

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Rich DeVos
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Smith: One of the things we're trying to do with this series is to get a sense of the context of the times and the culture, political and otherwise, that produced Gerald Ford. And we've heard some wonderful stories about West Michigan 40, 50 years ago - how it was then as opposed to how it is now, as I say, politically, culturally, maybe even spiritually. Where do you begin in all of this? Where are your roots?

DeVos: My roots are right here in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I was born on the East end of Grand Rapids near Diamond and Fulton Streets on Helen Street in a little dinky house in 1926. My grandparents lived a couple of houses away and this was an area of Grand Rapids known as the Brickyard. I never knew that until recently, but I've always heard them talk about it. But the other day I saw a plot map of the section and it was all 30 foot lots, I think. Nothing bigger than that. And all these little houses all stacked together. And the reason for that is that right near there was the area where most of the immigrants went to work. They worked in the brickyard making bricks. They had no skills, they didn't speak the language and so there was a good old Polish element and a Dutch element nearby, but both working in the brickyard.

Smith: So the Dutch were working in the brickyard as well.

DeVos: Oh, yes. Absolutely. We were the poor Dutch. The Dutch didn't come over here with money, they were fugitives like everybody else. The Holland culture was that the oldest son got everything. It wasn't split because if you split a farm, it couldn't survive. So the oldest boy got it and everybody else understood that. So they would move away. Many of them picked up and left and came to America. They just said, "That's the only chance I have." So they'd pack up and they'd come over here. So there was the beginning of the whole period of transplantation of people.

Smith: What was it about West Michigan that proved so attractive?

DeVos: It was a religious thing. Just like the city of Holland here was settled by Van Raalte. He had taken a whole bunch of Dutch of his church, literally transplanted a whole church group who all wanted to come to America. And they came together as a unit and they traveled on a boat down Lake Michigan and they saw the Holland area and they thought that would be a good spot to start a town and a community. And so they came and settled Holland, Michigan as a religious group and that whole college was a breakout from that because of the church group. They needed a school and Calvin College and Hope College were transplanted here that same way. And that ended up being the Reformed Church in Holland and ended up being the Christian Reform Church in Grand Rapids. There ended up being no real theological difference.

Smith: I was going to ask you what it was.

DeVos: But there were cultural differences. They argued in those days over unions, whether one church would allow it and the other church, if you joined the union would not, because you were pledging your loyalty to something besides God.

Smith: But you could use that argument for the Jaycees or the Kiwanis or almost any other fraternal organization, couldn't you?

DeVos: It was like the Temple of Saladin group. You had to take an oath to that organization, and to some that was wrong. And those were the kind of arguments, but all those arguments have disappeared and they're not important. But they're not really theological arguments. Everybody tried to make them theological, but they were not. I've been working to try and combine those two denominations of late. I decided it was foolish in a lot of ways to keep them apart and the powers that be finally convinced me to let it gradually go together. They started to worship together. The cultural differences disappear and so it's all kind of washing together anyway.

Smith: As a boy, were you very aware of the ethnic diversity around you?

DeVos: You're very aware of the fact that there's the Dutch and the Polish. The Protestants and the Catholics. And Catholicism was very close by with the Polish group and there was a, "If you aren't Dutch, you aren't much," was our slogan and they had some other ones that were worse. But there was a lot of tension between the Polish and the Dutch, just competitiveness amongst them. They lived right almost across the street from each other in the East end of town where I lived, but we played with them and worked with them and everything else, but we always fought with them a little bit, too.

Smith: What school did you go to?

DeVos: I went to Christian schools all my life, all parochial schools, all parentally controlled schools. The difference in our schools here is that they're all run by the parents and not by the church. And it is still true to this day. Our whole Christian school system here is parentally controlled. It is not controlled by the pastors. The Christian Reform Church endorsed the Christian school, but did not run the Christian school. There was a lot of closeness in working together, but the controlling factor was with the parents. The parents were on the board, the parents saw to the money, they managed the system and everything. That's still true to this day.

Smith: There's been over the years, at least I know in the context of the Ford story, a lot said about the different character, if you will, of South and Central. Is that exaggerated or was there a time when in fact they were very culturally distinct?

DeVos: The South always had a distinct, a different culture, a little tougher culture, I thought, a little roughness about it. And that, again, was a little bit farther out of the Dutch area as we would think of it, and a little mixed group and a lot of Catholic into that group as well. But, you see, the Christian group, therefore, many of them were in Christian schools, so it was not just between Catholic and Central. Central was up in what probably was considered a little better area, closer to the city. The other was kind of a union type area of town. I lived right near Central and there was always a split between all of us against South. South, there was nothing classy about the South, at least we never

thought. And Central would've thought themselves as a little bit better. I didn't go there, but it would probably be that way.

Smith: I get it. Do you have any memories of the Depression?

DeVos: Yes, I have very clear ones because, although I was born in '26 and the Depression hit in '29. From four years on, you're growing up in that period. My father and mother had to move out of their home that they had built; out of probably a \$4,000 house in those days, but they couldn't afford the \$25 a month payments and had to rent the house to save the house, which they did. We stayed out of that house for five or more years. My father was unemployed for many of those years. We lived back on Helen Street, the street I was born on, with my grandparents in an attic upstairs.

I remember at one time they wanted to put me in the Horatio Alger and they said, "Well, you aren't poor enough." So finally somebody made them realize we were pretty poor. We were poor enough so therefore we qualified from rags to riches. But we lived upstairs in an attic and got along. They were tough days but they were good days. From a kid's standpoint, you didn't know the difference. Everybody around was in the same state. A big deal was to exchange Sunday's puzzles with your cousins. You would bring a puzzle over and they would give you a puzzle back so you had something new to play with or work on. Getting a penny for candy was a big event. I remember a night when somebody came to my grandparent's house and tried to sell them a *Liberty* magazine for 10 cents and the kid said he couldn't go home until he sold it. It was dark and he was weeping on the porch and our grandparents said, "We don't have 10 cents." And I presume that's true.

