

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**Susan Ford Bales**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
**July 25, 2010**

Smith: We're basically at that point where it's now a four ring circus. We're still doing interviews; we're sending interviews out to interviewees to review; we're now reminding people who have had those for three or four or five or six months; getting them back and incorporating their changes and indexing them; and then sending them on to Grand Rapids. Right now Grand Rapids has about fifty-five that are done.

Susan Bales: That are signed off?

Smith: That are signed off, which is actually pretty good. The frustrating part of this is getting them back from people.

Susan Bales: Yeah, I understand.

Smith: We've got about forty that are out there now. Just this week I've sent out twenty reminders, along with a copy of the original transcript and a handwritten note and all that kind of thing. It's that overlap that will take this to the end of the year, but we're planning on finishing the interviews by the first part of October.

Susan Bales: I bet it's been fascinating. Did you learn anything that you didn't know?

Smith: Oh, we've learned a lot.

Susan Bales: Oh, okay. So it's not boring?

Smith: Oh, God, no, particularly parts of your dad's life. Obviously both of your parents, but much of the focus is on your dad. The post-White House years – not surprisingly just because of the age of the people we've talked to and all that – the sheer, not only volume of activity, but the seriousness with which he took it. And the contributions that he made; so much of it was off the radar screen and so much of it reflects back on the kind of person he was and how seriously he took all of those things. But also the humor; him going to the

movies and coming back and telling Penny and all the gals, they'd like it, it was a chick flick. Which is not a phrase you'd think as automatically rolling off his tongue.

Susan Bales: Did they talk about him going to In and Out Burger?

Smith: Oh, yes.

Susan Bales: Going through the drive-thru.

Smith: In fact, the last time the Eisenhower Medical Center – it was just a great story. But there are so many...

Susan Bales: Lorraine Ornelas.

Smith: Lorraine's story is very poignant.

Susan Bales: Oh, Lorraine.

Smith: And she told it so well. She was a nervous wreck getting on the plane the first time or going down the ski slope.

Susan Bales: Right.

Smith: But she was wonderful.

Susan Bales: And he was a huge father-figure to her.

Smith: She made that very clear. She learned all about self-discipline and having a purpose. And it was very, very clear it was a very special relationship.

Susan Bales: Yeah, it really was.

Smith: There is obviously a dwindling number of folks; we tried to go first after members of the Cabinet, but also people who had been in Congress with him. We talked to John Dingell on Thursday. Had a wonderful interview with Mike Wagner on Monday, and he told us at the very end, he said, "Let me tell you a story that I don't think anyone knows. It was about a Navy Ensign we'll call Shirley. Anyway, her parents were from West Michigan. Post 9/11 and post-Homeland Security Department setup, basically Secret Service was given a new coordinating responsibility for state funerals - to basically pull together

all the pieces. They gave an agency assignment to the woman and it turned out her parents were from West Michigan and she was an infant at the time. Her father was a disabled veteran, I think from the Korean War, and the government screwed up, he wasn't getting his checks and it got to the point where they were literally facing eviction from their home. In desperation they called their congressman. Well, one thing led to another and he took care of it. They saved their house and fifty years later she says, "Now I can repay the favor."

Susan Bales: Wow.

Smith: You'd be amazed at how many of these interviews are studded with those kinds of stories.

Susan Bales: For instance and you might check with Donna and Joe Calvaruso, there was a gal that I met at the museum who was one of Vietnam refugee babies who came to the wreath laying. I didn't realize it when I met her; I realized it later.

Smith: One of the really extraordinary moments of my life was the day when he came back and we dedicated the Saigon stairway, and there were probably five hundred members of Vietnamese community from West Michigan. It was bittersweet.

Erik: Remember the little guy who came up to President Ford with tears in his eyes and said, "Mr. President, I wouldn't be here right now if it wasn't for you. I would be dead right now." And hugged him.

Susan Bales: And that is something that Tyne did not know about, and I have passed some of this on to her and she's like, "Wow" - because she wasn't born.

Erik: She says, "This is neat, this is Grandpa."

Smith: Let me ask you first of all about your grandmother. One senses that's she's a really pivotal figure in this whole story.

Susan Bales: Miss DAR, there she is.

Smith: Tell us about Dorothy Ford.

Susan Bales: Well, first of all, I was like ten or eleven when she died, so I have some memories but they are a little bit fuzzy. My cousins would have - Lori and Linda and Julie. But I always remember we spent several days with Grandma before we would go to camp because Steve went to Leelanau – all the boys went to Camp Leelanau.

Smith: And that was where?

Susan Bales: Traverse City. And so always we would go back and the kids spent the whole month of July in camp, and then we spent the month of August at the cottage. The cottage does still exist. Actually, I took my girls and Joy back two summers ago.

Smith: That is also in Traverse City?

Susan Bales: No, it's in Holland – Ottawa Beach. And we went and knocked on the door and the woman let us in the cottage, which was phenomenal because as a child, you have these memories of “The Cottage,” but then to see the cottage... So anyway, usually Mother would go with us. Sometimes Mother wouldn't go with us, and Aunt Janet would then take us to camp. The thing you were always told is, don't let Grandma drive you. Grandma was not known for her driving skills and she had really bad eyesight and really bad cataracts. So you were always told never to get in the car with Grandma. She was a very strong woman, she was very direct – in a sense she was like Dad. I mean, it was pretty black and white, not a lot of grey. She was very transparent, very truthful, told you what she felt.

My mother tells stories about – my mother – here she finally gets a girl after three boys and my mother goes and cuts my hair into this really short pixie haircut and it looks horrible. So Mother puts a bonnet on me to take me to Michigan to see Grandma, and Grandma takes the bonnet off my hair and there's this really short haircut. I guess Grandma Ford let my mother know how she felt. “You finally got a girl and you cut all of her hair off...” and that sort of thing. I would not say Grandma and I are the same kind of grandmothers. I'm a really warm, fuzzy grandmother. Not that she wasn't warm and fuzzy. I would say I was one of her favorites. I was the last girl

grandchild to be born. There was only one other grandchild after me, which was Greg. I have her four-poster bed that Grandpa slept in that President Eisenhower slept in. She gave that to me and I still have it. I will probably give it to my granddaughter. She was an active woman. She had to be tough, she had four boys. Think about it; four boys is a handful.

Smith: The famous story is, of course, that she died in church and they went home and found her appointment book filled for several weeks in advance.

Susan Bales: Oh, yeah. She was a very busy woman and she played cards and did all that stuff. But she was very direct. She never stayed with us; she stayed in a hotel. She stopped by and would spend several hours with the children, and then she would leave. I don't remember her ever getting in there and getting her hands dirty, but I'm not sure grandmothers did that then. Let's think about the time, it's a very different generational thing.

Smith: Was there ever any talk – or is it one of those things all families have that you sort of knew existed, but you didn't talk about – about her first marriage, about the circumstances surrounding your dad's birth and all of that? What she went through? It clearly had to have stamped him in some ways.

Susan Bales: Do you know, actually I never knew about it until I was probably sixteen years old. It was just not something talked about. And I think part of it was to me, and I mean a rude awakening when they referred to Uncle Tom and Uncle Dick and Uncle Jim as half brothers; and I went, "No they are not. Those are my uncles." Biologically, you are calling them half, but I don't know the King family, I've never heard of the King family, and I don't want to say Dad hid it; it was just not talked about. And I actually never understood the whole circumstance until I sat down and read Jim Cannon's book that goes into such great depth about how it happened. And then at some point, I went to Omaha, Nebraska and I saw his birthplace. So Dad talked about being from Omaha, he just never talked about being from Omaha and as a King.

Smith: Did you ever have that conversation later?

Susan Bales: He talked about it – the parts...

Smith: One sensed at least in public he got more comfortable - it says something for his own capacity to evolve that he was maybe a little bit more comfortable talking about the idea of the broken family and all that.

Susan Bales: What he talked about more was when he was cooking hamburgers at the hamburger stand in high school and this man coming up to him and saying, "I'm your father." That was a very difficult – that's the story that maybe we talked about the most of. "Gee, Dad. How did you handle that? That must have been really difficult." And then going and spending a summer with him and then also how - I think he was extremely proud – proud in a different way – that he was able to throw his father in jail so that his mother got the money. I don't want to say that he was momma's boy, but he was the first son, he was the oldest son, he was productive, he was on his own, and he was protecting his mother.

Smith: Well, just a sense of justice, as well. Let's face it; it was the father who had...

Susan Bales: Had beaten his mother. But, you know what? We just never really thought about it. Occasionally, we would get letters at the White House from Kings saying, "We're related." And I don't want to say we brushed them off, but to us they are not our family.

Smith: Understood. Did you talk about your mother's first marriage?

Susan Bales: I always knew about that. That was never something – it was discussed – not a lot, and we knew the circumstances to it and all of that, but that was not hidden, whatsoever. And I know she was glad she never had any children with Bill, because that, of course, makes it far more complicated. I have to say, also, when I got a divorce, she was far more understanding because she knew what it was like.

Smith: Interesting. And then again there was this sort of mysterious circumstances surrounding her own father's death.

Susan Bales: Alcoholism.

Smith: And she sort of alluded that suicide was considered a possibility. Was there a sense within the family that was the probable motive?

Susan Bales: Yes. I would definitely say that's for sure. And I think now that Mother is open and honest about her alcoholism and addiction and that sort of thing, her father was an alcoholic – there's a very strong genetic link in that family, or that side of the family for alcoholism. Now when you go back and look at it, there is without question.

Smith: I don't mean to dwell on it, but it seems a little bit like a black hole in the story. That must have been an incredibly traumatic experience for her.

Susan Bales: Yeah, I think probably because of her age more than anything. She was what – fifteen, sixteen years old? And your father dies and you just go, "Oh my gosh." She never has really talked to me about what kind of influence her father had on her or how close. She was very close to her mother. And maybe the boys were closer to their dad, I don't know.

Smith: How many brothers did she have?

Susan Bales: She had two brothers. She was raised with brothers; I was raised with brothers. The male gene is pretty strong on both sides of the family. But it also tells you – the stories that I've heard about her mother, because of course, I never met her mother. She was dead before any of us children were born. She was a very strong-willed woman, too, in what I've read about her. I mean, she was a tough cookie.

Smith: And one senses that she certainly – indulged isn't the right word – but your mother wanted to follow an somewhat unconventional career path, and at the very least, her mother was willing to bargain with her to give her an opportunity to show what she could do.

Susan Bales: Right.

Smith: Certainly she wasn't suppressing her.

Susan Bales: No. But just to live through – and I think Grandma Ford and Grandma Hortense, they all lived through the Depression. You look at what they lived through, and they made some pretty strong women out of that whole thing. And I think it says a lot.

Smith: It's easy to apply a generational element to this, but it makes sense. Do you think that makes a significant factor in your dad's shall we say, fiscal conservatism.

Susan Bales: Oh, please – yes.

Smith: Your dad was...and it never changed.

Susan Bales: No. That I would have to say – I remember we all were told if you left lights on in your room, “What do you think – you own stock in the electric company?” How many kids have not heard that line from their parents? “Would you turn off your lights...”

Smith: Let me make it clear: it was him, not her?

Susan Bales: Oh, no. It was him saying that. I don't want to say Mother was frivolous, but her purse strings were much looser than his. So he would get after you for leaving lights on, leaving water running or dripping, all of those things – when he was home, which was a little bit rare, too. But when he was home, he was after you for that.

Smith: Did he tell stories about his youthful privation, for lack of a better word?

Susan Bales: No.

Smith: He didn't?

Susan Bales: No.

Smith: That's interesting.

Susan Bales: Didn't talk about that. But he did not believe in a mortgage. So when you bought your first house, and you would say, “But Dad, that's the only tax write off you can get. You don't want to have any debt.” Well, to him, credit cards were useless because you pay for everything in cash, you weren't to have a mortgage and to him you were to pay that mortgage off as fast as you possibly could.

