

**Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project**  
**Mel Laird**  
**Interviewed by**  
**Richard Norton Smith**  
**February 27, 2009**

Smith: When did you first meet Gerald Ford?

Laird: I first met Jerry Ford in the Navy. He was in the same task group as I, and we met on a little island in Magaw(?), where we had a couple of beers. I'd known him through Glenn Davis and Johnny Burns. I'd been out to visit them in Washington and I'd met him at that time. And then I spent some with him when I was a state senator, before I came to Congress in 1952.

Smith: He was already in the House.

Laird: He was already in the House and he'd been in for two terms. He came to Congress with Glenn Davis and Johnny Burns had already been in the Congress for about six years. When I went out to Washington as a United States Senator, I spent time with Jerry and Glenn because they were all members of a little group called the Chowder and Marches Society.

Smith: Tell us about that group.

Laird: Well, it's a group in which we took in two members – they took in two members each year. They tried to get them on so the group represented all committees in the House of Representatives. We would meet on Wednesday night and get a report what was going on in the Executive Session in each of those committees. We had meetings on Wednesday in our offices, and we'd rotate offices. Then we had a Tuesday morning breakfast and discussed what was going on in Congress so we'd be well prepared for each of the committees that made up the Congress.

Smith: Now you were elected in '52.

Laird: I was elected in '52.

Smith: So you had the experience, you were in the one majority Republican House.

Laird: I was in that.

Smith: And then that was the last time you were in the majority.

Laird: Right. And there was an interesting experience. I'd been in the state senate prior to that time, and going to the House of Representatives was a stepping stone from the state senate. But the state senate in Wisconsin was a very revered group.

Smith: Did you sense, even then, that Ford was ambitious?

Laird: I knew he was ambitious – that he felt that he had an opportunity. He thought perhaps he would be first senator at one time.

Smith: Really?

Laird: But that really never developed. Vandenberg had been his idol in the Senate from Michigan and it just never developed. He was on a fast track in the House of Representatives and he decided to forego the Senate and to go, perhaps, for Speaker.

Smith: Did he ever indicate to you an interest in the presidency during his Congressional days?

Laird: Yes, he did indicate he felt that he was qualified to be president. He always felt that there was nothing in his way from doing a good job as President of the United States.

Smith: The House in those days was clearly a very different institution from what it is today.

Laird: Much different. We had, of course, Speaker Rayburn who was a very unusual person. I remember the time that Speaker Rayburn called me aside after the debate about the HEW appropriation bill, and the ranking Democrat was John Fogarty from Rhode Island. Rayburn called me over and he said, "Mel, that was a tremendous job you and John Fogarty did on that HEW bill. You are getting along very well in the House. As a matter of fact, I want you to have a new office. I've been talking with John McCormick, and we're going to give

you a private dining room just outside the dining room itself, but very near the Speaker's dining room." See, that wouldn't happen today.

Smith: What led him to do that? He was singling out promising young talent?

Laird: Trying to encourage me.

Smith: On both sides of the aisle?

Laird: Well, he was encouraging me. I don't think he encouraged any other Republican that I know of.

Smith: I remember hearing President Ford talk about an old bull who told him to be outside this room at ten o'clock on Wednesday morning. No real additional instructions. What it was basically, is that they were bringing him in this small group that had oversight of the CIA and other intelligence operations.

Laird: Well, that's on the appropriations committee. That was George Mahon. Then George Mahon appointed the intelligence committee, and that was the only intelligence committee we had. They handled everything and did a great job. There were five members on that committee. I was not on it as soon as Ford went on it, but I went on it a little later on.

Smith: And what were the qualities you think that Mahon and others, presumably, sought in Ford that led them to...

Laird: Well, I think they thought he was very trustworthy, and they also felt that he was a person that put the country first at all times.

Smith: I assume, then as later, that there were show horses and there were work horses.

Laird: Yes.

Smith: And he, presumably, was a work horse.

Laird: He was a work horse. I always told him he wasn't as good a work horse as I was, but that he was learning.