Smith: President Ford was a real fiscal conservative, I mean a real traditional balance the budget, don't spend what you don't have conservative. And you wonder whether a lot of that came from the personal experiences that he had during the Depression, particularly going off to the U of M and on occasion selling his blood and, you know, borrowing. I think he had an aunt or uncle who helped him out. He obviously didn't get anything from his birth father. there has to be a whole generation who was poor.

DeVos: There was. Just like now, some banks are closing, but here all the banks closed except one, Old Kent. Old Kent survived. Forever after that it was known as the bank that hadn't closed. So when you went into your savings account and you have ten dollars, you could get the ten dollars out. But all the other banks closed and your money was lost and it was never regained. And so the loss in the banking system and keeping the money close and staying current. But you didn't have the facilities of borrowing you have today. There was no offer to you, so we all think we're really good people, but you really didn't have the option. Even when I built my first home, it was a 50% down and a very careful check on your credit and whether you paid your bills and so forth. And it was accepted at 50%, but that was the standards of the day and it all was born out of those Depression years. But it was also part of the Dutch Christian culture of paying your bills and being worthy citizens and thriftiness is next to godliness or something.

Smith: We were talking to, I think, it was Seymour Padnos who told us about the prevailing Dutch Christian culture in and around Holland. illustrated by THOSE WHO would buy a Sunday paper on Saturday night, but wouldn't read it until Sunday.

DeVos: That's right. That was true. We would run down Saturday night if we could afford a paper to buy it. Yeah, you wouldn't buy it on Sunday because every store was closed. You couldn't find it. If you went to Holland, you'd better be careful because there were no restaurants to eat in. even many years later in my life, when you come to Holland, there was nothing to eat in. But Grand Rapids was closed up pretty tight and respect for the Sabbath day was serious and real and arguments as to whether you could even use scissors on Sunday was part of the joke of the day. You certainly could not go out and throw a football around. You could not go swimming, but it might be okay to roll up your trousers and wade, but you could not go swimming on Sunday. That was recreation. Sunday was set aside to go to church and to prayerfully think about your life and go home and play games with your family, if you wanted to. But you didn't go out and do things other than maybe take a ride if you had a car.

Smith: Well, let me jump ahead because that's fascinating as a background. For years, the story has been sort of muddled regarding the sequence of events in 1948 when Jerry Ford decides he wants to run for Congress. He wants to take on Bartel Jonkman. He also wants to marry Betty Bloomer and he tells her in the spring he wants to get married, but he can't say when, and he can't really tell her why he can't tell her. The consensus is that, given the prevailing climate of the time, for him to publically announce his intention to marry a divorcee would have been politically very disadvantageous.

DeVos: I never thought of that, but I could see why.

Smith: Yeah.

DeVos: That would've been almost scandalous to marry somebody who'd been divorced in those days. He obviously got elected despite the fact he married her, though.

Smith: But he did wait until after the primary.

DeVos: Yeah, well, the general wasn't as tough, once he got through the primary, it was okay. She was a pretty lady and everybody accepted that.

Smith: Did you know Jonkman at all?

DeVos: I did not know Jonkman. I was just turning 20. You see, in '48, I would've been 22, having been born in '26. So I was just of voting age, really. We were all just coming home from the war, just starting our first businesses, trying to get going, totally uninvolved in politics. Bill Seidman is the man who got me involved in politics. Bill was our accountant and when President Ford asked him when he became President if he would come to serve in the White House, Bill acknowledged he would and I went and saw him in the office. He was our accountant at that time and we had just started Amway and it was a very little company. We started Amway when I was 23, so we were really young and Seidman was our accountant. And he said, "Yes, I am and it's something you should think about and you should certainly become politically active and involved. They have the ability to make you or break you." And he said, "So you ought to start paying attention. Your business is

growing, so you'd better pay attention on what is going on down there." And so we started and never stopped. Got involved, as you know, in many ways through President Ford.

Smith: Was this starting in his congressional days?

DeVos: We weren't involved in his congressional days, but when Seidman talked was when he went to the White House. But we had been involved with the President before that as a congressman, and, you know, talking contributions to him, but not nationally involved.

Smith: What made him a good congressman?

DeVos: He was known. He was good-looking. And he was a man of integrity and in this community that's all it would take. He was honest and they respected him and respected him all the years. There's never any question about his ethics and in those days, you never found him coming home with big money from Washington to help the city or help the city build something. He said that wasn't the ethical thing to do, to take advantage of his position.

Smith: There's also a story - at one point, he had risen in the Armed Services Committee and was not yet Minority Leader, but he was on his way up. And a group from Grand Rapids approached him about getting some sort of military installation for West Michigan. And he argued against it, saying that that's really not a firm foundation on which to build your long-term economy. That it's subject to boom and bust and in effect could be yanked at any time. Which is, you know, a politically courageous position because it would've been an easy thing for him to have done.

DeVos: We did have a weather training station in our hotels. The Pantlind Hotel was a training [station] for weathermen and so forth but that was during the war. But that's as close as we ever came to it. And there was never a base per se. They took over the whole hotel and ran a weather training school there.

Smith: Did you know Frank McKay at all?

DeVos: No.

Smith: Known by reputation.

DeVos: Only knew that he was considered to be unethical, but never knew the details of it. Knew George Welch pretty well as the Mayor at that time.

Smith: Now, was he part of the McKay organization?

DeVos: Well, nobody ever quite knew. Assuming he was because my wife remembers the days when she went out and got signatures signed to get George Welch thrown out of office and they did.

Smith: For what?

DeVos: I don't know. I'm not sure my wife knows why. It was just he was seemingly crooked. George lived out near Ada and he used to come over to my office when Amway was young. And he'd sit and chat, developed a very nice relationship in his later years. But I never found out, I never probed him on the rest of it. But he was fun and he had good ideas and he was encouraging.

