Smith: The reason we really wanted to talk with you was to get a sense of how Congress operated in the days when Jerry Ford was there, in whatever capacity. And then, obviously, trace the story beyond there. When did you arrive in Congress?

Brock: I came in at 31 years old, burnishing my sword and my bright armor, ready to change the world in 1962.

Smith: Pre-Goldwater.

Brock: Oh, yeah, pre-Goldwater, although Goldwater was a big factor, because I had read *The Conscience of a Conservative*, and just fell in love with that thought pattern. But, it was a wonderfully interesting time and ours was the breakthrough gun in the South. John Tower was the guy in the Senate that broke out of the South. I was the first person below the so-called Mason-Dixon Line in Tennessee, not a deep South state, but I was the first one to come in. I felt pretty proud of myself, and pretty excited. I came into a time in the Congress when the Republicans were a little bit down on their dobbber because we had not only been out of power for ten years, but we lost the presidential election and we didn’t see much prospect, because Kennedy was such an attractive leader.

Smith: You were also part of a class, I think – wasn’t that the same year Donald Rumsfeld was elected?

Brock: Don and I came in – I thought I was the youngest guy in Congress. The first person I met was Don Rumsfeld, who was a year younger than I was. The two of us talked about how young we were and how great it was, and next we met Ed Foreman, who was twenty-eight. So, anyway, it was a fun time.

Smith: You were young, but at that point the Republicans had a – I won’t call him elderly – but a leader who was -
Brock: Charlie Halleck.

Smith: Charlie Halleck.

Brock: Old and of the old school.

Smith: Define old school.

Brock: Old school in the sense of accepting the status quo. When you are young and you win, you want to come in, and you want to do battle. You want to take on the Huns and Hessians and change things. That’s why you ran. And the leadership in the House didn’t have that sense of excitement, of purpose. You couldn’t get any sense that we were there for a reason as a group. And that was pretty frustrating for the first couple of years. Particularly with a guy like Goldwater who was jetting up our political juices, and getting us excited about things.

Smith: Were you at the ’64 convention?

Brock: Of course. I was not only the chairman for Tennessee, I was the leader in working the South for Goldwater.

Smith: I have to ask you just because of my interest – do you remember the night that Rockefeller was booed? In the Cow Palace.

Brock: Yeah. Not a good thing.

Smith: Yeah. But spontaneous.

Brock: It was spontaneous. I was not a supporter of Nelson Rockefeller because I was more on the conservative side. More so than today, actually. You don’t do that in politics, and I think a lot of us were a little bit uncomfortable because it was spontaneous, and people felt like Goldwater had earned it and he was there – a philosophical leader and people didn’t want any division in the party, and Rockefeller represented that.

Smith: Talk about division in the party, because clearly civil rights was a significant issue at that point, and fairly or not, at least some in the Goldwater effort were seen as opposed to the civil rights movement.
Brock: Right.

Smith: How did the House Republicans, I won’t say finesse, but how did they deal with that issue?

Brock: We didn’t deal with it very effectively, to be honest with you. We were faced with a dilemma. I have said many times, subsequently, that the largest single mistake I made in my political career was following Goldwater and opposing the civil rights act. That was wrong, he was wrong, and both of us were using the Constitutional arguments, and frankly, not having enough expertise in the Constitution, we should have shut up.

But it was one of those issues which was dividing the party, and frankly, when Goldwater took that stance, it put a lot of us in the position of saying, either we’re going to support our presumptive nominee that we were actively fighting for to get the nomination and the election, or we were going to put the party over in the hands of Rockefeller. And that was not an easy choice – not a good choice. I don’t think we were that ideologically – I think we made up a bit of ideology. Sometimes you overstate your case. And both sides were doing that.

It became a bit less split when the Voting Rights Act came up. That was a much easier thing to address and support because nobody can legitimately argue against that. But ’64 was a tough time in that particular aspect. We didn’t have, by the way, the flashpoint issues that did come up in the civil rights area later on. Like bussing, which was a really serious issue for a lot of people, both parties.

Smith: Were you surprised by the magnitude of Goldwater’s defeat – and how did it impact your own race for re-election?

Brock: By the time the election got there, I was not surprised, I was terrified. Goldwater was running at 35% in my district, and I was a new guy that had won with 51%. I was hanging on by my fingernails and it got to the point where I literally, in the last month, in October, cancelled all of my personal billboards and put Goldwater in place of my own name, because I was running much better than he was. Still, the magnitude of that defeat was I
think more than we’d expected. But if you think about the context of that
time, Jack Kennedy was assassinated my first year in Congress. President of
the United States being killed. Lyndon Johnson was obviously going to take
the leadership of the party, and I think the country was not only reacting to the
difference between Kennedy and Johnson and Goldwater, but was reacting to
the possibility of further instability. When you think about it that way, it’s
more understandable, but it was very painful.