Smith: Did you have friends across the aisle?

Laird: Yes, we had a lot of friends across the aisle and we saw them quite often.

Smith: By that time Jack Kennedy had gone to the Senate, but in his early days they had offices across the hall from each other.

Laird: Right. Johnny Burns did, too. They were on that same floor and they got along very well.

Smith: Joe Martin – there is in effect, a coup, isn't there – to replace Joe Martin?

Laird: Right.

Smith: What fed into that, what was the background of that?

Laird: Well, the coup was organized by really, two people: Glenn Lipscomb, the chairman of the California delegation, and myself. We had a group of about fifteen people we got together and we decided to take a poll of all the members of the House to see how close we were to electing a new Speaker, or a new leader, as it was, because we had no majority at that time. The people that worked the hardest on that were Glenn Lipscomb, who was a tremendous man, he was chair of the California delegation – and they had the biggest delegation of Republicans in the Congress. Bob Griffin from Michigan. We had Johnny Burns and Glenn Davis.

We finally put out a poll to see who could get the most votes as far as the Republican leadership. The polls showed that the person that could get the most votes was Johnny Burns. But Johnny Burns was not actively pursuing this, whereas Ford agreed to actively pursue it. And you had to have a person who would spend a lot of time, a lot of effort in order to win that race against the incumbent, people who had been around there for a long time. And so we chose, this little group, we chose Jerry – not because he had the most votes – but because he said he wouldn't get out of the race.

Smith: Now this is against Charlie Halleck.

Laird: Yeah.

Smith: Oh, I'm sorry – before Charlie Halleck there was Joe Martin, who was ousted.

Laird: That was a different coup.

Smith: Was Ford involved with that at all?

Laird: Oh yeah. Ford was involved and so was I. We were called the Young Turks, so was Glenn Lipscomb. I thought you were asking about the Ford...

Smith: Just because Martin was a preview of Halleck.

Laird: We won that – very close, a very close vote. We had a close vote with Jerry – a very close vote. But it only takes a majority of one, or a plurality of one, to elect somebody and we won both of those. And they were short campaigns.

Smith: The thing I want to nail down, because I've heard different things; that when you obviously settled on Halleck to replace Joe Martin, was Ford considered at that point?

Laird: Yes, Ford was the second choice.

Smith: And was he not interested in doing it?

Laird: He was not interested in getting into that kind of fight. You see, you've got to be willing to get into a fight. Now, he was willing the second time to get into it. As a matter of fact, John Burns had more votes to become the leader, but Jerry, at that time, wouldn't get out of it.

Smith: And was the complaint against Martin was that he had just sort of gotten old and...

Laird: Yes, he wasn't making a good challenge.

Smith: Not aggressive enough.

Laird: Yeah. We loved Joe Martin. He was a fine person, but he wasn't aggressive enough to take care of the new young people coming up in the Republican Party.

Smith: And then in between, in '62, there's this contest – a preview of the Halleck fight – against Charlie Hoeven for the number three job.

- Laird: Charlie Hoeven, from Iowa. That's a job – conference chairman – and we elected Ford to that at that time. That's when Ford first came into the leadership role, and the conference oversees all the business of the Republicans in the House.
- Smith: At that point, of course, Kennedy is still in the White House. He's this very telegenic, charismatic figure. Was there a concern among Republicans on the Hill that you needed fresh blood – someone who could...particularly on television be a little bit more...
- Laird: Yeah, we felt that we had to have - and, just between us, Charlie wasn't taking as good care of himself...
- Smith: Well, I know in the book it says – and I've heard this because I wrote a book about Tom Dewey, and I knew about how Halleck had an alcohol problem.
- Laird: Well, we could not put up with that and have him come to the floor under any condition like that. That's underlying.
- Smith: Was that a problem in those days – more of a problem than later on? Was it part of the culture?
- Laird: I don't think so. I think we have the same thing. You go all the way back to Bob LaFollette. He turned into an alcoholic. There is something about Washington that kind of gets some people to turn. It's too bad, but they do.
- Smith: So after the Goldwater defeat, and you put this campaign together, Don Rumsfeld is involved?
- Laird: Yes.
- Smith: Bob Dole and the Kansas delegation is involved. It's almost a training ground for a whole generation of leaders.
- Laird: We had a good group. But it was a lot of work.
- Smith: What would have happened to you if you had lost?
- Laird: If we'd lost? Well, Halleck would have continued.

