ford than anybody and you'll find that more than half of us think they were Jerry Ford's *best* friend.

Smith: That passes for guile. I mean, beyond individual ego, there are successful politicians - all have the ability to make individuals think that they have a unique place in their lives.

Secchia: The good ones.

Smith: The good ones, absolutely.

Secchia: And I don't think Jerry Ford could be called a manipulator as I would say John Edwards was, or some other people who had issues to hide, but it's hard

to get a good interview out of people like me because I love the guy like a big brother. Do not want to hurt his legacy.

Smith: Tell me how broad a range of friends he had.

Secchia: Well, you could start with Jack Stiles. I think one of the questions you'll find in Maury DeJonge's interview that was never shared was one of the questions was, "My editors can't quite understand it, why do you consider Pete Secchia as one of your closest friends?" And that's right in the interview.

Smith: Really?

Secchia: Uh-huh. I have a copy of the interview because Maury told me 30 years ago that he would give me a copy some day. He gave me one a few months ago. I don't know where it is, I think I have it at the office, but you'll get it eventually. It was because he had this broad range of friends that he knew where to go for answers. Jerry Ford was the consummate politician in the sense that he wasn't being partisan political, but he knew how to work the halls of Congress. And if the lobby system worked as it did when Jerry Ford was in Congress from late 40s to the 70s, when you needed to know something about airplanes or military aircraft or civilian aircraft, you had to call somebody who knew that product or industry. Someone who could find the answers for you, so you could make a better decision.

So that was Jerry Ford's way of operating. He could call somebody or ask or tell somebody to get the answer from a person, but he liked to do that himself. He loved to talk to you about what you do and why you do it. So he had different friends from different sectors. I know that Bob Sheiffer (CBS) and Jones and some of those TV guys were his contacts. I remember when GRF hired Ron Nessen and he thought it was sort of neat that he was able to get this national press man to come and be his press secretary. He was a bit naïve in some ways. He was enraptured by certain musicians or entertainers, but we all are. Wouldn't you love it if Abraham Lincoln was resurrected and came walking in the room? You'd want to run up and ask him a dozen questions before he disappeared again.

Smith: How much of that was the Eagle Scout in Ford and how much of that was Grand Rapids?

Secchia: I think there's a lot that has the same values. I don't think there's a big difference between Eagle Scouting and the culture of Grand Rapids. There are people who will see us as country bumpkin-ish and there are others who think that our sartorial splendiferousness is lacking. The fact is, that we're Midwesterners. Scouting teaches kids to have goals, earn them, wear a badge. Always Jerry Ford wore that badge of honor when he was in the legislature. He was our congressman. He defeated an isolationist. He had his points.

Smith: It's interesting. We spent two fascinating hours yesterday with Dorothy Downton and it was interesting because she volunteered what others have sort of grudgingly yielded up, which was the extent to which, even when they were in the vice presidency, the Nixon people didn't want them around, looked down on them, saw them as *Grand Rapids*. Now, some of that you can understand, some of it's unavoidable given their roles, but some of it's cultural condescension. He obviously had to be aware of it.

Secchia: Oh, he was aware of it. He was well aware of it. When he brought Bill Seidman in to the vice president's office and Phil Buchen who was his attorney, these were people he knew he could depend on and that's who he wanted around him. If you look at the Nixon White House and you have the California boys and the fast movers, fast talkers, somewhat shifty manipulators and then you bring in Bill Seidman and Phil Buchen and Jack Stiles and Pete Secchia, it was... "Who are those guys?"

Smith: I want to talk about Phil Buchen. One of the things that Bill Gill said yesterday was that part of the burden, Phil Buchen talked to Duncan Littlefair and they both communicated to the President their views on the advisability of a pardon. And I don't know Duncan Littlefair except from a distance by reputation. But I would have thought that he was a political liberal who would not necessarily look favorably upon a Nixon pardon. Bill insisted that in this particular case, he did and he communicated those views through Buchen and apparently directly himself to Ford. Does that sound credible?

Secchia: I can't challenge it nor can I confirm it. Was Buchen in agreement with Littlefair?

Smith: Yes.

Secchia: There's been so many years gone by...

Smith: You know, it sounds basic, but it's basic for a reason. Tell us about Phil Buchen.

Secchia: Well, Phil's relationship with Ford had gone back to the pre-congressional days. Jerry Ford always felt that they had an honorable legal partnership and a good personal relationship. Therefore, when Jerry moved out of the legal business, when he needed legal help, he went right back to where he would've been nurtured as an early member of the bar. So they had a quiet but strong relationship. Phil was, I think, wanting to be a little more involved in the exciting side of Washington. But because of Phil's physical condition, and his health deteriorating quite rapidly towards the final years there, I just think they were very happy to come back and draw down from the deals or D.C.

I can't say specific incidents I might be reminded of, but when someone, you see it now, too, because you've been through several of them, but if someone goes from being your newspaper editor in Grand Rapids, to being a congressman, to being speaker, to being president, or they make their way up any ladder of success, you expect changes and sometimes you don't get changes. Everybody expected changes. But those who knew the man (or his bride) know there were few changes except the fact that there were more demands on time, more demands on their ability to attend events, more babies to kiss, more funerals to attend. So a lot of people change because their life clock starts ticking faster.

I knew a lot of these people back when we were all nothing. I mean, I'm still a country bumpkin and I'm proud of it. I don't even like to go to Washington, never did like to go to Washington (even when GRF was president). G.H.W. Bush asked me to be in his administration, I said no. I mean, that's how I ended up being ambassador to Italy. I didn't want to go to Washington.

Smith: Did Ford change?

Secchia: No. Where he did change, he changed for the better. He learned, he became more understanding and expansive on issues that I would never claim to understand. I don't know if I told you this story about, Golda Meir - do you remember reading thist one?

I was upstairs with Ford one night in the residence and he said to me, "Peter, what do you think about Golda Meir coming to visit?" It had been in the press that she was going to ask for - in today's standards it's probably minor - "million in aid." And he said, "What do you think?" I said, naively, "Well, you know, we have inflation, we have a big deficit, people don't like it when the government keeps giving away money to other governments. Maybe you ought not do it." He said, "Well, that's specifically why she's coming." And he says, "But that's what you think?"

A few minutes later, a buzzer goes off, I don't know whether it was in the chair or if the steward came out of the kitchen, but the call comes through and he says, "It's Henry Kissinger. He's in Tel Aviv and he's about to get on the plane with the prime minister." Then President Ford picks up the phone and says, "Henry, I've been talking to Pete and I don't think we're going to do it." And I'm sitting there with this vision that the Mossad is listening in and I'm going to find out that there's somebody in my hotel room when I get back to the Madison Hotel. I don't know what I'm talking about, I was just making conversation. But after you get into it, you find out that he'd talked to a dozen other people who'd had similar advice.

Smith: So it wasn't the fact of doing what the last person who'd advised him to do?

Secchia: No, and he got that bad rap. I don't think that was the way it was. It was just that he had a great memory. I used to describe him as an administrative genius because everybody thought he was an administrative dum-dum and that he didn't know the issues. But, this is a guy you can take a whole bunch of papers on different issues, throw them up in the air, and as they float to the ground, he'll pull the one out of the pack that needs attention. And then he'll know who to call to ask their thoughts and maybe he won't agree with you,

he'll just ask your thoughts. And you might think, "Well, I just talked to him and I told him this and that's what he did." That's bullshit. He'd talked to dozens of other people.

Smith: Over time, all those years in Congress...clearly people evolve. They learn. They grow, presumably, the more they're exposed to what's unfamiliar. His conservatism: Did that change?

Secchia: I think it diminished. When he first was in Congress, I didn't know him. I didn't meet him until later in the 60s, but I don't think he would've ever supported the ERA and some of the issues that Betty was strongly in favor of if he still lived in Grand Rapids. He still talked to all the people here that he talked to back then. I think his conservatism diminished on some of these social issues. I believe if today he was making a decision on civil unions or same sex benefits, he would've been a pioneer on that. Too, I think that he's probably similar to the current governor of Utah on how he would've viewed those issues.