Smith: Talk about civil rights – but I would think in Tennessee, Goldwater’s position
on the TVA would have been a significant factor.

Brock: Oh, yeah. Barry Goldwater had an ability to find a way to alienate everybody,
except those that were truly true believers. In my state of Tennessee, here was
a guy who opposed the civil rights movement, which – we were making pretty
good progress with the black community in Tennessee, less so in the South,
but particularly in my state, and we were working it. So, A) you start off by
attacking that constituency; next he comes out against TVA, which is sort of a
bedrock issue in the state of Tennessee, northern Alabama, other states that
are affected, but mostly Tennessee.

That was very hard for me, and I’d just say, “A case where somebody is
wrong,” and he was wrong. Then he came out against Social Security. Holy
cow, you take on everybody that’s getting power, everybody that’s old, and
everybody that’s black, and there’s not a whole lot of people left. I don’t
know how he got 35%. But I loved him because he just laid it out on the

table. He believed. He said, “Win or lose, this is me. I’m not going to con you
and then change my stripes because you have a difference of opinion with
me.”

Smith: In the immediate aftermath of that defeat, the House Republicans, obviously,
are confronted with their own future. Can you recall what went on in terms of
the maneuvering that led to a replacement?

Brock: Yeah, I sure can. It’s vivid. After the election, and we had just gotten our hat
handed to us, it was just mean. The younger guys, Rummy, me, particularly
some of the guys that had been there, maybe a couple of years before we
were, Charlie Goodell, Jim Martin, people like that – some with only two years of credentials, some with four, maybe some with six, had some very quick meetings. Talked about the fact that, particularly in the House, going back to what we said earlier, there was no sense of collective purpose, we had to wait for somebody to run for president to pull us together. And even then we were somewhat divided. There was no sense that in the House we could operate as a team and become more effective in advocating on those issues that we felt strongly. And frankly, the focus became Charlie Halleck.

Charlie was a very decent guy, but he was old. Frankly old and beyond his age. Old in the sense that he didn’t have the energy. And we wanted to go back and recapture our sense of purpose. We wanted to recapture our momentum, and that was a fairly easy call. It was easy in the sense that we knew we had to change the leadership, it was very hard to say, “Charlie, we want you to leave.”

Smith: Did you do that? Did anyone suggest that?

Brock: I don’t know that it was put quite that way, but it was pretty much read that way. It was hard for him, it was hard for those who had hung with him that were the older guys that knew him and loved him.

Smith: By the way, that raises an interesting question. I’m struck by the way these things occur. The older I get, the more and more it seems to me that for all the ideological divides and everything else that comes into play, that you cannot overestimate the generational factor. That this seems a generational/cultural divide, as much as philosophical or ideological.

Brock: Absolutely. That’s the case today in both parties. Watch how the parties change their leadership. Watch how they conduct themselves. It is not always age, it can be philosophical because these two parties, the Democrats more than the Republicans, are composed of disparate groups, with the difference out of parties and issues. But age does have an effect because there is so much more energy when you are coming in young and full of excitement about what you want to do and achieve. And the process tends to act like an emery wheel. It takes off your rough edges, and over time, the relationships become really
important. And today I say that I didn’t realize how important they were. I do now. And the relationships are nonpartisan.

Smith: It is interesting - there is a certain amount of irony here because Halleck replaced Joe Martin, with many of the same arguments.

Brock: Absolutely. So here’s a guy that goes against the old guy and now he is the old guy. To beat him, we couldn’t run on an ideological basis. We had to get somebody that would unify people older, younger, not on a philosophical basis, but on the basis of pulling us together and becoming a force – creating the leadership that would drive us to become a significant force in the House again. And Jerry Ford was sort of an obvious choice.

Smith: Were there other candidates considered?

Brock: I think we talked about a lot of different names. I think Charlie Goodell would have loved to have been chosen, for example, and he was a good guy. John Lindsay probably would have liked to have been chosen. Both were New York, both were a little bit Rockefeller – that was not going to work. Jerry Ford – here he is: Midwestern, solid as a rock, just basically a truly good, honorable, decent guy that everybody loved. You couldn’t say that he was mean spirited, you couldn’t say that he was going after Charlie out of spite. It would never have occurred to anybody.

Smith: But also, it seems to me, it’s funny now that you say that – you are absolutely right about New York. In those days, the center of gravity of the Republican Party was in the Midwest.

