We often start off asking people to say something about Gerald Ford that might be surprising. And I gather when you first met him, you had something of a surprising encounter.

One thing that might surprise people about Gerald Ford is how skillful he was as an interviewer. He was vice president. I had been selected as a White House Fellow. The White House Fellows, after they are selected, interview across the government for their job assignment. Eight White House Fellows had interviewed with his office. There were fifteen in the class and eight ended up interviewing with his office, various people in his office. They narrowed it down to two and two of us ended up having one on one interviews with Vice President Ford. I was fortunate to be one of them.

It lasted about half an hour and he asked an interesting set of questions, although not a highly unusual set of questions - trying to probe a little more about my background. In particular, I had studied at Brigham Young and Oxford and at Harvard and he was very interested in the comparisons between the different institutions. One of his sons, Jack, was studying at Utah State University at the time, so he was quite familiar with the major universities in Utah. Obviously, he knew about Harvard and Oxford. So, he was quite interested in the comparisons and what I had learned.

About midway through the interview, he asked me if I had any questions of him. I thought that was quite striking for a vice president of the United States to invite a young twenty-something year old being interviewed and ask him questions. And I posed a set of questions to him that I was curious about, including how he thought about the composition of his staff and what kind of people sought for his staff. Did he want people who were loyal or people who had a lot of experience or people who were full of ideas and had a lot of energy. He gave a fascinating answer that revealed to me that he had given some thought to this before just simply shooting off the cuff. He recognized
some of the strengths and limitations of individuals on his staff and believed that a combination of skills was really crucial and important. Without naming names, I later discovered when I saw these characteristics in person, his capacity to mesh his staff. He went way up in my estimation. My estimation of him before our interview had been based what I’d read. Nothing negative, but I did not have the impression that he was someone who is quite reflective and thoughtful, and, in a one on one interview, very articulate. His speaking style was not one that would compare favorably with a John Kennedy or Ronald Reagan or Barack Obama or Bill Clinton, but in a one on one interview, he was actually remarkably impressive.

Smith: Tell me about your time in the White House during the Nixon administration.

Porter: Well, I did not arrive to begin my White House fellowship - the fellowship year starts on September 1. You get your job assignment in the summer. And Vice President Ford asked if I would come early. By sheer coincidence, I arrived the morning of August the 9th. So, I was technically in the Nixon administration for about three and a half hours.

Smith: What was it like around the White House on the morning of August 9th?

Porter: It was very somber. You could tell that something important was happening. It was not chaotic, although, I did manage to walk in without a White House pass and without being on any clearance list. I had been around for interviews before, so I was not a totally unfamiliar face. I just walked past the guards, waved, and I guess they assumed I had a pass. There was a fair amount of relief that this chapter had finally ended. I think a lot of people, since it unfolded very slowly, had had time to prepare for it, so it was not like the shock of an assassination.

Smith: You wonder if Gerald Ford had had time to prepare. Or whether there had been any sub-rosa effort at preparation.

Porter: If there was, there was not much, because he always struck me as an extraordinarily circumspect person. He was ambitious as most people are and certainly most elected officials are or they wouldn’t run for office. He was not grasping and I don’t think he ever expected to be in the executive branch,
ever seriously considered running for president himself. His big ambition, as you are well aware, was to become Speaker of the House. As he saw that chance fading, he had made a commitment to his wife that he was not going to run for reelection. The vice presidency came as something of a surprise because Spiro Agnew’s resignation was a little unexpected. More than a little unexpected and Nixon, obviously, wanted to appoint John Connally and was thwarted in that.

So, Vice President Ford, I think, did not see this as a great opportunity. At his essence, he’s an extraordinarily loyal individual. I mean, when you think about it, he was as loyal to a president as I think any vice president has been with less reason to do so, because, by the time he become vice president, Watergate is well down the path and in the back of his mind, he would have been justified, well justified, in posing the question, ‘Has this person been telling me and others the truth?’ and, ‘If this movement toward impeachment takes hold, I may become president.’ But he wasn’t grasping for this.