Smith: I realize this is speculative, but how much influence did Mrs. Ford have on those kinds of issues? How much was simply being exposed to a broader range of opinion and reality, living longer, which has a way of playing havoc with ideology. Because he did seem to become in some ways more liberal, for lack of a better word, with age.

Secchia: Well, I think America has become more liberal and I think he was a strong barometer of the public sense. So as he became more entrenched and more familiar with the issues facing the country and the world, I mean, I doubt he'd put up with the Republican Party that we have today.

Smith: Could he get nominated in this district today? If he were running for the first time, if he wasn't the Jerry Ford of legend, would his kind of conservative - if you want to call it that.

Secchia: Well, his kind of conservatism probably doesn't exist today. There are still conservatives here, but it's like engineering and computer work. Everything is now for niche markets and what used to be conservatism was everybody who was over here who might agree with the majority of these ten issues.

Today you have fiscal conservatives, social conservatives, religious conservatives, it won't be the same. If he was running today as the attractive candidate that he was, you have to remember, in this district, the election is the primary, the Republican primary. So if you were able to get the Republican primary vote...

Smith: That's the question. In today's Republican Party, would he win a primary?

Secchia: I think so, but I wouldn't know enough about 1948's comparison. He ran against Jonkman who obviously was out of step. There again it is Jerry Ford the barometer, he read that shift before anybody else read that and he wasn't supposed to win. At least those who were entrenched in the leadership here thought that he didn't have much of a chance.

Smith: Describe then, if you could kind of encapsulate, when you really began to know him...give us a sense of the political culture, in this town and then maybe the broader culture. We're trying to trace, among other things, impact of the Christian Reformed Church upon the broader culture of West Michigan. But also, invariably, spilling over into the political culture. Clearly it has evolved, but where was it when you first really begin to know Ford? How much of it did he have to take into account? How much of it found reflection in his voting record?

Secchia: When I first got to know Ford, I was afraid he wouldn't get reelected. That's how I came to know him. I had met him at a few events and told him I thought we ought to talk. I reminded him that when he was home, he was only seeing people his own age and nobody was developing any contacts with the 30+ year old set which was the decade of people in their 30s that I knew. He was listening to that and said, "You know, I hadn't thought about that." I watched him make some adjustments in his campaigning, but I think that you have to understand that as he has changed and his personality has changed, and Grand Rapids has changed, but you still have the same old problem.

Grand Rapids is a Democrat city; it is not a Republican city. It has been voting Democrat in most elections for many years. But it was a part of the 5th District then, (the 3rd Congressional District now), and it is part of Kent

County which is Republican. We have had as many as a 18 to 3 majority on the county commission. When Jerry ran for office, it was about 17 to 4 and now there's only 19 commissioners because they've changed the structure. The county is still a Republican county, but it's an entrepreneurial region. And there's an inherent respect, I mean, there is a story in today's *Grand Rapids Press* where I'm quoted as saying, "You've got 300 greedy bastards in New York who give a bad name to the CEOs of America and in West Michigan, I don't know a West Michigan CEO who would fall into the category they are criticizing on Wall Street." (2008)

That's a point of pride we've always had here. I think Jerry Ford had an admiration for the Sandy Weill's and the local corporate leaders because he wasn't one and he always had respect for successful business people. He thought that success was an admirable quality and I think he had the same respect for the competent legislator who did his homework, was prepared, didn't only come to a hearing because there were television cameras, but came to make comments on certain provisions in the legislation.

Smith: You have to believe that those values were implanted early.

Secchia: Yes, and you see them with the young Scouts who were lined up at his funeral procession. You see their pride. I was at the recent scout fundraiser and that hasn't changed. So, you know, you hear that derogatory comment every once in awhile that "They're nothing but a bunch of Boy Scouts," and it's sort of like it has become a negative because there are those who don't want to see the values of that. It's like a child holding hands with a parent. When I grew up, that wasn't very macho. And I can remember when *National Geographic* came to Grand Rapids back in Ford's early days as President (1974-75) and they wanted to know "why Grand Rapids was different." They talked to a lot of people, but one of the quotes they had in the article, I remember (it was from me) and I said, "Well, I'm in the restaurant business and it's not unusual here to see a teenage boy come here holding hands with his mother and nobody laughs at them. They respect that parent-child relationship." And Ford having had the early problems in his childhood watched and admired everybody else who had a business and principles like his stepfather - a good

businessman, a proud businessman, an honest businessman - that was very important to Jerry Ford.

Smith: Do you think, again it's speculative, maybe he talked about it, maybe he didn't, I heard a little about it from time to time, but do you think that the circumstances of his early days gave him a particular empathy with not only broken families, but some other... I mean, you're looking for this counterintuitive, fiscally conservative as orthodox as they get, he was tight, fiscally.

Secchia: Personally...Also..." tight fiscally."

Smith: Do you have any stories to illustrate that?

Secchia: Well, I mean, I would kid him that he was "tighter than a second coat of paint." I used to kid him, but I'll tell you one funny story. We were out in California for a board meeting and I took Governor Engler by to say hello to then 90 year old Jerry Ford. We met President Ford in the office and we were sitting there chatting. It was getting dark. And when people get elderly they start to keep the lights down in their office, and there's piles of crap and newspapers everywhere, and stacks of things, letters to sign, and autographs to sign. I realized that University of Michigan was playing basketball at that time, and I knew he *never* had the specialized signal cable because back then you had to pay extra to get these basketball games. I knew he wouldn't pay for that. And I said, "You know, too bad you don't have..." He said, "Oh, I do! I do!" He said, "Well, let's go."

So he got up so fast he forgot his cane and he started to head for the door.

Well, Judy at the time was working and Penny Circle or someone came running out, "Mr. President! Mr. President, you forgot your cane!" She gives him the cane. We get to the house, he's got the TV and this special hook-up and I said, "Jerry, I can't believe you pay for this." He just smiled at me.

He loved his University of Michigan sports. He knew the players name, who could dribble, drive, _____ a perimeter shoot. Well, later on, we say goodbye, we're going through his office and I said to Penny, "I can't believe he bought that." She says, "He didn't. Somebody gave it to him."

- Smith: How much did he talk about money? I mean, he took some hits for particularly the early days of his ex-presidency. We've had occasion now to talk to a number of people who were on boards with him, and it was very clear he took it very seriously and he never just lent his name to something. But nevertheless, he was going to come home because he had no money and he was going to practice law and was going to make a little bit of money for his family. Was he proud of his success?
- Secchia: On his board service?
- Smith: Yeah, and just as someone economically successful?
- Secchia: I think he was dedicated to being a good board member, just as he was dedicated to being a good Scout, a good lawyer, or a good legislator. He studied for meetings and he told me a few times about the trip out east would give him a few hours and a plane where he could read, but he was said to be an excellent board member. I heard that from several people.
- Smith: Do you think he was sensitive to the criticism on public speaking?
- Secchia: No.
- Smith: No?
- Secchia: I tried to get him to be more sensitive to this criticism because of what he did. He just evolved into a "Well, if you want to pay me 50 grand, fine, but put 25 in the Ford Foundation," and then, "Do this and this." This minimizes the actual fees reported, but, you know, he was only out of office four years and, I guess it was eight years before anybody started selling their time for big money. Let's see, Carter lost after four years to Reagan, so it was twelve years then, because, you know, the big dollars weren't made until Reagan and Clinton and Bush '41.
- Smith: But you know Ford took heat for being the first.
- Secchia: Yes, he did, but I don't think he was sensitive to it. I don't think he did much of it then. It didn't take a lot of money for Jerry Ford to feel wealthy. I mean, he'd never had any wealth at all.

