

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**Roberta Hartmann**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
**September 15, 2009**

Smith: Thank you for welcoming us into your lovely home.

Hartmann: Well, you are more than welcome.

Smith: Where did you meet Bob?

Hartmann: You don't know that story?

Smith: No.

Hartmann: Well, let's see. Remember the beginning of the war, December 7<sup>th</sup>?

Smith: Sure. Pearl Harbor.

Hartmann: Alright. I was teaching school in Venice Boulevard School in Los Angeles and he was an ensign in the Navy. My friend teaching with me, her husband was an ensign; he'd already signed up and was in. And she said to me one day, "Roberta, it's time you get a new boyfriend," or something like that. "We have somebody we want you to meet. He's an ensign and I think you'd like him, and so I've invited him to dinner next Sunday night and I would like for you to come." I said, "Okay, fine."

Well, the next day, Sunday, after church my parents and I went to our favorite place at the beach on the waterfront in Long Beach for lunch. And the radio was playing music, and we had just finished and started to get up from the table when "Flash – Bulletin. Pearl Harbor's been bombed." And I got home and my friend called me and she said, "The boys are restricted to the base tonight, so we're going to do it next Sunday night, if it's okay, if they can."

So I met him the next Sunday night and started going out with him. And we were married that year and I sent him off to the war and I said, "I want a baby before you go. If anything happens to you, I'd like to have a baby." So I got a baby at the end of November, 11<sup>th</sup> of November, and my mother said, "I hope

nobody's counting." But that's how we met and that's how we stayed together for 65 years.

Smith: Now, when he came back from the war, how did he get into journalism?

Hartmann: Oh, well, he was with the *Los Angeles Times* as a political reporter for them and he opened the Washington bureau here in 1954.

Smith: Oh, really?

Hartmann: Oh, yeah. And later he opened the bureau in Rome. We lived in Italy.

Smith: When was that? In the '50s?

Hartmann: No, 1963. Kennedy was assassinated while we were there.

Smith: Was Pope Pius still pope?

Hartmann: Yes.

Smith: Did you enjoy Rome?

Hartmann: Oh, I loved it. That's my home away from home, and God willing, my son is going to take me next summer.

Smith: Wonderful.

Hartmann: I hope I make it. I've been on a crazy – I broke my hip and then Daddy died, and then everything happened. I don't know where it's going to end.

Smith: Well, it's nice to have Rome to look forward to.

Hartmann: Yes, I really do have that.

Smith: Now you mention that being a *LA Times* reporter and then being in the bureau here, he would have had an association with Richard Nixon?

Hartmann: Oh yes.

Smith: So Nixon didn't hate all reporters?

Hartmann: No, many a time Richard brought him home at the end of the day – being a morning paper he had to work late, you know, and lots of times Nixon was busy and he'd send his driver to bring him home. Sometimes he came himself, I can see him standing in there in front of the fireplace.

Smith: Really?

Hartmann: When I went to the hospital he sent a beautiful present. Yes, we were good friends.

Smith: So that's a different side of Nixon from the public Nixon.

Hartmann: Yes. He was such a nice guy.

Smith: Personable?

Hartmann: Oh, yes, he really was.

Smith: Why do you think that didn't come across?

Hartmann: I don't know. Well, part of it I would say that he had that devil Haig around him.

Smith: It's clear that there was no love lost between Bob and Al Haig.

Hartmann: Oh, he just met him head-on. And Bob can hold his own with somebody like that. And that made Haig even madder.

Smith: Let me ask you. Where did Bob's path first cross with Gerald Ford?

Hartmann: He had met him here as a newspaperman, and when we went to Rome, we were there two years and he was coming home and Mel Laird and Glenn Lipscomb, from California, wrote Bob and said, "Come on home. We want you to be head of the House Republican Conference. Then he became Ford's LA.

Smith: Was Ford a Republican leader at that point – the Minority Leader of the House?