- Smith: Would there have been revenge taken?
- Laird: They might have taken some revenge. We weren't in a position to...
- Smith: Do you think, at that point, does Ford see himself as a potential Speaker of the House? That's his ambition?
- Laird: Yes.
- Smith: With this new job, he is on the road constantly. I don't know if you knew Betty in those days.
- Laird: Oh, yeah. Sure. Betty was very close. We always took our vacations together. On July 4<sup>th</sup> we went down to a golf club in Virginia, I remember, and we couldn't get an extra room, so we had to all bunk together. We were very close. Betty was very fine and we had great times with her.
- Smith: Did you sense that she was unhappy at all? We now know that he was away a lot and...
- Laird: She was somewhat unhappy. Most of our wives get a little unhappy. If you are out speaking around the country and really doing your job, they are in the house, it's not the best place for a wife.
- Smith: Now Ford had been, at least, on the list of vice presidential candidates. Nixon had considered him in '60. In fact, you go back then, in '64 Eisenhower gave a list of names to reporters – eleven candidates who he could support in '64 for president. Your name was on the list and Jerry Ford's name was on the list, among others. And Richard Nixon's was not on the list.
- Laird: Richard Nixon was not. That's the part of the story that happened at that time. People kept putting out the fact that Ike left him off.
- Smith: The *Ev and Charlie Show* turns into the *Ev and Jerry Show*. And I gather that Dirksen was more willing to go along with LBJ, whether it was the war or whatever, than perhaps you and the House were.
- Laird: No, we pulled Dirksen back on that somewhat.
- Smith: Describe that relationship.

Laird: Jerry was cool about the war, you know.

Smith: While still in the House.

Laird: While still in the House. And we came out with a White Paper, which I was chairman of on Vietnam. Jerry signed it, Charlie Goodell signed it, and we pointed out the discrepancies of the policy in Vietnam and where it had gone wrong.

Smith: What was wrong in Vietnam? Was it that we weren't aggressive enough?

Laird: What was wrong was that you can't get in a war in that area of the world and not give all out to it. The real mistake that was made in Vietnam was when Kennedy changed the combat role. Ike was never for a combat role. As a matter of fact, he was very critical of that change. We pointed that out in the White Paper. We pointed out the tremendous growth of military people year after year after year, with no real program in mind as far as termination was concerned. Or in fact, any program to withdraw from Vietnam. There was nothing there and our White Paper pointed that out. That White Paper was signed by Ford, and that had a tremendous effect on Dirksen. Dirksen and Ford had a kind of falling out about that. The paper was signed by Charlie Goodell, by myself, and by Jerry Ford. I was chairman of the House Conference at the time – Republican Conference. And so we did point out the shortfalls in that paper. Have you ever seen that paper?

Smith: I have not, but I will. What's interesting, I sense that Dirksen, for whatever reason, was just much more willing to go along with Johnson, whatever it was.

Laird: Oh, yes. Dirksen was taken by Johnson's flattery, and he was flattered by Johnson almost on a daily basis. And that has an effect on some people.

Smith: And I take it that was not the case with you or Ford.

Laird: Oh, no. We questioned him. As a matter of fact, you'll read some of the exchanges in the White House tapes. You probably have – where Ford was confronted on several occasions – "You've got to do something about Laird –

you got to muzzle him.” You probably noticed that. Well, Ford never tried to muzzle me. As a matter of fact, he was very encouraging.

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

Laird: Well, I think it was fairly good. He was disappointed in Johnson. He was disappointed in some of the things he did about acquiring those radio stations and TV stations. I don't think that Jerry was one of Johnson's greatest admirers.