- Smith: Do you have any idea what Jerry Ford was worth when he died?
- Secchia: Nope, and he wouldn't talk about it.
- Smith: He wouldn't.
- Secchia: He had a chunk of stock from Sandy Weil, the early Traveler's Insurance, the early parts of CitiCorp Building that empire was exciting to him. I mean, today he'd be mortified at the CitiCorp fiasco, but he was a good board member, dedicated to that group. He had "Founders Stock." I mean, he referred to it as "Founders Stock." I don't know what founders stock is other than maybe back in the 70s you were able to give a certain class of stock to people that could be converted or split or had special dividends, I don't know.
- Smith: What would be a luxury to Jerry Ford?
- Secchia: Watching his University of Michigan football team or basketball team or visiting the campus and talking to the players. That would be a luxury. Private jets, I don't think so much.
- Smith: It is astonishing and it became a matter of discussion internally that, at least as long as I was here, I was appalled that he was flying commercially and subsequently Rich said of course he could use their plane.
- Secchia: I helped put that deal together.
- Smith: I wish it had been done earlier, but he kept up.
- Secchia: But you know how this came about? Rich said to me, "You know I'll always be happy to send a jet to pick him up." But I hated to ask Richard because somebody else might've asked him last week. He said, "Anytime he wants to go anywhere, I will have a plane there." I said, "You mean, anytime, anywhere?" He said, "Yep." I went to the president with it, and he still didn't use it very much.
- Smith: That's fascinating. Tell me about the relationship between the president and Rich DeVos. Was it any different between Rich DeVos and Van Andel? Was it closer to Rich? What's your reading?

Secchia: I think when they were both alive, it was similar. There was a mutual respect. Jerry had that consistent admiration of successful business people who did it the right way. Jay's been gone for awhile now, so the DeVos side is certainly closer, but when Jay was still alive and active in the business Jay and Rich were both friends and conservatives GRF admired, but *not* close friends. Jerry was still wrapped up in Washington. The early friends, the Jack Stiles days, were the old-fashioned "congressional hometown politics begins at home" crowd.

Smith: Is there anyone left from those days?

Secchia: Maury DeJonge or John Malinowski. You know the family, the guy that was his chief of staff who ended up a judge. I just read a book written by one of the Malinowski family members (about the family) and I forget some the names now, but he had run his office here in town...By the way, I think Bill Gill got fired from his TV station... he lost his job, let's just say that was for fabrications and self delusions, I think.

Smith: Tell me about the kids. What was your relationship? Maybe it's a large subject, but what was your role?

Secchia: My role was whatever he wanted it to be. You know, one time he called me up and asked me to come out and talk to Steve. "What for?" He says, "Well, I can't afford to send him to Duke and that's where he wants to go." Or University of Virginia or some expensive school.

Smith: Now, this was when he was in Congress?

Smith: He was vice president because I think the day I arrived, he flew out on Air Force Two. It was then a prop Conair.

Smith: With all due respect, why would he have you talk to Steve?

Secchia: He had a hard time talking to his kids about tough issues and money issues, I think for the same reason he admired people who had done well in business. He was a bit embarrassed that he hadn't done well. This is just my own personal judgment.

Smith: Yeah, makes perfect sense.

Secchia: It was nice to have someone else who had done well in business to come talk to Steven. He had arranged for Steve to work at a dude ranch, (Brown's?), out in Utah somewhere. And that's how Steve ended riding horses and now he's still raising them and he was breeding them for awhile, so that was one. I also remember the 1976 bicentennial dinner, my job was to watch Jack, make sure he didn't get into trouble. That evening I had to talk to him. But they were just kids. You know, Susan was dancing with some people she shouldn't be dancing with. He wanted me to talk about that. I don't think he had a close relationship with his kids in the early days. I don't think they paid much attention to anything he did and he didn't pay that much attention to things they did.

Smith: Was part of that just because he was away physically a lot?

Secchia: I think he was just dedicated to doing what he did.

Smith: Wrapped up in his work.

Secchia: And, we're all guilty of that. I went through my younger days of my children and I was busy building my business and just hope you catch a hold of the life raft before you sink.

Smith: Did he ever say anything in those later years to lead you to believe he felt that and/or felt any degree of guilt either toward the kids or toward Mrs. Ford for all those years when he was either physically absent or emotionally absent because of work?

Secchia: I think he had some guilt for not spending more time with Betty and not spending more time with the kids. But you know, when you have a friend who is president of the United States or "former president" of the United States, or minority leader, you don't just sit down and say, "Why aren't you treating your kids better?" or "Why aren't you treating your wife better?"

Smith: But if he, you know, had earlier involved you in these kinds of family discussions, I just wonder if in later years, that continued.

Secchia: Later, he didn't involve me in family issues. He asked me to deliver a message or to watch or talk to someone. He didn't have many family discussions. I don't think as a unit they did a lot. Betty ran the house and ran the kids and took care of everybody and kept it all going. And he was busy. He had that old-fashioned model that his father, Ford, had. I go to work in the morning and when I come home at night, I want my slippers and I want to eat and I want to sit down and read the paper and I don't want to be bothered. He had that slipper and pipe kind of "unwinding" culture.

Smith: Sure. And in one way he did evolve. I mean we talked about a change and evolution. I mean, certainly, he was so proud of her and her feminist credentials. You know, he certainly didn't need to put himself, for reasons of ego, at the center of attention. When she got the Medal of Freedom, when she got recognition, it was almost better than when he did. One sensed that in those later years.

Secchia: It was always, "Betty is more popular than I am." His self-deprecating humor wasn't as fine-tuned as some others, but he used it effectively and he was fair to her and he cared about her and he's the one guy I've met in my life who I'd say without a doubt was always faithful.

Smith: When was the last time you talked with her?

Secchia: I talked to her a few months ago. I don't like to call, but Jan (her assistant) says, I don't know how the staff works, because the staff says, "Call me" and then they filter everything through staff. Steve says, "Why don't you call Mom?" And he says, "She says you don't call very much?" And I don't want to go through staff. I had that problem with Barrett for awhile and I've been through lots of staff.

Smith: Did he put up walls?

Secchia: Well, everybody does when you're the gatekeeper. You have to. Because, in your judgment, "He doesn't need to talk to Pete Secchia right now, he's got to focus on that speech" or "He's got to get ready for this interview." And that's your job, I mean, that's the gatekeeper (the chief of staff). I respect that because I know how difficult that is. I occasionally would hear from some of

them when they were down and out and disappointed and it was easy to work for Jerry Ford and easy to think he didn't love you because he didn't spend a lot of time giving hugs or telling you that he really cared about you. But when it got right down to the nitty-gritty, you knew that he loved you because he wouldn't put up with your crap if he didn't. He just had a way about him that said, "I accept you."

Smith: Did you read, in part or in whole, Tom DeFrank's book?

Secchia: Yes.

Smith: What's your reaction?

Secchia: Well, after I read it, I had two or three facts I challenged. I didn't think it was a Pulitzer Prize book and I don't think he knew him as well as he claimed to have known him. I chaired that Jerry Ford's Hometown Downtown celebration. He said he still has the badge from that. I got to believe that wasn't, as he said it was. It was not a cold winter day, it was outdoors at the Calder Plaza and I remember we gave him cookies from this African-American lady friend of my family who used to make cookies for him at the store where he worked. We gave him the cookies. I'd have to go back and research, but I can't believe we were outside in January in Grand Rapids. There were a couple of little _____ - there were a few revelations that I wasn't aware of.

Smith: You wonder what the president's motive was. There are people we've talked to that believe absolutely he knew exactly what was going on and he was saying all this because it was going on the record and this was part of his legacy. And there were other people who felt that to some degree he was almost used. And I emphasize, not just by Tom, who really did care about the president and who is a good reporter. But it raises the question about whether it's a good idea for former presidents to have that kind of...

Secchia: I think, knowing Jerry Ford, I think he might have done the former and just figured, "Well, it will come out after I'm dead and I'd like to set the record straight and this is how it really happened." Because he's reading other columnist's stories on how it happened.

