

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Todd Matanich
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
December 1, 2008

Smith: First of all, thank you for doing this. What does it feel like to be back in this office?

Matanich: Nostalgic. I have a lot of great memories in here and it brings back a lot of great moments.

Smith: How did you come into the service?

Matanich: Well, in 1983 I was a hire from Hinckley's assassination attempt. The service hired about two hundred folks after that. I was in that wave and so I started the career in 1983. Didn't get involved with the Ford detail until about '91. I left Chicago to come out here and did about two and a half years out here with President Ford, and then left to go back to D.C. to do some headquarters time back in Washington. Then I had an opportunity to come back out in 2003, and I finished out out here, did about four or five years. As soon as he passed I retired.

Smith: How do agents get assigned? Do you have any say in that?

Matanich: Well, we all have dream lists when we come on the job, and headquarters has a division that handles manpower and planning. So they kind of take a look at what the agents would like to do, and then they punch it into to where the needs are. Both times I came out, I asked to, which was kind of the normal. There weren't too many agents who came out here that didn't ask to come out here. The fact that he bounced between Beaver Creek and Rancho Mirage wasn't a bad factor.

Smith: Geography is a factor?

Matanich: That helps, yeah. Plus, especially early on, it was a good life. A lot of travel – single guys liked it, so that was helpful.

Smith: He did love to travel, didn't he?

- Matanich: Yes, when he was younger he didn't sit still much.
- Smith: One sensed that around his ninetieth birthday - whether the doctors, at some point said, you're not going to be able to do this - it was like a turning of the page. All of a sudden, he was ninety – but he didn't seem to be, up until that time.
- Matanich: Right. He was very resistant to slow down. Towards the days when he was starting to decline in his stamina, he would go out to play golf, and he was apologetic that he couldn't finish eighteen holes of golf. And I used to tell him, "Sir, if you look around, you won't see many of your peers here." Now, they not only couldn't last eighteen, but they wouldn't have tried it. So he would, even at ninety, he would be out there and get in fourteen, fifteen holes, and he'd give it everything he had, but at the end of the day he just couldn't finish. And that was problematic for him. He had trouble accepting the fact that he couldn't get it in.
- Smith: And he continued to swim?
- Matanich: Yes.
- Smith: As long as he could.
- Matanich: Absolutely. He was something to see in terms of determination.
- Smith: He was a very self-disciplined guy, wasn't he?
- Matanich: Absolutely. The most self-determined man I've ever seen.
- Smith: Let me go back. You said '91. Now at that point he was still pretty active, he was probably still doing a lot of speaking.
- Matanich: Yeah, took some foreign trips and he was very active.
- Smith: What kinds of places would you go abroad?
- Matanich: Well, I went to the Ukraine, went over there for about ten days. Did a yacht trip from Kiev down to the Black Sea.

- Smith: This would have been post-Berlin Wall falling.
- Matanich: Yes. We were said to have been the first American vessel that went into the Black Sea and stopped at the Russian naval station there.
- Smith: Did he ever go to Poland?
- Matanich: Not with me. I didn't go with him.
- Smith: We used to joke - because when you get to the museum, it's so characteristic - no other president I know of would have the staircase of the American embassy at Saigon as a central exhibit, and in the '76 campaign display a screen endlessly repeating the Polish gaff. And the gag was, you weren't wrong, Mr. President, you were just ten years ahead of your time.
- We were talking about playing golf late in life – of course, he and Bob Hope were great buddies, and there are stories that Hope, toward the end of his life, would let it be known that he wanted to play a hole or two. The president would go with him, come back while Hope rested, and go back again. Does that ring a bell?
- Matanich: Well, you know, Hope may have done that – but President Ford, that I'm aware of, never did. I don't think he could have done that. He wasn't like that – he would go out and give it his all and then he'd be done.
- Smith: I was told that Hope would rest between holes, and the president, on at least one occasion, would, out of politeness, and friendship, accommodate Hope – that he would come back to the office, and then when Hope was ready to play the next hole he'd go out.
- Matanich: Oh, yeah – in that way, it wouldn't surprise me.
- Smith: In determining the size of a team, to be blunt, is age and activity a factor?
- Matanich: You mean in terms of staffing?

Smith: In terms of the Service assigning permanent folks.