He built the Civic Auditorium which is now DeVos place on that site. But that was all done by George Welch and he built the pipeline to Grand Rapids from Lake Michigan. He got that done. He was a forward thinking guy and he was moving the city ahead. I think he contributed a lot even though a lot of the people wonder how he did certain things. But that was a part of the era.

Smith: Desperate times call for desperate measures.

DeVos: We ended with an auditorium ahead of a lot of cities and used it. I went there as a child to go to lectures on milk and the importance of drinking milk and we'd all get a bottle of milk when we left. We had many Amway conventions there.

Smith: It's funny, you know, just sort of parenthetically, why did it take so long for the city to discover the river?

DeVos: I have no idea. When we built the DeVos Performance Hall and what's expanded beyond the Civic Auditorium, our slogan was that all paths lead down to the river. The stories were of how the Indians came down to the river from Ada and Cascade, those cities were outposts for Indians. That's why

Lake Drive runs down like it does because they followed the easy way downtown. Ada came down sort of that track into Grand Rapids from that direction. Nobody ever made anything of the river, but it had been used industrially. Right where the Ford museum is were flour mills and furniture plants [they] were located all along the river.

Smith: Your personal friendship with President Ford, did it precede his presidency?

DeVos: Oh yes, but not in any personal way beyond he would come out to Amway - I remember we put a new line in to make cans like shaving cans, pressurized containers. He came out and it was a big deal. We opened the Center of Free Enterprise – that was a big day and he came out and celebrated with us. That’s probably when we took the most pictures and made a big deal out of that building and his presence there.

Smith: Well, I would think that would be something close to his heart.

DeVos: He was very cordial and hung around and would visit with people; so that’s how our relationship really began. Guy Vander Jagt was a congressman from Holland, got me involved in helping raise money for Congress and so we formed the Republican Congressional Leadership Club. And I would fly in an airplane load of people here and pretty soon we had four or five hundred people giving \$2500 a year for Congress. That’s the first efforts of bigger fundraising efforts that we were doing.

Smith: When he becomes House Minority Leader, let alone vice president and president, there must have been people around here who thought, “This is great for us. I mean, there’s going to be something in this for us.”

DeVos: I didn’t get any of that feeling. I didn’t have any feeling of anybody around here saying, “This is going to be good for us,” other than the honor it would bring to us and how proud we were of having our famous congressman become the Leader of the House. When he became vice president, we said, “Wow.” We threw a party for him.

Smith: Tell us about it.

DeVos: I called him up one day and I said, “Mr. Vice President, anyone throw a party for you?” It happened kind of quick, you know. He said, “No.” I said, “Well, can we throw a party for you?” And he said, “Yeah, that’d be okay.” And I said, “You invite 25 people and I’ll bring 25 people down from Grand Rapids.” Our airplane would hold 25 at that time, so it worked good. So we got a room and set it all up and that was the night the story broke on the tapes and it become quite obvious he might go from vice president to president overnight. And in fact, I talked to him about that that night. And he said, “We really can’t talk about that at this time.” But it was the night that he was late coming to his own party because he had been detained in the White House because of this break on the tapes. Betty was there and our wives were there.

Smith: And how was she?

DeVos: She was fine. She was doing good at that time.

Smith: By the way - did you know, did people around here have any idea about her problem however defined?

DeVos: No. It was never an issue. The only time I came onto it once when we held an event at the White House with Billy Zeoli with Gospel Films, because Billy was pretty close to Ford and would go in and be kind of a spiritual encourager. Never written about, but would go regularly and Ford always would welcome him. And he was involved in athletics and so we had a big pro sports, a lunch at the White House to get these people to get behind him and support him. Planned to get him a little more political at that time - for that next reelection phase. And we had a nice deal and Betty came down to say ‘hello’, but she was a little shaky and that was my first time of wondering if she had a problem of some type.

Smith: Tell us about Billy Zeoli. Who was he and how did he fit into the Ford story?

DeVos: Billy ran Gospel Films in Muskegon. A good Italian who had a lot of flair and was a good leader. They would make films and rent them to churches. We would raise money to make a new Christian film. So we would make them and then we would loan them out and rent them to churches which

produced the revenue to keep that going. Later on, we got around to where we shipped them for free to high schools all over America.

That was the kind of stuff he did. I don't know how he got close to Ford other than through the sports side of it, I think. And we used to hold prayer breakfasts with ball teams and one time we were holding one, I think when he was still a congressman in Washington and he came to it with the Washington Redskins. And at that point he acknowledged his Christian faith. Billy felt that when he could, he would ask the players, "If you want to be a Christian, or you believe you'd like to accept Christ, put your hand up." And he said President Ford put his hand up that he believed. So Billy continued the relationship with him beyond that and then he would go to the White House very regularly. And he was always cordial with him. Sometimes Billy would stay overnight. Rumsfeld never liked him very much, because he didn't like anybody who got closer to the President, than he did, as you know.

Smith: It's interesting you say that; you know I've been working for years on this biography of Nelson Rockefeller and Nelson went to his grave convinced that Rumsfeld did him in.

DeVos: Yeah.

Smith: And not only Rockefeller, but, of course, George H.W. Bush felt that he'd been deep-sixed at the CIA at the same time. But one of the remarkable things about Rumsfeld, his reputation is you'll never find his fingerprints on anything. He doesn't sign things, you know.

DeVos: He was careful.

Smith: He was very careful.

DeVos: He was a pretty crafty guy. I don't know if he ever aspired to be president, but everybody aspires to be president. I know and they all are pulling whatever angle they can. It's a vicious disease when you get close to that throne.