- Smith: Did you ever hear him talk about the second Bush or Iraq? What was his take?
- Secchia: He thought there'd been some mistakes made. He told me he told the president that, too. You're talking about '43?
- Smith: Yes.
- Secchia: Yeah, he said, "He doesn't call me very often, but when he did, I told him." And I said, "How'd he handle it?" And he said, "Fine" and he thought that '43 was pretty good about taking that criticism. But GRF was always quick to tell you that he doesn't know everything the current president knows.
- Smith: But it must have been awkward - forget Bush, forget the policy, look at the personalities, with Cheney and Rumsfeld and Paul O'Neill, all those folks - I mean, that must have been difficult for him.
- Secchia: It was very difficult for him because he didn't know where to put his shoe down there, which path to walk.
- Smith: I presume it didn't undermine in any way his respect for O'Neill.
- Secchia: No, not at all. And that's why Jerry Ford was still Jack Stiles friend in the end when other people were saying Jack was useless, or often drunk and saying things about people that they shouldn't say, but it gets them in the gossip columns, the potpourri columns. People talk.
- Smith: That's one of the remarkable things about Ford. He was often a victim of that. He doesn't seem to have harbored any particular resentment. He often laughed it off. Did he have an enemy?
- Secchia: Oh, he had quite a few back in the early days.
- Smith: Did he think he had?
- Secchia: Yes, he had a few people that he didn't like and he was pretty sure they didn't like him. But I don't think he had an enemy or he would have been paranoid about Rockefeller. He didn't have that conspiracy theory deal. You know, to this day he felt on the Warren Commission they did the research they had to

do. That's why I can't believe some of these things I'm hearing about what really happened with him. I think he was a pretty basic guy. And, if you're a basic guy, you don't have a lot of devious plans and plots.

Smith: He certainly didn't waste any time nurturing enmities, unlike Richard Nixon who almost drew strength from them.

Secchia: You know, some of us have strange personalities, some of us know what we're going to say is going to anger. You know, Jerry Ford and I used to debate the '76 primary where he would get pissed off at Reagan and the Reagan people and I would remind him that, we made a dozen mistakes that each cost us a quarter of a point. There was no one mistake; there were just the little ones. And had he not gone out and campaigned in the primary in Minnesota and some of those small states, he would've lost worse because they didn't know him. He thought he could just stay in Washington and be the good Doobie all his life that he was and the Rose Garden Strategy kind of feel. It wasn't going to work that way.

I miss him. I proudly tell you, I miss him. I sit here looking out the window (here in his office) and I remember building this museum and trying to get the cash appropriated. I was often talking to him about raising money and the guy he was, in the sense he wouldn't bother a friend. I said, "Call Max Fischer, we've got to get this money." "Okay, Peter, I'll get to it." And he delayed it too long. Max passed away without getting the "big ask."

Smith: Great.

INDEX

B

Buchen, Phil, 9

C

Christian Reformed Church, 12

D

DeFrank, Tom, 20

F

Ford, Gerald R.

- decision making style, 10–11
- friendships, personal, 7–8
- funeral, reactions to, 13
- Nixon pardon, 2–3
- personal stories about, 10, 14
- political style, 7
- post-presidency earnings, 15–16
- social issues, 11–12
- Speaker of House ambition, 4
- vice president, 1

Ford, Steve, 17–18

G

Grand Rapids, Michigan

- culture, 12–14

L

Littlefair, Duncan, 8–9

M

Meir, Golda, 10

S

Stiles, Jack, 3–7

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Peter Secchia – Follow Up
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
May 8, 2009

Smith: We talked yesterday with Bill Gill and got some great stories, some of them understandably embargoed probably during the president's lifetime. He talked about this little - he didn't use the phrase "kitchen cabinet" - but this little advisory group of four people who met with him from time to time, particularly during the vice presidency. When he would come back here they'd meet at some coffee shop. Two of them are gone which means two of them are still around. One of them is a Republican leader of some sort whom he didn't identify, and himself. Are you the fourth? (Could be Walt Russell?)

Secchia: I have no idea. One of Jerry Ford's unique talents was to meet with little groups of people and each one of them thought they were the only group, you'll find as you get through all these interviews. Well, "there was one special group and I was part of that."

Smith: It's interesting, though, ego aside, he walked us through the conversation in a way that sounded pretty credible. These folks - this was about two months before Nixon quit - basically, they were beating up on Ford. They were pressing him to put more distance between himself and the White House.

Secchia: Local people?

Smith: Yes. And he was in, I don't think it's too strong to say, some degree of anguish, caught between his loyalty and what might be in his own, and for that matter, the country's interest. Clearly, this conversation took for granted that the time was coming when he would be in the Oval Office, which is why, according to Bill, it was off the record, at least during his lifetime. But at one point he quoted Ford as saying, almost his head in his hands, "But, you don't understand. No one else is defending this guy." And their sort of collective response was, "That's admirable as a human trait, a personal trait, but you've got to look beyond that at this point. You have larger obligations." Does that sound credible to you?

I suspect he was getting that advice from other sources as well.

Secchia: Let's work our way back to 1974. I don't think there were four people in Kent County who understood what was going on in Washington outside of Jerry Ford. So I would doubt that he would put much stock into what four locals had to say about this issue. When the pardon was given, I believe it was on a Sunday night. If I've done this interview before, stop me.

He was in Pittsburgh on Monday and the wheels came off the cart, the protestors at the White House, the loud crescendo of boos and harassment just came up out of nowhere from a White House entry honeymoon that had gone fairly well up to that point. Jerry terHorst's action totally surprised him. I received a call on that Monday from, I can't remember who, maybe it was Nell Yates, (his private Oval Office secretary – or Terry O'Donnell his scheduler) I don't remember who it was. They said, "President's coming back tomorrow," which would've been Tuesday, "after he overnights in Pittsburgh and he wanted to know if you'd come by for dinner on Tuesday."

So I went to D.C. for dinner that night. He would usually come upstairs for dinner at 7:00, 7:30, sometimes 8:00, but very seldom later than that. And that night it was almost 9:00 and he hadn't come up yet. He was busy reacting to all of the pressure that he was receiving. When he came up, he pressed the little button on his chair and asked for his martini. That was the only time I ever heard him use the f-word. But he said to me, "Nixon had really f'ed up the pea patch and it had to be done." And I recall just saying, "Why am I in this conversation, it's above my pay grade?"

And so I (regretfully today) shut him down to end this high level tone and said, "Why don't we talk about something else?" And he said, "This will probably cost me the '76 election." (The first time I had heard him mention '76.) And I tended to sort of agree with this, but you have to remember at this point in time, I was not a Republican "Leader." A lot of people think I was born that way, but I was *not* involved in active party politics in '75. I was helping Jerry Ford and some like-minded candidates in a very minor way. I was a young, I mean, I still dressed the same as I am, i.e.,

in jeans and a plaid shirt. I was just hanging out at the White House helping him and didn't deserve to be there, but he kept inviting me.

That night Betty wasn't feeling well. She was in bed with her neck propped up and her brace on. We talked a little bit, but she wanted to rest and read. So I went out to wait in their sitting area. When the President came upstairs, he picked up the papers and the first thing he did was go to the editorial which was his way of devouring a newspaper. He'd open up the paper and look at the letters to the editor in Grand Rapids, but when he was in Washington, he'd open up the *Washington Post* or *New York Times* and take a peek at the editorial.

This day they were brutally attacking his "pardon" decision and that just made the night go deeper and deeper into the darkness of despair, kind of, "What did I do?" and "Why did I do it?"

But his mind was made up. There was no question in his mind that he *did the right thing* then. I watched him receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. And the Kennedy Profiles in Courage Award. The pride was abundantly clear.

Smith: The Kennedy Profiles in Courage award?

Secchia: Both, the one from Congress and the "Profiles" award.

Smith: The Congressional Gold Medal.

Secchia: The Congressional Gold Medal. I watched him when he received that and I think that happened after the Kennedy. But he reflected on the fact that "finally I am proven right." It was like a weight was lifted off his shoulders. I don't remember him ever mentioning this when I was home. Now I'd ask Jack, remember Jack Stiles, Jack was his closest friend that he took to Washington?

