

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**Steve Ford**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
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Smith: It is safe to say that although your dad may have contributed to the democratization of technology, he didn't particularly share it. I think Penny told me he did learn to play solitaire on the computer.

Ford: He did. He could use his computer to play solitaire and that was about it. I used to have to – and I've saved some of these messages because they are wonderful – I'd get home from a trip and he would have called my answering machine to leave a message, and I could hear him talking in the background to Mom, going, "Betty, I think I left a message. I'm not sure." And we'd get this whole extra conversation that had nothing to do with welcome home, Steve, glad you're back. We miss you. Technology was not his deal. But it's interesting because when you think about back in 1974-75, he started the whole dialogue about deregulation, whether it be airlines, railroads, all that stuff. That dialogue was started in '74 or '75, that aviation bill or something went through that basically allowed for that cheap coach seat that I flew on last night to go back to Grand Rapids. I had no leg room, but I want to thank Dad for that.

Smith: It is astonishing when you think of the pace of change that occurred in his adult lifetime. Things you had to get used to that were radically different from what you were accustomed to.

Ford: Think about this: I can remember the first time I flew back on Air Force One. Dad picked me up in Salt Lake City. I was working on a ranch, I was a cowboy and out in the West, and he was going through Salt Lake City. I hooked up with him, got on the plane, was flying back and I remember, my girlfriend still lived in the Washington, D.C. area and we were going to go out on a date that night. I wandered up to the front part of Air Force One – sort of as an 18-19 year old kid – checking it out. And I was talking to the Air Force communications guy, and told him, "Yeah, I've got a date with my girlfriend tonight. We're going to be a little late." And he goes, "Well, would you like to call her?" And I was shocked. I go, "You mean make a phone call from this airplane?" "Oh, yeah, we can do that." And only the President had that in 1974. So I got on the phone, called

my girlfriend, and she goes, “Where are you?” And I said, “About 35,000 feet above Ohio right now.” And she didn’t believe me. And to think now, every seat on that plane, in front of it, has a phone you can pull. Whether you want to use it or not, that’s a different thing. But the technology, the chances – only Air Force One – the President was the one that had that technology back then.

Smith: I’ve been told he could receive email, but he didn’t send email. Is that more or less accurate?

Ford: Yeah. He would get email and he’d have it all printed out, and he’d read it, but that’s that generation. And then you run into other people that adapted and use email all the time.

Smith: Then the mail. He never stopped being a congressman when it came to the mail. We’ve been told wonderful stories about it. They worked on Saturdays – they would have worked on Sundays, I think, if he could get anyone to show up. But at the time of the anthrax scare, he wasn’t particularly interested in hearing why he couldn’t get his mail. And apparently there were people at the office who would be sent down to the post office and they would put on these crazy outfits, and they would go through and bring him his mail. I mean, mail was his drug.

Ford: That and newspapers. Every morning a stack of newspapers, whether it be the *Grand Rapids Press*, the *Post*, the *LA Times*, whatever. My early morning vision of Dad would be his swim in the morning, bright and early, his exercises, sit ups and everything, sitting down, having his cup of coffee, and a stack of newspapers. And that’s how he started the day. I can remember as a kid growing up around our breakfast table, at 514 Crown View Drive, Alexandria – Dad’s a congressman, the newspaper was a very important thing. All the kids, Jack, Mike, Susan, and I – everybody would grab and wrestle for a section. And you didn’t really talk much at breakfast, you sort of got into the facts and remembered what the box scores were going to be, talking about business or something. You had to sort of suck in some facts because you knew there would be a discussion that night at dinner and you had to defend your position.

Smith: That raises a large question, because after a conversation with Susan, I went away astonished, frankly, that at least in her recollection, during that summer of ’74, when your lives were about to be transformed, that there was as little discussion of this

possibility and all that went up to it as there was. How much political discussion took place around the Ford dinner table? More specifically, was it a subject that he went out of his way to avoid that summer?

Ford: Yeah.

Smith: Just as he went out of his way to avoid it in public?

Ford: Yeah, I think you just hit the nail on the top of the head. There was a denial at times, probably, going on about what might happen. With Dad being vice president, and the idea – I think everybody hoped that the smoking gun – the Nixon tape – that stuff wouldn't come out, and Nixon would be able to complete his presidency and heal the wounds and do the great things internationally with China and Russia and all those things. But there was a denial that I think we all sort of didn't talk about, thinking that there was that possibility. I think that's almost natural for any family that you go, "Gosh, we hope this doesn't happen." Because in no way would you think that that would be good for the country, if it got to that point where the president had actually committed crimes and had to resign and stepped out from office.

Smith: So in a curious sort of way, your household may have been one of the few in America where there is a deliberate effort not to talk about Watergate.

Ford: Everybody else was mad and angry and dang it, let's find out what happened. And that's true, yeah, because on the street people were demanding answers and trying to figure out what did happen. Had the President been part of a cover up?

Smith: And presumably that included your mother?

Ford: Oh definitely. Oh, they may have a pillow talk in the bedroom about what was going on. But the thing about this, Dad's career as a congressman was almost over, he was going to retire. He was not going to run for office again because he hadn't become Speaker of the House, the Republicans had not gotten the majority in the House. He'd told Mom, "If we don't win the majority, and I don't become Speaker, I'm going to retire. We'll go back to Grand Rapids, Michigan. I'll start my law practice again." A nice, quiet life. Everything Mom wanted after twenty some years in Congress. And then Nixon appoints him as vice president, and there were other, much more prominent names on that list that Nixon could have picked. Nelson Rockefeller, former governor of New York, John

Connally, former Democratic governor of Texas, and I think all of us – the perception was, Dad’s name, yes, it was on that list, but it was down at the bottom. Nixon – he was more important to Nixon in Congress to get legislation through than to be a vice president. And so in October of 1973, when we get the call as a family and Dad is asked to be vice president, that shocked us all. And I can remember Dad, you know, Mother was ready to go through the roof, because here she spent twenty some years to get him to finally retire, and now he’s going to be vice president. I remember my Dad pulling Mom aside and saying, “Betty, just don’t worry. Vice presidents don’t do anything.” And did that prove false.

Smith: There is a sense that – particularly during those years when he was really climbing the ladder to become Minority Leader and all that – how much was he away? How much of an issue was it? And did he feel guilty about it in later years?

Ford: He was away a lot. I mean, a hundred nights a year? Maybe more sometimes. And I know he felt guilty, but I can remember as a kid, every night when he was gone, Mom would kind of line all the kids up in her bedroom by her desk and her phone. And Dad would be on the phone and we’d all say our “How’s it going, Dad?” And he’d ask us how school went and all that. So there’s that vision of standing there in line with my two brothers and my sister, Mom pulling one of us over, giving the phone so we could talk to Dad. And that happened a lot. That’s where Mom, I mean, wow, she was a hero because she was the one there 24/7, got us to school, made sure we got to football practice, to the dentist, got the school worked on, and if there was ever a big blow up or a fight or something, she had to deal with it. By the time Dad got home, he could come home and be the good guy. Mom was the one who had to deal with it. She was the one on the front lines every day.

Smith: She was the disciplinarian?

Ford: Yeah. Because, Dad, by the time he got back, a day or two later, the storm was over and nobody was as angry and upset and things like that. So he could come bringing presents and things. In fact, Mom and I talked about this on the phone the other night. I was calling her, I travel now about a hundred days a year at least, and every city I go to, I always send my mom a postcard, because it reminds me of the kind of things Dad used to do. We were laughing on the phone the other night that when Dad would come home from these trips, and he’d always be somewhere helping a guy running for Congress, or

raising money for another Republican, or something like that. And he'd always get the key to the city or something, so he'd bring them home and for some reason, I was the one who got selected to get all the keys to the city. So I had this collection. But it was just classic Dad. With each kid he had something he did when he came home and made sure that each child had that sort of little special thing .