Smith: The term has been used so many times that Ford was a Boy Scout, and sometimes people use it condescendingly, and sometimes they use it admiringly.

Laird: Well, I think Johnson used that once or twice. Johnson made some other cracks about Jerry that weren't very nice.

Smith: Yeah. Did Ford take those things personally?

Laird: Yes, he did. He took them personally. You always had to keep going, sitting down to him and say, “Jerry, that's the way it's going to be. You got to be willing to take those. Those are small hits.” The fact that he couldn't chew gum and walk straight...

Smith: Later on in the White House there was the stumble-bum image, but that was an offshoot of questions about his intelligence.

Laird: Well, yeah, but the real problem was there that he did have a problem – with his knees. Very serious problem and it was rather an unfair criticism that they should bring that out.

Smith: Tell me about his intelligence.

Laird: Very intelligent. There was no question about his intelligence. There was sometimes a question about his judgment, but he was very intelligent. I mean, I will never forgive him for the manner in which he handled the pardon. Jeez, we had worked out...

Smith: Tell us about that, because he always said – he had this press conference on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August and he went in there – I think he can also be criticized for naiveté. Because he goes into this press conference believing, in that atmosphere, that people are going to ask about Cyprus and Turkey and inflation, and of course, all they want to talk about is Nixon. And he came out of that press conference angry, and...

Laird: And he thought that was all they were ever going to be interested in, as far as my term of president. And I want to put that aside – I'm going to put it aside. But he put it aside the wrong way. He should have gone along with Harlow and my scheme.

Smith: And tell us your scheme.

Laird: Well, our scheme was to bring about thirty to thirty-five members of the Senate and House and go down and have a nice little meeting with him.

Smith: Members of both parties?

Laird: Both parties. And Senator Stennis was one who agreed to do it. We had several others. We had quietly worked on this and I told Jerry about that – what we were doing. As a matter of fact, I could have talked to him the day before he pardoned. I didn't realize it was that far along in the White House staff. I knew who was for and who was against. I knew that. But there were quite a few very important people for, including Kissinger, including Haig, including Buchanan – you know who they are. I don't need to go through the whole thing. But they continued to urge Ford – the only way you are going to have any more press conferences where they talk to you about issues, if you get rid of the Nixon issue. They were wrong. We could still have pardoned him, but you'd pardon because there was a great popular demand to get that thing over with. And to permit Ford and the Congress and Washington to move forward with problems of the nation and not keep that fire burning on the pardon. You'd have gotten rid of it.

Smith: But he didn't do that.

- Laird: No, he didn't. And that's because he'd agreed with his people Sunday morning, bright and early. They talked about it Saturday night, too. It was a shame because I thought I had him convinced the other way.
- Smith: And you saw him that day?
- Laird: Saw him? I played eighteen holes of golf with him, and I had lunch with him.
- Smith: What was his mood?
- Laird: His mood was fine. The next day, when we were out on the first tee, he asked me, "What do you think about that pardon?" I said, "Jerry, you know what I think about the way that was handled. If you don't, you're blind, deaf, and dumb, because I've talked to you about that." And I said, "Now, listen, we've got a chance to win this tournament, we're only two shots behind. I'll talk to you about the pardon, what happened today, after this golf game."
- Smith: In the book, the extraordinary revelation is, at least the claim is made, that the pardon was unnecessary.
- Laird: That is correct.
- Smith: What is the background of that?
- Laird: Well, you know, I had a lot to do with putting together Leon Jaworski. You probably knew that.
- Smith: Now, this is after Archibald Cox is fired, and a search is on for another special prosecutor.
- Laird: A search, and I had the responsibility to get a prosecutor and get it fast. So I called Freddy Vinson, the son of the former Chief Justice. I was having dinner with him at the Shoreham Hotel. It was a crippled children's ball. My wife and I always went with the Vinson's and a few other people that were old time Washington people. And I said, "Charley, I just got back from the White House. I was called away from the dinner and was told that the attorney general was not going to be cooperative on getting – he'd gone back over – he had told us he was going to fire Cox." And he agreed to that at the White House that Saturday about two o'clock. He called me, and I was getting ready

for this dance/party, and he said, "Mel, I can't do it." And I said, "Jeez, I've been working on a new person. We've got a hell of a guy for this." I'd talked to the Congressman from Houston, who lived in the same building complex as Jaworski. Jaworski was also recommended to me by Vinson, and he was very friendly with Vinson. But he said, "He's \_\_\_\_\_ bar association, he's got a hell of a reputation, you'll have no problem with him as special prosecutor."

