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

Donaldson: No, I’m delighted.

Smith: First thing I’d love to ask you is, for people who were not around, take us back and give us a sense of what the mood was like in this town after the ’72 election, as Watergate began to be more than a blip on the horizon.

Donaldson: I think when the burglary occurred people were perplexed. What were these Cubans doing there in the office of the DNC chairman, etc., etc. As the story developed, more and more people began to suspect that the president of the United States might somehow be involved. A terrible thing. We watched the Erwin hearing. We had previously not seen John Sirica, the maximum penalty judge, extract from one of the defendants in that initial trial, that there were higher ups involved. And then we watched the impeachment investigation of the House Judiciary Committee. And by the time it came to the crux in the summer of 1974, the country was just convinced that Richard Nixon was a terrible man. His famous phrase of, “The country needs to know whether their president’s a crook. I am not a crook.” We all thought, yes you are, you are a crook.

And then when he resigned, of course, it was just a breathtaking event.

Smith: Where were you during this period? What were you doing?

Donaldson: I was the Watergate correspondent for ABC News. Not the White House correspondent, but I covered the trial, I covered the Sam Erwin hearings, I covered the impeachment investigation in the House. And when it all started, I thought – well, I had my view of Richard Nixon as a real sharpie when it came to politics. He came to power first in the House by accusing his Democratic opponent of being a Communist sympathizer, and all during the
way we all kind of knew what he was. But I thought he can’t possibly be involved in this. That’s just too horrendous.

Smith: And too stupid?

Donaldson: Too stupid? Of course, stupid. But Nixon, of course, saw enemies everywhere and his Golden Rule, if there was one, “Do unto them before they have a chance to do unto you.” Rather than the one that we think of as the Golden Rule. Yes, it was stupid. His defense, as we know, in listening to the Frost interviews and in the things he wrote, was basically, he was protecting his men. He was being loyal to his people. But if we listen to his tapes in the Oval Office, ultimately, he was protecting himself, and that’s quite clear.

Smith: I guess it’s safe to say, we still don’t know who ordered the break in or why. Do you have a theory?

Donaldson: Well, I accept the fact that the break in was the work of what’s his name – help me out Richard – been on radio, he’s the tough guy –

Smith: Gordon Liddy.

Donaldson: Gordon Liddy. I still believe that Gordon Liddy came up with the idea. No one said come up with an idea of how we can find out what Larry O’Brien is up to. We suspect there is something going on there we should know. He came up with the idea of breaking into the office. Did John Mitchell know? There’s no great evidence. Jeff Magruder? That’s a different case. And whether Richard Nixon, in fact, ordered it, or whether it was just a case of “will someone rid me of this meddlesome priest?” I’ve seen no evidence that says he ordered it.

Smith: We did an interview recently with Jerry Jones, who was Al Haig’s chief deputy. It was fascinating. Very candid. And he has come to the conclusion, just as theory, that Nixon did know about the break in – that it was all about the old Howard Hughes loans to Nixon’s brother and Larry O’Brien supposedly had evidence of this.

Donaldson: That’s right.
Smith: But, just one more theory.

Donaldson: Well, but here’s the thing: Nixon was a strategist, not a tactician, necessarily. He may have said to the right people, “We’ve got to find out what Larry O’Brien has, we can’t be surprised by something. We’ve got to know what he knows. See if you can find it out.” But that Richard would sit there and say, “Look, here’s my idea: we’ll find some people who are trustworthy, and we’ll have them break in to O’Brien’s office in the Watergate complex. Well, could it be done?” I just don’t think that he, personally…but we don’t know. I don’t know.

Smith: Do you think we ever will? Is there someone out there, or is there a tape we haven’t heard?

Donaldson: That’s like the same thing as saying that I’d like to be at Fidel’s bedside when he draws his last, and say, “Fidel, you’re drawing your last. Did you do it to John Kennedy?” And listen for the answer. I don’t know that there is any witness now who could have spoken, and who would have spoken, who will now speak, or who has in his will or in his memoirs to be published twenty-five years after his death, give us the answer to that.

Smith: Do you think John Mitchell took some secrets with him to the grave?

Donaldson: Probably. Yes. I think Mitchell was basically loyal to the end. There were some anomalies there that were—I mean, thieves fall out - but I think he did, yes.

Smith: This is a little off to the side, but, the competition between, clearly this was seen at the time, as Woodward and Bernstein’s story. You were working for a different organization, and the networks were obviously trying to make this story. What kind of competition was going on within the journalistic community?

Donaldson: Well, I’m ashamed to say that from the standpoint of my efforts, they were basically following the newspaper’s stories. Oh, yes, I would try to do a little something on them, but I don’t think any of us – now there were other newspaper reporters who deserve some credit - not just Woodward and
Bernstein. LA Times did some yeoman work, for instance. Even the New York Times, but I think most of us during that period were simply following the stories that appeared in the newspapers, and trying to do what we could to enlarge on them. But I didn’t ever successfully break a big part of the Watergate story.

Smith: In today’s media climate where newspapers are closing their Washington bureaus and cutting back, do you think Watergate could happen again? Do you think the way that the story unraveled and played itself out over those two years could happen?

