Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this. You were *Time*’s White House correspondent. How did that come about? And were you there from Nixon’s departure or did you come later?

Talbott: I hope I do a better job of talking about Jerry Ford than about myself and my own biography. I came to *Time* in 1968 as a summer intern. Then, when I was at Oxford, I did a second summer internship in Moscow in ’69. I worked on a *Time* project in ’70 and joined the staff in ’71 as the number two State Department correspondent. Then in what would’ve been late ’73 or early ’74, I was attached to the White House as not the White House correspondent, but a White House correspondent. I believe that Dean Fisher was the principal White House correspondent and that was the only domestic assignment that I had. I think it may have been late ’74, but in any event, it went through the ’76 election, and I covered Jerry Ford in the ’76 election.

Smith: Were you there for the Nixon resignation at the White House or did you come later?

Talbott: Physically at the White House? I was around the White House a lot because I was a diplomatic correspondent and that included NSC as well as the State Department, but I was not attached to the White House at the time. I was covering foreign policy at the White House.

Smith: Understood. Did you find it interesting that Ford, even before he actually took the oath of office, on the night of Nixon’s resignation - almost the first thing he says to the American people - he comes out on the front lawn of his house in Alexandria and reassures everyone he’s going to keep Henry Kissinger.

Talbott: Yeah. We all noticed that, of course, and I knew Kissinger – *know* Kissinger – very well. I spent a lot of time with him during that period when he was National Security Advisor, as well as throughout his period as Secretary of
State and have seen him since. Yeah, I mean, Kissinger was a reassuring figure. There’s no question about that. And, of course, President Ford - before that Vice President Ford - was extremely close to Brent Scowcroft who was, in turn, very close to Henry Kissinger.

Smith: But it’s interesting because, within a year, while taking pains to reassure Kissinger that he wasn’t in any way being demoted, he changed that unique situation where Kissinger wore both hats.

Talbott: You’ll have other sources who were both better informed at the time and will recall what happened better than I do, but my sense of it with all this passage of time is that it genuinely was not intended so much to clip Kissinger’s wings as it was to do a couple of other things. First of all, good sense. Good sense I think would argue for having the two positions separate – NSA and Secretary of State. And the other thing was, of course, it was in the context of firing Jim Schlesinger – it happened at the same time if I’m not mistaken. Right?

Smith: Right.

Talbott: I think there was some fall out on the part of the White House. “Let’s do a number of things at once because it makes what we’re doing with Schlesinger less front-and-center and, you know, it’s more humane. And everything else that we’re doing makes good organizational sense.”

Smith: Was Schlesinger just a case of bad chemistry or was there more to it than that?

Talbott: You know, the famous story that lingers to this day is that Jim Schlesinger, whom I also knew and had a huge regard for and still do, wasn’t overburdened by modesty or deference, and used to basically – I don’t know if he was smoking a pipe, literally, at the time – but would sort of poke the stem of his pipe at the President of the United States and sort of treat him like a medium-bright graduate student. You know, that was Jim.

Smith: We’ve been told he treated everyone like that.

Talbott: Right. God knows I was on the receiving end of it plenty, but I deserved to be. But he came by his self-confidence and sense of his own intelligence
honestly. He has extraordinary intelligence and I found him kind of fun in that respect, but I can imagine how his boss would not.

Smith: You say you covered Ford in ’76. Was the White House too slow to take seriously either the possibility of Reagan running or the seriousness of the threat that Reagan might pose?

Talbott: I don’t have any searing insights on that. I think that they were slow. Now, when you say “too slow,” they were obviously too slow, because they didn’t respond in a way that limited the damage. As we sit here in 2010 and talk about this, one of the many pertinences about that whole episode was that a sitting President was challenged in the primaries within his party. That, then, fell into a pattern that was already established with Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter and would then be continued with George Herbert Walker Bush - that any sitting president that was challenged in the primaries would not be reelected for one reason or another. So what would prompt action have meant or effectively would’ve meant? I don’t know. Was there any way to stop the Reagan challenge? I think probably not. Not least because of the circumstances under which Jerry Ford became president.

