Smith: Thank you very much for doing this. Tell us how did you come to have such an intermittent and longstanding association with the White House.

Seale: Well, I was at the Smithsonian as curator of architecture, and had written a history of state capitals with Henry-Russell Hitchcock. I was very interested in going on to something about houses, but I didn’t know what. I never could get my teeth into it. I got interested in the White House and the White House Historical Association wanted to do in ’74 or ’75 – ’75, I think – wanted to do a film about the White House. So I left the Smithsonian to do that and we went through a year or two of interviewing movie people and people like that. And there was nothing to base a movie on. So I proposed I do a book about the White House, and went under contract with the association to produce a history of the White House.

So I was there all the time. I want to make it clear, with the Fords, I was not an intimate member of the family, pulling up a chair to the table. I was at the fringes of things, and very much at the fringes of things, and not a lot there. Of course, I was all eyes and ears, and Mrs. Nixon – I did not meet President Nixon – I met her two weeks before his resignation when I started – in the summer.

Smith: What was the mood like at that point?

Seale: It was the strangest thing I have ever experienced. The day of the actual resignation I was over there and the action was taking place in the East Room of the state floor, and people on the floor below were all watching it on television. It just hit me as very odd. And then when I left, out in the street, there must have been the nearest re-creation of an 18th century hanging in England as ever happened. Every kind of person and every kind of riffraff in the streets, including a porn queen, Linda Lovelace, in a see-through black lace dress, passing out pictures of herself. And then, of course, as is famously
known, I’m sure, Mayflower pulled up a van in front of the House and left it. It wouldn’t happen today.

It was just a terrible setting that I’m sure the Nixon’s weren’t even aware of. They went from room to room, going east through the White House, and as they left a room, starting the evening before, the room was vacated and the things were taken downstairs and put in a moving van and taken to storage, which was then at National Airport. And then at last, in the Lincoln end of the House – there was no furniture in the rest of the house that was theirs, just the stock stuff in the White House – then they go downstairs and that’s it, and out the back with the Fords to the helicopter.

So that part I saw on television and I was not there during the move, but the Park Service made the move and everyone talked about it.

Smith: You said you met Mrs. Nixon?

Seale: I met Mrs. Nixon, yeah. She was rather willowy and sweet. She had a calming, very feminine quality. It was just a brief meeting about the film – that there would be a film.

Smith: Did it seem a little surreal to be talking about this book projected at some indeterminate point in the future?

Seale: It was actually a film during her time, but I always wanted to do a book on the House. So, yes it did. And she was very charming and loved the idea. She was used to talking to a lot of people. But it was a very pleasant encounter. I remember very vividly, she was pretty in a soft sort of way. Certainly not a movie star way.

Smith: And then, of course, when they left – the Fords didn’t move in for a week – and I guess the story was that Julie had been left behind to sort of supervise.

Seale: She came back on a bike everyday.

Smith: Really?
Seale: Julie did, and removing things. But they had moved most things. And then, of course, the West Wing incident with the filing cabinets being moved.

Smith: What was that?

Seale: Well, one of the staff, after Nixon’s departure, went to the big window at the end of the West hall and looked down and there were Army trucks in a line and filing cabinets were being taken out. And this was ordered stopped at once. And I remember hearing all about that with the Parks Service people and how they said no, this was not to happen. And then there was a lot of back and forth. The Nixons lived all over the White House. Some people don’t. The Fords didn’t.

Smith: What do you mean by that?

Seale: Well, they lived upstairs in the apartment, I call it. It’s forty rooms or something, but it’s a lot of rooms. But the state floor and the floors below stay the same. The Nixons were very interested in antiques and things. Mrs. Kennedy’s renovation had been making the White House a setting for television, basically. And it was very wise – why not? That is what it is – a stage. So that was defined under Kennedy with a great interest in historical embellishment. But the quality of the contents was not on a level with what the Nixons acquired. What is in the White House today is from the Nixon administration and you know they had appointed Clem Conger from the State Department to come supervise it.

Smith: He was sort of a legendary figure in his own right.

Seale: Yes, he was. He was a character. I’m amazed Nixon put up with him, but anyway, he did.

Smith: We’ve heard Mrs. Ford and he had their differences.

Seale: Oh did they ever. There is correspondence for that. But Clem Conger was very good at what he did with this, I should say, the class of people that he dealt with. Some of his talks would make MSNBC turn over in their graves, with some of the political things he said and some of the promotional films he
did. But he was doing what he was doing. And that was very much on Mrs. Nixon’s behest. I knew him well. And referring to the apparent freedom with which he pursued his collecting, he said, “Oh, she was personally very interested.” It’s been misinterpreted that the Nixons were in a rivalry with the Kennedy administration. I never, in all my research, saw one indication of that at all. I never heard an antique dealer say it – they naturally loved her for the business she generated. And she was more of a participant than Mrs. Kennedy in the actual hands on. She went in the car to historic houses all around Washington and studied the crown moldings and the centerpieces in the ceilings. Edward Vason Jones from Atlanta, an architect who was an expert in period decorations guided her, suggests what they might put in the rooms to make them more period historical. She was along. She helped select these things. But really we have no written record of that unfortunately. It’s not the kind of thing you record. She was busy, busy, busy. And Mr. Jones would get her for two hours and he and Clem would drive around to Riversdale or one of these big houses to show her moldings – somebody has to make the decision – and she would select from what she saw. All the original had been torn out in 1948 to ’52.