Matanich: There is a concept of acceptable risk with any protectee we have, aside from the president and vice president, but when it comes to formers, they pretty much have a standard package in terms of what assets are allotted. That's all changing, though, depending on the intelligence that's derived and security situations where they travel. So nothing is ever static, it's always kind of a situational staffing issue. The nice thing is, politics never enter into the equation, which was always a huge thing for me. I was thankful that we never had to play any of the games of whether you are on the in or out; it was always done in a very professional manner. And President Ford knew that and was unusually good about being security conscious.

Smith: Having been the target of two assassination attempts, how did that factor into his awareness of security?

Matanich: We never had any conversations specific to that, but he always was very conscientious of what we did and why we did what we did. And I think of the twenty-four years I was in the Service, of all the folks we protected through the years, he was as aware and as professionally courteous to security as anybody I've seen. He didn't like inconveniencing people - didn't like the fact that we did on occasion, in his travels. But through the years, obviously, there was a great understanding of when we did things, and why, and he had us around long enough to know when we were out of character.

Smith: Tell me if this is intrusive - the whole issue of the relationship. Obviously it is a professional relationship, but clearly if you're around people long enough, a kind of personal relationship develops at well. You work Christmas, Thanksgiving, presumably, it's a 365 day a year job. How is that adapted - how did this first family address that?

Matanich: I think there has been so much water under the bridge with this family and the Service - the fact that we were with them so long - we were

pretty much, it seemed to be, I don't want to say an extension of the family, but we were just an appendage to them. We were something that they knew was always there and in that regard I think it was, for me anyway, for my time here, it was a great relationship because they always knew what they could count on us for, and especially towards the last few years in his declining health. There is a very fine line between security and safety and public health, and we diverted a lot of potential problems by having a mutual understanding on where the Service fit into the picture.

Smith: That's well phrased. Penny and I had any number of conversations around our concern, one that a lot of other folks shared, at some point, they really both needed some help. The Secret Service has functions and they are not these functions. And there are wonderful stories...Bess Truman famously wouldn't have her agents inside the house. I think there was a garage outside the house, the Truman home, across the street. Mamie Eisenhower, on the other hand, had agents who would fix the washing machine when it broke down. That sort of thing. I'm sure there are these stories within the Service. Is it that clearly defined, or does it depend somewhat upon the particular individuals and situations?

Matanich: Yeah, there's no defined documents. The problem is that there are just so many different components to it that as soon as you make a rule, within a month you'd have to circumvent it. So I think more than anything, it was just a general meeting of the minds on concepts – security concepts and the difference between care giving and taking care of. And so we had our own distinct rules here that some of the details in the Service historically haven't had. I was very proud of the fact that the family was respectful to the agents here, in terms of having – they get into this job for a reason, and their hearts are all in the right spot for the right reasons. And if you take them out of their role of what they're doing and you put them in a care giving role, aside from the morale issues and potentially some discontent, everyone here was aware of not pushing the edge on that kind of

thing. It was understood and the lines, I think, were pretty distinct and held pretty firm.

That said, there was always cases where the agents were asked, on occasion, to do some things that normally they wouldn't do. And all I asked them to do was do what their conscience directed. And if they felt like it was something that was beyond what they could handle, then just to let me know. And I never had a complaint.

Smith: I left out one large element here. I assume he resisted, as long as he really could, acknowledging that such needs existed.

Matanich: Yes. He was a proud man.

Smith: The very quality you talked about - playing fifteen holes of golf and wondering why he couldn't play eighteen.

Matanich: He was a very proud man. One of his qualities that I really appreciated was the fact that he was old school in many ways, and yet thought younger.

Smith: That's interesting. What do you mean?

Matanich: Well, by thinking younger, I mean, he appeared to have certain philosophies that folks his age didn't have. He had a broader philosophy on world affairs and he was incredibly up to date on things – even to the end - that most folks wouldn't have dealt with.

Smith: And a real news hound – the stories are legend about how he could be happy if he had a half a dozen newspapers to read.

Matanich: Yes.

Smith: And presumably that was something he maintained as long as possible.

Matanich: Yeah, he was very current. It was always great just to – I mean, we didn't have a lot of sit down chats – that's not something we did as a rule – but on occasion when we did, it was just pretty incredible for

me to have an opportunity to sit and talk to someone who went back as far as he did and could tell stories of folks that I've only read about in books. And so it was quite interesting to listen to him.

