

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Werner Veit
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
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Veit: His political being is extinct.

Smith: Well, we'll start on that note. Even while he was alive, he and Mrs. Ford became sort of marooned in the national Republican Party. Could Jerry Ford get nominated in this congressional district today?

Veit: Not a chance.

Smith: And why is that?

Veit: Well, because the Republican Party in this district, as in so many others, has been totally captured by the far right, and it isn't so much that Jerry Ford had necessarily views that were less conservative. The difference was that today's activists don't even allow civility to the opponent. If you are not rabble rousing to those that disagree with you, then you're not on our side. And Jerry Ford was never that. He was a conservative. He was substantially to the right of me, for example.

Smith: He was a true fiscal conservative.

Veit: Exactly.

Smith: He was tight, that's what he was.

Veit: Right. That's right. And whenever we disagreed with him, it really was over that. There were some expenditures that we thought ought to be made, but no matter how we disagreed, or he disagreed with everyone else, there was never a lack of civility. There was never the notion that somehow those who disagreed were un-American. God forbid – it would never have occurred to him to call anybody a Socialist.

Smith: It was no accident that at the funeral in Washington Cathedral, one of the eulogists was a journalist. Originally it was going to be Hugh Sidey, and then

he passed away, so Tom Brokaw took his place. But a message was being sent.

Let me go back. Where does your journalistic career begin? What are your roots?

Veit: Mine?

Smith: Yeah.

Veit: I suppose my roots were I never learned how to do anything else. Well, even in high school, I was interested in more than in just writing. Where I went to high school, we set the type for our school newspaper.

Smith: Did you really?

Veit: And the whole operation intrigued me.

Smith: Was West Michigan home? Where did you come from?

Veit: Well, yes and no. I've lived here since early high school. I was actually born in Germany, and grew up partly in Colombia, and then came to the United States just before World War II.

Smith: Okay.

Veit: But then my growing up years were pretty much all in Western Michigan.

Smith: Arthur Vandenberg was still around.

Veit: Oh, yes. I worked for him.

Smith: Did you? Really?

Veit: I worked on a newspaper called the *Grand Rapids Herald*, which was a morning paper at the time, and he was one of the owners. He wasn't terribly popular with the staff. As matter of fact, the *Herald* was one of the first to organize a union, partly in opposition to Arthur Vandenberg.

Smith: Because of...?

Veit: He was very imperious. And he owned the paper. I was sent out to talk to him, I was nineteen or twenty, and probably scared. I knocked on the door to his house and he opened up and I told him that I would like to interview him on subject X. He was prepared for that. He handed me a question and answer sheet and shut the door in my face. As a matter of fact, in the newsroom they used to say, "Let's vote for him to keep the son of a bitch in Washington." He was a great hero because of the so-called bipartisan foreign policy. Until then nobody really thought much of him, but he had a lot of longevity, and from my perspective, I just believed what everybody else believed among my peers, for I all know he might have been a fine senator.

Smith: That's fascinating.

Veit: My view was pretty narrow.

Smith: But valuable. Because with a project like this, context – like a newspaper – context is not everything, but it is absolutely invaluable. We're trying to get a sense of the political culture and the broader culture of the place that produced and sustained and defined Ford. Which brings us to Frank McKay. He was a legendary figure. Describe the legend and maybe beyond the legend.

Veit: He was somewhat before my time. I think he was probably a product of the Depression, when anyone who could deliver anything was probably fairly popular. I think his political power came from really understanding patronage. He also had some questionable associates – the famous Purple Gang and so on – he was alleged to have been a part of. When I was in high school, the mayor of Grand Rapids, George Welch, supposedly was crowned by Frank McKay and the city was pretty much in the grip of that group. And all of a sudden there came a reform movement. A chap named Paul Goebel who had been a hero at the University of Michigan football team – that's big around here – began a reform movement. And much to everyone's surprise, managed to totally take over the city commission and the mayoralty and so forth.