Smith: Did she resent it? I'm trying to get a sense of the family dynamic. Obviously, part of the later story is that it was a contributing factor, in some ways, to some of her unhappiness at the time. In a lot of ways, it made her representative of women.

Ford: Made her very normal.

Smith: Yeah.

Ford: I think, no doubt in my mind that if you go through twenty-four, twenty-five years of your husband traveling a hundred to a hundred and fifty days a year, there's got to be some resentment built up from that. And at times, I'm sure, it made their relationship very tough. She wanted her husband, father of her kids, home. You need to be doing this, I'm the one doing that. I mean, that's just normal. That's just what any marriage would go through. If Mom were sitting here today, she would never blame anything on Dad, she'd take responsibility for her own choices. But I think looking back, you could paint that picture. That clearly had to play into some – and it's gradual. None of that happens quickly for anybody. It's gradual, builds up.

Smith: It's never been clear to me, at that point, how interested was she in politics? Was it something, because of him, she took an interest in?

Ford: It's hard for me to know. That's a great question, because I'd be curious how much, back when she was a young woman at twenty – late twenties, before she met Dad, how involved or interested she was in politics at that time. She and Dad used to talk politics all the time and whether she was interested or not, she made the attempt to be up to date on what was going on and participated in all those things. Whether that was out of a love for politics, or a love for Dad, probably a combination of both.

Smith: You keep hearing about how in those days members of Congress brought their families to town. That there was much more social interaction across the partisan divide, with all the consequences of that. Who were their friends?

Ford: I think they had two different sets of friends. As you say, back in those days you socialized across the aisle and on your side, too. That happened all the time. Also a lot of your friends would be considered what they would call almost lobbyists today. There was a much freer interaction between someone that was involved in business or things like that. So there was a different ground rule. But then there were plenty of people in the neighborhood, parents. There was a bonding by they might have a kid my age and we played basketball together, went to school together. There was still that. So there were friends on a lot of different levels.

Smith: We talked to Cokie Roberts who will never forget when her dad disappeared, that your dad would, not just call every day, but would go out to the house to check up and see if anything had happened. Almost a paternal kind of role. It's hard to imagine that happening today.

Ford: It is hard to imagine today. Yeah.

Smith: But that relationship was clearly special. They used to debate at the National Press Club. Then they would get in the car together and drive down and decide en route what they were going to debate that day, have the debate, and then they would go have a drink and lunch, and back to the Hill.

Ford: Well, you look at that, you look at the relationship Dad had with Tip O'Neill. Not your typical relationship of a President and a Speaker of the House from the other party – it usually doesn't happen. But they had a great fondness for each other. Why it wasn't so toxic back then? I'm not sure. I'd love to get back to some of that, but that's the nature of the beast.

Smith: We were talking to Alan Greenspan and he said one of the things that really broke that up was the jet plane. Because you have members on the West Coast who could stay on the West Coast, and live on the West Coast.

Ford: And not have to live in [Washington].

Smith: Yeah, and I've always thought another reason was the Cold War. For a long time, it imposed a kind of artificial consensus.

Ford: That's interesting. Yeah.

Smith: Plus, you had the World War II generation. They shared the life-defining experiences that transcended politics. The '60s race is a classic race of two candidates who really didn't differ on very much. And so it was a combination of the political culture, and a lot of other things.

Ford: You know, I think one thing today, and it doesn't have anything to do with Dad, but I think we, as a general population, learned from who we listened to, and when you put all these talking heads on TV today – whether it be radio, it could be the right, it could be the left, but they have a tendency to find such opposites and they scream at each other, and I think we, as a country, we learn to do the same thing by watching. That is probably not a healthy thing.

Smith: One of the things that contributed to this camaraderie one senses that people forty, fifty years ago, just drank a lot more than they do today.

Ford: I think they did. There was a typical five o'clock happy hour, and going back to Mom, I think you start adding all those things up; whether it be the happy hour at five o'clock that was endorsed by everybody, and Dad traveling and that putting pressure on their marriage. Again, it built up over the years. The drinking is just an end result of other stuff.

Smith: Do you buy into the genetic predisposition?

Ford: I do. I'm, myself, eighteen years recovering. It will be nineteen years in June. I'm a recovering alcoholic myself. And so I'm not blaming it on that, I take full responsibility for my sobriety the last nineteen years, but I thank Mom for being a great leader. You would have thought Betty Ford's son would have known better, you know. Here we went through the intervention with Mom and the Betty Ford Center and all that, and ten years after Mom goes through her bout with alcoholism, I, too, have the same thing. And I joke, I went to Mom and I said, "Mom, I think I'm an alcoholic." And she was just like every other mother in the country, she said, "Oh, my son can't be an alcohol, you can't be." And I said, "Mom, stop! You are like Betty Ford, the poster child for this whole thing." And yet she was just like every other mom. I think that's how insidious a disease it is, and that's what happens.

Smith: When did you sense that there was a problem in her case?

Ford: When did we actively talk about it, or when did we sense it? I think we all sensed there was a problem, but, again, I think we were typical of many American families, in that we didn't talk about it. We didn't know you could talk about it. When we did the intervention on Mom, I'd never heard the word intervention. That was a cutting edge, new tool they were using in alcoholism. Now you've got TV shows on intervention.

Smith: How rough was it? On you, who were intervening as much as on her.

Ford: Let me go back and finish answering the other question. I think all of us knew there was a problem, we didn't necessarily talk about it years before we did the intervention. You would see Mom at times, slurred speech, she'd miss appointments, not eat much dinner. So you knew something was going on, but, again, there was this denial – the elephant in the room. And finally, thank God, Susan kept after Dad and a doctor and said, "Look, we've got to do something." Dad agreed, understood, jumped in there to save his wife. And, again, he was as confused as all of us, because at that time the stigma of alcoholism – it was a skid row bum, it wasn't the former First Lady. So we had to sort of get over that hump, and when we did the intervention, Dad led it and called all us kids.

All the kids flew down there the day before and we met in his office next to the house. And we met with the doctor the night before in Dad's office and he walked us through what this intervention was. He said, "I want each one of you to walk in there with one or two stories of how your mother's drinking just tore up your life. But you've got to keep it short, you've got to be able to tell that story within a couple of minutes." He says, "We're going to go around the room and everybody is going to tell their stories and we're going to do this in love, and we're going to remind your mother, gosh, Mom, we're doing this because we love you. And she's going to get very defensive, and there is probably going to be screaming and shouting and tears and hugs, and more screaming and shouting." The guy knew what he was talking about. We're just blind, trying to be led.

The next morning we walked in that door, early in the morning – all the kids, Dad, Clara, a woman who helped raise us, our housekeeper years ago, and a nurse. We went in there and the initial reaction of Mom was, "Oh, look, here's all my family!" And then it took about a nanosecond for her to go, "Wait a second, it's eight o'clock in the morning. You guys shouldn't be here, you live in North Carolina, you live in..." and also the walls went up, the defenses went up, and the battle was on. What I'll never

forget, it is really kind of the journey of Mom and Dad in their marriage, is how Dad sat down, took her hand, and led that intervention, reminding her that he wanted his wife back, loved her, the kids were here, and kept calming her down, and just trying to fight to get his wife back. Dad led it beautifully. I mean, he just did a great job, and you could sense that steadiness, that he wasn't going to move – he's there, he's not going. And basically, he shut his life down after that. He stopped going to some of the board meetings and stuff like that until Mom got through this. We were a wakeup call that morning; she did all the work. We woke her up, and obviously, she did all the work. That's the image I have of Dad leading that.

Smith: Because it's never been terribly clear as to what portion was alcohol, what portion was prescription drugs, how they mixed. One senses that maybe there is no clear distinction. But did pills, in some ways, afford a respectable kind of cover? You had this genuine, physical problem for which she was prescribed by a perfectly respectable physician. You could, in some ways, almost take refuge behind that.

