Smith: Talking about newspapers, Gerald Ford was omnivorous in his devouring of newspapers. Until the end of his life it was five or six newspapers a day with your morning coffee.

Nessen: Well, he had the Post and the Times and the Wall Street Journal, but he also had the Grand Rapids Press and, I think, the Detroit News, maybe, and one other paper. He had six newspapers a day that he would…

Smith: And woe to those who interrupted him while he was reading.

Nessen: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Off the wall, tell us something about Gerald Ford that might surprise people.

Nessen: I think the thing about Jerry Ford that might surprise people that I really didn’t learn until he made a visit back to his hometown of Grand Rapids, Michigan. The people there really loved him. They knew him better than anybody else, and they really loved him. He stood in the city hall and the people who wanted to shake hands and say hello to him lined up. Well, the line was enormous – out the door and up the block. He stood there and the people came through. The thing that surprised me was how many of those people he knew personally. Knew their names, knew their families, and he’d say, “Oh, hi. How are you Ed? Are you still working out there at the automobile plant?” Somebody else come up and he’d say, “Oh, hi, Sally. How are those two kids of yours? Is your son still going to the University?” It was amazing how many people he knew on a personal basis. They had been his constituents, but he’s President of the United States, and he’s asking some guy, are you still on the line? That was surprising to me.

Smith: There is a wonderful story which I only found out fairly recently. As you know, he commuted that first week. But the first day that he was going to work as a resident, he walked up to the entrance to the West Wing, and the
Marine guard held the door open and saluted. And the president sticks out his hand and says, “Hi, my name is Jerry Ford. I’m going to be living here. What’s yours?”

Nessen: Wow. Well, I was a reporter for NBC, and I had covered Agnew, who resigned. So NBC, with a certain lack of imagination, thought well, you can cover the new vice president, too. So I covered him. It wasn’t a year, but it was eight or nine months as vice president, and then I became the White House correspondent for the first month of his administration. Well, it took the Nixons a few days to move out of the White House, so here is the President of the United States living in a – I can’t remember if it was a rambler or a split level or what – on Crown View Drive in Alexandria, Virginia, and I thought, isn’t that symbolic of this guy? The “president next door.” He’s just a guy who lives in the house next door, and he’s President of the United States.

Smith: Of course, you can argue, he suffered from that at times.

Nessen: Why?

Smith: I mean in the sense of the public perception. We had this very bifurcated notion – we love Harry Truman thirty years after he left office – and we appreciate Jimmy Carter when he was carrying his bags – but in the White House we didn’t cotton to, no pun intended, but…

Nessen: But don’t forget – this came after the imperial presidency, and I think people were looking for that. One of the stories that you may or may not know about Jerry Ford was, he had a dog, Liberty. Liberty has an accident on the rug in the Oval Office and one of the Navy stewards rushes in to clean it up. Jerry Ford says, “I’ll do that. Get out of the way, I’ll do that. No man ought to have to clean up after another man’s dog.” Now that was about as symbolic of Jerry Ford as anything I know. I mean, living on Crown View Drive when you are President of the United States, and cleaning up after your own dog in the Oval Office…

Smith: It’s also a metaphor for the task that history assigned to him.
Nessen: You’d better believe it. But, you know, look, you’re a historian, one of the things that Kissinger says that I’m a big believer in is, that you cannot understand historic events and people except through the perspective of thirty years of subsequent history. Okay, now, we’re looking back at Vietnam a little bit through that perspective of thirty years, and we’re looking back at Jerry Ford very much so, and that’s why his reputation, I think, is so much different – why he’s so beloved now, as compared to when he was in the White House, or when he had just left the White House. You see, in the long run of history and what the outcome of some of the things he did was, and you’re away from that day to day heat of politics. So, I believe that thirty years of subsequent history theory, and I think he has benefited from it.

Smith: Let me go back in time, because when we were talking to Jerry Jones earlier this week, one of the startling things he told us was that he, at that point, had sort of reorganized the personnel office for Haldeman. Haldeman calls him up – now Haldeman, of course, and Erlichman leave in April of ’73 – Haldeman calls him while he is still there, and wants to know how many jobs report to the vice president. Jerry does some quick thinking and comes back with a number of about fifty. He said, “Fine. I want every one of them to write a letter of resignation, and get them to me.” They knew that early that Agnew was going to be history. Does that ring true with you…

Nessen: I was totally on the outside then. I live out just off of Massachusetts Avenue in Bethesda, and about three blocks from where Spiro Agnew lived then. There was no vice president’s house in those days. I’m with NBC. About six o’clock in the morning I get awakened by a phone call. It’s the Today Show. They’re saying, “Get up, get up. Run out to Agnew’s house, we’ll send a camera crew to meet you out there. The Wall Street Journal has a story this morning saying he’s under investigation for corruption as governor of Maryland, and maybe as VP.” So, that’s my connection to Agnew, and I spent that whole summer of ’73, I guess it was, on the Agnew case. I’d go down to Annapolis and over to Baltimore and so forth. And then when he resigned, as I say, NBC with a lack of imagination says, “Okay, now you cover the new vice president.” But I didn’t really get into that part of the Agnew story.
Ron Nessen

January 28, 2009

Smith: Of course, he led the charge against network news. On the personal level, was he that hostile to reporters?

Nessen: He was totally unapproachable. Most public figures - whether it’s natural, or whether it’s put on - they try to be buddies with the reporters. But he never did. My most vivid memory of him was he brought charges against nine reporters. The Agnew Nine. Did you ever hear of the Agnew Nine?

Smith: No.

Nessen: I was one of the Agnew Nine. And I can’t remember exactly what the charge was, but it had to do with receiving leaked information that was used to expose him. Now, that’s really general, and not specific, but that was the charge. Well, we have a hearing over in the federal courthouse in Baltimore and they hired this New York First Amendment lawyer for me and for some of the other Nine. And so we go to our hearing…

Smith: Was that Floyd Abrams?

Nessen: Yeah. And we go over to our hearing in Baltimore and Agnew walks into the courtroom. And it was so still. In those days you couldn’t have cameras in the courtroom, so there were two sketch artists, one for CBS, one for NBC - they were sisters, and I actually have the sketch at home that she did that day - and she’s drawing this picture of Agnew. He’s very tall, and very stately, and has no expression on his face at all. He walks into the courtroom – dead silence – the only sound you could hear were these sketch artists, and he pleads nolo, no defense, and announced that he was going to resign. The last thing the judge did was pound his gavel and dismiss the charges against the Agnew Nine.

Smith: Of course, it was a very short period of time – it is amazing today, you stop and think of the Fords being at home and getting a call, and being told basically, “Get dressed. In two hours we want you in the East Room for a nationally televised ceremony.” It happened very fast.

Nessen: Well, I think there was a little bit of an advance – I think somebody – I don’t remember the story, you probably know it better than I do – somebody was
delegated to sort of sound him out, “If you were asked to do…would you?” It was something like that. I don’t remember all the details.

Smith: And remember, he had that surreal meeting with Nixon in the EOB, where Nixon never brought up the subject, and Ford goes back to the Hill and is told that Agnew has just resigned.

Nessen: But you see, I think one of the things that makes Ford the guy he was, the president he was, the now historic figure that he is – is, you look at the people who have become president: Nixon is a perfect example of it, but many others, including Obama. You don’t get to be president unless you have this hunger for it and you do all the things that you have to do to get up that ladder and take that top rung. It distorts your personality, I think. This is more about beliefs than personality. It distorts your personality, this craving to be president.

Smith: It defines you and your life.

Nessen: Yes, right. Jerry Ford never had that. His plan, as you probably know, he’d told Betty he was going to serve one more term in the House and then he was going to retire and they were going to go to Palm Springs and he was going to play golf and they’d spend time together. I mean, he’d spent thirty years traveling, week after week after week. She raised the kids. They never spent much time together.

Smith: Do you think he felt guilt about that?

Nessen: That’s something I never heard him talk about. I don’t know whether he did or not, but I know that he must have recognized it because that was the promise that he made to her – that he was going to serve one more term in the House. So then, all of a sudden he’s vice president and president, without ever running for it. So he didn’t have that distortion of his personality that I think people get when they just lust after that office.

Smith: Let me ask you, in terms of following him as vice president, did you enter into that assignment with the assumption that Nixon was a short-timer?
Nessen: I didn’t. I thought it was an interesting, challenging assignment, but I certainly didn’t imagine that in eight or nine months, whatever it was, that he was going to be president. I just didn’t put all those pieces together.