Hartmann: Yes, Minority Leader. And what his ambition was, was to be the head one.

- Smith: Speaker of the House.
- Hartmann: Yes. He never talked about being vice president or president, or anything. His goal was to be Speaker of the House.
- Smith: Tell me, as someone who knows better than anyone else, what were the qualities that bonded your husband and Gerald Ford? Because, clearly it was a relationship much closer than that of the traditional speechwriter.
- Hartmann: Oh, yes. Well, in the first place, they were both devout Christians, which is a good basis. And family men –good family men. He helped people and everything he did was on the good side. He was very personable, very friendly, honest.
- Smith: And very loyal.
- Hartmann: Very loyal, very loyal.
- Smith: But it's interesting: a loyalty that was not afraid from time to time...
- Hartmann: ...to speak his peace.
- Smith: Yeah. Tell us about that, because that's a rare loyalty.
- Hartmann: Well, like when he said he didn't want to say what Bob said about Nixon – the final words – because Ford thought it would be too strong against Nixon.
- Smith: Oh, that's right – “The long national nightmare is over.” Ford wanted to remove that from the speech.
- Hartmann: Yes. Now, had it been any other two people, it probably would have been. But Bob said, “This is it. This is what you are doing. It's not just family, it's the whole world. And this is what's going to be remembered – that you have saved the country.” And so forth. Oh, and at the convention, just before that. I think it was in Chicago.
- Smith: The '72 convention or the '76 convention? Before Ford became vice president?
- Hartmann: He just was, and he had made his speech – what year was that?

Smith: The speech when he became president – '74.

Hartmann: That's right – '74. Well, he made this speech and we were up there somewhere – Chicago – and they flashed it on the screen – the big screen, and we watched it. We came down and we were walking across an empty ballroom or something and the thing was still up there on the screen – our long national nightmare is over – and Barbara Walters – gave him credit that night on television. And Daddy didn't like that. Daddy said, "That's his speech."

Smith: I used to be a speechwriter, and people who don't do it, don't understand it. It's a very singular relationship of trust. Tell me about that relationship between those two men. Obviously Ford was comfortable with the words that your husband was writing for him. How did your husband go about becoming Jerry Ford's voice in some ways?

Hartmann: He had a knack with words – a wonderful way with words. And they would talk about things and he would say something that he thought Ford should think about putting that in, and they would just talk back and forth, and then Bob would write the speech. But they had this thing in common, whatever you want to call it.

Smith: It's almost a sixth sense.

Hartmann: They were both wired the same way.

Smith: That's very well put. Now, let me ask you because, clearly, there's almost a year from Agnew's resignation and Ford's confirmation as vice president – there is obviously an extended period between him becoming vice president and Nixon's resignation. And that had to have been an incredibly awkward period in some ways for Ford, and for those around him.

Hartmann: You mean like the last year of Nixon being president?

Smith: Yes, exactly. Because on the one hand, as vice president, he was expected to defend the president; but at the same time, not knowing what shoes might still drop, and the possibility that he might wind up there himself, he couldn't

sacrifice his own credibility. And one senses that no one was closer to him in those days, or a more valued counselor, than your husband.

Hartmann: That's why some people disliked him so much.

Smith: Tell me about that.

Hartmann: Well, I don't know. I don't understand it. But, I guess if you're hungry for attention to be on yourself, it's hard for you to let the person who should have it, receive it. And there were some people that were really not very nice to Daddy. But he held his own.

Smith: Before Ford becomes president, when he was vice president, was there friction between the Ford staff and people in the White House about the Vice President's role – his defense or lack of defense? I'm not trying to put words in your mouth.

Hartmann: Before he was president...

Smith: Before he became president, while he's still vice president, was there any friction between...

Hartmann: ...Nixon's people...

Smith: And your husband and his people, or Ford's people?