Ford: Oh, yeah, you justify it. Oh, yeah. I'm doing what my doctor told me to do. And, again, that's the slow progress of the disease. Mom had a legitimate pinched nerved in her neck, and her back hurt and you would prescribe medications for that and that makes sense. But when you combine that medication with alcohol – and that's what sort of fooled all of us, we never saw her drink that much. But that didn't matter because you were making this cocktail of drugs and alcohol, so it just heightened the effects. In the end, it doesn't matter whether it was sixty percent alcohol or forty percent – the end result is she couldn't participate in either one of them later on. And she had to get sober. Again, we woke her up, she did all the work.

You might remember, Richard, the best story I remember is after she started the process and went to Long Beach Naval Hospital...

Smith: Which was pretty rough, I'm told – the program is pretty rough.

Ford: Yes, it's kind of tough love. And I remember going, went and sat in on a couple of group sessions, and I remember meeting some of the guys in her group, and they were all the way from an admiral to a petty officer, whatever. Rank didn't mean anything, you were all in there as alcoholics. I remember Mom sitting there, and I guess it was the cafeteria, we were sitting at the table, and she sat there with three or four of these guys,

and they are telling dirty jokes, kind of sailor stuff, and I was just offended. I kind of raised up, I was getting to, "Don't you talk like this around my mother..." and I talked to one of the counselors and he said, "You know what? It's what your mom needed. They don't care that she's First Lady. She's Betty." And the doctors and everybody else had put her on a pedestal, catered to these needs, and helped create some of her co-dependency and the problems. And so the guy telling the dirty joke was probably a good thing to sort of bring her back.

Smith: Well, a detour, but it is well known among those who know her well, that she certainly has a more ribald sense of humor than your dad.

Ford: Yeah.

Smith: Jokes had to be explained to him sometimes.

Ford: You are exactly right.

Smith: She and the girls...

Ford: But it's funny, because as a son, you want to...and remember, that afternoon we did sort of a group thing. They went around the circle, the patients and some of the family members were there. And they asked me afterwards if I'd learned anything. And I said, "Gosh, you people here are not very smart. You're stupid. Why would anybody want to become an alcoholic? This is stupid." And I just remember them sort of laughing at me, going, you don't get it, do you? And here, ten years later I raise my hand and said, "I'm an alcoholic." So that tells you the awareness factor. I should have known better.

Smith: Not an intellectual decision.

Ford: Yeah.

Smith: Did your dad participate in some of these programs?

Ford: Yeah. He went out when Mom was at Long Beach. The analogy I use between Dad and Mom at that time – Dad was very busy – again, they were building a house in Palm Springs, he's on the board of directors of a lot of companies, giving speeches. It was a very active time in his life after the presidency. And she was home alone, and he felt it.

Smith: In some ways it was even worse because the kids were basically grown up.

Ford: Gone, yes, everyone was gone. She was really much more alone than she was, say, at the White House. The analogy I make when I look at Dad and what happened with the intervention, it's like two people climbing Mt. Everest. And you get up to the three-quarters level and your partner gets sick and you could obviously go climb the rest of it on your own. Or you can come back and help your partner get well, to get to the top together. And I think that's what Dad did. When he saw Mom, the alcoholism and that, he sort of shut a lot of things down, to say, "You're my climbing partner. There is no sense in me getting to the top without you." And he sat and waited and helped her join him to get to the top.

Smith: You know, that's raises another question. I remember mentioning in the eulogy the cliché that as we get older, we tend to get more conservative. Maybe because we have more to conserve, nostalgia for the past, or whatever. And, again, I don't want to make too much of this, because God knows he always remained a fiscal conservative. A true fiscal conservative. But in other respects, he seemed to take a broader view. And it's easy to say, well, the party moved so far to the right and all that. People speculate, well she had a lot of impact, but she'd always been around. I wonder whether that unfolding experience, going through the intervention and all that followed, and being involved as much as he was in the work of the Betty Ford Center - in the course of all that, he saw all these people, good people, accomplished people, people he admired, who had a weakness, a problem. You wonder whether that fired some of the compassion, the broadmindedness. I don't know, am I making too much out of that?

Ford: No, I think you're right. I give it to you on two different levels. I think Dad always had a great compassion for people and helping people. He was a pull it up by your bootstraps kind of [guy], that was the Midwest Grand Rapids way he was raised. And I'll give you two analogies - the end of the Vietnam war, he's in front of Congress pounding his fist, saying we need more money to get these people out of South Vietnam that helped us. These people are going to die. The Vietcong, the North is going to kill them. We need to help them. He had great compassion in Operation Baby Lift and the orphans coming over and things like that. And so that compassion was already there. In some respects, he didn't understand the alcoholism and that weakness idea because he didn't operate on that level. Dad, you gave him a challenge, he just got it done and that's the way. So Mom definitely opened up his awareness, even when I went through my alcoholism. I think he didn't understand it, but he trusted Mom to tell him, "Jerry, you know this is

what happens to certain people. It's a disease, you've got a weakness. You have to give it up to God. It's not just..." You know, Dad came from that generation of, dang it, I'll just get it done. So it was a different kind of compassion that I think she taught him. He already had that compassion for helping people that needed help.

Smith: Tell me about their faith.

Ford: We grew up going to church every Sunday, Episcopal Church, and they were very dedicated that way. I think they lived out their faith in a different way than you might see other Christians live out their faith. They weren't a very vocal – I remember going to Africa. I went to Tanzania to work with some orphans whose parents had died of Aids, and my faith then, I was probably a little bolder about it and everything. I told that church over there, I spoke at a church, and I said, "I've never seen my dad lay hands on anybody, and heal them. He doesn't speak in tongues, promise you that." And I said, "But you know what? I see him get up from the dinner table every night, and go do the dishes for my mother. And love her the way God would love her." So I think that's how he lived out his faith. He was very quiet. Proverbs 3, 5 through 6, was what they, every night at bedtime they laid there and held hands. It wasn't worn on his shirtsleeve.

Smith: Talk about opposites attracting. I assume her tardiness was a lifelong issue.

Ford: She was always late getting ready.

Smith: Was that a form of perfectionism? One thing that would surprise people - but she had butterflies before she went on and made a speech. I've often wondered whether the lack of punctuality was somehow related to, "I'm going to be as perfect as I can be before I go out there and do whatever I'm doing."

Ford: I'm not sure.

Smith: Or maybe she was just late.

Ford: And it really didn't make any difference because I can remember walking in the room so many times and Dad would be sitting in the chair, and I'd be pacing, "Is Mom ready?" He said, "Just relax, I've been doing this for thirty, forty years." I think probably the first fifteen years it was tough, and he learned a little more patience later on. You're right. Opposites attract and they both taught each other things. He loved her very deeply, and she loved him and respected him so much.

Smith: Did you ever hear them arguing?

Ford: Oh yeah. Both of them could be tough about standing their ground on their opinion. You know, Dad had a quick temper and it would come out and be gone. Once it got out, everything was fine and we moved on. But do you know when I saw his temper the most was when I played golf with him on the golf course. He'd miss a putt or mess up a shot, and "God damn it, grrr..." And then it would be gone.

Smith: Anger directed at himself.

Ford: Yes. Not at somebody else, no. Think about with Mom and Dad, the second half of her life is where she blossomed, and that was when they came to the vice presidency and presidency. And so, we're sitting here talking about Mom and Dad – she really had the burden of raising us kids and being there on a daily basis – getting us to the doctor, football practice. And then, once they moved into the vice presidency and the presidency, that's when she really blossomed. And she blossomed from real challenges – the breast cancer, later on the alcoholism, equal rights amendment for women. But that was her stage, and I think he was very proud of her.

Smith: Did you know she had been married before?

Ford: Yeah, vaguely. It wasn't something that was talked about, but it wasn't hidden from us.