Smith: Did you sense, at any point in that time, that Ford, although he might never say it, was internally, at least, preparing himself for it?

Nessen: Toward the end of that period, after he had become vice president, and as Watergate was unfolding more and more, I did then begin to sense that maybe he was sort of preparing himself. If you say, well, how did you know that? I can’t give you a specific example.

Smith: He never said anything overtly that – you know, Tom DeFrank’s story about…

Nessen: What was DeFrank’s story?

Smith: The DeFrank story was that there was some personnel action, as I recall – something like that – and Ford had said something critical of it, sort of let it slip, “Well, we’ll take care of that when I’m in there.”

Nessen: Oh, yeah, I think I heard DeFrank talk about that.

Smith: And you wonder whether Tom - I have to be careful here because Tom’s a good guy and a good friend - sort of made more of that than it warranted.

Nessen: I’m a huge fan of DeFrank, and I think there were five reporters who covered Ford when he was vice president, DeFrank and me and Phil Jones of CBS, Maggie Hunter of the New York Times, and I forget who the other one was. I guess Lou Cannon maybe from the Post. So I’m a huge fan of Tommy and we stay in touch. I’ve got a note on my desk, we’re supposed to have lunch now that the inauguration is over.

As you know, he had a very special relationship with Ford, lasting until up to the time of Ford’s death. He has a lot of stuff that he promised Ford that he’d never talk about until after Ford had died. So if he said that, then I have no reason to doubt him.
Smith: It’s revealing in another sense, of how comfortable Ford felt around him. It was no accident that in planning the funeral – that there was a journalist. That was there very deliberately to make the point, that there was a time in this town when you could hew to the adversarial relationship and still be friends.

Nessen: Well, you know, there’s this one other factor, and I don’t want to make more of this, and I’m sure you’ve heard it from other people, but in those days, Ford liked to have a drink or two before dinner. I never saw him drunk or anything even approaching drunk, but I do think that he maybe spoke more freely in the evenings a couple of times. You know the story, because I think it’s been publicized, about Ford goes down to make a speech at Tulane University in New Orleans.

Smith: Was this as vice president or president?

Nessen: As president.

Smith: Around the fall of Vietnam?

Nessen: Yeah. You know that story?

Smith: No, go ahead.

Nessen: He has two appearances that day. In the afternoon he speaks to the Navy League, I guess it was, and in the evening to a bunch of students in the gymnasium of Tulane. So in the afternoon, the speech was written by Kissinger, of course, and it was reaffirmation of America’s determination to help South Vietnam fight the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. Well, meanwhile, Hartmann, and a few others had written the evening speech for Tulane without showing it to Kissinger. And that’s the one that has the line in it: “For us, the war is over.” And of course, the audience went crazy. I mean, these young people, “For us the war is over.”

Well, we were riding down the elevator from the hotel. He had the afternoon event, then he had some kind of Republican reception where he had a couple [of drinks]. And I’m thinking, oh God, this is the most important speech he’s ever made, so we’re riding down on the elevator and I’m saying to him, “Now, Mr. President, just take your time. Read the speech carefully and just
keep it right there in front of you. It’s very important.” And Kennerly, who was you know, was like a son to him and could say things to him that nobody else could, Kennerly says, “Mr. President, what he’s trying to tell ‘you is, don’t fuck it up.”’ And he didn’t.

Smith: Was Kissinger upset?

Nessen: I don’t know whether he was upset or not. I mean, one of the things that marked the Ford White House, somewhat to its detriment, I think, you had a lot factions that were always pulling and tugging. You had the leftover Nixon people, including Haig.

Smith: Let me ask you about that, because that’s a great place to pause for a moment. Leon Parma told the story, and you can see the visual, on the morning of August 9th, was shuffled into the East Room at the last minute with some folks from the Hill. After the ceremony was over, there was a receiving line and everyone was invited down to, I think, the State Dining Room for a reception. He said you could watch the Nixon people peel off and go back to their offices. That may be over dramatic, but it does raise this large issue of how did you deal with the fact that most of your White House staff were Nixon people?

Nessen: There are two or three things. Number one, Ford’s overall theory was, if you didn’t have anything to do with Watergate, there is no reason why you should be booted out of the White House just because you worked for Nixon.

Smith: That’s generous.

Nessen: Yes, it was.

Smith: Politically, given the mood of the country, that’s very generous, maybe too generous.

Nessen: Absolutely. Well, I think what people like Hartmann and Rumsfeld were telling him is that that was too generous. It’s not that you are being unfair to them, you have to do some symbolic things so the public says, and “Oh, well Nixon and his people are gone. We’ve got a new guy and there’re new people there.” And some of it was that kind of larger picture issue, some of it was
just simply ambition. So you had the Nixon people, the leftover Nixon people, and what Ford said was, “Unless they did something wrong, there’s no reason to boot them out just because they were Nixon people.”

Smith: It was guilt by association.

Nessen: The Nixon White House was apparently organized in a way where they had floaters, they didn’t report to anybody. So one of the things that Rumsfeld – he was chief of staff then - did was, there were eight senior White House West Wing people, the NSC, the press secretary, the Congressional relations guy, the eight senior people. Everybody had to report to one of those eight senior people. What Rumsfeld said was, “Okay, here are the leftover Nixon staff people who report to you. If you want to keep them, keep them. If you want to get rid of them, it’s your responsibility to tell them they’re done.” So the two people I had on my staff were Father McLaughlin, John McLaughlin, and Ken Clawson, the former Washington Post guy. I didn’t want to keep either one of them on my staff, so I had to tell them. Father McLaughlin didn’t want to go, and he said he only takes his orders from the president. I said, “John, I need your resignation this afternoon, or else I’m going to announce it in my briefing tomorrow that you’re leaving.” So I had his letter. Clawson, it was very strange. His reaction was, “How am I going to pay my mortgage?” But anyhow, that’s how it worked.

Now, what you were left with was a White House that was, first of all, full of factions. You had these leftover Nixon people; you had people who had worked for Ford in his Congressional staff; you had people who had come aboard in his vice presidential year. You had new people who he had just hired, or needed to hire, and was hiring for the presidential thing. And you had some people who had never worked for him before. You had all these different factions and there were a lot of rivalries, and gone were personal rivalries. You had Kissinger and Rumsfeld, you had Bob Hartmann and practically everybody else.

Smith: How polarizing was Hartmann?

Nessen: Very, very polarizing. Very polarizing.
Smith: What was the basis of that? Was it a jealousy that only he was really protecting the president, or really understood the president, or…

Nessen: I think it was much more personal than that. I think Hartmann had been Ford’s chief of staff in Congress and he’d been like the number one guy. And all of a sudden, you had people who are at least equal, maybe more than equal. He was my neighbor out in Bethesda, and Ford was constantly traveling when he was vice president, so we’d get back to Andrews Air Force Base at two o’clock in the morning and he would say, “Come on, I’ll give you a ride home.” So that’s how we really got to be friends. But he was a difficult man.

Smith: Prickly?

Nessen: Very much so.

Smith: It leads again to this large question, this notion you talked about seeing Ford in his element, in Grand Rapids. Or that story about the [West Wing] guard, that’s what you would in some ways expect of a Congressman. How difficult was it for Ford to grow out of the Congressional mindset, into what I think most people would agree, is a very different set of job skills.

Nessen: Yeah.

Smith: There are those who think that the story of the Ford presidency is that evolution. And the tragedy was, just about the time he’d made the transformation, he lost the job.

Nessen: It was time to go. Right.

Smith: The whole spokes of the wheel, for example. Not only was it a reaction against the Haldeman/Erichman imperial presidency, but it also feels very much like a Capitol Hill office.

Nessen: Well, I remember the first time I ever heard about spokes of the wheel, but that was part of this debate about organizing the White House. And Ford’s original idea was spokes of the wheel - that the president was in the middle and all these senior staff people would report directly to him. Well, that’s
impractical, you can’t do that. And so, I think that’s when Rumsfeld began to
steer him away from the spokes of the wheel idea.

