Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this.

Were you in the Nixon White House?

Wallison: In a sense, I was. I worked for something called the President’s Advisory Council on Executive Organization, also known as the Ash Council. And that was during the Nixon period, but I was then a young squirrel, little chipmunk and did a study of the transportation agencies, as I recall, for that group. But it gave me my first entry into that whole scene.

Smith: Even if you’re on the periphery, obviously you could not escape the kind of enveloping mood that presumably Watergate created.

Wallison: I was out before Watergate really hit.

Smith: You were?

Wallison: Yes, I did this in 1969, 1970. I was only three years out of law school at that point so it was really just a nine month period during which I sort of immersed myself in what was going on in Washington. I did get to meet a lot of the people who became important in the Nixon period. I mean, Roy Ash was one and John Connally was another, both of them were on this Ash Council. But I was really just someone’s bag carrier without a bag.

Smith: Do you have a theory as to what it was about John Connally that so impressed Nixon?

Wallison: Affirmative. He’s a very affirmative man. He was charismatic, knew what he wanted, stated what he wanted very clearly. I think Nixon admired people like that. So that was never a mystery to me.

Smith: One of the stories we’ve been told, someone was told to call John Connally, who was Secretary of the Treasury at the time, and indicate to him that the President would like to have him at an event the next day. And as this story
unfolded, Connally made it very clear that if the President wanted him at the event, the President would call. You do wonder if Nixon, for all the talk of the bundle of insecurities that was Nixon, looked at someone like Connally and saw a kind of brass-plated—

Wallison: I think that would be a perfect little paradigm of the relationship between the two of them. And there was a little episode which involved the Ash Council that I thought actually encapsulated this whole thing, because one of the proposals of the Ash Council was to create a domestic council. We’ll talk about that when we talk about Rockefeller. Nixon assembled his entire cabinet. It wasn’t a public meeting, but it was a large meeting. The Cabinet was there and some of the subcabinet people were there and the White House staff and Roy Ash was going to explain to them what this domestic council was all about and, of course, they were not happy. The cabinet was not happy with the fact that there was going to be some intervening body between them and the President.

Roy Ash was not an articulate person. He was probably a very bright person, but he was not articulate. And he stumbled around and stumbled around and Nixon was there sort of in the doorway watching this whole thing. And then John Connally, who was a member of the Ash Council - after Ash had made a mess out of his description of the idea and the Cabinet was even more disturbed that what they originally thought was the problem was actually worse than they thought - John Connally stood up and in about four or five sentences, outlined what it would be, reassured them all, and everything sort of quieted down. And I always thought it was at that point that Nixon really took the measure of Connally and thought to himself, “Hmm, this guy could be a successor to me.” So, that’s what I saw in that little vignette.

Smith: Well, clearly we know that left to his own devices, he would have installed Connally as his successor. Other people at that point were making that decision for him.

How did you come back into the White House?
Wallison: Oh, well, of course through Rockefeller. I came back - actually the Ash Council had something to do with this because one of the people on the Ash Council was a person named Walter Thayer. Walter Thayer was a very well known business person in New York, a close ally of John Hay Whitney.

Smith: The heart and soul of the Eastern Establishment.

Wallison: Right. Exactly, in every respect.

Smith: How would you define the Eastern Establishment by the way at that stage? Did it still exist?

Wallison: Today?

Smith: No, did it exist then?

Wallison: Did it exist? Oh, yes, I think it existed at that point and it was largely a WASP establishment. These were people who ran major businesses or were major investors or very wealthy people like John Hay Whitney, they were movers and shakers in a sort of informal government. I mean they were the people who would be consulted by the people in the government. Not only because they were rich and well known, but simply because they were considered people who were above the usual concerns that the rest of us might have had in our daily lives. You know, they spoke from a different level. They were probably in a sense disinterested, but had a long-term view of things.

Smith: Wise men.

Wallison: Wise men, sort of, yes. I think that would be a good way to put it, and that was a time we actually believed in wise men.

Smith: More hierarchical society.

Wallison: Yes, it was a lot more like that. Of course I’m not a sociologist, but that would be my way of thinking about it, and I think Rockefeller was, in a sense, part of that group for obvious reasons.
Smith: In ’64, the California primary campaign was not going well, so Stu Spencer, who’s just tried everything else, he says, “Governor, it’s time to call in the Eastern establishment.” And Rockefeller says, “You’re looking at it, buddy. I’m all that’s left.” Which is a great line.

Wallison: It doesn’t really sound like Rockefeller, but, yes, he could well have said it and it might have actually been in part true. But in any event, I was working for the Ash Council and we did a study, as I said. And then Rockefeller decided that he wanted to do a study himself called the Modern State in a Changing World. And he consulted Walter Thayer - this is how I understand it - about who should run such a study. And Thayer said, “Well, there was this young kid on the Ash Council who did a pretty good job and he lives right here in New York. In fact, he’s at Jack Wells’ Law Firm.” Jack Wells was the senior partner in the firm I was with and Jack was one of my mentors.

Smith: I don’t mean to throw you off, but this name—

Wallison: Easily done.

Smith: Well, no, it’s just that. Tell me about Jack Wells, because he is important behind the scenes.

Wallison: Well, Jack was not of the Eastern Establishment because Jack was a real New York kid. The only difference was, he was not Italian, he wasn’t Irish, and he wasn’t Jewish. He was, as far as I could tell, a WASP but he had a very thick New York accent. He was very gruff. There were no sanded edges about Jack Wells. He told you what he thought right to your face and he expected you to tell him what you thought right to his face. So, he was a special guy from my perspective. But he was the guy who brought me into his firm. He was running Rockefeller’s gubernatorial campaign in 1966, and I had just graduated from law school. I was in the Ripon Society, one of the founders of the Ripon Society, and the group of us went to see Wells about helping out in the Rockefeller campaign. Ripon and Rockefeller all worked together. And somehow Wells sort of took a liking to me in the course of that meeting and he asked me whether I would like to work on the campaign. I had no job at that point, I’d graduated from law school, but I’d had no association with any
law firm. And I guess you could’ve done that at that time, but I don’t know. I had no particular plans for what I was going to do that year. I probably was hoping for a job, but I didn’t have one. Jack asked me whether I’d like to help out on the Rockefeller campaign, specifically he paid. “I’d like you to go and see a lot of the academics in New York State. The Ripon Society is very interesting to these people and you are a founder of it. They’d like to talk to you and maybe, in talking to these academics, you can convince them that Rockefeller is a worthwhile candidate.”

Smith: It’s interesting that the campaign would care.

Wallison: Yes, I was amazed. Now, I’m amazed. Then it didn’t seem so crazy to me but it showed how much money they had to spend.

Smith: They could worry about academics.

Wallison: They could worry about academics. So they paid me enough so I could buy my wife a wedding ring, which I didn’t have the money to do otherwise. Spent everything they paid me on that ring, which she fortunately still wears. And I traveled around New York State. I first sent out books that the Ripon Society had written called, oh, I forget even the name right now. But we had written a book. I think it was on the 1964 campaign. And I sent copies to all academics whose names I could find. I guess we had mailing lists or something like that and I got a lot of letters back saying, “Gee, I’d like to know more about Ripon. I’d like to know more about Rockefeller.” And so I traveled around New York and met a lot of people and talked to them about it. I don’t know whether I got a single vote for Nelson Rockefeller.

Smith: Did you report to Wells?

Wallison: Yes, I did. I would write him memos every week and he liked my memos. I guess I was able to write clearly enough so that he thought something good about me, and at the end of the campaign he asked me if I’d like to join Rogers & Wells, which I guess was called Royall, Koegel, Rogers & Wells at the time. And I said, “Oh, yes! Oh, absolutely.” Or otherwise be unemployed? And that was the beginning of our relationship.
Smith: Before I forget, was Frank O’Connor really a bad candidate?