Donaldson: Well, I think the ultimate outcome might be the same. But there might not be a Woodward and Bernstein – two kids who had no right to be given this huge story – and their senior correspondents, once they saw what they were on to tried get it away from them, [if it wasn’t for] Ben Bradlee that kept the boys in the story, as he said. And the reason I think the ultimate outcome would be the same, is that I know you know, it was the establishment that brought Richard Nixon down. The newspapers and the press did some work, but even without those kinds of stories, I think John J. Sirica, being a man of some intelligence - I got to know him pretty well – would have said, “It can’t just be these guys. There’s got to be someone and I’m going to put the screws to them.” As he did. And McCord then came forward, would have come forward with a letter and the rest would have been history.

Smith: Do you think Sirica is one of the unsung heroes of Watergate?

Donaldson: Oh, absolutely. He’d taken this as a routine burglary, and had the prosecution handled it that way, and they – let us say – would have been convicted, of course, and given them a light sentence, the normal sentence for something like that. That would have been the end of it.

Smith: And then, of course, in the middle of all this, you have a vice president who gets into trouble. One of the remarkable things Jones told us was that, before Haldeman and Erlichman left, which would have been April of ’73.

Donaldson: Two of the finest public servants I’ve ever known…
Smith: He called Jones, who was then running the personnel office at Haldeman’s behalf – reorganized it – asked him how many jobs reported directly to the vice president, and Jones did some figuring and came back with about fifty. He said, “Good. I want letters of resignation from everyone on the staff.” Which meant they knew before they left that Agnew could be in trouble. This in April and the story broke, I think, in the *Wall Street Journal* in August, which is pretty remarkable if you stop and think about it.

Donaldson: Attorney General Richardson had been investigating for some time, and it led to Agnew. I got to know Spiro Agnew when he was running for governor of Maryland, county executive of Baltimore County, and I don’t know of any evidence that has been uncovered that when he was county executive, it was pay for play or it was this, that, and the other. It may have been there. And when he became governor of Maryland, he was the reform governor. He saved Maryland from George P. Mahoney – “Your Home is Your Castle – Protect It,” said George P. Mahoney. And clearly it was a racial thing he was playing on. And Agnew was a good, progressive governor – reformed the income tax system and all of that.

My theory is, that when he got in power as governor, he learned that what some governors do in Maryland is – do this, do that, and what have you – and, why not? It’s like Illinois today. That’s the way we do it! And, of course, he wanted Rockefeller to be the Republican nominee until Rocky embarrassed him by not telling him – I was there in the room. He calls in reporters together to watch Rockefeller to announce that he was going to run for president. And Rockefeller announced he was not going to run for president. Spiro Agnew’s face just turned red as a beet in his governor’s office in Annapolis. Later then, of course Rocky changed his mind, but by this time Louise Gore has introduced Governor Agnew to Richard Nixon, and the rest is history there.

Smith: As you know, I’m working on a biography of Rockefeller, and it’s still a mystery as to whether he was supposed to be called that morning. And it’s one more of those things that, frankly, for all of their numbers and money and resources, they couldn’t elect a president, they couldn’t nominate a president.

Donaldson: They don’t claim that they called Agnew, do they?
Smith: They don’t. The best story that I can get is, that – and this again testifies to, in some ways, their ineptitude – they decided not to call him because he would leak the news.

Donaldson: Oh, it might have leaked, it probably would have leaked.

Smith: And at that point they figured they weren’t going to run so…

Donaldson: Agnew was the kind of person that that kind of insult, that kind of slight, he took it very personally, really. The Greek in him, I suppose. And then when Louise Gore introduced him to Nixon, they got along famously.

Smith: Now, she was the Republican power? She was the National Committee Woman from Maryland?

Donaldson: Yes, and a distant relation to Al Gore.

Smith: That’s right.

Donaldson: And she was very important in Maryland politics on the conservative Republican side, obviously.

Smith: Were you surprised – did you pick up rumors that Agnew was in trouble before, for example, the Wall Street Journal story ran?

Donaldson: Oh, there was a little gossip, but nothing you could hang your hat on. And I guess the short answer is, no, I wasn’t onto the story, or I would have tried to do it.

Smith: When Agnew resigns, we now know it’s pretty clear that Nixon would have liked to have appointed John Connally, and it was made pretty clear that that wouldn’t fly up on the Hill.

Donaldson: He had to listen to the Republican Party chiefs who just said to him, “We’ll never accept this. It won’t work.”

Smith: Rockefeller and Reagan, each for their own reasons, sort of cancelled each other out. And, as I understand it, Carl Albert and others made it clear that, if you want someone who’s confirmable, pick Jerry Ford. Had you had contact with Ford at that point?
Donaldson: Yes.

Smith: Tell me when you first…

Donaldson: I first met Jerry Ford when the *Ev and Charlie Show* fell apart because Charlie, Charles Halleck, the Republican Leader of the House, was upended by Gerald Ford and the Young Turks. And so, Everett McKinley Dirksen, and now Gerald Ford, would hold weekly news conferences and we’d all go – I was covering the Congress to some extent at that time. I don’t remember a thing that happened, except that they both talked about the Republican line and legislation and answered our questions. And then, one of my profound memories was, I guess, 1970, when Gerald Ford had the task of trying to impeach Justice Douglas. And I believe, and I think I can demonstrate that, that the White House asked him to – other people asked him to. I do not think it was his original idea, but he fell to it with a will. Justice Douglas maybe had been a Communist sympathizer to some extent, no one on that side of the aisle liked his decisions. He kept marrying young women, 30 and 40 years younger than he was, and terrible…

Smith: I actually think what offended Ford more than any of his decisions, remember – people have forgotten, remember the Justice ran articles in the *Evergreen Review*.

