

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Tom DeFrank
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
February 24, 2011

Smith: First of all, thank you again for doing this. We often ask people, can you think of something surprising about Gerald Ford; something that might surprise most people?

DeFrank: One thing I learned about him is that he loved watches; he loved expensive watches. He had a lot of watches. He wasn't ostentatious about it. I don't ever remember him flaunting watches, but apparently he didn't have a good watch as a kid and when he finally got some money, he seemed to gravitate towards good Swiss watches. It was just a little quirk. And I also was surprised to learn that – I knew he came from a very modest background as an adopted child and growing up in the Depression – but I didn't know that, until he told me, that in Michigan he used to sell his blood regularly because he needed the proceeds. I think it was \$25 a donation. He needed it for his tuition.

Smith: That's fascinating. I suppose – he's certainly not unique, or even unusual among that generation – do you think that's a source of his fiscal conservatism, or at least factors in?

DeFrank: Oh, absolutely. He saw what the Depression had done to his parents, or to his mother. He saw that money was always a problem, even though he got some help playing football, I suppose. But I think that's really the root of his fiscal conservatism – that and just he was a Midwestern orthodox Republican. I hesitate to call him a country club Republican because he's not a John Boehner in that respect. He had a lot of lobbyist friends like Bill Whyte of Ford, but he was always embarrassed about things like that.

I can remember in the spring of 1975, he took a trip to Hawaii with his friend Bill Whyte and Peggy Whyte, who I believe, at the time, was the Washington rep for – I want to say Ford, but I know that's not right – US Steel, or somebody like that. W-h-y-t-e, and he was very embarrassed because he took reporters and we were giving him a hard time about wasting taxpayers'

money playing golf on the big island of Hawaii and staying at the Monaki(?) Hotel, still one of the great hotels of the world – no longer a Rockefeller resort, but that’s where he went. And he was really kind of rueful about that. He said to me that he had cut the trip shorter than he had intended, and if he had not been vice president, he would done it for a few more days, but he was being sensitive for all the obvious reasons. He didn’t want to look like a big spender. He was never a big spender, but he didn’t want to look like one.

Smith: We’ve been told, in fact, that he was pretty tight.

DeFrank: He wasn’t a big tipper, and he also didn’t pay his staff particularly well, I don’t believe. There are some who worked for him for a long, long time, who made a pitiful amount of money. I guess that’s part of his upbringing. But after he was loaded, after he became extremely wealthy, he was still very tight with the quarters.

Smith: He took a lot of heat for commercializing the ex-presidency.

DeFrank: Well, he didn’t just commercialize the former presidency; he created the commercialized former presidency. That’s why I said in my book that every former president should go visit his grave in Grand Rapids and thank him for ensuring that they will be instant zillionaires. He created the model, he created the business model for the former presidency where a former president was not exactly encouraged to go out and make money, but able to make money without a whole lot of unhappiness – without a whole lot of blowback from it.

Smith: Was he unapologetic about that?

DeFrank: Totally unapologetic. One of the maddest I can ever remember him with me was a couple years after he had left office and I started gathering information about all of his financial dealings. It took me about a month to get what I felt was a pretty good understanding of all the various things he was into. I learned, for example, that he wouldn’t go on a corporate board without the

board agreeing to give him a separate deal, a separate consulting contract, and I think that one of them was in the six figures, which thirty years ago was a lot of money. And he had consulting deals for every corporate board he was on. I think at the time he was on eight. And he was into shopping centers and radio stations and Jack Nicklaus and Leonard Firestone and others. I wrote a little story about this. He had talked to me about it and was very unapologetic.

Smith: What did he offer as his rationale?

DeFrank: I'm going to tell you in just a moment, but the story appeared under the headline, "Jerry Ford, Incorporated." Penny Circle told me later she had never seen him as angry with me as he was. He wasn't throwing things, but he was really upset. So the next time I was out to see him, which was not too long down the road, he really landed on me. He said, "I thought that was a terrible story. It was really unfair." And I said, "Mr. President, let me remind you that much of the information in there came from you. You were one of my primary sources. We talked about this. You are quoted." And he said, "Yeah, but it made it look like I was bad and greedy and all that." And his basic rationale was twofold: one, I never do anything for free. Now, as you know, he did a lot of charitable stuff, a lot of pro bono stuff. But he never accepted money just for his name. He never accepted money without doing something, without giving a talk, without signing a charitable appeal, without doing something. He said, "I'm not on anybody's dole. I work for my money." And that was part of it.

In other words, it's not an ill-gotten gain, it was – to use the text jargon – this is my language, not his – it was earned income, not unearned income, and in his own mind he really made a distinction between earned income, which he had earned for doing something, and unearned, which is "We'll give you a hundred thousand dollars just to put your name on our letterhead." Which he didn't do. But his real rationale was, it's nobody's business, and he really got his back up on this, and I will always remember in this same conversation,

him pounding the desk and saying, “God damn it, Tom, it’s the free enterprise system at its finest.” And that was Jerry Ford. He believed it. He wasn’t going to be persuaded otherwise. He had no problem.

He had disdain for the notion of the appearance of conflict. This was one of his blind spots. His attitude was since he was a honest, and reputable person - which he absolutely was - that there could be no conflict. And the appearance of conflict was baloney, something created by reporters and do-gooders because he would never do anything involving a conflict of interest. It was a hot-button that never cooled with Jerry Ford.

Smith: Yeah. It’s a fascinating observation. I wonder, initially, because he left the White House with virtually nothing.

DeFrank: As I recall, he had a modest mutual fund, and a congressional pension, and then a presidential pension. But he was not a wealthy man, and he had his house in Alexandria. But that was it. He was a man of very modest means, even after leaving the presidency. It was a big deal for him to get the book memoir. And, as you know, for most of this century, the only way former presidents made money was to write a memoir and get some money there and that was kind of standard. But it was Jerry Ford who expanded the business model into what it is today.

Smith: I also wonder if he – because we sort of danced around this subject – clearly it was not something he brought up. Whether either then or later, he convinced himself, factored in the fact that he had to raise all this money to build a library. I always thought that what Ford and Carter discovered they had in common was that as soon as they left - they had the responsibility of raising the money. And, to Ford, who never spent anything in his campaigns, the museum was nine or ten million dollars. The library building was five or six – a pittance today – but to Ford, that must have seemed like a pretty formidable mountain to climb.

DeFrank: Well, I think he was truly shocked that a guy that spent 200 days a year on the rubber chicken circuit was going to have spend at least 100 days a year back on the circuit raising money for himself and for his legacy. I mean, for a long time he didn't have a problem with it, but it was not part of his calculation. And he did find, while he had an easier time raising money than Carter, he did have a difficult time, and I think it bothered him.

Smith: We talked to a lot of people in Vail and out in Rancho Mirage, and it's curious, maybe this isn't unusual – I'm interested in your reaction. He seemed more comfortable raising money for other people, other projects, than for his own.

DeFrank: Because he didn't want to think of himself as a charity. I agree with that. It was much easier for him to raise money for the Betty Ford Center, or for any number of other charities. And he raised tens of millions of dollars for charity, but it was hard for him to ask for money for himself. And I think part of the emotional drag of that was that it reminded him that he was a defeated candidate, a defeated president for re-election. And he was always getting a new lesson on how hard it is for a former president who has lost to raise money. And it kind of reminded him that he had lost, which bugged him forever.