Smith: It’s interesting. We’ve been told by people who worked on the campaign there were several flashpoints - maybe if things had been done differently, though it might not have prevented Reagan from getting into the race, it might not have given oxygen to the fire. For example, the Solzhenitsyn visit to Washington and the fact that Ford didn’t meet with Solzhenitsyn, Kissinger’s role in all of that fed very much the –

Talbott: I remember that episode very well, because my own specialty then and subsequently was Russia, the Soviet Union. And it felt like a big mistake at the time. It felt like a political mistake and a moral mistake. And, of course, as Kissinger’s own star fell - you were referring earlier to the way in which everybody took a sigh of relief when he was kept on by Ford - within a fairly short period of time, he was under attack from what have become known as the neo-Cons, as well as, kind of traditional Liberals, for not paying enough attention to moral politic as opposed to real politik. And the Solzhenitsyn thing was kind of a poster child for that.
Smith: One senses these cross-currents taking place during this period, where on the one hand, obviously, by the time of the convention détente had become a pejorative - almost like stimulus today - a word you’re not likely to hear from politicians. And yet it is in the Ford years when you have the joint Apollo/Soyuz mission. At the same time, you have Soviet proxy troops fighting in Angola. What was the point of détente in 1975? Was it something simply that Ford has inherited from Nixon?

Talbott: Well, there’s kind of two ways to answer that I would think, Richard. One would be sort of an independent analysis, but that is my own. And then the other is why it created the vulnerability for President Ford that it did. I’ll take them in that order. I thought that the controversy over détente and the criticism of it was exaggerated and not very sound. Which is to say I always found that détente was a kind of a no-brainer. You know, it had some vulnerabilities all along. One is that, whenever you have to attach a French word to a phenomenon or a policy in the United States, sooner or later you’re going to run into problems. You know, whether it’s rapprochement or détente. But the concept was pretty simple, which is, “Let’s reduce the tensions” - ‘-tente’ meaning tensions and ‘de-’ meaning less of them.

In various ways, détente had been there since the Truman administration, and certainly the Eisenhower administration. However, making that the polestar for the policy created a couple of problems. One was that it contributed to a mindset in Washington that basically said, “Well, just as boys will be boys, Soviets will be Soviets and sometimes they will do nasty things, but they don’t go to our vital interests.” And that is simplistic. It meant making mistakes like ignoring or dissing somebody with Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s stature when he comes to Washington.

The other thing was that it looked as though it was granting to the Soviets the geo-political and geographical room to maintain a sphere of influence internationally. And we might’ve come to it anyway in the conversation but I’ll mention it now - there was the whole business of the Sonnenfeldt Doctrine and whether we, the United States, should recognize an organic relationship between the Soviet Union and the Soviet leadership and the captive nations of
Eastern Europe which was highly offensive. It got Ford into big trouble, of course, in the campaign, in the debates, when he seemed to not recognize that Poland was under Soviet domination. All of that created a cascade effect, and Kissinger was particularly vulnerable to that over time because, frankly, he believed in it. I mean to say he really did believe in spheres of influence and balance of power and all that. And, of course, I think it was Ford himself in either a speech or an op-ed who began using the phrase ‘détente with strength,’ I believe that’s the case. Does that ring a bell?

Smith: Yeah, it does.

Talbott: Which was sort of a step towards retiring a phrase and trying to detoxify what has been part of your vocabulary.

Smith: Were you around the White House at the time of the fall of Saigon?

Talbott: I was around the White House all the time, but not in the sense that you mean, no. Not in the sense that you mean.

Smith: Were you surprised at all by the, for lack of a better word, I guess, resiliency? I mean, for years we had all been led to believe, whether it’s the domino theory or whatever, when you lose a war there’s a lasting, if not a permanent, diminution. And yet that summer, I believe, Ford was meeting with Sadat in Austria. The Middle East peace process was, if anything, accelerating. It didn’t seem as if the rest of the world had suddenly disregarded the United States. Was it surprising? We almost didn’t miss a beat.