Smith: It's almost a sign of character.

Susan Bales: Oh, absolutely. He had no mortgage on the Palm Springs house, he had no mortgage on the Beaver Creek house, he no mortgage on anything, very quickly. I think he did temporarily when they were building them and doing things like that. He had like a building loan or whatever it's called. But it was paid off very quickly. The man did not like that and he did not like his children to have debt. Once a year you'd get called into the office and it was, "How are your finances?" And you were like, "Oh I hate this conversation."

Smith: And how old were you at this time?

Susan Bales: Oh, until the day he died. Every year you got that, "How are your finances? Do you have a retirement fund? Are you putting enough money away every year to take care of you? How are the children? Are you paying for their college?" He prodded into your finances. He didn't want to know numbers, but he wanted to know that you were fiscally sound, shall we say, would be the best way to put it. And if you were hurting, he would do short-term loans. If you would say, "Dad, until so and so, until I get something," and he would. And you signed a document that you were going to pay it back. But it was a riot.

My favorite story is still the car and putting the blanket over the car; the car that he paid \$75 for before he went off to college. It was cold and he put it in the garage and put a blanket on it and the thing burned up and he went off to college without a car. Can you imagine? Think \$75 for a car? That's amazing to me.

Smith: Most of his life he didn't have any money to speak of.

Susan Bales: He didn't have money until he left the White House.

Smith: Someone told us the story – I think maybe it was someone who worked with Bill Seidman, but anyway, in his first couple of weeks on the job, maybe less, he asked when he would be getting a paycheck because he had someone going to college and he had...

Susan Bales: He had several in college at that point.

Smith: And he literally was living paycheck to paycheck.

Susan Bales: And when they bought the condominium in Vail, Dad borrowed money from all of us kids' investments that he had set up – our stock funds – which were our college funds, actually. And they bought that Vail condominium, if I'm correct, for \$50,000. They borrowed against their life insurance; they borrowed against everything to buy that condo; and then sold it for \$500,000 or whatever.

Smith: Which, first of all, tells you how much they must have fallen in love with Vail.

Susan Bales: Yes, exactly. That was a huge – I don't know, I mean, today's economy is so different, but I don't know how he afforded to take us skiing every year. Four kids, skiing, in ski school, ski lessons, Boyne Mountain, Sun Valley, the whole nine yards. Skiing is not an inexpensive sport. And to take a family of four skiing, that's huge. That would have been huge.

Smith: Was that something you did almost as early as you can remember? Is that something from childhood?

Susan Bales: I started skiing when I was five years old.

Smith: Really?

Susan Bales: And the first couple of Christmases, Steve and I stayed home with Clara, and Mother and Dad took Mike and Jack. But once Steve and I were five and six years old, then Steven and I got to go. We started off in Boyne and I remember ice skating on the ice rink in Boyne Mountain and there was the Snowflake Lounge in the lodge that children were not permitted in. And so Mother and Dad would go to the Snowflake Lounge at night. But Boyne was so small then that kids just ran loose in the lodge all night long and you made friends down the hall – and the kids just ran loose. It was very safe. It was really fun, but it was safe. It was a riot.

Smith: We were out in Vail and it was so clear that they are held in such special regard out there. Not least of all because they are the people who put the place on the map as a year-round destination. They contributed to its success as a winter sports destination.

Susan Bales: Then when you go back and you look at the whole fact that the first house we ever stayed in was Ted and Nancy Kendall's house. Ted Kendall's dad was my dad's Scout master. And we're still in touch with the Kendall's. I ran into somebody in Grand Rapids last week and they said something about the Kendall's. The Kendall's are in Phoenix now. They are still around; there is contact with the Ford family and the Kendall family.

Smith: You mentioned Clara. Tell us about Clara.

Susan Bales: Uh...sainthood would be best.

Smith: Was she a surrogate mother?

Susan Bales: Yeah, very much so. She was the glue that kept us all together. Clara kept Mother calm when she was out of control and frustrated when Dad was traveling and not available and Mother was trying to raise four kids. Clara was our housekeeper that came Monday through Friday, from nine to five. We all used to fake being sick so we could stay home with Clara instead of going to school. Clara was the one that when we ran away from home she would walk around the block and find you. She was the glue. Even after Clara left because her father became ill and she had to go and take care of her own father, Dad sent his shirts out because only Clara knew how to iron a shirt. I think they paid her fifty cents a shirt or a buck – I don't remember what it was – but it was unbelievable. So I would go out when they would drop them off – and I'd go out and spend the day with Clara and her dad at the farm. She was the glue. She could calm us all down, and if she took her slipper off, you knew to run as fast as you can because you were getting ready to get spanked and spanked hard. She was tough, but loving.

Smith: And your mother was perfectly comfortable with her playing that role?

Susan Bales: Oh, absolutely. Clara introduced us to Cassius Clay. Mother and Dad would travel and Clara would stay with us. So when Mother and Dad would travel and go on trips to who knows where and all over, all four of us kids would pile into Mother and Dad's king sized bed in Alexandria, and Clara would turn on the black and white TV and she would turn on Cassius Clay. She taught us about boxing as kids, because she loved Cassius.

Smith: She was African-American?

Susan Bales: She was African-American. Not dark-dark, but she was totally African-American. And her mother actually worked for my mother first. So Clara was with us for about twenty-five years.

Smith: So how old would she have been when you were a child.

Susan Bales: Well, she was there the day I came home from the hospital. She was there the day I was baptized in church, which some church members had a problem with an African-American being in our church. And the Museum has video tape – I think of my baptism and she probably left when I was twelve or thirteen – somewhere in middle school.

Smith: Okay. Did her presence call forth – did you have a conversation with your parents about race?

Susan Bales: No, but I do remember the first day at my elementary school, which was Douglas MacArthur in Alexandria, the first day that black kids were allowed in our school. And I remember one day, to my huge regret, calling Clara a very ugly name. And that's probably the first time that I ever had a conversation with my parents about race. There was just no discussion. I mean, Clara was family. It didn't matter. I didn't care what color her skin was and I think some of that came from me calling her an ugly name of growing up and hearing about it in school and things like that and going, "What are you all talking about? I don't get this." So to me, Clara was just – I don't think I saw her skin tone.

Smith: But the conversation you had with your parents was admonitory?

Susan Bales: No, I think it was more of trying to explain. Richard, you know that they were from Michigan; we were in Virginia; Virginia is the South. Things are a little bit different.

Smith: The first time I was ever in DC, it was in September of '64, and I'll never forget, we went out of the city and went down to rural Virginia, and stopped at a restaurant and on the table were paper placemats which said, "We

apologize because Congress passed the Civil Rights Bill. We have to serve everyone.”

Susan Bales: My dad took us down to Tent City when it was in Washington and drove us all through Washington when they did the whole Tent City all along between the Capitol...

Smith: The poor people’s city.

Susan Bales: Yes.

Smith: He took you down there?

Susan Bales: He took us down there and showed it to us.

Smith: Really. People always said of him, conservative on economics, internationalist on foreign policy, but moderate to even liberal on civil rights, the whole party – Abraham Lincoln bit.

Susan Bales: Exactly. And look at the whole football story. He wasn’t going to play football if Willis Ward...

Smith: And the sequel to that story, of course – many, many years later – the statute...

Susan Bales: Which is phenomenal. I know you read a lot, but have you read the book *The Help*? And it’s not a chick-flick book. It is about the South in Alabama and Mississippi in the ‘60s and *The Help* is the help stories where they are on the bus going home every day. And it was like sitting at the kitchen table listening to Clara. I’ve never loved a book more in my entire life. It is so touching and, sad to say, even in Tulsa, a friend of mine was in a house recently where there was a toilet in the garage and you know what that toilet was for? The help.

Smith: So she would talk about her experiences as a black woman?

Susan Bales: In the book *The Help* they do.

Smith: Okay.

Susan Bales: Not Clara. Clara – there was no color difference. She was family. And that was just the way it is.

Smith: Did your dad – he obviously had the three brothers – was he closer to one than another? What sort of qualities did each have?

Susan Bales: Well, I guess the thing is they were all very competitive. And I think Tom and Dad were probably the most competitive. I think Tom, from what I've heard – I was too young to really understand it – was competitive because of the politics. He was a state legislator and Dad was, you know. I think Dad was a better golfer than Tom. Now we all know that Uncle Dick was probably the best golfer of all of them. Dick and Jim were probably the better golfers of the four boys. But they all had a good time together.

Smith: The competitiveness didn't get in the way of just enjoying the company?

Susan Bales: Of their relationships? No. Tom went to Michigan State, I'm pretty sure. Some went to Michigan, some went to Michigan State, so I think it was a split household, as to college and that sort of thing. I only saw them in the summertime, on my way to camp. I loved my cousins; I looked up to my cousins because they were all older than me and they were like big sisters and I didn't have big sisters. So I used to love going to see my cousins.

Smith: Let me ask you – it's jumping out of sequence here, but that's the way this goes – how sensitive was he to the whole, for lack of a better word, the whole Chevy Chase caricature. The impression that had been created; obviously at odds with his athleticism. Over the years the story has been, well, he kind of laughed at it, or he sort of laughed it off. Is it something that bothered your mother more?

Susan Bales: You know, it's interesting because I personally thought the skits were funnier than – those parts were kind of funny. I think it may have bothered him because we all know that he was extremely bright, extremely athletic. They would pick one thing and it's kind of like let's repeat, repeat, repeat.

- Smith: It's such a turning point; *Saturday Night Live* goes on the air during the Ford administration and some people thought it was a breath of fresh air, some people thought it was outrageous, but it was a defining moment.
- Susan Bales: It was a defining moment.
- Smith: Satire turned to sarcasm; irony became cruelty.
- Susan Bales: Yeah, Dad has an unbelievable sense of humor and he's pretty thick skinned and so much of it rolls off of his back. I think over time, it began to bug him that that's what people would drag up more than anything. At the time it was okay, when you talk about history and things like that – that that's what people drag up is a little bit much.
- Smith: And the fact that Ron Nessen went on the air...
- Susan Bales: Yeah.
- Smith: Was of questionable judgment.
- Susan Bales: Yes.
- Smith: Or judge-a-ment, as he might say.
- Susan Bales: Yeah, there were some fluky things about it that just didn't – but I'll never forget Sally, bitchy, at the *Washington Post*.
- Smith: Sally Quinn.
- Susan Bales: Thank you. She wrote a nasty story when I graduated from high school about me. That the only reason I graduated from high school was because my father was President of the United States and I wasn't a 4.0 student or anything else. Wrote this horrendous story about me. That was one of the most hurtful things that ever happened to me at the White House and my dad said, "You know what your grades were, I know what your grades are; it doesn't matter. No, you weren't a 4.0 student, you've never been a 4.0 student, you were a B-C student; you were always a B-C student. We never asked you to get straight As." But it's things like that that you go, that's what you remember, is the story that she wrote. But I knew behind the scenes, the conversation my dad

and I had and he'd say, "Just forget about it." And he was so good at saying, "Let it roll off your back. It's really not worth making a big deal about. Just let it go." And I'd go, how can you do that? He was so good at that.

Smith: You wonder because he talked about – and it makes perfect sense – but you also wonder if it wasn't also a little bit of a rationalization. He talked about playing football as wonderful preparation for life in that sense. That there are a hundred thousand people who may be booing or cheering, depending on your last play, and it's in effect, irrelevant. They're not the ones down there who are playing.

Susan Bales: Exactly.

Smith: And he could carry that attitude into politics, which is pretty rare.

Susan Bales: Well, and it's true. Because when you think about the center, a team can't play the line without the center. The center is a very important person in the football line.

Smith: But one that doesn't get a lot of credit or visibility.