Smith: People we've spoken with have said it really took him a while, in the immediate aftermath of '76, to bounce back. And one wonders to what extent that wound never completely healed.

DeFrank: It never healed. It never healed and I don't care what the revisionists say, he never forgave Ronald Reagan. He was convinced that Ronald Reagan had lost the '76 election for him by not campaigning in Mississippi and Texas. And he was also extremely bitter - which I didn't know until years later – he was extremely bitter that Reagan didn't step aside in 1980 and let Ford try again.

Jerry Ford wanted a rematch with Jimmy Carter. He was convinced that Carter was a disaster to the country, was convinced that he could easily beat him, and was also convinced – and he was wrong about this, of course – that Reagan could not beat incumbent President Jimmy Carter. Ford wanted Reagan to step aside and let Ford have another chance, which was poor judgment even to think that that could happen. I don't know what Ford was thinking about that; why he thought that might happen. But the Ford people, of course, looked at it from the other side of the coin. The Reagan people thought that Ford had kept Reagan from being president in 1976. That it was Ford that should have stepped aside in '76 and let Reagan beat Carter then.

And so, once Reagan announced his Alzheimer's, Ford never spoke another unkind word about Reagan to me ever again. But that wound was never healed. I mean, it galled him that he was an accidental vice president and it galled him that he was an accidental president. It just really upset him and it was extremely painful, and I think it took him months and years to get some sense of equilibrium back in his life about it. You could make a case that he never really mellowed about it until he got the Profile in Courage Award from the Kennedy Library.

Smith: That really was a turning point, wasn't it?

DeFrank: It was an emotional turning point for him. He told somebody that he felt like that now he could die. He felt like the history books – the historical narrative would be amended in a way that made him more comfortable.

Smith: He'd say, "For twenty years, wherever I go, people asked the same question. And since the award, they don't ask the question anymore." The whole bizarre episode in 1980 of the vice presidential nomination...over the years it's fuzzy how much of that was Kissinger and Greenspan, and people looking for an entree back, and how active was Ford. What I'm trying to get at is - and you would know this better than most - I always thought that of Ford had a

weakness, there was a certain passivity. He could be persuaded to do something, but he wouldn't have thought of it or taken the initiative on his own.

DeFrank: That's because he was not in the least bit interested in being Ronald Reagan's running mate. The notion galled him, it upset him. He wanted nothing to do with Reagan. He really felt strongly about that. But, you are right, he could be swayed, and he could especially be swayed by people like Henry Kissinger, and to a lesser extent, Alan Greenspan. And for friends of his to come and say, "You have to consider this for the good of the party, this will make it easier for Reagan to win," he was susceptible to hearing things like that. And it also stroked his ego. And so I think in this situation, and this is just armchair, off the top of my head – I think he knew what he wasn't going to do. Which is why I think he constructed a scenario which made it impossible for Reagan to offer it and for him to accept it. I think he did that with malice aforethought.

But he was more than happy to let it go along, let it percolate, let people leak the idea out there. I don't think he was a particularly malevolent person at all, but I think he kind of saw it in some subconscious level as a way to stick it to Reagan some more. Just to remind people that Ronald Reagan – that Ronald Reagan couldn't do it by himself - he needed somebody like Jerry Ford to provide the ballast. I mean, he wasn't above a little psychic score settling. And I think that was a piece of it. But I think from the start, he knew there was no way this was going to happen because he was going to make sure he constructed a formula that made sure it wasn't going to happen.

Smith: That's fascinating on many levels. It raises this very large question: he had this reputation for being without guile – whatever that means. And yet he clearly was not without ambition. Was he as innocent as he appeared?

DeFrank: I think he was essentially innocent, essentially guileless – like the Detroit convention incident we've been discussing. I think there was a little healthy lapse into guile there. He was no dummy; he knew how to play the game, and he knew how to pull certain levers, but I think for the most part, he was about as guileless as you get.

Smith: Was he sensitive about popular perceptions regarding his intelligence?

DeFrank: He was very sensitive about it, but he was quite aware. I know he told one of my friends once after he'd fallen down on the ski slopes. He said something to the effect that reporters who write these stories, the only exercise they get is bending their elbow on bars in Vail when we're out here. He was very comfortable with the fact that he was an excellent skier, he was a pretty good tennis player for a long time, and he could have been a professional football player. So in his own mind, he knew that. The notion that he was clumsy, he said it didn't bother him, but it bothered him a lot. It always bothered him a lot. He thought it was just really unfair and he thought reporters were playing the Democratic game here and it always bothered him.

Smith: How would you describe his mind?

DeFrank: I thought he had an above average intellect. I think he had very good political instincts. I think he was smarter than people thought. As I said, I think he was a man of above average intelligence; I don't think he was a particularly strategic person, he clearly was not a visionary. He was kind of a meat and potatoes intellect; a pragmatic, commonsensical intellect. That's why I think people like Henry Kissinger, who was nothing but strategy and vision, and larger context and institutional memory, and shameless flackery and flattery, would appeal to a guy like Ford. Even well after he needed to know better about Kissinger, he was still was kind of enthralled with Kissinger.

I remember the story - most of the time when he was vice president, he was on this little twin engine Convair 580 prop jet. He was entitled to a nicer

airplane, he was, in fact, entitled to the backup Air Force One, a four engine Boeing 707. But Kissinger liked that plane and wanted it. I asked Ford one day – someplace, I can't remember where, it was on a trip – and I said, “Mr. Vice President, why do you fly this piddling little airplane? I know you sometimes go into airports where you need a smaller plane.” Nixon even used that plane once to fly into a small airport in West Virginia. It was Air Force One for one trip. But I said, “Most of the places you go, big cities, you don't need a plane this small.” So I said, “Why don't you do it?” And he said, “Well, Henry asked me if he could have that other airplane and I said sure, no problem.” So I was on a big airplane with Gerald Ford as vice president maybe a half dozen times – when he went to Hawaii, when he went on longer trips – but most of the time it was this tiny little airplane. To a certain extent, it showed his lack of ostentation, but it also showed the sway and the thrall that Henry Kissinger had on him.

Smith: Of course, on the night of the Nixon resignation, he appears outside the house in Alexandria, and the one thing he announces is that Kissinger was staying on. Now a year later, he decides to split the job. Is there a trajectory there? Or did he come to – not necessarily know Kissinger better than he had – but maybe come to understand the presidency a little bit better.

DeFrank: I think it was both. I think he got a larger dose of Kissinger every day as president. And I don't think he was thinking about the arc of history, but I think somebody, and it probably was Don Rumsfeld, and to a lesser extent Dick Cheney, put the idea in his mind that you probably would have more independent judgment if you had a secretary of state here and your own national security advisor. And that it was fine to have a holdover secretary of state, maybe you shouldn't have a holdover secretary of state and a holdover secretary of defense and a holdover national security advisor. So I think that was a conscious decision helped along by others with more ambition than Ford. But I think it was basically Ford's view. Ford once said to me

sometimes you need small doses with Henry. And what that meant was, Ford could see through some of the flattery, he could see through probably all of the elbow throwing and the special agenda and special pleading; and I think he thought it would be better for the institution and better for himself to have Kissinger split from both hats.