Smith: That's interesting. It seemed, once Ford became president, he decided, "I like this job and I'd like to keep this job." And Lord knows he worked his heart

out, but unlike most presidents, he's not someone who was defined all his adult life by the drive to be president. That set him apart. In some ways Reagan had that same - although Reagan wanted to be president, it didn't distort his—

DeVos: He got involved with Goldwater and that tempted his interest in it. Then, of course, he decided to run for governor and succeeded and so he gradually got into it. Reagan wasn't hanging around Washington where he got the fever as the other hangers-on. Cheney never seemed to have a strong hankering to become president. He was a real faithful servant, I always thought, in serving Ford and Bush as well. He wasn't afraid to tell the President his views on things and that's what you have him there for, though, he was criticized severely for it, but he never had a big yank to move ahead. He served well and he eventually would have loved to be one if fate had brought it to him.

Smith: People tend to forget that it was really Jimmy Carter in 1976 who sort of brought evangelical Christians into the process in a major way. And I'll bet you there are people who still don't know what Gerald Ford's religious convictions were.

DeVos: I'm sure.

Smith: But I take it they were genuine.

DeVos: They were genuine, but they were private and kept that way. And Billy working with him swore to him that he would never talk about it and never did. He finally wrote a book with the President's permission on some of the things about it, but it was long after he was out of the White House and had left there.

Smith: Did you have a discussion with the President about faith?

DeVos: I never did personally. When we had him on the boat, he was on the boat with us for a trip. We had Bill Simon, Admiral Owen, who was the head of the Navy in Italy came with us on that trip. That was the first time with the Admiral. Also Peter and Joan Secchia was his ambassador to Italy.

Smith: Was this as a former President?

DeVos: No.

Smith: He was in the White House?

DeVos: After he was out of the White House.

But then he was very much a part of the devotional periods at dinnertime and so forth. And when it was time to have prayer, he would offer prayer. Simon was a very open Catholic and was one of the few people who could offer communion. Did you ever know that he could give the Eucharist right in the prisons?

Smith: Really.

DeVos: Bill Simon would spend almost every Sunday in the prisons talking to the people on death row, offering them the Eucharist for the forgiveness of their sins. It's an amazing story, you know. It's unknown about that guy.

Smith: Absolutely. And it runs so counter to the popular image that he had.

DeVos: But he was a very devoted guy. So, Simon, we became big friends with Bill Simon and his wife. His second wife, as well. You speak of uniqueness about people, Simon, if you go to his house, we went to his house once for lunch, we were chartering his yacht, so he says, "You've got to come over and talk. We've got to talk about it. You're the only guy I've ever lent my boat out to." I said, "Well, okay." He said, "Come over to the house. We'll talk about where you're going to go." And so we had a nice lunch and his wife served a nice lunch, soup and everything, and he put his food on the table and it was a peanut butter sandwich, peanut butter and jelly. And I kind of commented and I laughed a little bit about it. "Yeah," she said, "that's all he eats." And so then we were cruising with him in the islands in the Greek Islands and we'd go out for dinner. And he'd carry a paper bag with him and he'd have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. And he'd sit at the table with everybody and when it came time to eat, he'd eat his peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Smith: A wonderful ending.

DeVos: Not an adventuresome eater and yet a guy who'd serve Eucharist. One of the few people given that. Was very religious, very faithful in his service. Personally, Ford, I think was faithful in his devotions, just very private.

Smith: He was in many ways, a private person.

DeVos: Well, he didn't want to use those things for good or for evil. Carter used it publically. I don't know if he meant it for good, for his advantage probably, and it served him, I think, well. But it took away for some his credibility of serving all Americans. And I think Ford understood that when you get in the White House you serve everybody. I think our present President lost that completely. He never understood the importance of the office of saying, "I'm here. I serve you all." He says that, but he doesn't do that.

Smith: Did you ever ask President Ford for a favor?

DeVos: Not that I know of.

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Smith: This is out of sequence, but I cannot let it go without thanking you. One of the frustrations that I felt, I'll phrase this carefully, when I was at the Museum. I always thought it was, to put it mildly, unfortunate that, particularly as he aged, he was forced to fly commercial. And I, and so many others of his friends, are grateful to you and those around you who particularly those last few years eased the rigors of travel.

DeVos: Absolutely.

Smith: It never should've come to that in my opinion.

Section edited out

Smith: You know, President Ford took a lot of heat after he left the presidency for going on boards and making some money, of which he didn't have any.

DeVos: That's right, he needed it.

Smith: Of course he originally intended to retire to Grand Rapids and make a little bit of money for Betty and the kids. Now, subsequent to that, presidents make a lot more money for speaking and serving on boards and the like.

DeVos: But in those days, they were criticized pretty much for speaking fees.

Smith: Yeah. Speaking fees and the boards.

DeVos: Oh, yeah, the board thing was a hot issue for him when he went on American Express and of course Bill Seidman was there. See, I knew how poor he was and Seidman tells this story of when he first went to the White House, maybe you know the story. The first question was, "When do I get paid?" He said, "I've got a son going to college and I don't have the payment to send him off to college. And so I need to know when I get paid so I can write a check." Seidman said, "The ethics of the man, after all those years of public service, he never put any money in his pocket." And Seidman says, "When he left the White House he still didn't have any money so he had to do all these things."

It's a lesson people should know -that the real devoted people in government don't come out of there with anything. And Al Haig said to me, "I was in charge of 5 million troops and I ran this huge operation, but I made \$150,000 a year," he says, "and you've got to pay for your own bread and butter, practically." You're surprised when you finally go to the White House you've got to pay for your meals. It's always a shocker to them.

Section edited out.

Smith: Did you see Ford at all during the '76 campaign? For example, were you at the convention in Kansas City?

DeVos: No, I was not at that convention. No.

Smith: He wound up the campaign back here in Grand Rapids. Were you around then?

DeVos: Yes.

Smith: What was that like?