Susan Bales: Right. Everybody is crazy about the quarterback; but do they talk about the center? No. And he really does play almost a far more important position than the quarterback does. But that always blew me away that I didn't get that quality and I wish I would have. But some of that may go back to his mother. I remember him telling me a story about his mother. I guess Dad had a really bad temper as a young boy. And his mother saying, "Have you ever looked at yourself when you are angry like this?" And that had a profound impression on him. Now we all know he got angry, and we all saw it. And it was not pretty.

Smith: Apparently there were days when you knew were God damn it days.

Susan Bales: Those were God damn it days and you disappeared really fast.

Smith: Was it kind of a slow boil? Other people talked about a summer thunderstorm – that it would just explode and then be gone.

Susan Bales: Except for when it was football. Colorado – Vaden –he could probably tell it better - the Colorado-Michigan game. Mother and I were out shopping and Vaden was at the house with him and I guess it was like the last twenty seconds of the game and Colorado won. And I mean things were flying across the living room and Vaden was like backstroking out of the room as fast as he could. And Mother and I walked back into the house and say what's going on and Vaden's going, "Don't ask about the game." He was not happy.

Smith: I suppose, actually, if you're going to get angry or throw things about something, probably a football game is better than – at least it's not your marriage or your kids.

Susan Bales: Right. Exactly. And I do remember giving him one year for Christmas, or sticking in his stocking, I had bought off the University of Michigan site and it's a sponge yellow brick with M so that he could throw it at the TV. It was like, "Here, Dad, use this when you get mad." But to me it was more of a spring thunderstorm that just volcanoes. Quick eruption and then it's over and you go, "Wow, that's really good."

Smith: Would he apologize afterwards?

Susan Bales: If the grandchildren were there, because Mother would usually say, "Jerry, you probably used some words that probably the grandchildren didn't need to hear." Glasses got thrown, kind of whaled across the room. But, you know, he usually didn't apologize; you just kind of understood it. If you were family, you understood it.

Smith: One thing that Tyne said... Your mother is a very complex person, who - people always want to pigeon-hole everyone, it's a shortcut, it's easy, they don't have to make the effort to understand people on their terms. And I've always thought she has a foot very much in both the traditionalist camp and the contemporary-visionary camp. Here's a woman who people often refer to as a free spirit. And we all know she had a more ribald sense of humor than her husband.

Susan Bales: Yes.

Smith: And yet, as Tyne illustrated in a very loving way, there are standards and you adhere to those standards, in some ways very old fashioned standards, about what you wear in public and how you comport yourself. Can you sort of weigh those two sides? You buy the notion that your mother is a more complex figure than the...

Susan Bales: Oh, my mother is a very complex individual. She is a tough cookie, a strong individual, but I think back to when once we all knew that Dad was close to the end, within six months, we were all as a group sending out emails of what is appropriate. I sat down and had a conversation with Mother and I said, "What do you expect people to wear? Because I don't want any discussion, concerns of you looking at a granddaughter or a daughter or daughter-in-law or somebody and going, 'Oh.'"

I know my mother has standards. What do you expect? She expected everybody to have hose on; nude or black, not to have open-toed shoes, and your arms were to be covered. So if you had a sleeveless dress on, you needed a wrap, you needed a jacket, you needed something. And one of the classic stories was when we went on the Crow's yacht, the *Michaela Rose*, which was an unforgettable family vacation, and mother made us dress for dinner. And there were what – nine of us? And a staff on the ship of eleven or fourteen or whatever it was. But what Mother meant "dress for dinner" for men were: no, she did not want to see hairy arms at the dinner table. So it was either a long-sleeved shirt, you didn't have to have a tie on, but you had to have a long-sleeved shirt or sweater or jacket on. Polo shirts were fine for lunch, but they were not fine for dinner. And so us women, we wore skirts and cocktail pants and she kind of gets into dressing up and we didn't. But we made it through it. It's fluky little things like that that are important to her. To this day, her table is to be set nicely, appropriately, different china and dishes are used for different meals because of the quality of the plate and the...

Smith: Presentation.

Susan Bales: Presentation. And I think some of it comes from her not having it as a child, and if you have the stuff, use it. She's not doing it to show off. She's just doing it – she likes those things. She likes dishes, she likes a pretty table, and

she likes fresh flowers. She likes those things. But if you are going to use them, use them properly. I know one time I used a white wine glass and put red wine in it as I was sitting there in the den having a drink with them, and Mother said something about, "Well, that's the wrong one," and I'm like, "Well, who cares?" She does. She does.

Smith: And grace was said at meals?

Susan Bales: Yes. Grace was said at meals, more so when it's the whole family. And growing up it was. In Alexandria we had, which we still have this table and it's in their kitchen in California, a table. There was no dining room and a kitchen; it was the same place. But there was a lazy Susan and if you didn't get your food – now remember, I'm sitting – Jack was to my right and Mother was to my left, and Mike was on the other side of Mother – and so on the lazy Susan, if I didn't get my food by the time it went around the second time, there was nothing left to eat because I was always fighting against the boys. And that was pretty casual for her growing up. But that was okay. But once they got to California and the White House, and Mother was very respectful of the White House. She didn't want them to come 'down to our level.' It was 'we needed to step up to its level.'

Smith: Let's go to the large issue of their faith, because I think a lot of people learned, or maybe relearned things they had forgotten during that week of the funeral. First of all, they were reintroduced to the family. Secondly, I think they came to realize the Fords had a real love match for fifty-eight years, and the importance of their faith, generally. How would you describe that?

Susan Bales: Their faith was extremely important to them. I don't know if a lot of people realized that Mother was raised Christian Scientist.

Smith: I didn't know that, because I am a Christian Scientist.

Susan Bales: She was raised Christian Scientist, and when she married Dad she converted to being Episcopalian. So he was the Episcopalian, and she was the Christian Scientist, which is why the boys went to Leelanau - a Christian Science camp.

Smith: Oh, okay.

Susan Bales: I don't know if that is still true. So, anyway, we went to church on Sunday. I wouldn't say we made it every Sunday; we were all baptized in the church; we all went to confirmation; I sang in the choir; we did all of the things that you were supposed to do to become an appropriate Episcopalian. I guess we were known as Emmanuel on the Hill, and Alexandria was the low Episcopal Church versus the Christ Church which is downtown. Alexandria was the high Episcopal Church. I never figured out what the difference was.

Smith: I think maybe one is more Protestant and one is quasi-Catholic.

Susan Bales: We were *low* Episcopalians. And I have continued. I mean, I'm very proud to be today a practicing Episcopalian. I have no problems with it. And Mother and Dad were very involved in St. Margaret's. As far as Grace, the Grace that they went to in Grand Rapids, is not the Grace Church that exists today. But Mother taught Sunday school, and of course, Boy Scouts was at the church hall and she did that. They were very much involved and a lot of our friends that we got to know and that kind of thing, we got to know through the church. And then the same thing at St. Margaret's. They were very involved in St. Margaret's at Palm Desert and building - that new sanctuary. The original church - actually, I got married in the first original church - which is now like the auxiliary hall compared to the big church that she and Dad and Leonard and Mom were very involved in building that huge church out there in Palm Desert. So the church has always been very much a part of their life.

Smith: Tyne spoke very movingly about conversations that she had with her grandfather. Whether he said it explicitly or she clearly drew this impression that there was a direct connection that he was not afraid to die.

Susan Bales: No. No, he was not afraid.

Smith: He foresaw a future life. That Christian theology mattered.

Susan Bales: Oh absolutely. That was not - and I know my brother Mike, having a divinity degree - Mike had long conversations with Dad about that whole time. But he had absolutely - I mean, I spent a lot of time with him from the time he came back from Mayo's until the time that he died. I was out there probably every two weeks or so and no, there was no qualm whatsoever.

Smith: Do you think her faith has helped her to get through the last few years?

Susan Bales: I think that her faith and her family are what keep Mother going. She has lost a lot of friends since Dad, she's lost Lee Annenberg, she's lost a lot of friends, and I think that's probably the hardest part of growing to be the age that Mother is – that all your friends are younger. But she still has Lilian Fisher. Lilian Fisher – they are the same age and they're both still going strong and I know she talks to Lilian a lot. But other than that, she's pretty limited in a lot of her friends. So, us kids and grandkids are out to see her a lot, but that, I think is what keeps her going. That and when she gets just ornery and stubborn. She is still very much in control, I promise.

I will tell you a story that will just let you know how much she is still with us. I needlepoint a lot, and so Vaden and I were just out seeing her in early July while attending Greg Willard's son's wedding, and I'm sitting at the kitchen table needlepointing and we're talking because she's eating her breakfast and I'd eaten an hour or so before. I had needlepointed Dad a Christmas stocking. Well, it got lost several years ago and I think it got thrown out. To a needle pointer, that's very hurtful. There's a lot of time spent on these things. So when they get thrown out, it's like you somehow got thrown out. So we're talking about it and Mother looks up and she goes, "Maybe he took it with him." I just went, "Really?" Okay.

Smith: She has a distinctive sense of humor, doesn't she?

Susan Bales: Oh, she has an unbelievable sense of humor. And she does stuff like that every now and then and I go, "You are really still..." She truly sits back and she knows exactly what's going on, who's playing what game, whatever. And she doesn't say a lot, but when she does, listen.

Smith: Go back to the beginning, because it's always been a little bit cloudy, this issue of - he's climbing the ladder at an accelerating pace, particularly after he becomes Minority Leader, post-Goldwater debacle. And was on the road a lot. I assume he had been on the road a lot before. He liked travel, didn't he? He liked the rubber chicken; he liked...

Susan Bales: He liked people. That's as simple as it is. He liked people. And he became the Energizer Bunny when he was around people. And I'm not going to say he didn't like being home and he didn't like reading his newspaper. He loved watching his boys play football; he loved being with his family. But the man liked people and it was like food for him, I guess is the best way to put it.

Smith: How much of that was an issue? Did it evolve over time? Did it become acute? What did it contribute to her unhappiness?

Susan Bales: Well, see, you've got to remember that when he was Minority Leader I was middle school, freshman, sophomore year high school. Parents were not probably one of my most favorite things to be around. But, yeah, I would say...

Smith: Was it a source of tension?

Susan Bales: Yes, I guess that's the best way to put it. And not that I wanted to be around the house anyway, I was usually out in the neighborhood playing with my friends or demonstrating – you always thought that somebody else's house was way cooler than your house and way more fun and everything else. But yes, I would say tension. And that's where Clara was the relief valve. I could talk to Clara about things that I felt I couldn't talk to my mother because she was tense. And as she says in her book, she was seeing a psychologist. Yes, there was tension. My parents never fought in front of us kids. If they fought they went upstairs to their bedroom and closed the door and fought behind closed doors or after we went to bed. I would say you would hear Jerry and a few curse words, but then they quickly excused themselves. There was no screaming and yelling and finger pointing in front of the children. So I could not tell you what kind of fighters they were. Unlike some people who probably could.

Smith: What is the sequence of events – I know she had the pinched nerve.

Susan Bales: She had the pinched nerve from tripping over a stool in the den in Alexandria. She had the pinched nerve, she spent much time in traction, on and off over the years; and she did a lot of physical therapy. She went to a psychologist for

peace of mind, which I understand. When you've got a husband who is gone a lot and you've got four kids you are trying to raise.

Smith: It's been suggested – and I don't mean to be trendy here – that she is, in so many ways, a kind of a stand in for a whole generation of women who were sort of on the cusp of the women's movement and self-realization – whatever that meant. But it's almost as if the language didn't exist yet. It's as if they didn't quite know what they were looking for, but they were sort of groping their way towards some re-definition of role.

Susan Bales: And I think that's true, but I also think she was very involved – there was the Senate Wives' Club, and the Republican Wives' Club, and all those clubs – Mother lunched a lot. Did the Red Cross stuff, which I don't think any of that's even done anymore. They were truly her support group. Bobby Burns, the McGregors – the families that stick out in my mind that they saw on the weekend were the McGregors, the Burns, Glenn from Wisconsin.