Talbott: Well, I think maybe you’re either overstating the positive side or understating the negative side. The spectacle of the Americans being lifted off of the Embassy roof, the tidal wave of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regulars sweeping over all of, well, what turned out to be all of Indo China - most of it - was pretty stunning and sobering at the time. Where you’re right is that, by then, it was pretty clear that that was as far as it was going to go, that Indonesia was not at risk, the Philippines were not at risk, Singapore was not at risk, Malaysia, so forth and so on. And it was also apparent what common sense should’ve made apparent - that Hanoi marched to the beat of it’s own
drummer and it was not a cat’s paw of China, not to mention the Soviet Union.

And remember that the whole rationale for the Cold War, certainly for American policy in Southeast Asia, was that there was a global Communist menace that was essentially monolithic. That overlooked, long after there was evidence, the split between the USSR and the People’s Republic of China. And then, subsequently, underestimated the extent to which Vietnam was an independent actor in a lot of ways. I mean, it was highly dependent on the big guys for a lot of armaments, but in terms of its policies, its intentions, it was highly nationalistic. Though I think that fairly soon after the shock and humiliation of the fall of Saigon of South Vietnam, people began saying, “Well, wait a minute. How different is the world, exactly?” And that goes to the point.

Smith: I don’t mean to get off on a tangent here, but I’d be curious: what do you say to revisionists who, forty years later, suggest that the war could’ve been won if only—

Talbott: There are a couple of revisionists. I’ll take the school that you’re referring to. First of all, counterfactual history, you’re a professional historian – I am not – I find counterfactual history kind of fun as a teaching device and as a mind game.

Smith: It’s a parlor game.

Talbott: But, you know, it’s not of terrific utility because you could neither prove nor disprove any theory about what might have been. I’ve never found it terribly convincing. I think what it would’ve taken to win would’ve been so massive that it would’ve buckled. It was either going to buckle in the field or it was going to buckle at home. The fact of the matter is that it was buckling both places and we decided to let it buckle there rather than here. A number of our contemporaries are writing now about how Americans are not good at long wars and so forth and so on.

Smith: We’re getting practice.
Talbott: Yeah, well, but the experience may be providing additional evidence.

Smith: Right.

Talbott: Okay. The other revisionist theory which I find to be more interesting - I’ll call it the Lee Kuan Yew School - which is that we won. We won in the following sense: we, by creating such an impediment to what Lee Kuan Yew would characterize as Communist expansionism, and containing it, as it were, to Vietnam with obviously some pretty major implications for Cambodia and Laos, but particularly Cambodia, we did actually stop the dominoes from falling, including in the very small country in which Lee Kuan Yew lives, which is Singapore. He has made that case. Others have made that case. I don’t know, but I find that a little bit easier to entertain than the other one.

Smith: Two things, I realize they’re speculative, but I’m wondering to what sense the impending Reagan challenge and the criticism from the Right, generally, must’ve had on inhibiting the Ford White House from preceding with normalization in relations with China and/or the Panama Canal treaties, both of which would have seemed to be logical and evolutionary – particularly in Panama, the administration was seriously negotiating.

Talbott: You bet.

Smith: But it didn’t go anywhere.

Talbott: I’ll say. No, I assumed you were going to raise Panama. That was huge. It was huge symbolically, it was huge in its own right, because, of course - and I think it was very unfortunate that Ronald Reagan chose to use that stick to beat up on Jerry Ford, because Jerry Ford’s instincts were absolutely right. Of course, subsequently, the Canal did revert and we haven’t suffered any geo-political damage as a result. I mean, we’ve got issues in the southern hemisphere, including Central America, including the Chinese mercantile growing presence and so forth and so on. But the notion that the loss of control of the Panama Canal constituted a strategic threat to the United States, or it was an injustice for us to give it back, never made sense. And Ford paid a real price for it, not least because he was on the defensive.
I think I remember at a White House correspondents’ dinner, it was one of these joke-y Washington rituals, I forget which one I used to have to go to, where he joked about it. He had a great big Panama hat. It wasn’t even a Panama hat. It was a sombrero, but he called it a Panama hat and he said something like, “They want to take this hat away from me, but it’s my Panama hat and I’m going to keep it.” He was trying to play it back, but it didn’t go over. I remember it didn’t work very well. It made him look silly. It made him look silly not least because it violated the first law of politics, which is never put on a silly hat. But it was a joke that didn’t work and that kind of underscored that it was a really damaging episode for him.