Wallison: I don’t remember, frankly.

Smith: I mean, clearly Arthur Goldberg was an atrocious campaigner and Robert Morgenthau wasn’t much better, but in between is the forgotten.

Wallison: That’s right. Rockefeller I think was always pretty lucky with his opponents, but Rockefeller was also a superb politician during those years. He was really an extraordinary guy for a person who couldn’t remember a name – or, maybe more accurately, he had 15 names that he could remember and every time he added one, someone fell off the other side. So he was a guy who could say, “Hiya, fella” and you actually believed that he knew your name, but just was being very friendly to you. And he would eat everything, every ethnic concoction that could be put together and did a wonderful job of making people feel as though he is one of them. So he was really a superb politician. So I thought he probably would’ve beaten anyone in New York at that time.

Smith: I don’t expect you to know the answer to this, but I’m just curious whether you’d heard anything at the time. Remember the Liberals put up Franklin Roosevelt, Jr. and, to this day, there’s uncertainty as to whether that was a put up job, whether he was there to draw votes away from O’Connor.

Wallison: That I don’t know. Rockefeller was not above those things, but I don’t know much about that. And that campaign, as I say, I was very far down in the apparatus and in addition, I traveled the entire time. I was never even in the headquarters except for a weekly or maybe monthly meeting with Jack where I would report to him, give him a memo about who’d I’d seen and what we’d discussed and what these people thought the issues were. That might’ve actually been of some value to him, to know what some of these academics thought about what some of these issues were.

Smith: It’s interesting because I get a sense from all the people I’ve talked to was a policy wonk. Long before the team caught on. And he was always looking, not only for talent, but clearly was also looking for ideas. And I wonder if in fact that this was part of that process.
Wallison: It could’ve been. It really could’ve been that the notion was to bring some more ideas into the campaign but, you know, with all the money that they had available, they could have gotten real academics instead of a kid right out of law school.

Smith: I take it money wasn’t that large of an object.

Wallison: Not that they paid me munificently, but I didn’t notice that there was ever a problem with money. I have to mention one more thing. How did this occur? And I think it was this, exactly in chronological order. After I’d done this campaign work, Wells invited me into his law firm. I worked for two years, really three, then I went down to the Nixon White House, The Ash Council. Then came back to the law firm and then Walter Thayer was asked about who could run this study of a Modern State in a Changing World and he apparently suggested me. I went to Wells and Wells said, “Yes, sure, that’d be great for you. Rockefeller’s a powerful man. He’s going to continue to be a powerful man. It’d be good for someone in our law firm to know him.” I remember this conversation very well. So I said, “Okay, I’ll be happy to sign on to help get this study started.” The idea is I would be a special assistant to the governor, but I’d work out of 22 West 55th Street, which was their office in New York.

Smith: When we said the ‘State’, are we talking about the state in the sense of the diminutive? One of 50 states or as opposed to--?

Wallison: Yes, good question, but not state in general. This was New York State.

Smith: Federalism, in effect.

Wallison: Yes, this is the Modern State, the Modern State, this is what a state like New York would do in a world that is changing. He loved ideas and he wanted to do this study.

Smith: He loved studies.

Wallison: He knew New York State would be paying for it as they were paying my salary and I was supposed to be running it. I mostly worked out of 22 West 55th Street.
Smith: People comment here’s a man with resources and taste and almost a persnickety need to have everything just so. And yet, the stories one hears about the work quarters at both 20 and 22 West 55th suggest almost a rabbit warren.

Wallison: Well, it was, but it was not that bad. I mean, we all had offices, small offices, and the place was cleaned every day and there were sufficient file cabinets and bookcases and things like that. It wasn’t as though papers were strewn around. And his own office was of very large size, very substantial. He had a desk and a big conference table. We used to meet around his conference table. In the back, he had a private office beyond that where he would go to take phone calls, so that the rest of us had no idea what he was talking about or with whom.

Smith: And then across the way was West 54th, the two houses—

Wallison: Yes, that was important. That was probably one of the two reasons he wanted to stay at 22 West 55th Street because behind it, on West 54th was the original Rockefeller house in New York. And, that, he used as a dining room and that kind of thing. So I said I’d be interested. Rockefeller wanted to meet me, so I went to 22 West 55th, a car picked me up, a limousine, and we drove up, around, and came down 5th Avenue to where his apartment was. But when I got into Rockefeller’s I was a little surprised because there was Louie Lefkowitz, who was the New York attorney general. Again, you can’t imagine how impressed I was by this. I’m four years out of law school and this man was the most important lawyer in New York.

Smith: The people’s attorney.

Wallison: So I get into the car and Rockefeller gets in and he starts the conversation with me. We talked for a while, and I said to him, “You know, our families” - I don’t know why I said this, but this was true - “You know, our families have something in common.” And he says, “What is that?” And I said, “Well, my grandfather was the fumigator at Pocantico Hills,” which was true. And to me, that was always a wonderful example of what this country is really like, because my grandfather, of course, was not of the Eastern Establishment. Far
from it, but he had this little trade, one of his many, many trades that he tried to earn a living as a fumigator. He was the fumigator for Pocantico Hills. Rockefeller got a big kick out of that. And I think it meant the same thing to him as it meant to me, because the fact that someone who had done this sort of menial work at Pocantico could now be, et cetera. And that was a wonderful thing about Rockefeller, he got what America was really about.

Smith: I’m told he was almost corny in his patriotism. I mean, really kind of old-fashioned, unabashed, almost sentimental love of country. And more than that, what the country represented.

Wallison: That’s right. Absolutely. That was one of the more attractive things about Nelson Rockefeller. So, in any event, he did hire me right after that. Then I went to work at 22 West 55th, and it was interesting. We started on this state-based program, but he then decided at some point that this was not going to work, that this whole idea of the Modern State in a Changing World was really not going to be sufficiently grand or cover sufficient territory, couldn’t probably figure out how to work in foreign policy, so he decided to resign as governor and enlarge the study. In order to run this study and he got Brooke Astor to contribute quite a lot of money to it and he threw in some money and a few other people threw in some money.

Smith: And that became the Commission on Critical Choices. Is that sort of a step up from the existing? It became, in fact, what he really wanted it to be.

Wallison: That’s right. Then he was able to bring in all kinds of really major heavy-weight people to be on the Commission on Critical Choices. And through that, he met Gerald Ford in a way that he had never had an opportunity to meet him before. I think Ford was quite impressed with Rockefeller and what Rockefeller was doing with this project.

Smith: Did you have any sense that this was a springboard for another run?

Wallison: Sure. I mean, not that Rockefeller told me this, but I’m not so naïve as not to understand what he was doing, because he had and I think the Rockefeller Brothers Fund—
Oh, sure, the studies in the late 50’s.

Had done studies, exactly. And they had catapulted him to some prominence and so I think he was thinking, “I’m going to be prepared to make a run and show what I have done, the ideas that I have developed here that are important for our nation’s future.”

There’s something that is in one way touching and in other ways extraordinarily naïve. He thought until the day he died, you know, the way to run for president is the best ideas, the best staff, the most innovative programs. At the very least, he was in the wrong party.

I don’t agree with that.

Really?

Of course not. Reagan is the premiere idea man. Reagan really had ideas. And he was in the right party.

I guess, okay, then—

In fact, it’s now Reagan’s party.

Oh, absolutely. But to the extent that Rockefeller’s second commission was in any way an outgrowth of the first, there is this debate over the extent to which he “moved to the right.” Whether a lot of that was in fact the product of a pragmatist’s experience discovering the limits of power, of government alone - although, the drug program argues against that and the Energy Independence Corporation argues against that. How much of it was an attempt to chase the caboose of conservatism as it headed off to the Right?