Donaldson: The *Evergreen Magazine!* The article, I recall, was on forestry or something, but the *Evergreen* was a magazine - a little titillating. Today we’d think it was just common, family fare almost, but not in those days. And I agree with you, I’m not saying that Ford didn’t believe in what he was doing, but I think there were other forces involved.

In anticipation of talking to you today, because I thought I remembered something when Douglas resigned from the court, and, sure enough, I remembered the letter that President Ford then wrote back to Justice Douglas and it is the most warm and salutary letter, warm admiration for your valiant effort to carry on…nation’s gratitude for service…distinguished years of service…a lifetime of dedicated public service matched by few Americans…on and on. I thought, as I read the letter, Gerald Ford was saying,
in effect, you know, I really didn’t think you were *that* bad a guy. Plus the fact that if you know Gerald Ford, he was not a mean man.

Smith: He also invited Justice Douglas to the White House for dinner. And he made sure they shook hands.

Donaldson: I think in retrospect, he was a little embarrassed, maybe. Maybe he thought he’d gone over the top.

Smith: It wasn’t his style.

Donaldson: It wasn’t his style, that’s exactly right.

Smith: What was his style?

Donaldson: Well, to see him, very affable, that great big grin, that smile and laughter and all of this. Now he was a very strong conservative, no question about it, when I knew him in the House of Representatives. But I must tell you, by the standards of the strongest conservatives of his party today, he was a moderate, even showing maybe a liberal tendency now and then. It was a different day, it wasn’t quite live and let live, there was great partisanship and he was a partisan. And yet, he, like other leaders on both sides in that day, understood that in the final analysis, you move legislation forward after you’ve gotten as many concessions from the dominant Democratic Party as you could. Then, unless you really had a matter of principle there, you understood that – I couldn’t tell you, but left to his own devises with no whip ordered – he would have voted for the stimulus bill – not really thinking it was the right way to go, but understanding that you’ve got to do something. Standing here is not an option, and that apparently is the best deal you could get with the Democrats in charge, so he’d signed off.

Smith: I’m jumping ahead here, but I remember at the time of his death, being a little surprised by the degree of surprise that some journalists showed toward the response. Which, as the week went on, only seemed to build, and I think it was in large measure, the fact that a lot of people who weren’t even alive when he was in the White House, were being introduced to this guy for the first time, and they were comparing him with the tone of politics in this town.
And he looked pretty good. And beyond that, that was a time when the country desperately needed to feel good about itself.

Donaldson: That’s the thing. I think history, and we see all the historians, you among them, placing presidents and all of that, I think as time goes by, there will be a greater appreciation of what he did for this country in just about two and a half years.

First of all, with Nixon’s resignation at a time when it was clear that we’d lost the Vietnam War, with tails between our legs, according to many people who still, to this day won’t understand what happened, desperately needed something to pull us out of this feeling about ourselves. This is America – we never felt this way after World War II, of course. And it was Gerald Ford, this warm, considerate, affable, but not weak man at all – I’ll never forget his line, “I am a Ford, not a Lincoln.” Alright – playing on the name, but what he said was, “I’m going to do a good job here. I may not be Abraham Lincoln, but I’m someone who knows how to do it.” And he did know how to do it.

I think his place in history will be much larger than it is today, because he really held the country together. It was his greatest accomplishment to me that in a time of great national upset and questioning, he was reassuring that we are still a good people and a great country, and we went forward.

Smith: You’re right. It’s funny, if you just look at the difference in the mood in America between the summer of ’74 and the Bicentennial summer of ’76. We weren’t just going through the motions of celebrating in ’76 – there was the sense that there was something to celebrate. Ironically, we’d tested our Constitutional institutions and found that they worked.

Donaldson: And I had never heard, then or since, really, a president deliver a State of Union message and say, “The State of the Union is not good.” Well, it’s true! And he detailed unemployment, he buttressed his statement with the facts. Presidents that try to pretend that the rest of us don’t know the facts are kidding themselves.

Smith: You are absolutely right. But you haven’t heard a president say it since, have you?
Donaldson: No. Of course, I haven’t heard a president until this time say, “I screwed up,” so I’m prepared.

Smith: Plus, wow, a budget with real numbers! The war is, all of a sudden, on budget, and...

Donaldson: Amazing.

Smith: Ford would have approved so much of Obama’s effort to reach across the aisle. And to restore some degree of civility to this town.

Donaldson: And that’s what I’m saying. I think Ford, in the House of Representatives, would have responded. Oh, no - give up all the principles – I’m not saying he would have rolled over for an Obama and all of his programs – of course not. But he would have responded in a tone, and you would have gotten that from him. And I think they could have done deals.

Smith: Where were you on August 8th and 9th of ’74?

Donaldson: Oh, well, I was up on Capitol Hill. We all knew what was in store by then. Everybody knew, but it hadn’t quite been on the record and said. And I was in John Rhodes office earlier the evening of the resignation speech. Now everyone knew I was a reporter, there were no deals made, whatsoever, but Rhodes just sat there and said, “Well, you know, it’s been a long year or two,” or whatever he said, “It’s over now, he’s going to resign tonight, and I regret it but it’s necessary.”

So I excused myself and I went out and I told Frank Reynolds – I think was our anchor, maybe or Howard K. Smith – that I’ve just learned authoritatively that the president will, in fact, resign tonight. Jay Smith, who was one of Rhodes’ great press people, told me later, and I think maybe Rhodes may have even written in his book, that he thought somehow that I had – he didn’t quite say violated ground rules – because he was a smart guy – he knew that there was not ground rules that prevented me from doing that. And we were friends after that. I admire John Rhodes greatly.