Brock: Absolutely.

Smith: You didn’t have much of a southern party. It was developing.

Brock: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, that’s our Heartland – it was then, it should be now. It’s not quite so much, but it would be better if it were – that’s the core of American values in my judgment. It really is. The northeast, the south, the far west, tend to have a little bit more focus on the specifics of their own location. The Midwest is sort of the place that pulls people together and it’s more of a
common purpose, it shares all the basic ingredients that the rest of us have, but it collects them, if I’m not being too obtuse in the way I’m presenting it.

Smith: Well, pragmatism isn’t a dirty word. Consensus isn’t a dirty word.

Brock: Pragmatism and consensus are terrific words, as long as you hold to a core.

Smith: Yeah. What was it about Ford? The danger is, as you know, Ford sometimes gets portrayed as good old Jerry Ford, and the word decency almost is used in a condescending way – as if it’s a substitute for IQ or sophistication, or whatever. What was it about Ford that made him stand out to his colleagues? One thing about Ford is, I think, certainly of any recent president, he is the least self-dramatizing of men. He may have been ambitious, but it didn’t show in the conventional ways.

Brock: I’m not sure he was ambitious, in terms of needing a claim, in terms of needing the reassurance of accolades from others. I think maybe where I’m going with that, he was comfortable within himself. Jerry Ford didn’t need somebody else to tell him that he was an okay guy. He had a sense of who he was, he had a sense of what his values were, and that just came out. And what you like about that, in a leader, is that you don’t feel that he is trying to impose on you. That he is, in fact, trying to gather you together and achieve something that’s important.

Smith: It’s not about him.

Brock: It’s not about him. No, it never was about him. But Jerry Ford wasn’t ideological in the sense of being out here on this issue or that. Jerry Ford had a core set of Republican values that all of us shared. And when you knew that, and you knew that he was comfortable within himself, and I say decent because he was such an honorable and a nice guy to be around. But there was never any doubt about where he wanted to go and what he wanted to do to gather the forces of the House together and achieve a larger purpose. And that’s a terrific combination.

Smith: How bitter did the fight with Halleck get?
Brock: Probably less so than we felt at the time. The guys that were around Charlie were there because he’d been around a long time and they’d been around a long time, and they knew him and he was a good guy.

Smith: Did that include people like Les Arends?

Brock: Yeah. Really decent people. Good people, but just felt like you don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater. That we had lost, not because of Charlie Halleck, and we wouldn’t win because of Charlie Halleck – that he just had earned it. He had earned his spurs, he had provided leadership and he was a friend, so you don’t turn your back on your friends. The bitterness was more – who are these young studs coming in here telling us what to do? Who are these – we called ourselves the Young Turks – and they heard that. I’m sure they said, “Well, that’s for sure not what we want.” “We’ve been around too long to have a bunch of new kids on the block coming in and telling us how to do things.” So, it wasn’t anger at Jerry Ford. That wasn’t the issue, and it wasn’t anger at Charlie. I think it was going back to the generational thing. Mostly the young activists saying, “We’ve got to get with it. We’re never going to win unless we change.”

Smith: And of course, the vote was close. It’s always been my understanding that the Kansas delegation provided the margin of victory. There was something like three votes, and they were three or four votes from…

Brock: Well, I would claim that the Tennessee delegation made the differences.

Smith: And did you have company by that point?

Brock: Yes. I had Jimmy Quillen and John Duncan both in Congress at that time, actually, and myself. As a matter of fact, Howard Baker, Sr. supported Charlie Halleck our three broke ranks with him.

Smith: Was that because of his relationship to Senator Dirksen?

Brock: Probably.

Smith: Makes sense.

Brock: And because he was part of the older crowd.
Smith: Yeah.

Brock: Not illogical, and not bad. But it was very close.

Smith: I assume there was a caucus. Did they each speak before the vote?

Brock: Now you’re testing my memory.

Smith: Well, then how do you campaign for something like that?

Brock: Door to door. Person to person. Talking to the people that you’ve gotten to know well enough to say, “It really has to change. That this is reason. We’re not here just to be here. We’re here to do something. To do something as a team. We can’t do it individually, we’ll never get anywhere. And if we’re going to do it as a team, we’ve got to have a team leader that crosses ideological lines, that draws East, South, Midwest, West together.” Charlie was Midwestern, but Charlie was not energized. Jerry Ford was. And Jerry Ford had energized support and that was sort of the basic of our argument.

Smith: What do you think his relationship with President Johnson was?