Smith: Now, the President's father was part of that. And, in fact, Ford's campaign in '48 presumably was in some ways at least an offshoot of that. Although it was

clearly the issue of internationalism versus isolationism drove him against Jonkman.

Veit: Of course, the district was much larger than the city of Grand Rapids, although that had the bulk of the votes. And that reform movement also attracted what was then a pretty powerful block, the Christian Reform voters in Grand Rapids. And surprisingly, Jonkman didn't hold all those. I think Jonkman really was surprised by Jerry Ford – his vigor and his appeal as something new. He was sort of, in some ways, a Republican white Obama.

Smith: I understand exactly what you are saying. And it's interesting because – a subplot there – it has been suggested over the years that Ford, who is popularly thought to be without guile, but certainly didn't get where he got without calculation, held off marrying Mrs. Ford until after the primary out of concern that it might, in fact, become an issue among...

Veit: Among that powerful group.

Smith: For whom divorce was a sin.

Veit: Yeah.

Smith: We've heard wonderful stories from people about the whole Dutch influence. Some of it semi-comical - people going down to buy a Sunday paper on Saturday night and not reading it until Monday. That kind of Sabbatarian observance.

Veit: I can tell you more pointed vignettes about that because when the *Grand Rapids Herald* folded, I started the *Sunday Grand Rapids Press*.

Smith: Roughly, when would that been?

Veit: 1958. So the first thing that happened was eight Christian Reform ministers showed up at my desk. Knelt before me and prayed for my soul because I was the worst kind of sinner because I caused other people to sin. It wasn't so much my sin as I was causing other people to sin. I was somewhat taken aback, didn't know quite what to say. I finally said, "Well, thank you very much."

Some of the other interesting things that used to happen: there was a carrier, a newspaper carrier, in the suburb of Granville, which is heavily Dutch, changed hands. Somebody else took over. And in the process we finally learned why it was that of all the several hundred news carriers that the newspaper had, this kid took two or three times as long to deliver the paper as it took anyone else. And what had happened was that he had a book of instructions on where to place the paper – behind bush X, or behind barrel Y. They were all neighbors hiding from one another that they were getting delivery of the Sunday paper.

I had a neighbor, a very nice chap, quiet and pious, but he was also a baseball fan, and he really followed the Detroit Tigers. In those days, yes, you could listen to it on the radio, but to get a full account, you really had to read the paper. So, he used to kind of sheepishly, after church on Sunday he would sort of come over and I knew what was going on and I would leave the sports section open to the Tigers accounts, so he could without actually seeming to, read the account.

It was a long time before our Sunday circulation exceeded our daily, but eventually it did. But that was a pretty good signal that times had changed, and the church itself had changed. It's interesting that, even in its hey day, it never quite had the hold on its members as the Evangelicals do today.

Smith: Really?

Veit: At least not politically. And it seemed to me that while their view of life was pretty narrow, I never felt that there was any hostility involved toward Catholics or Jews or whatever.

Smith: Right. Interesting. But obviously Ford had to take their presence into account.

Veit: And did.

Smith: And it affected, or helped to define what kind of conservative he was.

Veit: Sure. I'm not sure he was without guile, or perhaps he was without guile, but he was certainly a skilled politician. There's no question about it.

Smith: I have a theory which has been somewhat strengthened after doing 120 interviews. I'll put it in someone else's mouth. We talked to Lee Hamilton recently. Hamilton was kind of refreshing because he admired Ford, he liked Ford, but he said something very interesting. First of all, he said Ford was much more ambitious than people thought, but he was smart enough to hide his ambition, which in Washington is rare. And the sense one gets is that he knew there were people out there who – the polite word is underestimated him – and he used it. He was not above using it. That's a form of guile, certainly. It's certainly a form of calculation. When you say he was a skilled politician, how would that manifest itself in the district?