- DeVos: Well, it was an exciting event in Grand Rapids. I'm trying to remember the timing, whether we had the hotel then or not.
- Smith: I don't think you did. I think that was just a few years before.
- DeVos: Yes, before we stepped into that role. Grand Rapids was a sad city in those days. Secchia tells stories that the Secret Service would not allow the parade down Monroe Avenue because all the stores were closed and it would be such an opportunity for people to sit and get lined up to shoot him and they didn't want a parade because of the vacant stores in our community. Our downtown was - a lot of little cities like Grand Rapids were hurting in those days. But, you know, after WWII, the euphoria in our country was so great when Ford decided to run for office for the first time, I'm sure, it was such a positive time. You guys are all young and you missed all that, but after serving in the military and being gone for several years, the pent up excitement and belief in ourselves was so overwhelming that we could do anything. And those were great days. You know, we had our glory days, that was when Jay and I started our first little flying school and our first business after WWII. They were good days, but they were nice, simple, less regulatory, less complicated days.
- Smith: Well, there's got to be a joy in the sheer act of creating.
- DeVos: Yes.
- Smith: I mean, you were creating something.
- DeVos: Yeah, but, you know, we fought every government in the world, but nevertheless, that was part of the joy of prevailing in those conditions, whether you're dealing with the Chinese government, with Russia, with the Indian authorities which we fight now. (section edited out)
- Smith: Gerald Ford when he was in the White House was considered the most conservative president since Coolidge. Yet he lived to be seen by many within his own party as some kind of liberal. In part because of his views on some social issues. But that tells you less about him than it does about how the party evolved. Particularly under Ronald Reagan, but post-Reagan as well. What kind of conservative was Gerald Ford?

DeVos: He was what we would call a fiscal conservative and a more social liberal. More a liberal status on the social issues, that's all. Tolerated today much more so than tolerated in the days he was there. The difference was, there weren't as many other big issues. I mean, you don't have big issues, you focus on the small issues, so abortion and those issues became huge. Today, Afghanistan and wars and things are the issues, but in Ford's day, we fought over little things that were important to a lot of people.

Smith: Well, it's interesting, the older I get the more I come to the conclusion that ideology, philosophy – I'm not dismissing them for a moment - but that the biggest single factor in political change is generational.

DeVos: Yes.

Smith: And each generation has its own outlook, its own set of conventions, its own set of issues. And Ford, it seems to me, is someone with a very Midwestern sensibility, a profound decency, a real fiscal conservatism, but that co-existed with compassion toward people who were victims, genuine victims, in life. And as far as most social issues, he sort of came of age in a culture that basically didn't talk about, I mean, that viewed these things as intensely personal. And certainly not subject for government action or even political debate. And all that changed almost on his watch. John Paul Stevens told us that when he was nominated for the court in 1975, no one asked him the question about abortion.

DeVos: Really?

Smith: Not a single question.

DeVos: In '75?

Smith: In '75, late in '75, which is probably the last time that would ever happen. This is two and a half years after *Roe v. Wade* and yet no one asked him a question. But, by 1980, it was clearly a significant issue and a defining issue for conservatives.

DeVos: Well, it still is, isn't it?

Smith: Well, sure.

DeVos: It's one of those issues that will probably stay alive for forever and probably should stay alive because I'm opposed to it, you know. The casualness with which you take a life - argue when it starts if you want to - but it is life and especially when you get into late term abortions when they kill them as they're practically born and you stab them to death. I mean, it's just staggering the extent to which they go today. The casualness with which they treat life, and that begins to extend all the way over after awhile and we're seeing that today. And that's what I think a lot of us will always fight against.

You see the fear that Obama brings today isn't just one issue, it's all the people he's got around him and as you evaluate it and you see the string of it, you wonder where it leads us. And so you might not fight quite as hard on the health issue, but it's only one big step in controlling a huge chunk of the economy. But the crowd that's in the streets are really talking about capping trade and they're really talking about the union issues and forcing unionism on America. And it's all the issue of government takeover. The historical issues - they talked about it, they all talked about it a long time ago that that was the normal progress of society. But it just seems like it's happening in front of our eyes.

Smith: It seems as if the traditional economic issues have yielded to cultural issues and to many people, moral issues. It's not surprising that that should give rise to a more intense debate, perhaps an angrier debate because you're not talking about dollars and cents, you're talking about what many people hold absolute as their core moral convictions. It's a differential between the two and that maybe helps to explain the ferocity of the modern political back and forth. People feel with an intensity that goes beyond purely economic issues.

DeVos: Would the dismissal of the Nixon thing that Ford did, giving him a pardon, would that be an issue today?

Smith: Do you mean, if we went through a Watergate today and the president pardoned his predecessor? I'll tell you why in some ways it would be more intense. Because of cable TV and the internet. I mean, nothing has done

more to coarsen the political discourse or to oversimplify. Cable TV is the classic example. You have a 24/7 news cycle. Every day you need a new story. You need a new twist to the narrative. It's all black hats and white hats. It's all about conflict. Conflict sells, which is why you have a liberal channel and a conservative channel. And then the internet, which obviously can be wonderful and does many wonderful things, but it also provides a cloak of anonymity for on-going character assassination which has really poisoned the well, in some ways. So in that sense, I think it would be an even bigger story.

DeVos: Would that be because people know less?

Smith: Well, that is very interesting. If you stop and think, in theory, people said this when television was new. They said it when cable was new. They said it when the internet was new. In theory, we have access to more information than ever before.

DeVos: Than we should have?

Smith: Well, there's free will and if we're concerned citizens, we make it our business to continually educate ourselves. But the point is, does anyone really believe that this is a more informed electorate than in the past?

DeVos: No, maybe not.

Smith: I doubt it.

DeVos: But the issues seem to be a lot more fierce, as you say, and maybe a lot more complex.