Brock: Good. Good. First of all, I don’t know of Jerry Ford having a bad relationship with anybody, but Lyndon Johnson was a terrific politician and a terrific leader. We opposed a number of the things he wanted to do, but boy, was he a good pol, and he knew how to reach across party lines and work with even young smart alecs like me. I would never forget a couple of instances where he made some statements about me that just were mind blowing. One to my wife and he was talking about what a patriot this young man is, and, wow, here’s the President of the United States saying that about somebody who’s got maybe two terms, three terms, at that time in the Congress. And Johnson was really good at reaching out – and Jerry Ford, obviously, would do that. Both taking the national interests and knowing, even when they disagreed, you don’t have to do it by a mean spirited approach.

Smith: Did he talk at all about his work on the Warren Commission?
Brock: Only that it was tough. I’m not sure that I heard any of the internal specifics. I’m not sure he was comfortable talking about that, to be honest with you. But that it was hard, and not any fun.

Smith: Of course, ’66, you’ve got this big bounce back, to some degree almost as the other side of the ’64 disaster. You win back a number of Republican districts and you do very well in the governorships and the like. Did you have a sense that you were making progress? That you had done the right thing in putting Ford…

Brock: We said, “Hey, you want to make the case? Look at what we did. Look at how people reacted to the change and the image of a much more aggressive, much more active group of people that were willing to stand up and say, ‘Some parts of the Great Society are okay, others are just lousy, and we’re not going to put up with it. We’re going to go ahead and fight it.’” Showing some backbone is pretty important to this country and to the people of the country. And we did.

Smith: It is fascinating, there is a term which you don’t hear very much anymore: the loyal opposition. But it seems almost perfect to apply it to what you were doing back then.

Brock: That’s the way we thought of ourselves. That’s a good phrase. We’re all loyal as Americans, but it is our responsibility to stand up for those things we believe in and to oppose those things we don’t support. We felt really good about ourselves in ’65, ’66, and that translated into some pretty good press. And to a significant win in ’66, which led to our win in ’68.

Smith: Do you have a sense of where Ford stood on civil rights?

Brock: He was for it. Period. Across the board. No issue. And I think after ’64 when we took our beating, in many ways justifiably so, the party decided that that was an issue that we had to get active on. Voting Rights Act. Beyond that, other things that would demonstrate, again, that one party, one country, none of this discrimination thing. So it was a pretty good issue.
Smith: In Vietnam – where were you all at that point on the war? Clearly there was beginning to be a significant anti-war movement.

Brock: More than that. We had riots in the streets in Chicago at the Democratic convention, which I think cost them the election. We didn’t have the best candidate. Humphrey was a better candidate by yards than Richard Nixon. But the Democrats were viewed as dispirited, as divisive, as supporting pull-out without supporting our troops. They were spitting on our troops that came home. I mean, the Left in this country can be really obnoxious when they want to be. So can the hard Right, by the way.

Smith: They almost deserve each other.

Brock: They do. One time I suggested that we ought to give them Arkansas and let them all focus and shoot each other, as far as I was concerned. It was crazy. But, yeah, Vietnam was horrible. It was an interesting time, though, because we really didn’t understand. It is easy to understand people saying, “I really hate the thought of so many of our kids getting killed or wounded.” That’s understandable. But to hate those that were fighting, that’s a different order. And it really ginned up on our side, and with many Democrats, a sense of true anger at what was going on, and it made the debate less – the sides, they were drawing apart rather than pulling together, saying let’s find a solution. It was dividing us from pro and anti-Vietnam, and then pro and anti-troops. That’s serious stuff. Bill Steiger and I decided to, when we heard some people in the Congress literally calling for the suspension of any support to any college that allowed any demonstrations. Now that’s where the hard Right can just be self-destructive. And we said, “That’s insane. You’re going to drive more people into the other camp.”

We put together a bunch of about eight or ten of us, and decided to go out to college campuses. We went to fifty colleges in the next couple of months, and we didn’t make a speech, we just listened. When we came back out of that, Nixon had won – this is ’69 – and wrote up a report which said, “There is a reason for young people to be in the streets. They are drafted at age eighteen, they can’t vote until they’re twenty-one.” That’s really ridiculous. We didn’t like the draft, anyway. So we came back, we wrote up a report, which I
literally presented to the president, which said, “As a group, all of us wanted the President and the Republican Party to come out for the eighteen year old vote and the all volunteer army.” Both of which happened.

So, good things can come out of some mean debates, but Jerry Ford, Lyndon Johnson, those of us that were on what we thought was the side of the right, were working very closely together. A lot of the time.

Smith: What was his relationship with Ev Dirksen? Did Dirksen resent at all the fact that his buddy Charlie Halleck had been ousted?