There was, at one point, and you’ve probably heard about these, the so-called
peeking privileges. This meant you could go to the door of the Oval Office,
open it a crack, peek in, and if the president was not on the phone, or if he was
just reading the paper, or looking at papers and so forth, you could go in and
get your questions answered or whatever. Spokes of the wheel. It wasn’t
going to work and it didn’t work. But the spokes of the wheel was - at one
point what was happening with the White House. I’m trying to think of
where/when this spokes of the wheel idea changed.

Smith: It was pretty early. I think when Rumsfeld really showed up. We’ve been led
to believe that, in fact, one of Rumsfeld’s conditions for taking the job
was…that spokes of the wheel would be replaced.

Nessen: Really? I can believe that. But I think Hartmann, Rumsfeld and I’m trying to
think of who else might have been involved – and Kissinger. Those were the
three great rivals.

Smith: Let me go back a little bit before Nixon resigned, For people who weren’t
around, can you recreate what the mood was in this town?

Nessen: Well, Nixon was not a very popular figure. And I don’t think he was very
good at explaining himself and so forth. He was also a Republican and you
know Republicans are not necessarily popular – and he was a difficult person.
When you think back to him, and what it takes to become the president, and
he had none of those skills and abilities - I mean, compared to Obama? But
compared to anybody.

Smith: I’ve said the remarkable thing about the Nixon presidency was not how it
ended, but that it happened at all.

Nessen: I could not agree with you more. That’s totally right. I mean, how did this guy
get to be president when he lacked those skills you would think were needed
for it?
Smith: I realize this is speculative – there was this story was kicked around that
Nixon would have preferred another vice president, but he really was given no
choice by Congress.

Nessen: Right.

Smith: That said, he is said to have regarded Ford as his insurance against
impeachment.

Nessen: Yeah. Right.

Smith: Which tells you something about his….

Nessen: Bad judgment.

Smith: Well, but also his view of Ford.

Nessen: Well, yes, I think that’s true, but I think people who knew Ford and people
who were in Congress with Ford, I think they felt pretty comfortable having
Ford move up to that position. I think they did.

Smith: When the smoking gun was released – did you see Ford at that time? You
were covering him. Was there any discernable change in his demeanor, or was
there a poker face that he was deploying?

Nessen: Look, he’d been around Washington for almost thirty years, I think he knew
what was happening. He knew how this was likely to end. He knew what this
was likely to involve, and I just think he tightened up and did not want to
react publicly to that. But I think he knew what was coming. Did I, as a
reporter, sense that he knew what was coming, that he acted as if he knew
what was coming? I don’t have that recollection.

Smith: He was in an impossible position.

Nessen: Oh yeah.

Smith: I mean, he’s basically supposed to be out there defending the president. But
he can’t defend the president to the point where he loses his own credibility.
And at the same time, no one wants to admit the reason he can’t lose his own
credibility is because he may replace the president.
Nessen: Yeah.

Smith: Plus, he can’t have a transition. He can’t even acknowledge the possibility of a transition.

Nessen: You are absolutely right. That’s a very tough position to be in. But, he was. I saw part of it from the outside, and he’d already become president, of course, by the time I joined the White House.

Smith: On the 9th of August, were you in the East Room?

Nessen: Was that when he…

Smith: When Nixon left and then a few hours later he was sworn in.

Nessen: Yes, I was. What happened was, I had been White House correspondent under Johnson and then I came back as White House correspondent during the first month of Ford. So when Nixon gave his farewell speech, they herded us out onto the South Lawn – I’ve got a picture of this somewhere – and, of course, they walked out to the helicopter. You’ve probably seen this picture. Ford looked stricken and Betty looked stricken and of course, Nixon looked stricken.

Smith: She said it was the worst day of her life.

Nessen: And, so I’m over there with the crowd and they walk to the helicopter, and the helicopter goes away. Then we go back into the White House for Ford’s little talk. So I was there that day.

Smith: What was the mood?

Nessen: Oh, God, it’s hard to – you know, everything that was happening was like in some incredible melodrama that you never thought you would see, and you could see Nixon’s staff people crying and you’d see people like Hartmann, who were probably secretly celebrating already. But I do think that there was this sense of, “Oh my gosh, this is one of the most historic moments in America, ever.” There was so much happening and so much high drama and so much emotion – it was just overflowing.
Smith: Can you imagine how cable TV would over-hype?

Nessen: Oh my Lord.

Smith: The thing you didn’t need was hype. You needed to just get out of the way and let the story play itself out.

Nessen: My great mentor at NBC was Ruben Frank, who you probably know. The great lesson Ruben taught me, and I tried to follow it, and every time I watch cable television I realize they didn’t have any Ruben Frank: “Shut up and let the pictures tell the story.”

Smith: That’s what television is all about, isn’t it?

Nessen: Yeah. Right.

Smith: Supposed to be. Go to the radio if you want to hear endless talk and chatter. Tell me about Jerry terHorst.

Nessen: Well, I didn’t know terHorst very well before he became the press secretary. Then he became the press secretary, obviously because he’d known Ford, covered Ford’s first Congressional campaign, if I’m not mistaken, in Michigan. And he was obviously close to Ford. In those days, reporters covered the president when he would go to church – either at St. John’s just across Lafayette Square, or over here where there is a big office building now – used to be the National Presbyterian, which has now moved up to Nebraska Avenue. I and the other reporters would go to church with the president and of course, when he was going to National Presbyterian you had Rev. Elson, who thought it was his role to instruct the president, and he would say, “And Mr. President, the Bible teaches us that when you visit with Khrushchev next week…” We’d be scribbling all this down, go back to the office and pretend it was a story. So anyhow, we used to go to church with the president. One month after he becomes president, Ford goes across Lafayette Square. He goes to St. John’s and comes back, and normally what happens is, the press secretary then says, “Okay, that’s a lid. See you tomorrow morning.” Meaning, no more news today, see you tomorrow morning. But one Sunday, terHorst says, “You know, if I were you, I’d stick around a little bit.” So that’s
when the pardon was announced, on that Sunday morning. Pardon of Nixon. I’m sure you’ve heard the story, Ford later said that he was spending 25% of his time and the staff was spending 25% of its time on leftover Nixon stuff and he just had to get that off his plate so he could concentrate.

Smith: Actually, there’s even more than that. He talked about the first press conference, which I think was on the 28th of August, and I think is a quality about Ford which is, again, the flip side of this genuine, kind of Boy Scout niceness, which can only be called naivety. It’s hugely admirable in everything but a president. But he went into that press conference believing that everyone would want to talk about inflation and Cyprus, or at least he convinced himself. And he came out of that angry, partly at himself for not expressing himself terribly well.

Nessen: For letting it go this long. Yeah.

Smith: And angry, in a sense, at the press corps for being obsessed with this subject.

Nessen: Well, what happened was that we went back to the White House. He announced the pardon, terHorst announced the pardon, and he also said he was leaving, that he was resigning. The assumption was that he was resigning because he didn’t agree with the pardon. You probably have talked to other people, who will tell you that the reason he really resigned was that it was just overwhelming. The job was overwhelming, there was a fifty-five person staff to manage, it was a job where you got there in time for the seven o’clock staff meeting in the morning, and if you were like me and you tried to answer all your reporters’ calls before you went home, you left there at 9:30-10:00 or later at night. He was just overwhelmed by it, and this gave him an opportunity to gracefully leave. I don’t know what the truth is. I never had the conversation, one on one with terHorst.

Smith: Is he still around?

Nessen: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Where is he?

Nessen: He’s over in Virginia. I will look in my Rolodex, if you want his number.
Smith: Wonderful. Yes, because, obviously we want to talk to him. We’d love to.

Nessen: Anyhow, I don’t know the combination of reasons that persuaded terHorst to resign, but he did. I guess Jack Hushen, he was a deputy left over from Nixon, filled in for a while. terHorst never really explained to me why he was leaving, and as I say, there is this disagreement about why he left. I do think that Bob Hartmann, who was my neighbor, maybe was an advocate for me to replace terHorst. I’d been a journalist, I’d gone to UPI in ’56, went to NBC in ’62, this was ’74, so I’d been a journalist all that time. And I think, like most journalists, you know that what you are seeing, and are allowed to see, and what you’re told, is maybe 10% of what is really going on. I just had the itch to see what was happening on the inside. The book I wrote, *It Sure Looks Different from the Inside*, was a perfect summation of why I wanted to do that, but I don’t think I had exactly the right personality for that job. I was short-tempered, sort of full of myself, I didn’t suffer fools easily, and it was a difficult time. I don’t know if you care about any of the media issues – the fact of the matter was…

Smith: Sure. I assume they all saw themselves as Woodward and Bernstein.