I’m told there was a fair amount of tension between the Nixon White House staff and the Ford vice presidential staff because the Nixon White House staff wanted him to be even more publicly vocal with respect to his support for the president. I think he went as far as he felt he could. At no point did he signal that he was disloyal in any way. But, he had to have at least in the back of his mind the idea that it could happen. Most human beings have the capacity to throw themselves into their job and most of us do that when we’re under a lot of pressure because that’s one thing we can control. And that deflects us from spending too much time mulling and thinking about what might happen. So, he threw himself into the job. I talked to his scheduler. He was holding 11.7 meetings per day on average in comparison with Spiro Agnew who averaged less than two meetings a day. And he did a great deal of travel during his period of time as vice president. Lining up my interview with him was actually quite complicated once they narrowed it down to the two of us. Because I had to fly down and they said “Well, he’s travelling then” and “He’s travelling here and there.” So, he was throwing himself into the job of being vice president and I think that was good for the country, but I think it was also good for him to keep his mind off of what was going on.
Smith: We’ve been told by several people - and it’s relevant, for example, because of his later relationship with Rockefeller - that he really didn’t enjoy the job. He really didn’t enjoy being vice president. He was walking such a tightrope and there were those who thought he was out of town too much. I also wonder whether, in the back of his mind, he knew that although he might not be consciously worrying about how far he could go, there were people like Bob Hartmann on his staff who were worrying about it regularly.

Porter: They are not here to be able to give their accounts, but my understanding is that the one person in whom Gerald Ford did confide somewhat earlier was Phil Buchen who had been his law partner and was serving as his counsel and would later become his White House counsel. Gerald Ford recognized that there was a fair amount of tension within his vice presidential staff surrounding Bob Hartmann, who was a wonderful speechwriter, extraordinarily loyal to the Vice President, but who was one that I think Ford kept at a bit of a distance.

I never heard him once disparage Bob Hartmann and that was in the face of many other people making comments that were less than flattering. Ford was very loyal to Bob Hartmann. But I am told by someone who was in the meeting when they were discussing which of the White House Fellows to take of the two that had interviewed - Bob Hartmann was making the argument that they should not take me because I was from Harvard and, therefore, could not be trusted. And Vice President Ford said, “No, he’s from Utah and he can be trusted.” And the individual who reported this to me said that this was the first time he had seen Ford in a meeting - and he said, “By the way, that’s who I want” – run counter to the advice of Hartmann.

I am not surprised that the person that he confided in, at least a little, was Phil Buchen because they had this long-standing relationship, but even there, there was only a very limited discussion and my understanding is that it was Buchen who went to the Vice President and suggested to him that he ought to do some planning and there ought to be some preparation and thinking. And Vice President Ford was very reluctant to do that for the obvious reason that, once you start, the word that something is going on is very high. Vice
President Ford was a very careful person who saw that the upside was very low and the downside was very high and he was not going to engage in it.

Smith: Again, it’s fascinating when you talk about this circumspection. A number of people have speculated what secrets he might’ve taken with him to the grave. I’m sure there are things that we don’t know about. When you talk about Phil Buchen, he became symbolic of “the Grand Rapids crowd.” A lot of pot shots were taken at these folks - that they weren’t quite ready for prime time. What was your sense of that?

Porter: Well, Gerald Ford, I think, was remarkably skillful in selecting people and figuring out how they could best serve. Bob Hartmann very much wanted to be his White House chief of staff. He’d been his chief of staff on the Hill. He’d been his chief of staff as vice president. It would seem like a very logical move and Hartmann could legitimately claim that he had been enormously loyal to Ford. And, he could make the argument that he could and would serve him well. Hartmann was crushed when Haig was kept on for six weeks and then when he decided to bring in Don Rumsfeld as - the first title he had was – Coordinator.

Smith: That’s right. He didn’t want a chief of staff, did he?

Porter: His initial instinct was not, although it was quickly apparent that Rumsfeld was in fact the equivalent to the chief of staff and in many respects did a very good job as White House chief of staff. I was impressed with how he handled what was a challenging situation at a relatively young age. He was in his forties at the time and did a terrific job.

Smith: He told us that his advice to the President was clean house early. Ford was resistant to that for a number of reasons. One, he didn’t want to tar all the Nixon people with Watergate, that was unfair. And, two, there was an element of continuity involved. I’m wondering how these disparate elements meshed.