I thought everything was worked out that afternoon. I went back over there and there was a gol-dern explosion in the Justice Department and the whole deal was off. But it finally worked out, you know, and Jaworski was appointed and he was a great man for that job. I don't think Jaworski would ever have recommended that there be someone else appointed. He would have just suggested somebody else, but in a nice way. As a matter of fact, you can talk to his Congressman, who still is very much alive, and he's a good man. But anyway, this would have been working out a while. I also got involved in naming the council for the impeachment committee.

A man from Wisconsin, for whom I had great respect and admiration. And he was a good council.

Smith: John Doar.

Laird: Yes, John Doar. John Doar was from up in River Falls, Wisconsin, and I'd tried to get him to run for Congress, but he declined. He was a Republican – you know that? A long Republican family.

Smith: But my understanding was, at some point after the pardon takes place, Jaworski indicated that he had no intention of indicting Nixon?

Laird: I think that's true. If you'll talk to his Congressman, he'll tell you the same thing.

Smith: Which would, in effect, render the pardon unnecessary.

Laird: Yeah, but that's another story entirely. Ford went the other way. You understand.

Smith: Yeah. Back up, because you had left the Defense Department and then you had come, somewhat reluctantly, back into the Nixon White House.

Laird: I came back in, yeah.

Smith: When you first heard about the Watergate break in, what was your reaction?

Laird: Well, I didn't think the president probably had anything to do with it. That was my first reaction.

Smith: Right. Did you discuss it with Ford?

Laird: Yeah. But then I got other information. You know where I got the information?

Smith: From Fred Buzhardt?

Laird: Yeah. He was my general counsel for four years, in Defense. He came out to my house and he said, "Mel, you're getting caught out on a limb here. I want you to know that Nixon is in this thing up to his neck." And he said, "I shouldn't be telling you this because I am counsel for President Nixon." But he said, "I was your counsel for four years over in Defense, and I've always tried to protect you. I've gone over all the tapes, and he's guilty." That was a shocker to me. I went and told Bryce Harlow, and I felt that I had to tell Bryce.

Smith: Who was also on the White House staff at that point – troubleshooter. What was his reaction?

Laird: He said, "Mel, we've got to go." So that next day I told Nixon I was leaving, that I couldn't go for somebody that had lied to me.

Smith: Did he ask you what had led you to believe that he had lied to you? You obviously didn't give Buzhardt's...

Laird: No, I didn't tell him...I said I've talked to someone who has listened to the tapes. I didn't tell him. He knew who it was, because they always kind of worried about my relationship with Fred, anyway.

Smith: When you told him that, what was his reaction?

- Laird: I said, "I can't stay with you any longer." He said, "Mel, I wish you would reconsider that. I would like you to stay." I said, "I can't, somebody that lied to me." That's it. So I resigned.
- Smith: Ford said much of the same thing. It goes back to this Boy Scout image.
- Laird: But Ford never got the word from Fred. I tried to tell Ford.
- Smith: What did you tell him?
- Laird: I told him, "I know that he's guilty."
- Smith: And is this before Ford is vice president, when he was still on the Hill?
- Laird: No, no, no.
- Smith: Oh, this was during his vice presidency?
- Laird: Yeah.
- Smith: You played an integral role in Ford being selected for the vice presidency.
- Laird: He wouldn't have been selected if I wasn't up there. I guarantee you that. Because Nixon came in the morning before Ford was appointed and he told Harlow and me that he was going to appoint John Connally. And we said, "Well, that's a mistake. Will you give us twenty-four hours? We'd like to get some people from the Hill down here to talk with you, because that is a bad, bad mistake. It is wrong person at this time." I have nothing against Connally, I have great respect and admiration for him, but he should not be in that position now. We had just gone through a lot of things in which really, he had been accused of various things, and I thought you had to make a real clean appointment as vice president. And I did recommend Rockefeller.
- Smith: And what was Nixon's reaction to that?
- Laird: I'm talking to you now about the appointment of Rockefeller during Ford.
- Smith: Oh, I see. Okay.
- Laird: I mean, I was for Ford in the first time, but this time it had to do with...