Well, you know, it wasn’t so clearly defined at that point. The fact is that, until Reagan, we didn’t really know what conservatism was. Conservatism meant something like a strong military and a balanced budget and maybe smaller government, but there wasn’t a tying it all together in an ideology or philosophy. And so Rockefeller probably attempted to make himself look more conservative in certain ways. He had to in order to overcome his liberal reputation as part of the Eastern Establishment.
Smith: There are cynics who believe there’s a connection with Attica. When I set out to do this book, you’re playing head games in terms of, “Okay, what are the subjects that people aren’t going to want to talk about?” And I assumed it would be the women. But what it is, is Attica. They don’t want to talk about Attica. The people who at least believe they were closest to him or fairly close to him find it hard to understand this man who was so inclined to put himself in the middle of events, to put his stamp upon events, why he was so reluctant go to Attica?

Wallison: To go to Attica?

Smith: To go to Attica. I mean then there’s a whole story of how the thing was bungled and it’s all been conflated into the question of whether Nelson Rockefeller went to Attica or not. And you can debate what impact that might have had. The fact of the matter is the horse was out of the barn long before that became an issue. I’m no apologist, but the question remains what the motive behind it was.

Wallison: I can’t really speak to that. My recollection is that Attica did not turn out to be anything helpful to him unless you thought that what he had to project was an image of a toughness.

Smith: Yes.

Wallison: And so in that sense, maybe that was what he was trying to do. I mean, that’s the way one would look at it. But I always thought Attica was an interesting example of the way Rockefeller’s mind worked. He was willing to go some distance toward a compromise, but if he found the person on the other side still intransigent, he would switch over and then he would take some very radical step. I experienced that in working for him and maybe we’ll get to that when we get a little bit further along in the chronology. But when he was vice president, we had an episode like this. I saw it happen. He could’ve created a catastrophic situation for himself. Do you want me to cover that now?

Smith: Sure.
Wallison: We’re a little bit out of time, but this had to do with the Commission on CIA Activities Within the United States. Rockefeller was the Chairman and there were several major figures at the time on that commission, including Ronald Reagan. That was the first time I’d ever seen Ronald Reagan in action and I became a Reagan person watching that.

Smith: Really?

Wallison: Oh, yes.

Smith: You were impressed?

Wallison: Yes, compared to Rockefeller, yes. I was Rockefeller’s counsel at that time, when he was vice president - I was 34 years old at the time. The CIA’s activities in the United States had become an issue. The so-called Family Jewels had been revealed. Right after Watergate it was revealed that the CIA had been spying on the American people. Rockefeller was appointed Chairman of a commission that was supposed to look into this and there were several congressional hearings going on.

Smith: Was it also designed to some degree at least to head off or at least steal the thunder, say, from the Church Committee?

Wallison: Oh, I think so, yes. Look, that’s standard Washington procedure. I mean, if you can, you get a backfire going in order to see if you can outdo the publicity that those other people are doing and I think that worked. But Rockefeller got a very good group together, and Reagan was one of them. I’m not going to remember all the names. The president of the University of Virginia, the head of the AFLCIO. Doug Dillon from Dillon-Reed. These were really top-notch people. Oh, and Erwin Griswold, who was then I think he was Dean of Harvard Law School. And so, that was the group and they hired someone recommended by Ford named David Belin. David Belin had been on the Warren Commission. Ford was impressed with him and told Rockefeller, “He’s the guy you ought to hire to run this program.” Rockefeller did.

And for some reason, at some point, Rockefeller asked David Belin whether he was going to write a book. I think maybe he had written a book about the
Warren Commission. And he asked Belin whether he was going to write a book about this and Belin said, “Yes, maybe I will.” And Rockefeller said, “Well, you can’t.” Belin said, “Sure, I can. Who are you to tell me I can’t?” That went back and forth. Rockefeller then went to the commission, and he told them it was a terrible idea if this guy was going to be sitting there the entire time and then write a book about what they were doing. They all agreed with him that that couldn’t happen. Rockefeller would press Belin and Belin got more and more intransigent. Pretty soon, he was no longer simply the chief of staff at the commission.

In his view, he was now a tribune for the American people. He just happened to be running this study but he’s actually doing this for the American people. So it got pretty bad at one point. The way we used to work, Rockefeller and I would go home every Friday to New York. Belin would go to Iowa where he lived. At some point, I walked into the office of Rockefeller’s chief of staff, when he was signing some letters and I said, “Well, I’m going to be going, governor.” We all called him ‘governor.’ We didn’t call him vice president. “Governor, I’m going to be going, so I’ll see you Monday” and he said, “Peter, I’m going to fire David Belin this weekend.” And I said, “You’re going to fire David Belin?” And he said, “Yes, I’ve just had enough of this. He won’t agree not to write a book and I don’t think anyone in this position should write a book, so I’m going to fire him.” And I said, “Well, wait a minute. Let’s stop for a second here, because there would be an enormous firestorm if you did that. If you tried to say that you’re muzzling this guy, then he will defend himself and say all the things he said about his being free to say whatever he wanted about what happens in this commission and so forth. It is going to be a disaster.” And he said, “Well, I’m going to do it because I just can’t take this kind of behavior.” So I said, “Well, give me the weekend to see if I can do something about this” and he agreed. “Okay, alright. We’ll talk again on Monday.”

And I don’t know what would’ve happened if I hadn’t walked into his office at that time, but fortunately, I called David Belin and I said, “Look, things have gotten really bad on this business with you and Rockefeller. Could you come in on Sunday?” And then I called Ford’s counsel, Phil Buchen and I
said, “Phil we’ve got a terrible problem here. Belin...” and so forth, “I think this can be worked out but you have to be involved in this in some way.” So Phil said, “Sure, when can we meet?” And I said, “Well, can you come in early on Sunday and Belin will come in from Iowa and I’ll come down from New York and maybe we can talk this out.” We did; we worked it out. We suggested to Belin that he was actually counsel to the commission in addition to being executive director and as counsel he had certain responsibilities as a lawyer, there were certain privileges that his clients had with respect to what he could say. Lawyers are bound by this attorney-client privilege and he agreed that, “Well, okay, Yes, I am a lawyer and I do have to abide by attorney-client privilege and, yes, many of the things I’m going to be hearing are privileged, so I don’t think I can say it.”

Smith: So he was willing to be reasonable?

Wallison: He was willing to be reasonable. And so by Monday morning, we had an agreement. And that averted this problem, but I saw that Rockefeller’s judgment at that point was not of the best, because anyone would have seen, given what had happened during Watergate and how sensitive everyone was to government abuses of various kinds at that point, the idea of firing this guy would have been really catastrophic, I think, politically for Rockefeller and for Ford.

Smith: How did the Domestic Council work?

Wallison: It worked in different ways during different administrations as you might imagine, but once it was established under Nixon, the underlying theory was wrong, I think. The underlying theory is that you could have a Domestic Council that was the analogue of the National Security Council, so that you could have a staff that remained over administrations. When a new administration came in, normally, the files were empty, everything was gone. It was cleaned out. They had to start from scratch. Except in the Security Council. For the National Security Council, probably because politics ended at the water’s edge, you still had a professional staff that was there. You might have a new National Security Advisor, but you had a professional staff with an institutional memory and so forth.
Not so in the domestic area. And the underlying idea was, “Yes, we could have this professional staff in the domestic area.” It doesn’t work. It doesn’t work. In fact, politics would dictate that you can’t have people involved in your domestic policy discussions who are not ultimately loyal to you, completely loyal to you, because the stakes are just too high. And so it never worked, but it started out that way. The person who was head of the Domestic Council during the Nixon administration was John Erlichman.

Smith: Ehrlichman?

Wallison: Ehrlichman, that’s right. Ehrlichman became head of the Domestic Council. That’s right. And that was really a serious effort to develop a staff that had specialized skills and would be able to advise the President, take what came in from the cabinet and advise the President about what policies to adopt.