Nessen: No, but you see, it’s the opposite of that. Two guys who never went inside the White House gate brought down a president. You are a White House reporter, you’re in the press room, twenty feet down the hall there is the President of the United States. Every day you come to the White House, you never got a whiff of that story. Two guys outside of the White House, who never went into the White House, broke the story. You are really frustrated, and some of that, I think, was taken out on me, and on Ford. And also, terHorst, at least was perceived of as having resigned as a matter of honor, because he couldn’t agree with the pardon, and that, again, put some further pressure on me. Now, my view of the job was different from his because, who gives a damn what the press secretary thinks? You’re not a policymaker. You’re not a political figure. You’re a spokesman, literally. The president can’t come out there every day and answer questions at the briefing, so I thought my job was to answer questions as the president would answer them if he were there.

Smith: You carry whatever the press corps has in mind back to the president.
Nessen: Yes, and also, along that line, I tried to do everything that Ziegler didn’t do, and not do the things that Ziegler did. One of the things I tried to do was to get more reporters in to see Ford on a one on one basis. He liked that. I think I told you on the phone about bringing in *Newsweek* and *Times* correspondents on Saturdays, which were a little slower time…and they need a lot of color. What color was the necktie he was wearing when he signed that bill? All those little details.

Smith: Did he understand that?

Nessen: Yeah. He did. He’d been in Washington all these years, you know. So that was one of the changes I tried to bring about. The other thing that I did which was naïve, in hindsight, was, I thought, well, I’ve been a reporter, now I’m still a reporter, I’m going on the inside, though, and I’m getting even more details and I’m coming out, I’m like a pool reporter. And I’m going to report to the others. Well, that’s very naïve, I think, to think that was the job. I did say I would never lie, and never cover up, and I think I kept that promise. I think I probably delayed announcing some things every once in a while for what seemed like good reasons. But, I think the combination of – terHorst saying he was resigning because he disagreed with the pardon – I was on a program with McClellan at George Washington University a couple of months ago, and he talked about, and he talks about in his book and also in all of his interviews, all the things that he disagreed with Bush about. Who cares? Who cares? We’ve only got one president and nobody gives a damn – I don’t, in my view – what the press secretary thinks. But anyhow, that’s what I brought to the job, and some of the attitudes I brought to the job.

Smith: How did the Saturday Night Live appearance come about?

Nessen: Ford had three teenage kids living in the White House, and they all watched *Saturday Night Live*. We had this big White House…

Smith: Did they think Chevy Chase was funny?

Nessen: I don’t know about that. But I do know that every year we have the White House Correspondents Association dinner, and in ’75 – ’74 or ’75 – fall of ’74, I think, the entertainment was Chevy Chase. And it’s up here at the
Hilton Hotel on the hill, up Connecticut Avenue. I think it is the biggest ballroom in Washington, and there are literally, like 2,000 people there. The tradition is, there is an entertainer, and then the president does his speech. So they introduce Chevy Chase and he comes in, in the far door, and he comes through the tables, and he stumbling and bumping into things and knocking over things, and he gets up there and he does his whole Ford shtick. And, of course, Ford is sitting right there. Then it is the president’s turn. And Ford had this Hollywood joke writer named Don Penny on his staff, and Penny had prepared him for this. Ford gets up and he pretends to pull the placemat off. Then he gets up and he puts his speech on the podium and pretends all the pages fall off. Well, self-deprecating humor is the only kind of humor that goes over in Washington, and that’s what this was. And he won everybody over.

Smith: Do you think he resented – I know what you’re saying – but did he resent it?

Nessen: Yeah, he did. He never showed it very much.

Smith: How do you know that he did?

Nessen: I sensed that he did. He never said anything, but I just sensed that he thought that he was being parodied unjustifiably. He had a good sense of humor. He could make fun of himself.

Smith: I think it was in Vienna when Ford slipped on the steps coming down from Air Force One. And later on everyone around Ford was – I think they thought they were sort of bucking him up, or at least buttering him up, by going after the photographers for capturing him in such a pose. And he said, “Well, of course they did. They would have lost their jobs if they didn’t.” Which just tells you…I can’t imagine Lyndon Johnson saying that.

Nessen: Oh, no. You sure can’t. Well, he hit it off with Chevy Chase, and Chevy Chase comes from a wealthy family. His father was Ned Chase, the publisher, and his mother came from the Crane plumbing fortune and so forth. He loved to play tennis and Ford loved to play tennis, so Ford invited him to come to the White House and play tennis the next day. And he came.
Loren Michael, the producer, had been after me to get Ford to come on the show, and I wasn’t about to do that. Well, when I saw that Chevy Chase hit it off with Ford, and that he could take part in the fun, I started talking to them and Ford agreed to tape these two bits. He didn’t want to go on the show in person, but he would tape these two things. He said, “I’m Jerry Ford and you’re not.” And, “Live from New York, it’s Saturday Night.” And then they asked me to be the host. I’d been at NBC for twelve years as a news correspondent. The only live programming then was news and Saturday Night Live, so I knew a lot of the crew and so forth.

I think, looking back on it, and reading some of the books that have been written by the cast and by others, that it wasn’t in all good, clean fun. They felt, I think, an opportunity to really take a crack at Ford. I think he felt a little bit used, because look, he is used to Washington, where self-deprecating is the only kind of humor. You don’t make fun of your opponents, or you don’t make fun of people you don’t like, so I don’t think it was a happy experience for him. He didn’t get outraged by it, but…

Smith: Did he talk to you about it?

Nessen: Not really. And it shows he had a good sense of humor, or that he could make fun of himself. I only remember one time when he complained. He was skiing at Vail, and all the TV news shows used film of him falling while skiing. And Ford said to me, “Those reporters, the one exercise they get is sitting on a bar stool.”

Smith: Take us back to April of ’75 and the events surrounding the fall of Saigon.

Nessen: Well, I have to tell you this to start with. I did five tours in Vietnam as a NBC correspondent. I got wounded there. I thought I was going to die. I had a huge emotional attachment to it. I saw reporters I knew who were killed. I saw friends killed, I saw things that you should…I’m walking down a road one day and there is a pile of charcoal on the roadside and I ask some soldier, “What’s that?” And that was two little babies who had burned to death in a house. I had an enormous emotional involvement in Vietnam. So here I am in
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the White House, and I’m going to have to be the one who announces the end of the war. You could see it coming for a while, clearly.

Ford was on his way to Palm Springs when he gets handed this note from the radio operator on the plane, that DaNang had fallen, and that the North Vietnamese were kind of sweeping southward toward Saigon. Well, here again, Ford’s got all these parties and stuff he’s supposed to go to in Palm Springs. This was the famous picture of Ford – he has to go up to Bakersfield to make a speech, and of course, all the reporters wanted to ask him about the impending fall of Saigon. He gets off the plane, and you know this, and he starts running.

Smith: With Helen Thomas in hot pursuit.

Nessen: Everybody trailing him. The next day at my briefing, of course, I’m asked about this and some reporter says, “He ran almost as fast as the South Vietnamese army did, didn’t he, Ron?” That was a terrible time. The actual end came, and I’ve been doing a little research on this myself because I want to do a little bit of writing about that period. They are in some kind of relatively routine economic meeting, and Scowcroft gives him a note saying that the North Vietnamese had reached the airport in Saigon, or are closing in on the airport in Saigon. So Ford gives the order to load up all the C130s and take the rest of the Americans out. And by then Tan Son Nhat airport has fallen, so they have to do it by helicopter.

It was supposed to take two hours, because I think by that point there were five hundred Americans left in Saigon. Two hundred or five hundred. Well, somebody made the decision that they had to take out two thousand Vietnamese who had worked for the Americans or in some way were associated with the Americans, because they were going to be killed. So this helicopter lift lasts for sixteen hours, and we all sort of stood around the Oval Office. What do you say? What do you do? It was late at night, about eleven o’clock, and Ford said he was going to go up and wait for further word in the residence. And so it was Rumsfeld who was the chief of staff, Cheney who was his deputy, and me and David Kennerly, the White House photographer. Somebody said, “Sleep well, Mr. President.” And he walked out and I said,
sort of under my breath, “If you can.” We didn’t know what to do. I slept in my office that night I don’t know about the others.