Mel Laird, Mel and Betty Laird. Les Arends, I'm thinking of the people we went to the Greenbrier with. I knew their kids, their kids knew us, those were the people – and there were other congressmen and senators and stuff. I ended up in college with Cissy Baker and her dad and my dad go way back.

Smith: And on weekends you would play in Statuary Hall?

Susan Bales: Yes! Hide and Seek. But we'd also go to the Army/Navy Country Club. I think as a congressman you automatically got a membership at Army/Navy Country Club. So we would go to the country club a lot on the weekends and so you would run into these same kids over at the Country Club. And so you'd swim with them in the pool and the dads were all playing golf and the mothers were playing tennis or sitting on the lawn on the beach towels and that sort of thing. Those were the people you saw on a regular basis. And so that was your support group along with the Senate Wives Club and the lunches that they were all doing. I remember doing fashion shows, mother/daughter Senate Wives fashion shows, raising money – I don't know who they were raising money for. They did the *Congressional Wives*

*Cookbook*. There was a lot of support in that group of people then. I don't know, but I don't think that goes on anymore.

Smith: And it's fascinating because those were all "political wives" who in many ways shared experiences, and probably shared their frustrations.

Susan Bales: Absolutely.

Smith: Did she seem unhappy to you?

Susan Bales: She had unhappy times. She and Jack were like cats and dogs growing up. And I think it's because they are very much the same. And Jack in high school, if Mother said black, Jack said white. And he just liked to get her riled up. And he would get her riled up and there was no father there to say, "Jack Ford, stop that."

Smith: I was going to ask you what your dad's response to this was.

Susan Bales: He wasn't there.

Smith: Yeah. He was really away that much?

Susan Bales: Yeah, he really was away that much. And so Mother would get upset because she and Jack would get into this big fight and then I would have to go up and calm Mother down, Mike would go and have to say, "Jack, you need to go apologize." Mike never really became the fatherly figure, but Mike was having to do things...so that's kind of the way it was. Some mothers have one child that they just...and Jack and Mother were the bristly ones, shall we say?

Smith: Do you think your dad felt guilt, either then or more important, maybe, in later years? Because there is this sense that, although certainly he kept on traveling, that was...

Susan Bales: He did keep on traveling, but I don't think he felt guilty. He came, he went to North Carolina to go to his grandchildren's graduations; I think he spoke, not at their high school graduations, but I think he attended school with each and every grandchild for one day. That's a huge commitment. Now he did other things while he was there.

- Smith: That could also be seen, though, as in some compensating for what he didn't do or wasn't able to do.
- Susan Bales: Yeah, and maybe that was his way, but when he came to Tulsa, and he came to Tulsa several times, one he did Law Day while he was there. He went to Heather's middle school, but at first he went to Tyne and Heather's elementary school, which was a public school. I know he did it for all of Mike's kids and I know he went to Jonathan and Christian's football practices when they were little boys. Very close to the end of his life. He was involved with his grandchildren; he knew what his grandchildren were doing. He talked to them on a regular basis. I don't think it was guilt, I think he truly loved and cared about them.
- Smith: But in terms of maybe more intimately, meaning the relationship with your mother...
- Susan Bales: He bought her jewelry. He knew how to make up to her. He bought her jewelry.
- Smith: She likes jewelry?
- Susan Bales: She likes jewelry. And Ann Cullen would go – and I don't know, have you talked to Ann?
- Smith: Yeah, we have.
- Smith: Ann would go to the jewelers and he would say, "Here's the budget." And that was the hard part. And Ann would go to the jewelry store and she would come home with several things. She would try them on and she would walk into the office and say, "Okay, here's this, and here's this, and here's this ring, or here's this bracelet..." or rings or earrings. Mother was big on earrings. And so Dad would say, "Well, I like this one, but which one do you think *she* would like?" Ann had impeccable taste. And Ann, having worked for Mother for fifteen years, knew Mother's taste. So Ann would say, "Well, I really think this is the one she would like." And then the price discussion would happen, because sometimes Ann would go over the budget just a little bit because it was close enough, and Ann knew that Mother would really, really

like that one. So he knew jewelry always made her very, very happy. Very happy. We always waited for the little box on Christmas morning. Or he'd call me and he'd say, "What am I going to get your mother?" And I'd say, "Dad, I don't know. You need to talk to Ann. Ann is with her every day. I don't know what Mom needs; I don't know what Mom wants. Ann really does." But jewelry appeased her, shall we say? My mother liked clothes, a lot. And she liked expensive clothes. Very tailored, very simple, but she had good taste in clothes, and I don't think he ever said, "You spent too much money on clothes." It was his way of, if that's what she wants...

Smith: And then - talk about opposites attracting - because he was the most punctual of men.

Susan Bales: Oh, I thought you were going to talk about his clothes in the '70s.

Smith: Well, actually, we could, because the legend is there were closets full of suits that were older than you. And that he didn't want to get rid of. And that part of her function in life was to make sure he didn't embarrass himself by going out in some of this stuff.

Susan Bales: When you compare – her being the queen of fashion, he was not the king of fashion. He had one jacket that was a brown and blue wool plaid, double vents in the shoulder – I think it even had suede elbow patches on – that when we cleaned out the Beaver Creek house was still there. And when it went in the Goodwill pile, it was kind of sad to throw it out because he'd put it on and Mother would go, "No. Put it back." "Well, it's still good. It's not worn out." And we'd go, "It's not that, Dad. It's the fashion. Double shoulder vents is not in fashion anymore." That's where he was very frugal. It had to be worn out before he threw it out.

Smith: But then, as I said, the punctuality, which I assume as long as they were together, must have been an issue. Let me try out a theory, because I think one of the things that might surprise people about your mother – for all the time she spent in the public eye, for example, before she went up and gave a speech, she had butterflies.

Susan Bales: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Which is, in many ways, the mark of a true performer. It's when you stop worrying...and I always wondered whether some of it was - that's last thing I can do that I have control over. It's a kind of perfectionism. So maybe it's the last piece of jewelry, or the last look in the mirror, or whatever – but also, a little bit of butterflies.

Susan Bales: She did at the funeral.

Smith: She was late?

Susan Bales: She was late.

Smith: I noticed a couple of times we were waiting.

Susan Bales: I can't remember if it was – and it was simply when you go back and look at it and Greg Willard would be the one to know exactly what the item was, she had forgotten to get. One of the things she carried was one of his handkerchiefs. And she looked in her purse and that handkerchief wasn't there. Things that meant something to her. But all of us are sitting in the cars waiting in the motorcade because the motorcade can't leave until she is in the car in the lead motorcade. And we're all sitting there looking at our watches going, "Okayyyy." But, to her, and I don't mean this in a rude way, it was her show. And she does it now with dinner. We'll say, "Mom, can we eat at 7:00 instead of 7:30?" "Well, maybe." And at 7:45, and then you just can't...

Smith: She just has a different sense of time.

Susan Bales: She just has a different sense of time.

Smith: Was it an endearing difference that they had? He obviously accommodated himself.

Susan Bales: Oh, he was pacing. He would be *pacing* waiting for her. And the times that I would be with him, and you could see the eruption, "God damn it, people are waiting on us." And I'd say, "I know, Dad, but screaming and yelling is not going to solve the problem and it doesn't solve the problem with her."

Smith: Did she acknowledge that there was a problem with her?

Susan Bales: Oh, yeah. Oh she knows there's a problem.

Erik: Excuse me, Susan, I just wanted to ask, did he ever have a schedule, if he knew it would begin at a certain time, would he ever....?

Susan Bales: No.

Erik: He wouldn't move it maybe a half hour?

Susan Bales: No, I have friends that I do that with, but no, they never padded the schedule that I'm aware of. He would say to me, "Will you go check on her?" And so you'd go back and you'd kind of see, okay, the hair is done, the jewelry is going on, so we're probably five minutes away. But the whole thing with him, he'd come out in a suit and he'd have one tie on and he'd always have a tie in his pocket. And he'd go in and he'd say, "Betty, this, or this?" And she always picked, "This." This is what he wanted, this is what she wanted.

Smith: But he would defer to her judgment?

Susan Bales: And she'd go, "Uhum," and he'd go change it.

Smith: That was his idea of getting ready to go out.

Susan Bales: Right, and I guess because of her lateness, I'm unbelievably punctual. If I'm late, I'm late for a really good reason. Something has truly thrown me off. Because I back into things.

Smith: When that little cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, first appears, in the form of Watergate? By the way, were politics talked about in the house? Or was it something he left at the office? And was she political?

Susan Bales: First of all, my freshman and sophomore year in high school, I was at boarding school, so I was only at home on the weekends, because I was the last kid. And you've got to remember that Steve went to TC Williams, which is – did you ever see the movie *Remembering the Titans*?

Smith: No, but I know about it.

Susan Bales: Okay, that's the high school that I would have gone to as a freshman and obviously there were some issues, which is why I went to boarding school.

And Steve, being a boy, he could be tough and he'll be okay. So I was only home on the weekends. I was home Friday and then I had to be back at school Sunday night by four o'clock, or whatever it was. So when I saw him, I did not hear a lot of politics being discussed. Before that, in middle school, politics in general were being discussed because Mike and Jack, at that point, were in high school and they were starting to discuss politics.

Smith: Was Vietnam a topic?

Susan Bales: Yeah, because I remember when the boys got their numbers, which they got very high, high numbers and knew that they would not have to go. But I was way too young and I really didn't get it – I didn't pay attention to it.

Smith: You asked about stories – I'll tell you one. Jack Marsh gave us a great story, which I'm sure has never appeared in print. At least he said it hadn't, and it's amazing that it wasn't ferreted out at the time. Your dad's first days on the job in the White House; it's the day before he goes to Chicago to give the VFW speech, which, let's face it, as he said, "At least I don't have to worry about being interrupted by applause."

Susan Bales: Right.

Smith: That day, a day in advance, Jack Marsh comes in and says, "We've got a problem," and he had a lot of problems on his plate at that point.

Susan Bales: It comes with the job.

Smith: It turns out Steve had not registered on his birthday for the draft. And the thought that...you know, it's a juicy story. He said your dad looked like he was gob smacked, he just kind of put his head in his hands...

Susan Bales: Like, "How did I let that slip?"

Smith: And so, before the day was over, I think they got General Hershey himself, they got it all taken care of, buttoned down. And the press never found out. But you can imagine...

Susan Bales: We're not perfect, as we all know.

- Smith: Most families argued about Vietnam. Were there arguments about the war that you can remember?
- Susan Bales: I remember Jack and Dad getting into arguments about politics. Even then Jack was one of those students that sat in Social Studies class with the social studies book and a *Time Magazine* or *Newsweek* inside of it. He was always reading that kind of stuff. He was very much in tuned to it – I was just into riding my bike and playing with the dog. That would be a Jack question – which is why he got involved in Nixon’s re-election campaign, where he met a lot of those people. That’s why Jack was so involved in Dad’s campaign. That was his thing – it wasn’t mine.
- Smith: Was there a moment when suddenly the prospect of your life being turned totally upside down crystallized? I mean, did your parents discuss this ongoing...before the vice presidency? It would have been before that.
- Susan Bales: Well, in the vice presidency – with that happening, that summer I was dating Gardner Britt, of Ted Britt Ford, where you probably see those commercials now, in Virginia – Ted Britt Ford. Gardner, I dated him in high school, isn’t that special? I went with his family to Rehoboth Beach that summer. Wait – Dad was vice president – I’m trying to think about that.
- Smith: Okay, so ’73 is when Agnew’s problems emerge. August of ’73 is when the *Wall Street Journal* comes and then, of course, October...
- Susan Bales: Right. Because I’m just starting to think – I took Secret Service agents to the beach with Gardner’s family and they hung out in the garage of the house that the Britts had rented. So for the vice presidency, the only thing that truly sticks in my mind is, I came home on Friday and the front yard was full of press. And I mean full.
- Smith: It’s not a big front yard.
- Susan Bales: No. It wasn’t. We still had a garage then, because the garage had not been converted. And then some of them were across the street in the Abbruzzese’s yard. So I came home, it was probably four o’clock that afternoon that I got home from boarding school, and Mother was frazzled, truly frazzled, and she

says, "I need to go up and take a nap." I said, "Fine, you go take a nap and I'll take over the phones." And that's when Sam Donaldson and I became best friends, because Sam called every thirty minutes. "Have you heard anything? Do you know anything?" Finally, I went, "Now I know why my mother is frazzled," because our phone number was published in the phone book. It was horrible. So that's when I really got the first sense that something was getting ready to change. It was ugly. And that's when Mother and I, because she was a late person and not terribly punctual, I said, "We need to pick out some clothes. We just need to pick out some clothes if you're going to have be in front of the press, let's just pick out a couple of dresses that would be acceptable if, at the last minute, you have to jump and get dressed." That's the kind of stuff – I wasn't in tuned to it. I wasn't paying attention to it, because of my age more than anything.

