

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**Terry O'Donnell**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
**March 30, 2009**

Smith: Thanks for doing this. We really appreciate it. Tell us a little bit about what you were doing before your path crossed with Gerald Ford's.

O'Donnell: Well, I was an Air Force Academy graduate and an Air Force officer, and after Vietnam, I was serving in Washington, D.C. Alex Butterfield, who was my father's military aide in Hawaii when my father was Pacific Air Forces Commander, called me up one day and he said, "Terry, the Nixon White House is getting ready for the '72 election. Would you like to come over and get interviewed, because I know you're thinking about leaving the Air Force?" I was a JAG officer, a legal officer, at the time.

So I took him up on that, went to the White House, interviewed with Dwight Chapin and Ron Walker and a couple of other individuals and was hired on as a staff member in the Nixon White House. I did some advance work and then I went and worked directly for Dwight Chapin from the convention until the election and then I worked for Bob Haldeman directly as his assistant from the election in '72 until Bob resigned in March or April of the following year.

Then General Haig came in to take Bob's job. I'll never forget it, I was right in his outer office, my little office was right there in the West Wing. He said, "Terry, I understand you come from a good military family, so I want to keep you on the staff, but your last two bosses, I'm afraid, are going to go to the slammer. So, if you don't mind, I'm going to put you over into the Executive Office building for awhile until things cool down." Of course, I was delighted to stay on, because a lawyer leaving the White House during the Watergate time would not have been a good thing and I'm afraid I might have had some trouble finding a job. So, I was delighted to stay on. And, roll forward, when the resignation occurred, General Haig as Chief of Staff at that point asked me to sit in the President's outer office filling the job that Steve Bull used to fill for President Nixon as his personal aide for a few weeks until things settled

down, because there was no discipline, initially, in the office. People were walking in with papers and letters and things of that nature.

Smith: The famous spokes in the wheel?

O'Donnell: Yes.

Smith: Although one senses the wheel was coming off.

O'Donnell: That's right. So, I was happy to do that and that's how I ended up having my first meeting with President Ford.

Smith: Let me back up. Do you remember where you were when you heard about the Watergate break-in?

O'Donnell: Well, I don't remember where, but I was on Ron Walker's staff, on the advance staff. That was my first job when I came in. That was in June of '72 and I had been on the staff for maybe three weeks prior to the Watergate break-in. Of course, it didn't seem to be a very significant event, initially. Nixon had that landslide win in '72 and then it eroded and ate away and the resignation was ultimately the consequence of that. It was a tough time to be on the White House staff.

Smith: What was it like to be around Haldeman at that point?

O'Donnell: Well, one thing that I'm forever grateful of is neither Bob nor Dwight Chapin ever shared with me anything. I was a young aide working for them and they never shared anything with me about those events and I was very happy that I did not have to go to the FBI for interviews and everything else as many White House people did. Bob was a very dedicated guy. He was an exacting executive. He expected perfection. He said, "This White House is the President's house and it should be the best in the world." So if he walked through the West Wing and saw a paper askance, he'd make note of it. And if he went, literally, into the john at Camp David because this really happened, and the toilet paper roll was almost run down, he made a note of it and say, "Terry, that's not as it should be. Fix it." And that was my job and I found whoever was in charge of it and got it fixed. So that was the kind of man he

was. I enjoyed working with him because he's the toughest boss that I've ever had.

Smith: I also sense that Mrs. Nixon was held at some distance by Haldeman and Ehrlichman.

O'Donnell: The East Wing was very distinct in those days and dealt with differently. I would say, the more modern presidencies have incorporated the East Wing. Things have changed a lot since then. You're right.

Smith: Did they resent her? Did she resent them? Because I'm sensing there was a personal element quite apart from the cultural sense that, "Well, that's the East Wing and they do women's issues."

O'Donnell: That I can't comment on because I never was privy to any information about the inner workings vis-a-vie Mrs. Nixon. I know about the two staffs and how the East Wing was dealt with as a staff during the Nixon times, but I don't know the inner relationship between Bob Haldeman, or Dwight and Mrs. Nixon or Steve Bull. I just can't comment on that.

Smith: Was there a time, an epiphany, or was it a gradual dawning process, end of '72 or first part of '73, when you personally began to sense that a) this was bigger than we thought, and/or b) that maybe the President's involved?

O'Donnell: I think it was a gradual kind of painful process, step by step. There was a cartoon at the time which I think best defines it because I can remember it vividly. There was a gentleman on crutches and he's asking someone for directions and the fellow tells him, "It's just around the corner." We always felt the good news, the break, is just around the corner. But in the cartoon, corners just went on for infinity, just a squiggly line of corners. And so that's the way we began to feel. The staff was a terrific staff. It was a very dedicated and loyal staff.

So many of the people, the Nixon people, went on to become Ford people and Reagan people and George Bush people, Bush 41. So they were very, very good, capable staff with a lot of hope in the President and a lot of trust and so it was a slow, painful process that ate away at the confidence and trust. And

then, when the tapes came out, some of the tape quotes, I think at that point, everybody on the staff was very concerned about what really happened here and how it happened.

Smith: Did you know about the taping system?

O'Donnell: I'll tell you a funny story. I did not, bottom line. But when I went to interview in June of '72, Fred Malek was Nixon's personnel guy; he was one of the fellows that I interviewed with. After the interview, I went to meet with Alex Butterfield who I had known as a family friend and former military officer for my dad. And Alex took me into the President's office, the Oval Office; the President was away and I was looking around and touching things and he said, "Terry, be careful, there's a lot of tricky things in here."

That's the word he used and I had no idea what he was talking about, and then later I realized, that Alex was aware of the taping system and, in fact, I think it was under his jurisdiction or part of his responsibility to help to set it up. He didn't make the decision to do it, but he implemented that decision. But I never had an idea that it was there until it was disclosed publicly. And Alex, I don't know whether the Watergate staff knew before they interviewed Alex Butterfield that day, but you remember, he was the one who was credited for revealing it up there on Capitol Hill in a staff interview and immediately they rolled him into a formal hearing and made him say it on the record. And I think that was the beginning of the end because without the tapes, the President never would have resigned and they never would have a "case" against him, I believe. I just don't think it ever would've occurred.

Smith: You know, it's interesting, I only heard President Ford speak ill of two people and the worst he could say was, "He's a *bad* man." That's the worst he could come up with. One was Gordon Liddy and the other was John Dean, both of which, in retrospect, you can see why he might have felt the way he did. Did you have any contact with either one?

O'Donnell: I had a fair amount of contact with John Dean. Liddy and that whole operation, when you think about it, I think, was a horrible misjudgment, judgment error based on funds beyond belief. There was so much money that

was raised, there was really nothing you couldn't afford to do and here was a step going too far because the money was there where you could do these things and one of the greatest errors ever made in U.S. political history in terms of political judgment and the like.

John Dean, I didn't have a good relationship with John Dean, but when I was working for Haldeman, I would see him come in and out of Haldeman's office frequently and I would set up meetings. So I saw a fair amount of him. My problem with John Dean is that, because I'm the general counsel of Textron and before that I was the general counsel to the Department of Defense, and if you're general counsel, you have to be the conscience, you have to be the road block if something starts to go wrong. It's your job to say, no matter how unpopular it is, "We can't take one step in that direction," or "We can't put that out in our press release," or "We can't put that out in our earning's release because it's not accurate and ultimately it's going to cost you."

And quite the contrary, John, I think, helped lead the President and Haldeman and others down the wrong path as counsel when he should've been doing just the other thing. And then when it began to bind and he became the focus of an investigation, he flipped and cooperated and, to this day, still points the finger. But I think he was very ill-suited to be the chief lawyer of the White House. It was a bad personnel selection and I've often wondered if he had been doing the courageous thing as counsel, how that might have changed the course of events, because it was his job to say, "We can't pay under cover one dollar of those attorney's fees without disclosing it, because if we do, that's the road to an obstruction and that could lead to your resignation. So, I'm not going to do it. You shouldn't do it. I don't care what we have to say or what comes out. We can't go down that road." And he made that mistake and it was a tragic mistake, really, I think, so I would agree with the President 100% on that.