Smith: Jack Stiles? Who was Jack Stiles first of all?

Secchia: Jack Stiles, Jerry Ford respected early in his career because Jack got things done for him. It was a funny relationship. (It was sort of the kind of the

relationship I had with him.) He depended on me to get things done for him and I think Jack had filled that void for him in his early congressional years.

Smith: But who was Jack Stiles? Where did he come from?

Secchia: He was a local man. Nobody really knew much about him. The night he died, he was supposed to have dinner with me. He had called me at 4 pm...to say he had arranged a lady friend to meet with him and he went to Grand Haven. On his way home he rolled his car. They found his car the next morning in a ditch in the creek off West River Drive. Jack lived a fast life and was a small problem for the president in Washington. During this negotiation was the Midnight Massacre. All of these things happened fast. I believe President Ford was trying very hard to keep Jack out of the spotlight because there were some strange feelings about him, whether it be here or there. But I had dinner with Jack several times and I have a picture of us having a dinner on Ford's first trip home at the old Harley Inn. The hotel's not even there anymore, but I have a picture of that dinner, just the four of us. But I don't remember anything about Bill Gill's four-person group, but knowing Jerry Ford, I don't doubt it.

Smith: One thing Bill said...

Secchia: This is Bill Gill the television guy?

Smith: Yeah. He didn't say it, critically, he said it almost matter of factly, he said, "Jerry Ford was not without guile." Now, that obviously runs counter to the popular impression. I don't take it as criticism. I mean, anyone who wants to be Speaker of the House has more than simply ambition.

Secchia: Well, you know what, there's good ambition and there's bad ambition.

Smith: Well, sure. Sure.

Secchia: Jerry Ford wanted to be Speaker of the House because he believed that was the ultimate position for someone who had dedicated many years to legislative reasoning. He'd studied the budget, he understood the administrative

procedures of the House. He was like John Engler as our governor. He understood the insides facts and workings of the government.

Smith: Let me ask you about Jack Stiles. As I may have said earlier, Nelson Rockefeller didn't age well. There was a streak of, it's not too much to say, of paranoia. As vice president he saw enemies, and he had convinced himself that Rumsfeld was his ultimate enemy.

Secchia: Rockefeller?

Smith: Yeah, but he had literally also convinced himself that Jack Stiles' death was no accident.

Secchia: Did he?

Smith: Yeah, he believed that the president was surrounded by people who didn't want him to get reelected in 1976, and that somehow Stiles' death factored into - that they started the campaign very late and so forth and so on.

Secchia: If they did a sperm check on Jack's body, they would have found he was short a few gallons. No one knew at 4 p.m. that evening where he was going. I mean, he was out drinking and rendezvousing. I wouldn't refute that. But the campaign started late because President Ford had wanted to wait, to not get into the primaries... However, the next day after he received the Kansas City nomination we all met in Vail with Stu Spencer, Cheney and Baker (5-6 of us) to plan the campaign.

Smith: So, he had a local reputation?

Secchia: I don't know if he had a big reputation because you have to remember that these men were 25 years older than me so I didn't know about their younger days, (their prowling days). I just knew Jack was a loyal friend of President Ford's from years gone by.

Smith: What was his professional background?

Secchia: I'm sorry...I forgot.

Smith: But it's interesting that the president had him for such a close friend and in effect as a political ally given the vulnerabilities that went along with that.

Secchia: And I think those vulnerabilities really approached this risky status when Jerry Ford's role became more important. When Jerry Ford was a congressman and later, the Minority Leader, nobody really paid attention to who he hung around with, or who he had dinner with when he came back to town. I can remember taking Jerry Ford to an old hotel in D.C. where the piano player (Mark Russell), used to play. It's the old Sheraton-_____, right on the river by the parkway, off of Connecticut Ave. a couple blocks. It's where Mark Russell used to play in the early '70s.

Jerry and I went in there and we had dinner and a few drinks. We were talking and I was proud of my relationship with Jerry. I went over to Mark Russell and said, "Do you realize the Minority Leader of the U.S. Congress is in this room?" Russell played all this political satire and he looked at me like, "No, which one is he?" And I had to point out "The Minority Leader." Now, if Mark Russell, who is a 24/7 full-time political satirist and humorist and musician, didn't know who the Minority Leader was, then who was paying any attention to who he was having dinner with, me or Jack Stiles. It just didn't matter to most.

Rockefeller had this paranoia and he was also involved in a lot of intelligence operations that I wasn't involved in. I would challenge his thinking. I think Jack was just a party boy whose time had come. Great guy, fun to be with, and maybe drank a little too much, but he didn't talk a lot and he was loyal to Ford and that was important to Jerry Ford. Now, with your experience you know more about Jerry Ford than anybody and you'll find that more than half of us think they were Jerry Ford's *best* friend.

Smith: That passes for guile. I mean, beyond individual ego, there are successful politicians - all have the ability to make individuals think that they have a unique place in their lives.

Secchia: The good ones.

Smith: The good ones, absolutely.

Secchia: And I don't think Jerry Ford could be called a manipulator as I would say John Edwards was, or some other people who had issues to hide, but it's hard to get a good interview out of people like me because I love the guy like a big brother. Do not want to hurt his legacy.

Smith: Tell me how broad a range of friends he had.

Secchia: Well, you could start with Jack Stiles. I think one of the questions you'll find in Maury DeJonge's interview that was never shared was one of the questions was, "My editors can't quite understand it, why do you consider Pete Secchia as one of your closest friends?" And that's right in the interview.

Smith: Really?

Secchia: Uh-huh. I have a copy of the interview because Maury told me 30 years ago that he would give me a copy some day. He gave me one a few months ago. I don't know where it is, I think I have it at the office, but you'll get it eventually. It was because he had this broad range of friends that he knew where to go for answers. Jerry Ford was the consummate politician in the sense that he wasn't being partisan political, but he knew how to work the halls of Congress. And if the lobby system worked as it did when Jerry Ford was in Congress from late 40s to the 70s, when you needed to know something about airplanes or military aircraft or civilian aircraft, you had to call somebody who knew that product or industry. Someone who could find the answers for you, so you could make a better decision.

So that was Jerry Ford's way of operating. He could call somebody or ask or tell somebody to get the answer from a person, but he liked to do that himself. He loved to talk to you about what you do and why you do it. So he had different friends from different sectors. I know that Bob Sheiffer (CBS) and Jones and some of those TV guys were his contacts. I remember when GRF hired Ron Nessen and he thought it was sort of neat that he was able to get this national press man to come and be his press secretary. He was a bit naïve in some ways. He was enraptured by certain musicians or entertainers, but we

all are. Wouldn't you love it if Abraham Lincoln was resurrected and came walking in the room? You'd want to run up and ask him a dozen questions before he disappeared again.

Smith: How much of that was the Eagle Scout in Ford and how much of that was Grand Rapids?

Secchia: I think there's a lot that has the same values. I don't think there's a big difference between Eagle Scouting and the culture of Grand Rapids. There are people who will see us as country bumpkin-ish and there are others who think that our sartorial splendiferousness is lacking. The fact is, that we're Midwesterners. Scouting teaches kids to have goals, earn them, wear a badge. Always Jerry Ford wore that badge of honor when he was in the legislature. He was our congressman. He defeated an isolationist. He had his points.

Smith: It's interesting. We spent two fascinating hours yesterday with Dorothy Dowton and it was interesting because she volunteered what others have sort of grudgingly yielded up, which was the extent to which, even when they were in the vice presidency, the Nixon people didn't want them around, looked down on them, saw them as *Grand Rapids*. Now, some of that you can understand, some of it's unavoidable given their roles, but some of it's cultural condescension. He obviously had to be aware of it.

Secchia: Oh, he was aware of it. He was well aware of it. When he brought Bill Seidman in to the vice president's office and Phil Buchen who was his attorney, these were people he knew he could depend on and that's who he wanted around him. If you look at the Nixon White House and you have the California boys and the fast movers, fast talkers, somewhat shifty manipulators and then you bring in Bill Seidman and Phil Buchen and Jack Stiles and Pete Secchia, it was... "Who are those guys?"