Smith: Let me go back to – I still find it astonishing, when the vice presidential nomination was made, quite apart from the questions of taste, this kind of celebratory thing that Nixon put on. It was very interesting that your Dad went out of his way to not reproduce that when he nominated Rockefeller. I think he thought it was unseemly in some ways. But the astonishing thing was the logistics - you get this call in the afternoon, and that evening, you're expected to be in the East Room, dressed and polished for your introduction to the country. It is amazing that things happened as fast as they did. Was it a blur to you?

Ford: It was. And, again, I think all of us kids, at least my impression of it was, he was not going to be vice president, they were going to choose somebody else. And then as far as the presidency, that happened again as quickly. And we barely had time to brush our hair before we ended up at the swearing in process. Both of them happened like that.

- Smith: While he was vice president, was there ever a conversation in which the possibility of his becoming president...
- Ford: I don't remember having the conversation. Now, also, you've got to remember, at eighteen years old, that's not the thing that you are dying to have a conversation about anyway. Part of it was denial and part of it was everybody hoped that it wouldn't have to happen like that.
- Smith: Plus it had never happened before. It was unthinkable.
- Ford: Think about it Richard, this was like a Constitutional crisis.
- Smith: Absolutely.
- Ford: I'll never forget walking out on the South Lawn of the White House. Everybody remembers the famous picture of Mom and Dad walking out, and Dad purposely walking alongside Nixon. You know, vice presidents usually follow the president. Here he is walking side by side, Nixon gets on the helicopter; the famous wave from the steps. We're all standing there – Mom and Dad – and when you think about it, most presidents, after they are nominated, after they win the election, come into office, there are galas, balls, celebrations, time for change, whatever. This was not a celebration, this was a dark, dark cloud hanging over the White House. A lack of confidence, a Constitutional crisis – as the helicopter takes off, we're going to walk back to the East Room of the White House. Mom's going to hold the Bible, Dad's going to take the oath of office from a Supreme Court Justice, and here you have a man who was not elected by the American public; who is going to take over this country with a war in Vietnam, Cold War with the Russians, recession, unemployment, Dow-Jones has dropped 40%, price of oil in the last twelve months has gone up 400% from \$3 a barrel to \$12 a barrel. And you have a man who did not get elected by the American people who is going to lead this nation. That's a Constitutional crisis in my mind. It was a very solemn occasion. Very solemn.
- Smith: And of course that night, famously, you go back to the house in Alexandria.
- Ford: Dad's just become president; we can't move into the White House because Nixon – they haven't cleared out all their stuff quick enough. We go back to Alexandria, Virginia – the house there. Everybody is sitting around the table, and Mom's over there trying to

cook something, and she's talking, "Jerry, something's wrong here. I'm still cooking. You just became President." And it doesn't make any sense, but yet, it was probably the healthiest thing for the nation. You'd gone from a president, Richard Nixon, very secretive, paranoid, the Plumbers and all this stuff that was going on – to Jerry Ford, guy from the Midwest, willing to open up his life to anybody. So in planning, it was probably a healthy thing for the country.

Smith: There are stories that you decided pretty early on that you wanted to get out of Dodge. You didn't want to live in the White House.

Ford: Well, I'd been accepted to Duke University. When Dad was vice president, we didn't have Secret Service or anything like that, so our life was relatively normal. I applied to Duke the year before, been accepted, was just weeks away from going off on my freshman year at Duke University. And in August, 1974, Dad becomes president. All of a sudden all of us, Jack, Mike, myself, Susan – we got ten Secret Service agents that are following us around. And as you can well remember, at eighteen years old, that probably isn't the group you are hoping to hang out with. And so to be honest with you, I just didn't know how I was going to move into the Duke freshman dorm two weeks later with ten guys with machine guns and radios. It had happened so quick. Walked into Dad's office, the Oval Office, and told him I wasn't ready to go to college yet and he asked me what I wanted to do. And I said, "Dad, I'd like to take a year off, get used to this. I'll go back to school next year." And he goes, "What do you want to do?" And I said, "I've always had this dream, this kind of vision to go out West and be a cowboy." And I can remember him going, "Cowboy? What? Why wasn't I made aware of this?" I always figured it was better than a rock star, you know. "Dad, I'm going to follow in Jimmy Hendricks' tradition and be a rock star."

Smith: Would he have known who Jimmy Hendricks was?

Ford: Vaguely, because he would have said, "Is that that guy I told you to turn the music down?" And he and Mom talked about it, and thank God I have great parents that allowed us kids to go find our own way. They let me take off. Not go to Duke, moved out West to Montana, started working on ranches – cowboying and rodeoing – took my Secret Service.

Smith: Let me ask you about a story because it involves you. Jack Marsh told us, the day before your Dad was going out to Chicago to deliver the VFW speech, which Lord knows was controversial enough.

Ford: Whew, there wasn't much applause at that speech.

Smith: No. Marsh goes into the Oval Office and says I've got some bad news for you. He'd gotten a lot of that, so he asked what. And he said, "Steve didn't register on his birthday for the draft." And he said it's one of the few times that your Dad looked like he'd been gob-smacked. He sort of put his head in his hands. The extraordinary thing is that the press never found out. You can imagine today.

Ford: And I had to go down and register.

Smith: That day.

Ford: Yes. Because at that time at eighteen you were supposed to register for the draft. It was interesting because there was no draft anymore, basically. I can remember, as a kid growing up, sitting in the living room couch with the whole family, as my older brothers, Mike and Jack - because there was a lottery system for who got picked to go to Vietnam. And it was based on your birthday. And you got a number. And I can remember sitting as a family watching it, the lottery, and just like every family in America, praying that your kids were higher numbers and they didn't get picked.

So that had ended. So when my birthday came about, when I turned eighteen, I had forgotten to register for the draft. So you're right. Here was this big speech he was supposed to give, and his own son mistakenly had not done the registration. So we had to jump on that and get that taken care of. It was not purposeful, I promise you that, but it certainly would have been a terrible press situation if that had come out.

Smith: Did he discuss the pardon at all in advance? Did you hear any conversation about...

Ford: I heard more about it afterwards - the justification of it. His reasons for it. Because for myself, personally, I was, "Dad you can't do this! These people are angry." And he talked to me. I remember one thing he said to me one time. And again, I think he did a poor job of explaining it to the country. Now, were they so angry at the time that they couldn't have heard, even if there was a good explanation? It's like being in a fight with your best friend, your wife, whatever, if they are in that mindset where they are so

angry, even a good explanation isn't going to work. But he did a poor job of explaining. But I remember him sitting down with me and talking about the idea of grace and mercy; and the idea that a president is like father of a family, and at times the father of a family has to give grace and mercy to his kids for the betterment of the whole family. To keep the family together. And I think, with the pardon, that's how he looked at it. It was a greater picture to move the country on. Both him and Congress are dealing with the war in Vietnam, the Cold War with the Russians, high energy costs, inflation, unemployment. And Richard Nixon is in the headlines every day. There are still criminal charges pending. And so much time and energy and oxygen in the room is being taken up by Richard Nixon. And the country has to move on. And I think Dad probably expected that it would cost him politically, but I think, knowing him, he was thinking long term, not short term. And it did play out well long term. It didn't play out well against Carter.

Smith: But it's funny, all these years the conversation's been about the tangible, measurable, political consequences, including the notion that it cost him a second term. What we'll never know is what those consequences might have been if he hadn't pardoned Nixon and we'd gone through two and half years of Nixon obsession.

Ford: I think, and don't necessarily quote me on this, but I recall he talked to Leon Jaworski, special prosecutor, he talked to Congress, leaders in Congress, and found – how much time are you spending on this? Jaworski told him, "Look, Nixon could drag this out for years." And Dad just said the country has got to move on. The interesting thing about the pardon, I found fascinating, is that it was based on a 1933 Supreme Court ruling the Burdick case. Where apparently they had offered a pardon to a fellow who was held in federal custody if he testified, but he said he wasn't guilty, so he wouldn't accept the pardon. Because the Supreme Court had ruled that by granting a pardon, it was an implication of guilt, by accepting the pardon, it was an acceptance of guilt. And Dad, and I believe, Benton Becker, explained that to Nixon that we're basing this pardon on that principle. That I'm giving it, but there is an implication of guilt. If you accept it, you accept that guilt. And Nixon, obviously, turned that down at first.