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

O'Donnell: Oh, I don't know.

Smith: Well, let me rephrase that. Is there anything we don't know about Watergate, including, I suppose, who ordered the break-in, that you think we ever will know?

O'Donnell: I kind of doubt that we'll ever know anything more than we know now unless somebody is deciding to hold back on their true knowledge. But now that Deep Throat has been identified and so forth.

Smith: Did that surprise you, by the way?

O'Donnell: It did. It did. I didn't know that fellow.

Smith: Did you play the game, I mean, did you have candidates in mind?

O'Donnell: I didn't have a good lead. I actually bought into the composite theory, that Woodward and Bernstein were getting bits and pieces of information from a number of people and that was Deep Throat and they were just doing that.

Smith: That's what their editor, Alice Mayhew at Simon & Schuster, told Steve Ambrose, point blank - that it was in fact a composite.

O'Donnell: Because I don't know how one person, as I thought back at the time, would have all that information. Now, the FBI, that makes sense because so much different information funnels in. But then again, the notion that an FBI agent, much less an FBI leader deciding on his own that he was going to transfer information which he is sworn to protect, the FBI is sworn to protect their investigative information unless they're given permission, to me is repugnant. I mean, I just couldn't believe when I heard who it was that he would really carry on that course of conduct. I mean, he had a grudge, he wasn't selected for the top position, this and that, but none of those things justify that kind of conduct in my view. So it was a surprise that an FBI man would do that.

Smith: Remember, there was a wonderful moment, a couple of years before President Ford died, I think it was the last meeting of the Foundation. It was out there. And this was right at the height of the media speculation. And he had practiced, his timing was perfect, you know. He said, "I have an announcement I want to make. "I just want all of you to know that I'm Deep

Throat.” And there was just this stunned silence for a moment and then people realized it was a joke.

O'Donnell: That was a Foundation meeting I couldn't go to. I couldn't get out there and I truly regretted that because it was a special meeting, I heard, really a good one.

Smith: How did Haldeman tell you he was leaving? Or did he tell you he was leaving?

O'Donnell: He did. His lawyer was in and out, not Buzhardt, but his private lawyer, and the drumbeat of articles in the press and the like. And I don't remember precisely when I learned, but I learned from him. He would typically come out of meetings - he had long meetings with the President, generally two a day - he would come out of the meetings and Larry Higby, who had the job before me, would sit down with him and take notes. And out of a normal meeting with the President would come 15 or 20, and perfectly appropriate things, but action memos, usually a sentence or two saying, “Do that” or “Do this,” that went out to the staff.

They'd be called Higby-grams or whatever. And so Larry moved into Dwight's office and I really took that role. Larry would still sit in those meetings. But, Bob came out of one of those meetings and said, “This is it. We're going to resign, John Ehrlichman and myself, and on a date certain.” It was really a short timeframe, if I remember. And that's really when I first - that I learned of it. I wasn't surprised because the drumbeat of the press was relentless.

Smith: Were you surprised when the stories appeared in the press about Agnew's problems?

O'Donnell: Yes. Yeah, I had no idea that those problems existed and hadn't paid a lot of attention to Vice President Agnew's history and pedigree and so forth. I knew a lot of the staff members. There were some very good members on his staff. And so that was a shock, yeah.

Smith: Did you see much of the President during this period?

O'Donnell: I sat in for Steve Bull on occasion and helped Steve, because you remember, I came in to do advance work for President Nixon and when George McGovern was selected, the President found no reason to go out and campaign. And so, the advance team supported the first family, Julie and Trisha and Mrs. Nixon, and they would go out and do events. And so we had some time on our hands that summer and early fall, and it was just at the convention in Miami that Dwight picked me up out of the advance office and I became his assistant working at the convention. So my contact with the President was never personal. I was in a few meetings with him about some trips and of course I was on the road with him on several occasions. I did advance Senator [Allen] Ellender's funeral down in Slidell, Louisiana, but I had no personal rapport or contact with the President. I was just a junior staff member.

Smith: Even into '74 the defining months at the end of his presidency?

O'Donnell: Yeah, when Haldeman left and Haig came in, I went over to the Executive Office building and I even saw less of the President and the West Wing team than I did when I was in the West Wing.

Smith: Were you around the Vice President at all during that period?

O'Donnell: No, I was not. I really didn't have a chance to work with him. My dad, who had passed away in 1971, really liked President Ford a lot as a Republican congressman from Michigan and they got to know each other well. They played golf together at Burning Tree and so I heard my dad say great things about Jerry Ford over time, but that's about all I knew.

Smith: What did he say? And how did they get along?

O'Donnell: My father had a great sense of humor and he liked to tell stories and play some golf and have a drink or something at the club there, and I think the Minority Leader at the time then, Ford, did the same thing and they were very compatible in their views and they just got along very well. And, in fact, when the President asked me to stay on after the initial two weeks as his personal assistant he commented on my dad who had passed away and how good of friends they were. They were golf friends, mainly, but they were good friends. So that's really all I knew, other than he was a Minority Leader

and had been around politics for a long time and was on the Commission involving the Kennedy assassination. That's really all I knew about Gerald Ford at the time when he came in as Vice President.

Smith: What are your memories of August 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>?

O'Donnell: Yeah, the very vivid memories of being told about going to the East Room event where President Nixon made his farewell address to the staff, you know, with all the staff members, and then marching out of the East Room down to the portico and out on the lawn where the helicopter was and waving goodbye at that point. I remember it very, very vividly. The President gave his victory salute and got onto the helicopter and off he went. And I was still over in the West Wing working with David Parker, who was a Nixon guy, who was head of appointments and schedule and what Warren Rustand subsequently did for awhile for President Ford. And then we went back the next day, was it the next day, the next day for the President's swearing in ceremony.

Smith: That's that same afternoon.

O'Donnell: That's right, same day. I was there for that and it was a dramatic 24-hour period when you first heard about, because President Nixon was on television the night before, wasn't he? And announced the intent to resign and so all the way through that day was very disruptive.

Smith: Were there tears in that East Room?

O'Donnell: Yeah, yeah, there were. The staff was very, very proud of the accomplishments of the President and the staff and really was very dedicated to President Nixon, warts and all, for the good things that he had done, not standing up for the problems, but for the good things that he had done.

Smith: Let me ask you. Someone who was in the East Room for the swearing in, sort of got shoehorned in at the last minute with some congressional types, described the situation afterwards. After the ceremony in the East Room, there is a receiving line and people were all invited down to the State Dining Room for, I guess, a reception.

O'Donnell: Right.

Smith: And, at least, as this individual recalled it, he said, "You could see the Nixon people kind of peel off and go back to their offices."

O'Donnell: That's right.

Smith: And it illustrated that among the challenges the new President faced was integrating the vast majority of the existing White House staff, which had no taint, except political, with a few Ford people and whoever else he wanted to bring in. What's your recollection of that?

O'Donnell: Well, I do remember several of us leaving an event, I guess it was in the State Dining Room or the hall there after the swearing in and my thought was, "This is the new President's day and this is his staff and his family and his friends." And so it seemed like the appropriate thing to do, not to linger too long. It was out of no disrespect for him or anything along those lines.

There was, that afternoon, if I'm not mistaken, a meeting in the Roosevelt Room, I think, of the staff, and one of the funniest things I've ever heard occurred in that meeting. Everybody was pretty much in a state of shock. You may have heard this story before. And you had the senior staff of the Vice President, now President, and you had the senior staff of the outgoing President and you could've heard a pin drop. I mean, everybody was wondering, "What's going to happen here?", "What's going to happen to me?", "What's going to happen to the country?" I mean, you could really cut the air, it was that thick. And Tom Korologos bounced in, who had a magnificent sense of humor, and he looked around the room and he said, "You know, you Nixon guys are in serious trouble." Of course, he was the arch-Nixon guy. Everybody laughed and he broke up the meeting.