Veit: I don't ever remember a challenge from the right. He was smart enough to know that if there was going to be a real challenge; it was going to be from the right. That was a long time ago. Now it's pretty obvious, but it wasn't so then. So first of all, recognizing that was important. And secondly and thirdly and fourthly, what you just said about knowing the Christian Reform Church – that as long as he appeared socially conservative as well as fiscally conservative, it would be very difficult to mount a campaign against him. Nor, unlike his predecessor, did he ever slow down in terms of campaigning.

Smith: Was that part of Jonkman's problem – that he had just become less visible in the district?

Veit: Exactly. He thought this was sort of like a safe district in Britain.

Smith: It's interesting – I find it almost amazing that Ford, who had pretty much a safe district, nevertheless spent as much time, even after he became something of a national figure, in taking care of things back home.

Veit: I think one story illustrates how much he was interested in remaining, even after he became President. About two weeks, something like that, into his presidency, I don't remember exactly the timeframe, I was then the editor of the *Grand Rapids Press* and I got a phone call from Jerry terHorst, who was still his press secretary. He said, "Werner, the boss wants his paper." I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Well, we're not getting the paper anymore." I said, "Well, that's odd. Let me check into it."

I called our circulation department and he said, “Well, yes, we cut him off. We haven’t been paid.” I said, “You cut off the President of the United States?” “Well, you once told me you wouldn’t carry your grandmother past 30 days.” But with all the things that were going on, he was still concerned that he wasn’t getting his local newspaper. I think what Jerry told me, “Betty’s been a little busy.” Neglected to pay the bill.

He used to comment – it was a little disconcerting to publish an editorial and get a reply or a comment from the President of the United States. Now, I’m sure he directed Jerry or somebody to do it, but nevertheless.

Smith: Did you comment on the pardon?

Veit: Yes we did, and we were opposed to it. Still are opposed to it. But it didn’t change anything in terms of our personal relationship. I was the co-chair of the inauguration of this place for him. And he was always very thoughtful. I always got a little note at Christmas – no matter what. That was another calculated, smart thing to do.

Smith: In some ways he never stopped being a congressman.

Veit: That’s right. Exactly. That’s what congressmen did. They really paid attention to what’s going on in the district.

Smith: It didn’t always serve him well in the presidency. You can look at those two and half years as a trajectory of him learning – not necessarily unlearning congressional skills – but learning the very different skill set that a president requires. And in some areas, he’d be the first to admit – particularly in communications – he never mastered it. But he said what really hurt about ’76 was he felt he’d basically just mastered the job when he lost it. And you do wonder what a second full term would have been like.

Veit: And I was somewhat surprised that Jimmy Carter, who I didn’t conceive of as a big campaigner, could defeat a sitting president.

Smith: Did you know his parents at all?

Veit: No.

Smith: Did you have much contact with Mrs. Ford?

Veit: Yes we did. We were all aware – because life in Grand Rapids was different in those days – we were all aware of her alcoholism, drinking problem.

Smith: At what point? Before they were in the White House?

Veit: Oh yeah. And I think most of us were sympathetic rather than – it could happen to us. Heaven knows there were enough drunks in the newspaper industry.

Smith: When he was in Congress, one gets the sense that she's representative in so many ways of a whole generation of women. The children are leaving home, and they are married to a professional, and groping for a role of their own.

Veit: And it's no wonder that risks happen. So we were aware and everybody, I think. I don't think it was common knowledge among all the voters, but a certain common knowledge among people in the Republican Party. And out of it, for that matter.

Smith: Locally.

Veit: Locally, yeah.

Smith: Had you seen evidence of it?

Veit: I think knowing it, I saw things I probably would not have recognized. It wasn't ever anything...she was never falling down drunk or anything like that.

Smith: Of course.

Veit: She just had a serious problem.

Smith: But you found her a sympathetic figure?

Veit: Exactly. And I think it was typical that when she got breast cancer and so on, she took her illness as a way to do public good in establishing the clinic.

Smith: It is hard for people today to grasp how guarded people were on the subject of breast cancer thirty-five years ago.