Ford: She and Dad – just this great love affair. They really enjoyed each other, and he respected her so much, and so many times she went... here she is, talking about the Equal Rights Amendment for women, and it really wasn't a Republican platform – a

plank in the platform at that time. But he never discouraged her. He encouraged her to be who she was.

Smith: And one senses because there was a sea change going on, and it really surfaced in the wake of the *Sixty Minutes* interview. People in Washington fight the last war. And with the Reagan challenge looming, they went “Oh, my God, what has she done?” And then it didn’t take too long – the polls started coming in, and lo and behold, in ways that they hadn’t anticipated, there were whole sections of the electorate that found this refreshing. And indeed, from an administration that defined itself by openness and candor, she was living that.

Ford: She was it. And they didn’t muzzle her. It starts with how Mom and Dad approached her breast cancer early on. They wanted to take the shame off that disease.

Smith: I remember we talked to Nancy Brinker, and she said newspapers, the obits, would refer to a long illness.

Ford: No one said breast.

Smith: How did you find out about that?

Ford: I was actually out in Utah, working on a ranch, cowboying and rodeoing, and I got a call from the White House Secret Service letting me know that Mom had had this biopsy and they were going to do surgery. There was no time for me to get on a plane and get back. So I sort of kept hearing about it and we had no telephone communication out on this ranch. So it was even tougher for me. And I remember saddling a horse, going on this long ride. And I asked the Secret Service if they’d let me go by myself – just pray for Mom, think about her. And they did. And so I was really out of the loop at that point. But if she were sitting here today, she would tell you, she was scared and all those things - but it was all those cards and letters from people all over the country. Women who said, thank you Mrs. Ford for being candid, open. I went in, had a test, they caught it early, whatever, it helped me.

Smith: And it must have been an extraordinary realization about the latent power that she had to educate people. And, in fact, to bring about some pretty profound changes.

Ford: And, you know, a lot of it, too, was men who wrote Dad, who said, “Mr. President, thank you for showing me how to stand next to my wife as we go through cancer.”

Because, again, there was a stigma to it, nobody talked about it, and I think the two of them sort of got the healing process and opened it up. It's still got a long way to go. The same process happened for alcoholism. Dad showed here's how I'm standing next to my wife Betty, as she works through her alcoholism.

Smith: Were there some members of your generation who would enjoy the White House more than others? I mean, you didn't mind being away from the place.

Ford: I didn't mind, but I certainly enjoyed it. Gads, I remember the first night we moved in. I invited my best high school, elementary school buddy over, Kevin Kennedy, and said, "Look, you've got to come over and see this place." We went to the roof of the White House, up through the Solarium, out onto the roof where you couldn't go today. Took my stereo up there; and we're standing up there looking out, and the flags are blowing and we've got probably Led Zeplin's *Stairway to Heaven* playing, or something. And here are two eighteen year old kids looking at each other like Dumb and Dumber, going, "There must be some serious breach of security if you and I are sitting here on the roof of the White House." You just never would have expected it. I mean, if you were the son or daughter of Ronald Reagan you might have thought someday your dad might be president. But not the son or daughter of Gerald Ford. And ten months earlier I would have been outside of that fence, looking in, wondering what the heck do they do in there. And the events that would have to happen in history to catapult me over there. Agnew resigns, Watergate, all that stuff.

Smith: It's interesting you mention Agnew, because we've been told that although in later years, they were basically in the same neighborhood...

Ford: Palm Springs, Rancho Mirage, yeah.

Smith: They managed to avoid each other.

Ford: They did. They did not socialize. I remember going to one – I was down visiting Mom and Dad. One night they had to go to an event; they were invited over by Frank Sinatra to his house to watch a movie or something. And Dad asked me if I wanted to go. I heard Frank Sinatra, and wow, I'd love to meet Frank Sinatra, and so I went. And the former Vice President Agnew was there, there were a lot of people there, but they never had a big conversation or anything. That was the only time that I know of that they ran into each other.

- Smith: We've been told that at times they were on the same golf course and managed quite deliberately to avoid each other. Do you have a sense at all of his relationship with Nixon in later years?
- Ford: I asked Dad one time who was Nixon? Who was his best friend? And I remember having the conversation with him, and he said, "You know, Nixon didn't really have any really good close friends." He said, "His wife Pat was probably his closest friend that way." And I always got the sense from talking to Dad that Nixon was not that kind of man's man, guy-guy, that you joked around with. You had your guy friends, or men friends. And it's interesting because here he is a politician; he's got to sell himself to the people, and yet...
- Smith: He was not a natural.
- Ford: Yeah.
- Smith: Nixon himself once said, "I'm an introvert in an extrovert's profession."
- Ford: Yeah, that makes complete sense.
- Smith: And part of it was, he didn't want people to see him as a closet intellectual, which he was – probably much more than Jack Kennedy. Did your dad talk about the Kennedys at all?
- Ford: I don't remember much conversation about the Kennedys except Dad would mention that he and Jack Kennedy, basically kind of shared the same area –office space. And they used to walk across for votes together, things like that. But I don't remember a lot of conversation about the Kennedy family.
- Smith: Clearly, the Profiles in Courage Award was a huge, pivotal moment, wasn't it?
- Ford: The Profiles in Courage Award, the John F. Kennedy Award, goes back to the point we were talking about earlier – long range vs. short range – about what the Nixon pardon was all about. And to have Senator Kennedy stand up there and know what he would have thought twenty some years earlier - that that moment would ever happen where he would basically say the pardon helped heal the nation and things like that. I think for Dad, that brought it full circle. They figured the pardon cost him four to eight percent of the vote against Carter? And that could have changed the election. But, again, he was

thinking long term, not short term. And I think that showed the courage of what he did as a politician – to be a public servant, not a politician.

Smith: I only heard him speak disparagingly of two people. And the worst he could come up with was, “He’s a *bad* man.” One was John Dean and one was Gordon Liddy. We know famously he said he had adversaries, not enemies. Beyond that line, was he really that generous in his assessment of other people’s?

Ford: He was pretty dang good about that. He wasn’t harsh on people like that. It was a good quality. Again, he could get mad at somebody, but it didn’t last and talking about John Dean and Liddy and Erlichman and Haldeman, I don’t think he liked those guys because I think he smelled that from day one. I don’t think he had much love for those guys. I can remember him talking about Erlichman and Haldeman would come up to Capitol Hill to talk to him. He was the House Minority Leader and, “The President wants this, you get this legislation through.” And so on. And Dad said, “I used to go, wait a second.” In the back of his mind he goes, I know Dick Nixon, I served with him, that doesn’t sound like what Dick Nixon would want. And he would find out or talk to the President. And Haldeman and Erlichman had their own agenda as far as pushing things. So Dad, I think, had a good sense of what was good and what was bad – who to surround yourself with.

Smith: And I wonder, it could be very significant whether that may have consciously or otherwise informed his original decision not to have a White House chief of staff – not to put too much authority in any one set of hands.

Ford: It could have. I remember Dad always saying – and he probably wasn’t the first one to have said it – is a president is only as good as the people he surrounds himself with. And I think that was very much the downfall of Nixon. You had some people close to the top that, when it came to an ethical decision, a lawful decision, the ends justified the means, and trumped whatever laws you might break to serve the president – for national security – whatever you wanted. And I think Dad surrounded himself with people that might have wanted the same results of national security and things like that, but the laws of America trumped the president.

Smith: Why was Hartmann such a polarizing figure?