Smith: Could you see him learning the presidency?

Talbott: Yeah. It’s too bad Hugh Sidey isn’t around for your project. He was a great friend and mentor of mine at *Time* Magazine. Yeah, but in a good sense. I really liked Jerry Ford.

Smith: What did you like about him?

Talbott: His basic decency, his basic intelligence, his extraordinary sense of responsibility. The weight of history in a dictionary correct sense of the word – ironic. He had a sense of irony that, “What am I doing here?” But he didn’t let that paralyze him. He said, “Well, I’m here, so I’m going to do the best job I can.” I’ve always sympathized – he was so easy to caricature. You know, the bumbling thing, bonking his head, and stuff like that. He was probably the best athlete we’ve had in the Oval Office. I mean, I don’t know how good an athlete Teddy Roosevelt was. My sense was probably not terribly good, he just was incredibly vital. Jerry Ford played pretty serious football and swam every day and was coordinated and basically pretty smart and just very, very decent.

I thought he was a great guy. I wasn’t surprised, however, when Reagan gave him as hard a time as he did, and when Carter beat him because he had this huge burden, he had multiple burdens to bear. One was being an accidental president, or whatever you want to call somebody who’d never been elected in his own right. The other was he kind of had to carry the burden of Nixon
around because Nixon put him into the presidency. He had to then carry around the burden of pardoning Nixon, which I thought was absolutely the right thing to do at the time.

Smith: At the time?

Talbott: Absolutely thought it was the right thing to do. You know, we had to cauterize that wound, and cauterization hurts, and it hurt him big time. I think the polls showed that he paid a real price for that. Vietnam, it was on his watch that the inevitable occurred. And the other thing, I guess, is since he had not spent his life or at least decades driving for the presidency, he didn’t have that hard core of ambition and commanding presence that, even presidents who have not been successful or who had, you know, personalities that you would not think would make them good politicians – Nixon being the classic example. What Nixon did have was that will to be a leader that was just built into him by the time he attained the presidency. And Jerry Ford didn’t have that and I think that came through, “Really nice guy, but we can do better.”

Smith: Right.

Talbott: That was the attitude.

Smith: David Broder said, “He was the least neurotic President of my lifetime.”

Talbott: Least what?

Smith: Neurotic. He added that it was only later on that a lot of people realized, at least, in theory, this is the kind of person we claim we want as president.”

Talbott: I don’t know about least neurotic, but the point of David’s I would accept is, and I say this advisedly, because one president whose been an extraordinarily important friend to me in my life, that’s Bill Clinton. But I think to become president, there has to be something that mere mortals or near normal folks like myself would regard as a little crazy.

Smith: An obsessive quality.
Talbott: Yeah. Some combination of qualities that you realize are indispensable, both to get the job and to do it well, but you’re just as glad you don’t have yourself and you’re glad your spouse doesn’t have, if I can put it that way.

Smith: Yeah. I was just saying, it’s a TR and Taft test. Who do you want to be stuck on a desert island with?

Talbott: Who?

Smith: TR and Taft.

Talbott: Oh, yeah, TR and Taft.

Smith: And, you know, as much as I admire TR, I think I’d rather share the island with Taft, because he’d be a much less exhausting—

Talbott: As long as there were an ample supply of food.

Smith: — and a more mellow sort of companion, you know. TR would suck up all the oxygen.

Talbott: I don’t know. I think I’d go for TR

Smith: Would you? Well, he’d be entertaining.

Talbott: Yeah.

Smith: Let me ask you about Helsinki. Is that a classic case of something that is seen in one light at the time and subsequently comes to be seen very differently?

Talbott: You bet. Absolutely.

Smith: It seemed at the time as if there were no supporters. The Right obviously was critical, but I believe Carter criticized Ford on Helsinki during the ’76 campaign.