Brock: I never saw any evidence of that. Dirksen was, above all, a pragmatic leader. Wonderfully, wonderfully articulate, avuncularly, just all the nice things that you would expect of a guy who has this shock of hair that was just a wonder. Talk about a Midwesterner, he epitomized that, as did Jerry Ford. But I think they were very comfortable with each other. I never saw any evidence of – I saw a lot of evidence of them working together, I never saw any sign…

Smith: And the division of labor: it seems that Ford was comfortable with it, Dirksen in those days was a ham, too. A very theatrical performer.

Brock: He would never admit it.

Smith: And Ford was perfectly willing to sort of cede center stage to Dirksen.

Brock: Ford was almost uncomfortable with being out front in a public sense. I think he thought his job was more to shepherd us, to pull us together. Make sure that we were coherent. Dirksen, okay, he was a ham, but he loved being a ham. And he was so good at it. We had a few like that. Roman Hruska was a bit like that in the Senate, not to the degree of Dirksen. But you need that. That’s good politics, that’s good theater.

Smith: We got a great story from Stu Spencer who was assigned to sort of shepherd Senator Dirksen before this big Republican dinner in D.C., where he was going to be the main speaker. Dirksen knew he was being shepherded, and he said, “Okay, I want you to,” and he took a big glass, I guess it was a glass of gin to put on the podium beforehand…
Nelson: With no ice.

Smith: Yeah, with no ice.

Brock: So it looked like water.

Smith: Tricks of the trade.

Brock: He was more avuncular when he had a little bit of that kind of water.

Smith: Precisely. And, of course Stu tells it better than I, but he had a moment of panic when he realized there were several other speakers before Dirksen, and he thought, “Oh my God, I hope they don’t want a drink of water.” But anyway, Dirksen got there, and he started out and people were sort of taken aback a little bit, and then he launched into this thing, and had them all in his hand, and he also emptied the glass before he was done. But it was a tour de force.

Brock: Absolutely. That was the wonder of Dirksen. He really was just a special, special man.

Smith: By the way, one senses it was a different culture then. People drank a lot more – did people drink more? They certainly smoked, but was Congress more fueled by alcohol forty years ago than today?

Brock: I’m not sure I know enough about it today, but I have a sense that is true.

Smith: But just reflecting the broader culture in some ways.

Brock: There was a reason for that. Not just that people liked alcohol more, alcohol was the grease that allowed you to meld people in less public settings, less political settings. I talk a lot about how different things are now with the Tuesday-Thursday Club. They vote and members just run home to campaign to raise money these days, so they don’t know each other. We all had softball teams. We’d play softball against each other and then the two teams would go out and have a few beers. So not only were the members having a few beers with each other, but so were the staffs. That’s a different culture. And when you get to know somebody, it’s hard to hate somebody that you know.
Smith: There’s a wonderful story of Jerry Ford and Hale Boggs debating each other at the Press Club. And they would drive down together, and they’d decide on the way what the topic was going to be, and they got down there and did their debate, and then they went out and had lunch together.

Brock: And that’s what we did. I cannot count the times when I did the same thing with people, and you go, hell, full out against each other on floor of the House or the Senate. And you’d go out and have lunch or dinner. You’d laugh and you’d talk: “Man, did I get you on this one.” “Oh my gosh, but you cut me in pieces on that one.” And you’d laugh about it because you weren’t taking yourself quite so seriously, you were taking the issues seriously. But you knew that sooner or later you were going to find something on which you agreed, and you’re going to need each other. And so, you maintained those personal relationships and you think this is important stuff.

Smith: I also assume you weren’t playing, at least the same way, to the camera and the internet.

Brock: We didn’t have the internet, of course. The internet didn’t come until less than fifteen years ago. The mid-nineties technology really began to impact politics. Not just in the sense of the internet and communication, but what it did to money. We just didn’t need the kind of money that they seem to think they need today. And we didn’t have to focus all of our time on raising money. And that sort of colors and conditions your relationships with others, too.

Smith: It’s remarkable. I remember talking to President Ford. He came from a safe district, he didn’t ever have to worry, and yet, he went home a remarkable number of times, even during this period when he was also on the road traveling around the country. I remember him saying once, not critical, but as an object lesson…of what happened he thought to Guy Vander Jagt. That he just sort of stopped going home. He reached this level of national prominence and the like, and paid a real price for it.

Brock: I think, because we didn’t have the internet, and tools like that, going home was keeping in touch. It wasn’t to raise money. It was to talk to the Farm Bureau, the Rotary, the Jaycees, the different civic organizations.
Smith: It was to listen as much as to speak?