I remember that very well, but that was kind of the view because you had a change of power instantly, here, which has occurred very infrequently in American history. I mean, I guess if you roll back to the Kennedy assassination.

Smith: Which at least was a friendly transition, a tragedy, which, if anything, bonded the country. But there must have been enormous uncertainty among the Nixon folks.

O'Donnell: Oh, huge. I mean, "Are we out tomorrow?" or "Should I send my resume out this afternoon?" "Can we help? Is there something we can do?" "What's the right thing to do?" So those were all those things going through. And though there was tension during the Ford vice presidency between the Nixon staff and the Vice President in that, with Spiro Agnew, the practice was that the great speechwriting team of Ray Price, Pat Buchanan and Bill Safire, you know, they'd write stuff for Spiro Agnew and he really wasn't permitted to change anything. He'd go out to the hustings and deliver whatever he was told.

I think Vice President Ford probably asserted more discretion and pushed back a little bit more. Obviously, the Vice President does the President's bidding as long as it's appropriate and everything. So I think a little tension built up over that, and then there were the things that the Vice President had to do to protect the transition that he felt, I look back and I've read, he felt was coming for awhile. And he had to maintain his credibility and there were certain things that he couldn't do, that wouldn't be appropriate to do when he is knowing that he is very likely to be the President of the United States at some time in the not too distant future.

I think he acted appropriately in that regard, but it created some tension with the Nixon staff because he wasn't doing everything he could to defend the President because he had to maintain a certain degree of discretion for the country.

Smith: You can understand how everyone played that role and how everyone felt the way they did. It's interesting, we were talking to Bob Barrett and he said, "People really don't fully appreciate how good Ford was at keeping secrets." And he said, "I'll bet you there are things that he took with him to his grave."

O'Donnell: Oh, I bet. Yeah, that's an interesting observation. I would share that.

- Smith: One of the curious things I've found about the President that set him apart from most politicians I've been around, is he wasn't a gossip. I mean, politicians love political gossip, but on the personal level, I sensed he almost found it distasteful. That he'd change the subject if you went too close.
- O'Donnell: Yeah, he had a very clear - and it's the only way I saw him, as President - he had a very clear view of appropriateness and discretion for the President of the United States - what you should talk about and what you shouldn't, and he did not want to get into talking with staff about what's good or bad about another person other than personnel issues or something like that. He didn't have any patience for that. I didn't know whether that was the way it'd always been or whether that was a mantle he took to the presidency. It's a good thing to do, because as the President it doesn't do himself any good to get dragged down into gossip and things.
- Smith: And I assume there's no such thing as a private conversation with a President.
- O'Donnell: Well, the President has absolute discretion to share anything with anybody he needs to get something done or whatever.
- Smith: But in terms of, for a President to believe he can have a private conversation, I mean, how far do you go?
- O'Donnell: I think that mold has been broken. I think it existed. I really do. I think the President did have confidence when he was meeting with certain people. Rumsfeld and Cheney, for example, when they did the back-to-back that they would be totally loyal and discreet in that information and to my knowledge, they were. I mean, Cheney was an absolute example of maintaining confidences and secrets of a lawyer. As a lawyer, you appreciate that because that's what lawyers have to do with their clients' confidences and secrets.
- Smith: Yeah.
- O'Donnell: He would tell us, the staff, what we needed to know, but he wouldn't get into any of the dialogue. Haldeman, on the other hand, would come out of the meetings and, to his trusted aides, Larry Higby and then later myself, would describe a fair amount of what went on in those meetings, but by no means

everything. He kept a lot of it to himself and I know that because you subsequently found out what went on in those meetings through the tapes and so forth.

Smith: Tell me about the President and Edward Bennett Williams, their relationship.

O'Donnell: I observed that they had a very good working relationship and I think President Ford felt good about Williams being on the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. And I recall one meeting of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board in the Cabinet Room in which a policy debate ensued over intelligence tactics, if you will. And Ed, who was a prominent Democrat, was conservative on foreign policy and intelligence, and he knew constitutional law like the back of his hand. And so he and Attorney General Ed Levi got into a to-and-fro on the issue. The meeting concluded and the President asked me to get Ed and bring him into the Oval Office. So, I quietly did that, but it was apparent to those in the Cabinet Room that Ed was being led out of the room by me, which meant one thing, that he was going in to see the President. And he left the rest of the members of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board cooling their heels and Ed stayed in there a good while. Finally, I came in because we had a visiting group in the Rose Garden and we were quite late, and I broke that meeting up and to roll forward, when I interviewed at Williams & Connelly after Jimmy Carter won, Ed said, "Yeah, O'Donnell, I remember you. You're the one who broke up the meeting with the President just as I was about to make my sell." But they did have a nice working relationship.

Smith: Was he at one point approached about the CIA job?

O'Donnell: I believe he was. Yes, I believe he was and I think President Ford wrote about that in his book, although I can't be sure about that. I think he wanted Ed to take that job. I believe that to be the case.

Smith: Clearly the President had a lot of friends who were Democrats.

O'Donnell: Yes, indeed. Indeed. He surely did.

Smith: Tell me about the relationship with O'Neill. There's a wonderful story that Don Penny tells - he was sort of an outsider and he took things at face value. And he saw one day, I guess in the Oval Office, the President and Tip had had a meeting - you know, warm and friendly. And then Tip went out on the North Lawn in front of the cameras and, of course, lambasted the President.

O'Donnell: Right.

Smith: And Don, seeing what he saw, went back in to report to the President this outrage that was occurring outside his very door and the President's got his pipe and, you know, he says, "Don, that's just politics."

O'Donnell: Well, the identical thing happened to me. One of my fun duties on a Thursday or Friday afternoon if the President could break away Saturday morning for golf, he would ask me to call two or three guys in his name and set up a golf game at Burning Tree. And Bob Michel and Tip O'Neill were typical golf partners.

He asked me to do that on one day and I kind of screwed up my courage and I said, "Well, Mr. President," you know, because it wasn't my job to intervene on this, "are you sure you want to play with Tip O'Neill?" And he said, "Of course. Why not?" Well, he'd just made this statement this week and it was one of the pointed statements about a football helmet too small or being able to walk and chew gum or something like that. At any event, I was offended by Tip O'Neill's statement and I told the President that, and he just laughed and said, "That's nothing. That's politics. That's nothing."

So he had a strange ability to enjoy his friends, almost unbelievable ability to enjoy his friends and their friendship even though some of them were very tough on him, and Tip O'Neill was one of them. He would blast the President on a fairly regular basis and yet he would be in the golf foursome. I can understand Michel, he was on the same team, but Tip was not. It's interesting isn't it, because you don't see much of that today?

Smith: Ford comes into office - where were you at the very beginning of the administration?

O'Donnell: At the very beginning, I was still with Dave Parker in the Executive Office building next door to the West Wing. I think it was on the first full day of the presidency, General Haig called me and he knew that I had understudied with Steve Bull a little bit as personal aide to President Nixon in handling the appointments and paper flow and all that. And he said, "We've got people coming in," and this is part of the tension between the two staffs, he said, "We've got some people coming in who worked with the Vice President when he was Vice President with an inbox under their arm, papers falling out, and getting in there and we have no record of what was discussed or decided or anything else. We can't run the White House this way. You know how to do it. Would you go down there and enforce the schedule?"

"You have to have an appointment to see the President, you can't just walk in, and we have to make sure that ideas that come into him have the comments of the right people that are staffed properly." So, I said, "Sure, I'll go down and do it." And he said, "You know, it'd be a couple of weeks or so and after that we'll see if we can find a good legal position for you over at the Department of Justice." And I said, "Terrific." So, he took me in and introduced me to the President, who I did not know personally, and as I said, he knew my dad, and the President was, "Great, let's give it a try." And so I moved into the little office next to the Oval Office between the cabinet room and the Oval Office and started to fulfill that role.