Smith: Do you have mixed feelings about Harry Truman?

Seale: I think he did what he had to do to save the White House. And I think it would horrify people today, but we are more pedantic in our restorations today. Harry Truman was a “Masonic” historian. You’re a presidential historian; he was a Masonic historian. He thought in grand sweeps. So if he could save those stone walls and make the house still functional for a president to live in – by his philosophy, he had saved the White House. And I agree, I think he did. Because, had that house been meticulously gone into by the late famous restorer Charlie Peterson, who would have saved every scrap, it would be a House museum today, it wouldn’t be the White House where the president lives.

Smith: What do you mean by that?
Seale: You could no longer live in it as it stood after World War II. It was too much a wooden structure, not only for the use of structural timbers so much; but the lath that held the plaster on the walls, because most of that 1816 material was still there. McKim and White in 1902 put steel lath in and they just stapled it on top of the original wood. So the place was a firetrap - whatever anyone may say, it was, at least as a residence for the president. The Corps of Engineers realized this right after Pearl Harbor, when they made a complete structural survey of the House. When told he must move out, Roosevelt slapped the report on the table and because he loved old houses, here he said, “I’m not going to move.” The Civil Defense then wanted him to paint it camouflage – he thought that was the funniest thing that ever happened. But after Mrs. Roosevelt had gone and with her 13 truck loads of Roosevelt possessions, President Truman began having some signs of structural trouble in the building. The engineers brought him their earlier report.

Smith: And there had not been, throughout the Roosevelt years, any signs of physical/imminent decay?

Seale: I know the floors jiggled. But FDR lived in old houses and he loved old houses like his own up the Hudson, and Stratford Hallm, an 18th century home he loved down in Virginia. And he liked the “old” part – age was part of the romance of the house. So he would not have been one to change things. He did work on the house the entire time he was there with the White House architect Lorenzo Winslow. His interest in houses made him move right in and make the home fit what he wanted. Winslow had an office in the house. He and President Roosevelt designed the library. They built the swimming pool, of course, immediately. And they did many other things. Roosevelt was busy with the White House. But as far as a higher level of maintenance – that organic maintenance necessary to old buildings – he wasn’t interested.

When Truman went in, that huge central hall on the second floor – that runs transverse to the House – it was virtually empty. There were bedrooms that didn’t have a bed in them. The living quarters weren’t furnished. So your floors really jiggled with nothing to stabilize them. Anyone who knows
buildings, knows jiggling normally means wooden floors are healthy, if you can just stop the jiggling. But the steel that McKim and White had run in, in 1902 had worked against the natural movement of the house, and the brick and timber were cracking. More famously, of course, Margaret Truman’s piano - one of the two pianos in her sitting room, the caster on the leg went between two of the boards of the floor. I don’t think Roosevelt would have been disturbed at all by this. But the press took it on because it was a quick image. And Truman had to admit they were correct when they brought that 1941 report to him. I did interview some of the engineers who were still living in the seventies and they were still concerned that one fire bomb in the entrance hall could set that house like a lantern. And it just was foolish – as President Clinton later said about closing Pennsylvania Avenue – it would just be foolish not to listen to the experts.

Smith: Well, it’s interesting because the first president Ford ever met was Harry Truman. He met him as a freshman congressman, he was the lowest of the low on the committee overseeing the White House restoration/renovation. And he never forgot being given a tour of the House by Harry Truman.

Seale: And all the stories that went with it. Truman had a million.

Smith: And, of course, I guess the balcony was controversial in its day, and he never dreamed thirty years later that they would be spending the Fourth of July out there. It seems like every president since has been grateful that Harry Truman put the balcony up there.

Seale: Well, where design is concerned it was an unfortunate addition. If they had set the “shelf” of the balcony back from the columns even twenty inches, it would have been beautiful. But they didn’t, probably because to do so would have taken floor space away. It’s not an enormous porch. And they all love it. It’s their patio.

Smith: Could a president do that today?

Seale: Oh, yes.
Smith: Do you think he could get away with it?

Seale: The question is, *would* he? The president can do anything he wants to the White House. A person could go in there that liked Moorish interiors with incense and put cushions on the floor, and empty the room. It’s funny. I think nine times out of ten cases, the public would cheer. People love to know what the president does there and how he lives. But no president is going to do anything as radical because the White House is, as Taft first said, is a very valuable place as it has always been. Taft’s wife had a stroke and he had to tend to some of the state dinner details, and he did a seating chart with his aide, Archie Butt. He didn’t want to do it, but once he had finished he turned to Archie, and he said, “Archie, this White House is a very useful place.” So he put people where it worked politically.

Smith: I have often thought we need a new biography of Taft.

Seale: Oh, he was magnificent, brilliant, too.