Smith: And when the call came - the thing that I find astonishing is that literally, you had so little time. I mean, within a couple of hours you were supposed to be in the East Room of the White House for the ceremony.

Susan Bales: Yeah. And we couldn't find Mike, and we couldn't Gayle. They're driving to Massachusetts. I mean, when you start putting all the pieces together, it's a comedy show and we do look like a bunch of mucks from the Midwest that have no idea where anybody is. But, yeah, it was pretty amazing.

Smith: One senses your dad did not enjoy the vice presidency for reasons quite apart from – clearly there was a unique set of – he was walking a tightrope. But no one particularly enjoys the vice presidency, and in that sense, it was the job itself that wasn't much fun.

Susan Bales: I don't want to call it a ceremonial job, but it really is a ceremonial job. My dad loved to have his hands in the mess. And to pull him away from the Capitol...and maybe when he was vice president he could truly make a difference because he knew the players and could go up to Capitol Hill and do one on one lobbying and talking. "Come on, let's talk about this bill," and that sort of thing. And he really had a savvy about him with those. But, yeah, it's not a great job. The only thing I cared about was, I was anticipating moving to

a different house and I wasn't going to have to share a bathroom with my brothers. That's all I was concerned about.

Smith: You were going to move into the Admiral's House.

Susan Bales: That's right. Mother and I had picked out my bedroom, we'd picked out fabrics, we'd picked out all kinds of stuff.

Smith: And was she comfortable with the way her life was going at that point? Or at least she was along for the ride?

Susan Bales: She was along for the ride. Yeah, I think she was along for the ride. I think she was enjoying working on the Admiral's House and if anyone has seen the pictures of what the Admiral's House looked like beforehand, it was a disaster. It really was a disaster.

Smith: Did she enjoy decorating?

Susan Bales: Yeah, she enjoys doing that stuff. She enjoys fabrics – I think that's the fashion side of her doing things. So, in that sense, it was going to be fun, it was going to be nice. I was going to be closer to school.

Smith: And it would only be a couple of years.

Susan Bales: Exactly. And I think her theory was, it's only a couple of years and then we get to retire and go do what we want to go do. Which we know is not what happened.

Smith: Of course Tom DeFrank made a great deal in his book about a slip of the tongue that your dad made – something to the effect that, "When I'm," as opposed to "If I'm," a subject he presumably avoided under ordinary circumstances. At home, one would think it would be harder to avoid – it's like the edge of the falls is over there. Were there discussions about what if; aside from the very end, when everyone knew what was going to happen?

Susan Bales: I never heard it. But you've got to remember, Steve and I were the only ones home. And when you consider the age that we were do you think we were really paying attention to it? No. We were concerned about where our next date was coming from, whose party – we're high school kids. And we knew

the Nixons. We'd known the Nixons our entire life. We had been to the White House. To us, I think partially, we felt bad for the family because we knew them as a family and as friends.

Smith: In fact, your mother said that it was the worst day of her life. And one understands that she was referring to that personal element of what the Nixons were going through.

Susan Bales: Right. Because Dick Nixon, if you go back and look at Dad's book, he talks about how Dick Nixon was such a good friend to him when he was a young congressman in Congress and things like that. And Mother and Pat had become friends through these congressional luncheons and stuff that they all did. So it was very hurtful and we saw that in our parents, I guess, is the biggest thing. You saw the pain in your parents, because their friends were going through this. It was not, "Look at what we're going to get. Bye-bye, so long." It was that you were feeling the pain that your parents were feeling is probably the better way to put it.

Smith: At what point did it dawn, or was it revealed to you, that this was going to happen?

Susan Bales: When Dad got the phone call, because I'm the one who answered the phone. Are you talking about the vice presidency?

Smith: No, I mean in terms about moving into the White House - about the fact that at some point he's going to be president.

Susan Bales: Dad came home after that meeting after he knew.

Smith: Was that the meeting with Haig?

Susan Bales: Yes. And he didn't directly say it, but he gave some innuendos, kind of like, "We need to be prepared."

Smith: How did your mother deal with that? Over the years the impression has been left, maybe you were all in a state of denial, but that in fact, it was news to her. That it was a surprise to her, and not a necessarily totally welcome surprise.

- Susan Bales: Oh I think it was. Dad was very confidential. When you're not supposed to talk about stuff, you don't talk about stuff.
- Smith: It's interesting you say that because I wonder what secrets he took with him to the grave.
- Susan Bales: Oh, wouldn't we all like to know? Yeah. I agree with that. No, he was very confidential, and I think part of it, too, when we look back at it all, Mother is seeing a psychologist...
- Smith: At that time?
- Susan Bales: Oh, sure. So there is tension and he's thinking, "Why do I want to add more tension to what's already going on there?" Now life is a little bit easier because we now have Navy stewards cooking and helping at the house and doing things like that, because the vice president's house is not ready and we're still living in our house in Alexandria. Which, let me tell you, was really cramped quarters. What people don't realize is that the life that we lived was a very simple life; we were a very simple family. My clothes came from Sears and JC Penney's. The first time I got a dress from Lord and Taylor or Woodward and Garfinkel's was when my dad became vice president.
- There were four children. He made thirty some thousand dollars a year. We couldn't afford what a lot of those other people out there – I mean most of my friends were far more wealthy than my family was. So our house was small. It was adequate, but when the Secret Service and Navy stewards move into – I mean, our kitchen and dining room area was probably not much bigger than this room, so when you get people moving in and preparing food, it gets really small, really fast. And I don't think people realized that we didn't grow up with silver spoons in our mouths, to put it in perspective.
- Smith: Over the years the story has been told many times, and I'll give you a chance to confirm or deny it – that you, at one point, said you didn't want to go to the White House if it meant giving up your jeans.
- Susan Bales: Oh, I don't know about that. We were criticized for wearing jeans. We were one of the first families to wear jeans and were criticized for them. I mean, my

dad wasn't wearing jeans. My mother was still wearing dresses; you saw her in pants, but even then the First Lady didn't wear slacks. And I think the President almost always had a tie on, unless he was on the golf course. But us kids were criticized for wearing jeans – that was inappropriate First Family attire.

Smith: And there were the letters. The letters that I read when she let it be known that they shared a bed, and there were concerned Americans who wrote in to protest this fact.

Susan Bales: Yes, absolutely.

Smith: This must have been a whirlwind in any event, but the fact that suddenly you are fodder for anyone and everyone. Do you ever adapt to that?

Susan Bales: Yeah, you do.

Smith: Did you ever discuss it with him? Or her?

Susan Bales: No, some of it has to do with your age. Mike and Jack were gone. Steve left, went to Montana and jumped on a horse and said, "I'm outta here," instead of going to Duke.

Smith: Was that influenced by – he didn't want to be in the goldfish bowl?

Susan Bales: Yeah. "This ain't going to work for me."

Smith: Okay.

Susan Bales: And I think maybe Steve had talked about deferring a year, anyway. But I think this just kind of pushed it over the edge. "For sure, I'm going to take a year off before I go to college." So I went to Mt. Vernon College in Washington, which now is part of GW, and then transferred to the University of Kansas because I wanted the real experience. I wanted the real college experience. And I kept trying to get the real college experience and part of it is, you can't do that in Washington. The press are constantly following you. It didn't help that I was a photo journalist and I was working at AP – so no matter where I turned – I was with the press. To get to my father's office I had to walk by the press room. I mean, I kept trying to get the real experience.

Smith: Was there anyone who gave you advice, anyone who had lived in the White House before, anyone who was in a position to know what you were going through?

Susan Bales: No. Later, now, I've talked to Luci and Linda and people like that, and the thing is, it's changed so drastically. The White House days then and the White House days now, the press really followed the children, but we didn't have 24 hour news back then. And today you've got this 24/7 stuff and I cannot imagine being there now. They don't seem to follow the family quite as closely because they've kind of put a wall up and said, "You can't do that anymore." I don't know. It's tough. I'm sitting there looking at what they are doing with Chelsea Clinton's wedding. Come on, she's not in the White House anymore. Please.

Smith: The first few days – you were still in the Alexandria house for a week or so before you actually moved in.

Susan Bales: Almost two and a half weeks – maybe it was ten days, but close. Right.

Smith: Was there a time when you went on a tour of the White House to see your new quarters?

Susan Bales: We did go on a tour. But you see, that summer I had worked at the White House selling guide books. I had worked at the White House – my summer job when Dad was a congressman was working for the White House Historical Association. We called it the White House Hysterical Association, selling guide books to the tourists who came through. So when we went on the tour, I knew all the police guys, and when I walked through with my mother, they'd say, "Hey, Susan, how are you?" Which was kind of weird.

When the Nixons were there, there was always a folding screen at the end of the hallway so that you could get from the family elevator to the West Wing and the tourists could not see the family and the family could get out through, I can't remember the name of that room, to get out the front to get in the cars and leave. And so Mother and I go "behind the screen." Why, I had never gone "behind the screen." And so it was Clem Conger, Rex Scouten – Mother and I went out and did the tour of the whole second and third floor.

Smith: That name, by the way, rings a bell because over the years there have been suggestions that your mother and Clem were not completely simpatico in terms of style, temperament, whatever.

Susan Bales: That's true.

Smith: And that he presumably had a view of the White House that was not only very protective, but possessive as well.

Susan Bales: Yes, it was his house. Yes. That is true because when we walked – the only other bedrooms on the second floor was Tricia's suite, which was a two-bedroom area, and it was truly bubble gum pink. Pink shag carpet, pink bedspreads, pink walls, pink, pink, pink, pink. And both Mother and I just went "whoaaa." I would not call me a girly-girl, and so when we went upstairs, I actually took Julie's old bedroom and Clem said something to me about, "Well, do you like this furniture in here?" And I said, "It's fine, but I've always wanted a brass bed." Which I truly, truly wanted a brass bed. Well, a brass bed did not fit the era and time of the House. Clem was not happy. So Mother looked at Clem and said, "If you could find her a brass bed, that would be nice. If in the storage, whatever..."

Well, that wasn't going to work with Clem. Clem found me a phenomenal brass bed that was in Missouri somewhere that actually had - and I don't know the term for whatever that piece is that is on the top - it wasn't a full canopy, it was a partial canopy. And actually Chip Carter, I think, wanted to keep it because he took my room after I left, and Clem called the family in Missouri because they loaned it to the White House, they didn't give it. And they said no, we want it back. There're all kinds of little stories like that.

It's like Freddie the elevator guy going out and swimming with Dad in the pool.

Smith: Really?

Susan Bales: Yeah.

Smith: We've heard that almost immediately there were relationships with the permanent staff; that your dad would invite the butler to come in. "Oh, come on in and watch the football game."

Susan Bales: Yeah.

Smith: Or at dinner they would talk sports. And I wonder if that presented a bit of a challenge in some ways. Clearly the Nixons ran the White House differently. There is the story about your mother at the very beginning saying good morning to people and not getting a response.

Susan Bales: Right.

Smith: And going to the Usher to ask if there was something she did.