Smith: That's interesting. You're absolutely right. They are more complex and so much about our lives and particularly the media all drive in the direction of simplifying, oversimplifying. I mean, it's red and blue.

DeVos: And the government is so driven to complicate, complicate, complicate. I just talked to a physical therapist and she said, "You know, I used to get a new patient and now it takes me two unpaid hours just to get a new PT patient

registered in the system. It's a 50 page thing I've got to document, sign, and read, and study and find out." Just silliness.

Smith: That's the kind of thing, we go back to Ford as a conservative. He really began the deregulatory movement. And although it's funny, you know, he didn't like the phrase deregulation. He liked regulatory reform much better. Which, when you stop and think about it is politically smart. It doesn't sound like we're taking away protections; we're reforming a system that's gone awry. But certainly he was the kind of conservative who found excessive government and regulation objectionable.

DeVos: Well, the corporate cost today in trying to keep up with it is - any one of us can be charged with a crime today and that means you as well as me. There is something, some law you're breaking that you're not even aware of. And if they want to find you and hang you when somebody gets mad at you, they can dig up something on you. And so a little bit of a fear that lives in all of us that the lawyers are bad and good today.

But I tell you, the ones who are vindictive and they want to hang you, this guy on Wall Street going after the AIG people and all that stuff, all for his glory to become governor is the total abuse of all this little nitty-gritty crap. And so we dealt with AIG as a company and successfully and positively, they were a good organization and Greenberg was considered a good, honest guy. But this other guy got mad at him for some reason and maybe it's because he wouldn't support him and he was a big player, but the abuse of the regulatory process by the government has become bad. But we're not here to talk about that. We're talking about the changes that happened during the Ford time. You're talking about the transition. He was in that period, I think. You're a historian, so you look at that as a sequential thing in how that occurred. But our country has certainly become - and in those days, Ford and O'Neill would get together and have a beer or whatever after they'd argued, but like good lawyers would, they'd fight over it and knowing there were different viewpoints on it, but there are contrasting viewpoints that you can argue on today, fiercely, but they don't have a beer afterwards.

Smith: How right you are. There's a wonderful story. Someone had just joined the White House staff. The President and Tip had had a meeting in the Oval Office. It went very well, and then Tip went down into the driveway and proceeded to lambast his host and this guy, of course, is very literal. He sees the contrast between the two and he goes back in and tells the President, "You won't believe what the Speaker is saying," he goes on, chapter and verse. Ford has his pipe in his mouth and he says, "Oh, Don, that's just politics."

DeVos: Well that was because he and O'Neill had that relationship. They could laugh about it and didn't carry the bitterness over into a lingering hatred. O'Neill was a good Irishman, you know, a little bit of Reagan in him.

Smith: You're absolutely right. Yeah.

DeVos: But President Ford, you know, I can only reference it from our experiences with him, but he was also a man able and willing to listen. Bill Nicholson, if I was in Washington, I'd call him up and say, "Hey, I'm in town. Just wondering if the President's in town. I'd like to come over and say 'hello'." Now, that compared to today didn't seem to be a challenge for me. I knew Bush better in a lot of ways, but I would never do that with him. But I felt comfortable enough to just inquire.

I had no idea who the other people were, but I knew Bill and what's his name over there and I'd call up and I look back today and say, "What a lot of guts you had to even try that." And their answer would always be, "He'd like to see you." He liked to see somebody who didn't want anything. He just wanted to see someone from Grand Rapids to say hello. And usually he's say, "Oh, he's got 10 minutes here, so why don't you drop in." So I would come on in and they seemed to be easy to get in, in those days. I don't know why it seemed easy, but it was. And you just go in and spend a few minutes and then I'd say, "Time's up. I've got to get out of here." If we were on something interesting, he'd say, "No, sit down a minute. I want to hear more about that."

And one of the things that I'd get into with him is I talked about how to get him reelected. I said, "You're not the greatest speaker in the world. You

don't have time to go out and tend to the business of speaking and then running right now. And I have an idea for you. I want you to set the 200th anniversary of America. I want you to appoint 200 Americans to become ambassadors to America. From all walks of life, you can get union people, you can get whatever leaders you can find, doctors, lawyers, everything, a mix of people. And they're going to be your advocates for the next time until the election or whatever. But it isn't for the election. It's just to help inspire Americans to celebrate on the 200th anniversary.

And give these people half a dozen speeches and when the White House gets a request for speaking, say, 'The President can't come, but I have an advocate, I have my ambassador from that area who'd love to come and he'll present my latest views to you and he will speak on my behalf.' And tell this person to say, 'On behalf of the President of the United States, as his ambassador, representative, I'd like to present to you his latest message which I just got today from the White House and try to fill you in as best you can.' And you can do new speeches as fast as you want or whatever.

Whatever message you want to get out, all 200 of us are delivering speeches all over the country in every little two-bit rotary club and every little place. 200 people, you'd never think would take the time to go to and we can go and advocate for you all the time and you can do away with the campaign issue. Have nothing to do with the campaign issue. Just give us all a nice little kit, simple speeches, and give us a button and send us on our way."

He said, "That's a great idea. Write it up for me, will you?" So I was flying to Australia and writing it up, I remember it well, sending it in. And I didn't hear anything for a while. Next thing I got a letter from the White House saying, "We already have a speaker's bureau. Thanks." And they totally missed the significance of having these laypeople, these citizens out advocating every day, in little places, you know. I said, "If you want 2,000, take 2,000, but it's the 200th anniversary and you have 200 people speaking for you."

Smith: He was well aware of the fact that he was not a great communicator.

DeVos: I told him, “You can win if you just start the campaign right now. You’re just in here, let’s get the campaign started and this would be my view of how you get it started. Celebrate the 200th anniversary.”

Smith: It’s interesting, because there was criticism internally that he waited a long time. That first of all, they didn’t take Reagan as seriously as they should, but that he just waited a long time to get the campaign started.