The next day the helicopters were taking the refugees out to these aircraft carriers in the Gulf there, the South China Sea, and the helicopters were beginning to suffer all kinds of mechanical breakdowns because they’d been flying for sixteen hours. So Ford says, “Okay, tell Graham Martin (the U.S. ambassador) to get on the next helicopter and get all the Americans out of there and it’s over.” So Kissinger sends Graham Martin that message, and Graham Martin sends a message and you can imagine the pressure he was under. He says, “I don’t take my orders from you, I only take my orders from the president.” So Ford had to sign something, so Martin gets on the next helicopter with the rest of the staff and as many of the Vietnamese as they can get out, and that’s the picture that you’ve seen.

We had a prepared statement and I read the prepared statement, and then Kissinger and I went over to the Old Executive Office Building for a briefing. This was like 4:30-5:00 in the afternoon, and there were amazingly few reporters there, because everybody was back in their offices watching it on television and writing their stories for the morning papers and the evening newscasts. So there were very few reporters there. The briefing was sort of desultory. So we come off the stage and Brent Scowcroft is standing there. The first thing I said at the briefing was, “All the Americans are out of Saigon. The evacuation is complete.”

Scowcroft was waiting off stage. He said, “I have bad news for you. There are still 135 Marines in the embassy compound.” They weren’t forgotten. They were kind of a rear guard to protect, and to keep all these Vietnamese from climbing over the fence. The helicopters were going to come back, the Marines would be gone in two hours. But I had said all the Americans are out of Saigon, the evacuation is complete, and now 135 Marines are still there. So, we had this little meeting with Rumsfeld and Cheney and me and Scowcroft, I guess, and maybe his deputy. What should we do? I tell you, I’m not proud of it, but my suggestion was to – they are going to be gone in two hours – we were premature, but let’s let it go. And Rumsfeld, of all people,
given his reputation today, said something like, “This war has been marked by so many lies, let’s not let it end on one last lie.” And, of course, I realized instantly that he was right. So we called the reporters back into the briefing room and said, “Oops, there are still 135 Marines. They are going to be out in two hours, but I didn’t want to mislead you,” and so forth. And they sort of shrugged and so forth.

I’ll tell you one footnote to this in a minute, one postscript to this. There was a lot of black humor that night. What do you do? Kennerly and I had both been in Vietnam as journalists. This was a lost war by America, there was a tremendous amount of emotion there. What do you do, what do you say? And a lot of it was black humor. Kennerly said something like, “I have good news, and I have bad news. The good news is that the war is over. The bad news is we lost.” Kissinger, even Kissinger, he said two things. One thing I’ll tell you in a second, the humorous thing was he said, “I have lost two wars in two weeks, give me another week and I’ll lose another war,” because Cambodia had been evacuated, now Saigon. Everybody was so emotional, so there was that black humor. Kissinger, when he found out that the Marines were still in the compound, he blew up, and I had never seen him blow up. He was always self-contained, and he said, “God damn it, those sons of bitches, can’t they get anything right!” He was really angry.

Smith: And who was he referring to?

Nessen: Whoever was in charge of the evacuation or sending back information about the evacuation. The other thing he said, which I’m sure can be misconstrued, but what he said was essentially something like, “I hope that these last throes of the war are not dragged out,” because it would just make it worse and worse. He hoped that they would surrender quickly, or something like that. It was an incredibly emotional day, and the sequel to that was, that we did get a lot of Vietnamese refugees out. They were in two refugee camps: one in Arkansas and one in Florida. There was a bill to appropriate, I don’t know, $435,000,000 – millions were a lot of money in those days, it wasn’t a rounding era in those days. The House of Representatives defeated the money for refugees.
I took the AP wire copy into the Oval Office and gave it to Ford. I’d never heard him curse all the time I’d known him – three or four years by then. He said, “Those sons of bitches.” And what he did was, he went out and he campaigned for that money for Vietnamese refugees, and it was, to me, one of the greatest examples of moral leadership of his administration. And he got the money for the refugees. We went to the refugee camps in Arkansas and Florida to visit.

Smith: Some of the most touching tributes when he died, I remember reading stories, I think there were columns, Oped pieces in both the Times and the Post from Vietnamese refugees who looked upon him as their president. In some ways, their savior.

Nessen: He saved them. He really saved them. The interesting little sidebar is: everyday at my briefing, I was getting pounded, “Ron, what authority does the president have to take Vietnamese out. Isn’t his authority to just use those helicopters for Americans? Congress hasn’t given…” Pounding, pounding, pounding. I’d go back to my office, the phone would be ringing. It would be network executives begging me to help them get their Vietnamese camera crews and so forth, out. Hypocrisy is the number one product of Washington, as you probably know.

Smith: One of the things that I’ll never forget was, later on, we got the staircase from that embassy [for the Ford Museum]. And there was a big debate among the trustees. There is a great story…

Nessen: That fire escape where…

Smith: We got the staircase from the roof of the embassy.

Nessen: Oh my God.

Smith: Very quickly, I’ll tell you how we got it, because it’s a great story. At the time of the rededication in ’97, the Clinton administration sent Madeline Albright out as their representative. She took part in a program with several secretaries of state. Well, what was going on, they wanted the chemical weapons treaty passed, and I will never forget, in the kitchen of the Ford Museum, Gerald
Ford and George H.W. Bush are on the phones, calling Republican Senators to lobby on the chemical weapons treaty, which they got. And what we got in return was, we got the staircase from the embassy in Saigon. Madame Secretary guaranteed it. We brought it back, and there are all these people, beginning with Kissinger, who said, “Why in the world would you want to remind people of that?” But Ford, to his eternal credit, said two things: one, it’s a part of history, we can’t forget it; and two, with an imagination that I don’t think people often credited him with, he looked at that staircase and he saw it every bit as much of a symbol of a desire to be free as the big piece of the Berlin Wall out on the front lawn.

So, we got it, and he came back from California. There is a large Vietnamese-American community in West Michigan – we invited them in to dedicate that staircase.

Nessen: Oh my God.

Smith: And, talk about bittersweet…

Nessen: Wow. Well, everybody has got so many stories about that day. There was this Time Magazine photographer, Dick Swanson, and he was married to a Vietnamese woman, they got married inside Saigon, actually, and she opened this very, very well known Vietnamese restaurant in Georgetown, and they got married there. They left Vietnam before the end of the war. But she had a lot of relatives there, and when the end was getting near, he went back to Saigon, this photographer, on the last commercial flight into Tan Son Nhuit he hijacked a truck. He went around and he collected seventeen of her relatives, there was one uncle he couldn’t find – seventeen relatives, and took them out to Tan Son Nhuit got them on an evacuation plane and got them out of there.

Smith: And remember, then there was Operation Baby Lift.

Nessen: Oh my God. I went with Ford. I will never, ever forget that. They came to San Francisco – well, first of all, the first one crashed. This was like a horror show on top of a horror show. You had the evacuation of Saigon, and I knew people – my friends were not going to get out and so forth – and then this evacuation
plane load of hundreds of babies crashes. So then they have another baby lift plane coming. This was a C141, I think, and you know how big they are, landing in San Francisco, and Ford goes out to welcome the plane back. It lands and we climb aboard. Well, I will never forget that. There were hundreds of babies on this plane. They’d been flying across the ocean for like seventeen hours. There were hundreds of dirty diapers on that plane. It was like a nerve gas attack. But I thought that was an important thing for him to go and welcome that plane back. Now, the Vietnamese being what they are, this was supposed to be the Orphan Lift, which I think was the original name of it. Well, as you know, the South Vietnamese officials paid bribes and got their own children on this plane.

Smith: The assassination attempts. Two - improbable.

Nessen: In a couple of weeks.

Smith: In less than a month. Both in California. You were quoted after the second one as saying, “We’re never going back to California.”

Nessen: Well, let’s see, you’re going to have to help me remember here. Now the first one…

Smith: The first one was in Sacramento, with Squeaky Fromme.

Nessen: In Sacramento. That’s right. Okay. So he goes out to see Jerry Brown, who is the governor. And he’s staying at a hotel right on that park that’s in front of the capitol building. So it’s a nice day, so he decides to walk from his hotel across the park, up this little path, and then into see Jerry Brown. Right? So, he’s on the path. The Secret Services agents are on the path, and then there are spectators lining both sides of the path, and I’m walking sort of parallel to him, but behind the spectators. And all of a sudden, this woman raises her hand and there is a gun in her hand.