Smith: And you know who wanted that office?

O'Donnell: No, I don't know.

Smith: Hartmann.

O'Donnell: Oh, I didn't know that. No, this is not his study, now, this is the little office, it's hardly bigger than a closet, right between the cabinet room and the Oval Office and Bob ended up, of course, with the big office next to the President's study where Alex Butterfield used to be. But, in any event, I moved in and took the job and we got along well and a couple of weeks came and passed and a couple of weeks later, the President said, "Terry, this is working out fine. Why don't you just stay?" And I said I'd be delighted, because from a

standpoint of a position, I was having a great time and that it was a wonderful job.

Smith: What were your first impressions on him?

O'Donnell: Extremely hard working, extremely dedicated, wanting to hear from everybody initially, including his old pals, the Grand Rapids group, the congressional group, the industry group, K Street Corridor, who were pals of his, some of those people, and becoming a little frustrated with wanting to get all that done. You just couldn't do it all.

Smith: In those first few days, understanding the substance of symbolism at such a time, he had the Congressional Black Caucus come over and George Meany over and people who had not been in the Oval Office for some time, clearly sending a signal that this was a different—

O'Donnell: This was open and this was an open White House, open presidency and he wanted to continue those fine thoughts in the speech he had made upon taking the oath, you know. And so I enjoyed him immensely as a boss and I kind of reported directly to him and to the chief of staff of the White House who was then still Al Haig.

Smith: Was there any question of Haig staying long in that role or was it simply a question of what alternative you were going to come up with?

O'Donnell: I was under the understanding, and I could be well wrong from my perspective because I wasn't in the counsels where some of these things were discussed with the President. I typically, if you were visiting the President, I might work with the scheduling office to set your appointment and I might go out to the West Wing hall, say hello to you, say, "It'll be five minutes," or whatever or, "Come on in and sit outside my office" and I might take you in there and on occasion the President might ask me to stay and takes notes in the meeting, but that was rare. And then I would excuse myself, so what went on was not my jurisdiction, if you will.

Smith: You were a facilitator.

- O'Donnell: I was a facilitator. I was not a policy person. So I thought for awhile that the President was just going to give it a try and then Don Rumsfeld, of course, came back and others came in on the transition to advise and assist.
- Smith: Was that related to this recognition that the spokes of the wheel just wasn't practical? That a Rumsfeld would not have come in unless there was going to be some significant change?
- O'Donnell: Almost immediately, there was a huge clash of approaches, because what I would say the successful representative in Congress, in that model, which is the one that the President had lived and breathed for all these many years with the vice presidency being a brief interlude, and then the battle of the Nixon White House discipline process, heavily processed Staff Secretary ensuring that every piece of paper that went to the President had the views of all the interested parties, which is a good thing. But there was a big clash between those two cultures, which I observed. I mean, it was right in front of me, day in and day out.
- Smith: And, to what extent was it personalized? For example, Bob Hartmann was clearly a polarizing figure.
- O'Donnell: It's no secret that Bob and Al did not get on at all from day one and there was, not without reason, but there was a sense that the holdovers really should be purged, that we don't know where all the bodies are in Watergate, and after all, it became, despite all the good things done, the administration crashed and it was a failure in that regard and that's a fact. And so, we ought to get rid of those people and bring in all new people. And that view clashed with the notion that it was very hard to start a White House on the run without the experience and capability of the people on board. And secondly, the President knew a lot of these people because he had been an influence in Washington for a long time as Minority Leader, so he knew and respected a lot of the talent in the National Security Council, in the White House, and in the cabinet. So he really wasn't interested in making a wholesale change. And there was a lot of give and take. I mean, you've studied this and you know, there was a lot of tension and give and take at the time as to who would go, who would stay, who would end up in what position, whether the Nixonites

were suffocating and crushing the new presidency in the cradle or whether they were just bringing the best practices of how to run the White House successfully to bear.

Smith: One of the things we've been told, and it's perfectly consistent with what you say, is that a not insignificant consideration in the President's thinking was basic fairness - that it was not fair to tar everyone in the Nixon White House for the crimes of a handful. He really didn't want to be a party to branding people, in effect, professionally for life by simply kicking them out on the streets.

O'Donnell: That's wholly consistent with my observation of Gerald Ford, that he would take that position. I never heard that one way or another, but I can understand that that's the way he would be. You know, he had a high regard for a lot of the people. He saw a lot of the congressional relations people on a regular basis. He had a high regard for a lot of those folks.

Smith: Those first couple weeks...certainly as he talked about the pardon, one senses that perhaps naively he believed the country was ready to turn the page. As a new president who never expected to be president, he was painfully aware of everything else on his agenda.

O'Donnell: Right.

Smith: It should be everything from Greece and Turkey and Cypress to, gosh, the Glomar Explorer, the economy, the continuing energy problem - all this stuff. And then there was that first press conference on the 27<sup>th</sup> or 28<sup>th</sup> of August where he, again, perhaps naively, expected to be asked about all these concerns and it didn't happen that way, did it?

O'Donnell: No, they focused like a laser right on Nixon and the criminal investigation and cooperation and documents and document flow. He, even in my presence, expressed enormous frustration with all of the lingering strains of the Nixon investigation. I know and I heard him say on multiple occasions, "We've got to clear the decks." And he used that phrase, "We've got to clear the decks." And so I wasn't surprised at all. I got very short notice of the decision and came rushing in the night before, I think I was told, and came in to set up the

Oval Office with the press office for the statement that he would make on that date for the pardon. But I do think he was stung by the aftermath of the pardon and strong reaction to the contrary. I think, from what I observed, he knew it would be controversial but he didn't have any idea that it would blow up on the doorstep to the extent that it did, and that Jerry terHorst would resign and, you know, all of these things.

Smith: This obviously is supposition, but there is an ongoing debate as to what, in fact, lay behind terHorst's decision. We've been told by more than one person that it wasn't simple. That terHorst was genuine in his disappointment/resentment/anger over the decision to pardon President Nixon, but there was in fact more to it than that, that he felt the job was overwhelming—

O'Donnell: He wasn't comfortable with the responsibilities of the job.

Smith: Yeah, the sheer volume and demands of the job.

O'Donnell: That was my observation of Jerry at the time, but I was deeply disappointed at the time because I didn't think it was an appropriate response to the exercise of a well-established constitutional power. I mean, if the President had done something wrong, I can see people resigning, but I didn't see that. You might disagree with it, but the President has unfettered constitutional authority to grant pardons. But in any event, it was defining surely for the rest of the administration - the pardon lingered on right up to election day.

Smith: Right. Apart from the President, in your own sense, was it literally night and day? Was there pre-pardon and post-pardon in terms of just the reaction of people?

O'Donnell: Yeah, I think it was. Of course, you had the congressional committee stirred up and the question of the President going to testify and "Was there a deal?" and all these things. They kind of took the place of dealing with the criminal investigation. Maybe they were more demanding for awhile than was the status quo with just the ongoing independent counsel.

Smith: And how did that originate? Clearly Ford was perfectly willing to do it although it had never been done before. But, was that an invitation that came from the Hill informally?

O'Donnell: That I don't remember because, again, I would not have been involved in the decision to do that. I would've strongly urged against it just because I don't think the President should have to go up. I think it's a bad precedent to go up and testify before a committee under our system versus the Brits and everything, and even then in Britain, that's debate, that isn't sworn testimony. What takes place in the House of Commons is a great tradition, but I think it's different than an investigative committee grilling under oath. But, anyway, he was a man of the House and he felt that he wasn't exposed here and hadn't done the things that were being rumored.

My sense is in the snippets of conversations that I heard, he wanted to go up and clear the air and he felt he was the only one who could do it. And it was part and parcel to "getting this all behind him." Because the investigation was supplanted by the post-pardon investigation and the trouble with that is the post-pardon investigation was focused on him. The pre-pardon investigation was focused on Richard Nixon. So, in a way, this decision bit back and I think he was really genuinely surprised at the intensity of the backlash.