Porter: If you look, he didn’t clean house, but he made some significant changes. Let’s look at what some of them are. He had a change in the chief of staff. Haig was gone after six weeks.
Smith: Did Haig really expect to stay on longer than that?

Porter: I do not think he expected to stay on longer than that. I only had three or four occasions to have much interaction with him over the first two or three weeks, but he was exhausted. He had basically been there day and night for the previous eighteen months and I think he recognized that he was exhausted, he needed a change, and that the President needed to have a change there. Gerald Ford admired Haig a great deal and he did not view Haig in the same way that he viewed some of the other Nixon people. At the same time he made that change and Rumsfeld brought in with him his deputy, Dick Cheney, who was also a new face and played an important, significant role. He changed his assistant for economic affairs. The economy was a huge issue. Nixon had had Ken Rush there and Rush went off to Paris to be Ambassador to France and Ford brought in Bill Seidman. That was another big change.

Smith: And a Grand Rapids guy.

Porter: And a Grand Rapids guy, but very capable. He turned out to be one of the best people who’s ever been in that position. He did make a change in the White House Counsel’s office giving the post to Phil Buchen. He made a change at OMB. Roy Ash was leaving. And Ford did not discourage him from leaving, and brought Jim Lynn in. Herb Stein was leaving as chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors and Alan Greenspan came in who Ford picked. Nixon had tapped Alan Greenspan, but Ford went to Bill Seidman and asked him what he thought and Bill actually had me do some checking as well and came back that Greenspan would be a great choice. So, if you look with respect to economic policy, Seidman, Lynn, and Greenspan. He kept Bill Simon at the Treasury, but other than that, it was a very clean sweep.

If you look in the White House, he changed the press secretary on day one and Ron Ziegler moved on to California to work with Nixon on his memoirs. And he brought in Jerald terHorst and then later Ron Nessen. But that was a change. He changed the Counsel’s office. Change in the Chief of Staff’s office, and his Economic Policy assessment. He kept Kissinger in place on the foreign policy side. And of course he brought into counselor positions
Bob Hartmann and Jack Marsh. If you look at the people around him, he actually had in his White House circle a lot of fresh faces. When Rumsfeld says he urged him to make a lot of changes, I think one needs to remember – he did make a lot of changes. It was not like, ‘I urged him to make a lot of changes and he didn’t.’ President Ford did it quite subtly and very gracefully and not in one fell swoop.

Smith: Almost quietly.

Porter: And very quietly.

Smith: Rumsfeld wanted a public hanging, in a sense.

Porter: But that was never Gerald Ford’s style.

Smith: Yeah.

Porter: In part because he didn’t want Nixon people, many of whom - and I’m not going to name names - wanted to stay on and were encouraged to move on. But he didn’t want to do anything to damage them. But, above and beyond that, it just wasn’t his style. He did not have a vindictive, mean bone in his body. He was involved in the rough and tumble of politics. People sometimes say things they don’t really mean. But I never had the sense that he carried with him any grudges or animus or ill will toward people, even people who didn’t respond in kind to him.

Smith: I only heard him disparage two people and the worst epithet he could come up with was, “He’s a bad man.” That’s the worst he could say. One was Gordon Liddy and one was John Dean. Interesting choices. Clearly, for some reason, he and Jim Schlesinger did not get along. One senses it was chemistry. The reason I’m bringing it up is because of the whole question of his intelligence, and how sensitive he may have been.

He’d been on the Defense Appropriations Committee. He knew as much if not more about the operations of the military than Jim Schlesinger. People would say, “Oh, he’s like that with everyone.” But there was a kind of condescension that Ford sensed. And, for some reason, it rubbed him sufficiently the wrong way to do what he did.
Porter: He did not change Jim Schlesinger for over a year, so it wasn’t until October 31st of 1975. Ford came in August 9th of 1974. I believe that he felt that he gave Schlesinger ample opportunity to develop a good relationship with him. I think he felt that he went as far as he could to develop a good relationship with Schlesinger. And, I’m not sure how well they knew one another before, but he kept him on much longer than several of the other Cabinet officers whom he replaced. In part, I think it was the chemistry between the two of them. In part, I think it’s because Schlesinger did not consult him on a number of issues that he thought, given his interest and expertise, he would be consulted on. And, not least, because of reports that he was getting from off the Hill from George Mahon and others who did not have as good a relationship with Schlesinger as they had with several of his predecessors. So, I think it was actually a whole combination of things.