Smith: Did you see that?

Nessen: Yeah. And the Secret Service agent grabs the gun like this, so the firing pin is there, so the firing pin can’t go down. Meanwhile, the other Secret Service agents grab Ford and they rush him inside the state building, the state capitol.
So, Rumsfeld and I are in this room, and he goes into this meeting with Jerry Brown, and my understanding is, he never said anything to Jerry Brown. He’d just escaped an assassination attempt and he’s sitting there making small talk with the governor. Anyhow, meanwhile, the press is gone…

Smith: His line afterwards was, because I remember asking him, he said, “Well, I didn’t think it would be very nice to go in and say some lady just tried to shoot me while I was coming in to see you.”

Nessen: Anyhow, Rumsfeld and I went into a holding room or something, and we had to try and get as much information as we could, as quickly as we could, because the press was going bonkers. Most of them hadn’t seen it. So, then we had this briefing, and one of the interesting things to me was, Rumsfeld wanted to do the briefing – and he did the briefing. But anyhow, that was that. So that was Sacramento.

The second was in San Francisco.

Smith: Outside the St. Francis…

Nessen: Behind the St. Francis Hotel. Ford comes out of the back door of the hotel and I think we were going to the airport. [He] comes out and the motorcade is lined up there. His limo is right here, and there are people on the other side of the street waving and so forth. He comes out and he waves like this, and this is when the other woman actually got a shot off, and the Secret Service grabs Ford, throws him into the backseat, covers him up with their own bodies, and I’m sort of putting all this together in my mind. I’m walking next to Dr. Lukash, and boy, they got him in the backseat and that motorcade is starting to pull away and I thought, “Oh my God, if we don’t get in the car, we’re going to be left here.” So Lukash and I run and jump into the first car we come to, which is the press pool, and we race out to the airport. We race out to the airport. Meanwhile, Mrs. Ford has her own schedule and she’s down the Peninsula somewhere and we have to wait for her to get back to Air Force One. Of course, they pulled the limo right up to the plane. You step out the door and stairs are right there. They don’t want him to walk across any open space.
So we get on the plane, we’re waiting for her. She finally comes, and I’m up in the president’s compartment when she arrives. She sits down, and on other side of this table from the president, and she says, “Hello, dear. How are you? How did everything go?” I’m looking at Rumsfeld, and he’s looking at me and we’re both looking at Ford. Nobody has told her. Somebody, and I guess it was Rumsfeld, said, “You mean you don’t know?” And she says, “Know what?” I think it was Rumsfeld who said, “Somebody took a shot at your husband.” Well, I was looking right at her face. There wasn’t any horror – she’d been in public life all this time – a lot of things had happened, and she just accepted it.

But I have to tell you, in the back of the plane with the staff and the press, there was an awful lot of drinking on that flight home. The follow up to that is, the guy who hit her arm, as you know was a gay guy…

Smith: Yeah, Oliver Sipe, I think was his name.

Nessen: Oliver Sipple.

Smith: Okay. A veteran?

Nessen: Yeah, a veteran, and, as you know, there was a controversy and why they did this, I don’t have any idea. I guess times were different then maybe. But they did not invite him to the White House. I think it was wrong. I thought it wrong then, but times were different then.

But I’ll tell you one other thing, the next week *Time Magazine*, of course gave extensive coverage to this, and they had a replica showing the path of the bullet, and, as you know, the bullet hit the façade of the hotel, ricocheted down, hit the curb, and then sort of shattered into pieces. Well, looking at the chart in “Time” I figured out where Lukash and I were, and that bullet went just like that in front of us.

Smith: It is interesting that in later years, I think he is the only president to this day, who has actually put his name on a petition for gay rights.

Nessen: Yeah.
Smith: And you wonder whether he changed, whether it was just the political constraints of the time, and – it was a different culture.

Nessen: I just think that, again, you have to look at the influence that Betty had over him, and the fact that he had four kids, three of them young and living in the White House at the time, so he was exposed to popular culture, and so forth.

Smith: Did you know she had a problem? And what was the problem?

Nessen: Yeah. Well, I think everyone, including the Fords, was in denial. And you see, at the end of the day, a travel day or whatever, she obviously had a problem. And I don’t know whether anybody really knew precisely what the problem was, but you could not escape it - that she had a problem.

Smith: Did she enjoy life in the White House?

Nessen: In many ways, it was a better life because she got to see Ford more. When he was a Republican leader, was in the House, he was literally, always traveling. So now, when he came home, he just went upstairs and there he was, and I think she saw a lot more of him. And you’ve got people to help you, and so forth. I was not that intimate with the inner workings of the family, but my sense is that she did enjoy that period.

Smith: Were you on the job when she had her breast cancer surgery?

Nessen: Yes, I was.

Smith: That must have been a shock.

Nessen: Lukash called me on a Friday night, I think it was, and said, “Mrs. Ford is going to go into Bethesda Naval in the morning for a biopsy,” or whatever you call it. So I notified the press and we had a pool to go with us and arranged a press room out there and so forth. So she goes in and they discover that she has a malignant tumor and they are going to do a mastectomy. Now she sent word that she wanted this to be announced while she was still on the operating table. And that’s what we did. Now, that’s candor. That’s really candor, and it was her own decision. So we went out there into the briefing room they had set up and I said, “Mrs. Ford is undergoing a mastectomy now.
They discovered a malignancy.” That kind of candor, I think, is extraordinary, but that was her own decision. She sent word herself.

Smith: It’s hard, from this vantage point, all these years later, to realize what a forbidden subject that was.

Nessen: No kidding. And let me tell you how many people, how many women saw that and said, “I think I’d better go for a checkup.” Happy Rockefeller did and discovered she had a malignant tumor, as you know. My mother went and had an examination, and found she had breast cancer, and she had a mastectomy. She is still living at 97, I might add. But you can’t imagine how many women took that as a signal that maybe they’d better go and get a check up, too. And many women found they had breast cancer. That was really the birth of the awareness of breast cancer, and willingness to talk about it in public.

Smith: That leads into this larger question about her candor. There was the controversy surrounding the Sixty Minutes interview. The sense I have is that the immediate reaction goes back to what we were talking about earlier, the one fighting the last war. The instant reaction from the white males was, “Oh my God!” And then it took a while, but within days came in polling data that suggested that, in fact, a lot of people found her candor very refreshing.

Nessen: You bet.

Smith: It probably was a real problem, particularly on the Right, when you were already facing a challenge. But by 1976 there are all these buttons, “Betty’s Husband for President.”

Nessen: I’ve got one of those at home, incidentally. See, I think this is more an example of the common wisdom is always wrong, than anything else. There was sort of a unified media conclusion and you say, “Well, how do you know that?” And the response is, “Well, everybody knows that.” It’s the common wisdom.

Smith: It’s always been that way.
Nessen: Well, having been a journalist for a long time - and then on the other side, the common wisdom is almost always wrong. This was a case where the common wisdom was wrong, I think. I really believe that.

Smith: It’s amazing, when you look at that interview, even now. She said things in 1975 that I can’t imagine Hillary Clinton saying.

Nessen: Remember, that was 1975. That’s thirty-three years ago, preceded by Patricia Nixon, Pat Nixon. She never talked about anything. She only stood there and smiled, right? Then you had Lady Bird. Now, Lady Bird had as her issue planting beautiful flowers all over Washington. At that time that was an acceptable First Lady’s job, and so forth. You never had a First Lady – it was not traditional for the First Lady to get into policy issues or serious issues.

Smith: So you could understand why that conventional wisdom existed.

Nessen: Yes, but looking back at it from hindsight, you thought, “Oh my God.” In a way that’s a kind of discrimination all by itself – where you think of the First Lady doing anything except planting flowers or having teas, as being, “Oh my God, what’s happening here?” That’s a kind of bigotry, I think. Look, she was who she was. I think of both Ford and Mrs. Ford and the great things they brought to the White House. Again, this just comes back to my saying, he didn’t undergo all those character changes that happens when you lust after the presidency for twenty years. They were just normal people living over in Alexandria. They were going to retire to Palm Springs in two years. She was the same way as he was. They were just ordinary people.

Smith: And isn’t it interesting, it almost took his death for people to see just what an incredible love match that was.

Nessen: Yeah. Well, I’ve seen a lot of first couples, and so forth, and I believe that was a really genuine, deep, abiding love affair. And he used to like to flirt.