Smith: I think Taft is one of the least appreciated presidents. In some ways there are parallels with Madison, or Hoover – someone who was hugely successful in every other part of his career but the presidency. And even the presidency was less unsuccessful than, I think, the conventional view. But he didn’t, by his own acknowledgement, have a political bone in his body. And that’s the most political office in the world.

Seale: The Taft years are very interesting to me because of Roosevelt, with his crazy attempted comeback.

Smith: Have you read Edmund Morris’ third bio?

Seale: Yes.

Smith: I was surprised. I think of Edmund as a romantic – which is why I thought he and the first volume were made for each other. I don’t think Edmund is someone who frankly cares a lot about the governing process. And I figured the third volume would be very much like the first. Of course Edmund’s thirty
years older, too, and has lived a lot. I thought the third volume was in many ways extraordinarily bleak, and uncompromising in its portrayal of decay.

Seale: Isn’t that the way Roosevelt was? And grabbing that spotlight, wanting that spotlight? But ultimately failing after the presidency. At least he was not taken seriously enough to be restored to the presidency – but was willing to destroy Republican chances to further himself.

Smith: It’s a brave book. I think it’s not as commercial as it might have been if Morris had taken a little more sentimental approach.

Seale: I think there was a lot missed in Roosevelt by missing Edith. Silvia Morris did a wonderful book on Edith Roosevelt, but I think there is a lot more to be done about her, to interpret – she was extraordinarily powerful over him. And she lived so long. And there she lived until what – 1947? And nobody interviewed her? She wrote some books about her trips, but she was a very strong individual and very demanding. She restrained his circus tendencies. In Europe, after his presidency, he wanted to call on the royalty wearing his Rough Rider clothes, and she put the quietus on that. She was always there. At the White House her right hand man and friend for most of their retirement years (he died around World War II) was George Cortelyou. And they would clip off these things that Mrs. Roosevelt wanted to do, which I find absolutely fascinating.

Smith: In the case of the Fords, a classic of opposites attracting…She was never on time to anything in her life. And he was religiously punctual. Was that something that people noticed?

Seale: I never remember hearing anything about that. The main themes that I remember dealing with her – he comes across as a constant. She seems flighty, you know, in the shorthand of the press.

Smith: It’s funny you say that, because people often comment that he was much bigger than they had expected.
Seale: Strikingly, and yet in his movements, you didn’t see him that way. But I’ll never forget shaking hands with him. Every time it felt like I had a paw and his hand was monumental. They said at the White House at the time that Betty Ford was stage struck. That she got to the White House and here it was, a great empty stage for her alone and an audience, a full house. She could pick up the phone and call anybody in the world. And that she would sit at night and call movie actors and stage people. Then she got in the hands of social people, or PR people, who began to try to frame her, make her into a character. And I guess this all follows from Jackie Kennedy, I don’t know. Pat Nixon, I guess, never really fit into such an image. But Mrs. Ford said flip things – I looked these up – these sleeping with your husband lines, all that – she didn’t originate those remarks. Someone had put her up to that. To a reporter she would say, “Well, the next thing you were going to ask me is…” Then the reporter said, “Well, what if I did?”

Smith: Goading.

Seale: Then she would make the answer that I suspect had been decided beforehand. The symbol of that attempt to be a character to me is David Kennerly’s picture of her standing in stocking feet on the Cabinet Room table. There is even a certain vulgarity to that picture, considering the place and its meaning. But I don’t think that’s the Betty Ford who is going to go down in history. I think she changed. Of course, she made a remarkable change – the shoes fit her finally. She seems to have discarded those who would “image” her.

Smith: That’s interesting. Describe what you mean.

Seale: I think she became after some delay the first modern First Lady on her own. She did it without borrowed frills. She did not follow the Kennedy path, yet appreciated her surroundings. At the White House, she couldn’t have cared less about the interior decoration. She thought the Nixons had done a beautiful job, leave it alone. There was one room that she thought had too many legs in it – I think she called it the Leg Room – I think it was the oval room upstairs - the sitting room - where they had their cocktail parties – pre-dinner things. And she called it the Leg Room. I only know her feeling about interim
because of hers and Clemet Conger’s memos to each other. He had plans he
wanted to redecorate at the locomotive speed he had kept under Nixon, and
she didn’t. There was a particular piece of furniture, for example, that he had
paid a great deal of money for. When she sat on it, her feet couldn’t touch the
floor. She sent it to storage and he brought it back. And the Parks Service
people trembled with fear at a battle of back and forth never seen before at the
White House.

But Mrs. Ford was a genteel person. When it seemed time, she handled it.
That’s typically what happened to her at the White House. She kind of grew
into it. And I think she softened the Kennedy thing that dominated so through
Johnson and, to an extent, Nixon. Betty Ford was the president’s wife and
when the Ford’s left office she was First Lady. She looked great. There are
many new things what’s she’s famous for - the story about her personal
situation - she was willing to talk about it publicly. She was able to say things
a lot of women would not be able to, at least and be heard. I don’t think Mrs.
Clinton would be a person to do that. She has to do her own thing, too. But
modern in the sense that the individual suddenly fit and interpreted the office
of First Lady in a personal way that embodied the larger scene. And that is
why I think Betty Ford is very important historically, and will be.