Talbott: I wouldn’t be surprised, but I don’t remember that. Yeah, let’s spend a minute on Helsinki, because I think it was a very important part of the Ford legacy. And before I get into it, you may or may not find this useful, but I remember being in Helsinki for the 20th anniversary and, as it happened, my brother-in-law, Derek Shearer, was the U.S. Ambassador there and they had a
huge conference. I was Deputy Secretary of State at the time and went over to
give a speech and participate, and Jerry Ford was there and stayed at the
Ambassadorial residence with Ambassador Shearer, as he then was. And I
spent some time with him and you might want to even talk to Derek, who is a
professor at Occidental.

Okay, Helsinki. Multiple plot shifts there. Remember what the original
purpose was: it was essentially a Soviet proposal and its purpose was to
concretize or sanctify the division between East and West. You know, it’s the
old thing, “But ours is ours and what’s yours is negotiable.” That was kind of
their philosophy. So, you take the Iron Curtain and you kind of write it into
international law and acceptance.

Smith: Why then? What was it about the Soviet leadership or the Soviet worldview
that required—?

Talbott: Look, there’s been a lot on that. I mean, the long and short of it was because
they could, or they thought they could, and they thought they should.
Remember that the essence of the Soviet mentality is a weird combination of
– it’s basically defensive in its core, but it’s defensiveness that manifests itself
offensively. You know, the old line was, I think Dmitri Simes may have said
it, but in any event, “There’s nothing more offensive than a Russian on the
defensive.” So, what they were always trying to do was to protect, protect,
protect, protect. The classic example of that - you could say the czars, as they
gobbled up much of Eurasia - but Stalin who, after being almost bled to death
by World War II then sets about to create these layers, concentric circles of
facile space essentially to protect the Soviet Union. It didn’t have to do with,
you know, the Communist Internationale or communizing the world. It had to
do with making sure that ‘Never again’. Okay?

Smith: Sure.

Talbott: So that, I think, was the mentality on the Soviet side behind what became
Helsinki. And it was quite controversial on the American side, whether to do
it at all. Kissinger writes about that, Ford writes about it, Kissinger in his
memoirs and Ford in his, I think. But in the end they decided to do it and they
Max Kampelman in particular, who I assume you’ll talk to - it started, of course, as a negotiation that would lead to the CSCE, Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. And what happened in the course of that was that particularly the Americans, but with important input from key Europeans, saw an opportunity to jujitsu the dynamics here. And the instrument for doing so, of course, was legitimation of borders which the Russians wanted. The Soviets wanted to keep out for a long time, but ended up being included. And, instead of legitimating the Iron Curtain, the outcome legitimated the principle that the form of government under which people live is not just the business of that government, but is the business of the international community.

I’m grossly oversimplifying it, but that was really important because it created an opening for wedge initiatives to get the Soviets to accept certain principles, or at least pay lip service to them, and then allow international organizations, including the one that they cofounded, which had been the CSCE and became OSCE. And I think Helsinki was the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union. Now, you know, that doesn’t mean that once the final act was signed, that it was inevitable that by 1991 the Soviet Union or the Soviet empire would fall apart. I think that was very largely a function of Gorbachev coming into power, but it created pressures and caused sprouts to grow on the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain that might otherwise have taken a lot longer to develop.

Smith: And, at the time, Ford paid a political price.

Talbott: Yes. Well, he paid a political price because it looked like it was a peace treaty with the devil. That was essentially it. And there were a lot of things, regrettable things, dumb things said. Hal Sonnenfeldt is a very, very dear friend of mine and a colleague here at the Brookings Institution and a wise person whom I took advice from when I was in government myself. Now, he gave a speech - and you’ll have to check the date of this - to what was supposed to be an off-the-record meeting of American Ambassadors in London that got leaked. Evans and Novak lead to the headlines about the Sonnenfeldt Doctrine, which was essentially, “We’re going to let them have
their sphere of influence forever.” What Hal said was quite a bit more subtle and sophisticated than that, but there we were. It kind of fed not only into liberal opposition to the administration, but also to the rise of the neo-Cons. And then, of course, there was Ford’s what I can only describe as boneheaded misstatement of what he had meant to say in the debates about Poland, which just sort of, you know, “There you go again, right?”

Smith: He’d been to Poland. He had been to Romania and he’d seen the people in the streets. Cheney told us that in great detail, Stu Spencer; what everyone around him found so frustrating was, not that he made the original error, but that for a solid week, he would not step back from it.