Ford: That rough, gruff kind of...but yet he came up with some of the greatest lines that Dad ever spoke. And Dad was very loyal to Bob Hartmann. And that's a great character aspect of Dad – is the people that got him to Washington from Grand Rapids, from this district, Western Michigan – he kept them all on the train and they were part of it. Some people might say, “Well, they're too regional, they haven't operated on the national level enough.” And that hurt a president like Carter a little bit, some of that. But Dad was very loyal to those Bob Hartmann's and those people from Michigan.

Smith: By the way, quite apart from the unique tightrope that he was walking as vice president, we're told he didn't particularly like the job of vice president.

Ford: Well, basically, I think he felt very vulnerable. There was a sense that the president was sending him out there to defend the White House. And you were trying to defend policy, whether it be dealing with Russians on SALT agreements, or the Vietnam war, the economy, and then you were also defending the battle on Watergate. And I think Dad felt very vulnerable that this could all bite me later. So I think at some point he sensed it was maybe turning, and his defense of the President and Watergate kept that distance a little bigger than...Apparently, he never used his office in the White House. He stayed in the Executive Office Building, purposefully, to stay removed from Nixon.

Smith: He was genuinely shocked and offended when he realized that Nixon hadn't told him the truth.

Ford: Yeah. I know Dad had said that early on, when he accepted the vice presidency, he had a talk with Nixon and asked him – because at that time Watergate was not what it would grow into. Obviously, as it got closer, I think you are right, he was very offended. Because I think during that whole process, he was on the road out there supporting the President's policies, plus defending Watergate, and I'm sure he was re-checking in with President Nixon, saying, “You sure this is all good?” Then they find out there was a cover up, and so on and so on.

Smith: When the smoking gun tape was released, that really made it clear that the Nixon presidency was over. Were you out of town?

Ford: No, I was in Alexandria.

Smith: How did your mother take the news?

- Ford: I was eighteen years old, so I'm not sure I had a total grasp of how important those final pieces of information were.
- Smith: When did you realize you were going to live in the White House?
- Ford: I think I first believed it very shortly before it happened. As you know, it happened very...
- Smith: And the subject had been avoided.
- Ford: Yeah – very quickly. And you went with the flow. I'm sure Mom was much more aware of it than us kids were. No one hoped for that to happen. Dad loved being a public servant. That's what he thought people should do. You give your life. And I don't think he, even up to the end, suspected. He knew it might happen, but to suspect that Nixon would have put himself above the laws of the nation and the Constitution - it would just be beyond Dad. He knew it was a possibility, but he hoped for better.
- Smith: Could you see her blossoming, after they got there, and realized that this isn't so bad. There is a lot to be said for living in the White House. But she'd been a performer, and it's almost as if all those years...
- Ford: The curtain has now gone up.
- Smith: We were told she enjoyed the State Dinners and the public aspects of the job.
- Ford: Because you know it's not permanent – it's a temporary situation. Every four years or eight years, in our case two and a half years, the locks get changed and the key may open to right one time and to the left the next time. Mom did blossom, there's no doubt about it. That was a period for her to really blossom and become First Lady. But I think the biggest help to us was it happened so quickly. We didn't have a chance to worry about it, think about it. And again, I draw the analogy, if you were one of the Reagan children or one of the Bush kids, you almost knew that at some point your father might be president and there was a whole anxiety that went to the buildup. With us, it was let's go. It's you, let's move it.
- Smith: Did you think at the end of the '76 campaign, that you'd caught up – had a real shot at winning this against all the earlier odds?

Ford: At the end of the '76 campaign, at the end of the convention, I thought we had no shot at all because we were 30 points behind or so from Carter. As it got down to that last week, at the end of the campaign going into the election, I thought we had a real shot. And everybody was invested. And as much as I wanted it for Dad, because he wanted it, when we lost, it was almost a relief. A selfishness for me. I knew he was going to live longer because he wouldn't serve a second term. And as a son, it was a selfish thing I was glad we lost. But on the other end, I know Dad thought his policies were better than Carter's to lead us out of a recession, and so there was a mixed message there.

Smith: We were told it took him a while to bounce back.

Ford: Oh, yeah. He loved being a public servant. And when you come that close, it was how many votes in Ohio, and a couple places, could have changed the whole election. And the economy was getting better. Inflation was way down, they were producing jobs and unemployment started to head down. But, again, this is where I think he was a very ethical politician, public servant. He was advised by many people on his staff. "Mr. President, you have an election coming up in November, we can do some things to the economy that will get it pumped up." But those are always short term fixes. They never last. And he was against that. That had been done before in several presidential elections. Presidents have that power to do certain things to get the economic numbers up, but they don't last. He chose not to do that, was thinking long term again, not short term.

Smith: The fiscal conservatism – there is some debate over what kind of tipper he was – etc., etc. How much of that do you think is the product of a Depression era boyhood? Selling your blood to get through college and all of that. I assume there is a generational element. Plus, growing up in West Michigan - it's a number of things.

Ford: Dad was tight at times – there's no doubt. It was funny, I remember back in the Eighties, I was working for CBS for about seven or eight years on a soap opera, *The Young and the Restless*, and for a twenty-some year old kid, I was making good money. And I remember every time I went home he'd pull me aside and whip out a twenty and give it to me and stick it in my pocket and said, "Now don't tell your mother." And I just have to laugh. "Dad, I've got a job, I'm really doing quite well, just bought a ranch..." "Naw, you take it..." But he was always that way. He always wanted to look after you. I think it was his childhood, his upbringing, his father, his mother, Western Michigan, it was

getting out of high school and having no money to go to college. Finally got to Michigan – they had done a fundraiser at the high school – South High – and had some sort of little scholarship and raised a hundred bucks for him to be able to go to Michigan. Yeah, that all played in. He didn't waste money on things. It needed to work, be practical, be usable.

Smith: Did he actively resent his birth father?

Ford: He never talked about him.

Smith: Really?

Ford: When he did talk about him, which was very rare - he would talk about the story if someone had brought it up at dinner, "Dad, do you remember Grandma Ford?" And he'd talk about his mother, our grandma, and then he would relay into that story that my real father left us, and so on and so on. And you could hear the bitterness there. You could see him lift up his mother, Dorothy, but he spent more time lifting her up. And in lifting up his eventual stepfather, Grandpa Ford, Gerald R. Ford.

Smith: Did you know your grandmother?

Ford: Oh, yeah. I knew both my grandparents. Grandpa Ford, he died, I was pretty young, but I remember him, he used to take me in his backyard, had these big sunflowers and he'd pull nickels out of my ears and things like that. Grandma Ford, my sister Sue and I used to stay at her apartment all the time in Grand Rapids. She had a little parakeet and she used to go to church every day and we were scared to death to drive around with Grandma Ford. She would get in the car – she wore hats every day – and she'd get in the car and my sister Susan and I would call over to my Aunt Janet, Tom's wife, and say, "Aunt Janet, Grandma Ford wants to take us somewhere. Please come get us." She'd race over because we were just afraid Grandma Ford was going to get in a wreck or something. So we knew Grandma pretty well. Grandpa, not as well. But Dad lifted up his mother, that was his hero – his mom.

Smith: And how did he deal with aging? His health really held up remarkably well until he was around ninety or so. I guess when the doctors said you really can't travel, that was a kind of death.