Smith: I want to talk about Phil Buchen. One of the things that Bill Gill said yesterday was that part of the burden, Phil Buchen talked to Duncan Littlefair and they both communicated to the President their views on the advisability of a pardon. And I don't know Duncan Littlefair except from a distance by

reputation. But I would have thought that he was a political liberal who would not necessarily look favorably upon a Nixon pardon. Bill insisted that in this particular case, he did and he communicated those views through Buchen and apparently directly himself to Ford. Does that sound credible?

Secchia: I can't challenge it nor can I confirm it. Was Buchen in agreement with Littlefair?

Smith: Yes.

Secchia: There's been so many years gone by...

Smith: You know, it sounds basic, but it's basic for a reason. Tell us about Phil Buchen.

Secchia: Well, Phil's relationship with Ford had gone back to the pre-congressional days. Jerry Ford always felt that they had an honorable legal partnership and a good personal relationship. Therefore, when Jerry moved out of the legal business, when he needed legal help, he went right back to where he would've been nurtured as an early member of the bar. So they had a quiet but strong relationship. Phil was, I think, wanting to be a little more involved in the exciting side of Washington. But because of Phil's physical condition, and his health deteriorating quite rapidly towards the final years there, I just think they were very happy to come back and draw down from the deals or D.C.

I can't say specific incidents I might be reminded of, but when someone, you see it now, too, because you've been through several of them, but if someone goes from being your newspaper editor in Grand Rapids, to being a congressman, to being speaker, to being president, or they make their way up any ladder of success, you expect changes and sometimes you don't get changes. Everybody expected changes. But those who knew the man (or his bride) know there were few changes except the fact that there were more demands on time, more demands on their ability to attend events, more babies to kiss, more funerals to attend. So a lot of people change because their life clock starts ticking faster.

I knew a lot of these people back when we were all nothing. I mean, I'm still a country bumpkin and I'm proud of it. I don't even like to go to Washington, never did like to go to Washington (even when GRF was president). G.H.W. Bush asked me to be in his administration, I said no. I mean, that's how I ended up being ambassador to Italy. I didn't want to go to Washington.

Smith: Did Ford change?

Secchia: No. Where he did change, he changed for the better. He learned, he became more understanding and expansive on issues that I would never claim to understand. I don't know if I told you this story about, Golda Meir - do you remember reading thist one?

I was upstairs with Ford one night in the residence and he said to me, "Peter, what do you think about Golda Meir coming to visit?" It had been in the press that she was going to ask for - in today's standards it's probably minor - "million in aid." And he said, "What do you think?" I said, naively, "Well, you know, we have inflation, we have a big deficit, people don't like it when the government keeps giving away money to other governments. Maybe you ought not do it." He said, "Well, that's specifically why she's coming." And he says, "But that's what you think?"

A few minutes later, a buzzer goes off, I don't know whether it was in the chair or if the steward came out of the kitchen, but the call comes through and he says, "It's Henry Kissinger. He's in Tel Aviv and he's about to get on the plane with the prime minister." Then President Ford picks up the phone and says, "Henry, I've been talking to Pete and I don't think we're going to do it." And I'm sitting there with this vision that the Mossad is listening in and I'm going to find out that there's somebody in my hotel room when I get back to the Madison Hotel. I don't know what I'm talking about, I was just making conversation. But after you get into it, you find out that he'd talked to a dozen other people who'd had similar advice.

Smith: So it wasn't the fact of doing what the last person who'd advised him to do?

Secchia: No, and he got that bad rap. I don't think that was the way it was. It was just that he had a great memory. I used to describe him as an administrative genius because everybody thought he was an administrative dum-dum and that he didn't know the issues. But, this is a guy you can take a whole bunch of papers on different issues, throw them up in the air, and as they float to the ground, he'll pull the one out of the pack that needs attention. And then he'll know who to call to ask their thoughts and maybe he won't agree with you, he'll just ask your thoughts. And you might think, "Well, I just talked to him and I told him this and that's what he did." That's bullshit. He'd talked to dozens of other people.

Smith: Over time, all those years in Congress...clearly people evolve. They learn. They grow, presumably, the more they're exposed to what's unfamiliar. His conservatism: Did that change?

Secchia: I think it diminished. When he first was in Congress, I didn't know him. I didn't meet him until later in the 60s, but I don't think he would've ever supported the ERA and some of the issues that Betty was strongly in favor of if he still lived in Grand Rapids. He still talked to all the people here that he talked to back then. I think his conservatism diminished on some of these social issues. I believe if today he was making a decision on civil unions or same sex benefits, he would've been a pioneer on that. Too, I think that he's probably similar to the current governor of Utah on how he would've viewed those issues.

Smith: I realize this is speculative, but how much influence did Mrs. Ford have on those kinds of issues? How much was simply being exposed to a broader range of opinion and reality, living longer, which has a way of playing havoc with ideology. Because he did seem to become in some ways more liberal, for lack of a better word, with age.

Secchia: Well, I think America has become more liberal and I think he was a strong barometer of the public sense. So as he became more entrenched and more familiar with the issues facing the country and the world, I mean, I doubt he'd put up with the Republican Party that we have today.

Smith: Could he get nominated in this district today? If he were running for the first time, if he wasn't the Jerry Ford of legend, would his kind of conservative - if you want to call it that.

Secchia: Well, his kind of conservatism probably doesn't exist today. There are still conservatives here, but it's like engineering and computer work. Everything is now for niche markets and what used to be conservatism was everybody who was over here who might agree with the majority of these ten issues. Today you have fiscal conservatives, social conservatives, religious conservatives, it won't be the same. If he was running today as the attractive candidate that he was, you have to remember, in this district, the election is the primary, the Republican primary. So if you were able to get the Republican primary vote...

Smith: That's the question. In today's Republican Party, would he win a primary?

Secchia: I think so, but I wouldn't know enough about 1948's comparison. He ran against Jonkman who obviously was out of step. There again it is Jerry Ford the barometer, he read that shift before anybody else read that and he wasn't supposed to win. At least those who were entrenched in the leadership here thought that he didn't have much of a chance.

Smith: Describe then, if you could kind of encapsulate, when you really began to know him...give us a sense of the political culture, in this town and then maybe the broader culture. We're trying to trace, among other things, impact of the Christian Reformed Church upon the broader culture of West Michigan. But also, invariably, spilling over into the political culture. Clearly it has evolved, but where was it when you first really begin to know Ford? How much of it did he have to take into account? How much of it found reflection in his voting record?

Secchia: When I first got to know Ford, I was afraid he wouldn't get reelected. That's how I came to know him. I had met him at a few events and told him I thought we ought to talk. I reminded him that when he was home, he was only seeing people his own age and nobody was developing any contacts with the

30+ year old set which was the decade of people in their 30s that I knew. He was listening to that and said, “You know, I hadn’t thought about that.” I watched him make some adjustments in his campaigning, but I think that you have to understand that as he has changed and his personality has changed, and Grand Rapids has changed, but you still have the same old problem.

Grand Rapids is a Democrat city; it is not a Republican city. It has been voting Democrat in most elections for many years. But it was a part of the 5th District then, (the 3rd Congressional District now), and it is part of Kent County which is Republican. We have had as many as a 18 to 3 majority on the county commission. When Jerry ran for office, it was about 17 to 4 and now there’s only 19 commissioners because they’ve changed the structure. The county is still a Republican county, but it’s an entrepreneurial region. And there’s an inherent respect, I mean, there is a story in today’s *Grand Rapids Press* where I’m quoted as saying, “You’ve got 300 greedy bastards in New York who give a bad name to the CEOs of America and in West Michigan, I don’t know a West Michigan CEO who would fall into the category they are criticizing on Wall Street.” (2008)

That’s a point of pride we’ve always had here. I think Jerry Ford had an admiration for the Sandy Weils and the local corporate leaders because he wasn’t one and he always had respect for successful business people. He thought that success was an admirable quality and I think he had the same respect for the competent legislator who did his homework, was prepared, didn’t only come to a hearing because there were television cameras, but came to make comments on certain provisions in the legislation.