Smith: One specific incident which I’ve never known about before – someone told us not long ago that the secretary had sent over someone on his staff, not particularly high up on his staff – to causally inform the White House that the Pentagon had no intention of being involved in the refugee resettlement efforts after Saigon fell. And it was made very clear that was not an acceptable position. Clearly, the President had taken such a moral stand there, seeing the desire on the part of Congress to pull the plug once we were out of there, was shameful. And, he’d put together this kind of crazy quilt coalition and shamed Congress into putting up funds. As you know, while president, he visited some of the resettlement camps. A lot of people would’ve run away from that issue.

Porter: I’ve never been in the military and I’ve never worked in the Defense Department, although, if I had not gotten the offer from the vice president’s office, the other place I had a firm offer was from the Defense Department. But, I’ve never been in the military. I have spent a fair amount of time during my years in the White House with three different presidents interacting with the Defense Department and I do know that many people in the Defense Department feel like they have a supreme, superbly trained organization, that they have earned the respect of the American people, and that one of the reasons they are as good at doing what they’re doing is because they have a
very clear mission and they train people for that. They see it as a problem that the rest of the government, seeing this tremendous asset in hand is always wanting to deploy it. We were thinking about, at certain points, “Gee, these guys are terrific. Could we get them helping in the schools?” I had a conversation with Colin Powell who said, “Look, we have a job to do and that job is to defend the country and we can’t be adding all these other things.” The message that they were sending on here, I think, was not a Schlesinger-inspired, or idiosyncratic to him. It’s almost a gut response.

Smith: The means, though – it’s almost as if the message was less offensive than –

Porter: If I was counseling them, I would have said, “Sending somebody over to the White House? Are you out of your mind? This is the silliest thing you could possibly do. Wait until you are asked. Don’t try preempting it. And then, when they ask, explain, ‘Well, if we were to do that, it would mean x and y. Do you really want to go ahead and do it?’ and think about it that way.” But sending somebody over and preemptively informing them that “We are not going to be doing this” just strikes me as really ham-handed. I don’t know if Schlesinger was involved, or knew about it at all, but it had the predictable response and reaction which was exactly the opposite of what they were hoping for.

Smith: Ford was genuinely shocked that Nixon lied to him. At the end of August he has his first press conference and he believes - this man who’s been in Washington for twenty-five years – that reporters are going to want to talk about Cypress and Greece and Turkey and inflation and everything except what they all want to talk about. And, he was angry with himself afterwards because he didn’t handle some of the questions very well. I think there would’ve been a pardon anyway, but I’ve often thought that was, in some ways, the triggering event. Was he naïve? Wanting to think the best of people is a hugely admirable trait. Is it something a president can afford?

Porter: I don’t have any firsthand knowledge that would enable me to shed much insight on this. It occurred thirty days into office, the pardon.

Smith: Were you surprised?
Porter: I was surprised and the people who I knew that were much closer to him than I was were surprised. What prompted it, I am not certain. I do believe that he felt two things quite keenly. One, that there had been a lot of discussion during the final year of the Nixon administration that the presidency had gotten too big and that the best sort of way you could paint a picture for Richard Nixon is that he delegated the reelection to somebody else because he was concentrating on the presidency and the presidency was a really big job. You have to worry about foreign affairs, you have to worry about domestic affairs and if you look at the kind of relationship that Ford was hoping to establish with Rockefeller and what he led Rockefeller to believe he wanted him to do as vice president, there’s a bit of that in there, that ‘I want to delegate.’ Ultimately he discovered you can’t delegate it. But, ‘I want to delegate a chunk of this because I want to concentrate on that.’ So, I think there’s part of it that is sort of, ‘Well, Nixon was really concentrating on governing and he had outsourced the campaign to others and didn’t really understand what was going on.’