Smith: When Nixon said his farewell in the East Room, were you up on the Hill?
Donaldson: I watched. I wasn’t in the East Room.

Smith: Were you up on the Hill?

Donaldson: I watched it on television, I can’t remember where I was. It could have been here in old building, the east building. It was a remarkable speech, of course. Richard Nixon, self-pitying, the business about his mother. I’m sure she was a great lady, but…and then talking about having – when I get to the mountaintop, the valley and all of that. And this enduring symbol of him at the helicopter lives on and on.

Smith: That’s why, whenever we get to anniversary, August 9th is always seen as the anniversary of Richard Nixon’s departure. It’s never seen as the anniversary of Gerald Ford’s presidency. Nixon owns the images.

Donaldson: It had to be. Here was the ‘Trick’ – leaving town. I use the nickname his critics gave him. Here was the Evil One. Remember, Richard, in the streets – people honk, “Jail to the Chief,” honk if you want him to go to jail. All of that. This was a really grim time. His support fell. I was amazed the other day to see valid polls say that George W. Bush had the highest negative rating, not the lowest approval, but the highest negative rating when he left office. I would have thought it would have been Richard Nixon.

Smith: So Ford becomes president and there’s this sort of palpable lifting from the shoulders?

Donaldson: Well, Ford was not well-known in the country. He was well-known in Republican and political circles, but he was not a household name. And I think the majority of Americans probably said, who is this guy? But I think from the very first speech he made – wasn’t it in the East Room? – the very first, people began to say, well we like that tone. We like that. Of course, deeds more than words. But I think that very quickly the country thought this is going to be fine. This is going to be okay. There is someone there that we like.

Smith: I came to the conclusion a long time ago that he was much more sophisticated that he let on. That, in a lot of ways, he was perfectly willing to let people
underestimate him. It was almost a Reaganesque quality in that sense. And one evidence of that is, for example, he knew by instinct what he had to do those first few days - that symbolism was substance - and so who does he invite into the White House? He invites the Congressional Black Caucus, he asks George Meany – all of these people who had been basically shut out of the White House. And that’s just says something about – maybe it’s Congress, I don’t know. Maybe it’s that Congressional mindset that you get everyone into the room.

Donaldson: And maybe I am reflecting the ‘inside the Beltway’ mentality that is so reviled, and to some extent properly so, in the rest of the country. But I’ve always thought that when people come to presidency who don’t know Washington, who don’t know how it works here, they have one hand tied behind their backs – and you know the ones I’m talking about. Jimmy Carter, whom I covered, and even Bill Clinton, his first two years were disasters partially because he didn’t know how to make the system work. Gerald Ford, George Herbert Walker Bush, and I think again, history will treat him pretty kindly – or Richard Nixon, but in a more malevolent way, and certainly Lyndon Johnson – these people know how to get it done. And one way of getting it done is reaching across aisle, trying to be ecumenical, at least in tone, if not in spirit.

May I divest? Because you reminded me of something – Ford being underestimated and more sophisticated than people thought. Yes, that’s true, but he also was someone who – you got what you saw. There was not a lot of guile in him, and he was comfortable, so that he didn’t mind not putting on airs. My personal example was when I was working for the local television station here, he was the leader of the Republicans in the House, and I was running a Sunday program and there was not much news, and I got the bright idea that I’d get the Minority Leader. And it was easy to reach him on the phone down here in Alexandria. I got him on the phone and I said, “Congressman, may I come out and interview you for our news night program here on WTLP TV?” Well, he said, “What time do you want to come?” and I said, “Well, this afternoon.” He said, “Well, alright, but you have come
during half time of the football game. I’m not going to miss the football
game.”

So we showed up, we sat up. Sure enough, the first half ended, he came in, he
answered all the questions, and I was watching the watch, he went back to
watch the football game. He didn’t mind doing that. If I wanted to go on the
air and say, this man will only talk to me at half time, he’d thought it would
be fine. He’d probably be right as far as the country was concerned.

Smith: Well, you know what – it carried over into the White House. There are stories
of people on Saturdays interrupting a game – a college game or whatever –
you didn’t do that. That’s funny. But it’s interesting that he was that
accessible.

Donaldson: Oh, very accessible. I was not great shakes – then or now – but the point is, I
ran this little program, it was a CBS station, people watched it. Real cable.
But on the other hand, I wasn’t going to do it live. He was really busy, and I
wasn’t going to do a lot for the Republican leader of the House.

Smith: There was this notion that there is a Congressional mindset and an executive
mindset. That they are two different things. We don’t tend to elect members
of Congress, obviously we’ve broken that, and there are a whole bunch of
reasons why. Which, presumably affect how they perform when they are in
office. Do you have theories as to why?

Donaldson: There is a congressional mindset versus an executive mindset. First of all,
there are five hundred and thirty five of them and they realize – although
some of them don’t understand this – that one person up there cannot equal
one person down at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. And so, collectively, they
want to guard their camp. This one other guy wants to say, “I’m the chief,”
and their objectives, many times, are different. He now, she someday maybe,
represents the whole country, and if they are doing their job properly looks at
it from that perspective. And you know, better than I, or certainly as well as I,
that these people up there represent their constituents, and their narrow,
selfish interests, a lot of the time. And to say to them, “No, you should always
think of the whole country,” is unrealistic and is not what our founding fathers
set up. The safeguard is that they have to be responsible to their individual constituents.