Smith: That’s interesting. Remember in the family dining room, there was the
Revolutionary War paper that Mrs. Kennedy had found.

Seale: The “Wonders of America,” yes.

Smith: And I think Mrs. Ford had it covered up.

Seale: She had it removed. It wouldn’t exist if it hadn’t been put on linen originally.
So all they do is detach it and put it in acid-free paper and take it to storage.
So it can be stuck up again.

Smith: And, in fact, it was.
Seale: She thought it was gloomy, and it was – on the north side. So she had the room painted, as I remember, yellow, something like that. And it was just a sunnier place, because they were big breakfast people, I gather.

You want to hear a story about that mural?

Smith: Yes, absolutely.

Seale: Peter Hill - now a famous antique dealer in New England, and the crème de la crème of Empire and Victorian furniture. I mean, nobody would question anything he had – and his wife, were a young couple with nothing, living in Washington in a difficult part of town. And Baltimore was bulldozing these beautiful, beautiful federal buildings block after block of urban renewal insanity. This paper was in one of those federal period houses. Peter went and paid a little fee to the bulldozer man who left early, and he and his wife took spatulas or scrapers and things and spent the entire weekend, twenty-four hours a day, peeling that paper off the plaster and re-backing it and putting it together in the most meticulous way. It was one of those seeds of a great tree. Mrs. Kennedy’s committee paid $15,000 for it. The Hills had nothing in it except whatever they bribed the bulldozer man with, which is famous. And then Peter set up his business and his business grew and grew and grew.

Smith: That is a great story. Supposedly, Mrs. Ford had some crack about how depressing it was to be eating and seeing all these people shooting each other.

Seale: It’s very fine for what it is, but you know how that can be. It depends on where you put it. The White House is a workplace more than a museum. The workers need to be comfortable at home.

Smith: On so many levels, here was this family, which I still find astonishing…that summer [of 1974], when everyone else in America was talking about what might happen, they never had that conversation. Which illustrates the limits under which he was operating. He couldn’t even discuss it with his own children. Now, I’m sure he and Mrs. Ford – but one senses that even she was in a state of denial. I think until about a week before it actually happened, I don’t think they had a serious conversation. So here you have this family
that’s almost hermetically sealed off from these raging political currents; he had never aspired to the presidency; she certainly had never aspired to live in the White House. She was counting on their retiring; going home to Grand Rapids. And suddenly they are pitch-forked into this maelstrom.

Seale: And a very active family. The whole bunch of them. They were very dramatically energetic.

Smith: How so?

Seale: The children were always doing something. They were always busy with some sort of project. The son Jack lifting weights up on the third floor – they set up an exercise room – and that sort of thing was going on all the time. She had her public activities and was just as busy with family. But in a way, to me, they were the first in many years who never seemed really to live there. And maybe that’s more in my memory, for the fact that the house didn’t change much. They simply took the White House for what [it was]. And the people who followed them have more or less done the same. Unless something was broken and they fixed it. Mrs. Bush, the second, re-did the Lincoln bedroom, more of an alteration than the rooms had known in thirty years. That room has a Betty Ford story by the way. That was one of the rooms Clem Conger had planned to redecorate. She wanted redecorating to stop. It’s a mess to live around that, and so most first families have put up with it if they had to, but, anyway, she went out of town on one of the tours they took, and returned and in spite of her earlier direction, the decoration was underway. She stopped it instantly. The curtains and so forth were all taken out to storage. So the room still had Harry Truman’s textiles and things in it – literally tattered and worn out. That’s why, finally, Mrs. Bush bit the bullet. I think they changed a few things earlier, but then Mrs. Bush did work so extensive that the Lincoln room became comparable to a state room, although it is not officially so.

Smith: Gary Walters told us a great story. It’s revealing in many ways. His first day on the job, first full day on the job was a Sunday. And a call came and it was the President. And you just knew he wanted to say, “Oh, hi, Gary, this is Jerry
Ford,” but he sort of caught himself and said, “This is the President.”

Anyway, he said, in an almost apologetic tone, “You think you could get someone to take a look, when it’s convenient, at the shower because I don’t have any warm water.” And Gary was a little flustered because the engineer, I guess, isn’t there on Sunday. But he knew they would be going to church, and he said, “We’ll take care of it Mr. President, when you come back from church.” He said, “No, that’s fine, no big deal. I haven’t had hot water for two weeks.” And he just walked down the hall and used Mrs. Ford’s shower. Can you imagine Lyndon Johnson saying…

Seale: No. He had the shower torn out, anyway.

Smith: And so then I had to ask Gary about the Johnson shower, and I did not realize Rex Scouten tested it personally once when LBJ was out of town, and was practically blown out of the bathroom. And then, and only then, was Johnson satisfied with the shower.

Seale: Nixon got blown around, too. He didn’t know it was powerful like that. It had been shown to him by President Johnson, and then they turned the thing on and it knocked him around a good bit, too.

Smith: It’s interesting what you said – did they seem at home in the White House?