Hartmann: In all honesty, I really don't know about that. But I do know we were certainly friendly with him. And Nixon called him Bob. They were that close. Daddy didn't condone what he had done, but he felt sorry and said in his book, he said that Nixon did a lot for this country before that happened.

Smith: Ford couldn't have a transition for obvious reasons, he couldn't even acknowledge that he might become president, and yet, no one was closer to him than your husband. Did you discuss the possibility during that period that Ford might become president? Did he discuss it with Ford?

Hartmann: I don't know. I just remember when he called me on the phone and told me that Ford asked him to be with him.

Smith: This is as vice president?

Hartmann: Yeah.

Smith: The famous speech – the inaugural address – was that something done, in effect, at the last minute?

Hartmann: Writing that?

Smith: Yeah.

Hartmann: In a way, because he just waited, and then he'd sit down and pound it out. He didn't do a little at a time or anything. And so it really came like an explosion.

Smith: Really? Was that how he worked, generally?

Hartmann: He worked his head off.

Smith: What are your memories when Nixon leaves and Ford becomes president? Were you at the White House for the swearing in, for example?

Hartmann: Oh, yes. And that's another thing Haig did. He filled the front row of seats with all Nixon people. And except for Susan and Jack and Mike. And then I and our two kids sat in the row in back of the Nixon people. And we saw them go out on the plane.

Smith: Did you sense discomfort between the Nixon people and the Ford people? We've been told, for example, that that morning there was a receiving line and then I think there were refreshments or reception down in the State Dining Room. And some people have said you could see the Nixon people kind of peel off and go back to their offices.

Hartmann: Well, I don't think I was present at that. I don't remember that. I just remember where we sat and listening to them speak, and watching it because Bob walked out with the Fords. And was the last to say – he was the last person that Nixon talked to – wished Bob well.

Smith: Really?

Hartmann: Yeah. Held his hand and talked to him and wished him well.

- Smith: So then, they are in the White House, and the famous issue of the pardon comes up. By most accounts, your husband really maybe saved Gerald Ford from, at least leaving the impression that could have been very damaging. What's your recollection of that?
- Hartmann: I just know that he spent a lot of time talking to him and writing what he did. It was very personable, and it was really a very meaningful part of life, what happened then. And I think that he saved Ford by getting those...
- Smith: Was Ford too trusting? There is a view of Ford as kind of an Eagle Scout, and a guy who saw the good in everyone.
- Hartmann: Bob was an Eagle Scout, too.
- Smith: Was he really? Well, that's another thing they had in common.
- Hartmann: Yes. And another thing before I forget: Bob's father had the same birthday as Jerry. Betty had the same birthday as Bob.
- Smith: Really?
- Hartmann: In that foursome now, two of them have the same birthdays. And when Bob introduced the President to his father, and said, "And, you know, both of you have the same birthday." And grandfather Hartmann said, "I had it first."
- Smith: Was Ford inclined to trust people maybe too much?
- Hartmann: Yes, he did. I know that there were a couple of people, I won't say names, that he felt he was taken in a little by, that weren't working for Ford – were working against him.
- Smith: Right. Now, that brings us to Al Haig. Had they met before?
- Hartmann: Yeah, they had met.
- Smith: Where did the confrontation, or where did the clash come – what was it over?
- Hartmann: Well, Haig, as I said, he announced to everybody, "I am the President." That's what he said, hear my words. And he had all these people who were working for him that were really cowed into believing him because I think he could get

kind of mean. He wanted to be in charge, he definitely wanted to be in charge and he started them picking up their – well, one of the things that Bob and terHorst was it?

Smith: Jerry terHorst?

Hartmann: Bob said, “We don’t want anything carried away from the White House.” And Haig was having them pack up things and carting them out, and that’s when Bob called Benton Becker and Benton came on the next plane and came up here. He’s a wonderful person.

Smith: And they obviously had known each other from Benton’s earlier work with the Ford office.