- Smith: When Ford needed a vice president.
- Laird: Yeah. We get a little bit ahead of ourselves.
- Smith: Let me go back to the Ford selection. Nixon wants Connally. He sees Connally as his successor.
- Laird: Well, he loved Connally.
- Smith: What was it about Connally that he...
- Laird: Well, he thought he was a flamboyant, sort of a wonderful guy – that kind of guy that he would have loved to have been. He would have *loved* to have been a John Connally.
- Smith: That self-assurance?
- Laird: Yeah.
- Smith: The Texas swagger?
- Laird: Oh, yeah. He wanted that. He was his hero. That's right. You're making fun of me, but...
- Smith: No, no, no, listen, I know exactly what you are saying.
- Laird: It's true, I'm telling you.
- Smith: My question then is: there is a story – and I don't know whether it's true or not, but I've heard it from more than one source – supposedly Nixon said to Rockefeller at one point there in the Oval Office about this time, and Nixon says, "Can you imagine Jerry Ford in that chair?" Nixon thought Ford was his insurance against impeachment. Which was a total misreading of the reality of the situation. That actually, Ford may have made it more likely that Nixon would have been impeached.
- Laird: Right.
- Smith: You, then, must have discussed with Ford – over the years there has been this notion that there was no transition, no planning for a transition, that everything happened...

Laird: Oh, yeah, we had a transition. We had a good transition.

Smith: When he became vice president, did you think the odds were that he would become president?

Laird: Yes.

Smith: You did?

Laird: I thought we ought to plan for it.

Smith: And how did you discuss that with him?

Laird: Well, I discussed it with him on several occasions – that this thing was getting out of hand, and that he would become president.

Smith: What was his response?

Laird: He always said, “Oh, I’m not sure.” I said, “Jerry, just prepare for it.”

Smith: And how did you prepare for it?

Laird: Well, first you tried to give some thought into who would be your vice president. Secondly, you’d get into your cabinet and you’d have to make a change of at least half the cabinet – immediately.

Smith: Which he didn’t do.

Laird: No. Which he should have done.

Smith: Was that ‘Good Old Jerry’?

Laird: Good Old Jerry. He loved people and he never wanted to disappoint them.

Smith: Is that a weakness in a president?

Laird: I think it’s a weakness. I think you’ve got to be somewhat of a SOB sometimes, as a president. Or else have somebody real good that will play that part for you.

Smith: Before the smoking gun tape came out, do you think Ford, at some point in that period, began to believe, himself, that he might be president?

Laird: I think so.

Smith: He's in an impossible position, isn't he?

Laird: Yeah. He couldn't show that because that would have been harmful to him.

Smith: He had to be loyal to Nixon, but he couldn't be so loyal as to...

Laird: No, but you don't have to.

Smith: Is that why he got on a plane and flew around the country?

Laird: You can finesse that. He's busy.

Smith: Do you think that's why he spent so much time out of Washington?

Laird: Oh, yeah. Sure. I think it was a good idea, too.

Smith: I take it you were genuinely surprised when Nixon lied to you. Do you think he was, as well?

Laird: I don't know because I really didn't really want to believe Nixon lied to me. I really didn't, and I imagine he felt the same way. When Fred Buzhardt came out to my home, that was a sad day for me. I just had always hoped that he hadn't been involved.