- Veit: That's right.
- Smith: It just wasn't talked about.
- Veit: It was a taboo subject. But she eventually became open not only about breast cancer but about alcoholism. And I think a lot of people admired her for that, which wasn't really typical then.
- Smith: That brings up a couple of things. First of all, let me go back. During those congressional days, as being House Minority Leader and especially Watergate, the vice presidency; was there a kitchen cabinet? We've gotten conflicting reports. Some people claim to be part of it who have asserted that before Ford became president there were conversations in which people told him you've got to be prepared for this eventuality. Was there an informal, or self-appointed, group of advisors, or whatever you want to call it, that he would call on, particularly for sensitive counsel?
- Veit: If there was I never heard about it.
- Smith: Okay.
- Veit: In fact, this is the first time that I heard anything like that might have happened. It sounds somewhat un-Ford-like.
- Smith: In the sense that he tended to keep his own counsel?
- Veit: Exactly.
- Smith: That's an interesting thing. Again, the popular notion of this big, genial, friendly, outgoing, uncomplicated, guy; and one learns that there are depths within everyone. And he was very good at keeping secrets.
- Veit: You can't become Speaker of the House, never mind anything else, without having a pretty firm grasp on reality.
- Smith: How did the district change? He was there for a quarter of a century. During that period, how did the culture change? When I first came to Grand Rapids, my acid test was to ask people – when, if ever, could you imagine Elton John performing a sold-out concert in Grand Rapids? It was just a litmus test.

- Veit: That's an interesting test. Probably not. In the first place, his sexual orientation probably would have kept people in that district at arm's length.
- Smith: Yeah.
- Veit: Number two, even the arena – I think the town was really too conservative to spend money on a large arena. So the chances are, yeah, it probably would not have happened. Although, the district did change very rapidly once all the other changes happened in society. I could imagine today – of course geographically the district is different today, too – somewhat more in his favor really because its gerrymandered to some degree to be Republican. But I could at least imagine that a Democrat could take this district. And one did.
- Smith: In '74, he did. Was that purely a reaction to Watergate?
- Veit: No. It was certainly a reaction to Watergate, but it was also – Dick Vanderveen was a highly respected, very active Dutch personage.
- Smith: One of us.
- Veit: Exactly.
- Smith: Had he run against Ford. Had he ever run before?
- Veit: No.
- Smith: Was this the only time he ran for office?
- Veit: Exactly. And he told me how relieved he was when he was defeated.
- Smith: Really?
- Veit: When he ran, he thought that he would be interested in being a congressman, but once he got there and realized how little impact one of 435 would have for many, many years, he lost interest in a hurry. Because he thought of himself as a loyal Democrat, he agreed to run. But he spent almost no money to get re-elected and he didn't work very hard. He was very relieved, he told me. Dick was part of a group that still exists and that I'm a member of. We meet once a month to discuss politics. It was started by a federal judge who felt that it would be unseemly for him to talk too much about politics, but he still had

things he wanted to get off his chest. So he gathered a little group of Republicans and Democrats. This was not a Democratic thing.

Smith: Off the record conversations?

Veit: Exactly. And he unburdened himself – Dick Vanderveen unburdened himself at the first lunch after the election about how relieved he was.

Smith: That's fascinating. Before I forget, we talk about the culture evolving, but ironically Ford, in a sense, is responsible, at least for the funding for the Calder sculpture.

Veit: Oh yeah, which I always found greatly ironic.

Smith: What is the story of that?

Veit: Well, I have often wondered. One of the women who began this whole thing – this is a very persuasive person – she claims that she talked Jerry Ford into the notion that as long as we're going to have a National Endowment for the Arts that's going to spend money, it might just as well be spent in Grand Rapids. That's her story. I never talked to him about it. I'm not sure that that would have done it, but it may have. It really surprised us.

Smith: And in a number of ways - again, you know better than I – he did not have a reputation for bringing home the bacon. At various times, as a young congressman he was approached by people who wanted to get some military establishments in. And he opposed it because he thought, first of all, it was a boom and bust economy. So when you think of 'the big project' that has his name on it – that it's an Alexander Calder sculpture...