Smith: You mention a name that I just want to stop for a moment. Because you mentioned Rod Hills, he said he came on whenever he came on, about the time Phil Arelda had left following a dispute between him and the Vice President.

Wallison: Well, it wasn’t really a dispute. Here’s what happened. Rockefeller had been told that he would be the vicar of domestic policy, or at least he believed he had been told he would be the vicar of domestic policy. And the question is, when you have this domestic council, what does that really mean? There’s a chairman of the Domestic Council and that could possibly be the vice president. The members of the Domestic Council were all the cabinet members, so it wasn’t a crazy idea that the vice president would be the chairman. Or, you could be in some way much more involved rather than just a chairman, a non-executive chairman. You could actually be involved in the day-to-day development of the policy. Rumsfeld was the Chief of Staff. Rumsfeld was a very clever fellow. And he said, “Well, I can’t have this. I can’t have Nelson Rockefeller in charge of domestic policy and Kissinger in charge of foreign policy. What am I supposed to be doing? And what is the President supposed to be doing?”
And so, he somehow worked it out that he would give Rockefeller a choice. That is, Rockefeller could become the chairman of the Domestic Council or, if he became chairman of the Domestic Council, then Phil Arelda would become the Executive Director of the Domestic Council and he would have his hands directly in everything that was going on.

Smith: Was Arelda seen, correctly or not, as a Rumsfeld person?

Wallison: Oh, yes. Yes. And Rockefeller for some reason thought about that as though the real question was whether the person who was running the Domestic Council was loyal to him or not. You can’t blame him, because he’d always been the executive, right, so he thought the important thing is the staff guy. If the staff guy who’s in charge of it is loyal to me, then I’m in charge.

Smith: Someone to look over his shoulder.

Wallison: Whereas if I’m just the non-executive chairman, that’s a titular position. I don’t really have control of anything and Phil Arelda is going to be in charge. And so, the choice he made was for him to not become chairman of the Domestic Council and Jim Cannon, who was his man, would become Executive Director of the Domestic Council. And the President then became chairman of the Domestic Council. That was the titular role there.

Well, that was a disaster from Rockefeller’s point of view, because even though Jim Cannon was loyal to Rockefeller - Rockefeller’s closest aide without any doubt - when you’re in that position, you understand where your loyalties are going. Your loyalties are not still going to Nelson Rockefeller; they’re going to Gerald Ford. And Jim did exactly what anyone with any sense would do, or any patriotism or anything else, you have to work for the President. And so, Jim’s line of communication ran through Rumsfeld to the President. Rockefeller was outside looking in. So, although he thought he would have control over the Domestic Council, he lost all control over it.

Smith: That raises a question, a large question and maybe an unanswerable question, but a guy who had spent as much time in Washington as he had in different administrations, in different roles, who had demonstrated, particularly in his early days, exactly this kind of ability to read the signals and to see where the
real power locus lay, and to cultivate the right patrons and to work the system. Was it simply that he’d been governor for 15 years and I won’t say it dulled his instincts, but it reprogrammed him in a sense that he brought that self image into this situation?

Wallison: Yes, I think that’s probably the best hypothesis of all. I think he had been the emperor and he lost track of court politics. I mean, you forgot what court politics is like when you’re the emperor, naturally, because everything revolves around you. He never really got used to the idea that everything revolved around someone else in the Ford White House and that was Ford. So, I think that ultimately was the problem.

Smith: And then there is this huge cultural shift early on. Early in ’75, I guess, it’s announced. We talked to Jim about this, how he told the governor, it’s announced from the White House that there are not going to be any new programs until we get a handle on what we’re doing, budgetary reasons, so forth and so on, you know, for administrative of reasons. And Jim, I guess, flew up to New York and broke the news to the governor who had not heard about this before and who was literally scratching his head because where he came from, it’s not only a test of how you govern - the acid test of getting reelected is new programs, new ideas.

And he literally couldn’t grasp the rationale, the logic behind this. Plus the fact that he wasn’t consulted. And a couple of people have suggested to us that one of the generative factors in at least the timing of this was that the Vice President every week made it his practice to go to lunch with the President with a new idea. Usually with lots of enthusiasm and sometimes paperwork at the same time and that this was at least in part an attempt to send an unmistakable signal that that’s not the road we’re going to travel on this administration.

Wallison: Well, you know, I don’t remember that he went. I know he had lunch with the President every week, but I don’t remember that he had new policy ideas each time. The only new policy idea that I remember was the Energy Independence Authority, which he did get Ford to adopt as an idea.
Smith: There is a story, stop me if you’ve heard this, that this was debated more than once in cabinet meetings and Bill Simon was vociferous in his opposition and I guess somewhat cutting as he could be in some of the remarks he made. And the President indicated, well, that basically the debate was over and he was endorsing Nelson’s proposal. And Simon continued the debate in private and the President said, “Bill, you and I both know Congress is never going to adopt this, but I’m not going to embarrass Nelson.” Does that sound credible?

Wallison: Oh yes, absolutely. Absolutely credible. Rockefeller had done a tremendous amount of work on this and was very, very serious about it.

Smith: And the basic concept was?

Wallison: It was that the government would throw money into the business of developing alternative fuels. Guess what? It was very similar to what our current President is talking about, right? And I thought at the time it wasn’t such a good idea. I don’t think it’s a good idea now.

Smith: Because?

Wallison: Because the other fuels that we already have tend to be cheaper than the fuels that are developed through these artificial processes. What we’re going to do is gasify coal, liquefy coal, so that you could use liquid coal for powering cars. And things like gasified coal could be used for heating homes instead of natural gas. A lot of this stuff came out of the notion, and it was very common at the time that there were limits to natural resources. This was the global warming of that era, the climate change of that era.

Smith: And being the futurist that he is, this is far-sighted—

Wallison: Yes, that we’re soon going to exhaust the natural resources of the earth and so on. We’re never going to discover any new oil, and we’re not going to discover any more natural gas. So we really have to do something about this. Well, it turned out that wasn’t right. And as soon as oil was decontrolled, gas was decontrolled, we had so much of it prices plummeted.

Smith: Could it be argued that he was way ahead of his time?
Wallison: Well, you could argue it, but we still haven’t, maybe at some point in the future, we will come out of this, but if you’ve been reading the newspapers and listening to some of the news, you realize that now we’re going to have a lot of natural gas. They’ve discovered new ways to crack some of this shale that underlies almost all of the eastern United States and much of the western United States and much of Canada. And they can crack that with certain new techniques and produce so much methane, natural gas, that we have hundreds of years of natural gas even at increased use and much cheaper than we’ve had it before. So, yes, he might have been a thousand years ahead of his time, but what use is that?

Smith: I don’t think he would’ve been insulted if he had been told he was a thousand years ahead of his time.

Wallison: Probably not. Actually Carter did finally adopt the Energy Independence Authority. That did get passed, that got adopted by Congress under Carter, a Democratic Congress. No surprise there. Democrats, not only did they like the idea of limits to growth, but in addition, they liked the idea of spending money to create jobs. And Carter liked it because we had the oil embargo and that sort of thing, so we wanted to avoid, if possible, being held hostage to the Middle East. So, it was adopted. It started. Some plants were built, but they were producing this stuff at a cost that was more expensive, and no one wanted it. When Reagan came in and decontrolled everything, it was gone. Those things are probably abandoned right now. Maybe they’re used for shopping malls, but they’re not producing anything.

Smith: Was there an evolution in his relationship with the President, his attitude toward the President during those two years?

Wallison: I didn’t really see that. He always expressed loyalty in my presence to the President. He would sometimes criticize the President in the sense that, “Oh, poor Jerry, he’s not getting good advice from these people.” But that’s true of just about everybody. When I worked for Reagan, you certainly heard that. Every time Reagan made a decision that someone didn’t like it was that he was getting bad advice from somebody, but you had to let Reagan be Reagan.
Smith: What was he like as a boss in those days?