Susan Bales: Had she offended them? And I don't mean that the Nixons don't see color, but that's just once again a statement of most of the White House staff was black, and we didn't see that as "You are servants or butlers or maids." We were all just kind of one big happy family. They got me in trouble a couple of times. "Susan didn't make her bed this morning." Because my mother had a rule that we kids had to get up and make our beds. It was not going to be: move into the White House, and put your feet up and snap your fingers and ring the bell. "You are to get up and make your bed every day. That's the least you could do." And so they would tell on me and say, "Susan didn't make her bed this morning." And I'd catch all holy hell by the afternoon. "I overslept." "What a surprise."

Smith: But I take it that both of your parents got acclimated pretty soon to life in the White House.

Susan Bales: Oh, yeah. It's nice, it's really nice. It's nice digs, it's great food. And they are nice people. They are probably the nicest people you could ever imagine. The staff at the White House is what makes the White House what it is. The White House is just a building. But the staff is what truly makes it special.

Susan Bales: Did you ever get used to the press?

Susan Bales: No. No, you never get used to the press. They become your friends; you think you can trust them; you think you know them; and then all of a sudden you open the newspaper and you say, “Whoops.”

Smith: The pardon comes along.

Susan Bales: Right.

Smith: And did you have a sense of being in the eye of the hurricane? Did what was going on out there translate around the dinner table?

Susan Bales: No. Because once Dad came upstairs, it was family time. And that truly is the other advantage of living in the White House and having Air Force One. He was home so much more. I was a senior in high school, so I was pretty focused on getting graduated, getting into college, that sort of thing. And when he came upstairs, it was time to talk about, “What did you do today? What are you doing this weekend and what’s going on with you?” and that sort of thing. I had no clue ahead of time that that’s what he was going to do. None.

Smith: And then, of course, in short order, comes your mother’s breast cancer surgery.

Susan Bales: That was tough. And the reason I say that was tough was because, besides Gayle, there were only three females now in the family. Mike’s married to Gail, there’s Mother and there’s me. And I was seventeen - that seems like many, many decades ago, which it was. We’d just moved into the White House. Mother goes in; finds out that she’s got to have surgery; and the fact is, as a senior in high school – you’re trying to cut the umbilical cord anyway, and when you find out that she’s got stage II, several lymph nodes involved, the prognosis is not real good. And you’re going, “My mom may die.”

Smith: How did she tell you?

Susan Bales: She didn’t. Dr. Lukash told us. And I think that was the easiest way for her to do it. Lukash told all of us.

Smith: Including your dad?

Susan Bales: Yeah. I think Lukash had already told Dad, but then he sat down with Dad and Mother and I together, kind of again, "This is what's going to happen..." that sort of thing. And you're seventeen years old, you've moved into the White House, and now your mother's got breast cancer, and the chances are that she could die because of the technology of the time.

Smith: You were awfully young. Was the impact of the news even greater because it was something no one talked about at the time?

Susan Bales: I think so. Because when you think about it, back then Mother and Dad could have said she was having female problems. And the press would have left it alone because I don't think you could even say breast on TV then. And the press didn't invade like they do now. Do you think they ever would have asked my dad about boxers or briefs? Hell, no. Just to set the stage of where we are. So I think once Mother realized the impact, and I don't think she was going for impact - they had told her breast cancer is killing women and this could really make a difference if you'd change two words in the press release: breast cancer versus female problems.

Smith: So that discussion took place: how we handle this?

Susan Bales: Because Dad had said, "This is going to be an open and honest administration." And that was the discussion of breast cancer versus female problems.

Smith: And who was in that discussion?

Susan Bales: I think probably Ron Nessen, Dad, Sheila...

Smith: There was a professional...

Susan Bales: There was a professional side to it.

Smith: Did the family have the discussion?

Susan Bales: We discussed it. We had a little bit of time to hash it out and think about it, and the Johnsons came, and Mother left for the hospital right after that. But there were a few days before the Johnsons came that we were putting it all together, I guess, is the best way to put it - from the time that the doctors

discovered it, because they hadn't even done the biopsy – all they'd done was find the lump.

Smith: Was she scared?

Susan Bales: Sure she was scared. I would have been scared. Yeah, she was scared; we were all scared, because we really didn't know. Back then it was the "I don't know" days. They didn't know if it was cancer; it was strictly a lump; back then if it was cancer, they automatically do a mastectomy. There is no decision involved in the process.

Smith: And let's face it, a lot of people assume it's a death sentence.

Susan Bales: Yeah, exactly. And we didn't know then what kind of cancer it was. We didn't know how many lymph nodes were involved. We didn't know a lot. It was strictly, "There's a lump and we're going to go see what it is." And you didn't know what you were going to wake up with. That was pretty much: were you going to wake up with a raw chest, or were you going to wake up with your own boob there? We didn't know. The unknown, I think, is the fear more than anything.

Smith: Over the years, understandably, so much has been written and said about the example that she set and the history that she made. But he set an example, too.

Susan Bales: Oh, yeah. And it also showed the very tender side of him, very quickly. When you go back and you look at those tapes of him, and I'm trying to think of the one in particular...

Erik: The Economic Summit.

Susan Bales: Thank you. Where he says, "Betty's going to be okay." Which you can tell that he's very touched; he's hurting. And so that wasn't a side that the public had seen of him right off the bat.

Smith: Did you go up to the hospital?

Susan Bales: Oh, I was there the whole time. See, that day, it was really an interesting day. Louise Abbruzzese, who was the neighbor who lived across the street, went into labor that morning, and she was in that hospital giving birth to her third

child the morning that Mother was having her surgery. I guess they had come up and said it's cancer. I went down to see Louise, because I had babysat her other kids, and she let me hold the baby, who is named Elizabeth Ann, after my mother.

Smith: That's great. We talked to Peter in one of our interviews.

Susan Bales: How is Peter? He's like ancient, because he was like sixty years old a long time ago.

Erik: Will you ask her about the story about being locked out of the house – remember that story. While she was babysitting – with Secret Service.

Susan Bales: Ohhh, yeah. I do remember that one.

Erik: He was roaring telling us about that one.

Susan Bales: Yeah, I bet he was. When they were parents they probably didn't think it was. I don't remember the whole story, but I do remember it happening and going, "Oh, shit." No, I'd take their kids to the beach. Their kids – I loved their kids, they were great kids. I'd love to know where they are now. But Peter was old back then, or looked old.

Smith: Well, he's very, very well preserved.

Susan Bales: He's very, very, Democrat.

Smith: Yup.

Susan Bales: Very much a Democrat.

Smith: But that's great to get that perspective.

Susan Bales: Who was the congressman he worked for?

Smith: Wayne Hayes.

Susan Bales: Wayne Hayes, that's who it was.

Smith: Interesting background.

Susan Bales: Yes, exactly.

- Smith: Did he talk about Nixon in later years?
- Susan Bales: He never really did. I know for a long time, I think they still called each other on birthdays. There was still a friendship of some sort.
- Smith: You have to assume the relationship must have been changed from what they went through.
- Susan Bales: Right, but as we've gone through stuff, there is always correspondence. You don't just write somebody off like that who has been a long time friend. But, no, he really didn't talk about him much.
- Smith: Did he talk about Reagan?
- Susan Bales: He talked about Reagan more because Mother and Dad saw Nancy and Ronnie in Beverly Hills at functions, in LA, they ran into them at parties, that sort of thing. I know Mother talked to Nancy several times after he sent out his memo about the Alzheimer's. She felt very bad for her because she realized what a lonely life Nancy had ahead of her. And to me, part of me says, we had a very short time that we knew my dad had left, but his mind was there, all of those things. I think ours was far less painful. Who am I to judge? Except that I have a father-in-law who is more like a Ronald Reagan right now, who doesn't know who I am. I think it's far less painful the way that Dad went.
- Smith: Let's go back to the White House years because I guess it must have been – well you would know – hard on the heels of your mother's operation, you were wearing white gloves and making your social debut.
- Susan Bales: They were miserable to wear. Maybe that's why I never got to be in a diplomatic party – that was my debutant party, I guess is what it was.
- Smith: What was the story behind that?
- Susan Bales: Well, Mother was still in Bethesda Naval Hospital after her mastectomy, and actually that afternoon we had just surprised Dad with Liberty. And that was the ambassador's embassy White House dinner. And it's really not a dinner; it's more like drinks and desert. It's an after-dinner event, because I really

don't think we sat down to dinner, if I remember correctly. Maria Downs would know. But it is very formal, I think it's actually – besides when the Queen came – it's the only white tie, and I had never worn white gloves like that before, which they are miserable to get on and off. So you stay in this receiving line, you greet every ambassador and then there is dancing afterwards and I had to dance with all these people. And it was quite an experience.

Smith: Did you volunteer? Were you asked? How did it come about?

Susan Bales: No, my dad needed a female escort, and being the only female in the household, I didn't have a whole lot of choice. I had no intention of going to that, but Mother's surgery is what got it started.

Smith: Did you relate the experience to her afterwards?

Susan Bales: Yeah, it was like, how do you get into this stuff? To me, I wouldn't say it wasn't fun, it was a very special evening between my dad and I; and that was the neat part of it. The diplomat, proper etiquette, title – I'm sure I called an ambassador by the wrong name – that wasn't my everyday life.

Smith: The fall of Saigon – what was the mood?

Susan Bales: Didn't see a lot of Dad right then.

Smith: I guess that brings up a larger question: did he bring the job with him?

Susan Bales: No, when he came home at night, he did not bring it. There may have been a brief moment of discussion of "I may have to be excused to go take a call," or "If Brent is coming up or Henry is coming over, I may have to excuse myself to go in the other room and talk to them." And we knew better than to ask why, because most of the time he couldn't talk about it anyway. And then you knew what it was all about afterwards. So there was so much of that that just took place in the room next door, that you didn't really know what it was all about until it was all over with. So, no, he didn't bring it home with him.

Smith: There were two assassination attempts.

Susan Bales: Yes.

Smith: Astonishingly, three weeks apart, both in California.

Susan Bales: And I can tell you where I was for both of them. I can't remember which was first.

Smith: Squeaky was first.

Susan Bales: When in the year, though, it would tell you where I was. Because one I was at the beach with girlfriends, and the other one I was with a boyfriend in the solarium. Why I remember this stuff, I don't know. I had gone to the beach, all of us were getting ready to leave for college, which would have been August-September-ish. And the group of girls that I ran with, we all decided to go to the beach to have our last weekend before we all scattered. So we're down at the beach.

Smith: Which beach?

Susan Bales: Rehoboth. Down at twins house and we had had the radio on and we were just lying there, lying on the beach and I guess a bunch of us got up to go swimming, and my agents turned the radio off while I was gone. And we came back from swimming and somebody noticed that the radio was off and we went to go turn it back on and Tommy Pabst, who was head of my detail, who was with me, said something like, "Oh leave that off," or something. He obviously had gotten the information and was trying to figure out how he was going to tell me. So, anyway, we walked back to the townhouse and before I walked up the steps to go up to the townhouse he said, "Susan, I need to talk to you." And so he told me. And that was before cell phones or anything like that. He said, "Your dad is fine, everything is great, don't worry about it." But, yeah, I couldn't wait to talk to him until he got back to the White House. I guess if I really was persistent, I could have called Air Force One or whatever. But you didn't do things like that. But I was with my girlfriends, so I was glad I was at least with friends when that happened.

The other one was, I was dating a guy and we were up in the solarium and my agent called me up there and told me just over the phone. And that was to me, probably the beginning of 24 hour news in White House world. Because the technical communications guys could run it on the TVs non-stop, the footage

that they were picking up off the news networks and they were running it on the White House TVs. And so we were sitting there in the solarium, watching all of that stuff and then I went downstairs when Dad came back in the helicopter. But, yeah, those were scary. He had several bullet-proof vests made to match suits. And Mother and I chose never to find out what suits those were, so that when we would see him in a crowd, we wouldn't be concerned. I can't believe a woman – here he is married to a woman who was promoting the Equal Rights Amendment and tries to shoot him.