Smith: You talked about the vice presidential plane. We'd love to get the context – here is a vice president in a unique historical position, who on the one hand, more than most vice presidents, has to demonstrate his loyalty to the man who chose him. On the other hand, if he goes too far in doing that, will undercut any chances for his own future in an office that he can't even acknowledge might come his way.

DeFrank: Ford had to walk this terrible tightrope all the time. He started as a total, almost sycophant, for Richard Nixon. Not my president right or wrong, but the presumption was that Nixon was clean and Ford didn't have to apologize for apologizing for Nixon. And in the early going in his travels - and he traveled all the time because he wanted to stay out of Washington as much as possible – it was a poisonous, nasty, place – but in all of his travels, he'd always have one press conference on every trip. And he was very defensive of Nixon. He said I see no evidence of any wrongdoing, no evidence of an impeachable offense, and he was very trusting of Nixon.

Nixon had come to the House in '46, Ford came in '48, they were charter members of the Chowder and Marching Society, and he considered Nixon a friend. He always thought Nixon was a little weird, but he considered him a friend. He was convinced that Nixon was okay. And he also felt an institutional obligation to defend the man who had elevated him to the job. But as time went on, and as he would learn things, most often from Woodward and Bernstein's stories, I think it slowly began to dawn on Ford that Nixon was lying to him. Or Nixon's people, Alexander Haig and others, were lying to him about the state of Nixon's culpability. But still, he felt this

real obligation, a personal obligation and an institutional obligation, to defend Nixon.

It became harder and harder and harder for him to do that. And every once in a while he would let his guard slip in a quiet moment on the airplane over a martini, where he would say something that made it clear to reporters, even though he was talking off the record, that he knew that Nixon was in more trouble. Even if he was still defending Nixon, he knew Nixon was in more trouble. He never sat around on one of those late night trips back from the middle of no place and said anything like, Nixon hasn't been straight with me, but I have to defend him. He just wouldn't do that. It wasn't his kind of thing. But it was pretty clear that he knew at some point that he had been rolled by Nixon.

Smith: You wonder if, with the whole Eagle Scout thing, I don't know whether naiveté is the right word, but it involves an element of political judgment. For example, the first press conference with him as president was August 28th. He goes in there seriously believing that they are going to want to talk about Cyprus or Greece or Turkey, inflation; all the things that he's got on his desk. And he'd been forewarned that they were going to want to talk about Nixon. He didn't believe it; was angry afterward mostly at himself because he didn't handle it terribly well. I've often wondered if that was, in his own head, the tipping point that led to the pardon.

DeFrank: Well, years later he said to me, "I came out of that press conference and I said, 'Is this the way it's going to be for the next two years? Am I going to be dogged at every press conference with questions about Nixon and a pardon, and should he go to jail, should he stand trial? If he's convicted, should he go to jail? What about a pardon?'" And he said, he was just convinced that he would never be able to govern in the normal definition of the term, governing, as long as the specter of Nixon was hanging over his head. He said to me, and this was only a couple of years before he died, he said, "I was convinced that

Nixon would be indicted, he would go on trial, he would be convicted and he would be sent to jail. And this would take three years at a minimum, and that would just take me through '76 and beyond." And he said, "That's when I called Phil Buchen in," his former law partner and his counsel to the president, and he said, "Start researching this for me."

I think he thought he would never be able to move forward on the huge basket of problems that were facing the country, especially economic problems, as long as the specter of Nixon was lurking, was looming close to him, and I think that really began it. You are right, he was very distressed about the way that press conference had worked out.

Smith: And yet, in October that year, right before the mid-terms, he goes to California and everyone says, don't go see Nixon. And he goes and sees Nixon.

DeFrank: There was a small profile in courage. That was Jerry Ford. I think if Nixon hadn't been sick that obviously wouldn't have happened. But he was led to believe that Nixon might die. And he didn't want it to look like he was going to let Richard Nixon die without seeing him. I was the pool reporter on that. I was the magazine pool reporter on that trip and I remember being in the hospital. And the only thing I remember seeing was there were some big double doors flung open and Pat Nixon came out and she just threw her arms around him with great heartfelt joy to see him there. I just saw the back of him from a long distance away.

But he was adamant, and he was not going to behave like that. He thought it would be cowardly, and of course, as you well know, Richard, the argument was, well, it will just reinforce all those millions of people who think that there was a deal for the pardon. And now you are going to go see the guy. And he said, "I don't really give a damn what people think. The guy is sick, he may die, and I'm going to see him." End of conversation.

Smith: It's interesting, because in some ways it is representative of a frame of mind. We determine presidential success, the Rooseveltian model, as doing whatever the situation requires. And those are really admirable traits in a human being. It raises the question of whether a president can afford to be that uncalculating, because, let's face it, if they'd lost thirty seats instead of forty-seven, or whatever they lost that year, it might have contributed in some small way to a successful presidency.

DeFrank: My view, and I'll bet it was Ford's view, although he never said this to me, my view is that he finished himself for re-election on September 8, of '74, when he pardoned Nixon.

Smith: Really?

DeFrank: At that point, the honeymoon was over with the Democrats on the Hill – even his old friend Tip O'Neill said, "Jerry, things have now changed." The whole tenor of the bipartisan relationship was altered. And I'm betting that Ford said the damage that's been done has been done. People decided about what they thought about the pardon when it happened. That was the pragmatic side of him. I've taken my hit on this; I'm not going to take a further hit. People are not going to think I was in the tank for Nixon by going to see a sick man. If they think I was in the tank and there was a deal, they thought that when I pardoned him, not when I went to the hospital visiting a sick predecessor.

Smith: Yeah, because it raises this question. Here is a guy that I think arguably sacrificed his presidency to give Nixon a pardon, who saw him in the hospital at great political cost. And what did Nixon do? Right before the New Hampshire primary, he goes to China, ensuring that the spotlight will be on him, yet again. Do you have a sense of what the Ford-Nixon relationship was? Did it ever recover?

DeFrank: No, it never recovered. Ford said to me once that they had an understanding – it wasn't on paper – but they had an understanding – they'd given the pardon,

it was probably best that they not show up at things, even after Ford was out of office. And I know that aides to President Ford would routinely look at guest lists at parties to see if Nixon was going to show. Sometimes they got together – for instance, there was a USO dinner honoring Bob Hope once, and every living former president came. So there were rare instances like that where they were around. But they did not go out of their way to see each other, and they both understood, according to Ford – Ford told me they both understood that even after they were both long gone from the White House it was not smart for either of them to be seen hanging around much with each other.

Smith: I wonder if it went deeper than that. I mean, there were stories that Ford had confided his distress that Nixon had never thanked him for the pardon. And, of course, you put yourself in Nixon's shoes, the pardon was a humiliating act. Why thank someone and be reminded of it? But I just wonder if the relationship, if there weren't some real resentments created as a result of the pardon.

DeFrank: Well, he said to me once that Nixon was not a bad guy, but there was ten percent of Nixon's personality that sometimes – which he called the demons – he said this man had real demons – and that the ten percent of his personality sometimes overwhelmed the ninety percent of the better part of his personality. He said Nixon was never able to admit he was wrong on anything. And he said, as a politician, you've got to admit when you blow it, because we all blow it sometimes. And he thought that that was a real character flaw.