Smith: One of the banes for any former president, and I suppose for lots of celebrities, is the autograph seeker.

Matanich: Oh they were there. Till the end, they were there. Yes.

Smith: And how did he handle that?

Matanich: Generally well. His problem, I think, came from as most nowadays - he didn't like to see the same people coming back twice, putting it on eBay. He was okay if he thought it was for personal consumption. But if he thought somebody was doing it for moneymaking opportunities, that was a problem for him.

Smith: Did he know was eBay was?

Matanich: Oh, yeah. He knew how they could sell these. And that was the only concern he really had - if somebody was using them for commercial values.

Smith: There are funny stories about - I've heard from Penny - to what extent he actually became computer aware - cognizant as opposed to computer proficient.

Matanich: Oh, I'm not sure he did much buying on eBay or selling, but I know he knew it was out there. He just knew it existed and someone obviously told him what the value of autographs could be on the internet.

Smith: I know they went to New York fairly frequently, of course, he had board meetings and the like - were there places they particularly enjoyed to travel?

Matanich: They seemed to. For a while they went every year, to New York; South Central Park is where they always stayed there. And the

Christmas type season, they enjoyed their time there for several days shopping and just vacationing.

Smith: I heard they saw *Lion King* and I think they saw *The Producers*. I was told they enjoyed theater – they enjoyed New York. Each of them had spent, as young people, quite a bit of time in New York.

Matanich: They seemed to enjoy it every time they went. I think, in the years I went with them there, aside from the board meetings, there was some charitable thing they did where they went there for some silent auction. They would bid on that, so they obviously wanted to go back there.

Smith: It's no secret, he took some grief, particularly early on, for "commercializing" the former presidency. But people never really took into account the amount of charity work that he did.

Matanich: Right.

Smith: Or the campuses that he would appear on.

Matanich: Right. He was extremely active in that. There was a reason, aside from the locale of where he was at, that brought me back. I must say from a personal note, I was detailed over to the Department of Homeland Security when it was first set up from the Secret Service, and I spent a little over a year there, and so when this opportunity came up, I mean there was more than the location that brought me back out here. It was just the fact that I always respected him for his – just the way he conducted himself, and his humble nature, and his professionalism. He was one of the few – I wasn't a real protection agent – my personal interests lie in investigations for the most part, in which I spent most of my career. But the protection side intrigued me mainly because of the people. And when I had the chance to come back out here and spend, what seemed to be his last several years, that was a big part of why I came back. Just because of the kind of person he was.

Smith: More than once, it was almost an annual event for a while, he would get back to Michigan, usually around the time of the Ohio game. Did you ever accompany him on any of those visits? The reason I ask is, by numerous accounts, when he would go out there and give a pep talk, there was a sort of untapped vein of eloquence that people didn't associate with Jerry Ford. There was something about that place and that event that he – almost out of the movies sort of thing.

Matanich: Oh he was always very comfortable around college football players. I went with him to Notre Dame and Michigan and I think those were the only two, but he gave pep talks to the players both places, and the kids were always just enamored with his reports of the days when he played and some of his stories. He enjoyed it and the kids seemed to enjoy it as well.

Smith: The Bush's had him to the White House for his ninetieth birthday. Were you on that trip?

Matanich: No, I didn't make that trip. I came in 2003 when he was still quite active, still traveled, still went to Beaver Creek, still swam, still played golf, but shortly thereafter is when you could start to see the decline.

Smith: What was his daily routine like at Beaver Creek? I remember being amused, it must have been Penny who said, he'd go pick up the mail. He wanted his mail and he would go and pick it up himself.

Matanich: Yeah. He stayed busy up there, but it was always either, pretty much reading, writing, and just doing work in his office and the house. Didn't get out a lot out there, but up until his last year up there, he stayed pretty active. Went out to eat a lot.

Smith: They were both pretty visible around town?

Matanich: Yes.

Smith: I take it they have facilities named after them up there in Vail.