Veit: Not only that, but I never had any notion that he had any interest in art, particularly contemporary art. There were a number of people who, in this town, made fun of the Calder because of its modernity. Although by today's standards, it's not all that radical. But it was thought to have been and then a) have Jerry Ford, the great fiscal conservative push to get money for it; and b) for a piece of modern art just astounded us.

Smith: I know the coda to that story which confirms your astonishment because there were two things he said about this place. You may very well know this, but he didn't want a statue of himself here, and the spaceman was the substitute. But he said make sure it's representational art.

Veit: I did not know that, but it's certainly...

Smith: It's consistent with the mystery of something so seemingly out of character both financially and aesthetically.

Veit: And it turned out to be a real drawing place. It's a festival site now and led to other sculptures. As a matter of fact, all of a sudden Grand Rapids is a center for contemporary sculpture with the sculpture garden.

Smith: And he did, as president, give Calder the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Veit: That I didn't remember.

Smith: Yeah, he did, just before Calder died.

Veit: Well, like so many human beings, he is somewhat a man of contradictions. We all are.

Smith: You know what? I'm glad you say that because, again, this notion – as much by his admirers as anyone else – suggests not that he's one dimensional, but that what you see is what get. And that can mean a lot of things, including that there's not much behind what you see. For example, he clearly evolved in his later years. He and Mrs. Ford would be at convention after convention, and every four years the party had moved farther to the right and made social issues increasingly prominent. And I've often wondered; was it that he just stayed the same and they moved to the right. Certainly fiscally he never changed, but culturally...and I wonder how much of it was her influence.

Veit: That's certainly possible, but I certainly detected that it became somewhat more broad. After he left office he asked me to write his obituary – update it, I should think. So every year I would travel to Vail or wherever he was, or Palm Desert, to talk to him and we would talk about what had happened that year and we'd update it. I sensed very much that he was becoming quite

uncomfortable with the Republican's takeover of morality, as it were. I think he was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with it.

Smith: older I get the more I think the most important factor in politics, even more than ideological, is generational. Generational factors trump almost everything else. And what I mean by that, in this instance, I think of Gerald Ford as a classic, Midwest conservative, who, at least for much of his life, assumed that issues like abortion, or sexual preference, were not political. They were not things you discussed at the dinner table, or in the legislative hearing room. Conservatism was economic, it was foreign policy, but there are issues that are ultimately personal and not political. And that part of the trajectory of his political life was to see that change rapidly, in ways that I think made him uncomfortable. But once these issues were dragged out in the open, he took a surprisingly 'liberal' view. I'd love to be able to trace that to its roots.

For example, it's been suggested he saw what his mother had to put up with and the support that she didn't receive – legally mandated and so forth and so on. The fact that he really was a product of a broken home maybe bred into him a kind of empathy that you wouldn't automatically expect in that kind of conservative.

Veit: The problem is that we weren't close enough so that I could surmise where that came from. We were close enough so I could tell it was happening, but not where it was coming from.

Smith: Mike took over those – how long did you do those?

Veit: I think I did it about four years and then Mike took over.

Smith: So through the Carter years?

Veit: Yes.

Smith: Were you surprised when they became friends?

Veit: Yes, very much so. But I was pleased because I thought that was showed a development of his character – that his character was still developing.

- Smith: That is an interesting observation. That at that point in his life, age-wise and experience-wise, that you thought his character was developing.
- Veit: The first couple of years he was bitter and resentful.
- Smith: Really?
- Veit: The change was salutary, certainly.
- Smith: Bitter toward Carter?
- Veit: Yeah. And we never got into it all that deeply, but it was pretty obvious. I think he wanted to avoid my saying anything about that in the obituary.
- Smith: Did he talk about Nixon and their relationship?
- Veit: I tried to get him to talk about Nixon, but he reminded me the ground rules were that we would talk about what had happened since I was there last.
- Smith: Well, but Nixon's comeback was part of that.
- Veit: Yeah.
- Smith: There was a formula about the pardon – I heard it a hundred times. I'm sure you could recite it, too. Did you ever hear anything other than the set piece?
- Veit: No.
- Smith: Did he tell you anything that surprised you in the course of those?
- Veit: I don't think so, not that I recall, anyway.
- Smith: And you said about four years; that would also have covered the period of Mrs. Ford's hospitalization. Did that come up?
- Veit: What came though always was his admiration for her, not only his love for her, but also his admiration for her. That came through very strongly.
- Smith: Getting to 1980, it's hard to know – clearly there were meetings, there were discussions, there was talk about him possibly running. Did he talk about that at all – the possibility of running again in '80?