Smith: Speaking of admitting when you are wrong, stubbornness was certainly a Ford trait and it really haunted him after the Polish gaffe. And it's amazing – presumably in today's twenty-four seven news cycle, there's no way that a week would go by without – and clearly even then, people were scrambling to try to undo the damage. And yet we talked to people who literally, watching

the debate at the time before the echo chamber kicked in, didn't see it as a pivotal moment in the campaign. Within twenty-four hours that began to change.

DeFrank: I think it began to change even more quickly. I remember that at the post-debate press conference, the first question from a reporter of Ford's handlers, including Brent Scowcroft, the first question was from Pat Sloyan, who I think was at *Newhouse* at the time, and Sloyan asked Scowcroft, "General, how many Soviet divisions are there in Poland?" And I thought Brent was going to choke. And he used the figure of six or seven or nine, or something, but he answered it. And I said, well, I think this is going someplace. It didn't strike me in the room, as a, "Oh, my God, the election just changed." But within twenty-four hours it definitely had, and as you know, it took him almost twenty-four hours to get Ford to even to agree to put out a signed statement.

He put out a printed statement, kind of basically saying, what I meant to imply was. And knowing Ford, it was as grudging an admission as you're ever going to see. It's like Nixon saying he had to resign because he lost the political support of Congress, not because he had been impeached and was going to be convicted. And so, Ford was very stubborn about it. And it goes back to his own sense of self. I mean, he thought he was a decent and honest and hardworking and honorable guy, who never had anything and had excelled by hard work and true grit, and that's the way he was.

Smith: Yeah. You wrote at length in your book about the slip of the tongue that he made, I guess, on one of his vice presidential trips that really stood out because it was, in fact, the most explicit acknowledgement that there might be a Ford presidency. And he sort of caught himself, it's been a while since I've read it, but clearly he tried to swear you to secrecy.

DeFrank: Well, there were two things I remember. He was in Palm Springs in the spring of 1974, and Betty Ford was running late as she often did.

Smith: Wasn't it a case of opposites attracting?

DeFrank: Drove him crazy. He was always upset about Mrs. Ford's tardiness. Reporters had been assembled; we'd all gotten out to the airport waiting for him; as is customary, reporters are on the plane, but we got word that he was running late, so we all got off the airplane and got some more sunshine. We were heading back to Washington, and so we were at the foot of the steps leading up to Air Force Two. This was a big plane. Ford shows up without Betty, and he's apologizing. He said with great exasperation, "Betty's running late, again." She was still shopping.

So we were all talking and he sees Phil Jones of CBS, who was one of his favorites, and Phil, who spent a lot of time in Vietnam, was wearing one of those bush jacket outfits with the shirt with the epaulets that photographers and reporters in war zones love to affect. So he sees Phil and he says something like, "Hey, that's a pretty smart looking outfit there, Phil. Are you going to wear that when we go to the White House?" And it took him about a half second to figure out what he had said, "and to Capitol Hill" and to someplace else he said. And that was the first time that many people who had traveled with him regularly thought they had caught him slipping.

But the fact of the matter is, it was not a surprise to me because that was the same fateful trip in which I had a conversation with him in which he blurted out that he knew that he was going to be president. Now the official version of events has always been that he didn't know until a few days before the resignation when Al Haig called him and said, "There's going to be some Supreme Court tapes issued. It could be difficult and you need to prepare yourself." And that led to the famous incident where he and Mrs. Ford went up to the Chief of Naval Operations residence at the Naval Observatory,

which was going to become the vice president's residence and they were going to be the first VP and Second Lady to live there. They were going up to look at carpets and fabrics and stuff like this. And so they go up and they go through the routine where they are shown samples of these drapes and this carpet and this wall treatment, and all this stuff, and Ford, going back to his office in the limo, says to Betty in a very low voice, "Betty, we're never going to live in this house."

That's the official history, but I don't believe that's the first he knew. And the reason is that my first son was born on March 28, 1974. I had stayed back to be with my wife and new son, so I missed the first several days of Ford's annual trip to Palm Springs at Easter time. I was very neurotic about being away from the trail, because in those days things were happening so quickly – in the middle of Watergate – spring of '74 – that three days was a lifetime. So I really felt behind the curve. I called his press secretary and said I'd like to see him as soon as I get out to Palm Springs. And he said sure, so I did. It was arranged that I flew out – he had an office – he was staying at the Annenberg retreat – but he had an office in the International Hotel or Inn, which is now a Holiday Inn, and that's where the press was staying.

So I dumped my bags in the room and I went over to his staff office where he was going to see me. He came right in from the golf course, I still remember he was wearing white socks, kaki pants, and a light blue Munsingwear golf shirt with a little Munsingwear penguin above the left shirt pocket, and he was flustered, he thought he had played very poorly, he was cranky about that, but he was very nice. He was always gracious to me, and we were talking – it wasn't even an interview. I took some notes, but I was just trying to catch up – what have I missed, what's going on? He was very solicitous. He said we were worried about you, we heard the pregnancy was very difficult and glad you're okay. Typically gracious.

So we were talking and it was just a kind of a make me feel better that I was back in the game. It was the best game in town at the time. So I get up to go and he said, “Put your notebook away, I want to show you something.” And he showed me a column written in the *New York Times* a couple days before by William Safire, one of Nixon’s real loyalists. And I think the headline upset him more than anything else. The headline was *Et Tu Gerry?* Misspelling his last name – spelled it with a G not a J. And by coincidence, I had put together a reading file to read on the airplane coming out and that was one of the stories that I had missed because of the birth of my first child. And I had just read it on the airplane a few hours before. He said, “Have you seen this?” And I said, “Yes, I just read it.” He said, “What do you make of this?” I didn’t want to go down that road, so I tried to duck and I said, “Well, the first thing I noticed was they misspelled your name.” He said, “I want to know what you think about this. Why did Safire do this?”

Of course, Safire was a loyalist and Ford had given a very ill-advised interview with John Osborne of the *New Republic*, speculating about what a Ford White House would look like. And it was really one of the more boneheaded things he’s ever done, because he basically was saying, “I’m convinced that Nixon is going to survive, but if he doesn’t survive, will I keep Henry Kissinger – I might make a few other changes,” and it was just really ill-advised. I don’t know what he was thinking. I think he thought it was off the record, but it wasn’t.

Smith: Is part of it attributable to a congressional mindset? I mean, how many people pay attention to what you say on Capitol Hill, even if you’re the Minority Leader? As opposed to every word that comes out of a president’s mouth.

DeFrank: Well, a vice president who has a good chance of being president – I just think he wasn’t thinking clearly. And he was by himself, he probably had a martini – this was on an airplane. So he was just speculating, but it was just poor judgment. He said, “Why has he done this?” He said, “Bill Safire knows that

I've been damned loyal to Dick Nixon. I've gone out of my way to be loyal to Dick Nixon." He kept calling him Dick Nixon. And he said, "Why would he do that? I want to know what you think, why did he do this?" It's not my job to give advice or opinions to people I cover. It's usually not a good idea, but he was really leaning on me and he was really agitated. It really struck at his core because he thought he was an extremely loyal guy, and for somebody to suggest in the *New York Times* that he had behaved poorly really got to his own sense of self. And he was really agitated.