So I think there is always this tug of war. But I remind people, I’m not the historian that you are, Richard, but our founding fathers said that Article One was the legislature, not the executive. They wanted the legislature to be, if there was going to be, a more powerful of the three branches. They wanted it to be the legislature.

Smith: I would agree with you. But you know, one of the differences – I remember asking Walter Mondale this question, and I liked his response because he agreed with me – but the notion, forty years ago, if you arrived in this town, it didn’t matter if you were Republican or Democrat, you found yourself in a party that had a left and a right wing. Now there were obviously different proportions, but each party, in some ways, was a reflection of the whole country, ideologically. Now they are much more homogenized, and people who say we should have a liberal party or a conservative party, they basically have their wish, although in theory the Democrats now actually have a “conservative” wing. The point being, forty years ago, when you arrived in this town, before you could even hope to pass a bill…

Donaldson: Forty-seven years ago – I worked for the local station.

Smith: Okay, forty-seven years ago – you had to first internally learn how to deal with people who you might not agree with on a lot of things. I remember Bob Dole saying he was advised when he came to town, be sure to sit down with Senator Stennis.

Donaldson: Right.

Smith: Talk to Stennis. Ted Kennedy said when he arrived here, be sure and spend time with Dick Russell. Those people don’t exist anymore.

Donaldson: No, they don’t. And the mindset has changed, of course. I was talking to Cokie last night and a bunch of other people, and we were talking about those days, when her father was Majority Leader, or working up to be Majority Leader in the House, and the ecumenical way that people got together – fight
all day, it’s the old cliché, over some issue or something, and then sit down, break bread, tell jokes, like each other’s families. People say, and Cokie agrees, that one of the problem is, today they don’t move their families to Washington. They hang out with four other guys in a rooming house someplace or their office, sometimes – there isn’t this kind of association. I don’t think that’s the strongest thing that makes a difference – I think the strongest thing in this kind of tone that we’re talking about, is the warfare, politics as war, not just as partisan contention that began, I think in the Seventies. And, frankly, I think toward the Eighties, it was the Republicans. Now both sides did it, but it was the Republicans – Newt Gingrich and his backbenchers who wanted to get rid of this go-along Bob Michael and do it by just torching the place, term limits if they could get it. Get the Speaker, Jim Wright, who gave them the sword, I understand that. Destroy the Democrats and do it in the most bitter, partisan way, all things being fair. Well, I don’t think all things are fair in love or war. Certainly not politics.

Smith: Hale Boggs and Gerald Ford used to debate at the National Press Club and the story is, they would drive down together from the Hill, would decide on the way what are we going to debate today; they’d get down there and have their little debate; then they’d go have lunch and a drink and go back to the Hill.

Donaldson: I was at one of those debates. Don’t ask me, again, can you remember who said what – I don’t remember who said what – it was very civil, but strong from the standpoint of each having a point of view. But I tell people, you mentioned Richard Russell – I watched that great debate in the Senate in 1964. I can see Russell now standing in the center aisle – he would move in the center aisle and clap his hands like this when he debated. The leaders of the Southerners’ last stand, with some Republican support to keep segregation, but I never heard anyone call him a name.

I never heard, frankly, although there were moral issues, and people would talk about the moral issues involved, no one ever said, “The Lord’s on my side, and you are Satan.” Which is so commonplace and almost in so many words today. Politics they say is the art of the possible. To me, politics and the way we’re talking about it is making deals. Everyone makes deals. I might
make a deal with my wife, I want to stay home, she wants to go out, we reach an accommodation or something. And the people in the country who have been led to believe by some of the people I’ve talked about, that it is so wrong to make any compromise or deal, are helping destroy the political process that moves us ahead.

Smith: People have forgotten, at least at the presidential level – it was the Carter campaign that brought the Evangelical Christians, not the right, but Evangelicals in a major way into political arena.

Donaldson: Yes, in a major way, but they were not – Evangelicals – I covered the Carter campaign – were not in a driver’s seat as far as their desire to turn this nation into, in fact, the Christian nation, not in just the majority of the inhabitants, but in the way government… I mean, I’m convinced that a lot of the Evangelicals don’t want a separation between church and state. They want Italy – only not Catholic.

Smith: What are your memories surrounding the pardon – the Nixon pardon? Did it come as a thunderclap?

Donaldson: Yes. It ought not to have. It was a Sunday that Gerald Ford announced it?

Smith: Well, he went into his first press conference, and I think it was August 28th and he believed that people were going to want to talk about Cyprus and Greece and the economy and he was taken aback and angry, partly at himself because he didn’t handle it well.

Donaldson: All the questions were Nixon.

Smith: They were all Nixon questions, yeah. And that seems to have been a catalyst – that he told himself, if that’s going to be the experience I have every time I go
out and talk to the press...he was obviously getting a lot of information. My understanding is that Leon Jaworski’s office was saying it could take up to two years to bring Nixon to trial.

Donaldson: I sincerely believe that Ford sincerely believed that the business of the country would be harmed if Nixon was pursued. I believe that was his motive. I do not believe there was a deal before he became president at all. I accept that he was naïve. I was one of those at the time that was furious, not at Gerald Ford, but furious at the fact that Nixon had escaped because I think that the majority of the country wanted to pursue him. The majority of country, the reason there were questions, all of them or most of them at that press conference was that we, I wasn’t there, but the reporters were reflecting the majority country view — “We’re going to get the man, he has to pay!” And if you say, well, losing the presidency, the only one in our history, isn’t that...No! that’s not enough. A jury of his peers? Jail! Alright.