- Ford: I think a year before he died, I was playing golf with him. So I saw things that a lot of other people didn't see.
- Smith: There is a sense by the way, that he spent more time with you in those last years.
- Ford: Yeah, and I think that was purposeful on both our parts. One, at that time I didn't have a family, wasn't married. I could do that. The last year of Dad's life I kind of wiped my schedule clean in a lot of areas, and spent close to a hundred days with him, whether it be in Vail, Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, Palm Springs.
- Smith: Were you among those who tried to talk them that last summer out of going to Vail?
- Ford: Oh, yeah. And you couldn't. And we were all afraid with the altitude, he was going to die at the altitude from his heart. But they wanted to go one more time and it was the best thing to happen. I went up and spent several trips with him. And we went out and hit the golf ball and did stuff and it was wonderful. It was wonderful. A year before he died, again, I'll never forget – I was down at Palm Springs and Dad got me over. There was a friend of his that owned a private golf course, and we got to play on it. And Dad would not play every hole, but he would ride around and then every once in a while he would go tee up a ball, or hit some putts. Every once in a while he'd catch his drive pretty good, and it would go 175 yards. This was a ninety-two year old man. And you could just see him kind of raise up and bristle up like a big old rooster. And we'd go back and have lunch with Mom and I'd just kind of throw it out there and say, "Oh, Mom, you should have seen, Dad hit a pretty good drive on number four." And then he'd just kind of bristle up again and tell the story. And you could just see it give him energy. He loved that. When his physical activity got taken away, that was a tough thing on him. But he did have it almost to the end.
- Smith: And one senses they were both reluctant – she in some ways was especially so - to let outside people, nurses and others, come in. Because it in some ways acknowledged he'd crossed the threshold.
- Ford: The kids, we had to fight with them, to get them to get help. There were a couple of falls that had taken place where she'd hit her head, or I think maybe Dad had, too. And initially, it's just at night while they were sleeping, and then eventually it got to be all day. But, yeah, they were resistant. You feel like you're losing your independence. But once it got going, they were happy they had it.

Smith: How difficult was it, and how aware were they, of what, for lack of a better word, might be called the media deathwatch that was going on? It must have been pretty frustrating. You go in for tests or whatever, at Eisenhower Hospital and within five minutes, someone would have tipped off the press. That kind of ongoing attention – were they really aware of it?

Ford: I think they were, Richard. But I think because we'd been dealing with all of that for so many years – not necessarily the deathwatch – but on a lot of issues. Whether it had been Mom's alcoholism, or things like that. We were used to it and knew it was part of the territory. And it always made you sad that somebody on the staff of the hospital would kind of sell you out, but that's just human nature.

Smith: There's a wonderful story one of the Secret Service agents told us. The last time your Dad left the Eisenhower Medical Center and got into the Secret Service vehicle, and as they were headed for home he said he wanted to go to In and Out Burger. And so they drove to the nearest In and Out Burger. He gets out of the vehicle, walks in, stands in line to get his burger – I guess one more of life's simple pleasures.

Ford: He loved his In and Out Burgers. I remember when I would hit golf balls over at this course, and Phil Nicholson was over there, the great golfer – just won the Masters – practicing. So we watched Phil hit some balls and then we all sat down at a picnic table there and they went and got In and Out Burgers and we sat with Phil Nicholson and Dave Pelz, and Phil's caddy Bones(?). And Dad just loved it. They started telling golf stories and he was telling about how he used to play with Nicklaus and Gary Player and Lee Trevino and Tom Watson. But I'll never forget sitting there – In and Out Burger is what he wanted. You're exactly right.

Smith: I also wonder – it's speculative – but I also wonder if in the last few years, any conscious decision was made, influenced in any way by you all seeing Bob Hope's last years. It wasn't pretty.

Ford: He was blind at the end.

Smith: He didn't have to be out there. There are stories about your Dad's was nature – someone in Hope's office would call and ask him if he wanted play golf. And they'd go out and do one or two holes, which was all the holes that Hope was [able to play]. And then go back to the house and return later in the day and resume the game.

Your dad was a proud man, fastidious. We were told after the Foundation event speech in Washington where he gave Rumsfeld and Cheney the awards – I remember working on that speech – and he was having some trouble doing it. And he said afterwards that that was the last time he would speak in public. It suggests a sense on his part of this [aging] process.

Ford: He was pretty aware of what others had gone through and had a pretty good self-awareness of himself. Not in a big ego type of way – just this is the way I want to be seen, this is the proper way. We've got other ways we can do this now. The kids or Mom or somebody can give the talks now. I think everybody was glad because nobody wants to see their parent, mother or father, be embarrassed by the press. Be respected as you age. Just like when Dad and I would go play golf, I didn't invite any friends, or he didn't have any of his friends in those last months that he played golf. It was just him and me. We trusted each other, and it would have been awkward if anybody else would have been there because he wasn't at his best. But he still enjoyed it, he still loved it. It was funny, Dad and I discovered golf - I remember when I was getting sober, and I hated golf. He tried to get all us kids to play it, but I'd never gotten interested.

Smith: What is it about golf that is so addictive?

Ford: You've got to get hooked first, because you've got to get through that initial threshold to get on the other side to actually think you can hit it pretty well. But I was committed to find something that he and I could do together. I knew he loved it. I didn't love it. But I was committed to have that time with him and I just thought it would be great to have three or four hours driving around the golf course, hear his stories as he wasn't able to tell me when I was twenty years old; as I would tell him the stories, too, that I would never have told him at twenty, but you can tell him at forty. And there was this new relationship and that was my reason. Now, I fell in love with golf and we enjoyed and shared that together, and I think that was a unique bond because I was the only kid that really shared that with him. So I cherished that – all those times sitting in the golf cart and hearing things that I never would have heard if it weren't for out there.

Smith: He was, one senses, a discrete person. And you wonder if there are things he took with him to the grave.

- Ford: Probably. But he was such a Boy Scout that I doubt that they were about him. They might have been about somebody else. He was such a square.
- Smith: Was he sensitive about the Chevy Chase thing? The whole stereotype?
- Ford: You know, I think he probably, at a deepest level, might have been. But he wasn't concerned with that. He always told it – "Hey, if you're going to be in politics, you've got to be able to laugh at yourself." He was very good-hearted, good-natured about it. But I can't imagine as a human being, in some sense, you wouldn't – to know that you were probably one of the best athletes that ever served in the presidency. Playing football at Michigan, boxing, this is a guy that skied and swam. But he was pretty good about it. It would have made me mad, but he was pretty dang good about it.
- Smith: Do you remember your last visit with him?
- Ford: Well, my last visit with him was the days before he died, and he was home, he was in a bed and we were getting ready to celebrate Christmas. My mom and I were down there. I was down with Mom and other kids were not there.
- Smith: And, by the way, we were told all her life she's been a Christmas buff.
- Ford: Oh, yeah. And there was a tree decorated in the living room and stuff. But Dad, at that point, wasn't mobile. He was sitting there in bed and we had it in front of the TV in the family room there. I said, "Mom, there isn't anything Christmas in here. Christmas has always been your guy's deal, and here we are." And I ran over to Long's Drugs and I walked in the night before Christmas, Christmas Eve kind of thing, and there is one pack of little lights left. And I buy it and I'm probably the last guy out that night and they are going to shut down. I go home and I string the Christmas tree lights around the TV. And the smile came over his face and Mom and I – that was sort of symbolic – you knew something was going to happen very soon. That he was going to pass away. They had told us – the hospice people had told us – actually they thought it would happen earlier and they were shocked and surprised that he lasted days longer than they'd thought. They thought his body was shutting down. But Mom and I – he smiled – we got these little few words from him about thank you. Yeah, that was shortly before he passed away.

Smith: Were you surprised by the public reaction to his death? Because he'd been out of the public eye for a while. I thought part of it was there was a whole generation that was being introduced to him for the first time, and they were comparing these old film clippings against the ugliness of current politics. And he looked pretty good. But there was more to it than that. It seemed to build as the week went on.

Ford: I think people remembered he was a decent man. I think a lot of people realized after the whole Watergate-Nixon thing – all that died down - that that was an honorable decision that he made. I think people look back and think he was probably the president we were really looking for. He wasn't flashy. He was down the middle of the road, steady, fiscal policy, probably not so conservative on social issues. Fiscal policy he was a good solid conservative on that. And he had that perspective. And they look back and go, "Yeah, you know, he was probably the guy we were looking for." He was steady at the helm; there was nothing flashy about him; he spoke from the heart. So it's like an old girlfriend, you know, she really had a lot of great qualities, she would have made a good wife.