Brock: Absolutely. That’s how you grew. I was running 65 or better percent by my fourth term. Which is a little better than that 51% which was too close. But I don’t think I went home any less because that was my corner. I needed that. That fed me. It kept me straight and focused on the issues that people cared about.

Smith: How badly did he want to be Speaker of the House?

Brock: Jerry?

Smith: Yeah.

Brock: I don’t know how to answer that. He clearly wanted to be speaker in the sense of governing the House. I think he probably had mixed emotions about it in the sense of the public position it would put him in. He was comfortable representing his own views. He was not so comfortable saying, I think all Republicans think like this. That wasn’t quite his approach.

Smith: Yup. Which also helps to explain the difficulty of the transition from Congress to the White House. Some of it is structural, people talk about the spokes of the wheel - trying to run the Oval Office like you did your House office and all that. But it had to be much larger than that, a much more deeply rooted institutional culture which reflected his own personality. And suddenly, overnight, you’re forced to develop a whole new set of job skills.

Brock: Totally different job skills. And you move from a very comfortable place where everybody around you are friends – in both parties. And you’ve earned that, and you’ve earned the respect and you’ve established your role as the leader. And you go to a place where you’re leading a couple hundred million people. And you have to bring a whole different skill set to that – the ability to communicate, market, sell, as well as to guide the entire Congress. And to do so without the relationships that gave you comfort in the House. That is a big, hard transition. I don’t know.

Smith: When Agnew resigned, were you surprised? Let me tell you something I found extraordinary. We’re talking to Jerry Jones earlier today, who, at the
time was reorganizing the White House personnel office for Haldeman. He gets a call from Haldeman wanting to know – this is before Haldeman leaves, so this is before April of ’73 – gets a call from Haldeman wanting to know how many jobs report to the vice president. And Jones does a little bit of mental calculation and says, “About fifty.” He says, “Good. I want letters of resignation from every one and give them to me.”

Brock: That was Haldeman.

Smith: Okay, but the fascinating thing is, this is long before the Wall Street Journal broke the story in August of ’73, that eventually went to Agnew’s resignation.

Brock: Really? Wow.

Smith: Yeah. This is several months in advance, which tells me, or at least Jerry, and Jerry is pretty shrewd, that they knew that Agnew had a problem that could, in fact, terminate his vice presidency.

Brock: All of us knew that something was awry. I wanted Agnew out by certainly a year before he left. He was – you just weren’t comfortable with him – you didn’t feel respect for him. There was something that bothered you, and when I was running in 1970 I specifically asked him not to come to Tennessee. And he did. I pled with him and his staff to focus entirely on one issue, and that was the Vietnam War. That would work. He insisted on coming to Memphis, the biggest town – which he did. We had a POW rally for him in the Memphis stadium. But, you just didn’t want to be around him. You didn’t want him working for you, campaigning for you, and Jerry Ford certainly had a sense of that. So I’m not surprised that they would want him out. Now, I would bet that they didn’t know the specifics of the story. Here’s a guy that took some free suits – this is grubby stuff.

Smith: Yeah. When Agnew left, and it was pretty clear that Nixon – everyone agrees that Nixon himself said – his first choice was John Connally for the vice presidency. But it became pretty clear that wasn’t going to fly. I guess Carl Albert, and I assume Mike Mansfield, said to the president, “The one person who will be confirmed without difficulty was Jerry Ford.”
Brock: Sure. Nobody’s enemy. Everybody’s friend. Everybody loved him, everybody respected him. There was no question about integrity. The contrast. Freshen the process, bring in somebody that nobody would challenge. They were right. He was the right guy.

Smith: Did you think, because obviously the question that hangs over the Ford vice presidency, brief as it was, and obviously he spent as much time out of town as he could, was: at what point, shrewd guy, he’s been around this town for twenty years, at some point he had to have internally concluded that this thing could very well end the way it did. In the cloak rooms was there a sense that the Nixon presidency was doomed, or that, in fact, until the tapes, for example, were released, that this was something that could linger on, crippled but functional?

Brock: The latter. Until the tapes came out, there was pretty solid confidence that Nixon could survive with one wing. Could survive the balance of the term. It was uncomfortable. It wasn’t any fun, but it was some jerks that had done something stupid.

Smith: And the universal assumption was, the best argument that people made was, Nixon, of all people, wouldn’t be stupid enough to do this.