Smith: Before I forget – I heard him say, you were the person who tipped him off to the impending Agnew problem.

Laird: Yes, I did.

Smith: What was the background? I guess it was right at the time that Haldeman and Ehrlichman had been fired.

Laird: Well, how I heard about it will probably embarrass somebody, and I don't want to embarrass anybody. But a very good friend came to me and told me about the proceedings in Maryland. And I tipped off several people in the Hill. I went to John Anderson, who was a friend of mine. I went to Jerry Ford. Jerry knew it in that period.

Smith: But he heard it first from you?

- Laird: From me. You see the problem is, I couldn't really tell how I knew because, although Buzhardt had been my general counsel for four years, and had a loyalty to me, it was not proper as general counsel to the president, probably, to talk to me. It wasn't my problem, but it was Fred's problem. Do you understand?
- Smith: Yes. Sure.
- Laird: And I protected that.
- Smith: Was Ford surprised?
- Laird: Yeah.
- Smith: I take it there was never any real relationship between them, was there – between Ford and Agnew?
- Laird: No, no, no. No relationship at all. But, of course, Ford was disappointed that this was going to break this way. He wanted to make sure that I was right, and I told him, I let him know how I heard. I said, "You know, it's going to come out sometime, but I don't want to embarrass Fred Buzhardt." Fred Buzhardt was with me always and I made him general counsel of the Department of Defense and no one could have been loyaler than Fred Buzhardt.
- Smith: By the way, just as an aside, did people speculate about the identity of Deep Throat?
- Laird: Oh yes, sure.
- Smith: Were there obvious suspects? Was there anything like a consensus about who it might be?
- Laird: No, there was no consensus. He was one of the men who was talked about.
- Smith: Mark Felt?
- Laird: Yeah.
- Smith: You were, on August 7, 1974, in a prayer meeting. Tell us about that group of people.

Laird: The prayer meeting.

Smith: Yeah.

Laird: I was leading the prayer meeting.

Smith: Tell us about that group, and Ford's association with it. I think it might surprise people.

Laird: Now, you're talking about two different prayer meetings. Ford and I had a group – you understand that?

Smith: Tell us about that.

Laird: Well, we met on Wednesdays and we went to the prayer room just off the rotunda. You probably don't know where it is – it's an interesting little room. It's got stained glass windows and not many chairs in it. But we would meet there Wednesdays. We started out with Al Quie, who later became the governor of Minnesota, Jerry Ford, myself, and Charlie Goodell – there were only four of us. And then we filled in a few people later on. But for two years it was only the four of us. And even when Jerry became president, he kept up with his relationship with us. We had a couple of them down in the White House.

Smith: I know he said he didn't wear his religion on his sleeve.

Laird: No, he didn't.

Smith: But I take it, it was an important part of his life.

Laird: Yes, it was a very important part. I thought you were first talking about the big prayer meeting, in which I was...

Smith: I'm told he was called away, he was called down to the White House – that's the particular event I'm getting at – on the eve of Nixon's resignation. Can you describe that?

Laird: Well, that was a different deal at all. He was called down there, but that had to do with Billy Graham and a few others. Our prayer group was not connected with Billy Graham or any other people. You realize that?

Smith: Okay. But he was called...

Laird: I was in charge of the big prayer meeting on the '74, but that's a different thing. Don't get those confused – the little, small prayer group that we had on Wednesdays.

Smith: Was there a time when you sat down with Richard Nixon, and to his face, told him he ought to resign?

Laird: I told him that he had lied, and that I could not work for anybody that had made such a large lie, as far as our government was concerned. Now, you might have thought that I told him I couldn't work and that I didn't think a president of the United States was fit to be president after they lied. But that's a different thing. I wasn't out singing from the rooftops, that sort of thing. And I never embarrassed Fred Buzhardt. Never – until after he had died, and his wife gave me his papers, and she thought it was time to talk a little. That's the only time.

Smith: The day Nixon resigned, and then the next day when Ford comes in office, did you talk to Ford on either of those days?

Laird: Yes.