Hartmann: But that was a Haig deal. He wanted to take charge. He wanted to run it. And if there was going to be a new one, he wanted to still be the president. Egotistic, I don’t know. I think you’re kind of screwed up upstairs when you have that kind of an attitude. But Bob was too smart for him.

Smith: How did it manifest – their conflict? Did they have words?

Hartmann: I don’t know. Bob would tell me what was going on, but I don’t know whether they ever – I’m sure they had words together, but whether there was anything bad said, I doubt it.

Smith: Did Haig try to have him fired?

Hartmann: Oh, I’m sure he did. Bob was his worst enemy.

Smith: Because, in effect, he prevented him from controlling Ford in the White House.

Hartmann: Yes, that’s right. He really wanted to control that whole thing.

Smith: When Rumsfeld came onto the scene, was that awkward in any way? How did that work? Because, let’s face it, on Capitol Hill, I guess Bob had been chief of staff himself, and now he’s in this very different environment. Was that awkward at all?

- Hartmann: He and Rummy got along. There was an awful lot of talk about them not getting along, but there could be some incidents. But as far as Rummy – he came to Bob’s service – he flew up here. He was down south someplace. He came up at his service. I like him.
- Smith: Yeah. And Cheney? Did they get along?
- Hartmann: Daddy did not like Cheney. Daddy was the first person who found out Cheney wasn’t the good guy.
- Smith: Really?
- Hartmann: Oh, yes.
- Smith: That’s interesting.
- Hartmann: He did not like Cheney, he did not like what he did.
- Smith: What was it that he objected to, or what did he find?
- Hartmann: Well, I can’t say. You could probably go back and read in here. As far as he was concerned, Cheney was not doing him any good.
- Smith: Now, I’m told, and I know this because of the work I’ve been doing, that Bob was actually one of Nelson Rockefeller’s friends and allies in the administration. That the Vice President felt a little bit left out, and I know he regarded Bob as a friend.
- Hartmann: We liked Nelson.
- Smith: What do you remember about Nelson?
- Hartmann: Well, I’ll tell you. I liked him. I remember one night at a party – was it at the White House? We were dancing, it was a big party, and when the dancing started Nelson asked me to dance. And we had our picture taken – and it was just a lovely picture of us – and down at the bottom he wrote on there, “I hope Bob couldn’t tell what I was saying to you,” or something like that.
- Smith: Was he a good dancer?

Hartmann: Yeah. When we lived in St. Croix, you know Nelson's family owned Caneel Bay on St. John and Nelson called and invited us to come over for lunch. He sent a plane over for us. A little plane – I sat up in front – I thought I had my Volkswagen up in the air – and flew over there and landed – not on the strip – landed on the beach. We landed and a car picked us up. Then we went to the resort and had lunch. And Nelson had just had a birthday and he'd been given a camera. Nelson was out shooting pictures of everybody. Everybody else was taking pictures of Nelson taking pictures.

Smith: He was a lifelong photographer. That's interesting.

Hartmann: That was fun. They had been to our house to parties. In those days we had a million parties. I liked Happy very much. She was very nice. I remember one party they came a little early because they knew they were going to have to leave. I said I was so sorry and she said, "Oh, Roberta, you know, my two children are up in New York and I have to see them." And I said, "Yes, I certainly understand." It was kind of too bad the way he went out of life, but he was a nice guy.

Smith: Were there other people in the administration that Bob was close to? People on the White House staff or Cabinet or people that he did work for? Did he write any for Mrs. Ford?

Hartmann: No. He didn't write anything for her.

Smith: Were there other people you can think of as friends in the administration?

Hartmann: Well, Arthur Burns and Jack Marsh, Jim Lynn, and Secretary Diddendorf(?) and Kissinger. Kissinger used to tease me. He has been a very good friend.

Smith: Really?

Hartmann: You know, he gave my son's hospital \$1,000 in Bob's name?