Wallison: Difficult. Very, very difficult in that he did not brook disagreement from his staff, in fact. I assume you have interviewed Dick Parsons.

Smith: Right.

Wallison: I hope you have interviewed him at length.

Smith: Yes, I had a lunch discussion with him. I need to go back and do another one.

Wallison: You should go back and interview Dick Parsons. Not only is he a fabulous guy, a great character and brilliant and perceptive, but Dick was my deputy when I was the Vice President’s counsel. Dick then went over to the Domestic Council as the counsel to the Domestic Council. Dick and I had a running joke and I forgot what we labeled it, but the idea was, if you told Rockefeller what he wanted to hear, he didn’t think you were of any use; and if you told him what he didn’t want to hear, he didn’t want to hear from you anymore. So, either way, you were out in the cold if you ever got into a situation where he actually asked you for straight from the shoulder advice. This guy was not Jack Wells - and if you watched all the people who circled around him, and I did, over many years.

Smith: Hugh Morrow, for example.

Wallison: Yes, those people hardly ever, I was not actually thinking specifically of Hugh, but that’s not bad, there was—

Smith: Bill Ronan.

Wallison: Bill Ronan, Oscar Reubhausen, and then the guy who was George—

Smith: Hinman?

Wallison: No, there was another George who had been head of the World Bank.

Smith: George Woods?

Wallison: George Woods.

Smith: Yes.
Wallison: And I used to sit there in frustration because, you know, Rockefeller would be asking them for a decision on some issue and they would go all over the lot trying to avoid actually telling him what they thought, trying to send signals about what they thought, which Rockefeller, it seemed to me, didn’t seem to pick up. But he never seemed to get straight from the shoulder advice about a lot of things for that reason.

Smith: Do you think part of that, too, is 15 years as a governor of New York?

Wallison: Well, sure. I mean, there is a disease, a CEO’s disease, and that is, after awhile, you believe that your decisions, by and large, are the correct decisions. So you’ve already kind of got some idea of what you want to happen, and then when a person tells you exactly what you want to hear, well, that just reconfirms you in your position. In fact, the best executives are the ones who say, “I have my position. You don’t know what it is and I’m not going to tell you what it is, but I want you to tell me what your position is and why. And I promise you, if you articulate your position well and with reason, you will not be hurt if I don’t agree with you.” That’s the person who really gets good advice.

Smith: Was there a time at the beginning when he first took the job, when you were first down here together, when he sat either you or everyone down or when he sort of outlined how he saw the job and how he envisioned things unfolding?

Wallison: Yes, well, at the very start, we had meetings like that and especially around the question of who was going to head the Domestic Council.

Smith: Was that a defining chapter of his…?

Wallison: That was absolutely the defining chapter. The decision that was made to put Jim Cannon in as executive director, while Rockefeller would not be involved directly in the Domestic Council, was the decision that changed the whole relationship he had with the President and with domestic policy in this country. I’m quite sure of that. And I thought it was the wrong decision at the time, but that’s not how he saw it. And maybe, of course, if he’d made a different decision, Rumsfeld would’ve found another way to go around him if he had actually become Chairman of the Domestic Council. Well, then the
Domestic Council might never meet, or a number of other things might happen and Areeda might be doing what Cannon was later doing, and Rockefeller would’ve been cut out anyway. But I think if he’d had a title of some kind, or convening authority, and messages would have to go through him to get to the President, things would have been different.

Smith: Did he vocalize his unhappiness with Rumsfeld?

Wallison: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Rumsfeld became an enemy and throughout the rest of the administration, even when Rumsfeld went over to the Defense Department. As late as the 1976 campaign, Rockefeller was complaining that we had high unemployment because Rumsfeld was not spending the money that the Defense Department was appropriated for the various defense things and that had caused the economy to be weaker than it needed to be. If he had taken that money and spent it on the things he was supposed to spend it on. The implication was Rumsfeld really didn’t want to see Ford elected.

Smith: Which again gets into this sort of quasi-paranoia on Nelson Rockefeller’s part.

Wallison: Yes, there was that.

Smith: Now, it’s interesting, I’ll tell you quickly a story Bill Seidman told me originally, and I didn’t bring it up per se with Rumsfeld, whose instincts are still very quick. He’s still got a very keen antenna about sensing danger. The story was of Rockefeller as the good soldier. When Reagan was about to take the lead in delegates, Rockefeller made sure that New York and Pennsylvania were in the President’s camp and that’s really what gave Ford the lead. And, according to Seidman, who got the story from Rockefeller, at one of their weekly luncheons, shortly before the convention, Rockefeller told the President he wanted one thing. And that was he didn’t want Rumsfeld at the convention in Kansas City. And that if Rumsfeld was at the convention, he, Rockefeller, could not vouch for the loyalty of the New York and Pennsylvania delegations. And as the story was told to Seidman, Rumsfeld chose to have some elective surgery done that weekend, missed the convention.
When we talked to Rumsfeld it’s as if some sixth sense kicked in, and he detected the story that’s out there somewhere. And so he on his own said, “Oh, another one of Nelson’s paranoid fantasies was…” and he proceeds to tell all this. And it turns out he did have elective surgery, he went to Kansas City. He was there the last day of the convention which was when the President wanted the whole Cabinet there. To me that’s a non-denial denial. But in any event, Rockefeller was utterly convinced that Rumsfeld had been responsible for his removal and for deep-sixing George Bush at the CIA, basically to clear the field in the hopes that lightening would strike and he would be on the ticket. He went to his grave convinced that Rumsfeld was responsible for that.

Wallison: Or that Rumsfeld wanted to see Ford defeated because then he would be the leading candidate or one of the leading candidates in the next election.

Smith: But I’ll tell you how far that went, I mean, you may already know this. There was a guy, Jack, I don’t remember his name, from Grand Rapids, kind of a two-bit local pol who was in the early phases, kind of the exploratory campaign, working on it for his friend Jerry. And he was killed in an auto accident. Rockefeller was convinced that he was murdered. I mean, it’s that level, you know what I mean?

Wallison: I saw that, sure.

Smith: Did you sense that?

Wallison: Yes, I saw it with Bill Colby, having to do with the “family jewels.” Bill Colby, you know, in Rockefeller’s view was a traitor to the country by disclosing this.

Smith: And what was Colby’s explanation or rationale for doing what he did?

Wallison: Oh, I can’t remember, but I think what he said was that this was something that had to be exposed at some point and couldn’t be kept under wraps anymore. We were in a different era and that kind of thing. But, you know, I think a lot of it had already been discovered by the journalist, Seymour Hirsch. And so probably I think Rockefeller actually thought that Colby had
given it to Hirsch for whatever reason. I don’t know what he might have thought was the rationale for this, but he disliked Colby enormously. Thought he was disloyal to the country and so forth. And it was Rumsfeld and then Colby and you just hoped you weren’t third.

Smith: And I take it he really was a Cold Warrior. Stu Spencer said, “Of all the candidates, including Ronald Reagan, Nelson Rockefeller was the hardest line anti-communist of anyone.”

Wallison: Yes, I would think that’s right. He really was. And that was one of his good features as far as I was concerned. He really was a strong person on military matters and could not be moved on that.

Smith: When he was dumped, people always ask was he pushed or did he jump? And he was pushed.

Wallison: Oh, yes.

Smith: Did it come as a surprise?

Wallison: My impression is that it did. I don’t remember how I got that impression. I think maybe just talking with him afterward or having been in the room when he was talking to someone else about it. Or maybe it was just the fact that I was privy to enough of what was going on in his office that at that point late into 1976, that I would’ve heard if he had actually known this was going to happen. So I do think it was a surprise.