Smith: I mean, the day that Nixon resigned, did you have any contact with him?

Laird: I had contact with him, and I had contact with him the next day. And I went out to his home, and we had kind of a light snack and sat around on the floor, just as we did after he was sworn in.

Smith: Were the kids there? Was the family there?

Laird: Yeah, kids were all there. And Ford was trying to take care of seating, taking sandwiches to people that night.

Smith: And what was the mood?

Laird: The mood was very good. We were happy it had come to an end.

Smith: And that included Mrs. Ford?

- Laird: Yeah. She had become involved in the last few weeks there, but she was glad everything was over.
- Smith: Do you think she knew, at some point during those few weeks, that she was going to live in the White House?
- Laird: Yeah, I think so.
- Smith: Did you know about her problem at that point?
- Laird: Yes. I knew about her problem, yeah. But I didn't know exactly what it was. I thought it was – I didn't realize it was drugs. I thought it was probably just too much booze at that time. Because we used to go down to the White House quite often, and we'd go upstairs and have a few drinks. I always had my Manhattans and she was drinking. I thought she was drinking. Now some people say that she was taking some sort of drugs that affected her. I don't know. I knew her doctor well, though, and I can't believe... I sent him over to the White House and he married one of my – Bill Broody – who was one of them in my office – he married Bill Broody's secretary. As a matter of fact, I brought Bill Broody's secretary home when I was over on one of my trips to Spain, and Bill was looking for a secretary and I said, "Bill, you're not making any search for a secretary. I brought one back last week from Spain." And this was a good gal.
- Smith: One last thing and the minute I ask you about it, you'll agree, I think. You were very candid in the criticism that you made about the fall of Saigon, about the last days of Vietnam, and, in some ways, because you were such a close friend of President Ford's, I think it's even more important to get that on the record. What was the nature of your criticism of how things were handled? And, given the political climate of that time, how might have things been handled differently?
- Laird: Well, first, that was not Ford's fault, and we'd gotten everybody out of there. There were a lot of stragglers, the people that looked like Americans on the helicopter, most of them weren't Americans. No. You understand that?
- Smith: Sure.

Laird: I thought we had prepared pretty well. They'd have a clean slate, but there were a lot of Vietnamese that wanted to get out of there and we ran several big \_\_\_\_\_. The people that were on the helicopter thing in those bad pictures should have been avoided.

Smith: But the larger strategy – you criticized Congress for, in effect, pulling the plug.

Laird: I have always criticized them.

Smith: Describe that.

Laird: Well, you know, the Russians were pouring in tremendous amounts of money. As a matter of fact, in that last twelve months, they put in well over \$2.8 billion, which was a sizable amount. We were trying to get \$140 million out of the Congress, and I've always blamed Ford, Kissinger, and the secretary of defense at the time, Jim Schlessinger, for not pursuing that \$140 million that was needed to make for a clean break there.

Smith: Given the political climate at that time, could they have gotten that money out of Congress?

Laird: Yes. I've always said that on national security issues, I never lost a single vote on anything. And that could have been handled, but you had to do it, the president had to do it, the secretary had to do it. Schlessinger really wasn't for it, you know. You have to have leadership. For \$140 million we let the whole thing end up in a fiasco. We could have had enough support and planned that exit in a much different way. And I blame the secretary, I blame Kissinger, and I blame Ford.

Smith: Did you discuss it with him?

Laird: Yes.

Smith: And what was his rejoinder?

Laird: He didn't think it was worthwhile fighting over Vietnam anymore. But you weren't fighting over Vietnam, you were fighting over what had been contributed and the sacrifices that had been made and now it came out in a

different way. I could have shot that damned helicopter out of the sky, because that wasn't a helicopter evacuating major players in that thing.

Smith: How should President Ford be remembered?

Laird: He should be remembered as the man that saved the country at a very important time after a great disappointment. As far as Nixon is concerned we could have completely lost faith in our system. We didn't because of Jerry Ford.

Smith: That says it all. That's perfect. Thank you.