Smith: That's nice.

Hartmann: The teasing came from a picture in the paper – I don't know what it was – and underneath it, it said I was Mrs. Rumsfeld instead of Mrs. Hartmann. And Kissinger saw that and from then on he would say to me, "And how are you,

Mrs. Rumsfeld?” He’d just lean over and say it, and I said to Bob, “What am I going to do to stop Henry from saying that?” Well, he said, “The next time he says that, you say, ‘And how are you Secretary Richardson?’” Henry just howled. He said, “You know how to hurt a guy.”

Smith: Let me make a note of it to follow up on that.

Smith: The speechwriter’s life, particularly at the White House, has got to be consuming. Obviously, it’s not a nine-to-five job. Certainly not a 40 hour a week job. Any stories or anything come to mind? It must be pretty consuming to do that job, being on call, presumably, constantly.

Hartmann: I don’t remember. I just remember he would talk to me about what he was writing.

Smith: Were there kinds of speeches he liked to write better than others? There’s always Lincoln Day addresses, and there’s commencement addresses. Were there things that he enjoyed more than others about the job?

Hartmann: He just enjoyed writing.

Smith: He did?

Hartmann: Yes. Like that publisher says, “This reads like a novel.” He likes to write, he has a way with words. And he didn’t have to go over in his mind forty times how am I going to say this. He thought about and put down some words and then he put it together. He loved writing.

Smith: Do you have any remembrances of the Bicentennial year? There were all sorts of State Dinners and of course the campaign was going on at that point. Was there every any doubt about Ford running in ’76? Was there ever any question?

Hartmann: I don’t think so. Of course, I think Ronald Reagan is responsible for him losing the election. You don’t take on an incumbent president of your own party. But Nancy was going to be first lady or break a leg.

Smith: I assume Bob was involved in the writing of the acceptance speech at the convention?

Hartmann: Yes.

Smith: Do you know if a victory speech was written for election night if they won?

Hartmann: No, I don't know. I bet you they were thinking of everything else besides what they'd write.

Smith: Was he busy in the campaign?

Hartmann: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Did he travel with the President?

Hartmann: Yes.

Smith: Abroad?

Hartmann: He went with him practically every place he went.

Smith: Did he enjoy that?

Hartmann: Yeah. I remember riding in the plane with them. They were going to Myrtle Beach – is that down in the Carolinas or something?

Smith: Yes.

Hartmann: This is a story that never got in the paper. We went down there and we stayed there and we were going on to – where would we be going? What's the next big town?

Smith: Going south – down to Savannah? Or Charleston?

Hartmann: Well, I'm not sure, but I know we stopped at Myrtle Beach. And General Westmoreland, I think it was he and his wife, we had a setting of little cottages and the Fords had one and we had one, and they invited Westmoreland and his wife to dinner at their place. The next morning they came over and told Bob – Ford ate some fish and he got a little bone stuck on the uvula back there, you know, and fortunately they got it out. And that *never* was in the paper.

Smith: The President got the bone in his throat?

Hartmann: Yeah.

Smith: What did you like about President Ford?

Hartmann: Well, he was so real. You know, we had lots of close association. Bob got him to put in a swimming pool at his home and later Bob got the pool in the White House donated.

Smith: Did he?

Hartmann: We had a lot of things to talk about other than politics. We could visit and spend the evening. We'd be there at their house in Virginia to dinner, they'd be here. All this camaraderie was good, was nice, easy.

Smith: The kids – did you have much contact with the kids?

Hartmann: Yes. We met the kids, we saw them. When I saw Steve this last time, I said, "You have forgotten what you used to do." He'd used to come up and kiss me on the back of the neck. I said, "You haven't done that. I've missed that." But, that Ford family – now nothing ever that I know of was ever said about the children? Was there anything?

Smith: No.