There’s a part of that in Ford’s mind that cuts Nixon a little bit of a break. More importantly, I don’t think anyone who has not been president can fully appreciate all the strains and stresses of that office. One needs to remember that the country was in a very unhappy mood, not just because of Watergate and the lack of trust, but Vietnam was not going well. It was clear that we were going to need to get out of there, probably sooner rather than later. We had never really lost a war before. The economy was in real difficulty. We had had the energy embargo the year before. There was a huge number of things that were on his plate and I think in part, Ford looked at the situation and the fact that it was not that he was just getting lots of questions on this at the first press conference and that he didn’t handle those as well as he might have, but that a lot of his time was being consumed dealing with the issue on the papers and stuff like that. And, that he did not want to personally be distracted and he did not want the country to be distracted. I think he thought, ‘Well, once this is brought to a conclusion, people will move on to something else.’ I’m not sure he properly calculated, I think even he was surprised a bit
at the sharp initial reaction. He had to expect some of that, but I don’t think he was fully prepared for all he got.

Smith: Mel Laird loves Ford, but he’s never quite forgiven him for not following Mel’s scheme, which was, ‘Give me time, Jerry. I’ll bring a bipartisan congressional delegation down to the White House and they will petition you to grant a pardon.’ Now, my question is: given the extraordinarily bitter climate at that point, is it realistic to believe that you could send a trial balloon up without it being shot down? Was there any way to ‘prepare’ the country? If you’re going to do a pardon, was there another way of doing it in that climate?

Porter: People who advocate sending up trial balloons need to remember that you are always going to be held accountable for what you do with the information you receive when you send the trial balloon up. Had he sent up the trial balloon and it received a highly negative response, to then go ahead and do a pardon, would look like ‘I really am indifferent to and contemptuous of public opinion.’ And I suspect that he thought in his own mind ‘There’s a fairly good chance that I may get’ – How many people are going to say ‘Oh, my gosh. What a great idea! Pardon him just as quickly as you can’? The likelihood of it is a very low probability. The likelihood that the sense of ‘Look, he deserves the same kind of justice that everybody else got. He needs to be willing to stand up and be tried for anything that he may have done’, that would probably be much greater. Then he would be in the position of saying, ‘Well, okay, I’ve consulted you and I realize where you are, but I’m going to make a different judgment. I’m going to go ahead and do this.’ So, I think he properly dismissed sending up a trial balloon initially. And the Mel Laird solution, which, maybe Mel Laird would be one of the few people on earth who could do that because he’s an enormously talented, capable man. He might have been able to do that, but he could not have done it quietly. So, that would have been like sending up a trial balloon and I think that’s why Ford deflected that.
Smith: There’s a theory that the pardon and the Vietnam clemency board, both of which occurred in the first month, are really part of the same overall plan of trying to heal the country.

Porter: Well, the clemency came before the pardon.

Smith: Right.

Porter: I’m not sure how much successive planning Ford was doing at that time. I didn’t hear anything about that just in terms of office conversation. The idea of a pardon was never there. I remember the whole notion was that we’ve got to get Vietnam behind us, it’s been dividing the country and that’s why we ought to go ahead and do this earned amnesty. He did it at the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in Chicago. That was a very gutsy thing to do. I think he was still struggling at that time with what he was going to do on the Nixon pardon.

Smith: You’ve written about him and his energy policy. I don’t know how a crisis can remain a crisis for thirty-five years. It does sort of redefine the term. But it’s entered the lexicon. So, in a nutshell tell us what Ford wanted to do and it’s relevance to what hasn’t been done in the years since.

Porter: Gerald Ford became convinced that there were really two things that had to be done to deal with the energy problem or crisis that we had at the time. I prefer the term ‘problem’ rather than crisis. And one was on the supply side and one was on the demand side. On the supply side, he was for expanding drilling and drilling on some federal reserves that we had at Elk Hills in California, as well as he was in favor of drilling in Alaska and other places. ‘We have some proven, known oil reserves. We need to continue to explore, but we need to maximize and use what we have got.’

On the demand side, he was in favor of raising prices and getting the predictable consumer response. If you raise the price of something, you’ll consume less of it. I can remember him spending a good deal of time in our discussions about how a rebate scheme could work so that people who were on the lower end of the economic spectrum would not be damaged because they would be in less of a position to insulate themselves from higher prices.
For people with middle and upper incomes, they were going to have to make some adjustments. This looked like raising taxes and in a very real respect it was raising taxes because the federal government would be the conduit for this revenue increase. Ford was comfortable with that.