Smith: Parenthetically, do you resent the fact that both of those women have been released?

Susan Bales: No. And you know what? If I saw them on the street today, would I recognize them? No. I've seen them on TV. They look like a normal, grandmotherly type person. They've served their time. I'm uncomfortable, I don't like it, but they have a right to be out.

Smith: Has your mother ever expressed an opinion?

Susan Bales: No. I think some of the things – you've always been told you're supposed to get notification of hearings and all this other stuff – we haven't been notified about any of that stuff. That irritates me. So my mother has not been notified of a lot of that stuff and that's very irritating. That's more irritating than the fact that they are out.

Smith: The campaign of '76 – were you at the convention?

Susan Bales: It's right before I met him [Vaden] for the first time. First time I ever met him in my life. (?)

Smith: How bitter was the atmosphere up there. I mean the two camps. Literally you had dueling entrances by the First Lady and Mrs. Reagan, it just felt like a very divisive...

Susan Bales: It was divisive – I think that's a really good term for it. But I have to say, we were on such a cloud nine and so confident that we had it – at least I, as a family member, did. That to me it was, pooh-pooh on you guys. But the thing is, when I go back and look at it, that's not what I remember. What I

remember is the fun that we had, the fun we had campaigning as a family together. The time we had together as a family, the excitement, the joy, all of those things. That's what I remember. I don't remember the divisiveness and that...

Smith: Did you think at the end you'd won it? Did you think you were going to win?

Susan Bales: Sure.

Smith: I mean, you certainly came to have fun.

Susan Bales: And the thing is, that was August, and we had until November, and when I fell asleep and when Mother finally woke me up and sent me upstairs to go to sleep, which was like midnight, one o'clock in Washington in November; I went to bed thinking, we're going to pull this off. So when she woke me up the next morning and the first thing out of my mouth was, "Did he win?" And she said, "No." It was like, wait a minute, I want to go back to sleep again. I just couldn't believe that at the last minute we couldn't pull it off.

Smith: There is a wonderful story Rex Scouten told us. Rex, of course, is the soul of discretion, and the ultimate professional.

Susan Bales: Yes.

Smith: But he did tell us the story that that night he was upstairs and oh, along about two o'clock or so, whatever, in the morning, it wasn't looking great and the President decided he was going to turn in. So he goes across the hall and Rex follows him because he wants to say something consoling. And he said, "You know, Mr. President, who knows what's going to happen. If you don't pull it out it really will be shame because you deserve it. You worked hard for it. But you know, think for a minute, you've spent your whole life in service to this country. Whether it was in the Navy during the war, or all those years on Capitol Hill, and these are two of the toughest years any president..." He said, "You know, maybe it's just time for you to take a well-earned vacation." And your father says, "I don't think so."

Susan Bales: Well, I think, to comment, do you think he worked less after he left? No. He traveled as much, if not more, and he took his job seriously on the boards.

Smith: He took heat for “commercializing” the ex-presidency. We’ve talked to a number of people who were on boards with him who made it very clear he worked very hard on those boards.

Susan Bales: He was committed to them.

Smith: Yeah. And the other thing that people never really paid much attention to, or at least the critics, two things: all the work he did for charity and all the campuses that he visited; but two, the fact that he had to raise ten, twelve, thirteen million dollars to build those facilities in Michigan. Which, for someone who had never seriously really been challenged in his congressional races, must have seemed an awfully tall mountain to climb.

Susan Bales: Yes.

Smith: And he was a very generous donor to the Foundation over the years.

Susan Bales: He was, and then he turned around and helped Mother raise all the money for the Betty Ford Center. She learned it from him. I’ll never forget one very wealthy person was over for lunch one day and Mother is the one who had invited this person. And she looked at Dad ahead of time and she said, “This is mine, not yours.”

Smith: There was that line, I don’t know if it was true or not, that supposedly everything east of the Mississippi was his and everything west of the Mississippi was hers.

Susan Bales: Well, I wouldn’t put it that way, but they put dibs on people. The thing is, if you look at both organizations, there is a lot of crossover between the two of them. But Mother learned from him.

Smith: For her, just creating the Center must have called on a lot of muscles that hadn’t been used. In terms of, fundraising and building a building and hiring a staff – all of those kinds of things.

Susan Bales: But you see, it’s not only that. It’s not like raising money for a museum that’s going to go up. It’s raising a place for addicts. A lot of people don’t like to have their name associated with drugs and alcohol. It’s kind of like the breast

cancer thing. What Nancy Brinker did in raising money for breast cancer – unbelievable things. And I think my mother did that for drugs and alcohol. She put a face to it and made it okay. It's got a long ways to go, but that's just another one of her pearls. Hey, wouldn't we all like to have our name on a presidential building and foundation and whatever, but a drunk tank? No.

Smith: But you know something? When you stop to think about what she changed, at the intersection where the rubber meets the road, where ordinary people live their lives, it can be argued she had more impact than most presidents.

Susan Bales: Oh, I would totally agree with you on that. Yes, absolutely. And she had a gentle, strong spirit about her in twisting arms.

Smith: Did she turn out to be a natural fundraiser?

Susan Bales: Yeah, and she will tell you that she learned it from Leonard Firestone, though.

Smith: He clearly was a pivotal part of this story, isn't he?

Susan Bales: He was a pivotal part of my family's life. I mean, first of all, Leonard and Dad were friends for a long time. But it just goes on. I know Leonard's kids; I know Leonard's grandkids; their grandkids. Our families had been together for a long period of time. But Leonard and Dad go back, that gets into Bob Hope and how Dad met lots of people in the desert. Mother and Dad buy the lot from Leonard to build the house next to Leonard; then Leonard goes to Beaver Creek with Dad.

Smith: I've been told by more than one person that she basically saved his life.

Susan Bales: Yes. And I didn't know Leonard was a drunk. I did not see that. I did not know that. I saw him more in social situations. We all know how to behave when we have to. Yeah, the Firestones have always been around.

Smith: Let me ask you a sensitive question, because you mentioned Bob Hope. I wonder if in any way seeing Hope's last years, whether that made an impression on your parents in the sense that if that "we're never going to let history repeat itself." I think the last time that he did the dinner in Statuary Hall. I had written the remarks and he said to someone right after he finished,

“That’s the last speech I’m going to give.” An awareness of bumping up against one’s limitations and having sufficient pride, self-respect, whatever.

Susan Bales: I don’t know if I would say it was Mother; I think that was truly a family decision. We knew when it was time for him not to be out photographed in public. I think probably one of the last pictures of him was when President Bush came to the house.

Smith: April of 2006.

Susan Bales: Right. And Dad was standing and walking and he was until the day he died. But you do make that decision of “we’re not going out anymore.” And it is a sense of pride; it’s a sense of family pride as much as it is as individual pride.

Smith: I remember the vultures of the press being what they were, and a real concern on the part of the family that we have privacy.

Susan Bales: Leave us alone.

Smith: He’s not president anymore. But I mean, is that realistic in the modern media climate? Did you pull it off?

Susan Bales: No, I think we pulled it off. I think the fact that the last picture of him was with President Bush is really the way it should have been. He was with another man of his same club. And we weren’t hiding anything except for we knew the end was coming. But do you make announcements about that? No.

Smith: It must have been frustrating because I assume there were leaks coming from the hospital. There were people there that would tip off the media and that’s got to be frustrating.

Susan Bales: We got really good at it. Actually I have pictures somewhere of Steve and me sitting in our car taking pictures of the media. And Steven and I walking out of the hospital, and them not recognizing us. I think even one of us walked up to them and said, “What are you all doing here?” Steve and I kind of had fun with that. It was one of those hahaha, we can do this, too. And we got good at it. It wasn’t fair. I mean, a lot of times he was just in the hospital for tests.

And when you get to be in your nineties, you have little tests, you're checking stuff.

Smith: Did he share in that? Did he resent the media intrusion at that point?

Susan Bales: I don't think we told him it was much of a deal. The only thing that we ever had was, we had a standard press release that we would use if we needed it. But to go in for tests, or things like that, they were on a death watch and that was the thing and they were on it for years. Probably I would say the last four years.

Smith: Yeah.

Susan Bales: It just got to be a joke – well, the press are back, oh well.

Smith: Let me ask you, obviously I'll be asking President Bush tomorrow morning, was it difficult for him having so many of his people who came back in the Bush administration and it didn't always work out? I'm thinking of Paul O'Neill, in particular, with whom we've talked. Obviously, he knew Cheney became controversial, but Rumsfeld even more so.

Susan Bales: He didn't talk to me about that. It was more of – he stood behind Paul O'Neill, he stood behind Rummy, and to him they were friends and that sort of thing and I think he was discouraged more than anything of – what do see wrong with him, because I'm proud of them and they are still my friends.

Smith: Before I forget, back in the White House days, did you have contact with Rockefeller?

Susan Bales: We had some. I would see them at dinners and things like that. I went to the Vice President's house a couple of times for meals, events, that sort of thing. I got to know Happy's daughter...

Smith: Carol?

Susan Bales: Carol – fairly well. Carol and I were close in age. She was older than I was, so we communicated some.

Smith: Happy wasn't in DC very much.

Susan Bales: No, and the boys would come and go for different stuff on occasion. And that's about it. They were always very nice and very polite to me. They knew my name, so that's always a good start.

Smith: Your memories of the funeral...

Susan Bales: Yeah.

Smith: I've asked a number of people because I was wearing two hats that week, and I was with ABC the first part of the week and then with the family the second part of the week. And I can tell you, journalists, particularly the younger journalists, were surprised at the amount of public response. And I think that was because: a) they didn't know much history; and b) he hadn't been in the public eye for a while. But I also think what was going on – there were a lot of things going on – one of them was that it was a time when the country desperately needed to feel good about itself. It needed to convince itself, even for a few days, that it could rise above the kind of ugly partisanship that had become the norm. There's a whole generation that discovered him for the first time through those grainy film clips. And they were comparing what they saw with what goes on now. And he looked awfully good. And ironically, the Nixon pardon was trotted out as the prime illustration of political courage. So there was all of that going on, but things like, for example, I'm told the numbers of people on a Saturday night who turned out at Alexandria surprised you.

Susan Bales: Oh, it was unbelievable. And that was one of those things, Richard, you know. We planned that week to ten days of events, every single part of it was thought through, rehashed, discussed. And I don't know who came up with the idea of, we can drive through Alexandria on our way to Washington, and there was a relief - that's another way of going home. Because that was, for us kids.

Smith: Sure.

Susan Bales: That's where the boys had played football and Old Town Alexandria was where we hung out when we were young kids, and Alexandria, besides Grand Rapids, the other home, I guess is the best way to put it. That was huge and it

felt good. Just like going past the (World War II) Memorial and the people, the soldiers and stuff. It felt good. Dad chose not to do the horse and all of that down on to Independence Avenue. Which I'm glad. At first I kind of questioned his decision about that. Now I think back on it and I think it was truly the right decision, because *we* did these things, which to me were far more symbolic of him. And it said something about *him*.

Smith: It's interesting, because after the fact I know the Johnson girls right away, but I believe the Carters as well revised their plan because people saw the Ford funeral and it felt much more like a family event, a little bit less pageantry and more honest emotion. So it's had a lasting impact in that sense.

Susan Bales: And you know, going up the House steps and coming out the Senate steps, most presidents won't be able to do that. I guess they could do it, but it wouldn't have the symbolism that it did for us. Those are the kinds of things that were so special and so important to us. And what people don't know – there was so much laughter behind all of that. My friends would call me and say, "You just look so sad," and I said, "I am, but you know what? We are also laughing and telling stories and being together as a family." The public part is the hardest part of this thing. But there was still lots of laughter and enjoyment of being together. So it wasn't all sad.

Smith: Kind of an Irish wake. Kind of an ongoing wake.