Seale: I never thought so. But I think had he been re-elected, yes, probably so. But remember, there was the house in Alexandria. And this is one of the amazing things to me, they seemed to have thought all along that they would return to that house, which is in a nice Alexandria neighborhood. A split level, just what they loved with a swimming pool. They rented it for a while. And they went there just before they left the White House, and the Secret Service told them there was no way they could ever live there again.

Smith: Really?

Seale: I think it’s strange to prevent people who have just faced these things as they come, but…

Smith: It’s like Coolidge going back to the duplex in Northampton.
Seale: Right. It’s not going to happen.

Smith: It didn’t work.

Seale: No. They thought they could go back there, because they loved that place, they were very happy there, and it’s a real friendly neighborhood. But the Secret Service - you would have to buy the neighborhood. We’d have to rope off the street. So Mrs. Ford, I believe she says this in her memoirs, she said that they didn’t know where they were going to go. They picked Palm Springs as a maybe because it was near a golf course. And then they rented a house there that the Secret Service approved and she said, not for me. And they lived there a year and then moved down closer to town. But they eventually sold the house in Alexandria.

Smith: Early on in the presidency, he installed a swimming pool.

Seale: Oh, I remember all that.

Smith: Was that a controversy? That’s a pretty significant change.

Seale: I don’t think President Ford even thought of that. He swam a lot, and there was a beautiful pool at the Y, three blocks away. That pool suited him. But the Secret Service didn’t like it; he did; the Secret Service didn’t. He didn’t ask for anything. And then the National Pool people in California became involved, and donors became involved, and the Park Service became involved, and the architectural drawings they made were for a very exotic underground Las Vegas apparition. You went down levels and terraces with plants, and into this huge sort of Roman bath.

Smith: Shades of San Simeon.

Seale: Right. And so finally they settled on basically an ample-sized backyard pool. And that’s what the White House pool is. The inside pool Nixon floored to make the press room. It’s still down under there, with all the beautiful sea green tiles. President Ford really wanted to continue his swimming. People moved in like this to please him.
Smith: Was it a short walk from the Oval Office?

Seale: It is just right behind the building. It’s no distance at all. And the family has their times of use, and then the staff can use it between times, like the tennis court.

Smith: Let me ask you – it may be a sensitive question – but put in the broader context because Mrs. Ford has been very candid, in print and verbally over the years. One senses that people fifty years ago in this town just drank a lot more than they do today.

Seale: Oh, they did. When I moved here in ’71, the line was, “If you want to have a cheap party, have a cocktail party,” because the liquor was so inexpensive. And people did just drink like fish. In restaurants and in bars and private houses – it was drink, drink, drink. And that’s, of course, slowed down now considerably. But in Mrs. Ford’s case, I wasn’t surprised. I know nothing about the pill side of things, but I know that exacerbates problems. That the Fords would be fairly heavy drinkers, wouldn’t set them apart from anyone else. My God, especially after Lyndon Johnson, he was a very heavy drinker. And I remember one White House employer told me, “We could have a morning party for the Ladies’ Aid, and the Johnsons would have a bar.” But it was the way it was in Washington. And now they say they sell more bottled water than they do liquor. But the hard stuff – people drank it. And that’s the world the Fords came from – the Washington world.

Smith: And some smoking, too.

Seale: One description of the Kennedy party in the Blue Room, is that you couldn’t see anything for the smoke. It was just a big, grey cloud over everything. And people smoked a lot.

Smith: We have great stories from the social secretaries about how things have evolved over the last half century. But some things never change, including the people who try to move the place card settings.
Seale: Oh, I didn’t know that. I missed that one. I would think that was a very dangerous business.

Smith: They didn’t get away with it. Then there’s the lengths to which some people would go to get into a dinner.

Seale: Oh, yeah, I can imagine that.

Smith: Bess Abel tells the great story about, I think it was the King of Sweden who was coming to America. And there was some very prominent businessman, presumably either he or his wife was of Swedish nationality, and they tried everything they could think of, unsuccessfully. And then the story was relayed through Bess to Mrs. Johnson that the wife was dying of cancer. And Mrs. Johnson took sympathy on her and they got in. And she may still be with us, but she certainly had a miraculous recovery.

Seale: You know Washingtonians feel very left out of White House events. Historically, early on, there was a list that developed through the 19th century – it was called the Made List at the White House. And it was a list of the locals who were acceptable to come to the three or four or five state dinners, or official occasions to mingle with the crowd. Because of early-day transportation, you know, you couldn’t always get a big crowd. And time went on and the airplane came in and people could come. Like your Swedish dinner, anybody could come for that. They’d go from London for that, probably. They do all the time. And then in 1934, FDR did away with the Made List. Said he could get more public attention from having movie stars. He would only have them to luncheons, not dinner. And the performers at the musicals usually didn’t come to dinner, either. But the Made List expired and it was almost the same year or the next year that the Green Book in Washington came out with a list of the socially acceptable in the capital.

Smith: Years ago at the FDR Library, you could buy replicas of the matchbooks that FDR designed that said, “This matchbook stolen from the White House.”