Smith: You have to believe that those values were implanted early.

Secchia: Yes, and you see them with the young Scouts who were lined up at his funeral procession. You see their pride. I was at the recent scout fundraiser and that hasn’t changed. So, you know, you hear that derogatory comment every once in awhile that “They’re nothing but a bunch of Boy Scouts,” and it’s sort of like it has become a negative because there are those who don’t want to see the values of that. It’s like a child holding hands with a parent. When I grew

up, that wasn't very macho. And I can remember when *National Geographic* came to Grand Rapids back in Ford's early days as President (1974-75) and they wanted to know "why Grand Rapids was different." They talked to a lot of people, but one of the quotes they had in the article, I remember (it was from me) and I said, "Well, I'm in the restaurant business and it's not unusual here to see a teenage boy come here holding hands with his mother and nobody laughs at them. They respect that parent-child relationship." And Ford having had the early problems in his childhood watched and admired everybody else who had a business and principles like his stepfather - a good businessman, a proud businessman, an honest businessman - that was very important to Jerry Ford.

Smith: Do you think, again it's speculative, maybe he talked about it, maybe he didn't, I heard a little about it from time to time, but do you think that the circumstances of his early days gave him a particular empathy with not only broken families, but some other... I mean, you're looking for this counterintuitive, fiscally conservative as orthodox as they get, he was tight, fiscally.

Secchia: Personally...Also..." tight fiscally."

Smith: Do you have any stories to illustrate that?

Secchia: Well, I mean, I would kid him that he was "tighter than a second coat of paint." I used to kid him, but I'll tell you one funny story. We were out in California for a board meeting and I took Governor Engler by to say hello to then 90 year old Jerry Ford. We met President Ford in the office and we were sitting there chatting. It was getting dark. And when people get elderly they start to keep the lights down in their office, and there's piles of crap and newspapers everywhere, and stacks of things, letters to sign, and autographs to sign. I realized that University of Michigan was playing basketball at that time, and I knew he *never* had the specialized signal cable because back then you had to pay extra to get these basketball games. I knew he wouldn't pay for that. And I said, "You know, too bad you don't have..." He said, "Oh, I do! I do!" He said, "Well, let's go."

So he got up so fast he forgot his cane and he started to head for the door. Well, Judy at the time was working and Penny Circle or someone came running out, "Mr. President! Mr. President, you forgot your cane!" She gives him the cane. We get to the house, he's got the TV and this special hook-up and I said, "Jerry, I can't believe you pay for this." He just smiled at me.

He loved his University of Michigan sports. He knew the players name, who could dribble, drive, _____ a perimeter shoot. Well, later on, we say goodbye, we're going through his office and I said to Penny, "I can't believe he bought that." She says, "He didn't. Somebody gave it to him."

Smith: How much did he talk about money? I mean, he took some hits for particularly the early days of his ex-presidency. We've had occasion now to talk to a number of people who were on boards with him, and it was very clear he took it very seriously and he never just lent his name to something. But nevertheless, he was going to come home because he had no money and he was going to practice law and was going to make a little bit of money for his family. Was he proud of his success?

Secchia: On his board service?

Smith: Yeah, and just as someone economically successful?

Secchia: I think he was dedicated to being a good board member, just as he was dedicated to being a good Scout, a good lawyer, or a good legislator. He studied for meetings and he told me a few times about the trip out east would give him a few hours and a plane where he could read, but he was said to be an excellent board member. I heard that from several people.

Smith: Do you think he was sensitive to the criticism on public speaking?

Secchia: No.

Smith: No?

Secchia: I tried to get him to be more sensitive to this criticism because of what he did. He just evolved into a "Well, if you want to pay me 50 grand, fine, but put 25

in the Ford Foundation,” and then, “Do this and this.” This minimizes the actual fees reported, but, you know, he was only out of office four years and, I guess it was eight years before anybody started selling their time for big money. Let’s see, Carter lost after four years to Reagan, so it was twelve years then, because, you know, the big dollars weren’t made until Reagan and Clinton and Bush ‘41.

Smith: But you know Ford took heat for being the first.

Secchia: Yes, he did, but I don’t think he was sensitive to it. I don’t think he did much of it then. It didn’t take a lot of money for Jerry Ford to feel wealthy. I mean, he’d never had any wealth at all.

Smith: Do you have any idea what Jerry Ford was worth when he died?

Secchia: Nope, and he wouldn’t talk about it.

Smith: He wouldn’t.

Secchia: He had a chunk of stock from Sandy Weil, the early Traveler’s Insurance, the early parts of CitiCorp Building that empire was exciting to him. I mean, today he’d be mortified at the CitiCorp fiasco, but he was a good board member, dedicated to that group. He had “Founders Stock.” I mean, he referred to it as “Founders Stock.” I don’t know what founders stock is other than maybe back in the 70s you were able to give a certain class of stock to people that could be converted or split or had special dividends, I don’t know.

Smith: What would be a luxury to Jerry Ford?

Secchia: Watching his University of Michigan football team or basketball team or visiting the campus and talking to the players. That would be a luxury. Private jets, I don’t think so much.

Smith: It is astonishing and it became a matter of discussion internally that, at least as long as I was here, I was appalled that he was flying commercially and subsequently Rich said of course he could use their plane.

Secchia: I helped put that deal together.

- Smith: I wish it had been done earlier, but he kept up.
- Secchia: But you know how this came about? Rich said to me, “You know I’ll always be happy to send a jet to pick him up.” But I hated to ask Richard because somebody else might’ve asked him last week. He said, “Anytime he wants to go anywhere, I will have a plane there.” I said, “You mean, anytime, anywhere?” He said, “Yep.” I went to the president with it, and he still didn’t use it very much.
- Smith: That’s fascinating. Tell me about the relationship between the president and Rich DeVos. Was it any different between Rich DeVos and Van Andel? Was it closer to Rich? What’s your reading?
- Secchia: I think when they were both alive, it was similar. There was a mutual respect. Jerry had that consistent admiration of successful business people who did it the right way. Jay’s been gone for awhile now, so the DeVos side is certainly closer, but when Jay was still alive and active in the business Jay and Rich were both friends and conservatives GRF admired, but *not* close friends. Jerry was still wrapped up in Washington. The early friends, the Jack Stiles days, were the old-fashioned “congressional hometown politics begins at home” crowd.
- Smith: Is there anyone left from those days?
- Secchia: Maury DeJonge or John Malinowski. You know the family, the guy that was his chief of staff who ended up a judge. I just read a book written by one of the Malinowski family members (about the family) and I forget some the names now, but he had run his office here in town...By the way, I think Bill Gill got fired from his TV station... he lost his job, let’s just say that was for fabrications and self delusions, I think.
- Smith: Tell me about the kids. What was your relationship? Maybe it’s a large subject, but what was your role?
- Secchia: My role was whatever he wanted it to be. You know, one time he called me up and asked me to come out and talk to Steve. “What for?” He says, “Well,

I can't afford to send him to Duke and that's where he wants to go." Or University of Virginia or some expensive school.

Smith: Now, this was when he was in Congress?

Smith: He was vice president because I think the day I arrived, he flew out on Air Force Two. It was then a prop Conair.

Smith: With all due respect, why would he have you talk to Steve?

Secchia: He had a hard time talking to his kids about tough issues and money issues, I think for the same reason he admired people who had done well in business. He was a bit embarrassed that he hadn't done well. This is just my own personal judgment.

Smith: Yeah, makes perfect sense.

Secchia: It was nice to have someone else who had done well in business to come talk to Steven. He had arranged for Steve to work at a dude ranch, (Brown's?), out in Utah somewhere. And that's how Steve ended riding horses and now he's still raising them and he was breeding them for awhile, so that was one. I also remember the 1976 bicentennial dinner, my job was to watch Jack, make sure he didn't get into trouble. That evening I had to talk to him. But they were just kids. You know, Susan was dancing with some people she shouldn't be dancing with. He wanted me to talk about that. I don't think he had a close relationship with his kids in the early days. I don't think they paid much attention to anything he did and he didn't pay that much attention to things they did.