- Veit: No. And I would have been surprised. I think he was – at least when I talked to him – he was in the mood to reflect on the past.
- Smith: Was there resentment locally that they didn't come back here?
- Veit: Some, not a lot.
- Smith: Was he aware of that?
- Veit: Yeah. And I think the reason he was aware of it is because he was a little defensive about it. He would bring up the subject.
- Smith: Really? And his explanation was?
- Veit: I'm not sure that it made any sense. I think what he would talk about was how often he would come back here for specific events. That's what he liked to talk about.
- Smith: He took some heat, particularly early on, for attempting to 'commercialize the ex-presidency. And in particular for going on boards and lending his name to some things. Did any of that ever come up?
- Veit: Well, it did, but I think he reminded me as he reminded others, that the money that he earned went to the Foundation. And I think he was truly interested in political science scholars that would visit the library.
- Smith: That was part of his legacy.
- Veit: Exactly.
- Smith: It seems again, very much the act of a congressman or a Solomon, to split the library and museum.
- Veit: Yeah.
- Smith: It was a terrible idea. Did anyone try to dissuade him at the time?
- Veit: No, because we – Grand Rapids – were afraid we'd lose the whole thing, so we were happy to get half the loaf.
- Smith: Yeah. And how much of a catalyst was this for what's happened since.

- Veit: I think it was an important catalyst. I think it certainly encouraged the rebirth of the hotel, which then led to other things. Urban renewal in Grand Rapids was a disaster. There were many places torn down, some historic places. And monstrosities put in their place, and it really didn't accomplish anything. But the rebirth of downtown, which is now pretty lively, was really started with the museum and the hotel. They were simultaneous. They opened on the same day.
- Smith: I guess Fred Meijer had some land on the outskirts that he was perfectly willing to donate. And my instinct was that Ford felt pretty strongly about wanting to have this downtown.
- Veit: Yeah, there was a committee and I was one of them on it – a site committee. And I think despite Fred Meijer's popularity, on the committee there was a strong feeling that it should be downtown. And our ace in the hole, of course, was Jerry Ford, who after all, should have had the last word.
- Smith: And I think he agreed with that viewpoint. Was the burial place always part of the package? Did anyone discuss that with him? It had to at some point enter into the conversation.
- Veit: As I recall, it sort of came in almost casually when the architect started work on a site plan and I think he just – I think Jerry just worked with him right from the beginning. Let's put it over here or whatever.
- Smith: We'll be talking to Marvin later.
- Veit: If you talk to him you'll probably get a much better sense.
- Smith: This is a dramatic building. Were there different designs that you went through to get to this?
- Veit: Never saw one. It's a dramatic design, but it is not so avant garde to make it un-Ford-like. I think it's a very clever design.
- Smith: It's not a Calder.
- Veit: Exactly.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw him?

Veit: You know, that's a good question. I saw him at his 90th birthday, but then we had a big party at the Capitol. But I saw him subsequent to that. I'd have to think about that. It had to be at some event here, I would think. I was also on the committee planning his funeral before Mike was and I don't think Jerry ever participated in those discussions. We met yearly. We might have occasionally got a quote – "Jerry thinks X."

Smith: Were you surprised by the reaction, not only locally where to some degree you might expect it, but nationally?

Veit: Very much so. He was only president for two and a half years. He was Minority Leader.

Smith: Been out of the public eye for quite a while.