It’s interesting that thirty-five years later, a fairly large number of people have come to the same conclusion of how to deal with what is a much larger problem. At that point, we had about eight percent of the world’s oil reserves. And instead of importing at that time about forty-five to fifty percent of our oil; we’re now importing about sixty percent. If you look at the dimensions of the problem, it’s actually larger today than it was then. Many people have come to the notion that a two-pronged effort is needed.

Smith: On the economic front, inflation was identified as the train coming down the track and then almost overnight – I mean, you had this unique phenomenon, ‘stagflation’ - but clearly unemployment became the most pressing concern.

Porter: When he came in, inflation was very high and unemployment was rising from relatively modest levels and continued to do so, largely because of a huge swing in inventories. The way in which we measured inventories at that time, as Alan Greenspan would remind you, had masked a lot of what was going on in the economy in the last quarter of ’74 and the first quarter of ’75 when we had about a ten percent drop in GDP at that period of time. It was just a very sharp, severe downturn. He did feel, I suspect, as anyone would with the advice coming in, whipsawed between these two twin objectives. Everybody had memorized the Philips curve which basically says there’s an inverse relationship between inflation and unemployment. Now we had to throw out that thinking because it obviously didn’t apply in this situation.

He, I think, reluctantly came to recognize that he had to try to deal with two problems simultaneously. And that many of the things that would work for one would not work well for the other and, in fact, undermine it. So, he tried in the very conventional way that most people do to find a good balance. I think that he was as skillful as any president could be under those circumstances in finding the balance, because I think Gerald Ford was instinctively, intuitively a very balanced person. He did not cascade to one
extreme or another. He had not done that in foreign policy. He had not done that in defense policy. He had not done that in economic policy. If you look at his whole career, with a couple of exceptions, maybe, with a couple of comments he made on Supreme Court justices, but for the most part his was a very balanced kind of approach. He was very good at seeing arguments on both sides, seeing the merits and arguments on both sides, weighing them in one way or another.

This is not to say that he couldn’t be decisive, as he was with respect to financial assistance to New York City. And he heard lots on both sides and he would come down firmly, but his whole approach was a very balanced one. I think that came out very strongly in this episode of how you’re going to deal with a faltering economy that was experiencing high inflation, which is what he inherited.

Smith: The whole Ford/Rockefeller relationship - in retrospect, you wonder if the President might not wish he could’ve taken back some of the things he said. I mean, Rockefeller was either led to believe or convinced himself that he would be a kind of domestic Kissinger; he would have a measure of, if not control, then certainly influence over domestic policy that paralleled Kissinger’s in the foreign field. And I wonder how much of that is Gerald Ford the congressman saying that. You can look at the trajectory of the whole Ford presidency as not necessarily unlearning congressional skills, but learning to be an executive, learning to be a president. And, maybe at the end of two years, he wouldn’t have had that conversation with Rockefeller.

Porter: I think there are a series of factors that influenced this. The first is that Gerald Ford had had a very unhappy time as vice president in terms of what he was given to do. And I think his response to that was ‘I’m going to give my vice president a different opportunity to do something meaningful in this job.’ Secondly, I think he thought that his strong suit was foreign policy and defense policy. He recognized that he was going to have to deal with economic policy, but there was this third realm, which, for want of a better term, we call domestic policy, which is sort of everything else that is not
foreign and not economic. And here Rockefeller had interest, had expertise, had experience.

I think Ford viewed a lot of this as the relationship between the federal government and state governments and Rockefeller knew the other governors well. This would be, in his mind, a great portfolio and he was trying to get Rockefeller to get enthusiastic about the job and ‘This is my vision.’ What he quickly discovered was that these three are all intertwined. The notion that you can segment them is a fiction of people’s imagination. And, secondly, you can not have two people in charge. You can’t say ‘This part of the government someone’s going to run and this part of the government someone else is going to run.’ And, it quickly became apparent to him that that simply was not in the cards and I think it became apparent to Rockefeller as well. As a result, the way it turned out was a disappointment to Rockefeller because, I think he had hoped – although, the initial issue was over who was going to be the assistant to the president for domestic affairs. Rumsfeld wanted Phil Areeda and Rockefeller wanted Jim Cannon. They went to the mat and Ford went with Rockefeller. And I think that was showing him ‘Look, I’m prepared to make good on this’ and Jim Cannon was a terrific individual, is a terrific individual. I enjoyed working with him enormously. We were actually in the same suite - Bill Seidman and I were with Jim Cannon and Jim Cavanaugh.