Smith: One of the things we've been told is that the White House was being told through back channels from Leon Jaworski, that it could take up to two years to bring Nixon to trial. That had tended to define... "that's how long I've got to be here," assuming I'm not running for or reelected in 1976. "Do I really want to spend all my time here dealing with these things?"

O'Donnell: Prior to my taking the Textron position in 2000, I did a lot of defense work for companies and white collar defense work, and two years is about right. And the President's view is it's going to dominate all of his term and he genuinely believed, in things that I heard, that he just couldn't get about dealing with these problems with these things lingering in the background. And I remember the lawyers coming down to see him time and again over the investigation, the handling of the former President's papers, who was going to screen, what about the privilege, you know, the attorney-client privilege, and

executive privilege of those papers. And the President I think just threw his hands up in frustration and said, "I can't deal with this. I just can't do this and fulfill my duties. I want it over."

And so I think he did it for all the right reasons. I was very pleased and proud and surprised years later for the Kennedy Award came to him for that decision because I thought it was deserved. I still think it was the right decision for the country. But it will be one of those things that will be debated forever.

Smith: It's funny, and it will come as no surprise to you that Mel Laird still thinks he had a better way to do it. Mel had a plan. Mel's plan was, he was going to bring twenty or thirty members from both houses of Congress, bipartisan delegation, down to the White House to ask the President to do this. The problem with that scenario is, put yourself back in the supercharged climate of the day. Because I remember spending an evening one night with the President war-gaming this, thinking there must have been a more adroit way of doing this. The problem was, any trial balloon, I don't care what source, would never have gotten above the trees before it was shot down. I mean, there was no way to "prepare" the country for this.

O'Donnell: I think you're absolutely right, I think it was just too hot a topic. And he decided just to take it on quickly, and once he made the decision and acted on it quickly, there was not any time for it to leak out and bounce around anymore than speculation had already talked about the pardon somewhere out there. And, boom, he did it.

Smith: There has been criticism over the years that he didn't get much in return for whatever reason. That he didn't get Richard Nixon to say very much.

O'Donnell: Yeah, I read about those discussions and the intermediary who was—

Smith: Benton Becker?

O'Donnell: Benton Becker, yeah, the very fascinating discussions in San Clemente and everything that was going on out there at the time. I think the President in my view really had his eye on the ball when he did this and maybe he could've rounded the corners or made it a little more palatable, but I don't think it

would've gone down much easier than it did. And he thought it was the right decision and he got it done early in his administration. Substituted another problem, which was the backlash from that problem, which was focused on him, but he still thought to his last day that that was the right thing to do for the country and I think that was why he did it.

Smith: And then literally just a couple weeks later, you have Mrs. Ford's cancer operation.

O'Donnell: Right.

Smith: What are your memories of that period?

O'Donnell: Oh, he was extremely focused on her condition and I remember going out to the hospital, I think it was, not Walter Reed, but the Navy—

Smith: Yeah, Bethesda?

O'Donnell: I think. And he was worried about her the entire time, extremely focused on her. It was a tough thing for him to do because they were, from my observation, so close at that point. I think Bob Hope may have come in to see Mrs. Ford or been there at the time with the President. I have a slight recollection of that. But in any event, it was a tough thing for him, that's what I recall personally - for him to get through.

Smith: It's fascinating, when she did her *60 Minutes* interview, she became this sort of controversial, certainly an unconventional first lady. One senses that the initial consensus among the kind of good, grey male political types in the White House was, "Oh my God, what is she doing?" to be succeeded by perhaps mild astonishment when the polls showing that most Americans found this very refreshing. I mean, it may not have been helpful to the Reagan challenge.

O'Donnell: Yeah, it may not have been helpful on the conservative challenge front. The funny thing about what I recall from the President was he was remarkably buoyant and supportive of her views and would talk about them and kid about them. So, they were an interesting couple.

Smith: Was it sort of a joke on him? A joke on her? Or how would he kid about that?

O'Donnell: He would say, just in groups that would come into the White House, you would get questions on, say, abortion issues, that would come up and some of the women's issues that would come up, and he would say, "I feel this way or that way, however, Betty feels..." You know, he would always bring her into it. "Betty feels a little differently than I do" and he always would laugh about it. Or "We don't always agree" and then he would laugh about it. And he had that way about him, about poking fun at himself. But he seemed to not only take it in good humor, he seemed to support it. Now, maybe to a Stu Spencer or someone there may have been a different communication about it, but that's what my observation was, that he was highly supportive of her views and respected her views.

Smith: And that extended to his kids as well.

O'Donnell: Yeah. Yeah, that's right.

Smith: I mean, one senses, they didn't ask for this. You know, leave them alone or let them be themselves.

O'Donnell: Yeah, he was, I think given all his time and pressure that he had, I think he was a good father to the kids and was very devoted to them. You just see it come up during the day's activities. [He'd] ask me the question, "Is Susan back up yet?" or whatever. I could just tell they were always close to him, close to his mind how his children were doing, how Mrs. Ford was doing.

Smith: What made him so grounded?

O'Donnell: Well, it's just his cut, you know. He just took the presidency, just stepped right up to it and ran with the ball. He had enough confidence with himself, he had enough confidence in friends and advisors and staff, and he didn't hesitate. I think it goes back to his entire career, you know, Naval officer training, his football career, his law career, small law firm in Grand Rapids. That's pretty mainline, solid stuff in America that he experienced all of those things. He was a member of Congress.

So there isn't much he hadn't seen in my view and he was blessed with a very, I think, good sense of humor. Not that he couldn't get mad and he sure did, but he was blessed with a great sense of humor and a real interest in people around him. I mean, he would never get into inappropriate discussion, but he knew the agents, he was interested in their families, sometimes he met their wives, you know, because they might have been up at Vail or something like that on occasion. He had a genuine interest. He knew my two young daughters at the time. He knew Margaret and he would ask about them. You don't concoct that. That was just natural for him. So it's beyond my kin to speculate, but he was pretty darned solid, really well tied to the ground, really well-rooted.

Smith: The first day, of course, they lived out in Alexandria that first week, and the first day, I think, he actually was living in the White House and he's walking up to the West Wing and there's a Marine guard, of course, saluting, you know, holding the door for him. And he walks up and extends his hand and he says, "Hi, my name's Jerry Ford and I'm going to be living here. What's yours?"

O'Donnell: Yeah, I didn't see that, but I can picture it in my mind and that was Gerald Ford.

Smith: But that goes back to this larger question, because there is this view that it was the congressional Ford that was sort of plunked down in the Oval Office and that it took him awhile to learn, almost to grow out of that role. And yet, in many ways, it was those qualities that made him what he was and it was sort of perfect for the time. Did you see an evolution in comfort level - the difference of being a Minority Leader on the Hill and being the President?

O'Donnell: Yeah, I never saw him change in his focus and dedication to his family, his concern and interest in his friends. The frustration that he didn't have time any longer for a lot of his friends, you know, as much time as he'd like to spend with his friends, that was frustrating for him, you know. The frustration with the discipline and the amount of work that was required, not because he didn't enjoy the work and have a great appetite for it, but it just precluded him from doing things with people that he intended to do.

Smith: A sociable guy.

O'Donnell: Sociable guy, very. And he liked, unlike President Nixon, he really enjoyed having the debate on a policy issue before him.

Smith: Can you illustrate that with an example or two?

O'Donnell: Yeah, of course, he loved the budget and he had a lot of experience with the defense budget and so, at budget time, he actually held appellate meetings in the cabinet room. This is the antithesis of anything Richard Nixon would do. He [Ford] would sit in the cabinet room and Jim Lynne and Paul O'Neill would be at his side. On the other side of the table would be Carla Hills or Matthews or one of the cabinet members complaining and raising issues about this budget. "Look what OMB has done to this program. We can't live without this program" and that. And he'd entertain these meetings and I thought that was fascinating. It took a lot of time. Was it the very best use of his time? One could debate that, but he thought, "My cabinet members feel strongly enough about an issue, I'm not going to decide it on a piece of paper. I'm actually going to hear them out."