Smith: Did his mood change? I mean, in the remaining year, was there a difference?

Wallison: Yes, there was a big difference. Well, I lost track of him, really, because I went to the Dole campaign. I was the liaison between the Dole campaign and the White House staff and the Ford campaign. Right after the Republican convention, when Dole was nominated, he was looking for someone to be the liaison person. And I seemed like, I guess, the ideal candidate from his point of view because I was on Rockefeller’s staff, I wasn’t on the White House staff, but I knew everyone on the White House staff because I used to attend all of the senior staff meetings on behalf of Rockefeller. I was the guy who attended all the senior staff meetings in the morning, the 8 o’clock staff
meeting that was, in fact, presided over by Ford. I was the person who represented Rockefeller on those things, so I knew all those guys.

Smith: That’s interesting, I didn’t know the President himself presided.

Wallison: Yes.

Smith: And how did he preside?

Wallison: He’d go around the room. It wasn’t like under Reagan. In the Reagan administration, Reagan ran the 8 o’clock staff meeting, the major staff meeting in the Reagan White House when I was there. What that focused on was the news of the day. I always thought that was a mistake because you’ve got off-message immediately. You started talking about what the Washington Post was saying, what the New York Times was saying. Ford didn’t do it that way. He would go around the room, “What is your objective for today?”, “What news do you have to tell me?” and so forth and we’d all sit around the table and if we had something to report, we say it to Ford.

Smith: It’s interesting, one story line of the Ford presidency - a guy who becomes President, in some ways has to outgrow his congressional training, has has to become an executive. It’s been said that, whatever other faults he had, Don Rumsfeld was a very effective coach in some ways about that. One of the poignant aspects is that Ford, I think, himself felt that in ’76 he had just about mastered the job and then he lost it. Did you see an evolution or a growth in the President?

Wallison: I can’t really say that from those contexts, which were just these morning meetings - those were the only ones where I really saw Ford in action - that I saw much change. I was impressed with Ford from the beginning. He was a very serious man and a person that took his job very seriously.

Smith: I assume you saw a dichotomy between some of the public image - you know, whether it was the kind of stumbling around, that as a euphemism for, “You know he’s not intellectually up to the job.”

Wallison: I never saw that. I saw a lot of very interesting issues debated among the senior staff and Ford was a participant in that and knew the facts. He was up
on what the issues were and he raised a lot of the issues himself. I was impressed with Ford as an executive and as a president in a way that I’d never been as impressed by Rockefeller.

Smith: Really?

Wallison: Oh, Yes. Sure. Rockefeller did not have what you would call a critical intelligence. Rockefeller really didn’t know how to analyze a problem and go behind the first order description of it and go back and say, “Well, what if this fact changes or that fact changes?” and so forth. That’s just not the way his mind worked.

Smith: Was he a creature of enthusiasms?

Wallison: Yes, he was enthusiastic. He would’ve been a great salesman. He had that kind of marketing skill, marketing himself, marketing his ideas, but you couldn’t expect him to go back and see the weakness in the things he was talking about.

Smith: I’ve often thought it’s ironic that he’s remembered today for the Rockefeller drug laws. The fact is that was his third attempt to eliminate the scourge of drugs. I mean, the notion there’s no such thing as a problem that can’t be solved.

Wallison: Yes, he certainly believed that, and even though he couldn’t necessarily solve these problems, he could convene people who could solve problems, or at least get them together to talk about I, and out of that discussion would come something. But Nelson Rockefeller had very, very little idea about the basics.

This Commission on Critical Choices was an awful experience because he didn’t really understand how studies are done. When you do a study, you have to start with a hypothesis of some kind, a theory. What do you think the problem is? Let’s attack that problem. Rockefeller seemed to think that if you knew all the facts, the problem would present itself in some way as though you didn’t really have to have any theory. If all the facts were accumulated in front of you, then you’d know everything you had to know. There was no effort on his part to say, “We need relevant facts.” And how do
you make facts relevant? You make facts relevant by saying, “Well, here’s my hypothesis about what has happened or what should happen. Let’s collect the facts that are relevant to that hypothesis.” He would not have a hypothesis. He wanted the facts to be prepared and then for some reason he thought if he just had the facts, he would eventually have a solution. You get a lot of smart people together, but it never worked.

Smith: It’s interesting that you put it that way. Because my sense is also there was never an ideology. I mean it’s one thing to say, “I’m a pragmatic problem-solver,” but there really was no framework that I can discern. I mean there were certainly, it was the cold war era, there were priorities. But again, the drug problem’s a classic example. I mean, he would swing from one extreme to another. “If this didn’t work, we’ll do the opposite.” And in some ways, someone who’d read part of my book in manuscript the other night said to me, “You know, he didn’t leave very much. He didn’t leave much behind.” And I thought about it and, you know, aside from buildings and legends and an example - for some people an example to avoid - he didn’t leave much behind in a philosophical way.

Wallison: Right, because he was very, very pragmatic. That was the phrase at the time.

Smith: I wonder to what extent the dyslexia was a factor. And the reason I mention that is because, clearly, he said to people, “The best way to read a book is to get the author to come in and tell you in 15 minutes.” I mean, he really was absolutely dead serious about this. And he said, “When we ran the reports, the special studies, people would digest the book and the author would come in and in 15 minutes tell you the essence of what the book was.” There is something frightening about that in terms of doing anything in-depth. I wonder whether that is part of this, unwillingness, perhaps an inability, to go deeply beneath the surface, in part because of the dyslexia?

Wallison: That would be my explanation because he was not a person who was deep. He was not deep. And I had a couple of experiences with him that were just amazing. One was, and this doesn’t necessarily talk about depth, but it talks about a guy who, for all his involvement in policy and in current events, seemed to have missed some pretty obvious things. At the time, there was
real concern about a layer in the atmosphere, I’ve now forgotten the name of it, but it was being destroyed by hydro fluorocarbons.

Smith: The ozone?

Wallison: The ozone layer, that’s right. Guy Stever, who was the head of the National Science Foundation, came in one day to brief Rockefeller on this subject. Now, I happened to be Rockefeller’s one substantive person on his staff. I did all the substantive work that there was to be done on the Rockefeller staff and that says something about what involvement Rockefeller really had in policy issues.

Smith: Particularly given his reputation for attracting talent.

Wallison: Right. And so, I was invited to sit in on this meeting with Guy Stever and Stever was telling him about the scientific work that was going on and what the National Science Foundation was doing. They got onto the subject of chlorofluorocarbons and Guy Stever was telling him about how dangerous all these spray cans were. Then Stever left and Rockefeller says to me, “Peter, wait a minute.” I was leaving, too. He says, “Peter, wait a minute.” I said, “Yes, governor.” He said, “How do all those spray cans get up there?” And I thought at first he was making a joke and so I hesitated, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. And I said, “Well, governor, it’s not the cans, it’s the chemical in the cans that floats up there because it’s lighter than the air down below and it goes up and it has an effect on the ozone layer.” He said, “Oh, oh, okay.” Now, either his sense of humor was exceedingly subtle, so he played me on that and later on said, “You know what he said to me?” But I don’t think that was the case.

Smith: You know that answers itself.

Wallison: I don’t think that’s what happened. But another time and when he was still governor, in fact, we were talking about a policy matter and this was completely unbelievable to me. Someone came in and said, “Well, Governor, there are a number of trade-offs in this whole area.” Then the person left and he turned to the rest of us who were there and he said, “This guy kept talking about trade-offs. What are trade-offs?” I thought to myself, “Wow. Here he’s
been involved in policy as governor of the state of New York for all these years. People must have used the word trade-offs before because that’s the essence of policy. One side or the other and you have to find a balance for the consequences of the things that you are doing. How could he not know what the person was talking about when he referred to trade-offs?” And yet, he didn’t appear to.