Of course Jerry terHorst resigned on principle. Maybe because also he hadn’t been notified far enough in advance about these things. But it was a thunderclap. And I also believe, although there were many factors that cost Ford his election in 1976, and you can say it was this one, it was this one, it was this one, this one — if you had to pick one, it was the Ford pardon.

Smith: I don’t disagree with a thing you say, but then you sort of spool out this kind of counterintuitive school; if there hadn’t been a pardon and Nixon had continued to dominate for two years...

Donaldson: His presidency might have been ruined by that – I understand.

Smith: It’s a no-win situation.

Donaldson: This fork or that fork, since we didn’t take that other fork, we can’t ever know.

Smith: It is understandable, everyone is right now dwelling on the incredible challenges that this president confronts, but we all have such short memories. At least this guy was elected – here you have Gerald Ford, who comes in office, there’s no transition, there’s no honeymoon, there’s not even a real
inaugural. He’s got Vietnam, he’s got Nixon, he’s got the severest economic downturn since World War II. In fact, whiplash, because first everyone told him, no, inflation is the problem, and then a few months later everyone said the bottom is falling out of the job market.

Donaldson: WIN!

Smith: Yes. Which actually was concocted in the speechwriting shop of the White House. Alan Greenspan told us all about that. Ford really was dealt a pretty lousy hand.

Donaldson: Yeah, and the State of the Union is not good, let me just enumerate here. He was, he was. That’s just the breaks, uh?

Smith: Oh, sure.

Donaldson: He wouldn’t have been president if there hadn’t been a lousy situation.

Smith: The fall of Saigon. How traumatizing was that?

Donaldson: Oh, for the country, very traumatizing. Again, when we pulled out troops out, Nixon said peace…well, first Kissinger, peace is at hand, before the election – just kind of the icing on the election cake. And then, “Peace with honor,” said Nixon. I can’t speak for the country, I didn’t buy that. You knew what was going to happen. The Vietnamese wanted to live together and we could not stop them from living together and the North had prevailed. And now we know the famous, after a decent interval phrase, I think Kissinger understood very well what he’d done with Le Duc Tho, and when Le Duc Tho didn’t show up to get his peace prize I thought, well the man has got some integrity there. He knows full well that they are going to take over the South.

But when they did it with those awful pictures of the helicopter and Graham Martin with the American flag, the ambassador coming out. And later, Nixon, of course, kind of snidely suggested, well, we had a deal with the South Vietnamese to come to their aid. Thank goodness, Gerald Ford didn’t try to reintroduce Americans…it would have been impossible. The country would have revolted.
Smith: He said that was the worst day of his life as president, and you could understand that. But in some ways – it’s forgotten today – the best chapter was right after the fall of Saigon. Everyone wanted to walk away from this fiasco and forget we ever got mired there. Congress cut the money for resettling refugees, and Ford went through the roof and said, we have this long tradition in America of offering asylum to victims of persecution. And he put together this crazy quilt coalition, the American Jewish Congress, and the AFLCIO, and basically shamed Congress into forking over enough money – they brought 120,000, boatpeople…

Donaldson: But particularly people who we’d let down in so many senses. It wasn’t just someone from ________________, thank goodness we would help them out. We had been an instrument here – we thought for good at first, that’s true. But we’d been an instrument of these people’s plight. We had an obligation to them, I thought.

Smith: The Carter campaign – now when did you join? Was it the fall campaign or were you with him during the spring?

Donaldson: Oh, no, there were people, I guess before me in January of ’76, which now seems very late. But in those days, there were three or four of us still with Governor Carter, who still was thought to have almost no chance.

Smith: What’s the biggest misapprehension about Jimmy Carter?

Donaldson: Oh, I think there are several. One of the misapprehensions is that he was a rabbit – because of the killer rabbit, he was a wimp, in other words. That he was timid, or something like that. Far from it. This guy was going to do it with Sadat and Begin. This guy was going to try to do it. But I think people got it right. He was not a good national politician. He had, I’m told, the engineer’s mind, and you could see that in the small ways from the tennis court, to other ways. He wasn’t a good delegator, which again - put engineers in charge of products and they want to do it themselves and check all of the schematics and the designs.

But he surprised me to some extent, Richard. During the primaries he was pretty good as a primary politician, pressing the flesh, meeting people. We
caught on early that he didn’t like small talk, but he could do it, and his message, I can repeat now: “I will never lie to you, I’ll never mislead you, I’ll never dodge a controversial issue.” You see that’s the antidote to Vietnam and Watergate and the CIA investigations that were getting under way. Watergate didn’t hurt us, Vietnam didn’t hurt us, CIA didn’t hurt us, we can prove to the rest of the world, but more importantly to ourselves, that we are a great people. Today it was change for Obama, for him it was, we are a great people. Don’t feel bad about us.

Smith: Yeah.

Donaldson: And it sold brilliantly, although he had to struggle through those primaries, and on the last day in June there were three big ones: California, New Jersey and Ohio. He lost California and New Jersey. He won Ohio by 7,000 votes and Richard Daley said, “You’re the nominee,” and George Wallace said, “You’re the nominee,” and so therefore, he was. It was a close thing.

Smith: Can you put an ideological label on him?