Smith: Vicki Carr? Remember the Vicki Carr story?

Nessen: Vicki Carr. Yeah. And I’ve got a picture of that night, actually. That White House thing where she was the singer, and of course, you know the Mrs. Ford quote, which was, “That woman is never coming into my house again.” Well,
I mean, sure, he liked to flirt, but, boy, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing beyond flirting. I went to the Ford funeral at the National Cathedral, and when she came up the aisle, she looked devastated. When I looked at her, I thought, “I can’t imagine how she’s going to get through this day.” You could just see it on her face and in her body, and so forth. She was devastated, because they had been together for so long.

Smith: At the very end, when she had that last long walk down to the gravesite, and she got out of the wheelchair and managed it…someone said to her the next week, “I don’t know how you did that.” And she said, “That’s what my husband would have wanted.”

Nessen: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Were Ford people naïve in not preparing earlier for the Reagan challenge? Because one senses that either they didn’t really take it seriously, or thought maybe it wouldn’t happen, or he could be bought off. Really, it was pretty late into ’75 before people got serious.

Nessen: Yeah. I don’t know a lot of the personal details, but I think it surprised everybody that a Republican would challenge a sitting Republican president of his own party. And I think there was, perhaps, a little bit of underestimation of Reagan. I think you know what happened was that they went through that primary season, and here’s the mistake, just from a personal point of view, that I think was made. Ford won the primary in New Hampshire, he won it in Illinois, and Florida. So he got a New England state, a Midwestern state and a Southern state. Now, I’m not a politician or a strategist, but, at that point he should have said, “Okay, I have proven that I can win outside of the Congressional district of Michigan. We’re facing a lot of problems in this country right now. You’re going to elect me based on whether I’m a good president, not whether I’m a good candidate. So I’m going to go back to the White House and do my job.” That’s my own personal feeling. But, you know, he had a little bit of the old fire horse in him.

Smith: There’s a wonderful story, a semi-famous Stu Spencer story, which we, thank God, got on camera. He’d [Ford] go out there and the numbers would go
down – a lot of people have blamed the speechwriting operation, that really was never very good – and Ford wasn’t a charismatic campaigner. Anyway, they are in the Oval Office, just him and Cheney and the president. Stu is trying to come up with a euphemism, and the president doesn’t understand what he is saying, because he wants to get out there and campaign. And Stu finally says, “Mr. President, you’re a great president, but you are a fucking lousy campaigner.”

Nessen: That sounds like Stu.

Smith: And Ford just sat there and took it. Now, the sequel is what makes the story, because the story appeared in Jules Whitcover’s book, and Stu went ballistic. He called Cheney and really let him have it. Just chewed him out. And Cheney let it run down, and then he says, “Stu, there was a third person in that room.” It had never occurred to Stu that Ford would tell the story on himself. But it does tell you volumes about the guy.

Nessen: So Ford won the first three primaries, and I, and I think others, felt he should have then gone back to the White House and said, “I’m going to run as president, not as a candidate.” But Reagan challenged him week after week after week, and Reagan won some and Ford won some. The convention was in Kansas City that year, the Republican Convention. And Reagan and Ford got there and neither one of them had enough delegates to win the nomination. Ford was staying at the old Muehlebach Hotel, which hadn’t been remodeled then, and Reagan was at the big, modern, I forget which one that is, like a Westin, or something like that. Anyhow, they were meeting with all the delegates, trying to – and Haley Barber, I guess – wasn’t he from Mississippi?

Smith: Clarke Reed.

Nessen: Clarke Reed, was it?

Smith: Clarke Reed was the Mississippi guy, who was famously bought and rebought and doesn’t stay bought, or whatever.
Nessen: I guess it was him, then, that brought the Mississippi delegation over to Ford. That put Ford over the top. So they had a deal, and Ford’s guy was Cheney and Reagan’s guy was – the guy who used to have the PR firm over here on 17th or 19th street – the guy had been with him for ages. Anyhow…

Smith: Lyn Nofziger?

Nessen: No, not Lyn. But Lyn was there. I’ll tell you a Lyn Nofziger story. The deal that they had made ahead of time was that the winner would go to the loser’s hotel as a show of unity. So we go to the hotel and we ride up on the elevator, and they have like the whole floor for the Reagan staff. We walk down this corridor toward the big conference room, and I’m looking in all the doors of these hotel rooms and they’re open, and people are in there crying, crying, crying. Reagan staff people crying.

So anyhow, we get to the conference room and Ford and Reagan sit on this sofa, I guess it’s like a big living room for the suite or for the floor. They sit way down at the far end and talk and you can’t really hear what they are saying. And so, I’m standing there and Nofziger is standing there, sort of shifting from one foot to the other. It’s very, very uncomfortable. And finally, Nofziger says, “You want a drink?” And before I could realize what I was saying, I said, “Lyn, that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said.” I thought, oh wait a minute, I didn’t mean that.

But anyhow, I’ve always felt two things: one, that Reagan really cost Ford the election by dragging out this primary season for so long. And the second thing he did was, he didn’t campaign for Ford, really, in that year. He just went back to California and that was it.

Smith: It is still being debated by some people in terms of the ground rules for that meeting, because my understanding is that the Reagan people made it abundantly clear, early on, don’t ask him to be on the ticket. And after the fact, there were members of the Reagan Kitchen Cabinet…

Nessen: Who said, “How come he didn’t ask him to be on the ticket?” Yeah, I’ve heard that same story. To my knowledge, Ford didn’t ask Reagan to be on the ticket. There was a promise, and he kept the promise. Ford didn’t ask him to
be on the ticket. And then the Reagan people complained about how come they didn’t…and if he’d been on the ticket, you would have won.

Smith: Rockefeller went to his grave convinced that Don Rumsfeld did him in.

Nessen: I’m not sure who did him in. Somebody did him in. But, again, there were all these feuds, these internal, endless fights among Ford’s staff people - whether you were with Ford when he was in Congress, or you just joined when he was vice president, or you’d never been with Ford before, and so forth and so on.

I’ve heard all kinds of stories about that, and I guess the story that sounds rightest to me is, somebody, and maybe you know who it was, came to Ford and said, “You can’t win the Southern states if you have Rockefeller on the ticket.”

Smith: Now is that a reference to the convention? In other words, you won’t be nominated if Rockefeller is on…

Nessen: Right, I think that’s right. And Ford wanted to win, and so he – Rockefeller was very gracious about it.

Smith: Probably he wasn’t, privately.

Nessen: I can imagine. And who did he blame? Did he blame Rumsfeld?

Smith: He blamed Rumsfeld. He went to his grave blaming Rumsfeld.

Nessen: You know, Rumsfeld was so competitive with so many people, and I’m sure you know this, that at least one theory is that the reason he opposed Rockefeller is because he wanted to be the vice presidential candidate himself.

Smith: Right. And he had a reputation of being an extraordinarily skilled in-fighter, who never left fingerprints.

Nessen: Absolutely.

Smith: Didn’t sign things.
Nessen: Correct. That’s the Rumsfeld that I saw. Look, I’m a fan of Rumsfeld because I think, given what he inherited, the mess he inherited there, he got the Ford White House up and running. He sorted out the whole thing about leftover Nixon people, and so forth. I am a fan of Rumsfeld. But, on the other hand, I think during that period, at least, he was looking out in part for Don Rumsfeld.

Smith: I also think Rockefeller, though, was naïve. I don’t think Rockefeller was completely honest with himself about why he took the job. Someone who knew him very well and spent fifteen minutes on the phone trying to talk him out of it, finally exhausted all the intellectual arguments, and Rockefeller said, “But you don’t understand. This is my last chance.”

Nessen: Well, you don’t go into politics unless you’ve got a healthy ego, do you?

Smith: Did you sense, there was Greenspan, Simon, the whole New York City bailout – that was also a flashpoint where at least an effort was made to portray the vice president as being off the reservation. I talked to Bill Seidman who said that at the speech at the Press Club, there was a tug of war, and that one draft would go to the president, and basically it was Greenspan and Simon who were trying to, in effect, beat up on New York. And then Seidman would rewrite it and…

Nessen: I’m a huge fan of Seidman, and I think he was one of the most clear headed people – he was the least competitive of people. He was the part of the Ford staff that had come with him from Grand Rapids.

Smith: Do you think he suffered from the “Grand Rapids” connotation?