We were standing at this point and my notebook had been put away, and he said, "I want to know why you think he did this." And I said, "Well, Mr. Vice President, it's very simple. They know Nixon is finished. They know he's a goner. They know he can't survive and they know sooner or later – probably sooner – you're going to be president." And I was kind of mad of myself for the audacity – I should have known better – but I just blurted it out. But I was not prepared for what happened then, because without any delay at all, he blurted something out. And he said, "You're right. But when the pages of history are written, no one will ever be able to say that Jerry Ford contributed to it." If I'd had a pen out I would have dropped it because that was one of those holy smokes moments. Here was a vice president of the United States telling me he knew it was over and that he was going to be the next President of the United States at some point.

He quickly recovered and recognized the enormity of what he had done, and he came around the table, and he said, "You didn't hear that." And I, without thinking said, "But I did." And I think he took from that, I think he inferred from that that I was going to use this. When, in fact, what he should have inferred from that was that I was scared out of my mind. I was twenty-eight years old, still a journeyman reporter, and the vice president of the United States had handed me the biggest story of my young career. So I knew what I had there, but I was just scared to death, because I also knew that Gerald Ford

was my meal ticket to the White House, which I still report on thirty-seven years later. More than that – forty-some – whatever, I’m still covering the White House most days of the week. And so I can remember saying to myself, this is great, this guy is basically threatening me – he’s basically saying if you print this, you’re mud. You’re done for. And, of course, I was very ambitious as well, and that made me very nervous. But basically, it was an imposing guy. He had about eight inches on me and he was towering over me.

At this point, he grabbed my tie and he held my tie and he said, “Damn it, Tom, you’re not leaving this office until we have some understanding.” Well, I knew what the understanding was; the understanding was he wanted me to admit to agree that I wouldn’t use this.” And I froze. I was petrified. This is where I learned, for the first time, that he was not a dummy. Because it was his formulation, not my formulation. I was speechless, literally speechless, and he looked at me and he said, “Write it when I’m dead. You can write it when I’m dead.” And I was so relieved, so relieved.

Now, today I kick myself. Today I say I should have negotiated, I should have been able to work out some arrangement where I could have used something from it, not saying that it had come from him. Some formulation like, some of President Ford’s closest confidants, are increasingly believing that the end game is coming, or something like that. But I was so relieved to get out of this bind that I just unconditionally surrendered. And I said, “Okay.” He stuck his hand out, we shook hands, and we didn’t mention that incident again for years – like maybe fourteen years, something like that. We walk out – the other thing I should have mentioned is his press secretary, Paul Miltich, had gone out to take a call and had fallen asleep on a sofa in an adjoining room. So it was one of those – everything aligned – there was no handler to say uhhh, let’s don’t go down that road. It was just the two of us. He liked me, he trusted me, and he was really irritated about this column and he knew I had

just come in from Washington, so he was wanting to see what the mood from Washington was. We walked out the door and it was like it never happened. “Nice to see you, Tom. I’m glad your wife is doing okay. I’m glad the baby is doing okay.” All these things he said before, “Coming with us to Monterey tomorrow?” Just like it never happened.

We’ve already talked about that time when he was mad at me for doing the *Jerry Ford, Inc.* story about his business interests, which was always a hot button. There was another instance where he was very angry at all of us on the airplane. There was an instance, I don’t know where we were, I could find it in my records, but he always loved to do these daytrips, up to New York and back, up to Boston and back, but for him a daytrip began at seven in the morning and ended at two in the morning. It was not – I like daytrips that begin at nine and end at six or seven and it wasn’t his style.

Smith: He had amazing stamina.

DeFrank: Incredible stamina. But he would always, in those days, order up a martini or two on the plane coming back and often he would come up to the front. This was a strange configuration on this airplane. These days the president sits upfront, vice president sits upfront, the press sits in the back. In this particular small Air Force Two, it was reversed. The press sat in the front, Ford sat in the back. So he had to come through us every time he got on the airplane. There was a backdoor, but for some reason, it was never activated. He always came in the front door, came past us. So the good news was there was always engagement on every trip, even if he didn’t want to have a press conference. He would often come up to the front cabin at the end of the trip, at the end of the day, and just schmooze, and he did this on this particular trip, and he had not set ground rules.

One of the things he said was, that he was concerned about the fact that as the Watergate crisis continued while he was still defending Nixon, he was

concerned that the discord and the chaos, which was not his word, but just the disruption to orderly process of government, could at some point begin to take a toll on America's ability to conduct successful foreign policy. That diplomats and foreign ministers and people in other capitals around the whole would begin to wonder what was going on. And that concerned him.

Now, there were six or seven reporters on the trip that day, and we all thought that was a big deal, but we didn't think it was something that would just destroy him. So we all resolved that we were going to write it, and, of course, the television guys were the first to go back to the Ford press office the next day and say, "Does he want to say anything about this to put it in context?" Well, Ford went nuts. He was convinced that it was off the record, but he had not set ground rules on this one. Usually they were very careful about ground rules. And I don't think he thought it was a big deal, but he only thought it was a big deal when it became clear that it was going to be written and would probably look worse in print.

He called each of the television reporters individually to try to persuade them not to write it. He said it was off the record and they all said, no, it wasn't. And he was really in a foul mood. He didn't call me because he knew I wouldn't publish for three or four days, *Newsweek* being a weekly in those days, without an Internet. And so by the time he got on the airplane for the next trip – this was one of those back-to-back daytrips – he went out, he came home, and then we went out someplace else, I think to New York the next day. And by the time he came on the plane, he knew that the networks were going to use this story that night, and he was none too pleased. I'll never forget, he got on the airplane and he didn't even look on either side of the press cabin. He just came storming down the row and he said, looking straight ahead, without looking at any of us, he said, "Good morning, gentlemen." And just disappeared to the back. And that was a rare, rare fit of pique. He was real irritated. But they printed it; I printed it the next week, and the next

day, or two days, or three days later he was up in the cabin having martinis with us. It was just past.

Smith: People drank a lot more in those days, didn't they? That's one of the cultural changes.

DeFrank: Reporters drank a lot more and principals drank a lot more. There was a lot of that.

Smith: Do you think it fueled the relationships in some ways; kind of a camaraderie?

DeFrank: I think in certain respects, yes, indeed. It was easier to have a more social relationship with presidents in those days. And now it's a combination of times have changed, the culture has changed, and more than anything else, I think, reporters are viewed as the enemy, even among public figures who like reporters, because officials know that reporters can be a problem. Reporters can bite the hand that feeds them. Because reporters are going to do their job first, even if they like a guy and even if they get invited to events.

I can remember President George H.W. Bush gave me an interview once, and as I was leaving the interview from the Oval Office, he was referring to something that a senator had said, criticizing (him) in the *Washington Post* that morning. He said, "Did you see this story?" And I said, "Yes." And he said, "Well, what do you make of that?" And I said, "Mr. President, you know this stuff better than I do, this is just politics. He just said that because he had to say that." I said, "I don't think it's a big deal." And he said, "Well, you're probably right, but what really chaps me is I had that SOB to dinner last week with his wife and Barbara in the residence."