Brock: And John Mitchell. He was the campaign manager. Smarter than all get-out, tougher than nails, the thought that he would condone some stupid operation like that, just didn’t enter anybody’s mind. Nobody has to stoop to that sort of thing. When you’re talking about the White House, for gosh sakes, you just don’t play those games. Nobody thinks you do – or should. And Nixon really worked – on the Republican side – to reassure us that that was the case. That it would never occur to him to do that sort of thing. Nor would he tolerate it. And if he had been advised of it, he would have not only said no, he would have taken some action. And everybody said, yeah, that makes sense. We agree. You didn’t have to like Nixon to think that he was too smart to do that.

Smith: He lied to you.

Brock: He lied to us. He lied to some of us that were close. I was the southern chairman for him in ’68. I worked the South for him. I was the national young
voter chairman in ’72. I worked the country for him. In part because I owed him. He came to me in ’64 when nobody else would come. And I appreciated that.

Smith: I have to ask you, because you mentioned being southern chairman in ’68: was it, in fact, Strom Thurman who sort of held off the Reagan challenge in the South? That convention where you had this kind of unofficial Reagan-Rockefeller coalition to try to prevent Nixon on the first ballot, and there were clearly a lot of southern Republicans who, even then, their hearts were with Reagan. And yet, in the end, Nixon won enough delegates, particularly in the South, and the story has always been that it was Strom Thurman who sort of closed the deal. Is that your recollection?

Brock: I don’t know. I was not in that – I was in the room when we debated any number of names. We went through and found something against each one. Nixon waited until the last minute to name his vice president in ’68. We were at the convention, maybe the second night, and he had to make a decision in the next twenty-four hours, minimum. Should have been the next twelve hours. Everybody present had a reason not to support somebody – in the wrong part of the country – wrong approach – wrong constituent – whatever. Somebody said, “How about this guy from Maryland?” Nobody knew him. Nobody knew anything against him. Moderate, right kind of state, eastern, good balance with Nixon, California. And Agnew came out of that.

When you look at the Rockefeller-Reagan thing, people still remembered the ’64 Rockefeller thing. They weren’t going to go with him. And I think the two almost cancelled each other out. I would give Strom Thurman all the credit he wanted. If he did that, fine. But most of us just wanted somebody that was not coastal, in that sense.

Smith: During those months that Ford was vice president, before Nixon leaves, did you have any conversations with him that would touch upon what was going on or what might be coming down the road?

Brock: No. The only conversations you would have in that sense was: is it doing damage to us, what’s going to happen to us in the ’74 elections? That sort of
thing. It was not – I don’t think any of us had any portent, maybe some did. I certainly did not. I sat there with Nixon and when he looks you in the eye and said, “You know I wouldn’t do that sort of thing. You know I would not,” you accept that. It comes out impeachment proceedings are going on, and I had to tell him that I could not support him in the Senate on the basis of what I saw on those tapes.

Smith: Now was this after the smoking gun tape? Remember, toward the very end, when the June 26, 1972 tape was released and everything sort of collapsed. I think maybe it was a week or so before he actually left. Was it that late in the game? Or was it earlier?

Brock: It was pretty late. It was in the last, certainly in the last two or three weeks when it became so obvious that he was lying to those closest to him.

Smith: Was this a meeting at the White House that you had with him?

Brock: We had meetings in the EOB.

Smith: Okay. Was it just the two of you?

Brock: No, no, there were probably at least six or eight people, besides the president.

Smith: Now, was this the famous meeting where Goldwater and maybe Hugh Scott and…?

Brock: No. I was not in that meeting.

Smith: Okay, this was separate. But you know the meeting I’m talking about?

Brock: Yeah.

Smith: But aside from sort of that leadership, Nixon was meeting with junior members?

Brock: Some of the guys that had been troops in the campaign.

Smith: How did he react when you told him that?
Brock: I didn’t tell him. I sent him a note. I didn’t even want to do that. Man, there are a lot of times you don’t like to remember. That was one. None of us could believe what was on those tapes. You just couldn’t accept…

Smith: Was part of it the language?

Brock: Yeah, of course. The language was gross. Nobody needs to talk like that. All of us have used stupid words on occasion, but it’s in a fit of anger, or something like that. You feel bad afterwards. But to do it almost ad nauseam throughout the conversation, that bothers you. To hear him basically instructing people on how to fire an attorney general, and deal with people that – the Elliott Richardson incident, for example. Stuff like that. Unacceptable.

Smith: Do you remember the first time you talked to Ford, either at the end or at the beginning of his own presidency? Your memories of Nixon’s departure and Ford being sworn in? Can you recapture the mood of that? This must have been a pretty somber town. Even the Nixon haters must have, at least temporarily, suspended their...