- Matanich: Yeah, he has an amphitheater, an outdoor amphitheater up there where they have concerts and various music and plays, and both of them would frequent that place quite a bit.
- Smith: And the routine here? Sort of the same thing? Spent a lot of time in the office?
- Matanich: Yeah, most of his time was just spent here in the office. And up until the end, he was pretty active out in town – going out for dinner and going to McCollum – the theater. Played golf, hit balls.
- Smith: The last couple of years I used to be getting calls with annoying frequency from ABC, with whom I was under contract, reporting the latest rumors – and they were usually just that. And sometimes they weren't. Was there a sense that at least some elements of the media were out there, I suppose doing their job, but in a way that was almost ghoulish?
- Matanich: Well, I don't know what drives them to be as assertive as they are on that kind of thing, but it was kind of like our headquarters would inquire on any trips to the hospital. And my response, at some point, was, you really don't have to worry about our trips to the hospital – it's the trips home because, knowing President Ford like we did, the last thing he wanted was to pass in the hospital. So I said, it's when he comes home after the hospital that you need to be concerned about logistics. Not that it couldn't happen, but it's just that that's not what would have been his wish. And he usually got what he wished for.
- Smith: Was it tough for Mrs. Ford to accept the fact that they needed help?
- Matanich: I think so. I'm not sure that it was any more than anybody else. I think that they were just both very proud people and they were not folks to give into anything lightly. And so, they were both going to give it all they had, and she didn't want to make it easy on anybody because I think she knew how he was, and the bottom line was, they just were going to go down fighting. And that's what they did.

Smith: A specific example: I remember that last summer when they insisted on going up to Vail, and I remember having the conversation, and she obviously had it with a whole lot of other folks, trying to persuade them that maybe that wasn't a great idea. And the response that she had was, "At our time in life we've had the quantity of life and now we want the quality of life." And even though it was a rough summer, one has the sense that they wouldn't have done it differently.

Matanich: No. His response to that was they've told him for the last three years not to go up to Vail and he did and he had a great time. So he was just going to continue to roll the dice.

Smith: What was it about Vail that made it such a kind of special place for them?

Matanich: I think just the history of their family up there. The memories they had every time they went up. Like I said, I only was involved from '91 on for my years, but they obviously had just countless years of memories there in that house and the town. And they enjoyed seeing it grow - Beaver Creek growing. The memories, I think, kept drawing them up there.

Smith: That makes sense. I think I know the answer to this, but, did he have a sense of humor?

Matanich: Sure. We had some fun. He was never what I would have called a cutup or somebody who took things lightly. He was just a very professional man who, when the moment struck him, he saw the humor in a lot of things. But it had to be in the right spot at the right time.

Smith: Would you call him a workaholic?

Matanich: I don't know about his early years, but for his later years, he worked as hard as anybody I've seen in that age.

Smith: Your memories about the funeral: were you surprised? I was wearing two hats that week. I was with ABC the first part of the week and

then up in Grand Rapids with the family later on, and I can tell you, the media were astonished at the response, and particularly at the number of young people. And my sense was, these people were being introduced to him for the first time. And they were sort of comparing it with what they have grown up with and he looked awfully attractive. Someone who spent his life in politics, but who could rise above it – above partisanship, if you will. And that seemed pretty attractive two or three years ago.

Matanich: Well, just from my own personal perspective, I think a lot of people are craving his type of leadership. I'm not sure how much that played into the funeral or any of the activities, but I know in Grand Rapids, that was where it struck me more because it was to me a Norman Rockwell scenario – to go back and to see the folks and how they differed from the California situation as well as D.C. And the at-home feel of that whole situation up there just struck me as to the different dynamics of each site, California, D.C. and Grand Rapids and the sense of what you felt in Grand Rapids for him and the feelings that those folks had that went back years with him.

Smith: It really did feel like a homecoming –there's a warmth there which wasn't missing in Washington, but so much in Washington is official.

Matanich: Yes. You're not quite sure in Washington if it's heartfelt or if it's just expected. So you kind of play that in. But up in Grand Rapids, I think it was pretty much heartfelt.

Smith: She was amazing that week. We'd been told at the network, from St. Margaret's on, "Don't be surprised if you see Mrs. Ford in a wheelchair." But clearly she was going to defy that. Someone told me this story –after she got back, someone remarked to her how impressed they were, particularly at the end, by her walking all that way to the gravesite. And her response was, "That's what my husband would have wanted." Which rings true.