So he wanted to repeatedly have the advocates come in and sit with him and he'd entertain debate, give and take, before him. Nixon really wasn't interested in doing that at all. He wanted that done out of his presence and if he wanted to see contrary views, he wanted a well-staffed memo because I used to, with Steve, all the paper that went in from the staff secretary or National Security Council or anything else went through me. I mean, I was the guy who took the folders, take them in, unless Cheney or Kissinger brought a particular paper in alone and that was rare. Most everything went through the process and it was totally different the way they behaved, but what changed dramatically in Gerald Ford was his recognition that with all he had to do, he couldn't do as much of that, anywhere near as much, as he wanted. So I saw him move, a little painfully, toward a more efficient use of his time. He grew, in my eyes, as President, pretty dramatically over that period of time.

Smith: It's been said that his greatest frustration was, by the fall of '76, he felt he'd really mastered the job, only to lose.

O'Donnell: Right. Exactly. He would've been honestly a really fabulous second-term President. He really had his feet on the ground. He really had his understanding. He wasn't Ronald Reagan on the campaign trail or Barack Obama or whatever, but he was even getting better at doing those things and the last campaign swing which ended up in Grand Rapids with him losing his voice was one of the most fabulous political - from an advance man's point of view, was an enormous success. Big crowds and lots of cities, two and three events a day. It was a real demanding trip which Red Cavaney and his capable team put together, and I was working with them on schedules and briefings for the President on each event and he performed magnificently as a political combatant in that campaign in the end and you know, "coulda/woulda/shoulda," was almost there.

You know, the San Francisco situation set the polls back a couple of days. I'm sure Stu Spencer regaled you with some interesting stories. I saw Dick Cheney and Stu Spencer try to deal with that problem for 24, 36 hours and it was a tough one.

Smith: Was he just stubborn?

O'Donnell: On that one, I think he was pretty stubborn. At the San Francisco debate, he said what he said, and I was on the Poland trip with him and I knew he was talking about the spirit and the hearts and the minds of the Polish people, and if you asked him how many division the Russians had in Poland, he could quote you down to the weaponry that they had there, how many tanks. So he knew exactly what the situation was, but he didn't say it articulately.

Smith: If he had simply referred to the fact that, "I've been to Poland and I've looked into these peoples faces and I've seen..." he could've turned it to an advantage.

O'Donnell: It's the indomitable spirit that he was talking about, not the fact that Russia had tactical, strategic control at the time of the geography, but you know, Scowcroft and Cheney, Spencer and those guys were kind of running around,

we were in the back during the debate. The President came out, we whisked him off immediately, and there was no time for any kind of assessment, to Senator Hayakawa's campaign event in the hotel, the same big ballroom. And the President had been studying for it the day he got there and he mispronounced it, Senator Hayakawa or something like that, I can't remember what it was. But a great event, big rally and the President was buoyed, he was buoyed by the crowd, he thought he had nailed the debate and he felt fabulous.

Red Cavaney and I go back to the residence. He was staying at a residence in San Francisco. With him back there was the captain of the Mayaguez ship and that was prearranged, and the President comes in and he's feeling good, asks for a drink, and says hello to the captain. Red and I are the only guys there. Cheney's not there and Scowcroft's not, as they normally would be, and the President looks around and says, "Where's Dick?" And I said, "Well, he's back talking to the press." And he said, "Okay." And the President gets the captain a drink and they're sitting down, just the two of them there and the President said, "Flip on the TV."

So, I turn the TV on and he is getting hammered, real-time, right there, this is one hour after the debate, maybe, and the President's face, he can't believe what he's hearing. He didn't really comprehend what had happened there until he sees this stuff on the TV and Cheney and Scowcroft are doing their clean-up brigade with the press, trying to get things on an even keel, and then they get back to the house and the meetings, they ensue. Meetings break out, they're talking to him, and I'm out of the room then. But it was a total shock to him and they tried to get it turned around for him all the next day and half the day into, I think it was 36 hours or so, he finally kind of pierced the well a little bit.

Smith: That raises the question, could he be stubborn?

O'Donnell: He could be stubborn and I think he was pretty stubborn on that issue because, "I know damn well what I meant and I know that it's right," and, "My words aren't wrong." They weren't as precise as they should have been. And Dick

and Stu went in and told him that in multiple ways and he'd get a little angry, get his back up, and almost throw them out a couple of times.

Smith: That's exactly what Stu said. He thought he was going to be fired.

O'Donnell: And seldom did I see him get wedded to a position so vigorously as he was on this one, but it did turn around and he started to pick up again.

Smith: Going into election day, did you think he had a real chance?

O'Donnell: Yeah, I thought so because it was one large state or two small states that I recall might have made the difference and it was so close, so close.

Smith: Were you at the White House that night?

O'Donnell: Yes. We were in the Roosevelt Room. We went up to the residence a couple of times for a brief stint, but he was up there with the senior staff and some of his key people and stayed all night. It was pretty bad, because by 12, one o'clock you knew things were going down.

Smith: What was it like the next morning? And how long did it take him to bounce back?

O'Donnell: Funny thing happened the next day and David Kennerly took a picture of it. Just David and I were in the office, it must have been between appointments and I said, "Mr. President, you know that that last campaign trip that you took, you performed magnificently and you deserved to win this thing," and I was a little choked up about it. And so, I was trying to get him to feel good and he came over, put his arm around my shoulder and said, "Terry, we put up a good fight. You can be proud of it. And I'm going to be just fine." Here he was helping me and I was trying to help him, and I remember that very clearly, and David has a picture, I have the picture around here somewhere with his arm around me.

Smith: Did it take a while?

O'Donnell: It took a little while. You know, he went out to Palm Springs in, I guess, December. It was never the same, really. I mean, it never is between election day and January if you've lost the election. You know, you're winding down,

you're a lame duck. And he got back on his feet from what I saw pretty well, but he believed as we all believed that he was equipped to do the job and that he would've done a better job than Jimmy Carter. We felt very strongly about that. And he had his issues with Jimmy Carter during that campaign on a number of occasions even in my presence. He got quite upset because he thought Jimmy Carter wasn't conducting the campaign at a high national plane of integrity and truthfulness. He thought he was cutting corners and he was demagogueing. That was the word that he used on occasion and this upset President Ford significantly. He didn't get upset at people very often but he got upset at that. But true to form, it didn't last and they become friends and they go out with you and they do seminars together and things like that.

Smith: Bob Barrett, during the interregnum, after the election, he said the President would go around saying, "I can't believe I lost to a peanut farmer."

O'Donnell: That was the sentiment. That was the sentiment and the day that Jimmy Carter first visited, I brought him into the office, as was our practice, and they sat down and the President was not interested in seeing that meeting last too long, just the appropriate amount of time. So we made sure that happened. It was just one of those things, you know. But he got over that, too. I think he counted him as a friend for many, many years after that. And that's true to Gerald Ford; he's not going to hold a grudge, at least from what I could tell.

Smith: Do you think his relationship with Nixon was permanently altered as a result of what they'd both gone through?

O'Donnell: Yeah, I think so. I think so. I never really understood. You know, they had a longstanding relationship because of their position in the national arena that goes so far back and it was pretty solid, I thought. I think it was strained during the vice presidency. I think it was strained further in connection with the pardon and the aftermath of the pardon. The President, I remember, we were out in California and President Nixon was in the hospital with phlebitis and President Ford wanted to make sure he went by the hospital, if I recall correctly.

Smith: And that was something the political advisors didn't want him to do right before the mid-term election.

O'Donnell: I think you're right. I hadn't thought about that. Yeah, I think you're right. But, you know, there's a lot of things that he was told politically would be very bad for him and he went and did them anyway. I was frustrated by some of them, because politically I wanted him to be strong.

Smith: Such as?