Smith: Yes, there were strange gaps. Ron Maiorana, who was a press secretary told me this story. One day, he came into the office and Rockefeller was furious, just furious. He had the New York Times. He said, “Do you know what he said about me? Can you believe he did this?” Well, it was Lindsay and the headline was Lindsay Chides Rockefeller. Rockefeller bought that chides was semi-obscene and he didn’t know what chides was. And you know some of it’s cultural. In the ’58 campaign he’d never heard of the term bar mitzvah or take-home pay. Well, that’s kind of almost endearing. You know, it’s a cocoon. But 15 years later, and you begin to say, okay dyslexia goes so far.” But then the other thing it raises and I don’t mean to keep beating this, but I wonder if other people in the office ever, did anyone say anything to lead you to believe that they thought - I use the euphemism he wasn’t aging well - but that he wasn’t what he had been?

Wallison: Well, you know, Richard, it could be that someone did say these things to you, but I just don’t remember anymore. And I don’t remember my having that impression at the time until the Republican convention. At the time of the Republican convention when he put on that terrible show, I thought to myself… Oh, oh, no. I guess that was the beginning. Afterward in the campaign it was really bad, especially that one day when he flipped the bird at all the protestors in an airplane hangar during a rally and then he denied that he had done it until someone produced a photograph. But I came back one day after being on the campaign trail for awhile, I came into his office to say ‘hello’ and he’s signing photographs of himself going like that (flipping the bird). And I said, “Wait a minute. You’re the Vice President of the United States.” Now, of course, the Vice President of the United States can do anything he wants, but in that period, in 1976, we were a little bit more
starchy and that was not something that the vice president would do. And plus, he’s a Rockefeller.

Smith: At the convention, are you referring to the telephone incident?

Wallison: Yes.

Smith: Did he yank the telephone?

Wallison: Yes, he yanked the telephone away from the guy who was the head of the delegation or something like that. Tore down someone’s sign, someone was carrying an anti-Ford sign, maybe a Reagan guy or something like that. A sign was waved in his face and he grabbed it and pulled it off the stick. We were all sitting in the gallery. I and Susan Herter and Dick Allison and a couple of other people and we all looked at one another, “Oh, man, this is terrible. This is really terrible what he’s doing. He’s really acting out.”

Smith: I take there was no one to call that to his attention.

Wallison: Well, I wasn’t one.

Smith: Would Ann Whitman have done it, do you think?

Wallison: She might have. Susan Herter might have done it. Susan Herter was a very out-spoken woman. I’m a little surprised that she wouldn’t participate. Susan was an outspoken, tough bird and if you want to talk about “of Rockefeller’s class,” she was of Rockefeller’s class, and talked the way Rockefeller is accustomed to women talking. I mean she’d talk like this. She was definitely WASP upper-class and the wife of Christian Herter.

Smith: Did you have any contact with Happy?

Wallison: Oh, yes! Oh, yes, she was very nice to me. She was a lovely woman, and I liked her quite a lot, but we were not in any sense friends. But whenever she saw me, she was very effusive and remembered my name and so forth.

Smith: There’s still uncertainty as to whether she really didn’t like politics. She was obviously very devoted to the kids, I mean, that always came first. And he said himself that he’d made his mistakes with his first family and a number of
people said he was much more attentive to the boys than he had been to his first family and all of that.

You had a whole year, in effect, when you knew he wasn’t going to be there after January ’77. Did he talk at all about the future?

Wallison: If he did, I don’t remember at this point whether he talked to me about it or whether in general he passed some remarks. I just don’t remember at this point. Memories do fade. Mine may be faster than others.

Smith: Oh sure.

What was it like to be the liaison of the Dole campaign after the Democrat wars?

Wallison: Oh, that was an amazing experience. Bob Dole is an amazing character himself and we will not probably see his like again, as they say. But fantastic sense of humor, some fantastic timing, but not a morning person. Now, if we had a 24-hour news cycle as we do now, then things wouldn’t have been so bad, but at that time, all the stories in the evening were made in the morning. And Dole was a bear in the morning. And if the news people could possibly throw a question at him and get him to answer, it was a catastrophic answer, because he was always bitter and angry in the morning. And so he played right to type. The narrative about Dole, he was a hatchet man. You’re not doing anything on Dole, here.

Smith: No, but we’ve done a Dole oral history project.

Wallison: Really?

Smith: Because I ran the Dole Institute for a couple of years, put it together.

Wallison: Oh, that’s right.

Smith: So I always am looking for stories.

Wallison: Well, I have a story about “Democrat wars,” because I accompanied him everywhere and we used to go living room meetings with twelve Republicans in someone’s living room in Minnesota. And he would talk and he would
mention Democrat wars. And no one said a word. And I thought, “That’s really bad. I mean, he can’t really be saying this publicly.” And so, the night of the debate, I was in charge of briefing him for the debate. And I didn’t brief him on everything, but I brought in a lot of people like Alan Greenspan and other people to brief him on the things he had to know about the economy and so forth. But there were certain things that I knew that I had to talk to him about as he was being made-up. And I had a long list of things. The campaign wants you to say this, but you shouldn’t say that. He’s listening to me. He doesn’t take advice very easily.

Smith: He’s not easily handled.

Wallison: Not easily handled. I had a long list and he wasn’t reacting particularly well. I came to Democrat wars and I thought to myself, “No, I won’t say this because he’ll never say this in the debate. Naw.” So I skipped over it and I went on to some other things and then, of course, that was the thing that he said.

Smith: Sunday C-SPAN will be airing one of our Dole interviews, they’ll be airing the interview I did with Walter Mondale. And I said to Mondale, “You must have been standing there saying, ‘Oh, thank you, Lord’.” And he laughed, and he said, “Well, you know, Bob had an off night.” He said, “You know, we pols aren’t very bright. We’ve got a few applause lines and if they work, we reuse them.” And he said, “Bob used that line out there and it got applause.” He also said, in his preparation for that night, someone brought up the likelihood that Bob Dole would use that and Mondale said, “Oh, he’d never say that.” He said the same thing. You and Walter Mondale had the exact same reaction.

Wallison: That is fascinating.

Smith: Complete the circle thirty years later.

Wallison: That is fascinating.

Smith: Isn’t it something?

Wallison: Yes. Amazing.
Smith: Was there blowback at all? With the Ford Polish gaff, I mean, clearly we can document that went on for a week because he was so stubborn and wouldn’t concede that he’d screwed up.

Wallison: Uhm, Yes, there was a lot of blowback in the press about that and I think it put us on the defensive for a long time. I mean, Mondale’s response, if it was off the cuff and hadn’t thought about it, was great.

Smith: It was.

Wallison: And Dole really recognized that he shouldn’t have said it. He recognized it was a big mistake to say it. But the Dole campaign was great fun even so. I mean, even though, we travelled.

Smith: Ad hoc?

Wallison: Yes, a lot of it was. And you know we stayed in the worst possible places and we went to the worst possible places.

Smith: There’s a famous story that one day, supposedly, he pointed his finger to somewhere on the map and said, “Let’s go there.” I mean, it was that level of improvisation.