Susan Bales: Yes. That's a good way to put it.

Smith: And one of the surprises – again, I was up at the cathedral that morning – ironically, although he had chosen not to have the caisson through the streets of Washington, I was told a lot of folks turned out along the route just to watch the hearse go by.

Susan Bales: It was phenomenal. It just really was. I did not expect it. Mike Wagner had kind of warned us this could happen. And MDW can't predict what crowds are going to be. They didn't have a clue.

Smith: It's a holiday.

Susan Bales: Yes. It's Christmas; it's New Year's. And maybe the crowds were bigger because families were home. I don't know. But it really was warm and fuzzy and it made us all feel good.

Smith: Including your mother?

Susan Bales: Including Mother. We all were just flabbergasted; it was just like "wow." And it just goes on and on and on. Grand Rapids was very understandable, but as cold as it was – the miles of Boy Scouts and things like that – that blew us away.

Smith: She was not well that week, right?

Susan Bales: She wasn't, no. We didn't know how sick she really was. She was very sick.

Smith: Was it a bronchial thing?

Susan Bales: It was a bronchial thing, which we later found out – I don't remember the name of the bacteria that was in her lungs – but she ended up having to be on intravenous antibiotics for three months afterwards. It was a form of tuberculosis.

Smith: She's always had kind of a respiratory vulnerability.

Susan Bales: She has a bad respiratory system. And the only thing we can think of today is that the dog – something that is in the soil, the dog brought it in, had it on his paw, put it on the bed and somehow it got in her lung. For three months she was on antibiotics. She was sick.

Smith: We'd been told, again on ABC, at St. Margaret's, don't be surprised if you see Mrs. Ford in a wheelchair. And of course we never did until at the end, and then of course, she got of the wheelchair and made that long walk down to the gravesite. And the story goes – a week later, she's back home and there's a visitor who was complimenting her - in effect, "I don't know how you did it." And the story goes, she responded, "I just did what my husband would have wanted me to do."

Susan Bales: That's very true. To me, it's the old Depression 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps, stand up straight and we're going to get through this.' Now, truly,

I think the three days in Washington to rest in between California and Washington (Grand Rapids?) was a blessing to all of us, because we got to relax, we got to put our feet up; we got to take a deep breath. She literally got to spend two days in bed. And she wasn't diagnosed – they thought it was just respiratory – she wasn't diagnosed at that point with what we later found out she had. We were just kind of shooting anything we possibly could. That was the way we were to do. “Do not whine, do not cry, do not complain. I do not want to hear your sob stories. This is what you're going to do and you're going make your father proud.”

Smith: And then while she was at Blair House, you had a host of distinguished visitors. I think the Nixon girls came. I think the Johnson girls came.

Susan Bales: The Bush family came.

Smith: And also the Carters.

Susan Bales: The Carters came. The Clintons came. Now some came up into a private den and met with us and some met with the ambassadors. Because, you see, you've got to remember we had the Cabinet and the pallbearers that came first. And that's when the Clintons and some of those came. Happy Rockefeller came. So that was where we greeted a lot of those people. But the Bushes we met privately with their family upstairs. They weren't part of the larger group. That was the whole point of Blair House, so that you can greet a lot of those individuals and have time. And that stuff is exhausting. It's just exhausting. So we really controlled Mother's time in that situation because we didn't want to wear her out, and she wasn't well.

Smith: And it must have been touching, on the way out to the cathedral to go by the White House with its staff out on the street.

Susan Bales: With the staff out front waving at you – I think the only thing better than that would have been to go over and hug them all. Some of us went over to the White House and saw Dad's portrait draped, which was very comforting. It's so funny now – when we were there, what – a month ago – walking by the White House and saying, “My bedroom was up there. I lived there.” And people going, “Yeah, sure you did.”

Smith: Do you remember – were you there at the ninetieth birthday party?

Susan Bales: Yes, we went to that.

Smith: That must have been pretty special.

Susan Bales: That was special, and that was also the time, if I'm not mistaken, that they let us run all over the House. And we went to the third floor and the second floor – or was that '41? Okay – long time.

When '41 was there, they let us literally go, and that was the only other time we were allowed back on the family floor.

Smith: What is it about the solarium that every White House family seems to fall in love with?

Susan Bales: You could put your feet on the furniture. It's really simple. Everything else is an antique and a museum this and a museum that, and you're afraid you're going to put a ring on an antique table. The solarium is overstuffed couches and manufactured furniture from I don't know where. But you could put your feet on the table. That's the difference. We used to play cards up there a lot.

Smith: And there are pictures of you and your mother making Christmas ornaments. I'm told she is a Christmas fanatic.

Susan Bales: Oh, she is so Christmas. And I try and *be* Christmas. I don't. She over buys, if you looked at the pictures of the amount of gifts under the tree at Christmas time, it's huge. The house was decorated to the hilt. It's just the most magical time in the whole wide world. And I don't know, because I never spent Christmas with her mother, I don't know where she got it from.

Smith: Do you remember how old you were when you concluded Santa Claus was fictitious?

Susan Bales: You just informed me. Thanks, Richard.

Smith: I'm not talking about Uncle Santa. There is a difference. No, I'm wondering if you ever had that talk with, doesn't everyone have that talk with a parent? I would think it would be pretty traumatic.

Susan Bales: I don't remember it. And I don't remember it with my children.

Smith: The subject you dare not speak its name.

Susan Bales: It kind of just happened. And I remember maybe Tyne had stopped believing, but Heather hadn't. And I was like, "Oh, we've just got to go along with it. We've got to keep it for Heather." And then once Heather had outgrown it, then there was Hannah, and then after Hannah was Christian and Jonathan. So we're all still believing that.

Smith: Have you seen The Polar Express? Set in Grand Rapids.

Susan Bales: Oh, yeah. We saw that this year, we watched it. Of course, Santa is for real. It's big time.

Smith: At the end – you went back after the internment, you went inside the Museum, and I think the Carters were there. I assume there were others.

Susan Bales: You know, it was such a fog because we were so tired. You are so tired and you are so numb. There are some things that are very blurry.

Smith: I told people when you are up there doing a eulogy, you're in a fog, and you're just trying to get through it. And you look at the family right in front of you, and you want to connect with them, but you don't want to lose it in front of everyone. And it's odd, the thing I remember – the thing that cut through – I looked over and Rosalyn Carter was weeping. And I thought, who would have guessed thirty years ago that this is how the story ends. Who would have imagined.

Susan Bales: Yeah, those are the fluky little – and there were a lot of fluky little things like that that happened.

Smith: Or him on Air Force One with the baby over his shoulder.

Susan Bales: Yeah, there were just fluky little things like that that happened that week, that if we really sat down and tried to write a book about some of the stuff that went on behind the scenes, nobody would believe us. Nobody would believe us.

Smith: It looked flawless.

Susan Bales: Some of the people that call and say, “Where’s my invitation?” twenty four hours after he’s passed away – they expected them that quickly. The demands that some people...you just go “Excuse me, we’re just trying to get through the first twenty-four hours right now.”

Smith: Funerals bring out the best and worst in people.

Susan Bales: They really do. For us, for our family, my girls were home, I had been with Dad ten days before. And every time I left him at that point in his life, I wondered if this was the last time. But I had been with him ten days before and I’d made a commitment to come home and spend Christmas with my family and my girls came home for Christmas. And Joy, this was Joy’s first Christmas, and we knew Christmas Eve that he had gone into a coma, and we were on our way to church and Steve just said, “Pray for Dad,” and I said, “Okay.” And so we came home from church and made the decision to open gifts that night because of his state, which we knew it would be...

Smith: On Christmas Eve.

Susan Bales: On Christmas Eve, which we knew probably within twelve to twenty-four hours we were going to be packing our bags to leave. So we came home from church and had Christmas that night. Got up Christmas morning and we all looked at each other and went, “Nobody called us. It’s now Christmas morning and we’ve already opened our gifts, what are we going to do?” And Christmas Day we all literally sat around staring at each other, going, when is the phone going to ring? Really, just going, “Okayyyy, this is supposed to have happened by now and we’re still sitting here. Does it surprise you that Jerry Ford is going to stretch it out just as long as he possibly can?”

So in the meantime, I’m calling our travel agent, and every day she is moving our plane reservations another day. Cancel for today, book us for the next day and just keep doing it. Meantime, Hector flies back here to Dallas to get Tyne and Hector’s funeral wear and Joy’s portable swing and baby stuff, because we know once it starts, it’s going to start. Heather was supposed to leave the next day to go back to New York to go to work. She calls her boss and says,

“Can I have two more days off? My grandfather’s health is failing.” Because what’s the point of Heather going back to New York for one night, to turn around and then have to fly across the country by herself for her grandfather, who has just passed? So it was finally the day after Christmas, but I mean we sat around looking at each other, going “What do we do?”

Smith: There was a notion that he willed himself...

Susan Bales: Not to die on Christmas.

Smith: Not to die on Christmas.

Susan Bales: To ruin it for us forever. And Christmas will never be the same; it will never be the same. And I don’t know – knowing him, he could have been willing himself to, but I don’t know. The whole thing is that it still puts a damper on Christmas, no matter what. But I don’t think my grandchildren will – I have to make Christmas magical for my grandchildren, just like my parents made it magical for my children. So that’s my job and I have to do that. And I may be sad, but it’s not about me. It’s about them.

Smith: The last thing, does she talk about him?

Susan Bales: Yeah, we laugh about him.

Smith: Is that part of the process? In an way, of extended grieving, to get to the point where you can...

Susan Bales: Oh, yeah. We laugh, we tell stories, we make fun of him – “Do you remember when Dad” did this and that sort of thing.

Smith: He was not a friend of technology.

Susan Bales: No.

Smith: I was told that he, at some point, mastered the art of solitaire on the computer.

Susan Bales: On the computer, because he did love to play cards and he was a good card player.

Smith: Was he?

Susan Bales: He was a fantastic bridge player. He and Mother played Gin their entire life. They played a penny a point, and at the end of the year, they totaled up who won at the end of the year. So they played cards their entire life. And he did master solitaire, but he and the telephone were not great friends. And the fact is that we finally taught him how to use the hold button, but he never could transfer a call. He would stand in the stairs in Beaver Creek and scream, "Vaden, line one's for you!" because he couldn't figure out how to hit the intercom button and call you and tell you that the phone was for you. And if he didn't answer the phone so quickly, because he barely let it ring once, somebody else might have gotten it. And if the phone didn't get answered, that was another one of those "God damn it, somebody answer the phone."

Smith: Like answering mail.

Susan Bales: Yes. Now you know why I always answer the phone. I was raised by him. So another great one was a speech that he gave at Heather's school in Albuquerque, and he was supposed to say, "CDs" and he said, "CDS's." And there was another one, but it was stuff like that that you just went "Ohhh, Dad."

Smith: The Church of Latter Day CDS's.

Susan Bales: And Glenn Campbell was Glenn Cantbell. There were some things that you were not going to change about that man. Mother never got great on the computer, but she could read email and do stuff like that. And we'll send her pictures of the kids and stuff and that's great. She looks at the computer. That generation, it's just not their thing.

Smith: Yeah. It's an awful question to ask at the end because it's so huge, but I've asked so many people. How do you remember him? Or maybe it's easier to say – how do you think he should be remembered?

Susan Bales: Well, I think the way I remember him and the way he should be remembered are almost two different questions. I remember his smile, the twinkle in his eye, and him calling me Susan-Gusan, the girl of my choosen. He should be remembered for his decency and his honesty, and his listening and caring. Because I think, you're right, I think he's all – he's really one big, soft,

squishy person until you push that one button, and then he's a gorilla. But he was truly a statesman and a good statesman. I don't think there are many statesmen out there anymore. That's the sad part. And the crooked finger.

Smith: Does your mother expect to be reunited with him?

Susan Bales: Absolutely. Can't wait.

Smith: Perfect. Thank you.

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