O'Donnell: You know, the wheat embargo with Henry Kissinger. Some of Henry's advice which he took which drove the conservatives to a further hostile base, but things he thought were correct, he just did them. Encouraging Mrs. Ford rather than discouraging her is another one. You know, the conservatives didn't like Mrs. Ford because of her views, some of the conservatives didn't, and he didn't try to muzzle her, at least as far as I know, he never did. I saw him encouraging, not discouraging.

Smith: In the spring of '76, the eve of the Texas primary, Kissinger has a trip to Africa, which basically is to advance black majority rule in the former Rhodesia. He could've put it off, but what were the chances that he bumps it for the Texas primary?

O'Donnell: No, not likely.

Smith: But he went. I mean, the President told him to go.

O'Donnell: Yeah, he had a very traditional view of taxpayers' interests, the taxpayer, the citizens' interests, the citizens' time. We would go out in the '74 elections for all of these dinners, you know, the rubber chicken circuit. He didn't want to leave the White House until four or five o'clock, you know we'd fly out to Iowa to do a dinner for a congressman and friend of his and he'd fly back because he wanted to be in the office in the morning because that's the peoples' business. He didn't want to spend the night even though that would be the easy thing to do. So, time and again, he would arrange the schedule, they were grueling schedules, so that he could, like a good lawyer or banker

or someone who wants to be at the desk and feels they need to be attending to the business, that was kind of the mentality that he brought to the job.

Smith: One thing a lot of people commented on was just the sheer amount of energy that he brought to the job, which is not something you automatically think of. I mean, physical stamina is one thing, but just the ability to maintain that—

O'Donnell: Yeah, he kept going hard, and sometimes he would get very tired on these trips and we would discourage him from adding another appointment or another issue, but his friend wanted him to do this or something and he would do it and he'd get tired sometimes. And he wasn't at his best when he really got tired. Sometimes it would really effect his performance if he had to give a public address, you know, so we had to give a constant fight and he was helping the fight at the end, but really pushing it at the beginning, and that was to pare down the schedule to really focus on the critical things and even though it may hurt some of your friends and associates and members of Congress who you want to spend time with. You just don't have time to do it all. So he was torn a little bit between those two tensions.

Smith: Were you around him at the time of the two assassination attempts?

O'Donnell: Yes, indeed. Typically, as we worked the rope line in Sacramento just in front of the state capitol where Jerry Brown was waiting for the meeting, there was, shoulder to shoulder, an agent in front of him, behind him and on his side, and between the agent on his side and the agent behind him, I was there walking the rope line with him. Literally, shoulder to shoulder to shoulder almost, because people would constantly give the President things, envelopes, pictures to sign, letters, all kinds of things, and the agents had to keep their hands free, so they couldn't touch those things. The President wasn't permitted to touch them because it wasn't appropriate or safe, so I would take them like the bag man and I would put them in a big briefcase that I would carry. Then we'd take them back to the White House and every letter would be answered and every request would be dealt with one way or another.

Smith: That's a congressman.

O'Donnell: Yeah, that's right. And often he would take those pictures home and sign them at night instead of having the autopen. Isn't that amazing?

So, we're working the line and I saw, about one row back, a woman with eyes that were scary that I could still see and it was Squeaky Fromme and she had some kind of an orange cape thing on. And I caught her eye just before the event occurred, as we were walking down the line, and I was struck by the fact that she didn't look like a normal person. I was wondering what she was doing there. The next thing I know, the agent is yelling "Gun!" and her arm is coming up and that's when Larry Buendorf, the agent, caught the gun coming up and cut his hand right here with the force of the gun. The agents collapsed the President.

Smith: Buendorf was where?

O'Donnell: Buendorf was in the front, as I recall, the front agent and then the middle, Kaiser, the back agent, and then I was kind of tucked right in there. And they yelled "Gun!" True to form, they collapsed him which really meant, collapsing him, meant putting him on the ground and jumping on him. It was a huddle. They're looking around, they got the gun, and they got the lady. They yelled "Clear!" We're up out of the huddle, I wasn't in the huddle, I was next to it, and when the President is going down, he was throwing an elbow because he was being treated pretty roughly, you know, like a football player. Like, "What the hell's going on?"

And so we get up and we walk at a fast pace and double time, literally, to the state capitol and the President goes like this, (straightening his tie) goes into the state capitol and off into the room and there's Jerry Brown. "Hello." [He] meets Jerry Brown's guys and Jerry Brown knows nothing of this and it just occurred a minute before, two minutes. And I'm in the back of the room and one of the Brown aides comes in and whispers to Jerry Brown, and Jerry Brown kind of turns white and he said, "You okay, Mr. President?" And the President laughs and he said, "I'm just fine." And that's how Brown learned the incident. President Ford didn't say a word about it.

Smith: Maybe it was just too fast, but when you were double timing it into the capitol, was there any conversation, any discussion? Did he say, "What happened?" or "Who was that?"

O'Donnell: I don't remember anything at all. I remember, I think it was the agent probably said something to him that there was a person with a gun or something. So in any event, we finished that trip, get back to Washington and there was a big fight between security and political people about whether or not he goes back to California and when, particularly Northern California.

Smith: Because it was a hotbed of radical—

O'Donnell: Yeah, and because this event occurred when there been other threats from out there. So President Ford said, in my presence, told, I think it was Dick Cheney that, "I'm not going to be a captive in the White House and we're going back." And it was a month to five weeks later, we were in San Francisco and the President was speaking, I believe it was the Hopkins or the Saint Francis Hotel, I don't remember, and while he was speaking upstairs, I went down into the street to check the situation with advance men and the agents. And there was a crowd, mean crowd, demonstrating across the street and the agents said, "We recommend you take the President directly to the car, from the door of the hotel directly to the limo and not shake hands on either side" which he would normally do because people are lined up on the sidewalk.

So we go back up, the speech finished, the President comes down, we're in the elevator, and then we get him on the first floor and I say, "Mr. President, the agents want you to go straight to the car." And he says, "Fine." Didn't ask because he knew if they had a reason, they had a reason. And so we get out the door and it's about ten, fifteen steps to the car and we get about halfway from the door to the car and there was a gun pop sound across the street and the agents yell "Gun!" and they collapse the President again into this huddle. Rumsfeld was on that trip. This must have been before Don went to Defense. And then they throw the President into the car like a log, Rumsfeld's trying to get into the car and I think he did.

The motorcade then starts to peel out and my car is right behind the agent's car. I'm losing agents in the control car, so I jump into the control car because it's moving pretty fast, and I grab the door and jump into the thing and one of the military aides, I don't know if Bob Barrett or one of the aides was there, and we speed out to the airport. We were so concerned we were going to kill somebody because there were a lot of crowds, and the agents were driving so fast out of there.

When all that was done, I must say, I didn't have a great feeling about Northern California. That was Sarah Jane Moore that fired that shot off. And, by the way, the shot went over my left shoulder and hit the hotel wall and I was on the President's left and it was about that far away [gesturing an arms length]. I didn't know that at the time. And one of the photographers on the other side of this limousine, looking over the limousine, took a picture of the President coming out, you know, one of those rapid firing [cameras], and you could see them collapsing the President and I'm part of the way down and then I'm down all the way. And the President's 2/3 of the way down and then he's down. But those were frightening incidents.

Smith: Let me ask you, do you think people took too long in '75 to recognize the potential threat that Reagan posed? I mean, did people either believe he wouldn't run or if he did he would be a less formidable challenger than he turned out to be?

O'Donnell: From my observation, that was correct, but I wasn't a political advisor. I think his [Reagan's] strength in the primaries surprised people significantly and you know it was a real tough time. I remember in Kansas City, we had the Presidential Suite where they arranged a bunch of very good military photos - you know the President's photo gallery, those big, framed photos in the West Wing. And we had one with the President inspecting an aircraft, inspecting the troops, climbing on a tank, and near a naval ship. So we had the suite looking really good and conservative, and then Baker and the group would bring up these delegates, onesies, twosies, and threesies at a time, you know, from Mississippi and elsewhere who were undecided. And it was pretty tiny and we worked that entire process of the delegates there and that same

suite was where the President's Vice Presidential decision was made. Having stated Rocky was not going to run, they debated late into the night and ended up with Bob Dole. I was at the door that night of the suite, so I heard that debate going on.