I was thinking, we kept talking about Mom being there on a daily basis and Dad being on the road and stuff – but I look back and I think one of the great qualities of Dad as a father is he understood the situation he was in, that his job required him to be gone and I think later in life he felt guilty about that. And I know I came to terms with him and I think he came to terms with me, and wished he'd been home more. But the great quality and the memories I have is when he did come home, he never opened his briefcase, he would be at the house, he'd be with you, he'd be present. And I remember in my eighth grade year, I wanted to make the freshman football team and very rarely did an eighth grader make the freshman football team. And I went to Dad and I said, "Dad, I want to play on the team." And he said, "Well, that's going to be tough for an eighth grader. But I'll tell you what, if you can do one thing that nobody else can do, I can get you on the team." And so he thought about it, brainstormed, solved the problem. He said, "There's nobody that can snap for punts, and I'm going to teach you how to snap for punts this summer and they are going to need you." And, sure enough, when he was home, we were out in the backyard and he was showing me when he played at Michigan how he snapped punts. So I, as an eighth grader, went out for the freshman football team, made it, lettered, played, because he came up with a plan to get me on the team.

- Smith: It's a good story.
- Ford: Very practical. There was a problem. I wanted to play. He came up with a way, and he was present and did it. And that's the memory I have.
- Smith: And it's a kind of intelligence that I'm not sure, quite frankly, people would have credited him with – finding a practical solution.
- Ford: Very Midwestern, very Grand Rapids. Exactly what that is all about. The other thing I was thinking is, some of the best advice he ever gave me, and he gave all the kids this, was follow your passion, your heart. None of us went into politics, and I think it was because he advised, make sure it's in your blood, that you love doing it. He was never a politician for fame and fortune and power. He loved solving people's problems. He was a congressman-kind of guy that enjoyed being a public servant.
- Smith: When we were talking to Greg Ford, he had a visit with him in the last six months of his life. He expected it to be a few minutes, based on what Penny had said, and it was forty-five minutes or an hour or so. Greg asked him at one point, in effect, for the secret of his success as a politician. And your dad said something actually quite profound, he said, "I always treated other people's problems as if they were my own."
- Ford: I remember him saying that many a time.
- Smith: Which is simple, when you stop to think about it, but...
- Ford: You certainly apply yourself.
- Smith: It's like: work hard, tell the truth, and come to dinner on time.
- Ford: Yeah, a very connected way. And Dad had some great simple ways. He used to talk about the ideal of making and keeping friends. And he said when he found somebody that he might differ with politically or gave you a reason not to have a friendship, he said he was always taught, that's the person I need to find out something that we share. Do we root for the same football team? Did we go to the same college, or high school, or part of the country? He said he always worked to find something common that they could build a relationship on, instead of highlighting the differences. And I think that goes back to why he could reach across the aisle in Congress and work with Democrats and Republicans both so well. He genuinely liked people.

Smith: The one question I wished I'd asked him, and I don't know why I didn't. But I've often wondered whether – speaking of regrets – after the fact, he had any regrets in the whole Justice Douglas controversy.

Ford: Was it *Playboy*?

Smith: It was called *Evergreen Review*. And you know what the fascinating thing is? Today, I'm not sure Douglas could withstand the ethical scrutiny, but it wasn't the financial arrangements so much that offended your dad, it was the fact that he wrote articles for this sort of questionable publication.

Ford: But you know, I remember Dad thinking or talking about, and I think I saw it in print somewhere, where he actually said he'd screwed up on that, getting hold of that bone and running with it. And when he looked back he said, "I could have done a better job on that one." But he was pretty quick to admit his screw ups.

Smith: The notorious exception was the Polish gaffe which basically took a week.

Ford: They had to work on him very hard to say...

Smith: Cheney said he thought he was going to be fired. Other people said they were almost thrown out of Air Force One. But that stubbornness kicked in.

Ford: That should have happened much quicker. And it cost him. There is no doubt, you can look back on that – the campaign was going well, they were gaining ground. And, boom, that shut things down right away and took it the other direction. And I think, again, if he were here today, he would tell you he did a poor job of explaining the Nixon pardon. At the time I don't think he did, would have thought that, but if he had sat down and explained to people that he was doing it for the greater good of the country, that the House and the Senate were spending, I don't know, twenty percent of their day dealing with Richard Nixon, that you still had these potential criminal trials, and all this stuff. And it was going to be dragged out and he wanted to get on with the business of the country, and the economy, and getting jobs, and inflation. But he did a poor job. He was not the greatest communicator in any sense of the word. He was, in a room like this – one on one. But in front of the podium, speech-wise, he was not a great orator.

Smith: Last thing: I'll never forget at the funeral, when you are up there in a fog, and you're just trying to get through it and the family is sitting right in front of you, and you don't

want to break down. And it's odd, the thing I'll never forget is, at some point I remember looking over because I heard this sound, and Roslyn Carter was weeping. And it occurred to me: who would have thought thirty years ago that this is how the story ends? Do you have a memory like that – almost an epiphany – from those days?

Ford: That was a hard-fought campaign. There were a lot of things said on both sides and to see – just to see them come together later on and honorably come up with a genuine friendship. I've often said, I don't think there has been any president who has done more after his presidency to help the common man around the world than Jimmy Carter and his wife Roslyn. I think they remember Dad as a person they liked. I'll tell you Richard, I really equate it with when we went through the state funeral, first starting in Palm Springs and then came to Washington, D.C., and then finally, Grand Rapids, I remember sitting there on the Capitol steps. Flags are waving and the cannons are going off. It was a state funeral, but I didn't think about it as what Dad did to finally get the troops home from Vietnam or cut inflation from twelve percent down to four percent, or stock market got back over a thousand points during his administration, and the economy was actually rolling again and dealing with the Russians and Chinese, the *Mayaguez* – a number of issues.

I didn't think about any of that – what kind of president he was. I thought about what kind of father he was, the man. How he showed Jack, Mike, Susan and I how to be a great husband, how to be a great father, his compassion in our family. I thought about the intervention; I thought of him holding Mom's hand when she got cancer and saying, "We're going to take the shame off this disease." And I think Roslyn Carter thought about that – the man, the human being, the leader of his family. That's probably where that came from.

Smith: Last thing. Is it true that you and your siblings, when young, would play in Statuary Hall?

Ford: Susan and I. On Saturdays, when he was a congressman. You were talking about mail earlier – he always wanted to go in on Saturday and look at the mail. And he'd take Susan and I with him and we would get there. The Capitol obviously was a different world than it is today with all the security and everything, but he would have Susan and I sit down at these old hunt and peck typewriters and we would type a letter to our mom. And he said, "Now tell her how much you love her and appreciate her." And we'd type

it and once we got the letter typed to Mom, he would say, “Alright, you can go play in Statuary Hall.” And Susan and I would go play hide and seek in Statuary Hall, and the guards and police all knew us. It was family. And it’s a different world today. But that’s my memory of Statuary Hall - running and hiding behind the statues and typing these letters to Mom to tell her how good a mom she is.

Smith: And, again, how the cycle comes round, with him joining that august company in the Rotunda.

Ford: He will be part of that collection, and if I get a chance to speak at the ceremony, I will probably remind people of that story that forty some years ago, I was racing around this hallway hiding from my sister. The world has come a long ways.

Smith: Time was good to your dad. I mean, he lived long enough to know that people had come around on the pardon.

Ford: Yeah. He could look back and see, whether it was the results of the Helsinki Accord or deregulation, or the troops getting out of Vietnam, or the SALT agreement – even though he didn’t get a signed agreement – he forwarded the process to get SALT II. Continued the process with the Chinese. So he saw all those things happen and the healing of the pardon. That was important.

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