And for somebody like Bush '41, who was so astute, it showed a surprising naiveté about the realities of journalism, but in this case, just political realities. That's the way it happens. And so, over the years there has been a wariness that has grown. I suspect, and I don't think it has anything to do with

me, but I suspect, and know reporters are not going to have the kind of access to a future president or vice president that I was very fortunate to have with Gerald Ford. The press secretariat now is designed to keep the boss out of trouble. The press secretary in the modern presidency and the modern Washington political culture – the press secretary is somebody whose job it is to keep problems from happening. The press secretary is no longer a facilitator; he or she is a roadblock.

Smith: Not even an honest broker.

DeFrank: Absolutely not. I mean, you always expect a press secretary to be advocating the point of view of the person he or she works for. But it goes beyond that. The press secretary is now someone to keep reporters away from the boss at all costs. In those days, we were all fortunate – that small group that traveled with him – because we got to know him well and he was a different sort of guy. He didn't need to be told what to think about reporters. I feel really lucky.

Smith: Can you imagine a press secretary going on *Saturday Night Live* today?

DeFrank: Well, Ron Nessen did it in the early days of the Ford administration.

Smith: Was it a good idea?

DeFrank: No, it wasn't a good idea. It was not a good idea at all.

Smith: One wonders about Nessen. One senses that there was a television guy with a need to be on camera.

DeFrank: Well, also Ron, as you well know, had come from NBC, and *Saturday Night Live* is produced by NBC, and I think Ron, even then, was thinking about what he was going to do after the Ford press secretary job ended. And I think it was a bad idea.

Smith: Did you know about Mrs. Ford's problems, however defined?

DeFrank: I did. I didn't know about the pills, I didn't know about the pain killers. I knew about the drinking because we would see her wander back on the airplane sometimes with a drink in her hand. I can remember on this spring trip in '74 to Hawaii, there was a staff complex, and right next door was a press center, a very small press center in the marquee of each hotel. And she wandered in on one of those days with a drink in the middle of the day. I think it was a screwdriver, I can't be certain. She wasn't incapacitated, but she was drinking in the middle of the day. And so I had seen that, but I had never had any inkling that she had a serious problem. I took it to be she was a social drinker and drinking more than she probably should, but I didn't connect the dots.

Smith: Would anyone have written it, if they had?

DeFrank: Probably not, because she was the wife of a president, not a president. But, of course, every instance is different. Had she passed out at a dinner, or had she fallen out of her chair or knocked over something, then I think you can't ignore it, especially if it was on videotape or film. But I think, for the most part, in those days it probably would have been overlooked. But certainly not today. Everything is fair game today.

Smith: They were, in some ways, opposites attracting. We talked about the punctuality thing. He was religiously punctual. In fact, maybe it even became a bigger issue with him than it would have been because of the contrast with her, who was never on time for anything in her life. You wonder if there is an element of perfectionism – she wants to look perfect, she wants exactly the right jewelry, preparing takes longer. But you wonder – some people are just tardy or if there is anything more to it than that.

DeFrank: Well, I think that's part of it.

Smith: Or you can get conspiratorial. If she harbored unspoken resentment about so much of their marriage when he was on the road and away, climbing the ladder and leaving the responsibilities with her. That's pure speculation.

DeFrank: I don't know. That sounds reasonable to me, but I couldn't prove it. But I also think, now that we know more about her than we did all those years ago, maybe it was the alcohol and the pain killers, the drugs, the medications, that contributed to that. He once said some remark about women's things – very dismissive. But that was just in the context of "Betty's always late." But I think maybe her medical condition affected it as well.

Smith: Was he in denial for a long time?

DeFrank: He was. I think he was.

Smith: And I wonder if he felt any guilt – not simply about being away at a critical time as much as he was – but whether his absences in some way, may have contributed to her problem.

DeFrank: I think he did feel a certain element of guilt. He was gone while bad things were happening to her. And, of course, the breast cancer, I think, exacerbated his feelings of guilt about being gone, but the good news there was that they were in the White House and she had the best medical care she could have gotten anywhere. But I think the mastectomy fueled his sense of guilt that he was AWOL for her and I think it did bug him. And I think that's one of the reasons why he quit drinking. He said to me once, years later, he said, "Well, it just wasn't any fun drinking by myself, so I stopped." But I also think it was more of a principle decision on his part, too. She couldn't drink, and he wasn't going to aid and abet. I think part of him said, I probably had something to do with this because I was never there and I'm not going to repeat my mistake a second time.

- Smith: Today we take it for granted, but thirty-five years ago the notion that the First Lady of the United States had breast cancer – the word breast was never mentioned on television. It really does seem like things have evolved in terms of public awareness.
- DeFrank: Well, obituaries would say things like died after a lengthy illness. And now in obituaries you have to have a reason not to have the cause of death listed. But everything was so much more in code in those days, and for a First Family or First Lady, even more so. It's hard to believe how primitive by contemporary standards discussion about things like that were. It was shocking, and it was shocking because it was just not spoken about. And I give Betty Ford a great deal of credit for wanting to go public – making sure that people knew about it and knew about treatment and early detection and all of that. I think she provided a great national public service.
- Smith: There is a school of thought that says she enjoyed the White House.
- DeFrank: Oh, she did. She loved the White House. There is a famous David Kennerly picture of her dancing in bare feet on the Cabinet Room table. She loved the White House. For the first time in her life she had help. She had people.
- Smith: She had help and she had a stage.
- DeFrank: Yes, exactly.
- Smith: She had been a performer. And you often wonder – again – you could never crawl inside a marriage, but at what point did resentment fester that he was off making a name for himself, and she...
- DeFrank: was wrapping bandages with the Senate ladies for the Red Cross. But that all changed because the White House, as you say, was a stage for her. For the first time in her life, she didn't have to worry about carpooling the kids or cooking tuna noodle casserole, or being out of his liverwurst for his

sandwiches – which she hated for him to be eating. Especially after he left the White House.

Smith: Jack Marsh told us that the day before (Ford) went to Chicago to give the VFW speech about earned amnesty, whatever they called it – and you have he went into the Oval Office and said, “Mr. President, I have some bad news.” And he’d had no shortage of that. But it turned out that Steve, on his birthday, had not registered for the draft. And he said Ford looked gob-smacked. He just sort of put his head in his hands. They took care of it before the day was over. And no one ever got the story. But you can imagine in today’s media climate, on the eve of this politically risky initiative...I’ve often wondered whether that initiative and the pardon are not pieces of the whole. That Ford initially saw his task as trying to heal the country. And whether they were in some ways, almost equal.

DeFrank: It was binding up the wounds. As you well know, the title of his memoir was *A Time to Heal*. And I think it went beyond the pardon. It went to Vietnam, it went to the draft issue, and it went to the protests. Washington was such a snake pit the summer of ’74. It was hot and muggy and sticky and awful, but it was just a terrible – not a happy place - to be. I told the story many times about in those days Pennsylvania Avenue was a main east/west artery. Today it’s closed because of security reasons. But you could demonstrate in front of the White House and a big band of anti-Nixon demonstrators had set up shop right across the street on Lafayette Park, and they would hold up these signs that said, “Honk if you think he’s guilty.”

My enduring memory of the summer of ’74 is going by the White House, in and out day after day after day, early morning, middle of the day, late at night, and you’d hear the horns honking all day long. And I often wondered whether Nixon could hear that because it was a cacophony of horns being tooted. And I always like to say that on August 8, 1974, the honking stopped.