Brock: Well, it certainly was somber. It was scary that we had a president of the United States resign in disgrace. I think the thing that made it – was it tempered a sense of concern, frustration, anger, all of the above, was Jerry Ford. You were comfortable with him. Comfortable with his ability to hold it together, to move us through this. Again, the logic of having somebody that everybody really loved gave you a sense that the country was going to be okay. I don’t remember a particular occasion that we did talk about what we could do to move things forward. I was not part of the decision which led to his pardoning of Nixon. I think he probably thought about that, as that, to get all this behind us. Every one of us, if we’d be asked to advise him, would have told him to wait until after the election. Don’t do it now.

Smith: Were you taken by surprise that morning, when it was announced?

Brock: You bet. Flabbergasted, because you knew it was going to cost this election. We were already in trouble, we were already in trouble. Here was Jimmy Carter, Mr. Moral himself, Bible-reading, southern peanut farmer, nuclear sub
commander, all the right stuff, and we got Nixon hanging around our necks like an albatross that is fifty pounds or five hundred pounds, in some cases, and we were vulnerable. We were at risk. As it turned out, and I don’t blame this on the pardon, we didn’t know how bad it was. Every one of us, except one, who won the new Senate seats in 1970, was defeated in 1976. Nobody could carry that baggage. I’m sympathetic with the guys that were running in 2008.

Smith: Did you ever discuss it with Ford? After the fact, were there…

Brock: No, I never did. I would’ve told him “Doggone you, you gotta do the right thing all the time? Can’t you use a little caution and wait?” Even if he’d lost, he could have pardoned him after the election, but he has to do it in the middle of the election – in the last stages when – man, it’s hard enough as it was.

Smith: And not only that: remember, days before the ’74 elections, he visits Nixon in the hospital.

Brock: Yeah.

Smith: Everyone told him: God knows, don’t do that. But he did.


Smith: How should he be remembered?

Brock: Oh, I think, for precisely what he did. And that is to hold us together. For us in the House as a party to recover from some down times, for as a country, the same thing. Having the comfort of somebody that the American people could say, “This guy is solid. He is Michigan-solid. He is one of us. We can relate to him as a human being. We would never have a sense of any failing, any question about integrity, for goodness sakes, but also just the fact that [he’s] a good man. A good man. The kind of person you want in leadership. Holding us together, getting through one of our more traumatic times in the last fifty, sixty years, at least. That was a singular contribution, not everybody could have done it.”
Smith: Last thing – last question. Fall of Saigon, and all of that – the roof fell in on him not once, the roof fell in on him repeatedly, including the responsibility for those last days in Vietnam. And Congress wanted to pull up the drawbridge – they didn’t want to bring refugees out of Vietnam, and he took that fight to the country.

Brock: It was again, doing the right thing. We could have gone in – I was there – mid-fifties, I helped to evacuate the Catholics. They were denied jobs, the ability to practice their faith by the Communists when they took over. We watched the meanness of that war. We watched the courage of the Vietnamese who fought for their country and their freedom. And Jerry Ford, and all of us, at least a lot of us, felt this country has a moral obligation that’s really deep. We did a lot less than we should have. He knew that. But doing the right thing was, again, Jerry Ford.

Smith: That’s perfect. Perfect.
INDEX

A
Agnew, Spiro, 15–16, 18

B
Baker, Howard, Sr., 8

C
Carter, Jimmy, 20–21
Civil rights, 2–4, 10–11

D
Dirksen, Everett, 12–13
Duncan, John, 8

F
Ford, Gerald R.
character traits, 7
civil rights, 10–11
fall of Saigon, 22
Minority Leader, 6–7
Nixon pardon, 20
remembrance, 21
transition to White House, 15
vice president, 16–19, 18–19
Warren Commission, 9–10
Foreman, Ed, 1

G
Goldwater, Barry, 1–4, 4

H
Haldeman, H.R., 16
Halleck, Charles
 Minority Leader, 2, 5–9
Hruska, Roman, 12

J
Johnson, Lyndon B., 9
Jones, Jerry, 15–16

M
Mitchell, John, 17

N
Nixon, Richard
campaign management, 17–18
Ford pardon, 20–21
Watergate, 19–20

Q
Quillen, James (Jimmy), 8

R
Republican National Convention, 1964, 2–3
Republican National Convention, 1968, 18
Rockefeller, Nelson, 2
Rumsfeld, Donald, 1

S
Smoking gun tape, 19
Spencer, Stu, 12–13

T
Tuesday–Thursday Club, 13

V
Vietnam, 11–12, 22
Voting Rights Act, 3

W
Warren Commission, 9–10
Watergate, 19–20

Y
Young Turks, 8