Talbott: I assume you’ve talked to Brent.

Smith: Yeah, who knew instantly, “We have a problem.”

Talbott: Well, maybe this goes a little bit to one reason that the Ford presidency didn’t last. I think that, if he had had more experience at that level of government or had spent more of his life thinking about that experience, he would’ve had some software that would’ve said, “Error! Error!” and he would’ve in a not terribly felicitous way, would have backed out during the debate. “Well, you know, what I really meant to say was…”, but it just came out of his mouth and he said, “Well, I’ve got to live with that. It’s my story and I’m sticking by it.” And it really cost. I don’t think it cost him the election, but it sure hurt.

Smith: When you saw him twenty years later in Helsinki, did he feel vindicated?

Talbott: Yes, is the short answer. And you ought to talk to Derek about that. He was proud because, you know, in 1995, the Soviet Union was history. Had been on the ash heap of history for four years already at that point. Pretty much all of us who made speeches - it was a big international cast - and his own speeches are worth recalling. I mean, it was more memorable than a lot of other Jerry Ford speeches at that event.

Smith: A couple of quick things. You were at the ’76 convention?

Talbott: Yes.
Smith: How bitter was that? Remember, with the wives and the dueling entrances and all of the stagecraft and all.

Talbott: It made me glad that I didn’t have to cover a lot of conventions. I think it was the only – no, it wasn’t the only convention I covered – but I had the assignment of doing the reconstruction of how Bob Dole got selected for the ticket. Come to think of it, I’d been to a number of conventions. It didn’t strike me as particularly bitter. You know, conventions do not bring out the best in people and particularly politicians. That didn’t make a huge impression on me.

Smith: I don’t know whether this is part of your memory or not, but we’ve talked to a number of people, including recently Jim Baker, and the consensus is that John Sears made a fundamental strategic error in putting all their eggs in a procedural issue – that of having to name the vice president before the nomination as opposed to the far more emotionally galvanizing foreign policy issue.

Talbott: Sounds right.

Smith: And the Ford people consciously decided not to contest the Reagan platform. Kissinger was livid. There’s a wonderful story told by Tom Korologos. Kissinger made one of his numerous threats to resign and Tom says, “Henry, if you’re going to resign, do it fast. We need the votes.”

Talbott: Right. That’s very funny.

Smith: The Ford people basically decided to let them have it.

Talbott: It’s kind of coming back as you ask the question. That sounds right. And then, of course, it was four years later that Ford and Kissinger were back negotiating with Ronald Reagan about putting together a ticket that would’ve been a virtual co-presidency.

Smith: Was that serious?
Talbott: Oh, yeah, I think so. I wasn’t there, was I? I may have been there, but it sure felt serious at the time and I think Reagan entertained it. But Reagan’s own instincts correctly told him, “This is crazy.”

Smith: You know, it’s fascinating. People would talk about how Reagan would do this, Reagan would do that. And the Tea Party now is claiming Reagan. I often think, you know, Reagan is such a protean figure. Are you talking about the Reagan who was willing to put Dick Schweiker on his ticket and wanted to demonstrate his openness to moderate Republicans, or for that matter, Gerald Ford or George Bush four years later?

Talbott: I was going to ask, “Hello, what about George Bush?” My recollection is that he ended up on the ticket and he’s very much the ultimate moderate Republican.

Smith: Yeah.

Talbott: I’d still be a Republican, probably. I started off in life as a Republican and the ’64 Cow Palace convention in San Francisco pushed me in another direction. But, you know, George H. W. Bush was a paragon, is a paragon, of a side of the Republican Party that’s not much—

Smith: Whose had to pretend all these years in a sense to be something that—

Talbott: Had to resign from the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission. Yeah, I know the whole deal.

Smith: I have to tell you, I’ve been working for ten years on a suitably epic biography of Nelson Rockefeller. It opens with a thirty page reconstruction of that night, the Tuesday night at the Cow Palace where he is all but booed off the stage.

Talbott: I was there. I was there. I will never forget it as long as I live. This is wandering a bit.