And I think that was part of Ford's mission. He thought it was time – not only to bind up the political wounds – but just to bind up the wounds of a nation that was angry at itself over Vietnam, over Watergate, over the pardon, over lots of things. I've often said, in this superheated partisan atmosphere of today, where's Jerry Ford when we really need him? Because we really need that kind of humanity. We really need that kind of personality. I think he would be able to make all of this better. So I think he saw this healing mission in a grander context than just merely winding up the Nixon wounds.

Smith: Let me ask you, I realize it is speculative, but we've talked to Mel Laird. He loves Ford, but he's still mad at Ford for not, in effect, doing what Mel wanted him to do about the pardon. Laird believes that he could have put together a bipartisan group from both Houses, brought them to the White House, and had them, in effect, petition the President for a pardon.

Now, the problem with that scenario is – at least in my memories – it was such a supercharged atmosphere, I don't know how you could have launched a trial balloon without it being shot down before it ever cleared the trees. Even people who acknowledged the pardon may have been necessary, still say there must have been a more politically adroit way to do it. But if there was, I don't know what it was.

DeFrank: It had to be done in complete secrecy, for one thing. And something like this would have been instantly dismissed by the press, among others, as just a ploy engineered by the White House to take some of the heat off of President Ford. No one would have believed that the White House wasn't doing a backdoor deal on this, especially since – well, no, Rumsfeld was not there at that point, and neither was Cheney. With Al Haig there, I think the body politic, and especially the media, would have said this is another Haig concoction, trying to deflect heat off Nixon. You would have instantly resurrected the deal – is there a deal here? Even before the pardon itself resurrected the notion. And so

I think it would have been a non-starter. I think that's crazy because I always thought Mel Laird had more political sense than that.

Smith: We've talked about how you believed, maybe he believed, that any realistic chance of re-election was probably sacrificed when he issued the pardon. We can look, in some quantifiable way, at the political damage that was caused by pardoning Nixon. But we can only speculate as to what the damage would have been, if he had not pardoned Nixon. And spent the next two years with trials and obsessive press coverage. Wasn't it really a case where you were damned if you did and damned if you didn't?

DeFrank: Yes. I think he had no choice. I think the pardon, in retrospect, was the best of miserable alternatives. But I think he had no choice but to do it. And I think from the start, he understood the hit he was going to take on this.

Smith: A couple of quick things and we'll let you go. You talked about how ugly things were in '74. I think at the time he died there was certain amount of misplaced nostalgia. I think a lot of people were introduced to him for the first time that week. They saw the old clippings and they compared it to today's political climate and it looked pretty good. As you know, it wasn't exactly an era of good feeling in the '60s and '70s. Yet, it seems to have been a much more constructive period. The parties could work together. What was it about that period, and what was Ford's contribution to that before the presidency?

DeFrank: Well, Ford was much more in the Arthur Vandenberg school about foreign policy stopping at the water's edge. He said a zillion times, "I think people can disagree without being disagreeable." That was part of his philosophy. There was a time, I think in the '70s, you didn't always have to have a clear a winner and a clear loser. There was a middle ground. There was less polarization. There is just incredible polarization in this town right now. And even though both sides behave a little bit better right now, it is still very polarized.

Smith: Isn't it possible that one of the factors that created this, in some ways artificial, consensus was the Cold War? For forty years the number one priority, enough to make people at critical junctures forget their purely partisan identification, was staying alive.

DeFrank: Mutually assured destruction. I think that's right. The Cold War was a unifying force because everybody could support staying militarily strong and doing what you had to do to, as you say, stay alive. And so there was always a partisan divide, but it was much less nasty. And now it's just nasty and poisonous on each side. And that and the Internet, you can call people bad things instantly.

Smith: And the more outrageous you are, the greater the likelihood you are going to get noticed.

DeFrank: Right.

Smith: Which is what it's all about.

DeFrank: Making a splash, being even more outrageous – is what Sarah Palin has figured out, although I think she has probably started to peak here. But despite the incredible polarization over Watergate, for most of the '60s and the '70s and Vietnam, you could function on the political level in Washington more easily. Things could get done. That's why I think history is probably going to judge the passage of the health care law as a significant cultural accomplishment for many reasons. One of which is, it's hard to imagine how they have a White House that was able to get the support to get even a watered-down, scaled back version of that health care bill passed, given the anger and the volatility and the polarization of the process.

Smith: You've been with the *Daily News* how long?

DeFrank: Fourteen years plus.

- Smith: Okay. So you were not around when the famous headline...?
- DeFrank: No, I was at the National Press Club that day when he gave that speech, but I was not here.
- Smith: In the course of the Rockefeller research... a lot of Ford's speeches involved tug of war between competing speechwriting teams or philosophical arguments, or whatever. That one clearly did. Bill Seidman told me how his camp, which included the vice president, and Bob Hartmann, thought they had written the last draft. And, to their astonishment, the Bill Simon/Alan Greenspan camp got their fingerprints on the final draft. And you wonder how much of this was defensive, with the Reagan challenge looming – you want to throw something to the right. And how much of it was Ford's orthodox economics - if we bail out New York, what precedent does it set?
- DeFrank: It had to be both. But he was very adamant. I did a long interview with him about that years after he left office – about New York – after I came to the *Daily News*. I knew that was a story I'd be able to print for this paper some day. And he just basically said the same thing you just said. If we let New York off the hook, the unions will go crazy, it will never be able to fix New York and we'll have to do it again in Boston or Philadelphia, or someplace else. And we had to draw the line someplace.
- Smith: Hugh Carey told me once – he may have just been politic - but he said, “I never thought Jerry Ford got the credit he deserved because of his tough love approach to New York, without which no change would have been possible.”
- DeFrank: Well, that was Ford's point. He always said that they paid back those loans, and it worked out. And it wouldn't have worked out if I hadn't beaten them up. So he felt very proud about that and he didn't like the drop dead cover. He said to me about the headline, he said it should have been “I Saved New York.”

Smith: We didn't know that at the time.

DeFrank: No.

Smith: Do you think he grew into the presidency?

DeFrank: He did.

Smith: Did he master the job?

DeFrank: I think he did. I think he had a strong grounding. Of course, as you know, in the legislative process -all that time on the Appropriations Committee - I think he had mastered the whole budgetary piece of the presidency. But I think he got more comfortable in what I call the public diplomacy part of the job. I think he mastered it. He definitely grew in the job. And it's too bad; I would have liked to have seen what another four years of Ford would have been like.

Smith: Do you know what Bob Hartmann's job in the second term was to have been?

DeFrank: No.

Smith: Ambassador to Ireland. Was that another example of Ford being too loyal to someone? Granted that Hartmann had played a significant role and made real contributions, is there a point at which presidential loyalty is...

DeFrank: Yes, always. But that's not specific to Ford. I mean, every president has blind spots. Bush '41 kept Nick Brady around as secretary of treasury, even though he was probably one of the more incompetent treasury secretaries ever. Presidents always surround themselves with one or two or three hacks, toadies. And in Hartmann's case, he wasn't a hack, he was a very good speechwriter.

What I liked about Hartmann was, Hartmann was one of those people who could write like Jerry Ford talked. You could tell a Hartmann speech because it was a speech that sounded like Jerry Ford had written it, for the most part.