Smith: Was Anne Armstrong ever considered?

O'Donnell: You know, I don't remember. I don't remember whether Anne's name came up.

Smith: The reason is I think Bob Teeter had maybe included her name in a poll and I think the idea was, "We're so far behind. We've got to do some Hail Mary's."

O'Donnell: Well, that's when Rocky was not particularly happy, obviously, being out at the convention, but not being on the ticket.

Smith: How bleak was it for him? I mean, he was a good soldier.

O'Donnell: He was a good soldier and he hung in there. It was tough for him and his assistant Joe Canzari and I worked together to make sure things between the two of them were as good as they could [be]. The President, you know, was fine, but Rocky, this was a tough situation for him. And there was a strategy meeting for him afterwards. You know, it was important for Rocky to go and so forth, and he did, and he hung in there.

Smith: At one point, he wasn't going to go.

O'Donnell: That's right.

Smith: He went to his grave convinced that Don Rumsfeld did him in and then he transferred that to Cheney as Rumsfeld's deputy.

O'Donnell: Well, you know, there's that classic picture that Kennerly has and a lot of photographers have of Rocky giving the "one finger salute" at the convention floor. It almost looked like he enjoyed doing it, too, you know. I think he was at that point pretty fed up. And the conservatives on the floor, which was a very strong group, the Reaganites, you know, they needled him to death, they wouldn't let him alone. They were pretty tough on him.

Smith: His relationship with the President, did it suffer?

O'Donnell: Yeah, it did. It was never the same after that decision, I don't think. He was a buoyant person, Rocky, and the President liked him a great deal personally and he would see him for his weekly meeting, and he would come with a well-developed plan or policy of some sort that hadn't necessarily been staffed through the White House. Jim Cannon knows a great deal about that and so forth.

Smith: That's how you were elected in New York.

O'Donnell: Yeah. That's right and Rocky was a fountainhead of creativity and thinking and he was good. He was very good.

Smith: One thing before we wind up. At some point we'd love to have a second visit, but the fall of Saigon must have been an extraordinarily difficult time for everyone.

O'Donnell: Oh, yeah, yeah. I mean, I don't have crystal clear recollections of that other than the President's monitoring the heck out of it and being constantly engaged in it. One vignette related to defense which comes to mind is that Jim Schlesinger, whose an extremely bright guy, and the President would have these sessions in the Oval Office. Say it was going to be 45 minutes and Jim knew that going in; and he was a tough guy to get out of there once he was in. And both of them would light up their pipes and there was this kind of blue fog in the Oval Office area, they'd both be in there smoking their pipes. And the President knew a lot about defense and so did Jim and Jim would repeat a lot of what he knew, and I saw that relationship kind of deteriorate because of that.

Smith: Chemistry.

O'Donnell: The chemistry just wasn't very good, so that was kind of something in the making for a period of time. It was a chemistry issue. You're absolutely right.

Smith: And the massacre, whatever it was, when Rocky went and Rumsfeld went to the Pentagon and Schlesinger and Colby were replaced, and George Bush was

brought back - again Rockefeller absolutely convinced himself that it was all Rumsfeld, that Rumsfeld was pulling all these strings. I assume that was a gross oversimplification or just plain—

O'Donnell: Yes, because they were straight events. The Bush thing, Bush coming into the CIA. I mean, I don't remember the sequence of events, but I remember them being all at once. Maybe I'm wrong on that.

Smith: Yeah, basically there was a grand shuffle.

O'Donnell: I knew there was a shuffle, but somehow I thought Bush might have been over there already, but maybe not.

Smith: Obviously I'll ask the Secretary, but was it your understanding then that Don Rumsfeld wanted to be Vice President?

O'Donnell: I never saw that. Not that it wasn't there one way or another, but I never saw it because I knew the President was going through this process and was working on the Vice President selection, back in his study working on it pretty hard and there were a number of meetings associated with it and people, Rocky, came in and we brought him \_\_\_\_\_, I think, in under the tunnel. I think we did. I know we brought one of the candidates, I think it was Rocky, he'd go in to Treasury and go into the tunnel.

Smith: And was that when Rockefeller was—

O'Donnell: Being interviewed for the Vice President's job, yeah.

Smith: So that was at the beginning of the Ford presidency.

O'Donnell: The very beginning, I'm talking about now.

Smith: Supposedly the three names on the list were Rockefeller, Bush, and Rumsfeld.

O'Donnell: Yeah, see, I know Bush and Rocky were on the short list, but I don't know who else was on the short list, but I'm not surprised because Don had engineered the successful Minority Leader run for Gerald Ford in the House, so they were pretty close.

Smith: Tell us something about Gerald Ford that might surprise people.

- O'Donnell: I'm trying to think if I can come up with something that I haven't alluded to already today.
- Smith: Did he have enemies? I mean, he didn't think he had enemies, but I suppose Ronald Reagan qualifies.
- O'Donnell: You know, one thing that hadn't gotten a lot of attention is the Church proceedings which changed, perhaps forever, intelligence operations. Mike Duval and Jack Marsh were advising the President on that a great deal. I think one of the things that people don't really understand about Ford is his depth of comprehension and understanding of the mechanics of government and the agencies and the departments, National Security, Intelligence, Defense, the budget. He really knew how the sausages were made, you know. He would go over to the state department and give a briefing on the budget which was pretty spectacular to show the breadth of his knowledge. And with the Chevy Chase stuff, you know, the constant degradation of his –
- Smith: Was that tough for him?
- O'Donnell: If it was, he really guarded that closely, because all he did was laugh about it, but it had to be, at some point, tough on you. But then again, he's a resilient man. He didn't let stuff like that get under his skin.
- Smith: And you wonder how good an idea it was to let his press secretary go on Saturday Night Live and, in effect, call attention—
- O'Donnell: Humor and satire are powerful things and I think we saw it this election with Sarah Palin. I mean, my God. And the next thing you know, you're a caricature of yourself and you're not yourself anymore as far as people looking at you from the general public. It's not regulated and it shouldn't be, but we have a First Amendment in this country and it is a powerful thing. I can remember one trip, just to give you an example, out to Vail when [we] were into the stumbling, head-bumping stories, you know, the Chevy Chase things, and damned if the press hadn't pooled together to stake out the mountain and they combined. I mean, they had photographers all over there, AP, *Newsweek*, they were going to share, right? Who's going to get the big stumble picture? And the President was a pretty good skier and I skied with

him a couple of times and he was a lot better skier than I was, and I had a hard time keeping up with him. He would push the envelope, so you're going to fall when you do that. And, by God, they got their picture, you know, rear end over tea kettle, and put it on the front page of the *New York Times*, which I thought was really so unfair, but that was one of the political weapons. We don't really appreciate how powerful a weapon it is.

Smith: A great Ford story, in Vienna in the rain with the umbrella he went over to Mrs. Ford and slipped on the gangplank coming out of the plane and of course everyone around them was denouncing the photographers. And Ford says, "Well, of course, they took it. If they hadn't, they would've lost their jobs."

O'Donnell: Right.

Smith: That Eagle Scout quality.

O'Donnell: I was at the ramp at the top on the plane with him and I was warned that it was wet and slippery out there and I had the steward ready to hold the umbrella and walk down behind the President and Mrs. Ford so he could have, like a good sailor, one hand for himself, one hand on the railing, and he took the umbrella. He didn't want the steward carrying the umbrella, so he didn't have a hand for himself and took that fall at the bottom. I mean, it was a very embarrassing thing. But isn't that interesting, because he didn't want the appearance of someone doing his job for him, he didn't want to look like royalty or something like that with somebody carrying the umbrella.

Smith: Perfect.

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