Seale: I didn’t know that. But today they put out various “things” for people to steal. They’ve had to stop using linen hand towels in the bathrooms. They have
paper now because people take the linen ones. Things are likely to be taken from the table, and there is a policy that if silver is taken at a dinner, the butler, who sees the indiscretion goes and stands beside the culprit as everyone is getting up to leave. They don’t usually have to say, “Would you please put that back.” But they are prepared to do so.

Smith: Tell us about the permanent staff, the people who really run the White House and serve the family. They have a unique role, don’t they?

Seale: They do.

Smith: One senses they are always thoroughly professional, but that some families develop a closer or more relaxed relationship. I heard that both the Bush families were very highly regarded by the permanent staff. In the case of the Fords, the story is on a Saturday afternoon, the President was watching a college football game. And someone would come in to the room and offer him something. And he’d say, “No, thanks, but come on in and watch the game.” Which almost created a problem.

Seale: It would.

Smith: You have this job and this relationship – on the one hand it’s flattering…

Seale: And fellow workers see you in there with your feet propped up. Yeah. I can see where that might lead to an organizational problem. First families develop these friendships with staff. Look at Rex Scouten and the Reagans. They adored him, they trusted him – everyone would trust him. It’s a special kind of job, to work at the White House. I tried to link the White House management customs of great English houses, which are more or less patterned on what people used to do long ago with a big household staff composed of many people with particular responsibilities. But that kind of domestic work in England is an established profession. And it has its own rules and it has its traditions. Being a butler or being a chambermaid is a regular job. It’s not so in this country, but the White House was set up that way more or less because the structure worked over time. And it remains that way.
Different presidents made big changes. The Theodore Roosevelts re-vamped the White House physically and organizationally to serve America’s new world power. They printed rule books for every position on the staff. It was a job description of what you were supposed to do, house and offices – for example, one’s desk was to be cleared when he leaves every day. Nothing was to be left on the desk. The individual employee was responsible for the little book itself, which must not be found outside his possession, or he was dismissed. And the rules underlined the authority of the ushers in the White House. This functionary by name was an announcer in a European house. Ushers were traditionally intimate with the family, the go-between between the individual, the important person, and public business – everything. They made decisions that kept the machinery oiled. James Buchanan brought that title to the White House when he came in the 1850s, having been at St. James’. Now there are a lot of ushers and there are a lot of butlers, where you would have one of each in Europe. It follows the old regimented way, and the staff accepts that and the fact that it is ongoing. Universally, they know that the White House operation is ever-moving and that certain individuals guide it; their job is to support that individual so he can do what he has to do.

Smith: You wonder, with the Fords coming out of modest circumstances. And, more important, they had never imagined themselves being in this kind of setting. You wonder if there was any kind of cultural acclimating that needed to occur.

Seale: I don’t know. I’ve wondered that. Most presidents come from relatively modest living circumstances. I thought probably President and Mrs. Ford accepted the White House as you would accept living in a hotel, because that seems the nearest approximation. Few presidents in modern times have come from such domestic regimentation, even, really, going way back to Jefferson and those early people. Some southerners lived in houses where slaves, African-Americans served. Yet I never heard of a Southern house that had a regimented order to it in the European sense. They may have called their head man a butler, but no – they were more like helpers than trained servants. In
the later 19th century some of the new millionaires on the East Coast imported British staff as professionals but over the long haul it wasn’t long-lived.

Smith: There is documentation through oral history, but I would think there is a fascinating story, as the civil rights movement unfolded, how it played out in the Eisenhower, the Kennedy and Johnson White Houses.

Seale: It would be very interesting to know. I only know of one anecdote. My understanding is that it didn’t make any difference at the White House until later. But the day the Civil Rights Act was signed, an architect friend of mine, Blaine Cliver, was at the White House, assigned by the Navy. At that time segregated dining rooms were still in operation for the White House staff.

Smith: Really?

Seale: Yeah. And that goes back to Mrs. Taft, I believe. Mrs. Taft segregated them. They had never been segregated before. Nothing in Washington had ever been segregated before that early period.

Smith: I know Wilson gets a lot of heat for doing it throughout the federal service, and of course, Wilson was a Southerner.

Seale: Yes, he was, and not to mention Edith, his second wife. She was very Southern, from Rome, Georgia.

Smith: The Bicentennial must have presented all sorts of challenges, and for anyone who is stage struck, all kinds of opportunities, as well.

Seale: Yes, I think Mrs. Ford was kind of beyond stage struck by the Bicentennial. I do. She handled herself, I thought, very gracefully and very nicely. But, of course, we read about these things in history, about Cleopatra’s barge and the George IV’s parties with the live fish dancing silvery in the champagne. Well, this was close. Mrs. Ford staged the main Bicentennial dinner in the East Garden.

Smith: Was this for the Queen?
Seale: For the Queen. And they extended the air conditioning in ducts over the roof to blow into the tent because they are forbidden to film the Queen with beads of perspiration. So these ducts were run over the roof and cold air misted, was blown into the garden. And when you think about it, it’s for a relatively small group of people. But even this was outdone by the French response. They brought silver from Versailles, fine paintings – they had a silk-lined tent. By contrast, President and Mrs. Ford had a party that was rather simple to see, not wholly unlike a big wedding reception in any city in the USA.