And so he was loyal, but he also knew that Hartmann had a bad temper, had increasingly lost control of his drinking. There had been complaints from the Secret Service about altercations with Hartmann. And there was a famous incident, you may or may not have heard about it, about Bob, scantily clothed in a hallway on some trip with a drink in his hand, threatening to transfer a Secret Service agent who wouldn't give him another drink to Alaska – to Kodiak, I think it was. And so Ford knew all that, but I don't begrudge presidents their loyalty. But sometimes you have to find jobs for loyalists that are commensurate with their ability. And I don't Bob Hartmann would have gotten confirmed by the Senate as ambassador to anything. That's the kind of thing you'd need to have an ambassadorship to OECD, or something where you don't necessarily need a Senate confirmation.

Smith: Hartmann, from what we know, saved Ford from himself at times.

DeFrank: Often times.

Smith: And Ford recognized the value of having someone around like that, particularly in the White House, where they are few and far between.

DeFrank: Of course, Rumsfeld and Cheney couldn't stand him. They worked really hard to undermine him with David Gergen and others. Ford didn't like the fighting, but he kept Hartmann on. And so, again, I don't mind a president being loyal to his friends, but at some point you've got to make sure that taking care of your friends is done in a way that is not bad for America.

Smith: Since you saw so much of him after he left office, I'd be interested in your views on this. I mentioned in the eulogy the cliché that we get more conservative as we have more to conserve, or nostalgia takes over, or whatever – we get more cautious. And Ford certainly remained the most orthodox of fiscal conservatives. I suspect he was horrified at the deficits. That said, in many other ways, he seemed almost marooned in his party long before he died. And it wasn't just abortion – gay rights – things that you don't

associate with a conservative Republican president. Granted, conservatism itself is being redefined. But I wondered whether Mrs. Ford was an influence on this, plus the experience of going through the intervention with her and then building the Betty Ford Center; being part of that project, and seeing good, decent people – friends, corporate executives, who had a weakness, or had a problem – whether it all came together and sort of pushed the compassion button. He seemed to become more open.

DeFrank: I think being out of electoral politics kind of freed him up. It just kind of liberated him to say what he really believed. I mean, there were just lots of things he knew he couldn't support as a congressman or vice president or as a president. But, freed from those shackles, he felt more liberated and he didn't care what people thought. And if they disagreed with him in the party, too bad. I mean, he just didn't care. But I do think Betty had a real influence.

Smith: When you talked with him about Iraq and Afghanistan what was your sense of his attitude?

DeFrank: Well, he said that he thought that he supported them. I don't think we talked much at all about Afghanistan. But he was absolutely supportive of Iraq. He said Saddam Hussein was a bad guy and needed to go, and so he supported the intervention, he supported the war. But he said he thought he had made a fundamental mistake in pegging the war to weapons of mass destruction. And he said that he thought that even before it became clear that there were none, or none could be found. He just said he thought that was just dangerous. There was plenty of reason to lay out the case for getting rid of Saddam Hussein. And they should have just done that and nobody was going to support Saddam and there was just a strategic miscalculation for which he faulted Rumsfeld and Cheney more than he faulted '43.

Smith: Was it awkward for him, having so many of his people – Paul O'Neill, of course, Cheney, Rumsfeld – in the second Bush Administration. One senses

on the personal level there was never any diminution of his regard or respect or affection. But you just wonder if he felt any degree of awkwardness. You talked about being liberated, in some ways, having them there was the opposite of liberating him to speak out.

DeFrank: He was very proud – it showed that he had quite a bench. I think he thought that all these guys' re-emergence in the Bush era reinforced the authority and stature of his own limited time in the White House. But he didn't think some of the things they did were very smart – like the Iraq strategy. I would never have believed that Ford would have thought that Cheney should have been dumped in 2004 because he had become a political negative for Bush '43. But he was still very proud of Cheney. He just thought Cheney got a little too out there. And he wouldn't have said that fifteen years ago, that's for sure. But I think he felt liberated to say what he thought and didn't care much what people thought about what he thought.

Smith: When he died, were you surprised at all by the degree of public reaction?

DeFrank: No, because, as you know, Richard, presidential funerals are a state event planned by the Military District of Washington for years. I mean, every president plans his own funeral, and I'd have to go back and check, but at one point the funeral plans had to be updated every six months because as presidents get older, respective pallbearers die, or occasionally there will be a falling out, and the president doesn't want this guy as a pallbearer, didn't want this guy to speak, but he'd like him to be in the reserved pews. So presidents have time, just because of the law, to deal with the ceremonial aspects departure. So he planned all that. He's the guy who wanted Jimmy Carter to speak at Grand Rapids. He's the guy who decided that he didn't want Bill Clinton to speak, but he wanted Bill Clinton to be there.

Smith: I was wearing two hats – I was with ABC the first part of the week and then with the family the second half – and as an outsider parachuted into the

network operation it was fascinating to watch this reaction, particularly among younger journalists, who weren't around during the Ford presidency.

DeFrank: Weren't ever alive, yeah. And I think there are over a hundred million Americans today, or maybe a hundred and fifty million Americas, who weren't even born when he left office. I mean, I think the national education about Jerry Ford continues, and I think that's a good thing.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered?

DeFrank: As a guy who tried his best to do the right thing, and who helped contribute to healing a very fractured country. I think that's a good enough legacy for anybody, and I think that's what history will judge his to be.

Smith: Last thing, because one has a feeling that when the first Bush left office, there was almost this unspoken awareness that he had fulfilled his historical role. That he had very skillfully managed the end of the Cold War and with the kinder, gentler aspect tried to change the face of the party and of conservatism. But there was a sense of what might have been if there had been a second Bush term. Do you feel that way about Ford? Ford himself is said to have observed he felt he had just mastered the job when he lost it. Would a full Ford term have added significantly to his historical legacy?

DeFrank: No, I don't think so. I think he did what history will decide was important for him to have done. And I think four more years would not have really embellished the historical judgment. There is no way to know, of course, but I think how do you top becoming president after the first president in history resigns under pain of impeachment, and bringing the country through that, getting it back on an even keel.

Smith: People have tended to forget...Obama came in facing a terribly difficult situation, but at least he had the legitimacy of being elected. Look at what was on Ford's plate when he was pitch forked into this office, for which he hadn't

really been able to do a transition, whatever he might have thought privately. Did there hang over the Ford presidency this question of legitimacy?

DeFrank: Not in his mind, and not really among the people around him. Because he thought the one thing he had going for him was the legitimacy of his relationships with members on the Hill. He thought that was going to be the one thing that always saved him because they liked him. He always thought that he would never have been picked by Nixon – Nixon thought that Ford was impeachment insurance. It turns out that Nixon thought that the Hill would never vote to impeach him if Jerry Ford, who they knew so well, was going to be the successor. But, in fact, the Hill was very comfortable with Jerry Ford. It was a strategic miscalculation on Nixon's part. And so Ford always thought, yes, I'm unelected, but I've got a real reservoir of goodwill because these guys know me, I know them.

Smith: That must have contributed even more to the pain of coming so close in '76 to getting that imprimatur.

DeFrank: Right. And the pain was exacerbated by the pardon because some of his closest friends on the Hill admitted to him that it just can't be the same anymore – you've altered the balance. Yeah, we'll come and have drinks with you, but the political dynamic has changed forever.

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