Wallison: It might have been. I don’t know but it was fun because he was so funny. And even the travelling press liked to be with him because he was always funny and kept them amused. And in fact, at one point, he would be giving speeches and there was a certain joke that he would tell every once in awhile and the press loved that. The press would be standing in front of the podium in the little pen that they’d set up for the press and they’d say, “Tell them the bear story! Tell them the bear story!” It was a very funny joke, but he told it in a way that everyone broke up whenever he told it, even though we’d heard him tell it 25 times. It was about a bear that goes into a bar and he puts a five dollar bill down on the bar. And the bartender says, “What can I do for you?” And the bear says, “Give me a beer.” And the bartender says, “I don’t know.” He goes in the back and he talks to the proprietor and he says, “You know, a bear just came into the bar, sat down on the stool, put a five dollar bill there, and said, ‘Give me a beer’ What should I do?” The proprietor says, “Give
him his beer.” So he gives him the beer, takes the five dollar bill and the bear’s sitting there nursing the beer. Finally the bartender can’t resist anymore. He says, “You know, we don’t get many bears in here.” And the bear says, “I don’t wonder why at $5 a bottle.” Now, when I tell the story, no one will fall on the floor, but the press would just break up and, of course, the audience who’d heard it for the first time would break up. He had a way of telling a joke unlike anyone I’ve ever seen.

Smith: I’ve always thought that behind that very dry, sometimes sardonic wit is a very healthy sense of the ridiculous.

Wallison: Oh, Yes. Absolutely.

Smith: And if you don’t have that in this town, you know…

Wallison: He’s very smart, a very smart guy. And he saw the ironies of life but he couldn’t really control his anger; there was an element in him that was very bitter because of some of the things that happened to him. But he was smart enough to see all of the ironies and all of the posturings and everything else. But unfortunately he had that one problem that he couldn’t restrain himself. And if he could’ve done that, he could’ve been a really great pol, he might have been elected President.

Smith: Time, in many ways for both Dole and President Ford, time was good to them. I mean, Dole went on to become the face of the WWII generation and a kind of national grandfather. In a curious sort of way, people voted for Clinton but they admired Dole more.

Wallison: Yes, I think that’s right.

Smith: And Ford lived long enough to see people come around to his way of thinking on the pardon. When the Kennedy Library gave him the Profiles in Courage award, he said, “You know, for 25 years, everywhere I go people ask the same questions. Since then, they don’t ask the questions anymore.” So, you know, he had that. Rockefeller didn’t have that satisfaction in his last years.

Wallison: Well, I’ve always thought that Rockefeller never quite got it. He got that, in order to be president, you have to sacrifice. He was not prepared to sacrifice.
And anyone else who really wanted to be president would not have divorced his first wife. Nowadays you can divorce three wives and be elected president, but Rockefeller thought that he could—

Smith: Happy says, when I interviewed her, she said, “You know, I don’t know how much Nelson really wanted to be president, because every time he got close,” as she put it, “he would go do something stupid like marrying me.”

Wallison: It was an amazing thing. I mean, he wanted it, but he wanted it on his own terms.

Smith: That’s the title of my book - *On His Own Terms*.

Wallison: Really?

Smith: Yes, because it does capture - whether it was art, women, life, death - I think he thought he could take death on his own terms. The last part of the story is more poignant and less sordid than it seems, because I really thought he thought he could control that, too. It’s a sad story in a lot of ways.

Wallison: Oh, Yes, definitely a sad story about this man.

Smith: Did you see him at all after he left the vice presidency?

Wallison: I don’t think so.

Smith: He really did kind of pull up the drawbridge.

Wallison: Well, I mean, I’m sure he saw others. I was just not one of them. I went back to New York. I was practicing law. In fact, I was living in Washington for a year or two. Then I went back to New York and practiced law in New York so, even though he was there, I’d lost touch with him. I don’t remember that there were any reunions or things like that, although I did keep in touch with some people like Jim Cannon and others. This also came up while he was vice president, this business of on his own terms because we were talking before about Rockefeller being interested in ideas, in policy and so forth.

Now, the traditional role of the vice president is to go out and eat the rubber chicken and whipped potatoes and endear himself to county chairmen - raise
funds for them, praise them, keep in touch and send them letters and so forth. Rockefeller would hardly ever do that. He wanted to stay in Washington and have some involvement, whatever that involvement was, in the policy-making in Washington. So, of course, when Reagan started to be a threat to Ford, hardly anyone in the party knew anything about Rockefeller, who he was or what his real views were - what they had in mind was the old Rockefeller.

Smith: Yes, what they remembered from ’64.

Wallison: Right, the guy who just showed up a year before the election with a lot of money and thought he was entitled to get the nomination. He didn’t really help them. He didn’t really show the party how interested he was, and I thought that was always part of the same problem. That is, he thought he could do it on his terms and it didn’t work.

Smith: Did he have enough to keep him busy?

Wallison: I don’t think so. Maybe that’s why he was engaged in a dalliance, as they used to call it. But I don’t think he, I couldn’t imagine what he was doing.

Smith: That art reproduction business, I mean, it was really kind of make-work. He put a lot of money into it. He was in hock to his trust 14 million dollars. So he decided he would write a memoir. So he sat down with Hugh Morrow and he did 1200 pages of oral history which I have. He had very harsh things to say about Eisenhower, for example. And some of them are off the wall.

Wallison: Really?

Smith: Yes. Of course, FDR was his great hero. George Hinman said to Ann Whitman, when they had this discussion about does he really want to be president, Hinman had an interesting take. He said, “It isn’t that he doesn’t think he’s more qualified than Richard Nixon or Jack Kennedy or Hubert Humphrey, but he was raised by FDR. To him, FDR is a model of what the presidency is and Hinman believed that that, among other things, contributed to this on again, off again. It’s one reason why in some ways his legacy is so thin.
Wallison: Well, a lot of talent there, a lot of political talent, but not the full package, as they say. He just didn’t have the full package to be president. And actually I had concluded that he would not be a good president at all, because he had a dangerous quality of being able to convene people, but then not to fully understand what they were saying and what consequences of it would be. And so, he could’ve made a mess out of things.

Smith: Last thing. How do you think, thinking about Gerald Ford historically, how do you think he should be remembered?

Wallison: Ford, in many ways, had the qualities that I so admired in Ronald Reagan without the ideological stuff that I also liked. I am a Reagan person. But Ford had this Midwestern solidity, honesty, straightforwardness, at least as far as I could see, very little ego. Reagan was the same way. And I was just reading something, someone quoted Lincoln as having exactly the same kind of view of himself that Reagan and Ford had. “You know, I’m just an ordinary guy.” I favor, in Reagan’s case, he’d say, “Yes, they say I’m a great communicator but that’s because I communicate great things, it’s not me. It’s the ideas.” And Ford had much of that. I always thought that, this is a little bit of an aside, but Edmund Morris, who was Reagan’s biographer, so to speak, the guy who had the unique opportunity to watch a president operate, never could figure out Ronald Reagan. He couldn’t figure Ronald Reagan because Ronald Reagan was brought up in an era where you didn’t talk about yourself. I heard one about George H.W. Bush that his mother told him, “Not the great I am, you don’t talk about yourself.” I’m sure that was the case.

Smith: Edmund’s a friend, but I’ve often thought Edmund is also a romantic. He’s a great romantic and that’s why he and TR - particularly the first volume. Now the second volume - it’s a very different book because Edmund’s really not very interested in government.

Wallison: Right. Exactly. He’s interested in personality. And TR was perfect because of that.

Smith: And I think he, being a romantic, convinced himself early on that Ronald Reagan was somehow TR’s lineal descendent. And he was bound to be
disappointed given Edmund’s almost Henry Jamesian literary approach.
That’s not Ronald Reagan. But the notion that Reagan is unfathomable or so
distant, I mean, it’s—

Wallison: It was right on the surface and that is Reagan. Reagan was politics or policy.
Reagan was policy and philosophy and that’s what he thought about himself.
That’s why he was special because he, from his point of view, had been
imbued with wonderful ideas, great ideas for this country. Just like Lincoln
didn’t think of himself as a great man but just an ordinary man.

Smith: And both came almost as an instrument of forces larger than themselves.

Wallison: That’s right. And I thought Ford was of that kind. So I’d put Ford with
Reagan and with Lincoln, but not with Nixon, not with Clinton and certainly
not with the current person.

Smith: I think that’s a perfect note on which to end.
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