Hartmann: What a family! It was unbelievable that a man of this importance could have such a lovely wife and lovely children that knew how to behave. And she did a lot for the world with her openness about drinking, about having breast cancer. That shows what a family can do if a family works together. Susan said, "We've got to tell Mother we know what's going on, and it has to stop." And they all worked. And sometime after that we were at dinner at their place in Palm Springs, and we'd all had a drink and she asked Bob, "You want another drink?" And he said, "No, I guess not." She says, "What's the matter, you think you'll end up in my place?" She had a great sense of humor.

Smith: The Betty Ford Center. So she had a sense of humor?

Hartmann: Oh, yes, she did. But she was great. She was kind of tardy sometimes. We were out in California before a speech, and they said to me, they knew I was close to her, "You've got to get Betty on time because she is going to receive

an award.” And she was always kind of late. Everybody knew that. But who cares. But this time she was going to receive an award. She was in her dining room but she had lost an eyelash and she was looking for it on the floor. I said, “What are you looking for?” “Well, I lost an eyelash, do you see it anywhere down there?” And we looked and we didn’t find it, she said, “I’ll just take the other one off.” And I said, “Betty, you have to be there on time. I’m going to stay here and I’m going to walk you to there and you’re going to go.” And one of the other girls came flying out and said, “How do you like being her control person” or something. And I said, “I’m not. I’m her friend helping her.”

Smith: Being late was always a trademark wasn’t it?

Hartmann: Yes.

Smith: It’s funny, because the President was so punctual. The ’76 campaign – at the end – did you think you were going to win?

Hartmann: No. It just looked too bad.

Smith: How rough was that on the President? Because it took him a while to digest.

Hartmann: Yes, well, wouldn’t it? Of course, it would. But I don’t ever remember him ranting and raving or anything. He’s not that kind of a person. But I’m sure it was difficult. It had to be.

Smith: They enjoyed their new life out in California.

Hartmann: Yeah. Bob was a pallbearer at his funeral.

Smith: When was the last time you saw him?

Hartmann: Betty didn’t come to the dinner this summer, the four kids were there. The last time I saw him was the last dinner he came every June or July – end of June. He came every summer for this dinner and of course I was there at the last one.

Smith: Did he and Bob keep in touch?

Hartmann: Yes.

Smith: Talk by phone?

Hartmann: Oh, yes. They talked often.

Smith: Did Bob do any work for him after he left the White House?

Hartmann: No.

Smith: How do you think Ford should be remembered? Maybe I can make it more personal. How will you remember him?

Hartmann: As a very caring, responsible person, who did his best for his country, for his friends, for everybody. Just a God-given person to help us out. He was.

Smith: And Bob passed away – when?

Hartmann: A year ago this last April 11, three days after his 92<sup>nd</sup> birthday. I will give you a program of his service which took place at the Metropolitan United Methodist Church in Washington, DC. It has Bob's picture on the cover.

Smith: Yes.

Hartmann: I thought I'd give you that.

Smith: Oh, thank you. But you say he was a honorary pallbearer at the Ford funeral?

Hartmann: Oh, yes, but because Bob was in a wheelchair he didn't walk with the others when they arrived at the cathedral. We sat to the right of the speaker and then followed the pall bearers out. Our son, Rob, was invited and he helped his father. At Bob's funeral, my son spoke and read letters from President Bush '41 and '43, and Kissinger and Cheney \_\_\_\_\_ it or not. But the most beautiful was a letter from Betty. Our grandchildren talked and our daughter did, and Bob Orben spoke.

Smith: We had a great talk with Bob. We interviewed Bob and he was singing Bob's praises. He was a great admirer of your husband.

Hartmann: Yes, and he was always very, very loyal, and I'm sure that he probably kept other little things down level, because he knew they weren't so and not important so don't get disturbed about it. He's a very nice man.

Smith: He is.

Hartmann: And Benton Becker is a doll.

Smith: Well, we'll tell them we talked. Thank you so much. This was fun.

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