Nessen: I don’t know, I think in many ways the best people were – Phil Buchen, terrific guy, I think, and Seidman, who I’m a huge fan of. You can make the argument that the best people were the Grand Rapids people.

Smith: The debate and the Polish gaffe. How bad was that? Did you know instantly that you had a problem?

Nessen: Here’s what happened. Ford was anticipating a question about the Sonnenfeldt Doctrine. Hal Sonnenfeldt is here at Brookings now. We have
lunch often and talk about this. The Sonnenfeldt Doctrine was: we ought to let up some of the pressure on the Soviet Union along the Iron Curtain. And if we kind of eased up on the pressure, the Soviets would be more accommodating, and less stringent on how they ruled the satellite countries. So that was the Sonnenfeldt Doctrine.

Smith: And Helsinki was part of all this, in effect?

Nessen: Well, Helsinki was – what was the timing of Helsinki?

Smith: Helsinki was the fall of ’75.

Nessen: Okay, so that was before the debates.

Smith: Yes.

Nessen: Here’s how the Helsinki Accords came in – that the Helsinki Accords talked about easing up on the Iron Curtain countries. But what happened with the debate was that Ford was primed to say, “We don’t recognize the Soviet Union’s right to dominate these countries. We don’t recognize the Iron Curtain as being legitimate,” or whatever. That was what he was supposed to say. The New York Times guy asked the question in a slightly different form than Ford had anticipated, so Ford got kind of thrown off. You know how the practices and rehearsals for these go – you get all kinds of questions thrown at you and then you sort of shape your answers. So the question was asked in a slightly different form, and the way it turned out, instead of saying, “We don’t recognize Soviet domination of Eastern Europe,” he said, “the Soviet Union does not dominate Eastern Europe.” Okay, ok, this was in San Francisco at the Cow Palace – no, not at the Cow Palace, I forget where the hell the thing was.

But any case, after the debate we would always have a press briefing, as they do now. They’re called spin rooms now, but we called it a briefing, in which you’d say, “Oh my God, Ford just wiped up the floor with him!” So, of course the staff had a little huddle in the lobby of the hotel – it was in the Holiday Inn before we went into this briefing. And I think it was Scowcroft who said, “Look, before we start talking about how to spin this thing, let’s make sure we
understand, the president made a mistake, and we ought to acknowledge that. Tell them “it was a slip of the tongue, of course, he knows…” Well, we didn’t do that. And so, overnight, this was a huge thing.

Smith: Could you have done that without getting his permission?

Nessen: No, but here’s what happened. The next day, Cheney and I, when he was on the road, would have the equivalent of a staff meeting with him in the morning. So Cheney and I go into see him the morning after the debate and I don’t know if it was me or Cheney, who said to Ford, “You know, you made a little mistake last night, you said the Soviet Union doesn’t dominate Eastern Europe, and what we’re going to do is, we’re going to put out a statement saying, ‘He didn’t exactly word that correctly. Obviously, he knows that the Soviet Union…’ ” And Ford, as I know you must know from talking to other people, he could have a little bit of a stubborn streak. And I can hear this in my head to this day, he says, “I’m not inclined to do that.” If the president doesn’t want you to do that, you can’t do that.

Well the story went on for a week, it totally dominated the news. No matter what we did or said, that was the story. And so finally, after a week, I was authorized to go out there and say, “Of course, the president knows that the Soviet Union dominates Eastern Europe. It was a slip of the tongue.” But by then the damage had been done, and the damage was: Ford didn’t know what was going on. It reinforced – this is why gaffes and so forth can be dangerous in Washington, if they reinforce a stereotype. And the stereotype of Ford was, he wasn’t too bright. So this reinforced that idea.

Smith: Tell me about his intelligence.

Nessen: Well, look, there are all kinds of intelligence, right? And I just don’t see how you can serve for thirty years in Washington, have the responsible positions he had, and by history’s judgment, thirty years later, turn out to be a pretty damn good president in difficult times. What kind of intelligence does it take? Who was, arguably, the smartest president we ever had? Jimmy Carter. Was he a good president? He was certainly the best educated. Smartest, highest IQ president we had, but was he the best?
At the other end of the scale, I don’t know. Who do you want to pick? Ronald Reagan? Pretty damn good president. He had the kind of intelligence that you need to be president, and I think – I have no idea what Ford’s IQ was, I know he went to the University of Michigan, he went to the Yale law school. You can’t exactly be a dummy and go to the Yale law school.

He was chosen as a leader by his colleagues in Congress. I remember one of the early decisions that Ford made was, if he was having a news conference or something like that, the White House tradition had been, he sits at his desk, and the senior staff sits around him, and you fire questions at him that he’s likely to get asked, and see how well he can answer them. That’s the rehearsal. He didn’t want that. He wanted a written list of probable questions and he wanted a briefing book – not with the answers, but with all the background information, so he could absorb it and craft his answers. So, intelligence, he had the kind of intelligence that it takes to be a good president.

Smith: And, the last president to brief the budget.

Nessen: Exactly. And this was part of the strategy. Because all these stories: Ford’s too dumb, Ford’s too dumb, Ford’s too dumb…and so the decision was; who knows the budget better than he? Been on the appropriations committee all those years. Dealt with the budget every single year. And he went out there and he was masterful. It was over in the State Department auditorium, if I remember correctly. I had actually forgotten that until you just reminded me. But that was part of the effort to show that he certainly was smart.

Smith: After the election, did it take him a while to bounce back?

Nessen: Ford had never lost an election in his life. He won, what, fifteen terms in the House? He became vice president of the United States without ever running for it, president of the United States without ever running. Never wanted to be, never anticipated being, but he never lost an election. When he and Betty came out to the press room, I guess it was eleven o’clock at night or whatever, to concede the election to Carter, his face was unbelievable. I mean, it was stricken. And I’d forgotten this until I did some research for my own book, he
couldn’t read the concession speech himself. He asked Betty to read it for him. He was just stricken. It was the first time that he had ever lost an election. He’d thought he’d done a good job and he had been rejected in favor of this one term peanut farmer from Georgia. He was stricken, but I think he bounced back and found useful things to do in his life. He wrote a pretty good book.

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

Nessen: I’m trying to think whether it was – he used to come to Washington once a year in the spring for a staff reunion, and I guess he had meetings of the Gerald Ford Foundation, or whatever. So I can’t remember if it was at one of the Ford dinners, or whether I was out in California and I drove down to Palm Springs to visit with them. I guess the last time I saw him in person, I think, was at one of the staff reunion dinners. For the last two or three years of his life, he couldn’t really travel, and he and Betty would appear on closed circuit television. But, he got old and…

Smith: But he had the satisfaction of knowing that…

Nessen: You know, this is the great thing, and when, you think about the Kissinger theory – that it takes 30 years of subsequent history before you can accurately assess presidents and events, there are not many presidents who live to get to that point where history reappraises them. And I think the magic moment must have come when the Kennedy family gave Ford the award, the public service award.

Smith: Yeah, it was.

Nessen: And I just think it’s wonderful that he did live to see it.

Smith: And then a month before he dies, Rumsfeld tells him about the aircraft carrier that’s going to be named – a new class, too. So it rounds it out almost…you could write it.

Nessen: So many presidents have left office broken hearted, and didn’t live to see their reputations restored.
Smith: Think about LBJ.

Nessen: I know. I covered the Johnson administration and, I’m sure you’ve heard the Johnson tapes, and the thing that comes through in those tapes was, to me – when Lady Bird asked Beschloss to listen to those tapes and tell her – because Johnson had said you can’t release these tapes for fifty years, and historians were beginning to criticize him and write books about how bad he was and so forth. So she wanted to release the tapes early and she asked Beschloss’ advice. He knew I had covered the White House and we had been friends. He said, “Would you listen to these and just let me know if anything is there?”

So I took them home with me one night. And I thought, well, I’ll listen to five minutes and another five minutes and…three hours later, Richard, I’m sitting here, riveted. The thing that comes through is, this big, tough, rough, Texan was full of self-doubts and I think the most amazing tape is the one where he calls Lady Bird up in the mansion, and he says, “Oh, Bird, I’m having this event out here on the South Lawn. Can you just come and stand next to me?” And she says, “Oh, Lyndon, I’ve got a dentist appointment. I just can’t do it.” And he begs her, he begs her. He needed her support. He was a very, very complex man.
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