Donaldson: No, he didn’t have a firm Reagan-like, or Ford-like philosophy. On the other hand, he was not a situationalist. If he had a philosophy it came from his Baptist church and his feeling about morality and that spilled over to public policy also. But you couldn’t – he didn’t win the presidency because he was an ideologue. He wasn’t an ideologue.

Smith: They went into that campaign – obviously the Carter campaign was leading very significantly.

Donaldson: Oh, 18 points and maybe by some polls more after the convention.

Smith: Yeah. And Ford began to chip away at that lead.

Donaldson: Oh, yeah.

Smith: In fact, Mark Shields says the Ford television campaign in ’76 was as good as anything he’s ever seen.

Donaldson: And the Rose Garden Strategy also.
“I’m the president. I’m tending the public business. Here I am at the White House…” He never quite said, “I don’t have time to go out,” but we got the idea. Jim Baker and others, and Gerald Ford. But remember there’s always push-pull. Ford was doing things right that fall, but Carter was more and more doing things wrong.

So the gap being closed wasn’t Jimmy Carter really making an impression, but Gerald Ford, the faster horse coming up. Ford started speeding up, but Carter started slowing down. And I subscribe, whether it’s one week or two, sometimes we argue the idea, another week or two, and Ford would have been narrowly elected.

I also subscribe, and I told you, the Nixon pardon to me, Ford’s gaffe in the second debate, which he wouldn’t come off of, and that, too, was quintessential Gerald Ford. He thought he was right. I did at least two interviews with him over his lifetime after that, and he once again would tell me what he meant, and in the last one – because I’d gotten to know him pretty well – I said, “Well, President Ford, why did you put it that way? Why didn’t you say that? The way you said it made it sound to a lot of people who didn’t know you, that you didn’t realize that the Soviet tanks were in the street.” And when Kissinger, that night, came and said to him, “Mr. President, you’ve got to now correct this. We have to put out an addendum,” and you said, “No, I meant what I said, Henry.” That cost him five days.

Yeah. You saw him after he left office?

Oh yes. Not regularly, but on several occasions.

I wonder, here is a Republican president who would go to the convention every four years, and it’s as if every four years the party had moved further and further away. And I don’t know whether he moved to the left, I don’t know if Mrs. Ford had some impact, but you know, long before he died he was outspokenly pro-choice.

Right.
Smith: He’s the only president yet to put his name on a gay rights petition. I mean, there is this whole host of things…

Donaldson: I didn’t realize that. The pro-choice I knew.

Smith: Yeah. He was very, very outspoken.

Donaldson: I remember, Richard. Barry Goldwater was pro-choice, because he, who wrote *The Conscience of a Conservative*, and I think Gerald Ford also, believed that government really didn’t have right to interfere with individual liberties like that, even if they thought it was the wrong thing to do.

Smith: And that’s it. There’s the conservatism that says, “I want government out of the board room, I want it out of the school room, I want it out of bedroom.” There is a whole range of issues that frankly, we’re not even comfortable talking about. But if we have to talk about them, we certainly don’t want government to play a role in them. Now you have, particularly social conservatives, who hate government until they can use it to enforce their agenda.

Donaldson: Of course. And there is the hypocrisy of it. And I often wonder, depending on the person, do they understand this dichotomy in their reasoning? Or do they not even see it – do not see what they are doing? Depends on the person. I admire people like Goldwater. Because of a fluke, it’s known that I voted for him. The only vote of mine that I ever been, even to my wife, disclosed. And I admire Gerald Ford, and other people. And Democrats who feel strongly about something, but to thy own self be true, I admire them, too – whether I agree with them or not. These are the leaders who you were talking about. It’s hard to see that they are here today. And I ask myself, is it because I’m older and just thinking of the glory days? Or, in fact, have public leaders changed some?

Smith: Finally, and talking about being in contact with President Ford, you came out to Grand Rapids that day for our conference with the president.

Donaldson: I remember it well.

Smith: What do you remember? We laughed a lot, I know that.
Donaldson: We laughed a lot and I remember some of the people on the panel who were there. And I think wasn’t that the day that he told the wonderful story about running into Richard Nixon at an airport someplace after the ’60 election, and he shook hands and all, and Leno said, “Nixon said to me, ‘You know that inaugural was just wonderful. I would have like to have given it myself.’” And Leno said to him, according to Leno, “You mean the part about ‘ask not…’” “No, no. The part about I, Richard Nixon, do solemnly swear that…” I think he may have made that up.

I remember we also talked about the issues of the day. But I remember basically Gerald Ford being there, and I interviewed him then for my little webcast I had at the time. It was one of the times he repeated again, about how “Don’t you understand what I meant.” And also, once again, talked about the pardon, which I think he was always comfortable with. And I came to believe, long before this moment, that he did the right thing. It’s just in the ferocity of the moment, in the passion of the moment, I was very upset.