DeVos: Well, he was afraid to get too political too quick. But I said, “This will be non-political. This is just the 200th anniversary of America and this is your way of celebrating it.” I said, “You’ve appointed ambassadors all over the world to represent you. Why can’t you appoint 200 ambassadors to America?” And, later on, I kidded him, I said, “If you’d listened to me, you’d be President by now.” He laughed and all that. Who knows? But he could’ve got a jump on the game.

Smith: Did he talk about what might have been? He struck me as someone who really lived pretty much for the future. I mean, he would reminisce if you’d bring things up.

DeVos: He never dwelled on what might have been, but you got that when he lost how serious it was and what a hurt it was. But when my son lost the governorship, it was a hurt. But not that kind of hurt. In fact, said, “Come over this morning, Dick. Let’s have a cup of coffee and see how you’re doing.” He said, “I’m doing okay.” He said, “I never had so much fun. All of you are worried about me but I had a ball. I met the nicest people. I traveled this state. I’ve been to every county in this state. I’ve done every little prayer breakfast, every little county GOP meeting you can imagine. So I’ve been there. I’ve met the people. I’ve listened to them.”

In fact, the people running has campaign got mad at him because he’d take too long listening. They’d say, “Come on, Dick. Move along, Dick. Shake some more hands.” And he said Dick would always take his time and listen. Ford had a great ability to listen. At least he’d listen to me if I came in and I was nothing, I was this little business guy, but he was always respectful and listened and very cordial.

Smith: I want to ask you because it's almost as if you were teaming up to revitalize Grand Rapids. He was, as the story goes, offered a site outside of town for the Museum and made it very clear that he wanted to put it downtown. I think, in hopes of sparking some renewal. And then, of course, you refurbished the Pantlind.

DeVos: At the same time, it was all coming together.

Smith: Was it all coordinated?

DeVos: It was not as coordinated as it might have been, but Fred Meijer wanted to get it out of town. That's what it came down to. In any case, Fred's a great guy and a good friend, but he really wanted to get the Museum and his planned garden out there. He thought that would be neat. It would've been. There would've been nothing wrong with it. It would've been just fine, but Fred finally said, "Okay, let's get it downtown

Smith: Now, what lead you to buy the hotel?

DeVos: That fundraising for that music hall. That lead me to being involved in the new convention center expansion at the same time. The city was doing the convention center expansion. The hall had to be done privately. They wanted it to be done privately. So we raised the money for the hall. So then I got to working on trying to get a hotel downtown. I said, "If we're going to have a new convention center we ought to have a new and expanded hotel." Well, we couldn't find anybody. I went to Hyatt and Hilton and I talked personally to all those people about bringing a hotel to Grand Rapids. They all said, "No, we don't do hotels in cities like that. We aren't going to put a hotel on an old city like that." So we were directly turned down. And then Marv DeWinter, who designed the Ford Museum, came to me one day and said, "I've got an idea. Let's put a hotel right in the river.

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We had hired a research firm to look at it and they said, "Well, putting up 200 or 300 rooms, it might break even." But we got caught up with working with

the mayor of Grand Rapids at that time and we were using the Pantlind Hotel fairly good for our conventions.

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Well, I don't think we paid that much for it, but they told us we could fix it up for six million. They said, "For six million, you could restore this hotel and make it really nice." And we accepted on that basis but that was not accurate. Twenty million dollars later, we got it done. After closing the place up and really going at it; getting in the basement and finding out how bad it was. It was bad. But we restored the whole place and made it a beautiful hotel. But we were holding back the tower which is the tower end of that hotel. That was the next step if we were comfortable with the first step, and we were comfortable with the first step.

Conventions were beginning to come back, the city had a nice hotel and I guess our vanity got to us, "Aw, let's finish it up. We're this far. See what happens." So, we did it. It was a turning point for the city and the President was there when we opened it. I said everything that is important is going to happen in this place. But we did the hotel, the Ford Museum came on, the art museum came on, new buildings happened up around us. We have a beautiful city today.

Smith: He was so proud of what had been done and he was so interested. You know, the night before the funeral, I went out like everyone else and just walked around the crowds and went back and rewrote the end of my eulogy. And this quote which actually came from Tom DeFrank that, you know, in the last months of his life, when he couldn't sleep at night, he would say, "I go back to Grand Rapids." That wasn't just a figure of speech. I mean, in some ways, he never left. And I think, well you would know much better than I, I'm sure there was criticism at the time when he left the White House and didn't come back here, but he came back often.

DeVos: He was so faithful to Grand Rapids, it was unbelievable. He did so much more for Grand Rapids than was expected or whatever. Whenever we asked him for anything at the hotel, he came.

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Smith: Did you see him at all out in California? Did you visit with him on Rancho Mirage?

DeVos: Oh, we'd stop in there occasionally. We'd land in there and go to the house and have a cup of coffee and visit with him periodically. I think we did it three or four times coming through there. Or if we had a meeting or something in that area, we'd stop by.

Smith: They seemed happy out there.

DeVos: They seemed to enjoy it out there and he loved his golf, but, why not? It was a beautiful set up and it was much better than coming back to Grand Rapids. The criticism about not coming back was momentary.

Smith: Oh, no, absolutely. And I know as long as I was down there at the museum, just as you said, he would come back. The 25th anniversary, remember when we had Billy Graham in town?

DeVos: Wasn't that a great event?

Smith: I just thought this is the perfect event for Grand Rapids and what a wonderful tribute to President Ford if we can get Reverend Graham to do it. And he rearranged his schedule and he was spectacular. When he'd get behind that podium, it was like God was speaking to him. It was just extraordinary the transformation that took place. And to see the two of them together, it was a once in a lifetime event. But, you know, it was a lot easier not to do anything than to do something that might be criticized.