Smith: And then of course, the famous incident with the Marine playing The Lady is a Tramp.

Seale: Oh, yes, for the Queen. I’m reminded of the General Marshall banquet held in recent years for American and German relations to World War II. Very conciliatory. The band struck up Lily Marlene. A big blush fell over the assembly, not the least General Powell, the host and MC.

Smith: And it takes a lot to diminish Colin Powell.

Seale: Clearly he was very embarrassed. You have to trust that a lot of people didn’t know the difference.

Smith: Were you around when Saigon fell in the spring of ’75?

Seale: I was around, but I didn’t…

Smith: Was there a palpable change in the mood about the place?

Seale: I don’t remember.

Smith: And the assassination attempts in the fall of ’75.

Seale: Oh, yes. Those were striking. That was scary. But I don’t think people know the extent of threats that come to the White House. All that happened with the Clinton administration. Many near-disasters happened, and I stuck my fingers in those bullet holes on the front of the House, they were deep into the stone. Those rolling panels at the windows were installed in the Ford time. When the Fords and all who followed ate in the dining room the glass rolling partitions
– Gary may have told you about those. They’re about this thick, bulletproof. There are always threats, threats, threats, and starting with Theodore Roosevelt, they never shared those with the family because they were so horrible. Mrs. Roosevelt broke into tears when told about one written threat to catch her son Archie who was going to school over in Alexandria and cut his ears off. These hideous things parents they would hear, and so the Secret Service has always had one hell of a job. Whatever it is, they’ve handled it very well. It’s a little rough at first when they have to take action – like closing the [Pennsylvania] Avenue. Protecting President Ford, came to require many more agents than ever before, but that is small compared to today’s detail. They polish their technique. They must always know that another assassination might be near. For President Ford with danger seemed greater than with anyone before him.

Smith: And the most unlikely of targets. But it just tells you what kind of country we were at that point. It’s much more about us than him.

Seale: Oh I think so.

Smith: If you were asked to define Betty Ford’s impact on the White House and on the First Lady’s job, how would you describe it?

Seale: Well, I think in the future, when they are lining the First Ladies up, Betty Ford’s going to be very important. Because I don’t think she was trying to play First Lady when she got settled. I think her PR people tried to make her interesting to the press by being shocking. They tried to build a persona for Mrs. Ford. I think they were trying to make her interesting on a cheap kind of TV or Hollywood level. She came into her own on her own; by being Betty Ford she became First Lady. She became unique. All her predecessors had to cope with becoming First Lady. When it seems to me that after a period or trial that didn’t work – her being shaped by others – Mrs. Ford eased into the symbolic role. Jacqueline Kennedy fought First Lady bitterly. After she finished redecorating the White House she was gone a lot. Mrs. Johnson had to pinch hit for her in holding ladies events which are always part of the White House – punch and cookies, coke parties they call them behind the
doors. Mamie Eisenhower started these as a practical way of bringing more people to the White House. As president’s wife Mrs. Johnson pursued her duties in a traditional way, replacing the public project Mrs. Kennedy had distinguished with her redecoration and restoration with beautification. Mrs. Nixon bought antiques. But Betty Ford brought her personality which had more impact than any project she undertook. Americans came to know her as an individual. Betty Ford was herself and I think that will be clearer as time goes by. And I think she is more imitated by subsequent First Ladies than people realize.

Smith: It’s interesting that you say that. For example, once she went public with the breast cancer surgery – again one of the really striking things that we found, is just how unusual it was for people to discuss the disease. I think women discussed it among themselves almost in secret. But she had an enormous impact by example. And I think she was surprised. It was six weeks into the presidency, but I think that crystallized for her in a way that nothing else could, the potential impact that she could have. And then, of course, I’ve often said that she’s unusual, if not unique, among First Ladies, in that her historical impact may be greater after she left office. If you stop and think, between the breast cancer surgery and the alcohol and pills, and the Betty Ford Center and all of that, she’s had an impact on how regular people live in ways that some presidents don’t ever manage officially.

Seale: I would agree with that. A story I remember when they hadn’t been in office very long - a family in Alexandria that had been very close to them, particularly to Susan, there was a very terrible tragedy involving the violent death of the parents. And Arlington cemetery was where the funeral was. And Betty Ford prepared to go and then didn’t, and explained it to the family. She said it is a zoo wherever I go, and I can’t see going and ruining this solemn occasion. I always found that very touching. Likely a painful point of recognition of how his life had changed forever.

Smith: Yeah, can you understand?
Seale: Yes, I do. I can see the sort of wonder at the whole thing, the sort of reaction of, I’m a private person and I’ve been a private person, except when called upon. She was no recluse in her life before. She was always active with the Congressional Club and things in Washington cherished by the congressional people who have been there a long time. But suddenly, there is another person there – another world looking in on her. As it turned out she took the girls to go to the White House after the parents’. That’s where they went, not back home. It’s always been rather poignant to me.