Smith: Poor Lyndon Johnson, of course, died four years after leaving office. Ford was fortunate to live long enough to see most people had changed their minds. But what really did it for him was when the Kennedy Library gave him the Profiles in Courage Award. He said afterwards, “You know, for twenty years, everywhere I go people have been asking the same question. They don’t ask anymore.” After the Kennedy Library…

Donaldson: Well, when the Kennedys said that was courageous to do…

Smith: You know a funny story? He wasn’t even going to go. He wasn’t going to go to the event. I got a call from Ken Duberstein on behalf of the family saying, “Can you talk to President Ford and make him understand how important this is?” He was getting on in years and it was across the country, and so forth and so on. There was no one less self-dramatizing than Gerald Ford, and no one who was less inclined to lay awake at night wondering what history was going to say about him. It finally took Mrs. Ford to make him understand that this is a big deal. This is the honor of a lifetime. And they went and they had the time of their lives.
Donaldson: Of all the tributes during the week of the funerals, and I was at the cathedral here, I was not out in Grand Rapids, the one that impressed me the most was Jimmy Carter’s because of where it came from, and also because of the words. Again, not a guile in Jimmy Carter. And you could tell when he was heartfelt, when he really meant something, or whether they’d convinced him he had to go through something. I thought that was remarkable. And the relationship that grew up between the two of them – it was a testament to both of them.

Smith: It was amazing because I did the very last eulogy after President Carter, and sitting in the front row…

Donaldson: You were good, but you hadn’t been a president of the United States.

Smith: No, I hadn’t.


Smith: And you know what? In planning the funeral, there was one thing he was adamant about, only one thing: he didn’t want a caisson in the streets of Washington. And then, we made sure that Jimmy Carter was a eulogist, and we wanted a journalist to be a eulogist. It originally was going to be Hugh Sidey, but he passed away, so Tom Brokaw did it. But the point being, to show people today that there was a time not so long ago when presidents and journalists could be friends…

Donaldson: But there is something else about that relationship. Remember the picture just a few days or weeks ago? Five presidents; four of them standing together, and one guy off to the side – Jimmy Carter. He never really fit in, in that way of the club. But it was Gerald Ford that did it. He loved Gerald Ford as he went on. He thought he fit there. And Ford brought him in. Carter ___________ beat Ford. It wasn’t Carter that really reached out and brought Ford in. It was Ford who brought Carter in. What a thing.

Smith: What hit home to me – it was all a fog, when you are up there doing that - but the one thing I’ll never forget, Rosalyn was weeping in the front pew. Which said it all. You can’t fake that.
Donaldson: No, you can’t fake it, see.

Smith: And, clearly, those two families had become very close. Air Force One flew back to Grand Rapids from here, and I could see President Carter picked up one of President Ford’s great grandkids, a little baby really, put him over his shoulder. It was a side of Jimmy Carter I’ve never seen. And was walking up and down the aisle of Air Force One with this infant.

Donaldson: As you can tell from our brief discussion, I liked Jimmy Carter, also. Not so sure his place will rise much in history, though. And I think I see the warts, and saw them at the time, but he was basically, too, a good man who wanted to do good.

Smith: You were talking about the engineer’s mind. There are more parallels between Herbert Hoover and Jimmy Carter. Both very distinguished ex-presidents. Before the Carter Center there was the Hoover Institution.

Donaldson: The relief work that Hoover had done.

Smith: Humanitarian work.

Donaldson: After Hoover left the presidency he was called on in later years, not for economics, but to head commissions.

Smith: He told Harry Truman he’d added ten years to his life. He and Truman became the best of friends. It’s like Carter and Ford – this very odd couple, in some ways.

How do you think Ford should be remembered?

Donaldson: Oh, he’s going to be remembered as someone who really gave the country the lift it needed at a time of grimness, at a time the country didn’t feel good about itself. And someone who did a good job as president, and also as a human being, someone that you liked. I think all those qualities will be there.

Smith: It is interesting though, he went to his grave convinced that he had adversaries, but no enemies. He literally believed he had no enemies. I only heard him speak disparagingly about two people. The worst thing he could say was, that’s a bad man. You know who the two people were?
Donaldson: No, tell me.

Smith: One was Gordon Liddy and the other was John Dean.

Donaldson: Gandhi. I understand Liddy…

Smith: Oh, no! John Dean.

Donaldson: Shewww. I thought you said Gandhi and I almost dropped my teeth!

Smith: It’s ironic you mentioned Gandhi because, you know what? Well, I said in the eulogy, when Time Magazine wanted the greatest man of the century, they asked all these people, and they had two choices. And I thought Ford would say Churchill or Eisenhower, you know. He said, Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi, the greatest man of the century.

Donaldson: Oh, okay. John Dean. We’re seeing even more evidence that John, a very smart guy, said, “Well, I’m going to have to save myself here. This ship is going down. So, let’s just see how I can do that.” And I imagine, now that you’ve told me this, that was the basis of what Jerry Ford’s dislike for Dean was. He wasn’t turning on Nixon for the good of the country. He was turning on him for his own good, he thought.

Smith: Thank you.
# INDEX

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong></td>
<td>Agnew, Spiro, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C</strong></td>
<td>Carter, Jimmy, 19–21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D</strong></td>
<td>Dean, John, 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E</strong></td>
<td>Ev and Jerry Show, 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F</strong></td>
<td>Fall of Saigon, 18–19, 26–27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>J</strong></td>
<td>Jones, Jerry, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>L</strong></td>
<td>Liddy, Gordon, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>M</strong></td>
<td>Magruder, Jeff, 2, 8, 10–11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>O</strong></td>
<td>O'Brien, Larry, 2–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P</strong></td>
<td>Profiles in Courage award, 23, 36–37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R</strong></td>
<td>Rhodes, John, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>S</strong></td>
<td>Sirica, John J., 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>W</strong></td>
<td>Watergate, 1–5, 26–27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Y</strong></td>
<td>Young Turks, 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Sam Donaldson

February 23, 2009

---

27