Smith: No.

Talbott: What was I? It was ’64, so I was 18. I had just graduated from Hotchkiss and came from a moderate Republican family and one of my mentors at Hotchkiss
several years older than me was a guy named Jonathan Rose, who was Chappy Rose’s son. Chappy Rose you know from the Eisenhower administration. Chappy Rose was, I think, Deputy Secretary of Treasury, I believe. A very major figure in the Eisenhower administration. Anyway, so Jonathan Rose who went on to work for Nixon, got me a job working for Bill Scranton.

Smith: Short-lived job.

Talbott: Well, yeah, like for a weekend. Exactly. But in any event, Ann Brownell, Herbert Brownell’s daughter, was my boss and most of my job consisted of answering phones in the Mark Hopkins Hotel, I think it was - wherever the Scranton headquarters was. I’d gotten one pass to go to the Cow Palace and it was on the afternoon when Rockefeller was speaking. I was up in the bleachers and what I’m about to say sounds politically incorrect, but it was just objectively true – I was surrounded by little old ladies in tennis shoes and when Rockefeller came on, they started not only booing, but shouting and chanting, “You dirty lover. You dirty lover.” And I remember thinking to myself, “Not my Party.” And that was that.

Smith: And that night, one of those amazing moments in history, where you can see the page being turned because the next morning, it was not the same Republican Party.

Talbott: Yeah. That’s how you open the book? Well, that’s a great story.

Smith: Yeah. It’s almost as good as the ending.

How do you think Ford should be remembered? And do you think you would answer that question differently now than if you were asked twenty-five, thirty years ago?

Talbott: Nope and this is with one word and it’s a word he used, a four-letter word. H-e-a-l. He was a healing president and even though, you know, he wasn’t by a lot of standards, including reelection, a successful President, his overall effect was to suck the poison out of the body politic and on most issues - and the
ones I knew best and cared most about were foreign policy issues – his instincts were extremely good.

Smith: We talked to Jim Baker. Right before the Texas primary, Henry Kissinger is going to Africa to assert America’s support for majority rule in Rhodesia and the rest of the continent. And the people in the campaign are trying to persuade the President he doesn’t have to go, bad timing, so on and so forth. And, not only is he going to go, he’s going to have a press conference before he goes calling attention to this. And Baker went over to the White House to try to talk the President out of it. He said, “Ford’s puffing his pipe and he said, ‘You know, Jim, I think the thinking voters, the thinking Republicans of Texas, will understand this.’” And Baker says, “Mr. President, you don’t understand. There aren’t any thinking Republicans in Texas on this issue.” But Kissinger went and, you know, he lost 100 to nothing in the primary.

Talbott: Well, that was a clever comment of Baker’s. It, of course, wasn’t true. Of course there are thinking Republicans in Texas. They just didn’t think the same way. That’s the point. And, you know, being in tune with the Party and the nation, it’s a very contemporary issue now.

Talbott: I’ve got to go, but I was just going to recall one last thing myself about Ford as a good guy. I was the White House correspondent, I guess, by the time the election took place and I thanked Jerry Ford for getting me to many parts of the country I never would’ve otherwise seen, bouncing around with my Tandy Radio Shack precursor to laptops with alligator clips that you’d have to open up telephones and clip on so you could get your stories filed and stuff like that. It was a great experience. I really loved it. And then he lost.

Smith: Did you expect him to lose?

Talbott: Yeah. I mean, yeah, only because we had a lot of smart people at Time Magazine who really understood the polls. But at any event, the story I was going to tell is, you know, he was popular enough with the press that even those of us - I’m pretty sure I voted for Carter, all thanks to the little old ladies in tennis shoes. But, in any event, we all kind of felt bad for the guy and then he did a lovely thing. He basically said, “All of the members of the White
House Press Corps who’ve been travelling around with me are invited to come out with me to Palm Springs just as long as you leave me alone out there and we’re going to just charge the hell out of your companies for the seats on the back-up, the press plane, the Air Force One press plane, and you can bring your families for $5 apiece.” So, you know, I took my two-month old son, who traveled for virtually nothing and we had ten lovely days in Palm Springs.
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