Smith: Was part of that just because he was away physically a lot?

Secchia: I think he was just dedicated to doing what he did.

Smith: Wrapped up in his work.

Secchia: And, we're all guilty of that. I went through my younger days of my children and I was busy building my business and just hope you catch a hold of the life raft before you sink.

Smith: Did he ever say anything in those later years to lead you to believe he felt that and/or felt any degree of guilt either toward the kids or toward Mrs. Ford for all those years when he was either physically absent or emotionally absent because of work?

Secchia: I think he had some guilt for not spending more time with Betty and not spending more time with the kids. But you know, when you have a friend who is president of the United States or “former president” of the United States, or minority leader, you don’t just sit down and say, “Why aren’t you treating your kids better?” or “Why aren’t you treating your wife better?”

Smith: But if he, you know, had earlier involved you in these kinds of family discussions, I just wonder if in later years, that continued.

Secchia: Later, he didn’t involve me in family issues. He asked me to deliver a message or to watch or talk to someone. He didn’t have many family discussions. I don’t think as a unit they did a lot. Betty ran the house and ran the kids and took care of everybody and kept it all going. And he was busy. He had that old-fashioned model that his father, Ford, had. I go to work in the morning and when I come home at night, I want my slippers and I want to eat and I want to sit down and read the paper and I don’t want to be bothered. He had that slipper and pipe kind of “unwinding” culture.

Smith: Sure. And in one way he did evolve. I mean we talked about a change and evolution. I mean, certainly, he was so proud of her and her feminist credentials. You know, he certainly didn’t need to put himself, for reasons of ego, at the center of attention. When she got the Medal of Freedom, when she got recognition, it was almost better than when he did. One sensed that in those later years.

Secchia: It was always, “Betty is more popular than I am.” His self-deprecating humor wasn’t as fine-tuned as some others, but he used it effectively and he was fair to her and he cared about her and he’s the one guy I’ve met in my life who I’d say without a doubt was always faithful.

Smith: When was the last time you talked with her?

Secchia: I talked to her a few months ago. I don't like to call, but Jan (her assistant) says, I don't know how the staff works, because the staff says, "Call me" and then they filter everything through staff. Steve says, "Why don't you call Mom?" And he says, "She says you don't call very much?" And I don't want to go through staff. I had that problem with Barrett for awhile and I've been through lots of staff.

Smith: Did he put up walls?

Secchia: Well, everybody does when you're the gatekeeper. You have to. Because, in your judgment, "He doesn't need to talk to Pete Secchia right now, he's got to focus on that speech" or "He's got to get ready for this interview." And that's your job, I mean, that's the gatekeeper (the chief of staff). I respect that because I know how difficult that is. I occasionally would hear from some of them when they were down and out and disappointed and it was easy to work for Jerry Ford and easy to think he didn't love you because he didn't spend a lot of time giving hugs or telling you that he really cared about you. But when it got right down to the nitty-gritty, you knew that he loved you because he wouldn't put up with your crap if he didn't. He just had a way about him that said, "I accept you."

Smith: Did you read, in part or in whole, Tom DeFrank's book?

Secchia: Yes.

Smith: What's your reaction?

Secchia: Well, after I read it, I had two or three facts I challenged. I didn't think it was a Pulitzer Prize book and I don't think he knew him as well as he claimed to have known him. I chaired that Jerry Ford's Hometown Downtown celebration. He said he still has the badge from that. I got to believe that wasn't, as he said it was. It was not a cold winter day, it was outdoors at the Calder Plaza and I remember we gave him cookies from this African-American lady friend of my family who used to make cookies for him at the store where he worked. We gave him the cookies. I'd have to go back and research, but I can't believe we were outside in January in Grand Rapids.

There were a couple of little _____ - there were a few revelations that I wasn't aware of.

Smith: You wonder what the president's motive was. There are people we've talked to that believe absolutely he knew exactly what was going on and he was saying all this because it was going on the record and this was part of his legacy. And there were other people who felt that to some degree he was almost used. And I emphasize, not just by Tom, who really did care about the president and who is a good reporter. But it raises the question about whether it's a good idea for former presidents to have that kind of...

Secchia: I think, knowing Jerry Ford, I think he might have done the former and just figured, "Well, it will come out after I'm dead and I'd like to set the record straight and this is how it really happened." Because he's reading other columnist's stories on how it happened.

Smith: Did you ever hear him talk about the second Bush or Iraq? What was his take?

Secchia: He thought there'd been some mistakes made. He told me he told the president that, too. You're talking about '43?

Smith: Yes.

Secchia: Yeah, he said, "He doesn't call me very often, but when he did, I told him." And I said, "How'd he handle it?" And he said, "Fine" and he thought that '43 was pretty good about taking that criticism. But GRF was always quick to tell you that he doesn't know everything the current president knows.

Smith: But it must have been awkward - forget Bush, forget the policy, look at the personalities, with Cheney and Rumsfeld and Paul O'Neill, all those folks - I mean, that must have been difficult for him.

Secchia: It was very difficult for him because he didn't know where to put his shoe down there, which path to walk.

Smith: I presume it didn't undermine in any way his respect for O'Neill.

- Secchia: No, not at all. And that's why Jerry Ford was still Jack Stiles friend in the end when other people were saying Jack was useless, or often drunk and saying things about people that they shouldn't say, but it gets them in the gossip columns, the potpourri columns. People talk.
- Smith: That's one of the remarkable things about Ford. He was often a victim of that. He doesn't seem to have harbored any particular resentment. He often laughed it off. Did he have an enemy?
- Secchia: Oh, he had quite a few back in the early days.
- Smith: Did he think he had?
- Secchia: Yes, he had a few people that he didn't like and he was pretty sure they didn't like him. But I don't think he had an enemy or he would have been paranoid about Rockefeller. He didn't have that conspiracy theory deal. You know, to this day he felt on the Warren Commission they did the research they had to do. That's why I can't believe some of these things I'm hearing about what really happened with him. I think he was a pretty basic guy. And, if you're a basic guy, you don't have a lot of devious plans and plots.
- Smith: He certainly didn't waste any time nurturing enmities, unlike Richard Nixon who almost drew strength from them.
- Secchia: You know, some of us have strange personalities, some of us know what we're going to say is going to anger. You know, Jerry Ford and I used to debate the '76 primary where he would get pissed off at Reagan and the Reagan people and I would remind him that, we made a dozen mistakes that each cost us a quarter of a point. There was no one mistake; there were just the little ones. And had he not gone out and campaigned in the primary in Minnesota and some of those small states, he would've lost worse because they didn't know him. He thought he could just stay in Washington and be the good Doobie all his life that he was and the Rose Garden Strategy kind of feel. It wasn't going to work that way.

I miss him. I proudly tell you, I miss him. I sit here looking out the window (here in his office) and I remember building this museum and trying to get the cash appropriated. I was often talking to him about raising money and the guy he was, in the sense he wouldn't bother a friend. I said, "Call Max Fischer, we've got to get this money." "Okay, Peter, I'll get to it." And he delayed it too long. Max passed away without getting the "big ask."

Smith: Great.

INDEX

B

Buchen, Phil, 9

C

Christian Reformed Church, 12

D

DeFrank, Tom, 20

F

Ford, Gerald

- decision making style, 10–11
- friendships, personal, 7–8
- funeral, reactions to, 13
- Nixon pardon, 2–3
- personal stories about, 10, 14
- political style, 7
- post-presidency earnings, 15–16
- social issues, 11–12
- Speaker of House ambition, 4
- vice president, 1

Ford, Steve, 17–18

G

Grand Rapids, Michigan

- culture, 12–14

L

Littlefair, Duncan, 8–9

M

Meir, Golda, 10

S

Stiles, Jack, 3–7