DeVos: That's what keeps most people from progressing in life, in my opinion. Fear of doing something is what stops them. In Amway when I'd start with people, maybe a truck driver or worker in a factory and I'd try to get him in Amway, they can't get over the fact of just going out and asking somebody to buy a bottle of soap. That fear of what they will say, fear of being criticized for being in Amway, for example. None of that was true around the rest of

the world. I was just on the phone this morning with Billy Graham's grandson. He's a preacher at a church I go to in Florida. He's a young guy, just 37, but he's a nice young guy. But we were fairly close to Graham, that was a great move.

Smith: But that year, we had a number of people in conjunction with the 25th anniversary of the presidency. One of them was Justice Stevens and President Ford came all the way from California to introduce Justice Stevens. Which he didn't have to do, but he did that for everyone who came in that series. Alan Greenspan and others. Anyway, I remember asking him, "Mr. President, when was the last time you remember talking to Justice Stevens?" He said, "When I appointed him." I said, "Really?" And it turned out that Justice Stevens had always dreamed of playing golf with President Ford. So that afternoon, after the event, they went out and they played golf. Which was just a wonderful—

DeVos: He knew he was President but it never went to his head. He remained true to himself all through those years.

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

DeVos: No, I don't. Saw him a couple times in Colorado.

Smith: They loved it there, didn't they?

DeVos: That was a nice house they had there.

Smith: Yeah.

DeVos: That was a nice view for them. But, you know, Firestone helped him and took care of him nicely. You know, that was just a grand thing of Firestone to do. To help him because he didn't have any money, you know, when he came out of there. And where does an ex-President go? To rent a garage? He didn't have all the back-up all the other guys had, the years of money-making and so he needed a guy like that. I was just glad to be there on the airplane thing. You mentioned the airplane thing and I'm glad you did because I was honored to. You just realized they were struggling and he didn't have the money to just go out and do big things. And so Firestone I'm sure helped him

with his house and so we threw an airplane in. You know, it's nothing. It's not a big deal, but it is a big deal for them.

Smith: Yeah, it meant a lot to him.

DeVos: And so it was one of those things you look back at with fond memories. I would have to sit and just recollect my schedule a little bit as to when I saw him the last time.

Smith: Were you surprised at the time of his death at the amount of the public reaction? Not just here but around the country?

DeVos: I think so. You know, as the years went by, he looked better and better as a president. People came to appreciate what he did and his courage and the fact that he saved this country at that time from what could've been a real disintegration. And people didn't appreciate it at the time, but as time goes by, they realize his courage and his integrity. Even like having a little party for us for him, he and Betty came and just like old shoes, you know, and he'd sit and he'd laugh about things and do things.

Smith: He was very comfortable to be around.

DeVos: Yeah.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

DeVos: About as we are talking about. As a really, truly great American. One of our greatest presidents if for no other reason than his ability to do what had to be done, knowing it would cost him the presidency. There aren't any I know of who would do if they knew what they were going to do would cost them the presidency, they would not do it. But he did. And so I think as people look back at that history, they're going to say, "This is a man who loved America and served it at the highest level" for him. And that sort of went from _____ I seen him gone downhill. I didn't respect Reagan or like [?] Reagan, but after that it was all, "What's in it for me?" and "How can I help my buddies?" and "How can I get my agenda through?" Ford didn't come with an agenda. See, everybody else has an agenda. Present guy especially. It seemed like somebody wrote the book for him before he came, in some

ways, I think to destroy but to move it to a socialistic, an evening, which is his dedication, to even out everybody.

Smith: The great thing for President Ford - I mean, poor LBJ, whatever you think of him, but God, he died the day before they announced the Vietnam peace agreement? Ford lived long enough to know that most people had come around to his way of thinking on the pardon. And when the Profiles of Courage award - when the Kennedy Library made that award - he said, "For twenty years, everywhere I go people used to always ask the same questions. Now they don't ask them anymore." It's almost as if having the Kennedy imprimatur absolved him of the old allegations. Life was good. Physically it got tough at the end.

DeVos: They had a nice life afterwards, didn't they? They seemed to have. And he enjoyed doing the public things he did. He enjoyed coming to Grand Rapids.

Smith: And I'm told really right up until the end, the last time he came back here, he would tell the agents, "Drive me through this neighborhood." And he would go back to where he used to live or went to school. Or just to drive around downtown to see the latest buildings under construction. He never lost his interest in his own congressional district.

DeVos: It was more than living, he lived here. It was the beginning of his career. And so I'm glad he's buried here. This is a special place and the people treated him admirably when the end came. But he was one of us. Yeah, he was just one of us. He didn't put on airs. Today, that's it made out of a kingdom cloth [?] and I don't know, he must have a nice airplane to fly but it wasn't put up at the level today of the airplanes they fly. And Pelosi and her demands for an airplane, the lack of quality in the person of favored treatment for her. And Reid's latest effort to finagle the health bill so it would exempt Nevada of certain tax penalties. I mean that is gross abuse of privilege. That, Ford would never do.

Smith: That is a perfect note on which to end. That is great.

INDEX

A

Amway, 6–7

D

DeVos Performance Hall, 8–9

Dutch influence, 1–4

Dutch Reformed Church
influence of, 1–4

F

Ford, Gerald R., 4–5

Bicentennial, 21–23

character traits, 7

deregulation, 20

faith, importance of, 10–13

as fiscal conservative, 16–17

move to Rancho Mirage, 26

personal stories about, 21–22

post-presidency earnings, 14–15

remembrance, 28–29

vice president, 9–10

G

Gerald R. Ford Library and Museum

25th Anniversary, 26–27

site selection, 24

Grand Rapids, Michigan

Depression years, 4–5

downtown revitalization, 24–25

high school cultures, 3–4

mid-century culture, 1–7

S

Seidman, Bill, 6–7

Simon, Bill, 13–14

W

Welch, George, 8

Z

Zeoli, Billy, 10–11