Veit: For a long time. Naturally, I would expect it here, but that came as a big surprise.

Smith: I wonder how much of it was the timing – the country desperately needed to feel good about itself. And there is a whole generation that was discovering him for the first time. They were seeing the old film clips and they were contrasting that with the ugliness of today's politics, and hearing about this guy who fell on his sword with the pardon and it looked pretty good by comparison.

Veit: That may very well have been. Stories about his playing golf with Tip O'Neill and all those things, I think might have resonated with a lot of people.

Smith: A couple of quick things and we'll let you go. Do you have from the dedication stories, memories that stand out?

Veit: Actually, the biggest thing that stands out is Lady Bird Johnson, not Jerry Ford. I went to pick her up at the airport. Everybody who came in was a big deal. Lady Bird came walking off the DC8, carrying her suitcase, and I was really struck by that. And then she wrote the loveliest personal letter

afterwards and it included a check. There must have been a lot of residual expenses from people, I guess. I was just so totally taken with it.

Smith: When we did the re-dedication - I remember that cold, cold day. And Caroline [Kennedy] stayed in this office and watched it. Lady Bird wasn't going to miss it and she was sitting out there and Barbara Bush was kind of mothering her, and her health wasn't great at that point. It was really an effort to come here at all, and it told you something about the woman.

Veit: She told me that she had been fond of Jerry Ford. I had no idea that there was even some kind of relationship. In fact, she said, "He's such a nice man." I still remember that.

Smith: How do you think he should be remembered? Not necessarily from the local perspective, but in a broader sense.

Veit: Maybe as our last non-ideological president. Oh, I guess I can't say Clinton was all that ideological. He was a pragmatist.

Smith: It's interesting. John Paul Stevens told us at his confirmation hearings, no one asked him about abortion.

Veit: Is that right?

Smith: And that was December of '75 - almost three years after *Roe v Wade*.

Veit: Isn't that interesting.

Smith: Ford was very proud of that selection. Over the years people would suggest otherwise - assuming for ideological reasons that he was part of this long procession of Supreme Court justices who turn out to 'disappoint' their sponsors. Ford was very proud because it was a classy pick - intellectually impeccable. And because Stevens went on to have a very distinguished career in the Court.

Veit: Yeah, and I think it's wrong to say that he was a liberal Justice. I don't think he would have disappointed Ford. There may have been individual decisions that he may have disagreed with.

Smith: For the twenty-fifth anniversary of the inauguration we did a lecture series. We brought a number of people out here and one of them was Justice Stevens. Ford came all the way from California to introduce each of these people and it turned out Stevens had always wanted to play golf. I checked, and I could be wrong, but we believe this is the only time in history that a former president, in fact, introduced a justice whom he put on the court. And after the program, they went out and they played golf and had a great time and it was really kind of poignant.

Veit: Justice Stevens could not have been very young at that time.

Smith: No, we're talking, it's eleven years ago. So he'd be 79?

Veit: Also he was a much better golfer than people gave him credit for.

Smith: Ford?

Veit: Yes.

Smith: Really?

Veit: Oh, yeah. The things that would be publicized would be a slice off into the crowd or whatever, which happens to everybody. But he was actually a really good athlete. This notion that he couldn't chew gum and walk at the same time was absurd because he was probably the most athletic president.

Smith: The luck of the draw timing – Saturday Night Live goes on the air in 1975 – it's a real turning point. I suppose on some level cartoonists have been caricaturing presidents, but the power of television is vastly greater, obviously. And in some ways he never recovered from that.

Veit: It was really unfair because he was agile, and not in the least bit clumsy, a good athlete.

Smith: Final thing. Do you have memories of the funeral? And of Grand Rapids' response? I remember, obviously, the two mile line and all of that.

Veit: That is what struck me the most – is the lines. And the Democrats that turned out. There was a lot of affection for him here.

Smith: People had gotten over the fact that he didn't come back.

Veit: Exactly, and by this time never thought about it. And he is back in a sense.

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