Smith: And I’ve often wondered, when you go back and you look at the Morley Safer interview, the famous *Sixty Minutes* interview, and the things that she said. I’m struck by the unlikelihood that even a “modern” First Lady could or would say today, the things that she said thirty-five years ago. Mrs. Obama is extraordinary in many ways, but one gets the sense that they have made a very calculated decision to basically limit her activities to very traditional…

Seale: That’s the way the Obamas are. Their private life is capital P, private. Her mother manages the family needs and deals with the staff. There have been no photographs whatsoever allowed in the family quarters. Which has not been changed a lot. All the paintings are borrowed from museums, so the walls are pretty much vacant when a new family arrives. New pictures are borrowed. So privacy in the current family motif at the White House. Betty Ford was otherwise, and was willing to make public statements. She was so struck by what was happening to her, that she was sharing the experience. A sort of First Lady looking back on herself.

Smith: It’s interesting because I think in this town – as you know better than anyone – people put a label on everyone. It’s much easier to deal with a label than the complexity and nuance of real life. And as far as Mrs. Ford was concerned, she was this Cub Scout den mother, Sunday school teacher from Grand Rapids, Michigan. That was the label. And there has always been this other side – the performer, the Martha Graham dancer, the woman whose talents had been sublimated in the traditional roles of wife and mother.
Seale: But not a public woman. I mean, she didn’t want to be, or she would have been. She might have longed to be on the stage, as I think many women start out on a career and then marry and have children and then that career stops and What might have been is always back there. I deal with a lot of them who think, had they continued with their careers they would have been at the head of the show. It’s perfectly normal. And that may have been the case with Mrs. Ford. But she chose to be wife and homemaker, and she knew what she wanted.

Smith: When President Ford passed away, ironically, one of the things that people saw was just what a love match they had. Just extraordinarily close. I think he always felt a certain guilt about having been away as much as he was during those earlier years when he was climbing the ladder – typical of men of his generation and of his profession.

Seale: And to an extent today.

Smith: Of course. We talked to Steve recently and he said every single night that his dad was out of town, he would call and Mrs. Ford would line up all the kids, and they’d get on the phone and tell their father what they did that day.

Seale: Well, there are no shadows in that family’s life. They were very happy. There is that wonderful picture of them in the Oval Office, all lined up. Amazing, amazingly modern, too.

Smith: From someone who has been around a long time, how do you think he should be remembered.

Seale: Ford?

Smith: Yeah.

Seale: As a man who probably should have been elected again. I think he was amazing the way he harmonized everything. But his enemies were able to take the pardon and kill him with it. But the pardon had to be. It’s the reason Nixon resigned, is to avoid a long court drama even though, in fact, he might have won it. Well, the newspapers hated Nixon, that’s what they wanted. And
I think Ford was a good president for almost a term. And I think history will remember him, always as a interim, and the one president that never stood a national election as president.

Smith: But you do have a sense in some ways, even in that short period, he fulfilled his historical mission.

Seale: Oh, yes. For certain. A very difficult one, at that. And turned heads away from the tragedy and back to business. Ford could have done otherwise. He could have capitalized upon the resignation to pump himself up, to increase his power especially with the press. He chose instead to use his time to calm the waters. When he went to office he had to face the storm the media had whipped up over the Nixon Watergate affair. This was the greatest stir the media had yet attached to the modern presidency and it was scandal-based. Gerald Ford faced the power of the media – but more a challenge, TV. I always like to say that beginning with Eisenhower TV was the presidency’s most significant transformation. Truman realized as the White House was being rebuilt, the power that what Kennedy called the little gadget – TV – and Truman began to honor it. He used the White House almost always as his setting. And he created the broadcast room, which is sort of ludicrous, a room about this big; and that was where they were going to broadcast from – it being a historic setting and TV would be visual. Then Eisenhower came along. Robert Montgomery was brought back to the White House – there’s a biography – and from movie star to director to master planner of TV. He had been there under Roosevelt, and he returned to organize Eisenhower for TV. Eisenhower at first was frightened of it. The biggest ordeal in getting the first broadcast was who was going to powder his shiny head and nose. And Robert Montgomery grabbed the powder puff and did it. Then Eisenhower grew right into television and loved it. And so the studio moved next door very quickly and did a lot of TV. It was the beginning of an era of a new level of communication for the president. A president today must be telegenic – is that word?
Smith: And to Ford’s disadvantage, quite by accident, 1975 is also the debut of *Saturday Night Live*, and a whole new – some would say ironic, some would say something else – a whole new sensitivity.

Seale: An awful lot of humor today is cynicism. Show business.

Smith: Perfect.
INDEX

B
Bicentennial
  Queen Elizabeth, 20

F
Ford, Betty
  Clem Conger, 3–4, 9–12
  as First Lady, 9, 21–24
Ford, Gerald R.
  assassination attempts, 21
  move to Rancho Mirage, 13–14
  remembrance, 25–26
  swearing in, 1–2

N
Nixon, Richard
  resignation, 1–4

W
White House
  restoration, 3–7
  staff, 17–19