Smith: Rockefeller, of course, went to his grave convinced that Rumsfeld did him in, that the deep-sixing of George Bush at the CIA was all part of the same nefarious scheme. Of course the president in the end was the one who signed off on all of those changes.

Porter: That is true.

Smith: I find it fascinating because Ford always said he regretted it and I think he did. But he also said, “You know, I don’t think Nelson would’ve been happy in a second term as vice president.” Because he had come to see all these limitations that you described and he knew Rockefeller’s temperament, and he didn’t see how it would get any better. And, again, there may have been an
element of rationalization in that, justifying what he did, but there’s also a lot of truth to it.

Porter: This is an inherent problem with the vice presidency. John Adams felt it acutely because it became apparent to him we can only have one president at a time. And, here’s the problem, you want to select people as vice presidents who can, if necessary, step into the job. You want to have people who are talented, you want people who are good decision makers, and you want to have people who are leaders. At the same time, if you select people who are talented, good decision makers, and leaders, they don’t enjoy – they may be willing to abide it – but they don’t really enjoy it.

Who was the last vice president that you would say really enjoyed the job? It’s hard because you are totally at the beck and call of what the president wants you to do and he may or may not give you assignments that you can really enjoy. But it is very clear to him, to you, and to everyone else that we can only have one president at a time. If Ford were to get reelected, presumably, he could run yet another time under the Constitution. As a result, the only chance Rockefeller had to become President was if Ford died for some reason or got impeached. Given Ford’s health – he did go through two assassination attempts, but that’s not the way anybody wants to become president – so I think Rockefeller recognizes ‘This is my last job.’ And when you have had his career, his family, his background, and his aspirations, that’s not an easy thing to take.

Smith: Two last things. By election day ’76, the polls suggested you’d caught up. What was the mood? Did you think you actually—

Porter: He started from so far behind – everyone points to the time of the Democratic convention – that it always seemed like a long shot. Many of us, as we saw him moving up in the polls, got genuinely enthusiastic. ‘Maybe he can do it.’ I personally think that, if the election had been a month later, possibly even two weeks later, and there had been one round of good economic news, which came out afterward – you need a catalytic event and you need a reason for people to say ‘Well, okay.’ Unfortunately, the timing of the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November did not permit that. So, Ford never quite
caught it. But, you know, hope springs eternal in the midst of campaigning. I thought at the time it’s going to be something of a miracle if we’re able to catch Carter. You look at all the polls that come in from various states and you think of how you can do it and, yes, mathematically, there was a shot at it. It was a real disappointment, but it was a long shot just because of how far back he had started.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

Porter: I think that he should be remembered as one of the most decent, honorable, dignified, and honest men that we have had as president. And we have had many good ones and I think he fits in that category.

Smith: Character counts?

Porter: Character counts. I think he should be remembered as someone who inherited a very difficult situation, both in terms of the mood of the country, the trust in government, the challenges of how we were going to extract ourselves from Vietnam, the relationship with the Soviet Union which was tense at that time, and China, and with a very difficult economy. And if you’d look at the two and a half years he was President and ask “Did we make progress in all those areas?” The answer to that in my view is an unequivocal yes. If you use as a measuring rod how someone transforms the situation that they inherit, then I think he deservedly should be considered as one of our most remarkable presidents.

The length of time he was President, the way he came into office, his style was not such that he’s going to be remembered in the way a John Kennedy is, who was very charismatic and died very tragically and was in office roughly the same amount of time. But if you look at what actually happened and what was done, I think Gerald Ford actually stacks up remarkably well. Personally, it was a great privilege to work for somebody who was as kind and thoughtful and decent and impressive as he was, but I think if you actually look at the record of accomplishment and not simply his personal qualities, I think he deserves to be very favorably treated.

Smith: That’s great.
Porter: Thank you.

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