- Matanich: Sure. They were both, in my eyes, each other's biggest cheerleader in terms of pushing themselves to do what they had to do. It was interesting to watch their longstanding relationship.
- Smith: Several people have said to us, whenever he was on the road, the day never ended without him calling her. And usually a call in the morning and a call at night, whenever they were apart.
- Matanich: Yeah. Extremely close.
- Smith: For people who had never been around the man, who just saw the name in a textbook or just saw the clips that we've all seen a hundred times, what would tell them about Gerald Ford that would flesh him out?
- Matanich: I probably think of the qualities that just took me the most into these times is his constant stance on integrity and honesty. You didn't need a dictionary to know where he was coming from. He was very direct and succinct and, I just don't see that a lot today and so I think those qualities are, aside from being admirable, are qualities that the youth of today should know can exist and do exist in successful people, and that it doesn't have to be an old world philosophy.
- Smith: It's funny because the word decency is used over and over. Some people use it almost as a euphemism – almost with a trace of condescension – that decency in lieu of sophistication. And decency certainly applies, but I also sensed that he was more sophisticated than those critics suspected.
- Matanich: Yeah, when it comes to sophistication, I looked at him as the type of person that you didn't need to – he just seemed to be able to deal with the folks no matter where we were. No matter what level of society we were dealing with, he was comfortable. I always felt he was comfortable around pretty much any segment of society out there and that was impressive to me. A lot of folks, and I don't know if you call that sophistication or lack of, but I think he was, aside from being just decent to them, I think the fact that he could individually speak to

folks and have them find commonalities - because I guess he came from humble beginnings and that probably helped in that regard.

Smith: He never forgot where he came from.

Matanich: Exactly, and I don't take that lightly. I think that's quite a nice quality, and another one that I was glad to see in him.

Smith: Quickly, my favorite story which goes to that. The Nixon's left the White House so abruptly that it took several days to pack up, and so the new president commuted for a week. Well, the first day he was actually moved into the White House, he walked in to the West Wing and there was a Marine standing at the door saluting, and he walked over and says, "Hi, I'm Jerry Ford. I'm going to be living here. What's your name?" Well, that's a Congressman, on one hand, but it's also Ford. To be totally comfortable in any situation and try to make the other person equally comfortable.

Matanich: Yeah. I would not say pretentious was in his vocabulary – at least not that I ever saw.

Smith: Is it really true that he was an addict of butter pecan ice cream?

Matanich: Absolutely. Yes.

Smith: His one weakness.

Matanich: We all have our quirks.

Smith: Would he go in a restaurant and sort of consciously try to lead a normal life?

Matanich: Yes.

Smith: And, what would you do?

Matanich: He wasn't big at asking for private rooms or special treatment or any of that, so, of course, we kind of tried on occasion to steer him where the situation was best for our concerns in terms of being able to cover the event he was at. So we would get in a position close enough that if

someone did go up and was over zealous, or whatever, that we could intercede and he always understood when we were sitting close by.

Smith: It was somewhere, I believe it was in New York, I remember reading the story the next day – a wire story – someone, I think it was in a restaurant, happened to have a gun on him. There was no connection except that once a reporter found out that Gerald Ford was in the same place – does that ring a bell at all?

Matanich: I wasn't there at that incident, but I do remember the story. Those kind of things happen more often than they are reported. But often times we don't make them public because if there was no connection it wouldn't be public necessarily.

Smith: Finally, what do you do on Christmas Day?

Matanich: What did he do?

Smith: Christmas Day, birthdays – again, I guess it gets to that relationship between the agent...

Matanich: The agent's job is the same no matter what day it is. They're here, they're posted around the house or, for Christmas, most times he was up in Beaver Creek and so the agent's job up there is the same situation as it is anywhere else. Usually the supervisors have off on holidays, so that's nothing different. But it wasn't like our involvement with the family was any different, necessarily on holidays – other than he would go up and do the annual Christmas Tree lighting up in Vail, and had certain holiday activities they did just historically. But, other than that, it was another workday.

Smith: And – this may be over the line – do you have a final memory?

Matanich: Not one in particular. I look back and see many different – and as we talk I remember a lot of things that I had forgotten about. It was just the total package with him that was a pleasant memory. I don't have specific instances that I found appealing. It was just the package.

Smith: Were you on duty when he passed away?

Matanich: Yes.

Smith: Well, thank you. I appreciate it very much.

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